

“If one wants a country to be Jewish . . . a certain threshold of the population may actually need to be Jewish.”

Israel's Existential Predicament: Population, Territory, and Identity

SERGIO DELLA PERGOLA

Over its history Israel, a land whose very name cannot be agreed upon by its inhabitants, has been an object of conquest by many rulers and inhabited by people of many different cultural, ethnic, and religious orientations. Today, this multi-threaded competition has boiled down to two ethno-religious-cultural groups. Jews, after recovering political sovereignty through the state of Israel, and Arabs, struggling to gain for their own political framework (the Palestinian Authority) the higher rank and privileges of statehood, remain engaged in a bitter conflict over ultimate possession of the land.

Demographic Dilemmas

Third in a series

From the perspective of Israeli strategy in this conflict, it has been suggested that the state faces a conundrum because it has three fundamental goals, but can achieve only two of the three at the same time. The three goals are to preserve the Israeli state's Jewish identity, democratic character, and territorial extent.

Thus, Israel can choose to apply a Jewish cultural identity to the whole territory and population between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River, but in that case it cannot be a democracy. Israel can opt for the same territorial extension and apply to all residents the democratic principle of “one man, one vote,” but in that case it will not be a Jewish state. Or Israel can choose to be a Jewish and democratic state, but in that case it

will have to withdraw sovereignty from significant parts of the territory and population.

This existential predicament reflects the demographic balance sheet and population dynamics encompassing the entire area that was the British Mandate over Palestine between the twentieth century's two world wars, with the fringe addition of the Golan Heights (formerly part of Syria), which Israel occupied during the June 1967 war. The controversy is not just about demographic data, of course; political ideology also is involved. But the demographic data, once understood, leave little room for debate: The Arab population has been, is, and for several more years will be growing at a faster pace than the Jewish population. Such trends inevitably have political implications.

This relatively small parcel of land—less than 12,000 square miles—still hosts a varied array of population groups, but in public discourse they are usually reduced to the rough dichotomy of Jews and Palestinians (as local Arabs choose to identify). Each side has good reasons, based on long-term textual, archaeological, and hermeneutical evidence, to claim the whole land as its own. Each side has paid a high price in the affirmation and defense of its territorial rights, and the price continues to be paid. Prospects for ending the conflict in the foreseeable future remain quite uncertain, even under best-case scenarios, notwithstanding the ongoing diplomatic efforts by the Barack Obama administration and other agents from inside and outside the region.

Possible solutions to this protracted, bloody conflict would obviously be political—whether negotiated by the parties directly involved or imposed by some external power. But, as in many other cases of ethnically and religiously split societies, politics cannot be understood without delving into the cultural and psychological identities

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of the main collective actors. Indeed, culturally rooted factors significantly affect demographic behaviors and trends, shaping the size and structure of the Jewish and Palestinian populations as well as the present and future viability of their respective political entities.

THE BONE OF CONTENTION

When the United Nations General Assembly on November 29, 1947, approved Resolution 181—which partitioned Palestine into two states, plus a *Corpus separatum* comprising the Jerusalem and Bethlehem areas—the plan clearly recognized the ethnic and religious roots of the conflict. The UN resolution aimed at appeasing the main actors by allocating each of them one of two states, and by suggesting unequivocal names for those two states. Contrary to the belief of many today, those two names were not *Israel* and *Palestine*. They were *Arab* and *Jewish*.

In addition to names, the UN decision contained several important provisions that recognized and allowed ample space for the legal rights, needs, and prerogatives of the two populations, grounded in their respective national identities. There could be no doubt that *Arab* and *Jewish* were to become the national states for the Arabs and the Jews of Palestine. This was supposed to be the solution—but also appeared to be part of the problem.

On May 14, 1948, David Ben Gurion proclaimed the independence of the Jewish state under the name of State of Israel. (Those who listen today to Ben Gurion's recorded voice quickly realize that *Israel* was in fact a nickname for *Jewish*.) The leadership of the Arab community in Palestine, however, did not follow Ben Gurion's lead, choosing not to declare the independence of the Arab state.

The ensuing warfare generated two important developments. One was the exodus of about 700,000 Arabs, mostly residents of the territory allocated by the UN to the Jewish state. The second was the military conquest of, and expansion by the Jewish state into, areas allocated to the Arab state. The 1949 armistice treaties signed along those lines thus established the recognized temporary borders of a state of Israel that hosted a large Jewish majority while incorporating certain areas that mainly Arabs inhabited. The putative

Arab state, in turn, was now dismembered into three portions: the Gaza Strip, under Egyptian occupation; the West Bank, under Jordanian occupation; and the rest, as noted, incorporated by Israel.

It is important to realize that the real bone of contention is what happened in 1947–1949, not the outcome of the Six Day War in June 1967. In 1967, Israel occupied the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights (in addition to the Sinai Peninsula, which was returned to Egypt in the 1979 peace treaty signed by Egyptian President Anwar el-Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin). From the very start of Israel's existence, however, diplomatic efforts have focused on reaching a comprehensive agreement that incorporates mutual and peaceful recognition of the existence and rights of two permanent actors, Arabs and Jews, in Palestine.

FACTS ON THE GROUND

In the meantime, day by day, demography has created new facts on the ground—small, little-noticed facts like a birth, a death, a change of residence. Accumulated over time, the sum of these little demographic facts becomes one of the major strategic variables operating at the cognitive as well as the political

level. Over time demography has been increasingly present in public discourse, though its actual impact on observers and policy makers cannot be assessed simply.

After World War II, the population of Palestine between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River comprised one million and a quarter Arabs and just over half a million Jews. The Jewish population increased more than tenfold over the next 60 years, due to mass immigration and a fairly high and uniquely stable natural increase. At the beginning of 2010, Israel's *core* Jewish population reached 5,704,000. When combined with 313,000 non-Jewish members of Jewish households—mostly immigrants from the former Soviet Union—the *enlarged* Jewish population amounts to 6,017,000. This includes 296,000 residents in the West Bank.

The Arab population that is incorporated into the state of Israel—enlarged by natural increase, the annexation of East Jerusalem in 1967, and the adoption of Israel's legal system for the Golan

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Areas and Populations in Israel and Palestine (Beginning of 2010)

	Jews and Others ^a	Arabs	Foreign Workers	Total	% Jews and Others
Total	6,017,000	5,206,000	222,000	11,445,000	52.6
State of Israel ^b	5,721,000	1,536,000	222,000	7,479,000	76.5
Thereof:					
Pre-June 1967 borders	5,507,000	1,238,000	222,000	6,967,000	79.0
East Jerusalem	195,000	276,000	N.A.	471,000	41.4
Golan Heights	19,000	22,000	N.A.	41,000	46.3
West Bank	296,000	2,200,000	—	2,496,000	11.9
Gaza	—	1,470,000	—	1,470,000	0.0

a. Includes non-Jewish members of Jewish households, according to Israel's Law of Return.

b. According to Israel's legal system (which also applies to the Jewish and Other residents of the West Bank).

Sources: State of Israel and Jews and Others population: Israel Central Bureau of Statistics. West Bank and Gaza: author's adjustments of original data from Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics.

Heights—reached 1,536,000 in 2010. The West Bank and Gaza have a combined Palestinian population of 3,670,000, for a grand total of 5,206,000 Arabs living in Israel and territories under the Palestinian Authority.

Looking at the table above, one striking figure is that nearly 11.5 million people live in this small territory—about half of which, especially in the south, is thinly populated desert. (Population is quite dense in the northern half of both Israel and the Palestinian territories.) The total population is even more remarkable in light of the evaluations of experts in the 1920s and 1930s. They believed the top carrying capacity of British Palestine, given its available physical resources, was about 2.5 million people. This says a lot—beyond the political aspects of the demographic equation—about technology's ability, albeit not unlimited, to increase the economic capacity of a land and its possible population size.

DRIVERS OF GROWTH

Over repeated periods in Israel's history, immigration has constituted the main driver of population growth. The volume of immigration has been characterized by a wave-like pattern created by the variable intensity of push factors in the vast array of countries where Jewish people are dispersed worldwide. The immigration process has been greatly facilitated by Israel's all-inclusive special immigration law, the Law of Return, which awards immigrant rights to any Jew in the world, their children and grandchildren, and all of their spouses—whether Jewish or not.

Israel also has a regular immigration and naturalization law, recently at the center of an animated parliamentary and public debate when Israel's cabinet approved an amendment according to which new citizens who do not immigrate under the Law of Return must pledge allegiance to Israel "as a Jewish and democratic state." This amendment seems redundant in light of our preceding survey of Israel's formative stages as the recognized Jewish state.

One major peak in Israel's intensive immigration history occurred in 1948–51, with the transfer of over 300,000 endangered Jews from Muslim countries and as many Jewish survivors of World War II's mass annihilation in Europe. This wave nearly doubled Israel's population, amid obvious economic difficulties, and also introduced significant sociocultural and socioeconomic heterogeneity into the country's social fabric. A second major peak came in 1990–91, with the arrival of nearly 400,000 immigrants, mostly from the former Soviet Union.

Overall, a net positive balance of immigration over emigration has prevailed in 58 out of Israel's 62 years of history, and has consolidated a society about half of which carries a Middle Eastern cultural background and half a European or American background. That said, more than 70 percent of all Jews in Israel today are part of a second, third, or later generation born and educated in the country.

For the past several years, however, as immigration has diminished, the main component of Jewish population growth in Israel has been

the natural increase generated by the excess of births over deaths. Israel's life expectancy ranks among the top 10 in the world, which points to a generally good and accessible health system. Israel's Arab citizens continue to experience a moderate health gap. But their life expectancy is rising, and it is in line with an Eastern European nation like Poland, rather than a Middle Eastern country like neighboring Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, or Egypt.

Israel's Jewish fertility rate nearing 2010 was slightly on the rise at 2.9 children per woman—substantially higher than in any other developed country, and twice or more the effective Jewish fertility rate in most diaspora communities. This reflects not only the typically large families of the Jewish population's more religious component, but also a diffused desire for children among moderately traditional and secular Jews, a trend especially notable among the upwardly mobile.

The current fertility rate for Israel's Arab citizens, at 3.7 children per woman, is down from its top level of nearly 10 children on average in the early 1960s. A closer look at the data reveals stable fertility patterns among the majority of Israel's Arab citizens, and a much higher but rapidly declining fertility rate among semi-nomadic Bedouins in the south.

Among Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, processes of demographic modernization have proceeded hand in hand with those of the Muslim residents of the state of Israel, albeit somewhat more slowly. The UN Human Development Program has ranked health patterns in the Palestinian territories about 65th out of some 200 countries, considerably behind Israel's high standards but still better than in many other Middle East societies. In addition, fertility rates have been declining—faster in the West Bank than in Gaza—but they remain somewhat higher than among Israel's Muslims and characteristically also higher than in most other Arab countries in the region.

These trends perhaps reflect better health care and some economic gains, along with rapidly rising levels of education, in the Palestinian territories—in spite of continuing Israeli occupation and limitations on freedom of movement and political association. The resulting fast pace of Palestinian

population growth has been somewhat curtailed in most years—long before the 1967 war and during most of the years since—by a negative migration balance.

One further salient issue is the widespread settlement of Israelis in the West Bank. Until 2005, the settlements also encompassed the Gaza Strip, but under Prime Minister Ariel Sharon the Israelis withdrew and relocated nearly 9,000 settlers. Today some 296,000 Jews and related family members live in the West Bank. They are comprised mostly of young, religious households, with a fertility rate approaching 5 on average.

The high-profile question of the temporary suspension of construction in these settlements in connection with the recent Israeli-Palestinian negotiations concerns this group. The settler population's fast natural increase reflects not only ideological activism, but also housing that is significantly cheaper than within Israel's pre-1967 boundaries.

Regarding Jerusalem, whose municipal boundaries were expanded immediately after the 1967 war, the city today has grown to a grand total of 774,000 inhabitants. Of these, 471,000 live in the East Jerusalem sections; and of these latter, 276,000 are Palestinians (as against about 70,000 in 1967) and 195,000 are Jews (including their non-Jewish household members).

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AN ARAB THRESHOLD?

The combined results of these different demographic patterns create a complex mosaic of people and territories, the significance of which obviously transcends the mere numbers. From Israel's perspective, the major issue is this: Do current demographic trends in Israel and among Palestinians increase or decrease Israel's chances to be a Jewish and democratic state? Here are some facts.

In 2009, Arabs accounted for just over 20 percent of Israel's population (including West Bank Jewish residents but not Palestinians in the occupied territories). Yet Arabs generated 25 percent of all births in Israel because of higher fertility rates and, importantly, because of their much younger age composition. At the same time Arabs, again because of their much younger age composition, accounted for only 10 percent of all deaths in Israel.

Consequently, excluding international migration, 30 percent of the total natural increase in Israel's population last year occurred in the Arab sector—significantly higher than the Arabs' population share. Excluding immigration, in 2009 Israel's population grew by 1.5 percent among Jews and 2.5 percent among Arabs.

The present trend thus generates a steady growth in the Arab share of Israel's population. Israel's Arab population is expected to reach 24 percent in 2030 and 27 percent in 2050, while the share of Arabs among children younger than 15 will likely be 30 percent by 2030. Looking at age composition, in 2009 Jews comprised 91 percent of all Israelis at age 78, 77 percent at age 48, 70 percent at age 18, and 68 percent at age 6. This represents a gradual transformation in structural identity within Israeli society as one moves from the older to the younger age cohorts—a transformation from a national into a binational state.

Is there a threshold? As it currently stands, within the borders of pre-1967 Israel, and ignoring the foreign workers, the Jewish population is just short of an 80 percent majority. Including the West Bank, the Jewish population is over 60

percent of the combined total. Even adding the Gaza area, it is at least 51 percent. This is technically a majority. It is not, however, truly sufficient to ensure Israel's Jewish and democratic character, especially in light of the ongoing population trends.

Total population size and the respective share of the two major population groups, Jews and Arabs, depend on three major factors: the balance of births and deaths; the balance of in-migration and out-migration; and the balance of joining versus leaving a certain group, for example through conversion. Within Israel—inside pre-1967 borders plus East Jerusalem and the Golan area—the share of Jews at the end of 1967 was 85.9 percent versus 14.1 percent Arabs; in 1977 the figures were 84.2 percent and 15.8 percent respectively; in 1987, 82 percent and 18 percent; in 1997, 79.7 percent Jews, plus 2.2 percent non-Jewish relatives, and 18.1 percent Arabs; in 2007, 75.6 percent Jews, 4.4 percent non-Jewish relatives, and 20 percent Arabs; and at the beginning of 2010, 75.4 percent Jews, 4.3 percent non-Jewish relatives, and 20.3 percent Arabs.

In this instructive progression, the hundreds of thousands of Jewish immigrants from the former

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Soviet Union pass nearly unnoticed, except for the new label of non-Jewish relatives who stem from the Law of Return's comprehensive provisions. The share of Jews in Israel is continuing to diminish, as it has in most of the 42 years since Israel incorporated East Jerusalem and its Arab population, simply because population growth in the Arab sector is faster. And all of this ignores the impact of temporary foreign workers who are not Jewish, but some of whom are Muslim.

TOWARD BINATIONALISM

All in all, the present trends continue to erode the Jewish share within Israel's population. In 2020, Israel's Jewish population share is expected to be 73.6 percent, with another 4.4 percent non-Jewish relatives and 22 percent Arabs; the share of Jewish children below 15 will likely be 69.7 percent, with 3.1 percent non-Jewish relatives and 27.2 percent Arabs. Excluding the West Bank and Gaza, Israel is expected to continue to hold a solid Jewish majority. But with figures like these, it is hard to pretend that Israel is not becoming, if it is not already, a binational state.

Some analysts, mostly identified with the right-wing spectrum of Israeli politics, have suggested that the over 2 million Palestinians who live in the West Bank outside Jerusalem ought to be incorporated into Israel's demographic equation—they maintain that the true numbers of Palestinians are lower than those outlined above. But even if they were right, the ensuing percentage differences would be trivially small. They speak of a 67 percent Jewish majority in Israel and the West Bank (including, without saying so, the 313,000 non-Jewish immigrant relatives). By my own estimate, a more likely figure is 62 percent. Note that Cyprus—clearly a binational state—was 82 percent Greek and 18 percent Turk when it gained independence in 1960.

In addition to inaccurately portraying recent trends, the same critics project large-scale migrations to Israel based on the observation of, or rather hope for, “economic meltdown” and “the rise of anti-Semitism.” This seems to disregard history's lessons.

International migration, already noted as one of the main engines of Israel's past Jewish popu-

lation growth, is currently close to minimum historical levels. The massive former Soviet reservoir is largely exhausted, and Jews do not readily flee affluent Western democracies even if they witness anti-Semitic incidents or temporary economic recessions. Indeed, the largest single-country-origin group now arriving is returning Israelis. Continuing emigration from Israel, while not unusually high, reduces the net migration balance to a bare minimum.

Moreover, because of frequent intermarriages across the Jewish diaspora, if these more numerous immigrants were to materialize, a higher share among them would not be recorded as Jewish and would add to the 313,000 such individuals who already live in Israel. Conversion to Judaism, which might sensibly draw on this human capital, continues to be kept at low levels by the stringent criteria adopted by Israel's Chief Rabbinate.

Differentials between the Jewish and Palestinian population growth rate will probably disappear eventually. For now, the declining fertility of Arabs is compensated for by their younger age composition. This may change with shifts in Arab age distribution, but it will take at least two decades before the effects of such developments are noticeable.

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THE LAND SWAP REVISITED

One controversial proposal that supposedly might mitigate the cumulative effects of differential demographic trends is a “swap,” an idea recently revived by Israel's Minister of Foreign Affairs Avigdor Lieberman. Within the framework of an eventual Israeli withdrawal from parts of the West Bank, Lieberman advocates annexing major Israeli settlement blocs and in exchange handing over to the Palestinians Israel's Triangle region, a strip of land just inside Israel's post-1967 border. This region, which extends from the city of Umm al-Fahm in the north to Kafr Qasim in the south, is inhabited almost entirely by Arabs.

Many view Lieberman's proposal as part and parcel of what they see as the foreign minister's xenophobic agenda. But his critics should not be so quick to write off this idea simply because of the political leanings of its most prominent supporter. Such land swaps have been frequent

in Europe's political history and have repeatedly occurred in the Middle East. While Lieberman is often labeled a far-rightist, the notion of swapping sovereignty over the Triangle is not simply a far-right idea. On the left, the former deputy defense minister Ephraim Sneh, a committed dove and until recently a prominent member of the Labor Party, was an advocate of this very notion, as was Yossi Beilin, one of the architects of the Geneva peace initiative and a one-time leader of the Meretz radical party.

In 2002 the former prime minister Ehud Barak said that "such an exchange makes demographic sense and is not inconceivable" (though he cautioned that it "could only be done by agreement"). Indeed, underlying this idea is a principle that has long been championed by the left and is today supported by a majority of Israelis: the concept of two states for two peoples.

The Triangle region has an Arab population of some 300,000; another 275,000 Arabs reside in East Jerusalem. Together these two areas cover about 3 percent of Israel's territory but are home to more than a third of Israel's 1.5 million Arabs. By redrawing the frontier between Israel and the West Bank to place the Triangle and East Jerusalem's Arab neighborhoods under Palestinian sovereignty, the Jewish proportion of the Israeli population would increase from the current 79 percent to 87 percent.

Under this scenario, the Jewish share of the population would remain well above 80 percent into the 2030s and beyond. Concern about Israel's demographic composition would be postponed to a distant future, by which time the respective growth rates of the Jewish and Arab populations may well have converged.

True, the Triangle's Arab residents have not greeted this proposal warmly. Israeli Arabs know that becoming citizens of a Palestinian state would involve a trade-off: Gains in national identity would likely be accompanied by losses in civil liberties, democratic rights, and standards of living. As a result, many Arabs see their better option as remaining Israeli citizens while fighting for a separate identity within Israel—and, for some, demanding an alteration of the core identity of the Jewish state. But this is also a recipe for heightened tensions and ongoing strife within Israeli society.

The vexing question of the right of return of the Palestinian refugees of 1948–49—which UN Resolution 194 binds to the willingness to live in peace with Israeli neighbors—would find an accommodation in the Palestinian state and in resettlement with economic compensation. Israel, too, should accept a certain quota of returnees that would not upset the ethnic balance of the Jewish state. Division along ethno-religious lines, possibly followed by economic cooperation, was the right solution back in 1947, and it still might be the only viable one now.

As for the status of Jerusalem, a frequently mentioned solution would be partition, allocating the Jewish neighborhoods to the state of Israel and the Arab neighborhoods to the Palestinian state. A better solution—if it were feasible—would be the further creation of a Greater Jerusalem Authority with local autonomies for Jewish and Palestinian neighborhoods, and a joint Israeli-Palestinian Authority for the governance of holy sites or perhaps Jerusalem's entire walled Old City.

A JEWISH DEMOCRACY

Provided that civil rights are granted equally to all citizens, there does not need to be a contradiction between a cultural-national definition of society (incorporating symbolism, language, and institutional values and connotations reflective of Jewish history and memory) and the fully functioning operation of democracy. The vast majority of countries operate like this. While the United States is perhaps an important exception to this rule, many nations with the reputation of liberal and enlightened democracies are constitutionally defined in quite particularistic terms.

Indeed, many if not most contemporary democratic constitutions define binding normative standards regarding the state's religion, ethnic origin, and national language. This is true in Europe, and it quite explicitly applies to the Islamic identity of most Muslim countries. In this respect, Israel is hardly exceptional. However, if one wants a country to be Jewish, speaking Hebrew, and conforming to certain narratives and traditions, a certain threshold of the population may actually need to be Jewish. ■