

Jerusalem Letter

Jerusalem Center For Public Affairs

JERUSALEM INSTITUTE FOR FEDERAL STUDIES • CENTER FOR JEWISH COMMUNITY STUDIES

Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher • David Clayman, Executive Editor

ISSN: 0334-4096

JL: 79 5 Nisan 5745 / 27 March 1985

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF ERETZ ISRAEL

Yosef Levite

Growth of the Jewish Population in Israel / Converging Jewish Fertility Rates / Growth of the Arab Population / Jews and Arabs: The Demographic Race / The Future Role of Jewish Immigration

GROWTH OF THE JEWISH POPULATION OF ISRAEL

There has never been a time—including the long period of their exile—when Jews did not live in the Land of Israel. True, between the eighth and the nineteenth centuries, under the successive rule of the Arabs, Crusaders, Mamelukes, and Turks, their number dwindled to just a few thousand. However, from the mid-nineteenth century onward there was a resurgence, because of increased immigration, combined with improved medical conditions which lowered the mortality rate. In 1880, on the eve of the organized Zionist return to Zion, there were over 20,000 Jews living in Israel.

From 1881 on, the “Lovers of Zion” movement, and later the Zionist movement, began sending Jewish immigrants to Israel at an ever accelerating pace. At the same time, the unorganized immigration of both Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews, which had begun a generation earlier, continued to provide the bulk of the new settlers. Within the space of some thirty years, until the outbreak of World War I in 1914, the total population of the Yishuv (Jewish community in Eretz Israel) reached 85,000. The impressive increase in the size of the Jewish population continued during the thirty years of the British Mandate (1918-48). On the eve of the establishment of the state, there were approximately 650,000 Jews in Israel. Thirty-five years later, at the end of 1982, there were 3,373,200 Jews in Israel, constituting 83 percent of the country's population.

The Jerusalem Letter is a periodic report intended to objectively clarify and analyze issues of Jewish and Israel public policy.
Subscriptions: Individual: \$35 per year; Institutions: \$50 per year. © Copyright. All rights reserved.

21 Arlozorov St., Jerusalem, 92181, ISRAEL Tel. 02-632017

CONVERGING JEWISH FERTILITY RATES

The Jews are an unusual phenomenon in the history of nations, being identifiable as a people for several thousand years. Among other things, this fact allows us to analyze, over an extremely long period of time, the great changes the Jewish population has undergone. Immigrating to Eretz Israel within the context of modern-day Zionism, the Jews brought with them from the diaspora their own behavioral patterns, including family structure and traits. But unlike earlier generations, where the family unit was similar in Jewish families all over the world, it was now possible to discern significant differences.

The Jewish communities in Europe had undergone a process of modernization which had changed their lives radically. This process, which had begun in Western and Central Europe as far back as the eighteenth century, permeated the Jewish population of Eastern Europe at the turn of the present century. Modernization brought with it, *inter alia*, changes in marriages, for example, deferral of the marriage age and an appreciable decrease in the number of offspring per family.

These consequences of modernization were also very notable in Mandatory Palestine among Jews of European extraction. At the end of the 1930s, the fertility rate among this population was quite low—so low, in fact, that there was no guarantee of natural replacement (i.e., the mortality rate was liable to exceed the birth rate). Yet this fact did not trouble the Yishuv at the time, as its ranks were being continually bolstered by legal and illegal immigration.

During the Mandatory period, there was a tendency among Jews of Asian and African extraction to adopt, to varying degrees, the lifestyle of their European counterparts. One of the consequences of this tendency was a diminished birth rate among that population as well.

The first few years of the state's existence saw a wave of immigration which brought to Israel's shores hundreds of thousands of immigrants from Asia and Africa. Those who came brought with them the same family structure patterns that had once characterized the Jewish people as a whole: the average fertility rate in immigrant families of Afro-Asian descent stood at six children per family. The average fertility rate among European families, by contrast, was less than three children per family. Between the fertility rates of the two populations, then, there emerged a sizable gap which in turn became one reason for the internecine social and economic gap which is among Israeli society's most painful problems.

In the course of the thirty years that have passed since then, a drastic change has occurred in the fertility rate of Jews of Afro-Asian descent: they have adopted family structures similar to what exists among those of European origin, just as they have picked up other ways of life from their Ashkenazi brothers. The result—a substantial drop in their fertility rate.

We are, in fact, witness to two reverse demographic processes. Among the first generation of immigrants from Asia and Africa, the fertility rate in Israel was lower than was common in their native countries; and the birth rate of the second generation continued to fall, until it became substantially lower than that of their parents in Israel. Among those of European origin, by contrast, the process was inverse. Their rate of fertility in Israel exceeded that which was common in their native European countries, and the fertility rate for second-generation immigrants surpassed that of the first generation.

The outcome of these two processes has been the gradual shrinking of the inter-group fertility gap. This trend was especially prominent during the first two decades following the mass immigration; during the 1950s, the fertility rate of Jewish women of Afro-Asian descent was still more than twice as high as that of women of European origin. During the years 1972-75, however, the fertility rate of the former exceeded that of the latter by only about a third (36 percent). Statistical data from subsequent years also indicate a trend toward a shrinking fertility gap (though at a more moderate rate).

In general, it may be said that the differences in birth rates among the various Jewish groups are not great, and that they are steadily tapering off and becoming indistinguishable. One of the contributing factors has been the gradual breakdown of barriers to inter-group marriages, which are currently on the rise (in 1979 they constituted 20.8 percent of all Jewish marriages). This veering away from the past custom of marrying within the group will naturally help to even out the fertility levels of the diverse components of Jewish society in Israel.

Certain trends in Western societies towards increased permissiveness have been gradually filtering into Israeli society. Non-binding and transitory ties between couples are replacing the readiness to marry; marriages are taking place, for the most part, at a later age than before. Finally, there is a tendency to divorce more easily. From the demographic standpoint, at any rate, these "Western trends" constitute a squandering of the optimal years for bearing children.

These trends are still far from reaching the proportions known today in the Western societies of Europe and North America. In a 1975 study, the rate of Jewish divorce in Israel stood at 11-12 percent. It may be assumed that the current divorce rate is slightly higher, and there are indications that it is still on the rise. But, as noted, we are still a long way from the divorce situation that exists in the Scandinavian countries and the U.S., where the chances that a marriage will end in divorce vary between 40 and 50 percent.

GROWTH OF THE ARAB POPULATION

The Arab population in Eretz Israel, like the Jewish one, has seen substantial demographic changes. Various studies underscore the fact that, from the ninth century until the beginning of the nineteenth, the overall population never exceeded 300,000; there were even low ebbs during which the number of residents in Eretz Israel was less than 150,000 (including several thousand Jews). This can be attributed, in part, to frequent wars, plagues, and the absence of any health services whatsoever. But the primary reasons for the meager population were substandard nutritional conditions and widespread malaria—the results of having neglected the intensive agricultural methods of the Byzantine era. Consequently, the broad tracts that had previously supported a dense population deteriorated into sand dunes and marshes.

After hundreds of years of stagnation and demographic status quo, the first half of the nineteenth century witnessed the beginning of a marked recovery. This was an apparent side effect of the growing bond between the Holy Land and the European powers, who established in Eretz Israel not only consulates and postal services of their own, but also progressive health services. Members of the first waves of Zionist immigration—who began settling in Israel from 1881 onwards—no doubt contributed their share to the modernization of Israel. All these developments caused a reduction in the Israeli Arab mortality rate, and consequently a rise in their natural increase. The Arabs in Israel numbered approximately 270,000 in the year 1800; 490,000 in 1890; and by 1914 (on the eve of the outbreak of World War I) 600,000 people.

JEWS AND ARABS: THE DEMOGRAPHIC RACE

During the course of the thirty-year British rule, the population of Western Eretz Israel (Palestine without TransJordan) tripled—from 676,000 at the beginning of 1919, to 1,970,000 at the end of 1947. Both the Jewish and non-Jewish ranks swelled during that period by some 600,000 each. Yet despite the nearly identical increase in absolute numbers, the growth of the Jewish sector was much more rapid in relative terms: it increased more than eleven-fold—from a mere 56,000 at the beginning of 1919, to 650,000 at the end of the British Mandate, in May 1948.

The increase in Jewish population during the Mandate resulted primarily from immigration, which rose rather dramatically during this time, especially in the years 1919-21, 1924-26, and 1932-36. By contrast, the growth among the non-Jewish population could be traced, for the most part, to natural increase, which was influenced by two simultaneous factors: a substantial, rapid drop in the mortality rate, and a high birth rate that was still rising slightly.

In addition to the effect of a high natural increase rate, growth in the non-Jewish population in Israel can be attributed as well to some Arab immigration; not a few of the Arab residents of adjacent countries uprooted themselves in order to come to Western Eretz Israel and benefit from the economic development brought about by the Jews. It was not for nothing that Hebrew settlers used to say—though with some degree of hyperbole—that, for every Jew who settles in Israel three Arabs cross over from TransJordan.

In any case, Jewish immigration during the Mandate period was a decisive factor in altering the relative composition of population. The proportion of Moslems in Western Eretz Israel dropped from 81 percent in 1919 to only 60 percent in 1947; the proportion of Jews rose during the same period from 8 to 32 percent.

The War of Independence and the establishment of the State of Israel gave rise to dramatic changes, not only in the political and geographical spheres, but in the demographic one as well. The Jewish population in Mandatory Eretz Israel remained essentially in place within the boundaries of the new state. In the Arab sector, however, the overwhelming majority of residents crossed what later became known as the "Green Line"; at the height of the battles, they moved to Judea, Samaria, the Gaza District, and the adjacent Arab states. The total number of deportees was set at some 620,000, while approximately 156,000 non-Jews remained in the young State of Israel, opting for Israeli citizenship.

In contrast, the establishment of the state brought about a sharp rise in the number of its Jewish residents. Once the severe limitations on immigration imposed by the British had been lifted, tens of thousands of immigrants began streaming into Israel each month. By the end of 1951, 690,000 immigrants had arrived, doubling the Jewish population from what it had been at the time of the state's establishment. During the next twenty years—until the end of 1982—the number of Jews in Israel reached 3,373,200, comprising 83 percent of the total population within the Green Line.

During the Mandate and the first decade of statehood, the waves of immigration fulfilled a decisive function in expanding the Jewish population in Eretz Israel. In 1925, for example, the immigrants increased the population by an astonishing 28.5 percent, and in 1949, by 26.6 percent. But as the Jewish population grew, the relative influence of immigration fell, and its place as a growth factor was gradually taken over by natural increase.

Natural increase is calculated by subtracting the number of deaths from the number of births. In 1982, 72,992 infants were born to Jewish mothers in Israel. Statistically, this means that there were 21.8 live births per 1,000 inhabitants. Given that the death rate that year among Jews in the country stood at 7.5 per 1,000 inhabitants, we derive a rate of natural increase of 14.3 per thousand.

In the Arab sector (which comprised 17 percent of the nation's residents within the Green Line), 23,703 infants were born that same year—almost one-third the number of live births in the Jewish sector. But the picture in terms of natural movement (as it is called in statisticians' terminology) was very different. The Arab birth rate was 34.9 per thousand; the death rate, 4.1 per thousand. The result: a rate of natural increase of 30.8 per thousand—i.e., more than twice that in the Jewish sector. This situation of a high birth rate combined with a mortality rate which is very low by world standards means that the Arab population of Israel today is a youthful one, with a very small percentage of elderly.

If we look at the natural movement data for all of Western Eretz Israel (the area within the Green Line together with the territories), we see that the Jews constitute 65 percent of the overall population and non-Jews only 35 percent. But the Jews account for only 45 percent of the entire natural increase of the population, while non-Jews account for 55 percent.

Yet that is not the whole story. For a number of years now, the non-Jewish population within the Green Line has been in the process of a rather rapid decline in its fertility level. If, for example, we look at the most progressive element among the Arabs—the Christian community—we note that their birth rate is dropping to the point where it resembles that of the Jews. And there is no doubt that the fertility level of the Moslems within the Green Line has also undergone a decline in recent years, though far more moderate than that occurring among the Christians.

Furthermore, among the Arabs in the administered territories there has been continuous emigration, which significantly reduces the growth of the population due to natural increase. The majority of the Arabs leaving Western Eretz Israel have tended to head for the Arab oil states, which until now were in need of many outside workers. It cannot yet be known whether this migration—which has been going on for years, with fluctuations—will continue, given the glut in oil reserves in the OPEC nations and the drop in the price of this black gold on the world market.

THE FUTURE ROLE OF JEWISH IMMIGRATION

The numerical ratio between Jew and Arab in Western Eretz Israel was decisively affected in the past by the waves of immigration. In the years of mass immigration when the state was first founded, for example, immigration contributed no less than 80 percent of the annual rate of increase in the Jewish population in the country. Although the relative contribution of immigration to the growth of the Jewish population has gradually declined since then, in the longer run, its numerical contribution should not be taken lightly. A Central Bureau of Statistics forecast sets out three different potential models for Jewish population growth in Israel by the year 2000, in accordance with different estimates of the annual immigration levels:

ANNUAL EXCESS OF IMMIGRANTS OVER EMIGRANTS

5,000
15,000
25,000

SIZE OF JEWISH POPULATION IN ISRAEL IN THE YEAR 2000

4,125,000
4,300,000
4,500,000

A 20,000-person differential in annual immigration would therefore lead, according to this hypothetical calculation, to a 375,000-person differential in the size of the Jewish population in Israel by the year 2000.

Ever since the resumption of Jewish settlement of Eretz Israel more than 140 years ago, immigration has always been accompanied by the phenomenon of emigration from the country. Of the 25,000 persons in the first immigration wave (1882-1904), for instance, the majority left the country, returning to the diaspora. Of the 80,000 immigrants in the fourth immigration wave (1924-1928), more than 25 percent left the country.

In the past, emigration from Israel largely took the form of the "returning flux" so common to melting pots—namely, a return to the country of origin by those who had not managed to build lives in the new land. The existing data indicate that, in the past, the failure to find one's place in Israel was the lot of older people, ages 40-60. In recent years, by contrast, emigration from Israel has basically lost the character of a "returning flux." People leaving Israel today include those who have lived in Israel for many years, including a sizable proportion of young people born and educated in the country.

At the same time, it should be stressed that statisticians do not have clear-cut data on the breakdown of emigrants by age, education, and profession. The study of emigration from Israel is difficult and complicated, for Israeli citizens who leave Israel generally do not (nor are they asked to) declare their intention to emigrate.

Nevertheless, according to cautious estimates, if all the Jews who left Israel from the time of the state's inception had remained, together with their offspring, the current Jewish population in Israel would be 15 percent higher.

The Jewish population in Israel is but a portion of the entire Jewish people, most of whom still live in the diaspora. The demographic processes in the diaspora are extremely troubling: low birth rate, aging population, assimilation, and intermarriage. Natural increase among Israeli Jewry has thus far offset the demographic decrease in the diaspora. But unless there are some changes in the demographic trends in both Israel and the diaspora, the Jewish people as a whole will soon enter into a process of demographic decline. It would be tragic if, during the same era in which Zionism flourished, established the State of Israel, and sought to guarantee the continued survival of the Jewish people, we were to witness the opposite process of the people's diminution.

* * * * *

Yosef Levite is a journalist and member of the editorial board of Bamahane, a weekly publication of the Israel Defense Forces. He served for twelve years as editor-in-chief of S'kira Hodshit, another I.D.F. publication. Mr. Levite edited The High Mountains of Israel (Hebrew), a book of essays on the territories, which was published earlier this year.