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The Battle of Numbers

We shall try to spirit the penniless [Palestinian] population across the border by procuring employment for it in the transit countries whilst denying it any employment in our own country ... Both the process of expropriation and the removal of the poor must be carried out discreetly and circumspectly.

Theodor Herzl (1895)¹

It must be clear that there is no room in the country for both peoples ... There is no way but to transfer the Arabs from here to the neighboring countries, to transfer all of them, save perhaps for Bethlehem, Nazareth, and the old Jerusalem. Not one village must be left, not one tribe. The transfer must be directed at Iraq, Syria, and even Transjordan. For this goal funds will be found.

Joseph Weitz, director of the Jewish National Fund's Land Department (1940)²

[Israel must] implement a stringent policy of family planning in relation to its Muslim population. The delivery rooms in Soroka Hospital in Be'er Sheva [serving the Negev's Bedouin population] have turned into a factory for the production of a backward population.

Yitzhak Ravid, head of the Rafael Arms Development Authority (2003)³

The vast empty spaces of the Negev, Israel's southern desert, are a playground for the Israeli army and the smugglers who cross its long open border with Egypt to trade in anything for which there is a demand: from cars and cigarettes to guns and women. The desert forms 60 per cent of Israel's land mass but is home to fewer than 7 per cent of its citizens. Many are to be found in Be'ersheva, a grim oasis of concrete that is the capital of the Negev and Israel's fourth largest city. In early August 2003 I travelled there to meet Morad as-Sana, a Bedouin lawyer who had just returned from a honeymoon in Istanbul. He and his wife Abir, a lecturer in social work, had come back to a new law that made it illegal for them to live together. As they crossed over the border from Jordan, they were forced to part: Morad to his apartment in Be'ersheva, and Abir to her parents' home in the West Bank city of Bethlehem.

While they were away, the Knesset had passed a temporary amendment to one of Israel's founding pieces of legislation, the Nationality Law of 1952, making it impossible for an Israeli citizen to obtain a residency permit for a Palestinian spouse from the occupied territories.⁴ In effect, Israel had banned marriages between Israelis and Palestinians. Under the new law, 27-year-old Abir was barred from joining her husband in Be'ersheva, and Morad, aged 30, was banned by military regulations from entering a Palestinian-controlled area like Bethlehem.⁵ Israel had revoked a fundamental human right of its Arab citizens: the right to love and to raise a family.

The pair were far from alone in their enforced separation. The amendment, known as the Nationality and Entry into Israel Law, discriminated against hundreds of Arab citizens recently married or preparing to marry a Palestinian from the occupied territories. It also promised an uncertain future for thousands more long-established couples: Palestinian spouses who had been stuck for years in Israel's interminable naturalisation process would now find their applications for a residency permit or citizenship frozen or refused. Without a permit, the families would either be forced into hiding or torn apart.

Morad and Abir were determined to live together. "We will live like fugitives," said Morad, who had few illusions about what that would entail. "We won't be able to give out our address, Abir will not be able to leave the house or work in Israel, or go to the doctor if she gets sick. We will learn to fear every knock at the door."

The terrible plight of couples like Morad and Abir briefly caught the world's attention. The amendment to the Nationality Law provoked outrage from international and Israeli human rights groups, which had no hesitation in calling the measure racist.⁶ Technically the law also applied to Israeli Jews who married Palestinians, but in practice only the rights of Arab citizens were being harmed. (The law, of course, did not apply to the other inhabitants of the occupied territories – the Jewish settlers.) B'Tselem pointed out that the legislation violated Israel's Basic Law on Human Dignity and Liberty as well as a pledge in the Declaration of Independence that the state would "ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or ethnicity".⁷ Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch submitted a joint letter of protest to the Knesset shortly before the vote on the amendment, urging parliamentarians to reject it because it contravened international law.⁸ Even the dovish interior minister, Avraham Poraz, who had been required to legislate

the amendment by the prime minister, Ariel Sharon, was apologetic. He admitted: "It would be best if the bill never made it to the law books, because an enlightened and humane society should allow reunification of families."⁹

Such regrets were of little consolation to Morad. He had met Abir three years earlier on a peace-building programme in Canada designed to encourage Israelis and Palestinians to trust each other and partly sponsored by the local Israeli embassy. "I am an Israeli citizen and this is supposed to be my state. What other country treats its citizens in this way?" he asked. "And what message does this [law] send us apart from that our government not only doesn't trust the Palestinians but it doesn't trust us either." He paused briefly as he contemplated his future, and then added: "Where does it stop? What will they do next?"

As the bill passed the Knesset vote, Israeli officials strenuously denied that it had any racist motive. The law, argued the head of the Shin Bet, Avi Dichter, was "vital for Israel's security".¹⁰ He claimed that the government had been forced to block the entry of Palestinian spouses into Israel after a small number had abused their naturalised status to participate in terror attacks. Despite a petition to the courts, it was never clarified how many naturalised Palestinians had been involved in such attacks or in what ways. Several commentators suspected that the measure had been drafted not with security in mind but out of a fear that Palestinian applications for Israeli citizenship through marriage would eventually erode the country's Jewish majority. Naturalisation through marriage offered Palestinians from the occupied territories the one and only legal route to acquiring Israeli citizenship. A *Ha'aretz* editorial sounded less than convinced by Israel's official arguments: "On the assumption that the bill is indeed for security purposes, as the government claims, [it] appears to be both an unnecessarily vehement and unbalanced reaction to the security situation."¹¹

The story of "the separation wall through the heart", as one international human rights lawyer called the legislation,¹² slowly dropped off the media's radar. Over the next two years large Knesset majorities renewed the temporary amendment. Only in May 2005 did the issue briefly flare up again, when the government made further modifications to the law, ostensibly designed to suggest a slight easing of the restrictions but which in practice made almost no difference.

THE NEED FOR 'A MASSIVE JEWISH MAJORITY'

Shortly after the cabinet vote on the new legislation, the prime minister, Ariel Sharon, held an impromptu press conference to explain the decision. At the time he was on his way to Washington, on a trip designed to soften up the Bush Administration over the terms of Israel's imminent evacuation of 8,000 settlers from the Gaza Strip. Tens of thousands of feet above the green-blue waters of the Atlantic Ocean, Sharon publicly addressed the issue of demographics for the first time as prime minister. His comments marked a dramatic turning-point in the government's official policy. He told the press corps:

The Jews have one small country, Israel, and must do everything so that this state remains a Jewish state in the future as well. There is no intention of hurting anyone here; there's merely a correct and important intention of Israel being a Jewish state with a massive Jewish majority. That's what needs to be done, and that's exactly what we're doing. This is considered normal everywhere.¹³

Before his flight to Washington, Sharon had made a similar observation to senior ministers and security officials. "There's no need to hide behind security arguments," he reportedly told them. "There is a need for the existence of a Jewish state."¹⁴ His officials took him at his word. The website of the *Yediot Aharonot* newspaper reported that the National Security Council, the body that advises the prime minister on the country's security needs, was preparing to recommend other restrictions on citizenship as a way of "improving the demographic situation in Israel".¹⁵ Later it emerged that further changes to the Nationality Law would exclude not just Palestinians but any non-Jew marrying an Israeli.¹⁶ According to a report in the *Ha'aretz* newspaper: "There is broad agreement in the government and academia that the policy must be strict and make it difficult for non-Jews to obtain citizenship in Israel."¹⁷

The Jewish state already had some the toughest naturalisation laws in the world, requiring of non-Jews who married Israelis that they remain in the country on temporary residency permits for at least five years and renounce their existing citizenship. Even then, their application could be rejected if they failed to meet undisclosed criteria set by the Population Registry in a government procedure over which, uniquely, there was no judicial appeal. Now Israel was intending to tighten the rules to the point where non-Jews would be ineligible for

citizenship or possibly even residency, and the children of an Israeli and a non-Jew would lose their citizenship rights too.

The new uncompromising mood was almost certainly a reflection of much wider demographic concerns that were preoccupying Sharon's government during the second intifada. They were most notable in Sharon's sudden conversion to the cause of "unilateral separation" in general and disengagement in particular.

There had been much speculation about the reasons for the "Gaza Disengagement Plan", as it was named, since Sharon announced it in February 2004.¹⁸ He advanced it in the face of bitter and relentless criticism from the right wing, especially from senior members of his own Likud party, including his chief rival for the party's leadership, Binyamin Netanyahu, and militant settler groups who called the move "a transfer of Jews" and staged violent protests, including blocking public roads and attacking public buildings, to prevent its implementation. Why had the man widely seen as the chief architect of the settlement project in the occupied territories – the politician-general who infamously told his followers in 1998 to "grab hilltops" to prevent occupied land being handed back to the Palestinians under the Oslo Accords¹⁹ – turned on the settlers now? Why the sudden change of heart, even if only in Gaza?

There was more than a suspicion among commentators in the Hebrew media that, faced with pressure from President George W. Bush to help create a "viable Palestinian state" as part of a US-sponsored diplomatic peace plan known as the Road Map, Sharon needed a concession to get the Americans off his back.²⁰ He needed to give the Palestinians something that could be presented as the first step on the path towards Palestinian statehood.²¹ Gaza was a small limb of the Zionist project and could be sacrificed without too much pain: it had no religious or historic significance to the Jewish people, and only a few thousand settlers were living there. More importantly, though, in severing its connection to the tiny but hugely overcrowded Gaza Strip, Israel was also disposing of an unwanted Palestinian population estimated at about 1.3 million, more than a quarter of all the Palestinians who fell under its rule.²² The rapidly growing Gazan population had been a demographic thorn in Israel's side for some time. An earlier prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin, had once publicly wished Gaza "would fall into the sea". He had added: "Since that won't happen, a solution must be found for the problem."²³ In disengaging, Sharon seemed to have found the best solution available.

During the course of the second intifada it had become increasingly apparent to Israeli politicians, diplomats, academics and generals that the country's continuing military rule in the occupied territories was losing legitimacy – even in American eyes. The Oslo years, when Israel had been able to mask its control through Yasser Arafat's corrupt and largely dependent regime of the Palestinian Authority, were effectively over. Israel was clearly back in charge, running the show directly from Jerusalem, even if it made great play of the occasional handover of a West Bank city to the Palestinian security forces. In response, campaigns by the global Churches to withdraw their investments from Israel were being stepped up,²⁴ and the biggest British union of university lecturers passed a motion in April 2005 to boycott two Israeli universities.²⁵ Even though lobbying by Israeli and Jewish academics in Britain managed to overturn the motion a short time later, the psychological and emotional barriers that once prevented groups in the West from punishing Israel were starting to fall.

GAZA AND FEAR OF THE APARTHEID COMPARISON

The new harsher climate of opinion had been partly created by bolder voices in Europe prepared to compare Israel's rule in the occupied territories to that of white South Africa during the apartheid years.²⁶ Paradoxically, security-minded Israeli academics were making much the same calculation, warning their leaders of the pressing need to withdraw from Palestinian territory.²⁷ Their thinking was driven by political and ethnic arithmetic:²⁸ between the Mediterranean sea and the River Jordan – in the land once known as Palestine and today longed for by many Israelis as the enlarged state of "Greater Israel" – the populations of Jews and Palestinians had reached virtual parity. According to Israeli demographers, there were 5.2 million Jews compared to a little over 4.9 million Palestinians, the combined Palestinian populations living in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza.²⁹ Given the far higher Palestinian birth rate and Israel's continuing hold on the occupied territories, Jews would soon be a minority in Greater Israel.³⁰ Once the region contained a majority of non-Jews, so the argument went, the Palestinians needed only to demand one person-one vote for the artifice of the "Jewish and democratic state" to crumble. Greater Israel would have to adopt the discredited apartheid model to enforce its rule or find itself transformed by demographics into Greater Palestine.

In November 2003 Ehud Olmert, a member of Sharon's inner circle in the cabinet, set out the new predicament facing Israel in an interview with the *Ha'aretz* newspaper. In doing so, he was also undoubtedly reflecting the prime minister's new thinking.

There is no doubt in my mind that very soon the government of Israel is going to have to address the demographic issue with the utmost seriousness and resolve. This issue above all others will dictate the solution that we must adopt ... We don't have unlimited time. More and more Palestinians are uninterested in a negotiated, two-state solution, because they want to change the essence of the conflict from an Algerian paradigm [of armed resistance to occupation] to a South African one. From a struggle against "occupation", in their parlance, to a struggle for one-man-one-vote. That is, of course, a much cleaner struggle, a much more popular struggle – and ultimately a much more powerful one. For us, it would mean the end of the Jewish state.

Olmert concluded with what sounded much like a justification for the Gaza disengagement Sharon would shortly announce: "[The] formula for the parameters of a unilateral solution are: To maximize the number of Jews; to minimize the number of Palestinians."³¹

Professor Arnon Sofer, the head of geopolitics at Haifa University and the most prominent of the demographic prophets of doom, summarised Israel's plight in even starker terms in July 2004, shortly after Sharon unveiled the disengagement plan. Placing himself in the Palestinians' position, Sofer described how they might see the future of the conflict from what he called their "prisons" of Gaza and the West Bank:

The Jews won't permit us to have an army, while their own powerful army will surround us. They won't permit us to have an air force, while their own air force will fly over us. They won't allow us the Right of Return [of refugees]. Why should we make a deal with them? Why should we accept a state from them? Let's wait patiently for another 10 years, when the Jews will comprise a mere 40 percent of the country, while we will be 60 percent. The world won't allow a minority to rule over a majority, so Palestine will be ours.³²

Like Olmert and Sofer, Sharon doubtless regarded cutting Gaza adrift as the minimum price to be paid to maintain Israel's international standing and its control over most of the West Bank. Losing some 1.3 million Gazans would buy the Jewish state a little time as it sought

a way to deal with its urgent demographic problems.³³ Throughout 2004, however, as the debate about disengagement raged, Sharon personally avoided referring to questions of demography, preferring the country's usual justifications based on "security". Yossi Alpher, a former adviser to Ehud Barak, noted the most likely reason: "Sharon apparently downplays demography because to highlight it would put the spotlight on his own central role of settling the West Bank and Gaza in the course of the past three decades, thereby creating the demographic problem in the first place."³⁴ Only as Israel began evacuating the settlements in August 2005 did Sharon allude to the fact that a demographic imperative lay behind the disengagement. In a short televised national address, he offered a single substantive reason for leaving Gaza: "We cannot hold on to Gaza forever. More than a million Palestinians live there and double their number with each generation."³⁵ Vice-Premier Shimon Peres was more plain-speaking. "We are disengaging from Gaza because of demography," he told the BBC's *Newsnight* programme.³⁶

A JEWISH CONSENSUS EMERGES

Although no one was making the connection, the disengagement, the effective ban on Israeli Arabs marrying Palestinians, and the proposal to prevent Israelis marrying non-Jews were all products of a new tide of Jewish chauvinism sweeping Israel, winning converts across the political spectrum and at the highest levels.³⁷ In the vision being formulated by Israeli officials during the second intifada, the Jewish state was a place where only Jews were welcome and only Jews counted. The obsessive number-crunching of demographers, and their media elevation to guru status, suggested the shallowness and profoundly anti-democratic trend of the approach. Some Israeli leaders still used "security" as the defence of policies that violated the rights of non-Jews, but with far less conviction. The distinction between security and demographic issues had always been blurred in Zionist thinking but now it was vanishing. As Ilan Saban, a professor of public law at Haifa University, observed disconsolately: "We have, unfortunately, become a Jewish and demographic state."³⁸

Such obsessions were far from novel. Surveys since the 1970s had shown a remarkable consistency in the replies of Jewish respondents when asked about the ideal traits of their country. For example, a poll undertaken by Haifa University in 1995, at the height of optimism about the Oslo peace process, showed that 95 per cent of Israeli Jews

rejected the idea of Israel as a liberal democracy. In a series of surveys taken between 1980 and 1995, the team found that on average about 60 per cent of Israeli Jews believed the Jewish character of their state was more important than its democratic character.³⁹

These results were confirmed again in 2003 in a major opinion poll, the Democracy Index, organised by the Israel Democracy Institute, which reported “alarming findings”. It concluded: “The picture emerging from the various indicators shows that Israel is mainly a formal democracy that has not yet acquired the characteristics of a substantive democracy.” According to the survey, only 77 per cent of Israeli Jews believed democracy of any sort was a desirable form of government, giving Israelis the lowest ranking in a comparative survey of public attitudes in 35 democratic states. More than half of Israeli Jews said they opposed equality for Arab citizens; more than two-thirds objected to Arab political parties joining the government; and 57 per cent thought Arab citizens should be encouraged to emigrate, either through inducements or force.⁴⁰

Although a strain of anti-democratic and anti-Arab thinking had been prominent among the Jewish public for decades – a legacy of its Zionist training from the cradle – there was something discernibly new about the political climate in Israel after the eruption of the second intifada. It was evinced in a willingness by the country’s leaders, including its leftwing elites, to speak out in public using the same chauvinistic language more usually heard on the street or from the far right. In the new consensus, rabbis, politicians, generals and intellectuals of all political stripes agreed that the country needed to return to what was seen as its founding vision: a Jewish state that was for and of Jews only.

Increasingly shrill reports on the demographic growth of the Palestinian minority served only to fuel the alarm. Prof. Sofer of Haifa University, for example, warned that the population growth of Israeli Arabs, at about 3.5 per cent a year, was comparable to sub-Saharan Africa but that their mortality rate was close to Europe’s. He also noted that the Bedouin in the Negev had an even higher rate of increase: at 4.5 per cent, one of the biggest in the world. According to Sofer’s forecasts, there would be 2.1 million Arab citizens by 2020. Given a Jewish birth rate of only 1 per cent, he predicted demographic calamity as the “non-Jewish” minority grew to 32 per cent of the population within a few years. This would give Israeli Arabs an electoral influence that could, he warned, undermine Israel’s

democratic features and pass effective control of the Knesset to the Palestinian leadership in the occupied territories.

The leaders of the Palestinian Authority have been using the electoral power of the Arabs of Israel for their own needs ... [Israeli Arabs] can tip the balance on decisions about the future of Golan or the future of Jerusalem if these decisions are put to a referendum or incorporated into a party's platform. In their hands lies the power to determine the right of return or to decide who is a Jew ... In another few years, they will be able to decide whether the State of Israel should continue to be a Jewish-Zionist State or whether it should "turn into a State of all its citizens".⁴¹

Given this kind of logic, the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza were far less of a problem than Israel's own substantial Arab minority. A mixture of building walls and disengaging could keep the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza out of the Jewish state. But once that task was complete, Israelis would still face the difficult question of what to do with the rapidly growing Palestinian population who lived in the heart of Israel, supposedly as equal citizens. How was the threat that their demographic growth posed to the Jewishness of the state to be countered? How could they be prevented by democratic means from bringing Palestinians back into the state through marriage? And how could a fifth of the population continue to be excluded from the centres of power when all they were demanding was democratic reform, the creation of a "state of all its citizens"? As Sharon's government began formulating responses to these questions, politicians and academics of the left fell into step.

THE BIRTH OF A NEW BENNY MORRIS

Benny Morris, a distinguished historian who had done much to explode the myths of the traditional Zionist account of Israel's founding, came to personify the terrible intellectual contortions needed by the left in the new political era. He began over the course of the second intifada to argue that Zionism's pre-state leaders had failed in their historic mission to create a fully Jewish state when they allowed a rump Palestinian population to remain inside the borders of Israel during the 1948 war. The 150,000 Palestinians of 1948 had become the more than one million Israeli Arabs of today, a population group he referred to as a "time bomb".

Morris's thinking was first articulated in Britain's *Guardian* newspaper in 2002, when he quoted extensively and approvingly from the writings of early Jewish leaders in Palestine. He showed convincingly that they had known there was only one way to create a Jewish state: through the mass expulsion of the native Palestinian population.⁴² Later Morris fleshed out these ideas in a lengthy interview with the *Ha'aretz* newspaper. After observing that Israel's first prime minister, David Ben Gurion, had made sure before the 1948 war that "there is an atmosphere of transfer" – the word most Israelis prefer over the more explicit phrase "ethnic cleansing" – he continued:

I think [Ben Gurion] made a serious historical mistake in 1948. Even though he understood the demographic issue and the need to establish a Jewish state without a large Arab minority, he got cold feet during the war. In the end, he faltered ... I know that this stuns the Arabs and the liberals and the politically correct types. But my feeling is that this place would be quieter and know less suffering if the matter had been resolved once and for all ... If the end of the story turns out to be a gloomy one for the Jews, it will be because Ben Gurion did not complete the transfer in 1948. Because he left a large and volatile demographic reserve in the West Bank and Gaza and within Israel itself.⁴³

Morris's concerns about this "volatile demographic reserve", he made clear, stemmed from his view of the Palestinian mind as essentially irrational and diseased, a position he appeared to have developed during his well-publicised interviews with former Prime Minister Ehud Barak. "When one has to deal with a serial killer, it's not so important to discover why he became a serial killer. What's important is to imprison the murderer or execute him." Asked how he proposed dealing with the murderous mentality of the Palestinians, Morris replied: "Something like a cage has to be built for them. I know that sounds terrible. It is really cruel. But there is no choice. There is a wild animal there that has to be locked away one way or another."

Morris, however, continued by suggesting that the cage policy might ultimately fail to contain the Palestinians, and then Israel would face the same moment of crisis as in 1948, when expulsion of the Palestinians was needed to save the Jewish state. This time Israel could not afford to hesitate.

If you are asking me whether I support the transfer and expulsion of the Arabs from the West Bank, Gaza and perhaps even from Galilee and the Triangle

[inside Israel], I say not at this moment ... But I am ready to tell you that in other circumstances, apocalyptic ones, which are liable to be realized in five or ten years, I can see expulsions.

Did he include expulsion of the country's Arab minority, the interviewer asked.

The Israeli Arabs are a time bomb. Their slide into complete Palestinization has made them an emissary of the enemy that is among us. They are a potential fifth column. In both demographic and security terms they are liable to undermine the state. So that if Israel again finds itself in a situation of existential threat, as in 1948, it may be forced to act as it did then.

Morris was simply following to its logical conclusion Israel's founding ideology. As a "Jewish and democratic" state, Israel needed a convincing Jewish majority so that its decisions – even discriminatory and racist ones – could be justified as the will of the people. Morris believed that, as the ethnic arithmetic again turned against a Jewish majority, the country's leaders must confront the same questions faced by the generation of 1948. In Morris's mind, the most worrying demographic phenomenon was the relentless growth of the Israeli Arab population and what Morris characterised as its "radicalization" or "Palestinization". These terms, regularly used by Israelis when talking about the Palestinian minority, were rarely explained. They were a kind of shorthand understood by all Israelis, from Morris to Sharon. But what did they mean?

As we have seen, Sharon and Barak believed that the country's Arab citizens had been unmasked during the second intifada as a second front of the Palestinians in the occupied territories. They reached this conclusion from their premise that the Israeli Arabs could not have been the sole authors of the call for a "state of all its citizens", the main political programme of the minority's parties since the late 1990s. Someone else was behind the campaign. The culprit could be inferred from the goal of a state of all its citizens: the destruction of Israel as a Jewish state. As far as Barak, Sharon and apparently Morris were concerned, this was proof enough that Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian Authority were the true authors. The Palestinians, they believed, hoped to use Israeli Arabs as advance troops, subverting Israel from within through a political campaign for democratisation.

The Israeli leadership demographic fears did not end there, however. The amendment to the Nationality Law showed that Sharon also believed the citizenship enjoyed by the country's Arabs could be further exploited by the Palestinian leadership. As Israel tried to separate itself from the Palestinians through wall-building and disengagements, Arafat could retake the initiative by converting marriage into a demographic weapon. If he encouraged Palestinians to wed Israeli Arabs, they would have the right to leave their prisons in the West Bank and Gaza and return to Israel as the spouse of an Israeli citizen. In the imagination of Sharon and Morris, the Israeli Arabs were a Trojan horse, carrying inside them the seeds of the Jewish state's destruction.

THE ISRAELI ARAB TIME BOMB

Senior political and military leaders expressed similar misgivings about the "time bomb" represented by the country's Palestinian minority. In October 2004, well after the Gaza disengagement had been announced, the public security minister, Gideon Ezra, told *Yediot Aharonot* that the presence of Palestinian citizens in the Jewish state was the most troubling aspect of the conflict. "There are Arab citizens in the State of Israel. This is our greatest sorrow. Finish things in Gaza, finish things in Judea and Samaria [the West Bank]. We'll be left with the greatest sorrow."⁴⁴

Israel's military chief of staff through most of the second intifada, Moshe Ya'alon, described the crushing of the Palestinian uprising as "the conclusion of the War of Independence", implying that he regarded the military assault on the Palestinians as the completion of a job unfinished in 1948. He also compared the threat of the Palestinians to cancer.

When you are attacked externally, you can see the attack, you are wounded. Cancer, on the other hand, is something internal. Therefore, I find it more disturbing, because here the diagnosis is critical ... My professional diagnosis is that there is a phenomenon here that constitutes an existential threat.⁴⁵

As the sociologist Baruch Kimmerling noted, the Palestinians in the occupied territories were regarded by Israelis as an external problem, so in talking of an "internal" threat Ya'alon appeared to be referring to the country's Palestinian citizens.⁴⁶ Such an interpretation was confirmed by a later interview, in 2005, as Ya'alon prepared to step

down from his post. He alluded to the coming apocalypse hinted at by Morris. As well as the “external existential threat” posed to the survival of the Jewish state by the Palestinians in the occupied territories, he said: “There is one internal existential threat which concerns me very much, but I will not discuss it as long as I am in uniform.”⁴⁷ It was difficult to imagine what the threat could be apart from the “cancer” of the Israeli Arabs.

Morris’s observation that Israel’s Arab minority was a “demographic and security” threat reflected the blurring of these terms in Israeli discourse. The demographic threat of high Arab birth rates, which for Israelis like Morris meant the Jewish state was being swamped by a tide of Arab babies, was inescapably also a threat to the long-term survival – and therefore security – of a Jewish state. In the opinion of many Israelis, it was the biggest security threat facing Israel. This was the view endorsed by the former prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu. Shortly before Morris’s interview, Netanyahu, then the finance minister in Sharon’s government, addressed the Herzliya conference, the largest annual gathering of Israel’s political and security establishment, telling them:

If there is a demographic problem, and there is, it is with the Israeli Arabs who will remain Israeli citizens ... We therefore need a policy that will first of all guarantee a Jewish majority. I say this with no hesitation, as a liberal, a democrat, and a Jewish patriot.⁴⁸

The ideological path being pursued by Israel with increasing determination following the outbreak of the second intifada was laid out long before, in the events that forged a Jewish state on the Palestinian homeland. In the pre-state philosophy of Zionists like Vladimir Jabotinsky, an “iron wall” policy of force was needed to make the native Palestinian population submit. In practice, however, faced with enduring hostility from Palestinians over their national dispossession in 1948, Israel had built its walls to exclude as well. The Israeli historian Ilan Pappé characterised Zionism, the ideological foundations of the Jewish state, in the following terms: “The gates are kept closed, and the walls high, to ward off an ‘Arab’ invasion of the Jewish fortress.”⁴⁹

ZIONISM’S LONG DEMOGRAPHIC NIGHTMARE

The “demographic problem”, as Morris correctly noted, had been an enduring Zionist obsession since well before the creation of Israel.