

# Israel's Demographic Dilemma

Immigration and birthrates may redefine the Jewish state.

By Leon Hadar

TEL AVIV—They are Hebrew-speaking Israeli citizens who wave the national flag bearing the six-point Star of David. They sing the national anthem that celebrates the return of the Jewish people to their historic homeland. Their kids attend Hebrew public schools and after graduation serve in the Israeli Defense Force. They are proud Israelis who seem an integral part of Hebrew culture and, unlike many Arab citizens of Israel, they don't have any ambivalent feelings about Israeli identity. They are Israeli patriots who love their country and are willing to die for it.

But these Israeli Hebrews are not Jewish. In fact, they are observant Catholics, members of what the Vatican calls the "Hebrew-Speaking Catholic community in Israel." Indeed, recognizing the significance of this small but growing community of Catholics, the late John Paul II announced in 2003 that he was placing beside the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, Michel Sabbah, an auxiliary bishop with a special task of "the pastoral care of the Catholic faithful of Jewish expression" living in Israel. Jean-Baptiste Gourion, who was ordained as the new bishop at the Catholic Church in Kiryat Ye'arim near Jerusalem, is a converted Sephardic Jew who was born in Algeria, received baptism at the age of 24, became a Benedictine monk, and moved to Israel in 1976. Since 1990, he has been responsible for the pastoral care of the Hebrew Catholics.

The appointment of Father Gourion ("lion cub" in Hebrew) as a Hebrew-speaking Catholic bishop in Israel is cer-

tainly a milestone, considering that since the middle of the second century, no Hebrew Catholic was named a Bishop of Jerusalem. The move ignited opposition among some Catholics who suspected that it was part of a strategy, backed by Israel and its allies in the Vatican, to divide the Church in the Holy Land into two parts, denying its predominantly Arab character and weakening Patriarch Sabbah, an Arab who has been an ardent champion of the Palestinian cause and who resisted the idea of creating within Israel a separate church for Israel's Hebrew-speaking Catholics.

When John Paul II decided to create a special ecclesiastical jurisdiction for the Hebrew Catholics, displeasing Sabbah and other opponents, he was taking the side of one of the leading figures in the debate, Franciscan Fr. David-Maria Jaeger. Jaeger is a canon lawyer who was born to Jewish parents in Tel Aviv and after converting to Christianity became a Catholic priest. In addition to being a spokesman for the Franciscans who govern the holy sites in Jerusalem, he was a lead Vatican negotiator for the historic 1994 agreement between the Holy See and Israel.

Jaeger has been one the first Catholic figures to recognize the dramatic demographic changes that have taken place in Israeli society in recent years, during which as many as 500,000 non-Jews, most of them Christians, have settled in Israel. Most are immigrants from the former Soviet Union, mainly Russia and Ukraine, while others include guest workers from countries like Poland and the Philippines.

Hence, at a time when the number of Christians has fallen sharply in the Holy Land—from 10 percent of the population of the area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean a century ago to less than 2 percent today (130,000 in Israel and 50,000 in Palestine)—Jaeger and other Catholic leaders have concluded that the Jewish state could become a source of Christian salvation.

Consider the irony: since 1989, more than a million Russian and Ukrainian immigrants have arrived in Israel in what Jews call *aliyah*, the ascent to the Promised Land, with Israeli leaders hoping that the newcomers would help balance the demographic pressure of the rising Arab population on the Jewish state. Similarly, many businesses have imported close to 500,000 guest workers from as far away as China as part of an effort to replace Palestinian workers from the West Bank and Gaza. Now many of these non-Jewish New Israelis could help the Vatican and other Christian denominations contain the demographic pressure that the growing Muslim population is placing on a shrinking Christian community in the Holy Land. God, as they say, works in mysterious ways.

One of the main reasons the Vatican is raising its profile inside Israel is the recognition that many the newcomers from Russia and Ukraine are Orthodox Christians. "This has created an unforeseen opportunity for the initiative of the Catholic Church, which has hastened to send a dozen Russian-speaking and Ukrainian-speaking priests into this new area of evangelization, right in the

middle of Jewish colonies and settlements,” says Elisa Pinna, an expert on international religious issues for the Italian news agency ANSA and author of *The Twilight of Christianity in Palestine*. The crisis over the Greek Patriarchate of Jerusalem, which is paralyzed by internal political disputes and economic problems, has weakened the Orthodox Church’s ability to challenge the energetic efforts of the Catholic Church in the Holy Land. Orthodox religious figures in Israel believe that there are close to 500,000 Christians who have immigrated to Israel from the former Soviet Union, Pinna notes, suggesting, “these new Israeli Christians are even more numerous than the Palestinian Arab Christians.”

In that context, the nomination of a bishop for the Hebrew Catholics helps the Vatican in its competition for the religious allegiance of these Christian citizens of Israel, most of whom are registered as “others” in the Israeli government’s population register. The Catholic Church needs a voice within “Israeli civil society” and a leader who can speak for the culture in its own language, Jaeger told John Allen, the Vatican correspondent for the *National Catholic Reporter*. Noting that the Catholic bishops of Israel are Arabic-speaking and minister largely to the Palestinians, Jaeger said, “It’s as if the only bishops in Spain were Basque, or the only bishops in the United States spoke Navajo Indian.” And suggesting that the Hebrew Catholics and their church could now become an active part in the political and social life of Israel, Jaeger added, “There are important debates going on in Israel right now over labor, over the economy, over family law, and the Church is not part of those debates because it has no voice.” Indeed, Father Gourion, in an interview with *Ha’aretz*, announced that he was planning to “build an Israeli Christian

Church” and to “open new churches where the language of worship will be in Hebrew” and train a new generation of Israeli Catholic priests who “are familiar with the Israeli culture and literature and who will be able to build-up a vibrant Israeli-Christian community.”

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is probably hoping that Bishop Gourion will emerge as a political counterbalance to the Palestinian Patriarch Sabbah. From that perspective, if the Catholic Church succeeds in evangelizing more of the “others” who reside in Israel, the existence of a community of Hebrew Christians that could conceivably number 100,000 in 10 years could be victory of sorts for the Israeli side in terms of containing the political power of the 180,000 Arab Christians in the Holy Land. But the emergence of a large and vibrant Hebrew-speaking Christian minority, reflecting the changing demographic makeup of Israel, also raises intriguing questions about the identity of Israel as a Jewish state.

Helping create the foundations of a Hebrew Christian minority in the midst of a Jewish majority was not part of the plan designed by the founders of the Zionist movement. As part of the effort to fulfill the Zionist dream of repatriating the Jewish people from the Diaspora and enable the “Ingathering of the Exiles,” the Knesset on July 5, 1950 passed the Law of Return (and related Law of Citizenship), stating that every Jew in the world has the inherent right to settle in Israel as an automatic citizen. The law did not attempt to define the term Jew. A 1970 amendment accorded the right to immigrate to Israel to non-Jews who are either children or grandchildren of a Jew, the spouse of a Jew, or the spouse of a child or grandchild of a Jew. The amendment was intended to accept families where mixed marriages were abundant, thus permitting “others” to immigrate to Israel and acquire automatic citizenship.

At the same time, Palestinian refugees who wish to return to their country of birth are not permitted to do so. That means that Woody Allen and his Korean-American wife, Soon-Yi, have the right to become Israeli citizens in a few days, while the children of an Arab-American born in Haifa do not.

Moreover, a recent amendment to the citizenship law has banned residents of the West Bank and Gaza who are married to Israeli citizens from taking up residence in Israel. The amendment doesn’t explicitly target Arabs—it bans “residents” of the occupied territories married to “Israeli citizens” from acquiring citizenship—but, *Ha’aretz* publisher Amos Schocken argues, it “constitutes harsh discrimination and a violation of the civil rights of Israeli Arabs, for whom the natural reservoir of possible marriage partners includes Palestinians in the territories,” while Jews hardly marry Arabs from the West Bank and Gaza. The law is “a source of harsh discrimination and will exacerbate the boycotting of Israel by the Arab public,” Schocken warns, adding, “A similar decree, if imposed on Jews in any country, would have elicited a harsh Israeli reaction, and justifiably so.” The UN Human Rights Commission has condemned it as racist.

The migration of Arabs from the West Bank and Gaza into Israel, the gradual evolution of a Christian community out of more than a million immigrants from the former Soviet Union, and the influx of thousands of migrant workers has ignited a debate over what Israeli officials call “immigration policy.” A committee formed by Sharon is considering several changes to the immigration laws, including such proposals as limiting the ability of those who are illegally present to obtain legal status in Israel and toughening the conditions required for immigration following marriage between Israeli and non-Israeli citizens.

In fact, what is taking place is a debate over the national identity of Israel and the definition of “Jewish state.” Will Israel be a Jewish state in the same way that Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are Muslim or in the same way that Ireland and Poland are Catholic and Great Britain is Anglican? Will Israel be an exclusive Jewish state, customized theocracy, in which Hebrew-speaking Christians and Arab Muslims and Christians are regarded as second-class citizens, or will Israel become a “normal” Western nation-state in which a Jewish majority is able to absorb into its ranks non-Jews?

The debate is dramatizing the new “demographic threat” facing Israel. Until recently, Israelis referred to that threat when discussing Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, the concern being that unless Israel withdraws from these territories, the Jews could lose their demographic majority in the area between the Jordan and the Mediterranean. But the latest statistics suggest that this may already be reality. According to the most recent official figures, the population of Israel stands at 6.8 million—5.2 million Jews, 1.3 million Arabs, and another 290,000 “others.” The Palestinian population of the Gaza Strip stands at approximately 1.4 million; in the West Bank it is about 2.4 million. There are also 237,185 Palestinians in annexed East Jerusalem. These numbers suggest that the Arab population in the entire Holy Land stands at over 5.3 million, while the Jewish population is 5.2 million. It’s therefore not surprising that most Israeli politicians, including members of Likud, are in agreement on the need to give up most of the West Bank and Gaza. That has less to do with the recognition of Palestinian national rights than the conclusion that only withdrawal could prevent Israel turning into a binational Jewish-Arab state.

But as Israel prepares to withdraw from Gaza, the current concern is that even after a withdrawal from the occupied territories, Israel could face a serious demographic threat. Indeed, the official figures understate the number of non-Jews living inside Israel. To the 290,000 “others” one has to add a large number of immigrants from Russia and Ukraine who have not registered with the Israeli government and some 100,000-500,000 illegal guest workers, suggesting the real number of non-Arab Christians is probably around 500,000. Add to that the 1.3 million Arab-Israeli citizens, the 230,000 Palestinians in East Jerusalem who have not applied for Israeli citizenship, and the estimated 200,000 illegal Palestinian residents living inside Israel, and the number of non-Jews in Israel constitutes more than 30 percent of the population. At the same time, when the Israeli government refers to 5.2 million Jewish citizens of Israel it includes what the official lingo describes as “Israeli citizens living outside the country,” who number 400,000-800,000, most of whom hold dual citizenship.

The Israeli government projection is that by 2025, inside the current borders, 30 percent of the population will be Arab, 5 percent will be “other,” and only 65 percent Jewish. Without a dramatic increase in Jewish *aliyah* to Israel—Sharon seems to hope that economic and political troubles for Jews in Europe and Latin American will produce a massive wave of immigrants—the actual percentage of Jews living in Israel will probably be smaller and that of “others” will probably be higher.

Some Israelis having been toying with the idea that as part of an agreement with an independent Palestinian state, Israel will offer to Palestine large Arab-populated areas inside Israel in exchange for keeping control of some of the Jewish settlements in the West Bank. Another proposal is to encourage

the Arab citizens of Israel to become citizens of the new Palestinian state. Both ideas are considered impractical since the majority of Arab citizens of Israel reject them.

A more realistic scenario for Israel would be to try to absorb the Arab community into Israeli political, economic, and cultural life, something that has already happened in certain fields. Just recently, Abbas Suan, one of the three Arabs on Israel’s national soccer team was hailed by Israelis—Jews and Arabs—as a hero after the understudy midfielder struck a goal in the closing minutes of a World Cup qualifying match against Ireland.

While Arab towns are underfunded compared to Jewish municipalities, many Arabs have done well in business and other professional fields, and according to some figures, Arab Christians in Israel are doing better in terms of education and standard of living than the Jewish majority, and several Druze and Bedouin officers serve in top-ranking positions in the Israeli military. Moreover, the diffusion of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could certainly make it easier for Israeli Arabs to be integrated into Israeli society.

But even before that conflict comes to an end, Israel could take steps to make the Arabs feel like equal citizens. Bush administration officials have hailed the new Iraqi leadership’s election of a Kurd to the ceremonial job of president. Since the Arabs in Israel, like the Kurds in Iraq, constitute 20 percent of the population, why not elect an Arab to the ceremonial job of president of Israel? Similarly, while American officials and pundits celebrated the Cedar Revolution in Lebanon and the evolution of a new Lebanese nationalism that seeks to create a national identity that brings together Maronite Christians, Muslims, and Shi’ites, why not seek a similar new definition of Israeli nationalism that will

permit Hebrew-speaking Jews and Christians, Arab Muslims and Christians, and Druze to become part of an Israeli nation?

That will mean that Israel will have to move beyond the notion of a Jewish ghetto in the Eastern Mediterranean and advance into a new stage in its political and cultural development that Israeli intellectuals describe as “post-Zionism,” in which Israel as a normal European nation-state defines its identity based on territory, language, and culture. Jewish religion and culture will still remain a powerful component of the Israeli identity, in the same way that Christianity is an important element of the national character of many European states, and Jews around the world would maintain familial and cultural ties to Israel, as many Latin Americans feel an attachment to Spain. But in the same way that Jews in North America and Europe have struggled and succeeded in becoming full citizens in the midst of Christian majorities, they shouldn’t be surprised if the Hebrew-speaking Christian community, which will probably grow in numbers in the coming years, strives to win equal rights in Israeli society.

Since—unlike Arab citizens of Israel—no one can accuse Hebrew Christians of posing a threat to national security, there is really no reason they shouldn’t become as Israeli as their Jewish neighbors. Indeed, by permitting new recruits to the Israeli army to pledge allegiance on the New Testament, the government seemed to recognize that one can indeed be a proud Israeli and a observant Christian at the same time. Israel may not be ready for an Arab president, but what about a Hebrew Christian prime minister? ■

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# Discriminating Tastes

The ongoing effort to overthrow Prop. 209

By Steven Greenhut

ON NOV. 5, 1996 California voters approved, by 54 percent to 46 percent, a groundbreaking antidiscrimination measure known as Proposition 209. Yet despite the passage of nearly nine years, the assaults on this common-sense measure continue.

Prop. 209 amended California’s Constitution to read: “The state shall not discriminate against, or grant preferential treatment to, any individual or group on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin in the operation of public employment, public education, or public contracting.” It included necessary caveats, such as allowing sex to be considered as “reasonably necessary to the normal operation of public employment.”

Who could object to something so obvious and fair? Government should not discriminate against individuals. Yet such seemingly unobjectionable language is highly objectionable. We know why. The Left only gives lip service to nondiscrimination, but in fact is committed to a race-based agenda that allows government officials to hand out political spoils to the “underrepresented minority groups” they favor. Which is why political leaders continue to try to chip away at 209.

In May 2005, Sacramento Superior Court Judge Thomas Cecil struck down one of the most recent and blatant attempts to circumvent Prop. 209. Called Assembly Bill 703, the measure, passed in 2003 and signed into law by Gray Davis, gives a fascinating insight into the world of California liberalism.

To 209 foes, nondiscrimination is troubling, as are the precepts of the

American founding. But international treaties and the United Nations are wonderful things. So legislators, led by Assemblyman Mervyn Dymally, sought to replace American-based jurisprudence with UN-style lawmaking. The legislation argued that Section 31 of Article I of the California Constitution—Prop. 209’s language—has created “confusion and conflict” because in banning racial discrimination it does not define what racial discrimination might be.

In my experience, men such as Dymally never have trouble spotting racism, real or perceived, so this is an unusual problem. But the solution is even more unusual and disturbing. The law embraced the definition used by the United Nations’ International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, as adopted in 1965. And—no surprise—the convention allows discriminatory measures such as racial and ethnic quotas to be used for affirmative-action purposes.

The Pacific Legal Foundation, along with Prop. 209 co-sponsor Ward Connerly, filed suit against former governor Davis and Attorney General Bill Lockyer, an affirmative-action supporter who has tried various ways to undermine Prop. 209. The argument was flawless. The legislature cannot on its own change the language in the state constitution. Dymally is free to collect signatures to put the matter before the voters, but he cannot quietly substitute United Nations language for constitutional language.

“This is a happy day for me personally,” Connerly said, according to news reports. “We’re putting another nail in