

## Israel's lethal brew of deficient education and demography

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It is said that Nero fiddled while Rome burned. In many respects, the fire that may one day devour Israel has already been ignited while the emperors that have been leading the country for years repeatedly cobble together governing coalitions grounded in shameless political expediency that is increasingly mortgaging our collective future. Exceptionally proficient public relations wizards deftly divert public attention to the inane, ensuring that the discourse endlessly skates on superficial surfaces without ever considering how thin our ice is becoming.

While the concept of national security is the only real determinant of Israeli elections, few delve into the depth of what this actually entails. Ensuring that Israel has the ability to defend itself in one of the planet's most dangerous and volatile regions requires first world military capabilities. Preserving a first world army is contingent on maintaining a first world economy. But today, half of Israel's children are receiving a third world education – and they belong to the country's fastest growing population groups. Such children will be able to maintain only a third world economy as adults – with all the existential implications that this has on Israel's future.

This week, we received another reminder of just how deficient Israel's education system actually is – and how completely out of touch the country's leaders really are – with publication of the new PISA exam results. This exam is given every three years. It tests the knowledge of 15 year-olds in 81 countries in the core curriculum subjects, math, science and reading.

Israeli pupils have done very poorly on this exam for years. Instead of dealing head on with the root problems, recent governments have preferred to shower the system with money – increasing education expenditures (net of inflation) per pupil in primary and secondary schools by 17% between 2009 and 2018. For the first time in Israel's history, the country's education budget exceeds its defense budget, making it the highest of all government expenditures.

And yet, the Start-Up Nation's average score in the three core subjects places the country below every single one of the 25 relevant developed countries. At the same time, achievement gaps between Israel's children soar far above every one of the other 25 developed countries. A full third of Israeli children score below the minimum proficiency level set by the OECD. That is a higher failure rate than in each of the other 25 developed countries, which together had an average failure rate of just 20%.

Arab-Israeli children, who constitute 25% of all Israeli pupils, score below many third world countries. In fact, their achievement levels – which have actually managed to fall since the last exam in 2015 – are below the averages in 9 of the 10 predominantly Muslim countries participating in the exam.

Most of the Haredi children, who constitute 19% of Israel's pupils, don't even study a full core curriculum (Israel is the only developed country that enables parents to deprive their children of their basic right to a core curriculum) and even what fraction of the core they do study terminates entirely for the boys after eighth grade. Consequently, most Haredi children don't participate in the exams and cannot be blamed for Israel's low scores. Had they participated, Israel's abysmal showing would have been even further below all of the other developed countries.

In addition to the Arab-Israeli and Haredi children, who together account for nearly half of Israel's children, the country has a large geographic and social "periphery" comprising non-Haredi Jewish children who are also receiving a third world education. These three groups of children belong to the fastest growing population segments in Israel. They will eventually constitute a majority of the adults – and they will lack the ability to maintain the first world economy that Israel must have to physically survive.

Already today, half of Israel's adults are so poor that they don't even reach the bottom rung of the income tax ladder and pay no income taxes at all. Ninety-two percent of Israel's entire income tax revenue comes from just 20% of the population. These are the more educated and skilled Israelis – of whom an increasing share is already deciding to emigrate from the country. In 2014, 2.8 Israelis with academic degrees left for each such Israeli who returned. By 2018, this ratio increased to 4.1.

Depriving most haredi children of a full core curriculum later manifests itself in dropout rates of over half the Haredi women and over three-quarters of the Haredi men who are unable to complete an academic degree. Consequently, while 25% of American haredim – who are required by US law to study core curriculum subjects – have an academic degree, only 12% of Israeli haredim have one. There are no shortcuts in life. Very few people can skip a good education as children and eventually become physicians, engineers, and all of the other professions that a first world economy must have. With the Central Bureau of Statistics forecasting that half of all the country's children will be haredim in just two generations, is there anyone left in Israel who does not comprehend the country's lethal brew of deficient education and demography?

There is an urgent need for a massive, comprehensive education reform encompassing a vastly upgraded core curriculum that is mandatory for all children – with no more exceptions for the haredim. This needs to be accompanied by a serious change in how the country chooses its teachers, trains them and compensates them alongside a complete overhaul of the budgetary black hole that is the Education Ministry – a mammoth bureaucracy that epitomizes inefficiency, redundancies and major conflicts of interest.

Israel has a long history of finally getting its act together when its back is to the wall. The issue of education is more insidious, and therefore can no longer be put off. When its effects become fully apparent, there are no redo buttons that can make adults children and provide them with the education that they'll need later in life.

As such, Israel is in urgent need of serious policy-makers who understand the gravity of the situation, who have the ability to explain and convince the majority how the national good often runs counter to politically strong sectoral interests, and who are willing to put the good of the country before all else.