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The future population of Israel and Palestine

In 2000, Israel's population reached 6.1 million, excluding the Palestinians living in the occupied and annexed territories but including the Jews living in settlements. The population of Jerusalem (both parts) numbered 650,000, among which 210,000 non-Jews, mostly Palestinian (228,000 according to Palestinian sources). The Jewish population rose from 717,000 in 1948 to 5.1 million in 2000, due to an exceptionally high growth rate (3.8% per year) of which 49% is due to net immigration. The Palestinian citizens of Israel (also called Israeli Arabs), who in 1948, after the exodus, numbered only 156,000, have now risen to nearly a million (948,000); their demographic growth

is thus almost equal to that of the Jewish population — 3.5% per year — without the input of immigration. Ashkenazi Jews (Jews from Europe and America) — not including immigrants from the former USSR — represent 35% of the total population, Sephardic Jews (from North Africa, the Middle-East and Asia) account for 32% and the Jews who emigrated from the former USSR represent 17%. The rest of the population (16%) is made up of Palestinians who are Israeli citizens. These are not all Muslims, since many are Christians or Druzes. Adding up the populations of the West Bank (1,840,000), East Jerusalem (228,000) and the Gaza strip (1,120,000), Palestine, which does not yet exist as a state, would have today a population of 3.2 million (Jewish settlers not included).

However, the demographic growth rates of these various populations differ, and for this reason, it is important to carry out evaluations and projections on a frequent basis. Despite this fact, the Central Bureau of Statistics of Israel (CBS) has only just published the new population prospects for 2020, nearly five years after the last projections, carried out in 1995 [1]. Other projections have also been published, of which mention will be made below [2 and 3]. Israel's neighbours, in particular the Palestinians, will be curious to learn what to expect from the future in terms of demography, especially now, at such a critical moment in history, when nothing can be foreseen too clearly. Coincidence or not, the Palestinian Bureau of Statistics, as if to mark its own turf, has also recently published its own population projections.

◆ Though detailed, the typology still needs refining

For the first time, Israeli population forecasts establish a distinction between new immigrants and those who came long ago; a new category has been added to the religious classification system, in addition to Jews, Muslims, Christians (both Arab and non-Arab) and Druzes, that of non-religious persons or persons "not classified by religion". To match the reality of a multi-denominational immigration, the Central Bureau of Statistics has coined a new concept, the "extended



Historical data

Palestine under the British Mandate ceased to exist in 1948. It was replaced by the state of Israel (20,330 km²) while part of what was left of the territory, mainly the West Bank (5,640 km²), including West-Jerusalem (67km²) were integrated into the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, while the Gaza strip (380 km²) was turned over to Egyptian rule. After the Israeli-Arab War of 1967, Israel occupied these territories. Jerusalem, which had been divided in 1948 into East and West Jerusalem, was reunified by Israel after annexation of the Eastern part of the city. The peace negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians should result in the definition of a status for these territories. Some are governed by the Palestinian Authority (zones A, civil and military, and zone B, civil), others are occupied (zone C) or annexed (East Jerusalem) by Israel. Since nearly 300,000 Jewish settlers have created colonies in the West Bank, in East Jerusalem and in the Gaza strip, one can only make conjectures as to the future proportions of Israel and Palestine.

Jewish population”, which encompasses Jews, non-Arab Christians and persons of no declared religion. The rest of the population consists of Arabs, for the most part Palestinian: Muslims, Arab Christians and Druzes.

On the other hand, official projections make no distinction between Jewish residents of Israel *stricto sensu* and those living in settlements on Palestinian territory. In addition, legal citizenship is not taken into account: Palestinians with Israeli citizenship (who have the right to vote) and those who are not citizens (Palestinians living in East Jerusalem and Syrians from the Golan) are classified in the same category. According to the data used for the official projections, the Arab population numbered 1,004,000 in 1995, and the Palestinians with Israeli citizenship, present or potential voters, were 805,000 (1). This is no small difference, neither from a demographic nor from a political point of view. Last, official projections and those made by researchers do not account for the 200,000 to 250,000 immigrant labourers (neither Jewish nor Palestinian), who are considered temporary residents, even though many end up staying.

◆ The ultra-fertile ultra-orthodox

Some criteria, such as ethnic origin or degree of religious observance, are not accounted for by official statistics despite their strong political and social significance. Researchers have tried to compensate for this lack of information. Berman, for example, found that the fertility rate of Sephardic Jews was higher and declined at a lower rate than that of Ashkenazi Jews [4]. As concerns the impact of religious observance, Della Pergola assesses the fertility rate of the ultra-orthodox — 7% of the population in 1995 — at 6.4 children per woman; for the orthodox Jews — 18% of the Jewish population — the rate is 4.4, whereas for the non-observant and moderately religious population (75%), the rate is only 2.4. Berman also observes a spectacular rise of the fertility rate among the Sephardic ultra-orthodox population (from 4.6 children per woman in 1980-84 to 7.2 in 1994-96) and

among the Ashkenazi ultra-orthodox as well (from 6.9 children to 7.8 per woman); the rate stabilizes at the third generation (2) (from 8.7 to 7.9). Slightly inflecting current trends, Della Pergola foresees that the ultra-orthodox population will grow from 7% of the Jewish population in 2000 to 11% in 2020 and 17% in 2050, assuming that ultra-orthodoxy is transmitted from generation to generation. At the same dates, the proportion of orthodox Jews will have grown from 18% to 21%, then to 24%, and that of non-observant or moderate Jews will have dropped from 75% to 68% to 59%. However, the degree of religious observance — and the number of children per family, which is strongly linked to this factor — may vary in intensity from generation to generation.

◆ Hypotheses opposing demographic dogma

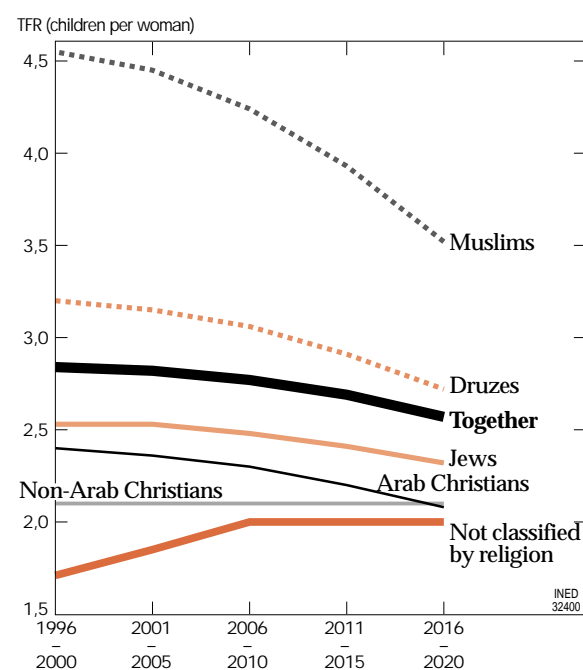
The Israeli projections suggest three possible outcomes for the period 1995-2020, the medium assumption being the most likely. According to the high assumption, the fertility rate will remain constant for all groups; net immigration, which concerns only the “extended Jewish population”, and not the Palestinians, will be positive despite a slight decline, while the mortality rate will decrease for the three groups (this hypothesis is identical in the three assumptions). According to the “medium assumption”, the fertility rate (see figure 1) will decline significantly among the Muslims, and slightly less among the Druzes; the rate will drop slightly for Jews and Christian Arabs and will remain constant among persons not classified by religion and immigrants from the former Soviet Union; net immigration, for the “extended Jewish population” will remain positive but the decrease will be sharper than in the high assumption. Last, in the low assumption, the fertility rate will drop below the replacement threshold for all groups, both Jewish and non-Jewish; the net migrations will be first positive, then negative.

The medium assumption dares contradict the dogma of the necessary transition towards replacement fertility (2.1 children per woman). Implicitly, the Central Bureau of Statistics recognizes that there are different rates of demographic growth and that the high fertility rate has a good chance of remaining so. Among the Jews, the high fertility rate of the orthodox and ultra-orthodox should offset the moderate fertility rate among non-religious Jews. With an overall rate of 2.3 children per woman in 2016-2020, Israeli Jews will have reached the rate projected by the UN for... Syria [5]. Still more surprising, their fertility rate will probably exceed that of most Arab and Middle-Eastern countries: Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Lebanon, Turkey and Iran, whose fertility rate will drop, according to UN estimates, down to 2.1 per woman. In terms of demographic transition, Israeli Jews (and Palestinians from Israel and Palestine), along with the populations of Mauritania, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Iraq, will probably lag

(1) Subtracting 181,800 Palestinians of East Jerusalem and 17,300 Syrians of the Golan.

(2) Persons born in Israel of a father also born in Israel.

Figure 1 – Development of the Israeli fertility rate according to religion, until 2020, medium assumption



Source: Central Bureau of Statistics, *Projections of Israel's population until 2020* (unpublished data)

behind the rest of the world. The fertility rate of Muslims living in Israel will also probably decrease, from 4.6 children per woman (present rate) to 3.5 in 2016-2020 (3). This is both a high and a low figure. Indeed, if, against all expectations, the fertility rate did not vary during the last ten years, then why should it change during the next twenty years? And if it must decrease, then why should the decline be any slower than in Syria, Egypt or in North Africa, since, compared to the rest of the Arab world, Israeli Arabs are said to enjoy numerous socioeconomic and cultural advantages? For Israeli demographers, the unexpected turn taken by the fertility rate of the Arab population in Israel is not due to political causes, but to strong family ties and to “the concomitant vigorous action of more traditional forces within the community” (4).

As concerns migrations, the medium variant does not correspond to the 1995 projections, which forecast the slackening and inversion of migratory flows. Can this be ascribed to Israel's satisfactory economic results, which are liable to generate optimism? Between 1995 and 2020, Israel expects to welcome a net influx of 415,000 immigrants from the former USSR, among which 255,000 Jews (62%), plus another 275,000 immigrants from the rest of Europe and America. Immigration may thus foster religious diversity within the “extended Jewish population”, by including more Christians and persons “not classified by religion”.

◆ By 2020, Israel's population will be larger and more diverse.

Of course, the question of Israel's population for the next twenty years is closely linked to the question of borders. In 2020, Israel's population should reach at

least 7.8 million (low assumption, not counting East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights) and at the most 9.1 million (high assumption, including East Jerusalem, the Golan Heights, and zone C of the West Bank) (5). The medium variant corresponds to a population of 8.3 million, East Jerusalem and the Golan not included, and 8.7 million if they are included (which corresponds to an annual average growth rate of 17‰ between 1995 and 2020). In any case, regardless of the future extent of the Israeli territory, which remains uncertain at this time, its population will exceed all previous estimations (6), since its natural and migratory growth potential had been grossly underestimated. With a total annual average growth rate of 17‰ from 1995 to 2020, Israel should surpass almost all Arab countries (except those of the Arabian Peninsula), as well as Iran and Turkey. This means that Israel will, like the Netherlands, become a very densely populated country.

Is this good or bad? Rapid demographic growth is supposed to go along with greater diversity. According to Della Pergola and his colleagues, if current demographic trends do not change, their consequences could be quite negative. Indeed, the issues at stake are of paramount importance: the balance between the young and the elderly, between Jews of the Diaspora and Jews of Israel, and between Israeli Jews and non-Jews. According to official projections, the Palestinian population (including East Jerusalem), will increase from 1 million in 1995 to 2 million in 2020 (the “extended Jewish population” will have reached 6.7 million), or 23% of the total population. Using the same methodology and projecting into the future the trends determined by the Bureau of statistics, Della Pergola comes to the conclusion that in 2050, the non-Jewish population (nine tenths of which are Palestinian) should reach 3.7 million, alongside a population of 8.2 million Jews, or 31% of the total population (see figure 2). In Jerusalem, the epicenter of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, regardless of the fertility and migration hypotheses, the Palestinian population will increase more than twofold between 1995 and 2020. By 2020, it will have reached somewhere between 35% and 43% of the “reunified” Holy City's population, as opposed to only 30% in 1995 [9]: this

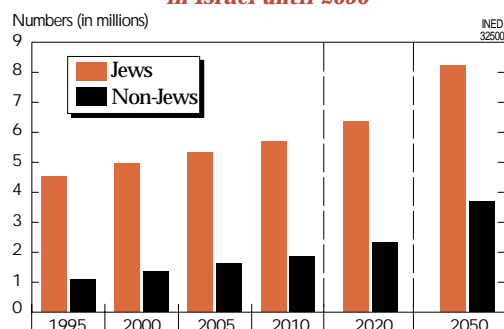
(3) Thus, the fertility rate of all Israeli Palestinians (Muslims, Christians and Druzes) will decrease from 4.3 to 3.1 children per woman. This drop is not as sharp as that drawn from a similar study (2.7 in 2016-2020), cf. [6].

(4) According to allusive phrasing of Segio Della Pergola *et al.* [2]. The Central Bureau of Statistics (*Projections of Israel's population until 2020*, unpublished manuscript) does not clearly explain why the Muslim fertility rate remains at the same level. The possibility that this rate will remain constant in the future is not excluded, but it corresponds to the high assumption.

(5) If, in addition to East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, Israel annexes zone C of the West Bank, whose Palestinian population numbered 63,700 at the end of 1997, then one must add about 120,000 inhabitants to the total population figure, and about as many to the Arab population (which will thus exceed 2 million inhabitants) cf. [7].

(6) In 1992 and 1999, we had forecast for 2020 a population of respectively 6.9 and 7.5 million (East Jerusalem and Golan not included), in other words a 20% and an 11% decrease [8]. The United Nations (whose projections, like those of the Israeli demographers, take into account the annexation of East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights) project a figure of 8.0 million, or 9% less.

Figure 2 – Jewish and Non-Jewish Population in Israel until 2050



Sources: Central Bureau of Statistics, *Projections of Israel's Population until 2020* and Della Pergola et al. [5] (for 2050).

fact underscores the acuteness of the question of demographic balance in “reunified Jerusalem”.

Within the overall “extended Jewish population” category, the Bureau of statistics distinguishes only one group from the rest, that of the immigrants from the former USSR. This group is not all Jewish and its characteristics are those of a new ethnic entity: its members speak Russian rather than Hebrew, they are not religious, many are married to non-Jews, and they tend to vote for the two Russian political parties *Yisrael Ba'Aliya* and *Yisrael Beitenu*, which have 10 representatives (out of 120) in the Israeli Parliament, rather than for the other parties of the Israeli Establishment. For these reasons, separate projections were carried out for this group, whose number should reach 1.1 million by 2020 (576,000 in 1995), or 16.5% of the “extended Jewish population”.

◆ A war of cribs or a battle of numbers?

Israel is not the only country in the region whose population is rising rapidly. The Palestinian Authority foresees an even greater increase of the Palestinian population: the 2.8 million of 1997 are expected to reach 6.5 million in 2020 [10]; true, the territory concerned is as yet ill-defined and its status has not yet been determined. Overall, the two states that will share the territory of the former Palestine of the British Mandate are expected to have a population of 14.8 million by 2020. This is a remarkable figure, given that before the war of 1948, Palestine had a population of only 2 million, two thirds of which were Palestinian and one third Jewish. In 2020, this proportion, which was later reversed by the Palestinian exodus, will be closer to the earlier situation, but on a much larger scale: in twenty years, according to projections, there will be 8.1 million Palestinians (on Palestinian territory and in Israel) and 6.4 million Jews, in the religious sense (6.7 if one considers the “extended Jewish population”). Of course, these figures are somewhat “fixist” in nature, since they are based on the assumption that populations develop separately and do not account for mixed marriages between Jews, Muslims and Christians, or between religious and non-religious Jews.

Palestine seems to hold the world record for demographic growth: 37.7‰ per year, compared with 17.4‰ in Israel between 1995 and 2020. Both

countries, despite apparent saturation, expect the arrival of many immigrants or returning emigrants (half a million in Palestine, and 700,000 in Israel), on top of the highest fertility rate in the world: 5.93 children per woman in Palestine in 1997, and still 3.52 in 2020. These figures seem wildly exorbitant, as if belonging to another age, compared to usual UN projections which tend to report very slow migrations and the irreversible trend of fertility rates towards the replacement threshold. In 2020, a fertility rate as high as that of Israel and Palestine will be found only in sub-Saharan Africa, in the Arabian Peninsula (Arabia, Oman, Yemen) or in Afghanistan, Bhutan and Laos, or still in faraway Paraguay or the Solomon Islands.

Should we question the credibility of these projections and criticize them as one more item of contention between Israel and Palestine, one more battle of numbers?

In fact, these scenarios are perfectly plausible. If the best way of seeing into the future is to study the past, then there is no reason not to believe that Israeli and Palestinian demographic trends, which are highly determined by political, ethnic and social tensions [11], will maintain their specificity during the next quarter of a century. Will the peace process, if it ever succeeds in finding an acceptable solution for both parties, temper this demographic explosion? It would seem so. However, one must not disregard a factor which is specifically Israeli: each ethnic and religious group can be tempted to play the “numbers” card in order to increase its access to economic resources and wield greater political influence.

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