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# President Rivlin's "Four Tribes" Initiative: The Foreign Policy Implications of a Democratic & Inclusive Process to Address Israel's Socio-Demographic Transformation

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## Introduction

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Addressing the 15<sup>th</sup> Annual Herzliya Conference, on June 7, 2015, the President of the State of Israel, Reuven (Rubi) Rivlin delivered what many would come to consider a defining speech, commonly referred to as the "Four Tribes" speech. In his remarks, President Rivlin addressed the socio-demographic transformation that is remaking Israel's society, now composed of four growingly equal-sized "tribes" – secular, national-religious, ultra-orthodox ("Haredi"), and Arab. This transformation, President Rivlin contended, mandates the formulation of a "new concept of partnership" among the tribes.<sup>2</sup>

Following an introduction of President Rivlin's initiative and its rationale, this brief will explore the implications for Israel's foreign relations and international standing. The main argument outlined below is that President Rivlin's initiative and work on this issue should be a major spearhead in combating the delegitimization of Israel. Simply put, the courageous effort to address socio-demographic change through a public and inclusive process testifies to Israel's liberal democratic values. Furthermore, recognizing its "imperfect" democracy, it being a "work-in-progress", does not set Israel apart from the Western community of democracies. Quite the contrary. Western democracies, many of which struggling with defining issues of demography and identity, could actually draw lessons from the Israeli process. Considering that compared to all other Western nations, Israel faces the most un hospitable geopolitical environment, this makes its work in progress even more admirable. Thus, this initiative also offers a new area for dialogue with Western democracies. This dialogue could contribute particularly to improving Israel's troubled relations with the European Union and its member-states that are growingly critical of Israel.

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<sup>2</sup> For the official English version of President Rivlin's address, see Spokesperson's Office, President of the State of Israel, "President Reuven Rivlin Address to the 15th Annual Herzliya Conference "Israeli Hope: Towards a New Israeli Order", June 7, 2015 <http://www.herzliyaconference.org/Uploads/dbsAttachedFiles/PresidentSPEECH.pdf> [accessed: January 25, 2016].

## Offering "Israeli Hope" to the Evolving "New Israeli Order"

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The crux of President Rivlin's initiative is the widening gap and eventual dissonance between the founding Zionist ethos of the State of Israel and the evolving socio-demographic reality. Some 25 years ago, the solid majority of Israel's society subscribed to the Zionist ethos, shared the collective burdens, and actively participated in the labor force. The evolving trends however, suggest that before too long, the characteristics of the majority of Israel's society will be undergo a remarkable transformation.

One of the most notable manifestations of this transformation is the expected composition of first grade pupils in 2018. Specifically, and based on projections of Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, in 2018, nearly a half of first grade pupils will belong to two groups – the Ultra-Orthodox Jews and the Arabs – that do not subscribe to the foundational Zionist vision of the State of Israel. Furthermore, these groups – or "tribes" in President Rivlin's terms – are relatively excluded (voluntarily or not) from the mainstream Israeli discourse. Clearly, these groups do not benefit from full and equal rights and entitlements, nor do they share equally the collective burdens of the society – be it national or military service or full participation in the labor force. Consequently, they are not full partners of Israeli economic and social activity.

Yet even the relations between the two Zionist "tribes" are experiencing a considerable change. The smallest "tribe" of the Israeli society – the nationalist-religious group – will make up 15 percent of first-graders in 2018. This tribe too is moving closer in religious observance to Ultra-Orthodoxy. Some members of this tribe subscribe to messianic religious beliefs and exhibit alarming disdain to the rule of law and to democracy. The once-majority tribe – the secular population – will merely make up 38 percent of first-graders in a few years, compared to more than 50 percent in 1990. Moreover, the secular tribe in itself is divided along various sociological groupings (social and geographic core and periphery; Ashkenazi and Sephardic, etc.). Taken together, these divisions pose a threat to Israel's national security and resilience and its ability to deal with challenges from home and abroad.

The division of Israeli society into four "tribes" – secular, nationalist-religious, Arab, and Ultra-Orthodox is clearly not exhaustive, but as President Rivlin pointed out, it offers a unique perspective on the ongoing structural transformation of the Israeli society that is composed of four growingly equal societal groups. Each group bears its own cultural, religious, and even national ethos. This division is evident mainly in Israel's public education system in which each group has its own administration, including curricula, budgeting, and educational oversight.

The evolving socio-demographic trends, evident in the soon-to-be composition of first grades in schools across the country, constitutes from President Rivlin's perspective a "new Israeli order" in which conventional majority-minority relations no longer exist. These social changes are already present in the Israeli body politic and constitute a major reason for the growingly dysfunctional political system that poses, in turn, a considerable challenge in forming stable governing coalitions and providing effective and inclusive governance. These changes appear to be a major factor in the growing hostility and mistrust among the various tribes and facilitate disturbing expressions of racism and intolerance.

Notwithstanding, and as President Rivlin reminds, these socio-demographic processes not only create a set of intricate challenges for Israel's national security and resilience, but also offer immense, and insofar mostly untapped, potential stemming from the rich and multifaceted Israeli societal mosaic. Undoubtedly, one of

the main long-term missions of the Israeli society is to leverage this social and cultural rich diversity by embedding a sense of partnership and equality with and among these tribes, along with respecting societal differences.

To that end, President Rivlin outlined – in his Herzliya Conference address – four pillars of what he termed as a "new concept of partnership":

- A sense of security for each "tribe" – meaning that each group will retain and preserve the fundamentals of their "tribal" identity;
- Shared responsibility: All four "tribes" share an equal responsibility for the future of Israel and its society, implicitly suggesting that all the "tribes" should shoulder the collective burdens of the society;
- Equity and equality – the bedrock of the partnership is to preclude any form of discrimination or favoritism based "tribal" membership and providing all citizens equal opportunities and access to the "Israeli dream";
- Shared "Israeli-ness" – the creation or invention of a newly shared "Israeli character"

This "new concept of partnership" would require not only practical policy measures to narrow socio-economic gaps, facilitate equality and shared responsibility, and enhance mutual respect among the tribes, but also mandate a new national inclusive ethos that can bridge across the societal divisions, i.e., a "shared Israeli-ness".

Granted, the articulation of these principles into concrete policy measures and their subsequent implementation are no easy feat. However, inventing a new Israeli ethos transcends a conventional policy process. As President Rivlin specifically noted, the invention of a new Israeli narrative and ethos is "the most challenging pillar". At the very least, this exercise would require an inclusive process enjoying broad and popular support process that seems at odd with contemporary widespread populist and intolerant "talkback-ist" style of public debates.

Considering there is no manual or guide for successfully inventing and embedding a new national ethos that resonates across disparate societal groups or "tribes", President Rivlin's undertaking is particularly remarkable and entails a work of a generation. The starting point, as President Rivlin pointed out is challenging – having "identified a very real threat in our collective suppression of the transformations that Israeli society has been undergoing in recent decades; in neglecting to confront what I call the 'new Israeli order'".<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, President Rivlin has become a major voice in favor of tolerance, equal rights, freedom, and the rule of law. His public statements denouncing acts of intolerance, violence, and racism have earned him the ire of his opponents, but much respect from Israeli citizens.

To advance the President's agenda, the small team of the President's Office has launched a series of initiatives. Under the rubric of "Israeli Hope", the Presidential initiatives all aim to contribute to increasing mutual understanding among the various tribes, challenge expressions of racism and intolerance, and increase the socio-economic integration of the more excluded tribes – mainly Arabs and Ultra-Orthodox Jews. The President's Office works with a broad range of groups that can advance his agenda – from schools

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

and youth movements, through universities and the Israeli Football Association, onto major Israeli financial firms and high-tech companies.

Extending beyond these specific and targeted projects, the President's Office established with the convener of the Herzliya Conference, the Institute for Policy and Strategy (IPS) at the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya a high-level public steering committee to flesh out the Presidential agenda. Serving as the conceptual groundbreaker of the "Israeli Hope" agenda, members of the steering committee include top opinion and community leaders, senior academics, and business executives. Co-chaired by Prof. Uriel Reichman, President and founder of IDC Herzliya and Prof. Alex Mintz, Director of IPS, the steering committee is tasked with identifying and mapping the potential areas of consent and dissent among the various tribes in an effort to enhance equality and mutual respect among them. In exploring areas of consent and dissent, the committee could portray the possible components of a new Israeli ethos. The IPS and the steering committee will produce a report with concrete policy proposals to President Rivlin in the run-up to the June 2016 Herzliya Conference that will serve as a major deliberation platform for the President's agenda.

## The Foreign Policy Dimension of "Israeli Hope"

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Although little known abroad, President Rivlin's "Israeli Hope" agenda bears not insignificant foreign policy implications for Israel as it confronts de-legitimizing criticism mainly in Europe, but growingly in the United States as well.

Israel's detractors, seeking to "demonstrate" its failings in terms of freedom and democracy focus on injustices and discrimination towards Israeli Palestinians/Arabs.<sup>4</sup> From their perspective, and as leaders and followers of the BDS movement contend, Israel is an illegal racist colonial outpost and these shortcomings undermine its right to exist. The truth of the matter is that rights of no country in the world have ceased to exist because of its democratic and liberal shortcomings.<sup>5</sup> The ascendancy of liberal democracy in the post-World War II era has demonstrated that there is no such thing as a "perfect democracy". One only needs to review the Annual Human Rights reports of the U.S. State Department to see the shortcomings of nearly all Western democracies. In this sense, Israel is not unique among the other Western liberal democracies.

Indeed, Israel's democracy remains a "work in progress", so to speak. There is no better way to showcase how Israel addresses these challenges seriously other than President Rivlin's "Israeli Hope" agenda. The work on the agenda demonstrates a desire and commitment shared by the top leadership of the country, along with leaders from all sectors and "tribes", to create a more inclusive, equalitarian, and democratic society united around a new Israeli ethos that respects the citizenry's diversity. Essentially, one cannot come up with a more effective and truthful antidote to the malicious disparaging messaging of the BDS movement.

Furthermore, President Rivlin is commanding growing respect across the Western world. President Rivlin's official visit to the White House in December 2015 and the warm welcome he received from President Obama shows that his work is earning notable and worthy admiration. In subsequent remarks, President Obama hailed President Rivlin's stance on "the need for tolerance and acceptance among all Israelis -- Jewish

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<sup>4</sup> I refer here to Israeli citizens of Arab-Palestinian descent living within pre-1967 Israeli borders.

<sup>5</sup> On this point, see Alexander Yakobson and Amnon Rubinstein, *The Jewish Nation-state and Human Rights*. London and New York: Routledge, 2009.

and Arab."<sup>6</sup> The British *Guardian* elected President Rivlin as one of its heroes for 2014 for becoming "his country's conscience."<sup>7</sup> Considering Israel's challenging political and social environment, and in international comparative terms, President Rivlin is emerging as one of the most conscientious incumbent Heads of State in his drive to tackle socio-demographic transformations and offer a democratic and inclusive process.

From this perspective, President Rivlin's agenda is timely and relevant not only to Israel, but also for many countries in Europe. Furthermore, it seems that Israel is poised well ahead of most other European nations in its attempts to address these emerging challenges. Although the Israeli experience is notably different from European socio-demographic transformations, there are several points of similarity. Notably, socio-demographic changes are establishing a growing dissonance between the citizenry and the national ethos. One major factor that serves to exacerbate the dissonance and increase societal chasms is the radicalization of growing margins in various societal groups that come to view the governing institutions and current national ethos as a threat to their identity warranting their violent and extremist opposition. While in the past, many thought that the "melting pot" would be the magical integration wand, the radicalization of the public space, enraged by growing populist demagoguery is simply melting down national pots across Europe, so to speak.

Therefore, an Israeli initiative to engage the European Union and relevant member-states in a dialogue on addressing socio-demographic transformation could open the door to demonstrating that Israel like Europe is facing new common challenges and that Israel's experience could actually contribute to Europe. Just as Israel had become the "Start-Up Nation" that many European countries seek to emulate in fostering innovation and technological R&D, Israel could leverage the Rivlin's "Israeli Hope" agenda to enhance its soft power. Considering the current state of European-Israeli relations and the disputes concerning the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, this new area for cooperation and dialogue will not transform the relationship, but could definitely support its improvement.

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<sup>6</sup> Office of the Press Secretary – The White House, "Remarks by the President at Righteous Among Nations Award Ceremony," Embassy of Israel, Washington, D.C., January 27, 2016 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/01/27/remarks-president-righteous-among-nations-award-ceremony> [accessed: January 31, 2016].

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Freedland, "Heroes of 2014: Reuven 'Ruvi' Rivlin, President of Israel," *The Guardian*, 31 December 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/dec/31/reuven-rivlin-ruvi-president-israel-likud-palestinian-rights> [accessed: 27 January 2016].