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Demographics between the Mediterranean and the River Jordan

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The fiftieth anniversary of the Six Day War is an appropriate occasion to examine demographic trends in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza and their implications. For some, this is an emotive subject and is surrounded by myths.

In 1967, Israel, with a population of 2.8 million, captured the Sinai, the West Bank, Gaza, and the Golan Heights that then had a combined population of nearly one million. Since then, Israel has withdrawn from the Sinai and Gaza, and the focus here is on the West Bank. We begin by examining demographic trends inside Israel. In 1967, Israel annexed East Jerusalem and the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) includes the Arabs of Jerusalem in its total of the population of Israel, despite the fact that they are not Israeli citizens, although they do have Israeli identity cards.

The CBS has published a range of forecasts of the population of Israel to 2065. (See www.cbs.gov.il/www/hodaot2017n/01_17_138b.doc) These used different assumptions about the birth rate, and the figures in Table 1 are based on its medium forecast. This suggests that the population will reach 10 million by 2024, 15 million by 2048 and 20 million by 2065. The CBS forecast a very small change in the balance between Jews and Arabs: the share of the latter will decline from 21 percent in 2015 to 19 percent in 2065. The big change will be within the Jewish population; the share of the ultra-orthodox (Haredi) in the total population is forecast to rise from 11 percent in 2015 to 20 percent in 2040 and to 32 percent in 2065. Their share of the Jewish

population will rise from 14 percent in 2015 to 24 percent in 2040 and 40 percent in 2065.

Table 1

Israel: Population 2015-2065

	2015	End 2049	End 2065
Total	8.5	13.2	20.0
Jews and others*	6.7	10.4	16.1
Ultra-orthodox	0.9	2.6	6.4
Arabs	0.8	2.8	3.8

*Jews, non-Arab Christians and others whose religion is not classified in the population register

Source: Central Bureau of Statistics

Population growth is greatly influenced by fertility rates, defined as the number of births per woman. In 2015, the total fertility rate in Israel was 3.1, compared with an average of 1.7 in the OECD. Some Israelis believe that this reflects the country's spiritual strength and belief in the future and in this respect, it compares well with the pessimism that they consider to be prevalent in Europe.

For others, the breakdown of the population is the key feature of Israel's demography and possibly the most worrying one. The growth of the population is led by the ultra-orthodox whose fertility rates are more than double those of the rest of the population. This rate declined in the early 2000s, but has risen since then. The main for concern is that the ultra-orthodox population has a low average educational level and a very low labor participation rate especially among men. As the size of this population increases, so its share rises and it affects the society as a whole, be it income per capita, or national scores that measure educational achievement, such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). Other consequences include widespread poverty and this may well increase as its population grows. As the rest of the population subsidizes the ultra-orthodox (through the welfare system that is funded by tax and national insurance contributions), so a relatively smaller number of people will have to support a relatively larger one over time.

Without a revolution in Haredi education and employment, the economy will suffer badly because there will not be enough non-ultra-orthodox to support the ultra-orthodox. For this reason, it is therefore unlikely that the 2065 forecast will be achieved. The reason for this is that economic pressure on the non-Haredi population will increase as the need to support more and more people who either do not work or earn so little that they need welfare rises. There have been precedents for political action on this issue and they may well increase. The issue has always been extremely divisive and will provoke more conflict within Israeli society.

For some, the larger the Jewish population the better. If that is the result of higher birth rate among the Haredim, then it is they who are “saving the Israel and the Jewish people from demographic doom.” The rise in the Jewish population is seen as helping to strengthen Israel’s political case, its economic and military strength. The economy needs workers and the army needs soldiers. The larger the Jewish population, the greater Israel’s justification, whatever its borders.

These arguments are debatable. There is no evidence that a larger population increases support for Israel, within any borders. Neither the economy, nor the army need large increases in manpower. The economy is becoming ever more knowledge-based, so fewer, but more highly educated, workers are needed. As the volume of manpower is no longer a constraint, the Israeli army has already reduced the length of mandatory service.

For others, what may be called environmental considerations are the main cause of anxiety. Based on 2011 figures Israel is the 33rd most densely populated country in the world, with 394 people per square kilometer (1,021 per square mile), and the large increase in the population forecast will make it even more dense with the associated problems of congestion and pollution.

Table 2 shows that between 2000-2004 (annual average) and 2015, there was a 17 percent increase in fertility among Jews of and a 27 percent fall among Arabs. As the former formed the majority, the overall fertility rate rose. In 2014, Israel’s total fertility

rate was the highest in the OECD and its demographic growth rate was the second highest.

Table 2

Israel: Total Fertility Rates, 2000-2015

	2000-04	2005-09	2010-14	2014	2015
Israel	2.92	2.91	3.04	3.08	3.09
Jews	2.67	2.81	3.03	3.11	3.13
Moslems	4.57	3.89	3.50	3.35	3.32
Christians	2.35	2.14	2.18	2.27	2.12
Druze	2.87	2.54	2.30	2.20	2.19
Not classified by religion	1.55	1.53	1.68	1.72	1.72

Source: Central Bureau of Statistics

Israel's population is currently growing by two percent a year, mainly as a result of natural growth; immigration is very low. The Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza is growing by an estimated 2.9 percent a year. There are disputes about the size of the Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza because it has been alleged that the Palestinian Bureau of Statistics (PBS) does not reduce the total when people leave the West Bank and Gaza to live elsewhere, as many have done. At least two Israeli experts have denied that this significantly change estimates of the size of the Palestinian population in those areas. The PBS also includes the population of East Jerusalem in its calculation of the Palestinian population.

For these reasons, the data in Table 3 on the West Bank and Gaza, based on a neutral source: the CIA World Factbook and has been adjusted to avoid double counting. The Arab population of Jerusalem has been removed from the Palestinian total and remains

in the Israeli one despite the affiliation that most East Jerusalem Arabs feel towards Palestine.

Table 3 shows that in the region between the Mediterranean and the River Jordan, the population of Israel fell from 76 percent of the total in 1967 to 67 percent in 2016. The Jewish population fell from 63 percent to 50 percent during the same period.

Table 3

Population in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza, 1967-2016

	1967	1967	2016	2016
	Millions	Percent	Millions	Percent
Total	3.7	100.0	12.8	100.0
Israel	2.8	76.0	8.6	67.2
West Bank and Gaza, excluding Arabs in East Jerusalem	0.9	24.0	4.2	32.8
Jews	2.4	63.0	6.8*	53.1
Arabs	1.4	37.0	6.0	46.9

Sources: Israel: Central Bureau of Statistics, West Bank and Gaza: CIA Factbook and author's calculations

*includes non-Arab Christians and others not classified by religion. The population of Jews alone was 6.4 million, or 50 percent of the total population of Israel and the West Bank.

In 1967, Israel annexed East Jerusalem, and it became a united city with a significant and growing Arab population. Since then the Arab population has risen from 69,000 (26 percent of the total) in 1967 to 324,000 (37 percent of the total) in 2015. Israel has

built new suburbs in the eastern part of city, that were outside Israel prior to 1967 and which the Palestinians (and others) call settlements.

Israel has also built settlements in the West Bank, while those in Gaza were abandoned in 2005. According to the CBS, their population has increased significantly since 1967. Figures for recent years are given in Table 4. The CBS includes the Jewish population of the settlements in its totals for the population of Israel, even though this group does not, according to Israeli law, live inside the country. It does not include the approximately 300,000 Arabs living in Area C in the West Bank, under direct Israeli control. This is the area where Israeli settlements are located.

Table 4

The Population of Israel Settlements in the West Bank, end of year 1972-2015

1972	1,500
1983	23,700
1995	134,300
2008	281,100
2014	370,700
2015	385,900

Source: Central Bureau of Statistics

Estimates of the Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza vary and Table 5 gives those made by the CIA, the Palestinian Bureau of Statistics (PBS), the United Nations and the World Bank (2015).

Table 5

The Population of the West Bank and Gaza by source, 2016

CIA	4,451,014
PBS	4,816,503
UN	4,769,000
World Bank	4,422,000

Some Israelis have said that the Palestinian figures are bloated, not only because they include the Arabs of East Jerusalem but also because the figures ignore the fact that many have left the West Bank and Gaza. This dispute is ideological in that it relates to the balance of Jews and Arabs in Israel and the West Bank and Gaza. Those favoring Israeli settlements in the West Bank (and opposing the creation of a Palestinian state there) suggest that demographics are not a threat: the Jews are not a minority. Those who are against settlements see a demographic threat as Jews become a minority between the Mediterranean and the River Jordan.

Population density in Gaza in 2017 is estimated at 4,931 per square kilometer (12,766 per square mile). In the West Bank, it is 478 per square kilometer (826 per square mile).

If the Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza, as estimated by the CIA, is ten percent smaller than claimed, because exits have not been counted, then it numbers four million. If the 1.8 million Israeli Arabs are added, then the total Arab population between the Mediterranean and the River Jordan is 5.8 million. With a Jewish population of 6.8 million, their share of the total is 52 percent; in 1967 it was 67 percent. This is one of the most important legacies of the Six Day War.

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