Opinion **Middle Eastern politics & society**

The emigrants Israel can't afford to lose

Those inclined to leave are the ones sustaining what's left of the country's liberal democracy

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Before the attacks on Israel by Hamas militants on October 7 2023, Iran's then Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei had asserted that Israel would not survive the next 25 years. He was not telegraphing the murderous assault from the Gaza Strip into southern Israel. He was anticipating something much slower and less visible: the steady departure of Israeli citizens disenchanted with their country's political trajectory.

The remarks came after months of protests against reforms to Israel's judiciary proposed by the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The laws would have undermined the Supreme Court's power to check government excesses while giving politicians greater sway over judicial appointments. The proposals sparked fury and mass demonstrations across Israel for months.

Israel's enemies have long sought to damage it from the outside. But a country can also weaken itself from within if it alienates the citizens most committed to its liberal character.

According to Israel's statistics bureau, about 400,000 Israelis moved abroad between 2013 and 2023. In a small country, that is still a striking number: roughly 5 per cent of the population. In recent years, the pace has quickened: there were 55,300 departures in 2023, 82,700 in 2024 and 69,300 in 2025. Although some new immigrants entered the country during this period, more people left the country than moved to it in the past two years.

By comparison, only 1 per cent of US citizens were estimated to live abroad in 2022. Nearly 1 per cent of Israel's population has moved abroad in *each* of the last two years.

These are not trivial fluctuations. A 2025 study concluded that the departures represent a significant "brain drain", disproportionately involving doctors, engineers and other highly educated, high-earning workers. For a country whose prosperity and security depend heavily on technological sophistication, professional expertise and a dynamic innovation economy, that would be troubling enough. But the deeper danger may be political.

What Israel is experiencing is not only a brain drain but also what I call a "democratic drain": an outflow of citizens who are not politically representative of the population as a whole. Instead they are disproportionately liberal, secular and attached to democratic norms and institutions.

Since the 2023 reforms, Netanyahu's government has pursued other illiberal actions — broadening control of the occupied West Bank, curtailing press freedoms and barring entry to supporters of boycotts against Israel. All of this has taken place during Israel's brutal offensive in Gaza.

A survey last year found much higher interest in leaving among secular Jews than among religious or ultra-Orthodox Jews. The overwhelming majority settle in liberal democracies. About one-third went to the US, 18 per cent to Germany, 9 per cent to Canada and 8 per cent to the UK. That matters because democracies are sustained not only by constitutions, courts and elections but by the social groups willing to defend them. When a country loses disproportionate numbers of its secular, educated, liberal-minded citizens, it loses the civic and electoral constituency on which democratic resilience depends.

That loss may be especially significant in Israel, where the country's liberal-democratic character has always depended on a complicated balance of secular and religious communities, often with competing visions of what the state is for. Remove enough citizens from one side of that balance, and the system begins to tilt, perhaps irrevocably.

We usually think of democratic erosion as something done by leaders to institutions: courts are packed, the press is bullied, legal norms are bent and electoral rules are manipulated. But democratic systems can also be hollowed out in a quieter way — when a significant number of those people most committed to liberalism decide that leaving is easier than staying and fighting for democracy.

Israel's distinctiveness has long rested not only on military strength and economic performance, but on its claim to be the only liberal democracy in a region of authoritarian regimes and theocracies. If it continues to alienate its secular, educated, democratic-minded citizens, it will not merely be harming its economy. It will be thinning out the very constituency most likely to defend the institutions and political culture that have distinguished it from its adversaries for generations.

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