

# Demographics in the Israeli-Palestinian Dispute

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Brief Analysis

**B**eyond the current violence and terrorism lies a demographic reality in the Arab-Israeli dispute which might in the future transform the politics, economics, and geography of the region. The demographics may affect U.S. foreign policy vis-à-vis the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

In the next twenty years, the population of Israel (including all of Jerusalem) is predicted to rise from 7.1 million to 9.7 million. The Jewish population will increase from 5.0 million, or 70 percent of the total, to 6.3 million, or 65 percent of the total—and that is on optimistic assumptions about continued immigration. The non-Jewish population will increase much more rapidly, from 2.1 million to 3.4 million. Most of this is due to the more rapid growth of the Israeli Arab population, although there will also be a substantial increase in the foreign (non-Jewish, non-Arab) population.

The increase in the Arab population is due to two principal factors: 1) a high birth rate—3.7 percent for Israeli Muslims and even higher for Palestinians, and 2) the illegal influx of Palestinians from the West Bank, Gaza, Lebanon, and Jordan. When considering the Israeli opposition to right-of-return proposals for refugees, one must realize that 153,000 Palestinians have already moved into Israel illegally: 70,000 into Jerusalem, 70,000 into the Little Triangle area, and 13,000 into the southern Bedouin communities. A striking example of these two trends—high birth rates and illegal immigration—coming together can be seen in the influx of Gazan women who enter polygamous marriages with Israeli Bedouin and then have ten to twelve children.

In addition to the increase in the Israeli Arab population, the Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza will increase from 3.0 million to 5.8 million in the next twenty years. Adding together the population of Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza, the population of Mandatory Palestine—the historic Land of Israel—will go from 10.1 million, of which Jews are just under 50 percent, to 15.5 million, of which Jews will be just over 40 percent.

This increase in the Arab population poses a demographic challenge. As a result, the Palestinian territories will face scarce water resources and poor economic conditions that, in turn, will breed frustration and instigate further violence and terror. Moreover, the structure of Israeli society and the Knesset will be transformed. Adding together Arabs and ultra-orthodox Jews, whose numbers will increase by .5 million over the next twenty years, one finds that non-Zionists will be the majority of the Israeli population by 2020, which fact could undermine Israeli democracy and the rule of law. Other geopolitical implications include the danger of the loss of Israeli control over districts in which there will be a large Arab majority, such as Galilee, the Little Triangle, and northern Negev.

Furthermore, the shortage of water, coupled with intensified population density on limited land, could lead to a collapse of transportation and other infrastructure—an area in which Israel is investing woefully inadequate resources. All in all, the deterioration could result in the emigration of Zionist Jews and could convert Israel into a third world state. This gloomy vision of the future underlines the need to prepare plans to preserve the modern and Jewish character of the state.

Proposal for an Initiated Separation in the Land of Israel

A solution for this demographic crisis is an initiated separation. Far from the Saudi proposal to establish a Palestinian state within the 1967 ceasefire lines of the West Bank and Gaza, this proposal entails the establishment of two states along a demographic border. The Palestinian state would include the Palestinian parts of Jerusalem other than the Temple Mount, Holy Basin, and three Arab enclaves on the Israeli side of the 1967 boundaries (these enclaves contain a total Arab population today of over a half million—a population that will increase dramatically by 2020). The Israeli state would include the Jewish-majority areas of the West Bank and Gaza, which would require Israel to annex fifty Palestinian villages where about sixty thousand Palestinians reside; Israel would withdraw from fifty Jewish settlements, where nearly forty thousand Jews live.

Besides demographic considerations, there are also security concerns; given these concerns, Israel should control the borders so that the Palestinians will not share borders with any other Arab state. That would require Israel to control the Jordan River Valley area, which is quite large but has very few inhabitants. As an additional security measure, the separation of the two states should be total, meaning that they should not engage in any form of economic cooperation. In particular, Palestinians should not be allowed to work in Israel because they are more likely than foreign workers to stay; after all, they claim that the land is their home.

Many may argue that this type of separation is provocative and may be rejected in the Arab world. However, the gravity of the existential threat to Israel from the coming demographic transformation highlights the need to implement this separation plan with full force. If such a plan is not implemented, Israel will be engulfed in an ocean of Arab states in which Islamic radicalism is a rampant force. In contrast, implementing the Saudi separation plan along the 1967 ceasefire lines is dangerous because it would leave Israel with such a large Palestinian population that its Jewish character would be in danger. In other words, Israel must do more than withdraw from nearly all of the West Bank and Gaza; it must also hand over to the Palestinians some of the majority-Arab parts of pre-1967 Israel.

Critics of this proposal will highlight the problem of operationalization, especially on specific issues such as water. For example, nearly one-third of Israel's water comes from the West Bank. The solution is simple: desalination. The cost to Israel would be on the order of a few hundred million dollars each year, which is expensive but worthwhile in the pursuit of security and survival.

While there are drawbacks to the initiated separation, it offers the best prospects for ensuring the continuing Jewish character of the state of Israel. And the plan may be the most appealing to the majority of the Israeli population.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Merissa Khurma.

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