

Demography and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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The attack by the Islamist group Hamas against Israel on October 7, 2023, and the immediate Israeli offensive in the Gaza Strip, with the thousands of deaths and the devastation that we are witnessing daily in one of the most densely populated areas of the world, have pushed further away the prospect of a solution of coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians through the establishment of two peoples-two states, a solution that is viewed favorably in non-holy Palestinian and Israeli circles by many Western countries and by the Holy See. To complicate the socio-political picture, we recall that in the last decades, in the territories occupied by Israel in the West Bank, there has been an incessant work of human settlements and the construction of roads and infrastructures, facilitated by Israel's rapid population growth. According to many analysts, in order to dominate the Palestinians, Israel is now implementing a real system of apartheid that is spreading from the occupied territories to the Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel. Based on the available data, which are not always reliable for political and organizational reasons of the existing statistical systems, this study attempts to grasp the strategic role that differential demography has had and continues to have in this complex conflictual reality.

Keywords: demography, religious conflict, Middle East

Introduction

The attack by the Islamist Hamas group on Israel on October 7, 2023, and the immediate Israeli offensive in the Gaza Strip, with the ensuing deaths and devastation, pushed away the prospect of a solution of coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians through the establishment of two peoples-two states, a solution viewed favorably both in moderate Palestinian and Israeli circles and by many Western countries including the Holy See (Neuhaus, 2022). As evidence of the pessimism previously outlined, it is notable that in a 2022 poll conducted by the Israel Democracy Institute, only 32% of Israeli Jews expressed support for a two-state solution, while in a contemporaneous poll by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, only 37% of Palestinians indicated their approval (Neuhaus, 2022).

To further complicate the social and political landscape, it is important to note that over the past decades, Israeli-occupied lands in the West Bank have witnessed a significant increase in human settlements and infrastructure development, facilitated by Israel's rapid population growth.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is widely discussed from political, military, and religious perspectives. However, there is comparatively little attention paid to other dimensions that are also significant, including demographics and society. These factors have played and continue to play a pivotal role in shaping the political landscape surrounding the conflict. Instead, strength in numbers is one of the important determinants of the whole Israeli-Palestinian equation (Della Pergola, 2007).

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Human Losses

The number of casualties resulting from this conflict is alarming. The Palestinian statistical offices are responsible for providing updates on a regular basis. For example, as of October 2, 2024 at 9 p.m., Palestinian sources have recorded more than 41,000 casualties in Gaza, 722 in the West Bank, and 10,000 individuals reported missing, nearly half of whom are children and women (Table 1).

Table 1

The Palestinian State-reported Casualties and Missing Persons Bulletin, Updated 11/4/2024, at 2.00.p.m.

	Numbers
Total martyrs in Gaza Strip	43,374
Kids in Gaza Strip	17,289
Women in Gaza Strip	11,815
Elderly in Gaza Strip	2,421
Medical staff martyrs	1,047
Press martyrs	183
Educational staff martyrs	496
Total martyrs in West Bank	768
Kids martyrs in West Bank	167
UN staff martyrs	203
Civil defense	85
Missing	10,000
Missing kids and women	4,700

Note. Source: State of Palestine, PCBS¹; Ministry of Health, UN; OCHA, 2024.

Information regarding the Israeli side is more limited. As reported by Human Rights Watch, which cites estimates from Agency France Press, the highest death toll occurred during the assault on the Supernova music festival, where at least 364 civilians were killed. Agency France Press estimated that 815 of the 1,195 individuals killed were civilians, including 79 foreign nationals. The massacre included 282 women and 36 children. Palestinian armed groups forcibly transferred 251 civilians and members of the Israeli armed forces to Gaza territory, where they were held hostage. The majority of the victims were Jewish, but there were also victims of other nationalities. Many victims held dual nationality².

Differential Demographic Growth

The objective of this research is to gain insight into the strategic role that differential demography has played in these two complex societies that are in a state of permanent conflict. In order to achieve this, an attempt has been made to utilize the available data provided by existing statistical systems, despite the inherent limitations of such data sets due to political and organizational reasons. It should be recalled that the areas in question are the territories of the current State of Israel, with a population in 2024 of 9.9 million, and the territory of Palestine, with a population of 5.4 million (PRB, 2024). This latter territory includes the Gaza Strip, which is controlled by the Islamist Hamas group, and the West Bank, which is subject to a variety of governance arrangements. These include areas under the rule of the Palestinian National Authority, areas shared with Israel, and areas under exclusive Israeli control.

¹ https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/site/lang__en/1/default.aspx; https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/site/lang__en/1405/Default.aspx.

² <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024>.

The growth of the population has affected both communities residing in this territory, which is among the most densely populated on Earth. Indeed, in 2023, the population density per square kilometer of arable land in Israel was 2,599, while that of the Palestinian territory was 13,126. It is also noteworthy that the population density of the EU, in the same year, was 620 people per square kilometer (PRB, 2023).

From the early 1800s onward, the population of Israel exhibited a gradual increase until it reached 2 million in 1947, at which time the United Nations adopted the partition plan. In this interval all the religious groups that constitute it grow: Muslims, Christians, but especially Jews. However, significant shifts took place during the British Mandate (1922-1948). In fact, during the latter period, while the Christian and Muslim populations exhibited a doubling, the Jewish population demonstrated an eightfold increase, with its incidence rising from 11 percent to 32 percent in comparison.

But, the period of most intense numerical growth occurred between 1948 and 1950, when between 650,000 and 750,000 Arabs were displaced by the 1948-49 war³. These individuals were forced to leave areas under Israeli control and take refuge in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Transjordan, Syria, and Lebanon. Concurrently, the newly established state of Israel welcomed migrants who had survived the Nazi regime, as well as individuals from Muslim-majority territories in the Middle East and North Africa. As a result of these forced displacements, in 1950 the territory west of the Jordan River was populated by 1.2 million Jews and 910,000 Muslims⁴. By the late 1950s, the Jewish population within the armistice lines drawn after the 1948-49 war, which excluded the West Bank, East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, and the Golan Heights, had reached 2 million. Subsequently, when the Soviet Union began to accept emigration, a significant number of individuals relocated to Israel, contributing to a Jewish population of 5 million by the end of the 20th century. Today, nearly half of the world's Jewish population lives in Israel, exceeding 7 million as of 2022, accounting for 75 percent of all Israeli citizens scattered around the world (Boyd, 2023). The figures in Table 2 allow for a complete picture of the evolution of Israel's population by religious affiliation as well.

Table 2

Population of Israel by Religious Affiliation, 1950-2022 (in Thousands)

Years	Druze	Christians	Muslims	Jews	Total
1950	14.8	35.0	113.8	1,103.0	1,266.8
1955	18.5	42.7	134.1	1,555.3	1,750.4
1960	22.8	49.0	162.8	1,882.6	2,117.0
1965	29.2	56.3	207.3	2,269.8	2,562.6
1970	35.2	74.5	321.2	2,543.1	2,974.0
1975	41.5	79.4	403.1	2,931.2	3,455.3
1980	49.9	88.8	489.7	3,249.4	3,877.7
1985	71.0	98.8	568.7	3,494.5	4,233.0
1990	81.4	109.8	666.2	3,802.7	4,660.2

³ In the period preceding the declaration of its independence, the Jewish population of Israel constituted 630,000 individuals, representing approximately one-third of the total population. The ratio of Muslims to Jews was two to one. Additionally, the 1950 census recorded a modest Christian population of 35,000 individuals (Boyd, 2023).

⁴ To be more precise, at the time of the establishment of the State of Israel (May 15, 1948), the Jewish population was 649,600. Over the course of 3.5 years, that is, by the end of 1951, 689,739 Jews immigrated to Israel. This exceptional immigration can be explained by Bachi as a result of the simultaneous combination of pull and push factors that occurred in that short period. These included Israel's policy of encouraging immigration by facilitating the return of immigrants through the provision of transportation, as well as the growth of Arab nationalist movements hostile to Israel (Bachi, 1974).

Table 2 to be continued

1995	92.8	159.9	797.2	4,495.1	5,544.9
2000	102.5	133.4	952.0	4,914.1	6,289.2
2005	114.1	145.4	1,124.0	5,275.7	6,930.1
2010	126.4	152.6	1,303.5	5,752.2	7,623.6
2015	136.3	164.7	1,470.9	6,276.8	8,380.1
2020	146.0	178.3	1,653.6	6,823.5	9,215.1
2022	149.4	184.4	1,728.1	7,042.0	9,557.5

Note. Source: CBS, Central Bureau of Statistic Israel, 2022⁵.

To provide a more comprehensive comparative picture, Table 3 also presents figures on the evolution of the Palestinian population from 1997 to 2022, as well as forecasts to 2026, which were published by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics.

Table 3

Population of Palestine 1997-2026 (2022-2026 Forecast)

Years	Palestine	Years	Palestine
1997	2,783,084	2012	4,226,410
1998	2,871,568	2013	4,327,751
1999	2,962,226	2014	4,429,084
2000	3,053,335	2015	4,530,416
2001	3,138,471	2016	4,632,025
2002	3,225,214	2017	4,733,357
2003	3,314,509	2018	4,854,013
2004	3,407,417	2019	4,976,684
2005	3,508,126	2020	5,101,152
2006	3,611,998	2021	5,227,193
2007	3,719,189	2022	5,354,656
2008	3,820,801	2023	5,483,450
2009	3,922,130	2024	5,613,463
2010	4,023,462	2025	5,744,561
2011	4,124,795	2026	5,876,648

Note. Source: Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2021⁶.

A review of the last 20 years (1995-1997 to 2021-2022) reveals that while Israel's population increased by 72.4%, Palestine's population grew by 87.8% (Tables 2 and 3). These figures represent the ultimate outcome of the disparate demographic trends observed in the two populations, a factor that has assumed a significant strategic and explanatory role. Indeed, both the Israelis and the Palestinians have employed demographic factors as a means of exerting political pressure. The term "overtaking" has emerged as a key concept in this context, signifying the perceived ascendance of the Palestinian population over that of Israel⁷, which, as we

⁵ <https://www.cbs.gov.il/en/subjects/Pages/Demographic-Characteristics.aspx>.

⁶ https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/statisticsIndicatorsTables.aspx?lang=en&table_id=676.

⁷ Symptomatic of the feared numerical overtaking of the Palestinians by the Jewish population is, for example, the furor caused at the time of the presentation of demographic data by Colonel Mendes, Deputy Commander of the Israeli Civil Administration responsible for the administration of the Occupied Territories, who, while explaining the demographic data to the Knesset in 2017, remarked that already at that time, between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River, the Palestinians outnumbered the Jews by one and a half million (Furlan, 2018).

shall see, the Palestinians are already accomplishing over the Israelis because of demographic characteristics more favorable to them (higher fertility and a much younger population). Israeli concern of incipient Palestinian demographic superiority was also underscored by Palestinian sources when the results of the 2022 census conducted by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics were released (Najib, 2022).

The Numbers of the Overtaking of the Palestinians

In tracing the demographic evolution, we cannot ignore the religious factor, which is crucial in the context in order to understand its consequences, especially at the political level. To achieve this, we will utilize Table 4, which was originally presented by J. Chamie (2022). In 1948, the two populations had a combined total of less than one million individuals. In 1948, 82% of the population of the State of Israel was Jewish. This figure would now be 74%, and by 2048 it would drop to 70%. The population of Palestine, currently 5.5 million, is projected to grow to 8.6 million by 2048. In the two territories as a whole, the Jewish population would constitute a minority (48 percent), which would be even smaller (45 percent) in 2048 (Table 4) (Chamie, 2022).

Table 4

Population under the British Mandate of Palestine, Israel, State of Palestine, Total Territory (Values in Millions and %)

British Mandate over Palestine						
Years	Population	% Muslims	% Jews	% Christians		
1922	0.75	78	11	10		
1931	1.04	74	17	9		
1945	1.76	60	31	8		
	Israel		State of Palestine		Overall territory	
	Population	% Jews	Population	Population	% Jews	
1948	0.9	82	0.9			
1960	2.2	89	1.1			
1970	3.0	85	1.1			
1980	3.9	84	1.5			
1990	4.8	82	2.1			
2000	6.4	78	3.1			
2010	7.7	75	4.0			
2020	9.3	74	5.0			
2022	9.6	74	5.3	14.8		48
2030	11.1	73	6.3	17.4		46
2040	13.2	71	7.6	20.8		45
2048	15.2	70	8.6	23.8		45

Note. Source: J. Chamie, Demography of Israel-Palestinian conflict, Inter Press Service, 2022.

The demographic projections in Table 4 above are quite plausible when looking at the most important demographic components of the two communities today. In fact, the natural increase in Israel in 2024 was 1.3 per 1,000; in the territories of Palestine, 2.5 per 1,000; the fertility rate in Israel of 2.8 children per fertile woman, in Palestine of 3.6; and in Palestine the population is much younger than in Israel (the percentages of population under 15 were 28 and 38 percent, respectively) (Table 5) (PRB, 2024).

Table 5

Key Demographic Indicators of Israel and Palestine, 2024

	Israel	Palestinian territory
Population 6/30/2023 in millions	9.9	5.4
Births x 1,000 population	18	29
Deaths x 1,000 population	5	4
Natural rate of increase (%)	1.3	2.5
Projected population at 6/30/2035 (millions)	11.7	6.6
Projected population at 6/30/2050 (millions)	14.1	8.0
Total fertility rate	2.8	3.6
Average life at birth in years	83	75
Population per square kilometer of arable land	2,599*	13,126*
Percentage of population under 15 years old	28	38
Percentage of population over 65 years old	12	4
Old age index %	42.9%	10.5%

Note. Source: PRB, World Population Data Sheet, 2024; * values at 2023.

The figures previously illustrated were heavily influenced by political, religious and nationalistic drives. It is important to note that the Palestinian state is comprised predominantly of young individuals, while in Israel, the ultra-Orthodox population, specifically the Haredim community, is regarded as the most extremist. The latter is experiencing significant growth due to a high fertility rate of approximately seven children per woman. Projections indicate that by mid-century, this minority will constitute approximately one-third of the total population. Consequently, this will render the attainment of a peaceful solution even more challenging, even in the context of the ongoing bloody conflict (International Web Post, 2023; De Martino & Hanau Santini, 2023).

Conclusions

In light of the aforementioned evidence, it is evident that the attack by the Islamist Hamas group on Israel on October 7, 2023, and the subsequent Israeli offensive in the Gaza Strip, which has resulted in thousands of deaths and widespread devastation, have significantly undermined the prospect of a solution of coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians through the establishment of two peoples-two states, a solution viewed favorably by moderate Palestinian and Israeli circles, as well as by numerous Western countries and the Holy See, has now become increasingly implausible. The socio-political situation has been further complicated by the fact that, over the past decades, Israel has been engaged in the incessant establishment of human settlements and the construction of roads and infrastructure on the occupied lands in the West Bank.

This note has attempted to show, on the basis of the available data, which are not always entirely reliable for political and organizational reasons related to the existing statistical systems, how the strength of numbers is an important determinant in this complex reality.

The strong demographic growth of both the Palestinian and Israeli populations was highlighted, and within the latter, trends by religious affiliation (Jews, Muslims, Christians and Druze) were shown, emphasizing the numerical overtaking that the Palestinians are making over the Israelis, thanks to demographic characteristics more favorable to them (higher fertility and much younger population). On the Israeli side, an original trait that distinguishes it is the remarkable potential for growth of the more extremist minorities, as a result of their high fertility. This feature, in light of the ongoing war, will make peace in this territory even more problematic.

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