Unpromising Demography in a Promised Land:

Yisrael Beytenu and the Escalation of Demographic Politics in Israel

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(3495 words)

Behind the closed doors of foreign policy workshops, Middle East analysts have tried hard to imagine a future day when Israel's shifting ethnic and religious demography drives the outcome of Knesset elections and reshuffles the country's political alignments. They needn't imagine at all. That day passed on the 10th of February of 2009, when 12 percent of the Israeli electorate cast their ballots for Yisrael Beytenu ('Israel Our Home'), an upstart secular nationalist party whose campaign billboards were plastered with the in-your-face campaign slogan "no loyalty, no citizenship". The vote thrust the party's list of candidates, headed by Moldovan émigré Avigdor Lieberman, into third place, ahead of the once-powerful Labor Party (led by Ehud Barak) and behind centrist Kadima (led by Tzipi Livni) and rightist Likud (led by Binyamin Netanyahu). Yisrael Beytenu's 15 seats out of the Knesset's total of 120 may not seem like much to those of those living in democratic states with two-party systems. But in Israel's

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splintered parliamentary democracy, that proportion gave Lieberman the power to pick Israel's next prime minister. He chose Binyamin Netanyahu. And to seal the deal, Netanyahu handed Lieberman the high-profile post of foreign minister.

Lieberman's rising political star befuddles much of the Israeli establishment. Despite being perennially poised on the verge of multiple indictments for financial crimes, tagged as an Arab-loathing ultra-nationalist by the Israeli media, and labeled from within the political system and in international circles as a public diplomacy nightmare, Lieberman's voter appeal has climbed steadily—and not just among fellow Eastern European émigrés. His party's popularity has grown among young, secular Israeli-born Jews, as well. Why? Demography is Yisrael Beytenu's political lifeblood. Its platform taps into the fears of the country's demographically ebbing, secular middle ground, and it feeds off of working Israelis' frustrations with the country's two most dissonant minorities: Israeli Arabs, and Ultra-Orthodox Jews (Haredim)—both of whom object to the Zionist political and sectarian order; both of whom are on the demographic upswing.

This paper puts forth the argument that Israel's democracy faces a demographic challenge that is more complex and more immediate than most Middle East analysts assume. We contend that secular and moderately religious Israeli Jews, upon whose hopes and political ideals the state was founded, are experiencing a "demographic squeeze"—the rise of two ethnoreligious minorities: the Haredim, who harbor political sympathies to the right; and Israeli

Arabs, whose political sympathies typically lie to the left. This dynamic, we hypothesize, will ultimately relegate to minority status those citizens whose political sympathies remain most consistent with Israel's founders and with the political leadership that governed the Jewish state during the second half of the 20th century. Our objective in this paper is to develop this general argument into a more specific thesis that is guided by the pattern of ethnoreligious demographic change over the next twenty years.

Our means of developing the demographic pattern that will underlie this thesis is demographic projection, for which we divide Israel's citizenry into three relevant groups: Israeli Arabs, the Haredim, and the remainder of the Israeli population, which we refer to as "other Jews and others". The two-decade forecast that we present, from 2010 to 2030, is the unweighted average of two demographic projections: a constant-fertility variant and a replacement-fertility variant (discussed in a later section).

The outcomes of our projections strongly suggest that, within the two-decade time frame, the ongoing compositional shift will significantly modify the ethnoreligious composition of the younger portion of Israel's age structure. According to both projections, the slim majority currently held in primary school by the children of secular and traditional Jewish families, plus the children of immigrants, will be replaced by a majority (perhaps as high as 55 percent) of Israeli-Arab and Haredi children, each in their own school system, by 2030. However, our projections suggest that in 2030 the non-Haredi, non-Arab

group—other Jews and others—will retain a majority, about 67 percent of eligible voters (down from 79 percent in 2010) among Israel's electorate (18 years of age and older).

What do these projections tell us of Israel's political future? Like other politico-demographic analyses, our results identify trends that indicate an increasing potential for political change. However, they fall short of discerning when and how these changes could unfold or the nature of the state's reactions. Our analysis does, however, suggest that Israel's democracy will come under increasing internal stress in the coming two decades, and that political tensions could intensify and grow more complex thereafter. Similar to more detailed analyses,[3] our projections—if extrapolated beyond their twenty-year horizon—suggest the continued presence of a Jewish majority population in Israel for the foreseeable future. However, the source of that Jewish population growth, which is increasingly Haredim in its identity, is reshaping Israel's ethnoreligious composition in a manner that, we believe, is unlikely to relieve inter-group tensions.

Israel's Ethnoreligious Dynamics

[3] Goldscheider, C. 2002. *Israel's Changing Society: Population, Ethnicity, and Development*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Israel's ethnoreligious demography has been a central political issue since the Jewish state's inception, and it remains so today. At Israel's independence in 1948, the Jewish population within the Green Line (pre-1967 borders) is estimated to have numbered roughly 718 thousand (82 percent of residents), up from 543 thousand (30 percent) in 1946, and 384 thousand (28 percent) in 1936—before World War II.[4]

At Israel's independence, its secular Zionist founders' hopes of maintaining a Jewish majority rested on keeping up a brisk pace of childbearing among Jews, and on steady streams of Jewish immigrants. Over the long run, they trusted in the powers of prosperity and modernity to turn Israel's kaleidoscopic assortment of Jewish and non-Jewish ethnic communities into a modern multi-ethnic population whose women would be raised to embrace European-like aspirations and to desire a European-like family size.

The outcomes, so far, are mixed. Descendents of European and American Jewish émigrés have, indeed, stayed somewhat above the two-child replacement level, unlike those who remained overseas. Jewish immigration to Israel, however, has been more episodic than continuous. The post-independence wave (1948-51), which brought about 700 thousand immigrants to Israel's shores, was followed by nearly four decades of much lower levels, and then another great

[4] Itamar Rabinovich and Jehuda Reinharz, eds. 2008. *Israel in the Middle East: Documents and Readings on Society, Politics, and Foreign Relations, Pre-1948 to the Present*, Ed. by, Brandeis University Press, Waltham, MA. (Appendix 5, pp. 571-572), online at: http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Society_&_Culture/israel_palestine_pop.html

wave, from 1990 to 2000, of more than 900 thousand mostly-Soviet émigrés.[5] Today, most sources put Israel's net annual influx from overseas at under 20,000 individuals, a figure that puts it at, and probably somewhat below, 18 percent of the country's annual population growth.[6]

Much of the hoped-for fertility convergence has already occurred. While women arriving from traditional North African, Middle Eastern and Asian Jewish communities averaged well over five children in the 1950s, their granddaughters now average less than three. Israeli Arab fertility, too, has dropped, albeit at a slower and periodically halting pace, from a total fertility rate (TFR)[7] over 7 children per woman in the 1950s, to about 3.6 today. Within the Israeli Arab population, which now comprises about 20 percent of Israel's 7.4 million citizens, the TFR of Arab Muslims (83 percent of Israeli Arabs) is estimated by the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) at 3.8 children per woman. Arab Christians currently make up just over 8 percent of Israeli Arabs, and experience a TFR of 2.1 children per woman.[8] The remaining 8-or-so percent are Druze—a religious minority that is integrated into Israeli's secular political and military spheres (Druze serve as officers in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), and are Knesset members in parties on the left, center and right, including

[5] Goldscheider, 2004.
[6] See UN Population Division. 2009. Population Prospects, the 2008 Revision. United Nations: New York; US Census Bureau, International Program Center. International Data Base. http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/idb/ (accessed, Feb. 10, 2010).
[7] The total fertility rate is a "period measure"; a snapshot in time of lifetime childbearing. Formally, TFR is the lifetime number of children born per woman, on average, if she followed the average childbearing behavor exhibited by the population.
[8] Central Bureau of Statistics. 2009. Statistical Abstract of Israel, Jerusalem: Government of Israel.

Yisrael Beytenu). The CBS estimates the Israeli Druze TFR at 2.5 children per woman.

The other minority of demographic interest is the Haredim. This Jewish minority is composed of the adherents of several Ultra-Orthodox sects. Although these sects originated in Eastern Europe, Israel's Haredi population now includes adherents from Sephardic and Mizrahi communities. Estimating the Israeli Haredi population and its vital rates is difficult. Because the group is currently not represented by an Israeli census category, official statistics are, as yet, unavailable from the CBS. Accordingly, Goldscheider's recent exploration of Israeli demographics, which relies on CBS statistics, fails to mention the Haredim.[9]

Two authors have tried to tackle the problem. Using data drawn from Israel's Labor Force Survey, Berman classified families as Haredim when a head-of-household reported a yeshiva (rabbinical school) as the last school attended.[10] From data associated with these households, Berman estimated fertility schedules for 1982 and 1995, which yielded total fertility rates (TFR) of 6.4, and 7.6 children per woman, respectively. From these and the CBS-reported mortality schedule for Israeli Jews, Berman estimated an Israeli Haredi population of 280 thousand in 1995 and projected its rise to 510,000 in 2010.

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[9] Goldscheider, 2004.

[10] Berman, E. 1998. "Sect, Subsidy, and Sacrifice: An Economist's View of Ultra-Orthodox Jews." Discussion Paper 98-08. Jerusalem: Maurice Falk Institute for Economic Research in Israel. Berman, E. 2000. "Sect, Subsidy, and Sacrifice: An Economist's View of Ultra-Orthodox Jews." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 115(3):905 - 953.

DellaPergola counted on the residential segregation of Haredim and Haredi voters' preference for religious party candidates to identify Haredi neighborhoods. Applying this method to Jerusalem's neighborhoods, DellaPergola estimated a TFR of 6.4 children per woman in neighborhoods where 70 percent or more of the residents voted for a religious party.[11] For the *American Jewish Year Book*, DellaPergola, Rebhun and Tolts estimated that in 2000 the Haredim comprised about 7 percent (~350,000) of Israel's Jewish population.[12] Estimates appearing in the Israeli and international press between 2004 and 2008, several attributed to DellaPergola, and several lacking attribution, have appeared indicating a significantly larger population—between 500,000 and 650,000—roughly 8 or 9 percent of Israel's total population.[13]

If estimates of Haredi population and fertility seem hazy, even less is known about the net rate of recruitment—conversion into, minus defection from, Haredi sects. Berman notes population increases that he concludes are unexplained by age-specific fertility rates and attributes them to gains through recruitment.[14] Perhaps because of the high psychological and social costs of

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[11] DellaPergola, S. 2001. "Jerusalem's Population, 1995-2020: Demography, Multiculturalism and Urban Policies." *European Journal of Population* 17(2):165-199.

[12] DellaPergola, S., U. Rebhun, and M. Tolts. 2000. "Prospecting the Jewish Future Population Projections, 2000-2080." *The American Jewish Year Book* 100: 103-146 (p. 130).

[13] Wagner, M. and T. Halkin. 2005. "Haredi population to double by 2020." Online at *Jerusalem Post.com*, Nov. 9, http://israel.jpost.com; Addelman, M. 2007. "Majority of Jews will be Ultra-Orthodox by 2050." Press Release. Manchester, UK: University of Manchester.

[14] Berman, E. 2000. "Sect, Subsidy, and Sacrifice: An Economist's View of Ultra-Orthodox Jews." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 115(3):905 - 953.

defection (secularization or conversion) from Ultra-Orthodox life, defection rates, though not well studied, seem to some authors to be surprisingly low.[15]

Ethnoreligious Projections

To project ethnoreligious demographic conditions and trends in Israel, the country's population was divided into three groups that are relevant to our approach: Israeli Arabs, Haredim, and (the remainder) other Jews and others (OJO). Establishing these three groups as the focus of analysis, and ignoring finer ethnic and religious disaggregation within each group,[16] made it possible to estimate their current male and female age-specific populations (in 5-year groups) and fertility and mortality schedules, either from published census-derived data, reports and academic publications, and reasonable assumptions.

For Israeli Arabs, and for the total Israeli population, age-specific populations and vital rates were obtained from Israeli Central Statistics Bureau (CBS) reports and from research by Goldscheider.[17] Whereas the Haredi population characteristics are not available from the CBS, the Demographic Yearbook of Israel lists "Ultra-Orthodox" as an educational supervisory category.

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[15] Efron, N.J. 2003. Real Jews: Secular vs. Orthodox and the Struggle for Jewish Identity in Israel. New York: Basic Books; also see: Sharp, H. 2010. "High Cost of Leaving Ultra-Orthodox Judaism." in *BBC News Online*. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8435275.stm

[16] For an approach using an ethnic breakdown of the Jewish population, see: Goldscheider, C. 2002. *Israel's Changing Society: Population, Ethnicity, and Development*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

[17] See CBS. Statistical Abstract of Israel, Jerusalem: Government of Israel, 8.11, p. 383; Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics. 2007. "Israel in Figures, 2007." Jerusalem: Government of Israel, p. 26; Goldscheider. 2004.

For this category, the CBS projects student number and rates of growth. We matched an array of stable age structures, of varying TFRs (6.0 to 7.5 children per woman, in increments of 0.1) and population sizes, to the most recent 2010 projection of the population of Ultra-Orthodox-supervised first-grade students (25,409), and the 2010-to-2014 annual growth rate of children in Ultra-Orthodox-supervised first grade (3.9 percent).[18] The TFR 6.4 model and a 2010 population of 798,000 (10.5 percent of Israel's population) produced a close match.

Two fertility variants—projections varying only in their fertility assumptions—were generated using the component cohort method and specific algorithms for producing incremental declines in age-specific fertility and mortality: a constant-fertility variant, and a replacement-fertility variant. The constant-fertility projection assumes that the current fertility and mortality schedules of each population continue unchanged to the end of the projection in 2030. The replacement-fertility projection assumes that Israeli Arabs and OJO attain replacement fertility in 2030, and that the period fertility (measured by the total fertility rate) of Haredim declines by 1.4 children per woman, from 6.4 in 2010 to 5.0 in 2030.

[18] CBS. 2009. Statistical Abstract of Israel; also see statements by the Taub Center in: Selig, A. 2009. "Study: 48% of pupils are Arab, haredi." in *JerusalemPost.com*. Jerusalem. http://www.jpost.com /servlet/Satellite?cid=1251145151803&pagename=JPArticle%2FShowFull; the full interview is at: Ben-David, D. 2010. "Interview with Dan Ben-David, Taub Center for Policy Research." Jerusalem: IFAT Media Information.

The age specific fertility schedule for Haredim was obtained from Berman,[19] and fit to the specified TFRs using the method developed by Coale and Trussel.[20] Age-specific populations and rates for the remainder of the population, OJO, were calculated to satisfy stated Israeli age-specific populations and vital rates. We applied the UN Population Division's schedule for annual net migration and added these individuals exclusively to OJO, distributing them to male and female age cohorts using a distribution associated with labor migration to Central Europe.[21] In both variants, defection from one group to another—a factor that is relevant to the projection of Haredim and OJO, but poorly understood, undocumented in either direction, and assumed to be small—is absent in both variants. In both variants, male and female life expectancy at birth, for each ethnoreligious group, is set to advance two years during the two-decade-long projection.

Projection Outcomes

By 2030, the constant-fertility and replacement-fertility projections generated Israeli populations totaling 10.42 million and 9.87 million, respectively

[19] Berman, 1998.

[20] Coale, A.J. and T.J. Trussel. 1974. "Model Fertility Schedules: Variations in the Age Structure of Childbearing in Human Populations." *Population Index* 11:185-258; Fitting model schedules to an indicated TFR is done by the application DemProj, see: Stover, J. and S. Kirmeyer. 2007. "DemProj, Version 4: A Computer Program for Making Demographic Projections." Washington, DC: The Futures Group International & Research Triangle Institute, online at: http://data.unaids.org/pub/Manual/2007/demproj_2007_en.pdf.

[21] Migration Policy Institute. 2006. "Migration Information Source, country database. http://www.migrationinformation.org.

(Table 1). The average of these, which we use as our forecast, projects a 2030 Israeli population of 10.14 million. This forecast lies somewhat above the 9.98 million people projected by the Israeli CBS medium variant for 2030, and well within their high and low variant projections of 10.61 and 9.59 million, respectively (Fig. 1). This forecast suggests an Israeli age structure in 2030 that is moderately pyramidal, somewhat similar to its present age distribution, with Israeli Arabs and the faster growing Haredim claiming significantly larger shares of the under-20 population (Fig. 2).

The CBS has been reported to have estimated that, in 1960, 15 percent of students in the Israeli primary school system were either receiving an Arab or Ultra-Orthodox-supervised education. This same account claims that by 2007, 46 percent were counted in those two educational categories. Our forecast (Fig. 3) indicates that by 2030, 55 percent of primary school students will be children from those two groups (constant-fertility projection, 57 percent; replacement-fertility projection, 53 percent). However, it will take two to three more decades beyond our projections for these two politically disparate ethnoreligious groups make similar inroads into the portions of Israel's age structure that are eligible to vote (18 years and older). By 2030, the combined population of Haredim and Israeli Arabs is likely to be very close to composing half (47 percent, in our forecast) of all 15 to 19 year olds (Fig. 4).

[Figure 4]

Unless current trends in ethnoreligious fertility in Israel undergo an abrupt change or the country receives an unexpected wave of immigration, it is reasonable to expect the gradual proportional decline of Israel's secular and traditional Jewish population. This basis for this expectation lies not only in these projections, but also in the estimation of the ethnoreligious age structures that are already in place. Both Haredim and Israeli-Arab age structures are youthful, and are therefore endowed with population momentum—the potential to continue growth for several decades, even at replacement-level fertility or somewhat below, due to the relatively large proportion of women that will move through their peak childbearing years before smaller cohorts mature. At the same time, the age structure of the remainder of Israel's population (OJO) is more mature than these minorities. The aging and passing of its older generations are bound to yield proportional declines, relative to Haredim and Israeli Arabs, for several decades. Nonetheless, our forecast suggests that the shift in ethnoreligious composition will proceed at a moderate pace. Under our projections' assumptions, the point at which OJO turn from majority to plurality appears to be at least two decades beyond 2030.

Trends and Their Political Implications

Those less informed of Judaism's variation or its evolution in Europe are typically surprised by these dynamics. They shouldn't be. Haredi sects grew out

of 19th century movements aimed expressly at deterring secularization and conversion, and propagating a life-cycle program immersed in statement of faith and ritual. Early on, their leaders recognized the trade-offs between women's participation in society and childbearing. Haredi women, whose educational, social and career opportunities are circumscribed by sectarian behavioral rules, are expected by their family to assume their place in the community through early marriage and frequent childbearing.

What long-term political shifts can Israelis expect? It is difficult to say. Israeli Arabs, who currently comprise about 15 percent of eligible voters and whom we project to rise to 23 percent by 2030, have cast their votes for lists of Israel's left, often significantly augmenting Labor's tally. Because the political sentiments of Haredi voters—presently ~6 percent of those eligible—lie overwhelmingly to the right,[22] it is logical to expect the Knesset's political center of gravity to shift rightward by 2030, when our forecast suggests they will account for 17 percent of the eligible electorate. Such a shift would make Arab votes even more critical to left-center coalitions. As logical as this scenario seems, it may, however, be much too simplistic for the complexity of Israeli politics.

The behavior of the religious parties makes Israel's political playing field extraordinarily unsteady, particularly in the near-term. The Ashkenazi Haredim, who comprise the vast majority of the Haredi population, have overwhelmingly

[22] Ilan, S. 1998. "To the Right of the Right." in *Ha'Aretz*. Jerusalem (in Hebrew, cited in Berman, 2000).

cast their votes in recent elections among the two religious parties running candidates on the United Torah Judaism (UTJ) list: Degel HaTorah (led by Lithuanian rabbis) and Agudat Israel (led by Hasidic rabbis). For these non-Zionist parties, who currently occupy five seats in the 18th Knesset, domestic religious and welfare issues hold more sway than foreign policy. Although UTJ participates in the current Likud-led government, its parties have, in the past, expressed their willingness to join center-left governments in order to secure yeshiva and family subsidies for Haredim. In contrast, the most influential religious party, Shas (11 Knesset seats), a product of the leadership of the less numerous Sephardic Haredim, receives most of its votes from the non-Haredi Sephardic and Mizrahi (Asian and North African) communities. Maneuvering away from the non-Zionist UTJ, Shas joined the World Zionist Organization in early 2010.

Despite the unambiguous trend in Haredi demographics and their comfortable position in the Likud-led government, it would be a mistake to believe that gradual changes in the ethnoreligious distribution of eligible voters will be reflected each election by a shift in electoral outcomes. In fact, UTJ and Shas each lost one seat in the 2009 Knesset elections. Rather than translating directly into newly realized political power for either of these communities, the growing proportion of Israeli Arab and Haredim among the voting public will more likely play further into the rhetoric and positioning of political parties within the context of vote competition for the middle-ground Jewish majority.

The recent rise of Yisrael Beytenu and the details of the party's platform may foreshadow this effect. Yisrael Beytenu's focus on Israel's demographic destiny twists its platform askew of the conventional Israeli political spectrum. Unlike other parties on Israel's political far right, Yisrael Beytenu's Knesset members support the establishment of a Palestinian state and the passage of a pro-immigrant secular marriage law. But unlike those to the center and left, the party calls for an oath of loyalty as a prerequisite to the full rights of Israeli citizenship—a scheme that would likely purge a substantial portion of the growing Israeli Arab population from voting rolls, and quite possibly disenfranchise non-Zionist Haredim who, on scriptural and political grounds, object to the current Jewish state.

Yisrael Beytenu also proposes to hinge eligibility for social benefits on fulfillment of military or community service, driving a wedge between groups who are, by law, conscripted into the IDF, and those who are not. Not only native-born and non-native Jewish citizens fulfill compulsory IDF service, so do émigrés of mixed origin, Israeli Druze and Circassian citizens (significant numbers of Muslim Bedouin have also served voluntarily). On the other side of this demographic divide are Haredim who obtain deferments to attend yeshiva,[23] and Muslim and Christian Arabs who are not conscripted, nor sought after, nor do they typically seek IDF service. But perhaps the most contentious element of

[23] Berman, E. 1999. "Subsidized Sacrifice: State Support of Religion in Israel." Contemporary Jewry 20(3):905 – 953; Berman, E. 2000. "Sect, Subsidy, and Sacrifice: An Economist's View of Ultra-Orthodox Jews." Quarterly Journal of Economics 115(3): 905 - 953.

Yisrael Beytenu's demographic agenda is entitled *land for land, peace for peace*. Rejecting government *land for peace* initiatives with neighboring Arab states, it proposes instead to swap Israeli-Arab border towns (and Israeli Arabs) for close-in Jewish settlements on the West Bank.

Looming ahead are contentious debates over the educational standards required of Haredim-supervised schools and the subsidization of Haredi adult students and families. Israeli Haredi communities are typically poor. Most yeshiva students leave studies with few skills and are unqualified to sit for the matriculation exam (bagrut). As the proportion of Haredim grows, popular objections—both from the political left and right—to religious subsidies, family support and military-service deferments are likely to grow stronger and gain even more electoral attention.

It is probably unwise to attempt near-term predictions for a political system where new break-away parties, co-mingled electoral lists, and governments composed of strange political bedfellows (like the current coalition) are commonplace. We offer just one: As the secular and traditional proportion of Jewish voters recedes, the strength and power of rhetoric focused on Israel's ethnoreligious demographic trends will grow. And that political middle ground will indeed recede—unless, of course, the rules of the game change … which is precisely what politicians like Avigdor Lieberman have in mind.

Figures.

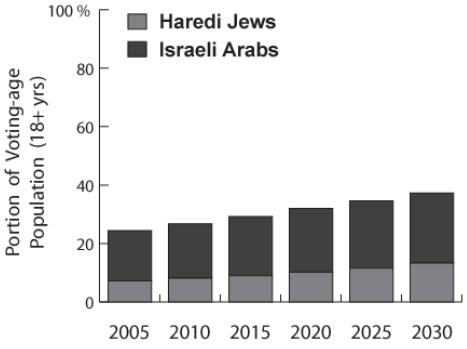

Fig. 1. Projected trend in voting-age population.

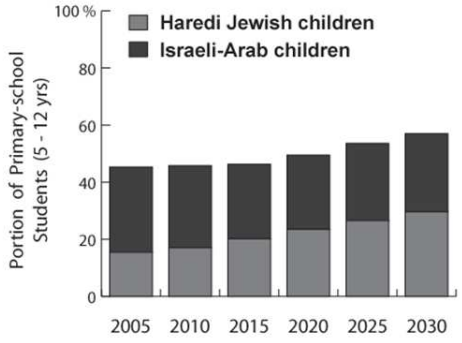

Fig. 2. Projected trend in primary school student composition.

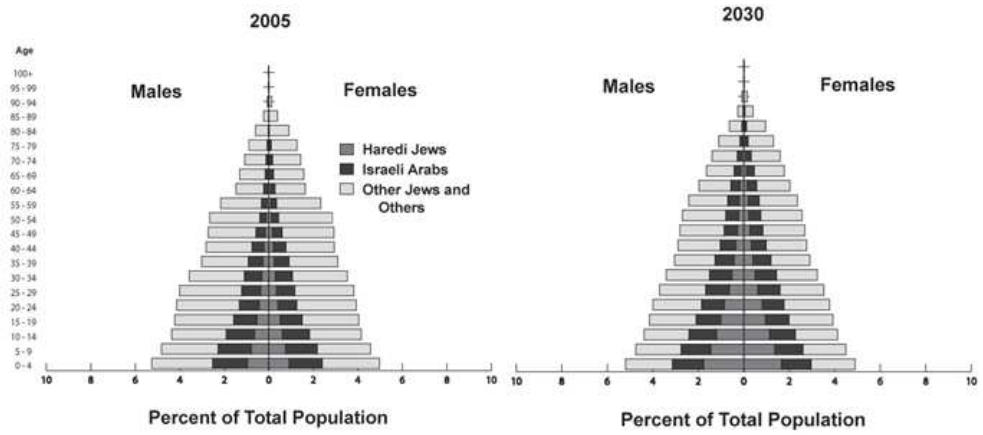

Fig. 3. Projected changes in the composition of Israel's age structure, 2005 to 2030.

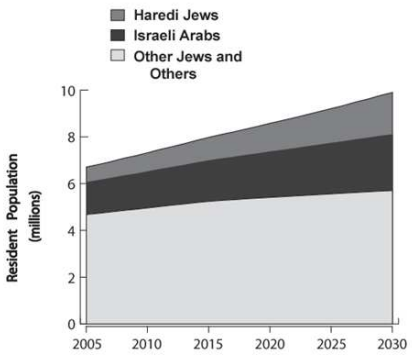

Fig. 4. Trends in total population growth among specified ethnic and religious groupings.