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ONE on ONE:
It's the Demography, Stupid
An interview with geographer/demographer Arnon Soffer.

by Ruthie Blum

"I thought I'd never hear myself say this," says Haifa University geographer Arnon Soffer, without a trace of self-doubt, "but Israel will have to relinquish the Jordan Valley."

Soffer, a geostrategist widely seen as the originator of Ariel Sharon's separation plan, has never been one to pull proverbial punches. A prominent figure in the public debate on disengagement, Soffer has been a leading purveyor of apocalyptic predictions about Israel's demographic problem *vis-a-vis* the Arabs for more than three decades.

At 68, his stature and super-confident demeanor make him seem almost too large for his tiny office, which, he says, has become the venue for meetings with everyone from military brass to Knesset members.

"Many people said I was crazy," says Soffer, a glint of self-satisfaction in his eye. "But since then, they have come to realize I was right."

As the cabinet prepares to vote on the latest proposal next week, Soffer discussed with us the rationale behind the plan he conceived, the prospects for its execution, and challenges ahead of Israel in what he believes is an inherently hostile neighborhood.

Was the disengagement idea yours?

The day he was elected prime minister Sharon asked me to bring him a [disengagement] map I published in 2001. I have been a leading figure on this issue for years.

When did he first summon you?

We had met throughout the years many times. He knows me well, and requested the meeting.

You're considered a demographic prophet of doom. How did that happen?

In 1970, as a young geographer, I decided to focus on military geography - or geopolitics. Then, while working on the national masterplan for the north, I became obsessed with the problem of the Israeli Arabs that I saw developing in the Galilee. In retrospect, this had an effect on where the Jewish hilltop communities were later established. Many people said I was crazy. But since then, they have come to realize I was right.

In 1975, I began researching the problem more seriously. That's when I grasped that the issue is about demography. I began taking members of the defense establishment to the Galilee to show them what was happening. Slowly, I created awareness.

After that, I started bringing the same people to the Seamline. For the past 15 years, every week, once or twice a week, I accompany the highest-ranking defense officials there.

In 1988, I published a pamphlet in which I raised the question of whether Zionism is a dream or not. The 1,000 copies of the pamphlet disappeared immediately. Arafat received a copy of it, and then, for the first time, said that the Palestinian womb is a biological weapon.

It was around that time that I began to say publicly that Israel's days were numbered. After researching the subject I concluded there was no way Oslo would work, and I told Bibi Netanyahu that Oslo had to be stopped immediately. Bibi read my material, and quoted it in his book, A Place Under the Sun, in a chapter on demography.

Speaking of Bibi, his attitude toward the plan has been ambiguous.

Bibi understands that we have to disengage - he has said so on more than one occasion. But Bibi is also a political animal, and he considers Sharon a rival. Unfortunately, politicians are often willing to sell out the country for their own personal considerations. This is true of the whole Knesset.

Take the mass rally in Tel Aviv on Saturday night. Each party came there in order to get rid of someone else. That whole thing was ridiculous.

Didn't the rally express widespread support for disengagement?

Had it been a protest against the Likud's rejection of disengagement, even I would have participated. But there was Yossi Beilin who came to sell his wares. And Ami Ayalon. And Shimon Peres, who only cares about Shimon Peres.

What do you make of the Likud's rejection of its own leader's plan?

The Likud is filled with ignoramuses. A day doesn't go by without me running into a Likud member who can't tell you where Kalkilya is, or, for that matter, where the Green Line is.

I keep a map of the country from 1966 in my office, because it shows where the Green Line really is. I also have a map that shows how the Palestinians view the country. In it, the entire State of Israel is theirs. That's something the Israeli Left would like to forget.

How does the current fighting in Rafah relate to the disengagement plan?

Disengagement is one thing and the Philadelphi Route [the narrow road separating the Gaza Strip from Egypt] is another. Even after disengagement - which I have no doubt Prime Minister Sharon will pass within the next two or three weeks - Philadelphi will have to be guarded heavily, to keep Egyptian forces from deploying in Gaza.

The operation in Rafah is a welcome necessity. The terrorist gangs who rule there must be wiped out, and the tunnels blocked. The proposed moat is also a good idea, though technically and physically complicated.

Some oppose disengagement because they think that until the Palestinians accept Israel's existence, no solution can be viable.

They say something worse than that. People like Effi Eitam and Benny Elon say the Palestinians should set up their homeland in the Sinai. I asked Eitam at the Herzliya Conference whether he spoke to Hosni Mubarak about this plan and he said "not yet." I'm telling you, these people are out of their minds. The Right is insane for believing in transfer, because they're not reading the international map - I mean, look what happened in Kosovo - and the Left is insane for believing in plans like the Geneva Accord, which begins by saying "There will be mutual faith" between us and the Palestinians.

Is that why you opposed Oslo? Because it wasn't unilateral?

Yes. In 2001, I told a gathering of the country's economists that the country's demographic clock is ticking, and that unless we made courageous decisions, Israel's countdown would begin. I caused an

earthquake.

Faisal Husseini said in response: "Israel will end up begging us to leave them one tiny strip of land."

I've been screaming this from the rooftops to anyone who will listen. Had you hung around the corridor outside my office during the last two months, you would have thought it was the Knesset, since so many politicians have been through here to listen to my demographic predictions.

Dan Meridor said I convinced him.

Six months ago, Ehud Olmert said "Professor Soffer convinced me; we can't escape this any more." Sharon, as you see, also understands it.

What about your former Haifa University colleague Yuval Steinitz? He hasn't been won over.

Before he became a Knesset Member, we used to travel together to Tel Aviv every week for meetings on the subject. He understands it very well - who is he trying to kid that he doesn't understand it? He is familiar with every number and statistic that appears in my research.

In 1987, at a meeting organized by [former ambassador to the US] Zalman Shoval between myself, Shoval, [nuclear physicist and right-wing leader] Yuval Ne'eman and Ghandi [the late Rehavam Ze'evi], I began by presenting the demographic statistics. Ne'eman got up and said: "Don't believe a word of what Arnon Soffer is telling you: The Central Bureau of Statistics also belongs to the Left."

At that moment, Ghandi got up and said: "I've known Arnon for many years. I accept every word of what he is saying. This country is not something we can forfeit, but people can be transferred." That's when he decided to found the Moledet Party.

Shulamit Aloni phoned, and my wife said to her: "You see, Arnon talks too much."

Two months later, prime minister Yitzhak Shamir was introduced to me and said: "Oh, that's you who's bothering everybody with your statistics." So, I told him [that] he and Shulamit Aloni had something in common: my statistics bothered both of them.

So you ignored your critics and continued to "bother" them with your statistics.

As an academic, it's my job to publish my research. Look, these demographics are facts. The world is going insane. Islam is going wild. There is going to be a clash of civilizations. In the Middle East, there is going to be the highest Arab birth rate in the world. There cannot be peace.

Let's view it from a Palestinian perspective. Let's pretend you and I are Arafat and Yasser Abed Rabbo looking at the map. Look at what the Jews are going to leave us for a state. They're going to leave us the Gaza Strip - which is no more than a crowded "prison." Then there's another "prison" called Hebron, and another, larger one called Samaria. Here there are 1.6 million, here 1 million, and here 1.5 million (soon to be 3 million). Each of these "prisons" is cut off from the rest. 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. 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. The fact that in the meantime Palestinian kids are being killed doesn't matter; what matters is that Palestine will be ours.

Isn't it logical for the Palestinians to see it this way?

So, while Abed Rabbo is off talking to Yossi Beilin, and Sari Nusseibeh is off talking to Ami Ayalon, time is passing and Palestinian women are getting pregnant. This, coupled with the flood of Arabs from other countries - 300,000 since 1948 - means they're going to finish us off.

This is why I keep saying that in order to save the State of Israel, we have to separate unilaterally, and as quickly as possible.

Sharon clearly agrees with you. Why, then, did he bring his plan to the Likud for a vote?

He and his two sons are about to be indicted. There is no other logical explanation. Then again, he's clearly going to pass the plan - in two to three weeks.

How will the region look the day after unilateral separation?

The Palestinians will bombard us with artillery fire - and we will have to retaliate. But at least the war will be at the fence - not in kindergartens in Tel Aviv and Haifa.

Will Israel be prepared to fight this war?

First of all, the fence is not built like the Berlin Wall. It's a fence that we will be guarding on either side. Instead of entering Gaza, the way we did last week, we will tell the Palestinians that if a single missile is fired over the fence, we will fire 10 in response. And women and children will be killed, and houses will be destroyed. After the fifth such incident, Palestinian mothers won't allow their husbands to shoot Kassams, because they will know what's waiting for them.

Second of all, when 2.5 million people live in a closed-off Gaza, it's going to be a human catastrophe. Those people will become even bigger animals than they are today, with the aid of an insane fundamentalist Islam. The pressure at the border will be awful. It's going to be a terrible war. So, if we want to remain alive, we will have to kill and kill and kill. All day, every day.

While CNN has its cameras at the wall?

If we don't kill, we will cease to exist. The only thing that concerns me is how to ensure that the boys and men who are going to have to do the killing will be able to return home to their families and be normal human beings.

What will the end result of all this killing be?

The Palestinians will be forced to realize that demography is no longer significant, because we're here and they're there. And then they will begin to ask for "conflict management" talks - not that dirty word "peace." Peace is a word for believers, and I have no tolerance for believers - neither those who wear yarmulkes nor those who pray to the God of peace. There are those who make pilgrimages to the Baba Sali and the tombs in Hebron, and those who make pilgrimages to Kikar Rabin in Tel Aviv. Both are dangerous.

Unilateral separation doesn't guarantee "peace" - it guarantees a Zionist-Jewish state with an overwhelming majority of Jews; it guarantees the kind of safety that will return tourists to the country; and it guarantees one other important thing. Between 1948 and 1967, the fence was a fence, and 400,000 people left the West Bank voluntarily. This is what will happen after separation. If a Palestinian cannot come into Tel Aviv for work, he will look in Iraq, or Kuwait, or London. I believe that there will be movement out of the area.

Voluntary transfer?

Yes. And Gaza is going to be such a disaster that it will be beyond our capacity to help. There will have to be large-scale international aid. The US will have to pressure Egypt to cede land. And - though I never thought I'd hear myself say this - Israel will have to relinquish the Jordan Valley.

What about the Israeli Arabs? If they, too, cause a demographic problem, how will unilateral separation help?

The population increase of Israeli Arabs is going to present a major problem. But, if we no longer include the Palestinians, and we begin embracing immigrants, foreign workers, Druse, and Christians - who are now on our side, because they see what crazy radical Islam is - then there won't be an Israeli Arab problem.

While we're on the subject, you tell me what you need east Jerusalem for. Why do you need 300,000 Arabs as Israeli citizens? What's holy there? Anything that is holy we should annex. But all the area of Shuafat, Zur Baher... I just subtracted 200,000 - and suddenly there's no Arab problem. And, if that's not enough for you, one day we'll tell Umm el-Fahm that we'll take Ariel, and they'll take Umm el-Fahm and everybody will live in his own culture.

In other words, we have to act wisely, and this sometimes means using both a carrot and a stick. The greatest tragedy today is with the Beduin. And who's to blame for that? You and I are. Why do we have to give child allowances to a man who has tons of kids?

You were also a big alarmist on water. Wouldn't ceding the territories deprive us of crucial aquifers?

In any case, there's not enough fresh water for the two populations, so it makes no difference. We understand now that we have no choice but to increase desalination.

Look, you probably drink coffee. How much does your cup of coffee cost you at your local cafe? NIS 10. That's \$2. Do you know how much water you can purify for \$2? The Palestinians cannot afford this, but we can.

Why isn't Israel implementing large-scale water purification then?

Why? Because the country has gone nuts. Why aren't we purifying water? Because we have to. Why don't we deal with our garbage? Because we have to. Why aren't we taking care of education? Because we have to. But that's another type of problem altogether. You're asking me about geopolitics. Why we're turning into a Third World country is another question entirely.

Aren't you getting carried away? Israel is only 56, and has a pretty amazing track record.

We belong to the smartest and most talented nation in the world, with the most Nobel prize-winners. As such, we are capable of doing everything, and whatever we don't accomplish has to do with the system, not with the brainpower. If you knew how many Knesset members I've had in my office... I'm telling you, they're illiterate morons.

Some say that the aftermath of a post-separation war will be occupation all over again.

We won't occupy them again. We will enter on punishment missions. As I've said, the minute a missile flies, we will destroy the area.

You see no problem in relocating settlers?

I do see problems. That's why I'm not in favor of returning to the Green Line. Because we are not only faced with a Palestinian problem. We are also faced with a civil war. So I tread carefully and believe in making compromises.

Your attitude leaves no room for the unpredictable, like the massive immigration from the former Soviet Union. If you had made such predictions in 1917, Israel would never have been established.

If I had used my predictions in 1930, I would have been wrong, because I didn't anticipate the Holocaust. If I had done the same in 1950, I would have been wrong, because I didn't anticipate the Six Day War. If I had done it in 1970, I would have been wrong, because I didn't know the Soviet Union would fall. A mensch tracht, unt Got lacht (Men make plans and God laughs).

Having said that, it is nevertheless irresponsible not to make plans, to ignore realities. As I told the chief rabbi: "In 1939, you waited for God and he didn't show up."

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