



RESEARCH NOTES

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The Jews of the West Bank and Gaza and the Peace Process

by Salay Meridor

Every Israeli government since 1967 has supported some form of settlement activity. The following report offers a demographic profile of Jews living in the West Bank and Gaza. It examines the considerations behind various governments' settlement policies and the motivations—political and ideological—of the settlers in these areas. Finally, the Jewish communities in the territories are considered within the context of the peace process.

In the Six Day War of 1967, Israel gained control of the West Bank (Judea and Samaria) and Gaza. The history of the war itself is an important element of Israeli perspectives on these territories. After the fighting ended, Israel felt a collective euphoria at the unexpected victory, a tremendous sense of relief that the threat to Israel's existence had been wiped away, and joy that those parts of the historic Jewish homeland which were the very cradle of Hebrew culture had been returned. This experience formed the backdrop to the beginnings of Jewish settlement.

As these origins would suggest, every Israeli government, whether from the Right or the Left, has supported settlement activity in these areas. The policies of the various Israeli governments have invariably been based on three primary considerations:

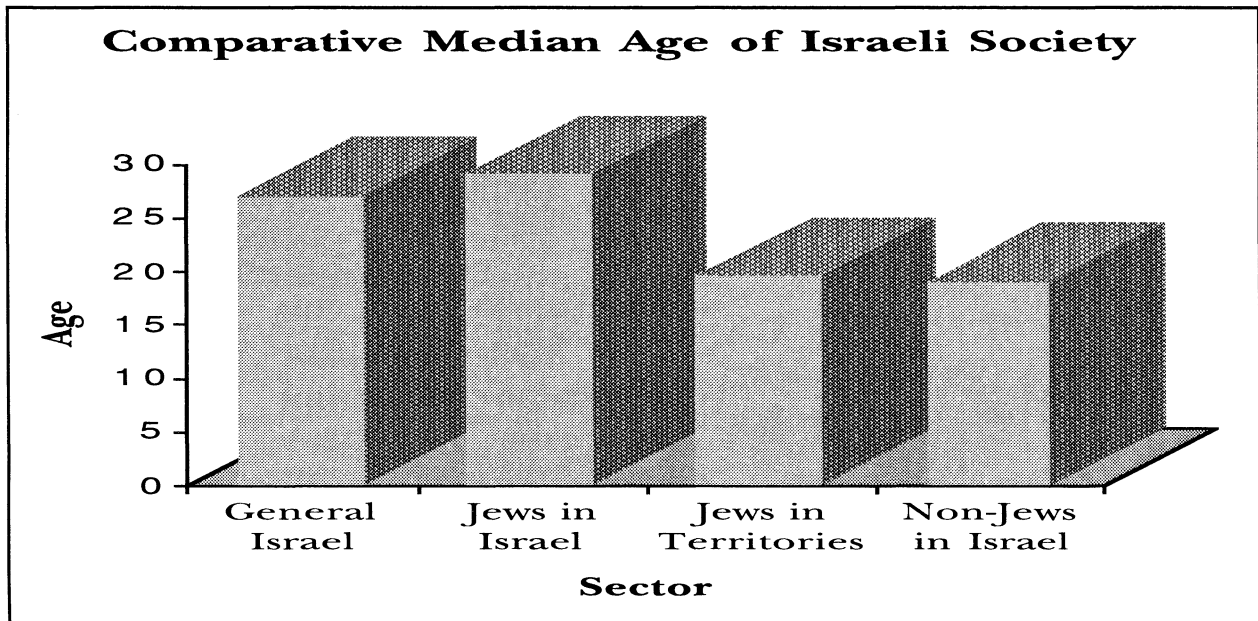
- 1) security, and the importance of having a Jewish presence in the territories to ensure the defense of the state;
- 2) demography, namely that Israel has preferred settlement in areas without a dense Arab population; and
- 3) history, and the Zionist ethos of the "Return to the Homeland."

These three considerations are not entirely mutually reconcilable. For instance, for security purposes, Israeli governments have sometimes felt the need to encourage settlement in areas with large Arab populations. Of course, different Israeli governments have placed different emphases on each of these considerations at different times based on their own philosophies and circumstances.

In the years 1967-1977, Labor governments emphasized security and demography. Aspiring to territorial compromise with the Arabs (essentially in the form of the "Allon Plan"), they permitted and encouraged the establishment of Jewish communities in areas they intended would remain under Israeli sovereignty (about 50 percent of the territories). These Labor governments were also strongly influenced by the spirit of the "Return to the Homeland," and so were willing to approve new communities in densely populated Arab areas on essentially moral grounds.

The Likud governments of 1977-1984 placed greater emphasis on the "Return to the Homeland" and less on demographic considerations. In addition to ideological motivations, the Likud policy was guided by the concept of a "functional compromise" as the eventual solution to the political struggle over the territories. Communities would only be established on state-owned lands, thereby limiting the location of new villages.

After 1985, the emphasis of the Israeli government (at that point a national unity government consisting of both Labor and Likud) gradually moved away from the establishment of new communities to a policy focused instead on the growth of existing towns and villages. Nevertheless, over the past decade, average annual population growth has been approximately 10 percent, with the Jewish population of the territories passing the 150,000 mark at the end of 1996.



Composition of the Jewish Population in the Territories

The Jewish population of the territories is similar to that of Israel in general, although it has certain unique characteristics. First, it is young—the youngest in Israel, by district. The territories are home to many young families and a larger number of children than the average in Israel. The median average age is under twenty (for Jews in Israel, it is almost thirty). In fact, 90 percent of the Jewish population of the territories is under forty-four years old.

Second, the settler population is considered very religious. Contrary to popular image, however, only about half of the population can be defined as such. Nevertheless, this percentage is much higher than the Jewish average in Israel and, together with the high concentration of young families, explains the high birth rate of Jews in these areas.

As far as the employment profile of the Jewish population of the territories, a relatively high percentage is employed in service industries, especially in education and other professions requiring higher education. About 60 percent commute daily to large centers of employment in Israel. Others work in the territories themselves, generating a gross domestic product of over \$1 billion per year from these areas alone.

The primary industries of the Jewish population in these areas include manufacturing, advanced technology, commerce, services, agriculture, and tourism.

Motivations for Settlement

The Jewish population of the territories lives in some 140 towns and villages—about 60 percent in towns and 40 percent in villages. Two motivations, the quality of life and ideology, have been the most significant factors driving the growth of the Jewish population. A third motivation, incentives provided by the government to serve political goals, has also played a role, albeit to a much smaller extent than the other two.

An Attractive Way of Life

Most of the communities in the territories are noteworthy for their high quality of life, due to relatively low density housing, excellent education, and an active and supportive community. Most of the population is located within fifteen miles of the large urban centers of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and the other cities of the coastal plain. Indeed, in many ways, the communities of the West Bank and Gaza are the suburban ideal for most Israelis. Compared to Jerusalem and the coastal plain, where the

population density is 1,000 persons per km², and Tel Aviv with 7,000 per km², the nearby areas on the other side of the Green Line offer a population density of 300 people per km².

The Zionist Ethos

Zionism attaches great importance to the concept of the "Return to the Homeland" and to settlement of the country. This is a deeply held value of the entire Israeli people, and is not limited to one particular political group. It is this belief that led a Labor government to establish the settlement of Kiryat Arba next to Hebron. David Ben Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, founding father and long-time leader of the Labor party who, in principle, favored conceding many areas to the Arabs, said in 1970:

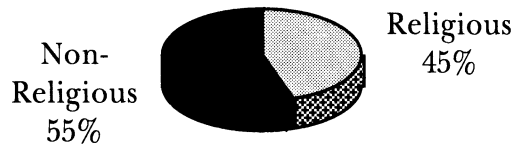
Hebrew history begins in Hebron . . . that is where the forefathers and foremothers of the nation are buried . . . It was there that David founded the great Kingdom of Israel . . . We will make a vast and terrible mistake if we do not settle Hebron, Jerusalem's neighbor and forerunner, with a growing Jewish community in the very near future. It will be a blessing also for the Arab neighbors. Hebron is fit to be Jerusalem's sister.

Zionist ideology continues to influence Israeli policy toward the territories. For example, the same attitude that led Ben-Gurion to support the establishment of a Jewish community in Hebron also played a role in the insistence of two Israel governments (one Labor, one Likud) on continued Israeli control over the Makhpelah Cave and the Jewish Quarter during the negotiations with the Palestinian Authority leading to the Hebron accord in January 1997.

Political Motivations

The government of Israel has also encouraged Jewish emigration to the territories for political reasons. Especially during the first decade after the Six Day War, the Israeli government encouraged the establishment of Jewish communities in the territories to enhance Israeli security, integrate the newly-won areas into the larger skein of Israeli society, and create legal claims on the land. While this has not been an

Secular-Religious Breakdown of the Jewish Population of the West Bank and Gaza



insignificant factor in increasing the Jewish population of the territories, its importance has been exaggerated.

Most of the growth in the Jewish communities of the West Bank has been in areas close to the urban centers of the country. This indicates that the primary factor spurring population growth has been the search for a better quality of life, not the political machinations of the Israeli government. Government investments and incentives were significant early on, when the emphasis was on building new towns and villages. However, beginning in the 1970s, when the emphasis shifted to largely private-sector expansion of existing communities, the relative importance of government incentives declined. To a great extent, it is the case that the farther a community is from an Israeli urban center, the greater the effect of ideological motivation and incentives has been on its development.

Over the years, the "pull" of the better quality of life in the West Bank Jewish communities has been stronger than the "push" of political incentives and the growth rate has persisted, largely without regard to political developments. Evidence for this can be seen in the steady growth of the communities during the Rabin and Peres governments, which curbed the government incentives for emigrants to the territories.

Distribution of the Jewish Population

Today, most of the Jews live in areas close to

the center of the State of Israel. Some live in more remote, desert areas and a small minority in immediate proximity to the large Arab population centers. At the end of 1996, over 150,000 Jews lived in the territories, distributed as follows (rounded to the nearest thousand):

Greater Jerusalem area	65,000
Western Samaria (near Coastal Plain)	60,000
Jordan Valley	5,500
Gaza District (Qatif and Erez)	5,000
Southern Judea	2,500
North Samaria	2,000
Other	2,000

If the existing growth rate remains stable—as experts anticipate—the Jewish population of the territories is expected to reach approximately 200,000 in 1999, the target date for a permanent status arrangement between Israel and the Palestinians. The population is expected to continue to climb to some 220,000 by the year 2000. The greatest growth is expected in those areas closest to the center of Israel: the greater Jerusalem area and western Samaria.

The Jewish Communities and the Peace Process

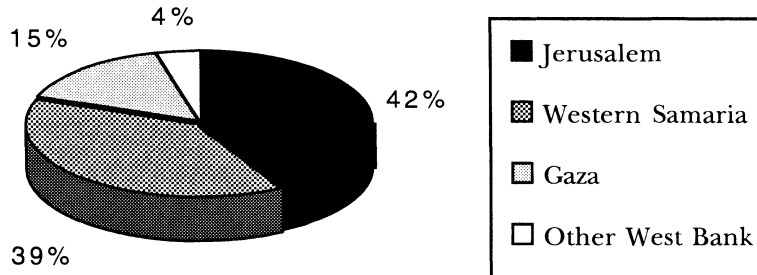
The Jewish communities in the territories

grew by approximately 50 percent between 1992 and 1996, and this growth did not prevent rapid progress in the Middle East peace process. Today, a consensus is building in Israel that the Jewish communities should not be dismantled in any future peace settlement. At least some Palestinian leaders—as demonstrated by PLO negotiator Abu Mazen’s reported understandings with Labor MK Yossi Beilin—are beginning to accept the Jewish communities as a reality.

For too long, the Israeli and Palestinian populations have viewed their relationship in the territories as a zero-sum game. However, the history of the communities there has demonstrated not only that the two sides can live together but that both can prosper simultaneously, and even as a result of the other’s presence. Palestinians and Jews living in the territories have shared interests in economic development and jobs, freedom of movement, health, tourism and environmental protection among other things. In the economic sphere, many thousands of Palestinians are employed in Jewish towns and villages in construction, agriculture and industry. As for health care issues, when an accident occurs, ambulances travel between Arab and Jewish communities before knowing who the injured are. It is important to



Distribution of the Jewish Population of the West Bank and Gaza



of jointly owned businesses could serve as a bridge between Israeli capital and the Palestinian population. Likewise, joint treatment of the sewage of Jerusalem and Bethlehem or of Hebron and Kiryat Arba could protect the aquifers supplying water to both communities. Tourism is another area in which cooperation could produce both social harmony and economic welfare. Ultimately, just as tensions between the two groups can

develop coordination between the emergency services at the district level and to encourage joint health services. With respect to the environment, the sewers of both communities are polluting the common water sources.

These shared interests and problems suggest that common solutions could be found as well, which would improve both the harmony of Jewish-Arab relations in the territories and the lives of both communities. For example, the establishment of joint industrial parks and promotion

endanger the entire peace process, dialogue, understanding, and cooperation between them could make a decisive contribution to their ability to achieve and maintain peace.

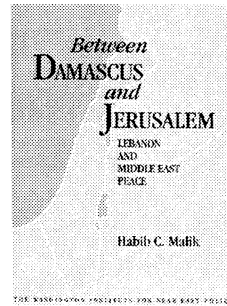
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