

Opinion Iran and Hamas Threaten Israel's External Security. Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Leaders Threaten From Within

Ultra-Orthodox Jewish leaders are dragging Israel into the Third World. Their insistence on keeping Jews in ignorance and poverty is both a profound embarrassment, and a threat to Israel's security.



An Ultra-Orthodox Jewish boy looks through a window of a ritual booth, known as a sukkah, used during the Jewish holiday of Sukkot, Ashdod, Israel. September 20, 2018\ AMIR COHEN/ REUTERS

- **What it's really like to be ultra-Orthodox in America - and illiterate in English**
- **How Israel's religious ultra-nationalists fought a civil war, retreated to the ghetto and lost their influence**
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The ultra-Orthodox political leadership is destroying the State of Israel. Literally.

It is dismantling the economic foundations of the Jewish state by preventing Haredi Jews from becoming productive citizens in a modern, developed economy.

It is humiliating these Jews by depriving them of the dignity of earning a living and supporting their children and families.

>> Israel Is Not Becoming a Jewish Fundamentalist State

It is alienating non-Haredi Israelis, who must bear the burdens of taxation and army service that the Haredim have forsaken.

And if all this were not enough, it continues to insult and offend Diaspora Jewry by engaging in non-stop name-calling and creating a malignant alliance between the institutions of government and the institutions of religion.

Of course, it professes to be acting in the name of Jewish tradition, but is actually distorting and besmirching that tradition for its own narrow purposes. Lovers of Torah can only weep. re harsh words. But it is too late for delicacy or euphemisms.

Israelis know how to deal with security problems. They know what to do when Hezbollah, Hamas, Syria, and Iran threaten Israel with military action. But what happens when they are attacked from within, by corrupt religious parties known for their lies and political horse-trading, camouflaged by a thick layer of religious sanctimony?

In such cases, Israel's political elites - Haredi and non-Haredi alike -generally prefer not to confront the problem at all.

Neither side can imagine a historic cataclysm that will finally end the massive machinery of religious coercion that the Haredim have established, which is the cause of the mess Israel is in. Both sides assume, fatalistically, that the status quo can continue forever. Even when, as is now the case, it clearly cannot.



Ultra-Orthodox Jewish men during religious studies in the Sha'arei Hesed neighborhood in Jerusalem, Israel. Aug. 1, 2010 Bloomberg

Consider the following: Professor Dan Ben-David of Tel Aviv University, President of the Shores Institute for Socioeconomic Research, has issued a report entitled "Overpopulation and demography in Israel."

Ben-David is worried that in 40 years, Israel will be more crowded than any country in the world, except for Bangladesh. He notes that it is already the fourth most crowded country in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), a group of 34 developed countries.

And why this worry? Because Israel has a very high birthrate, which is usually a blessing.

But this high birthrate comes alongside a long list of deeply troubling conditions: Israel's rate of poverty is exceedingly high when compared with other OECD countries; its labor productivity is disturbingly low, and continuing to fall; its dependency rate is the highest in the OECD - meaning that it has the highest ratio of non-working adults to working adults; and most distressing of all, its public education is a resounding failure.

The literacy and mathematical skills of its students, as measured in international exams, are far below those of the vast majority of OECD students. Indeed, the overpopulation crisis is really an education crisis. Israel is a developed country and the so-called "Start-Up Nation," but as the Shores report shows, a substantial segment of its citizens receives a Third World education.



Ultra-orthodox Jewish women seen through barrier to separate them from the men, pray at the grave of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai during Lag Ba'Omer celebrations at Mt. Meron. May 16, 2006 Oded Balilty / AP

To say that this picture is a grim one is an understatement. But the report is thorough and the data are compelling. And the most important conclusion that emerges is that two communities - Haredim and Arabic-speaking Israelis - are key to the educational and economic crisis in which Israel finds herself.

Of course, this conclusion is not really news. Israelis have long known that the Haredi and Israeli Arab communities have the highest percentage of poorly skilled adults, the lowest percentage of employed people, and the most sub-par outcomes in the educational testing of their children.

What is new, as Ben-David demonstrates, is that as poverty deepens, inequality in Israeli society is growing dramatically worse. The huge gaps between Israel's various population subgroups have reached shameful levels, unacceptable by any moral, civic, or political standard.

Also new, and very important, is the fact that things are getting better among Israeli Arabs and worse among Israeli Haredim.

Israel's government, to its credit, is in the midst of a five-year plan for economic

improvement in the Arab sector. And while there is much yet to do, government figures published last week in the financial newspaper *Calcalist* showed a dramatic increase in the employment of Arab women over the past year.



Ultra-Orthodox Jewish men walk past artist Solomon Souza, 22, as he spray-paints a portrait on the metal shutter of a closed storefront in Mahane Yehuda, Jerusalem. February 24, 2016\ REUTERS

In the second quarter of 2017, 35% of Arab women were employed; a year later, the number was 40%. Since the underemployment of women is the major economic problem for the Arab sector, these figures are indicative of a significant turnaround. The shrinking of the Arab birthrate from 4.5% to 3.1% in the last 20 years also indicates educational and economic progress for Israeli Arab women.

Among Haredim, the opposite is happening.

There, the problem is not the employment rate of women but of men, who are directed by their rabbis to forsake the labor market for full-time Torah study. In the 1980s, the employment rate for Haredi men was 64%. In 2015, slightly less than 54% of Haredi men were employed. Two years later, that number had dropped to 51%.

>> What the Radicalization of Israel's ultra-Orthodox Community Looks Like From the Inside

Some suggest that statistics notwithstanding, there are reasons for optimism. Various observers have argued that turmoil in the Haredi world is certain to generate change, sooner rather than later. In this view, access to the internet and smartphones has liberated young Haredi men and women from the isolation to which they had long been condemned.

Even more important, the argument goes, the current rabbinic leaders lack the spiritual authority of their predecessors. They are seen more as political hacks than giants of Torah. And the Haredi parties, once able to articulate common values, have collapsed into an endless cycle of petty bickering and internal upheaval.

The result is that the masses of young Haredi men are challenging the rabbis whose edicts are keeping them in desperate poverty. Why, these young men

wonder, must they be confined to the four walls of the yeshiva?



An ultra-Orthodox tech entrepreneur works on a laptop computer by a notepad in the Clicktale Ltd. offices in Ramat Gan, Israel. July 10, 2016 Bloomberg

It has begun to occur to them that they can remain fervently religious and still be productive, contributing members of society. They can have careers, make a living, support their families, and still find time for study of Torah. And it also has occurred to them that the politicians in religious garb who are directing their lives may be doing so more out of self-interest and a need for control than out of reverence for tradition.

Nonetheless, while all of these things are true, it is also true that actual change is impossible without government intervention.

If you are Haredi, dissatisfied with your lot, and want to enter a profession, how are you to do so without an education? As Professor Ben-David makes clear, the only answer to Israel's economic woes is "opening the education floodgates and letting the knowledge already existing in its best higher education institutions flow to every school in Israel - with particular emphasis on the areas currently receiving a Third World education."

What this means is that Haredi schools in Israel must be obligated to do what every other school in Israel does: Teach the "core curriculum," consisting of English, math, civics and science. Such studies, of course, would be alongside traditional Torah study.

In fact, regulations now exist mandating this requirement, but the Haredi schools ignore them, and are allowed to do so.

And enforcing these regulations will not happen through pleading or persuasion, but only through compulsion, with every cent of government funding to be forfeited if the requirement is ignored. The argument that schools will get there on their own is ridiculous. Unless arms are twisted, the rabbinical bureaucrats running these schools will resist at every turn, and decades will pass before the required changes are introduced.



President Reuven Rivlin visit an ultra-Orthodox school on the first day of the

school year, 2017. Mark Neyman / GPO

But as Dr. Ben-David makes abundantly clear, Israel cannot wait that long. Israel is a country at war, and the existence of “Third World education” in Israel is an existential threat, no less serious than the one posed by hostile neighbors and Iran.

And this too: Torah study is not in any sense inconsistent with secular learning. The greatest rabbinic scholars of all eras and of all camps have always combined their Torah learning with secular studies.

Maimonides studied astronomy, medicine, mathematics and philosophy. The Vilna Gaon, a proponent of Haskalah, or education, studied history, philosophy, literature, and science. “The Rav” – Rabbi Joseph Ber Soloveitchik – was a titan of Talmudic learning who completed his Ph.D. in philosophy in Berlin, with a thesis on the epistemology of Hermann Cohen. And the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, both took courses at the Sorbonne and completed a degree in mechanical and electrical engineering in Paris.

For all of these rabbis, their Torah studies were, of course, primary. But they also saw secular and humanistic studies as being of real importance and as promoting the service of God. When we add to that the practical consideration that, in every period of Jewish history but our own, religious Jews – except for a tiny elite of brilliant scholars – were expected to work and provide for their families, the case for secular studies is overwhelming.

But Israel’s government pays no heed. Instead, they make the absurd claim that the problem can be addressed through a bill to draft ultra-Orthodox youth now being negotiated with the coalition parties and the courts. More Haredi young men will enter the army, they suggest, and then will build on their army training to acquire professional training.

It is not clear if this bill will ever pass, but what is clear is that it is a joke. Haredi enlistments will be increased a tiny bit, if at all.

And more important, for those who finish the army, it will be too late. Serious secular education must begin at age 5, not at age 25. But fearing the wrath of the ultra-Orthodox parties, the government refuses to insist on core studies in the Haredi sector.

Professor Ben-David has performed an important service for the State of Israel. He has reminded all Israelis of the existence in the Jewish state of “Third World education,” which is both a profound embarrassment and a threat to security.

And he has reminded ultra-Orthodox authorities that they have allowed their isolationism and defensiveness to deprive their young people of what they need and what tradition allows. It is now up to Israel’s secular parties, on both the right and the left, to take action – before it is too late.

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