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ISRAEL WILL FACE SERIOUS CHALLENGES OF ISOLATION AND POPULATION BALANCE

Ryoji Tateyama

- As Israel celebrated the anniversary of its independence, President Reuven Rivlin showed the traditional optimism that, if the Jewish population of Israel were to reach 12 million, the Palestinians would decide that the best place for them to live is Israel.
- However, nearly all demographic statistics predict that, if Israel continues its rule of the West Bank and Gaza, Jews will slip into minority status by about 2020.
- The Palestinians have already shifted the focus of their anti-occupation struggle to a strategy of internationalization, and they are gaining broad-ranging support in Europe and the US, which will likely result in further isolation for Israel in the long run.

The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.

Israel celebrated the 67th anniversary of its independence this past April but, reflecting the instability of the Middle East, there was no mood of celebration. President Reuven Rivlin touched on the harsh reality that Palestinians still have not accepted the existence of Israel but stated that, if the Jewish population of Israel were to reach 12 million, the Palestinians, too, “will decide that the best place for them to live is Israel.”

Rivlin’s remark is simply a repetition of the optimism traditionally held by the Zionist right wing represented by Likud. Right-wing Zionists who embrace force have asserted since before independence that a powerful Jewish state would prompt the Palestinians to abandon their national ambition for an independent country and accept Israeli rule. Israel is now quite powerful both militarily and economically, but there are no signs whatsoever of the Palestinians abandoning their hope for statehood.

The Palestinians have already shifted the focus of their anti-occupation struggle from direct negotiations with Israel to a strategy of internationalization in such venues as the United Nations and the International Criminal Court (ICC). Negotiations with Israel since the 1993 Oslo Accords have yielded the Palestinians nothing more than partial self-rule even as the number of settlers has more than tripled.

This internationalization strategy has filtered down to the average citizen. The young people the author met in Ramallah in the West Bank last October manifested glocalization. They have been physically localized in a small area by the security fence and other restrictions on movement, but the spread of their ideas and movement has been globalized by the Internet. In particular, the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement targeting products made in the settlements continues to gain broad-ranging support in Europe and the US, which will likely result in further isolation for Israel within the international community.

An even more serious problem for Israel is the population balance. Nearly all demographic statistics predict that, if Israel continues its rule of the West Bank and Gaza, Jews will slip into minority status by about 2020. To reach Rivlin’s target of 12 million Jews, millions of American Jews will have to emigrate

to Israel, a virtual impossibility. A shift in balance will make incompatible Israel's two core values of a Jewish state and a democratic polity.

The right wing, with the ruling Likud Party at its core, emerged victorious in the March general elections. A new coalition government has been formed between the right-wing parties headed by Likud Party chairman Benjamin Netanyahu and the religious parties. Grounded in hawkish nationalism and religion, the fourth Netanyahu administration will undoubtedly be even more adamant in rejecting compromise with the Palestinians. Should the nuclear talks with Iran prove successful, the Obama administration may put pressure on Israel over the Palestinian issue. However, it is only a matter of time before Obama acquires lame-duck status, and Netanyahu will likely rely on his friends in the US Congress to skirt US pressure.

In the short term, this will be regarded as a “success” for the Netanyahu administration. Over the long term, however, the realities that face Israel – including isolation by the international community and the population balance – will become all the more challenging. The situation calls to mind the words of a Palestinian leader in Gaza back in the early 1980s, more than three decades ago: “The Crusaders and other outside forces that have come to this land have all been Lebantized and swallowed up by indigenous forces. Israel, too, will no doubt meet with the same end.” Time is on the Palestinians' side. 

Ryoji Tateyama is a professor emeritus, National Defense Academy, and a visiting fellow, the Institute of Energy Economics, Japan. He was a faculty member of the Graduate School of Security Studies and Department of International Relations, National Defense Academy, from 1997 to 2013, and taught security studies and international relations in the Middle East.