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Jewish Majority and Arab Minority in Israel—Demographic Struggle

Abstract: The aim of this article is to take a closer look at national Israeli policies in the domain of population growth. Demography plays a powerful role in understanding the Israeli society and the changes it has experienced over time. The “demographic struggle” presents the constant effort of the Jewish population to maintain, regardless of the costs, the numerical majority of the Jews in Israel. The central means to achieve the demographic dominance are the immigration policies and fertility rate, therefore the control over these factors of social life is of primary importance to the Israeli authorities. The methods of managing and influencing the two demographic indicators are discussed in the article in details, since the differences between the Arab and Jewish communities in this area are crucial. The article presents also briefly the role of demography in constituting *ethnic democracy* in Israel.

Keywords: demography, Israel, immigration, fertility rate, ethnic democracy.

The two most significant and fundamental issues which determine the fate of the state, which shape and influence the condition of its society, can be described roughly as: the land and the people. It is natural that without these two elements, none country or government could ever exist. Therefore, these two components are used as guidelines for conducting analysis of the Israeli national policies influencing the Israeli society and relations between Jewish majority and Arab minority.

What needs to be clarified at the very beginning is the term “Arab minority,” by which I refer to the Arab citizens of Israel living within the state, and not to the Arab population dwelling in the Occupied Territories of Gaza and West Bank. It is crucial to underline this distinction, since it brings significant changes to the understanding of the issues discussed.

The aim of this article is to take a closer look at the national Israeli policies in the domain of population growth. Demography plays a powerful role in understanding the Israeli society and the changes it has experienced over time. Demographic factors, such as migration and fertility rate, determine the size and structure of the Israeli society, and are central elements that distinguish between the Jewish and Arab communities. Since the beginning of the state, the relative size of the Jewish and Arab population has been of central political importance to the Israeli authorities. Firstly, the Jewish numerical dominance was needed to assure the social, political and economic dominance of the Jewish majority in the country, and to maintain the

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Jewish-Zionist character of the state. Secondly, the importance of sustaining Jewish majority has been understood as “security” matter, which is of primary significance in Israel (Gans 1998).

Among the most crucial demographic indicators and areas of research, four can be distinguished: immigration, fertility rate, geographic distribution, and residential patterns of ethnic groups (Goldscheider 2002). For the purpose of this article, I only chose to deal with the two of them, namely: immigration and fertility rate. These two elements seem to gain much importance when they are related to the formation of social inequalities between the Jewish and Arab communities. For the reason of limited volume of this article, the remaining two indicators are not discussed.

Jewish Immigration to Israel as Destiny

Immigration was perceived as the fundamental goal of the Zionist movement since the very beginning of its activity in Europe in the early 20th century; at the time when there was no yet Jewish country in the world, and the immigration to Palestine had only started. In the early statehood, the main objective of the State of Israel was to attract as many Jews as possible to immigrate and settle down in the *Promised Land* in order to establish the Jewish majority there (Yonah 2004). David Ben-Gurion the then Israeli Prime Minister, expressed this goal in the following words:

The main thing is the absorption of the immigrants (...) for many years, until (...) a regime takes hold in the [Arab] world that does not threaten our existence. (...) The state's fate is dependent upon 'Aliyah.¹ (...) 'Aliyah must determine our policy in negotiations. (Harris, 2002, p. 263)

As suggested by the quote, the fate of the state of Israel is dependant on the immigration of Jewish people to the Holy Land. This assumption has served as primary logic for Israeli authorities in formulation of policies, which have discriminative character and contribute to development of inequalities between the Jewish and Arab communities in Israel on many levels of social life (Kimmerling 2002).

The Law of Return—the Cornerstone of Israeli *raison d'être*

The formation of the State of Israel on the 14th of May, 1948 was accompanied by the Proclamation of Independence.² In this document, the most essential characteristic of the state was circumscribed, namely, the Jewish nature of the state, which should be understood as the prevalence of the Jewish majority over any other ethnic group (Al-Haj, 2004).

In order to maintain such status of the country, on the 5th of July 1950, on the legal basis of the Proclamation of Independence, the Law of Return was enacted in

¹ *Aliyah* means the Jewish immigration to Palestine, and later to Israel.

² An official document signed on the 14th of May, 1948 in Tel Aviv by the first Prime Minister—David Ben-Gurion. Even though the proclamation is neither a law nor an ordinary legal document, it has legal validity, and it gives strong preference to the Jewish citizens in the field of various legal solutions.

the following form: “Every Jew has the right to come to this country as an *oleh*”³ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2004). The right to settle down in Israel was formulated not as entitlement granted by the authorities of the state, but was understood as an absolute, inherent, and natural right of every Jew in the world. It is *de facto* a purely ethnocentric law, which provides a legal basis for the immigration into Israel exclusively for people of Jewish origin (Al-Haj 2004).

The Law of Return expresses the perennial desire of Jews to settle down in the Holy Land after nearly two thousand years of dispersion and persecution. In order to understand properly the uniqueness of the Law of Return it is necessary to take into consideration the specific circumstances of that period of time, namely the aftermath of the World War II. The fresh and painful memory of the Holocaust and suffering of the Jewish nation created a strong need for own Jewish State, which would serve as a shelter for the millions of Jewish survivors scattered around the world. After the World War II and its horrendous atrocities, the public opinion and international organizations were in favor of founding a Jewish State, which would be a specific kind of compensation for the hardships of the time of war (Herman 1977, Kimmerling 2002). The Law of Return was therefore a logical consequence of many historically grounded reasons, and certainly, at that moment of time, the idea of allowing all the Jewish people to come to Israel was morally, historically and socially justifiable (Yonah 2004).

The Law of Return was followed by the Citizenship Law enacted in 1952, which granted automatic citizenship to any Jew entering the country on the basis of the Law of Return (Rolef 1987). Since the establishment of this Law, there have been constant debates⁴ over its legitimacy, social and political consequences. Gouldman suggests that Israel’s nationality law is the reflection of the prevailing national ideology, which is inextricably bound up with the notion of Israel as a Jewish State (Gouldman 1970).

In general terms, persons who remained in Israel after its establishment were granted Israeli nationality either by return or by residence. As for the Arab population, those who decided to stay in the new Israeli State were granted the citizenship. However, the Law of Return did not apply to them, since they were not Jews. As Gouldman points out, it is certainly easier to acquire Israeli nationality for Jews than any other ethnic group, and as such the Israeli Nationality Law and the Law of Return are open to charge for discriminating on ethnic grounds in favor of Jews (Gouldman 1970, Gans 1998).

In the course of time, several amendments were made to the initial form of the Law of Return from the year 1950. The most important one was passed by Knesset on 19th of March 1970, and had two major consequences. First of all, it specified the term “Jew” as person being born to a Jewish mother, or having converted to Judaism, and not being a member of any other religion. Secondly, this amendment accords the right to immigrate to Israel to non-Jews who are either children or grandchildren of a Jew, the spouse of a Jew or the spouse of a child or grandchild of a Jew (Rolef 1987). Under

³ *Oleh* is the term used to describe a Jewish immigrant to the Land of Israel (Joppke, Rosenhek 2001).

⁴ The debates were mainly on the problem of clear and objective definition of who is a Jew, and on the type of conversion into Judaism, which was to be valid for obtaining the right to return (Rolef 1987).

these circumstances the relatives are also automatically given the Israeli citizenship and can enjoy full civil rights. This clause has had far reaching consequences in shaping the immigration to Israel, since it allowed people who are not Jewish to come to Israel and be treated as Jews. Especially was it crucial for the Russian immigration, which will be discussed further.

Waves of Migration

Exercising their right to return, almost three million Jews came to the Holy Land since the establishment of the country. Of this number, more than two-thirds came from European or Western countries, and the rest from Middle-Eastern (Iraq, Yemen, and Syria) and Asian-African countries (Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and Libya) (Goldscheider 2002). In the years between 1948 and 1967, Israel attracted almost one million Sephardim Jews from Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and other Arab states who were to take up residence on the former Arab lands (Boyle & Halfacree & Robinson 1998) (see Figure 1). For a clearer picture of the complexity of Israeli immigration patterns and ethnic diversity, it is beneficial to present the mass immigration waves, which were central for creating Jewish majority in Israel, as well as other minor waves that were crucial for increasing the Jewish population, namely the influx of Ethiopian Jews and the guest workers.

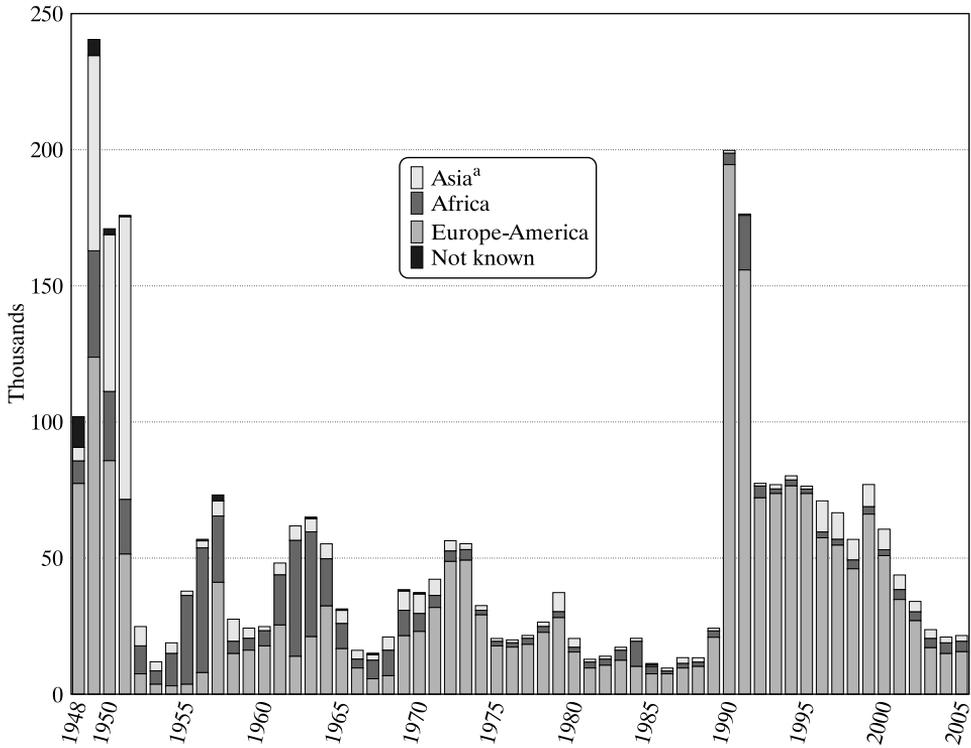
The first mass immigration wave, took place in the period between the years: 1948 and 1951, shortly after the proclamation of independence. In the first four years of the existence of the country 687,624 Jewish immigrants arrived in Israel. Almost half of these immigrants—326,786 people—came from Europe and were survivors of the Holocaust, who came to Israel in search for shelter. There were also 237,352 of Jewish immigrants, who came from Asia, mostly from the neighboring Arab countries. The remaining number of immigrants came from Africa or America (Central Bureau of Statistics).

The enormous number of almost 700,000 of newcomers demanded spectacular efforts to make it possible for them to settle down in new environment. The social differences between these people were huge, starting with various ethnic and national backgrounds, education level, and ending with the lack of common language to communicate (Goldscheider 2002). This flow of immigrants was certainly the most significant and meaningful one, since these people were the first builders of the state, who had laid fundamentals for what is now a successful and prosperous country. This period of time was particularly important for enlarging the Jewish population, and hence strengthening the very young and still weak country. In its first years of existence Israel was solely dependant on the newcomers, and the Jewish immigration was considered to be the principal tool to maintain the “demographic balance” (Joppke & Rosenhek 2001).

The second mass immigration wave, which had great impact on the Israeli society, was the immigration of Jews from the Former Soviet Union (FSU), which started in the 1960s and achieved its peak after the demise of the Soviet Empire,

Figure 1

Immigrants by the Year of Immigration and Country of Origin. *Central Bureau of Statistics, Israel 2006*



^a As of 1996 Asia includes the Asian republics of the former USSR.

in the early 1990s. In the period between 1990 and 2002 nearly one million immigrants from FSU came to Israel (Castles & Miller, 2003), and dramatically changed the fabric of the Israeli society, as well as of Israeli political scene. In the two first critical years of that immigration wave 375,610 Jews decided to settle down in Israel (CBS).

The Russian Jews who arrived in Israel were well educated and had high social and economic aspirations. However, they had little knowledge of Jewish history, and traditional and religious customs, since they were brought up in mainly secular environments (Locher 2004). Israel had long campaigned for the release of 2.15 million Jews from the FSU, which was mostly supported by religious arguments (Boyle & Halfacree & Robinson 1998), however the significance of the mass migration of the Jews from the FSU should be discussed much further than that.

The reason behind such intense and full-scale politics of propagation of immigration of Russian Jews into Israel was the conviction of Israeli authorities that the aim of population increase should be achieved at any price. The “price” in the case of Russian immigration was the dubious Jewishness of the immigrants. It was estimated that approximately 20 percent of the immigrants from the FSU in the early 1990s, and

up to 60 percent by mid-1990s, were not Jewish according to the Orthodox definition.⁵ Similarly, the Jews from Ethiopia, discussed below, were also considered not to be Jewish according to rabbinic establishment (Shafir & Peled 2004).

One of the consequences of the arrival of the Soviet Jews could be observed on the political scene in Israel. Since early 1990s the Russian immigrants were gaining more elective power, which resulted in receiving the majority of the votes in the 2001 elections. Soviet Jewish politicians, who then came to power, have been advocating for the mass deportation of the Israeli Arabs from the West Bank and Gaza Strip (Castles & Miller 2003).

The two mass waves of immigration presented above were not only due to ideological or religious reasons, such as providing safe home in the Land of Israel for the Jews from all around the world. “Soviet Jews have become critical to the expansion and affirmation of Israeli territorial hegemony” (Boyle & Halfacree & Robinson 1998, p. 176). The policy of arbitrary distribution of Jewish settlers on the Israeli lands had major importance to the security of the country, especially after the annexation of the new territories after the 1967 war—the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The new settlers, absolute majority of who were immigrants, were supposed to strengthen the eastern borders and balance the demographic ratio between Jews and Arabs (*ibid.*).

In addition to the grave meaning of the Jewish immigration to the State of Israel in terms of safeguarding the Jewish numerical majority in the country, there were also other reasons for encouraging the immigration. The vivid example of Ethiopian Jews, who were literally *brought* to Israel, shows that the right of a Jew to immigrate to Israel has always been treated as fundamental principle guiding the Israeli immigration policies.

The influx of these Jews was different from the one described above, for it was from the very beginning performed entirely by the government of Israel. Ethiopian Jews were brought to Israel with the airplanes during two operations: Operation Moses, in November 1984, and Operation Solomon in 1990. The aim of these actions was to bring approximately 30,000 to 35,000 Jews to Israel (Schindler & Ribner 1997). Ethiopian immigrants, as any other Jewish immigrants to Israel, were registered immediately upon arrival in the country and sent to many of the absorption centers (*ibid.*), where they were supposed to begin to accommodate to living in their new homeland. The absorption centers provided the newcomers with certain range of aid, namely: medical care, depot for family reunion, help in reducing cultural shock, and social and psychological assistance (*ibid.*). Even though, the process of adjustment into the culture of majority has been painful since Israel expected the new guests to fit quickly into the new society, and did not take into consideration the unique social fabric of the Ethiopian communities and their utterly different customs. Israel invited thousands of Jews from Ethiopia without a mature and conscious reflection about the potential consequences on the Israeli society, as well as on the immigrants themselves.

⁵ According to the orthodox definition, a person is a Jew when he or she was born to a Jewish mother or converted to Judaism according to the orthodox religious rite.

Although the number of immigrants was relatively small, it symbolized “Israel’s continuing commitment to be a political haven for refugee Jews from around the world” (Goldscheider 2002, p. 54). With this act Israeli authorities underlined the merciful “open-door” policy of the state, which admitted Jews of such different economic, cultural and religious background, and was not discriminative in that respect. However, these immigrants were not so eagerly welcomed by the society, since their oriental origin was very distinct and not easily socially acceptable. Nevertheless, the Jewish state pursued the policy of encouragement of new immigrants, who were considered mainly as “an instrument to pursue elementary state-building tasks (...) to plant Jews in the peripheral areas of the country with a higher concentration of Palestinians, and to strengthen the Israeli state and society in economic and military terms” (Joppke & Rosenhek 2001, p. 14).

One more immigration wave needs to be briefly presented here, since it has also influenced the shape and structure of the Israeli society, even though it was not as numerous as the previous ones. In the second half of the 1980, Israel began to invite so-called *guest workers* (or *gastarbeiters*), who were not Jewish and who came from Thailand, the Philippines and Romania (Kop & Litan 2002). They were supposed to substitute the Palestinian low skilled workers, and by this, Israel meant to become independent of the Arab labor force. The timing of this policy was explained in “security reasons” terms, since it had taken place after few violent terrorist attacks in 1980s. The number of guest workers today is estimated to exceed 200,000, and has also created bulk of social problems, because the Israeli authorities did not put much effort into their integration into Israeli society. These groups still dwell in segregation from other communities in Israel (both Jewish and Arab), very often in overcrowded houses, and have significantly lower standard of living. Moreover, their poor situation is also influenced by the fact that they are not Jews, and it is thus difficult for them to obtain Israeli citizenship (*ibid.*).

In comparison to the immigration of non-Jewish guest workers, the Israeli authorities have utterly different attitude towards the Jewish immigration to Israel. The Jewish immigration is the fulfillment of the ultimate priority of the Zionist movement, and thus is perceived in ideological, rather than pragmatic terms. The absolute devotion of the Israeli government to the matter of Jewish immigration lead to establishment of one of the most peculiar official authority bodies in Israel, which is focused exclusively on managing the immigration issues. This role is performed by the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption (MOIA). The establishment of the separate Ministry, which is solely geared to facilitate the immigration to Israel, is certainly one of a kind on a world scale.

The Ministry of Immigrant Absorption—Example of the Israeli Immigration Policy

The State of Israel has developed a coherent and reliable network of organizations, institutions and groups which aim is to facilitate, encourage, welcome and absorb the immigrants into new society. The Ministry was established to deal particularly

with managing the inflows of immigrants from all over the world. As stated on the official website, the Ministry: “is responsible for providing government assistance to new immigrants and returning residents who have arrived in Israel within the last decade—from their first steps in the country to their integration into every area of life in Israeli society” (MOIA). The Ministry serves the interests of all the Jews wishing to settle down in the country of Israel. For good comprehension of the peculiar character of this Ministry, it is advisable to present the scope and variety of the activities performed by the Ministry, since it illustrates the level of involvement of Israeli authorities in managing the process of immigration.

One of the first objectives of the Ministry is to identify “each immigrants potential for growth and contribution and develop appropriate opportunities for realizing such potential” (ibid.). However vague this might sound, there exists a powerful and efficient network of departments, which work on the practical dimension of the ideological principles of the Ministry. The number of departments amounts to twenty-six and their responsibility is to assist and control every stage of the whole process of absorption to ensure that it performs without any disruptions.

To exemplify the amount and range of help given to the Jewish immigrants, it is beneficial to mention some of the Departments. For instance, the Employment Department deals particularly with the proper recognition of the immigrants’ skills in order to place them in the best suitable job, where they can “make use of their potential for the well being and benefit of the society as a whole” (ibid.). The Housing Department is responsible for providing the assistance in finding proper accommodation; The Ben-Gurion Airport Department helps with the initial absorption procedures immediately upon the arrival at the airport. Variety of other departments assist with providing up-to-date information about the changes in Israeli legislation, language and cultural training, absorption into the educational system (with special emphasis on the higher education), establishing own independent business, etc.

The help and assistance offered by the Ministry, is naturally directed solely to the Jews and their families, which have the right to come and settle down in Israel on the basis of the Law of Return. Thus, the Palestinian people, either the ones who live outside Israel and would like to come back to their old villages where they come from, or the Israeli Palestinians who would like to bring their relatives to Israel, are denied the right to immigrate to Israel with the help of Ministry of Immigrant Absorption. Moreover, by giving preference in allocation of state’s resources, like: financial aid, housing, employment, or education, the state discriminates against the Arab citizens who are not entitled to these benefits.

Implications of the Jewish Immigration for the Arab Minority

As noticed by Goldscheider: “Immigration—in its ideological, policy and behavioral forms—has symbolized the renewal of Jewish control (...). At the same time, it has been one of the core symbols of the conflicts of the Jews and Arabs in the Middle East” (Goldscheider 2002, p. 44). Not surprisingly, Jews and Arabs in Israel have perceived

the immigration to Israel differently. Naturally, the Jewish population sees making *Aliyah* as the fundamental and unquestionable right of every Jew in the world. On the other hand, the Arab minority considers immigration as unfair allocation of state's resources to the ethnic majority. In a democratic country, state resources should be distributed evenly among the citizens of the state, regardless of their ethnic origin. However, Israel, according to Sammy Smooha, is an *ethnic democracy*, where the preference is given to the dominant ethnic group, here: the Jews (Smooha 1997, 2001).

In the 1950s the major concern of Israeli authorities was to successfully absorb the newcomers and to equip them with basic necessities for a fresh start. The Jews who came to Israel in the first years were fully devoted to the process of building a new, strong, and modern Jewish society. The state was helping them to achieve this goal by fostering the feeling of Jewish identity and citizenship in many ways. "Jews felt themselves to be the sole proprietors of state resources and institutions. The army, the flag, the national anthem, and official holidays were not only Jewish, but for the Arabs, signified painful past experience" (Kimmerling & Migdal 2003, p. 179). The latter have had restricted access to the benefits of Israeli democracy in the areas of welfare, education, and jobs or housing benefits, which Jewish citizens were freely enjoying.

Another issue emerging in the context of immigration policies is the allocation of citizenship to the new immigrants. The significance of the nationality and citizenship for individuals and groups was assessed by Gershon Shafir and Yoav Peled, who stated that citizenship can function as a tool of social stratification and can be used in discourse over the allocation of state resources. Moreover, these authors perceive the citizenship as "mode of incorporation of individuals and groups into the society" (Shafir & Peled 2004, p. 368). They concentrated on the Law of Return as the most vital legal expression of the Israeli identity as a Jewish State, which established ethnonationalist citizenship granted to persons on the basis of his or her ethnic descent. The citizenship was also a guarantee of privileged position in the state and the full incorporation into the society in all spheres. On the contrary, the non-Jewish population was granted a secondary citizenship, since not derived from the Law of Return, and not backed by any social privileges (ibid.). Yossi Yohan described the Israeli immigration policies as being exclusive. There is no consistency between their selective character and the democratic obligations of the State of Israel (Gans 1998, Yohan 2004). In a democratic state, the policies, also immigration policy shall be based on civic rationale, whereas the ethnic bias in these regulations leads to unequal status of different ethnic groups what can be observed in Israel.

Population Growth in Israel

The second vital issue in discussion about the demographic Jewish-Arab struggle in Israel, is the population growth understood in terms of fertility and mortality rates (See Figure 2). In the beginning of the existence of the state, the total population of Israel amounted to 650.000 in mid-1948, and has during more than half a century

increased almost ten-fold. In the year 2000, the total population of Israel amounted to 6.4 million people and a rate of population growth was 2.5 percent per year over the last 15 years (Goldscheider 2002). In the years 1990–2000, approximately one million immigrants arrived in Israel, mostly from the FSU. In the same period, the fertility rate in Israel was higher than in most Western countries, but still lower than in Third World countries, and amounted to 2.9 percent per year. Mortality rate is among the lowest in the world, and amount to 0.6 percent per year (ibid.).

Figure 2

Fertility and Mortality rates of Jews and Arabs in Israel. Central Bureau of Statistics. Israel 2005

	Total	Jews and Others		Arabs
		Total	Thereof: Jews	
Live births (in 2004)	145,207	104,357	100,062	40,850
Crude birth rate (births per 1,000 persons in the average population)	21.3	19.0	19.2	30.9
Total fertility rate (average number of children a woman is expected to bear during her lifetime)	2.90	2.62	2.71	3.99
Deaths (in 2004)	37,767	34,176	33,117	3,591
Crude mortality rate (deaths per 1,000 persons in the average population)	5.5	6.2	6.4	2.7
Infant mortality rate (infant mortality per 1,000 live births)	4.5	3.2	3.1	8.0

However, the sole numbers cannot provide us with valuable information about the Israeli society. What is more important, are the patterns of population growth among the Israeli Jews and Arabs. These patterns are the key for interpreting and understanding the demographic situation in Israel and the implications it has on the two societies living in one country.

Pro-natalist Israeli Policies

Since its foundation, Israel has certainly been a pro-natalist state. Two main factors can account to the Israel’s pro-natalist policy. The first one, as distinguished by Onn Winckler , is the demographic balance between the Jewish and Arab populations in Israel (Winckler 2003). Thus, since the early 20th century, the Zionist leaders encouraged the immigration of Jews from all over the world in order to establish the Jewish majority in Palestine, later in Israel. Year 1967 was the turning point, not only for political reasons (Six-Day War), but also for demographic ones. The new territories under the Israeli occupation lead to the situation of “demographic panic.”⁶ This was to be understood as the considerable growth of Arab population under the

⁶ The term “demographic panic” corresponds with the “demographic threat,” since both imply that the growing Arab population on the one hand, and the lack of new immigration on the other, will threaten the Jewish character of the state.

control of the Israeli forces. Particularly, this was tangible in the 1980s when there were no greater Jewish immigration waves into Israel and the fertility level of Arabs was still much higher than of Jews. This “panic” was diminished in the late 1980s and 1990s when the mass immigration from the former Soviet Union arrived in Israel. The events of October 2000 (the Second *Intifada*) also brought the demographic balance between the two groups on the political agenda, however no particular policies were introduced.

The second factor mentioned by Onn Winckler which has fundamental meaning for shaping Israeli pro-natalist policy, is the phenomenon of shrinking of the Jewish population in the world. This universal trend has its roots in two sources: the Holocaust, and the rising number of mixed marriages and assimilation of the Jews from Western countries (*ibid.*).

Differences in Fertility and Mortality Rates among Jewish and Arab Israelis.

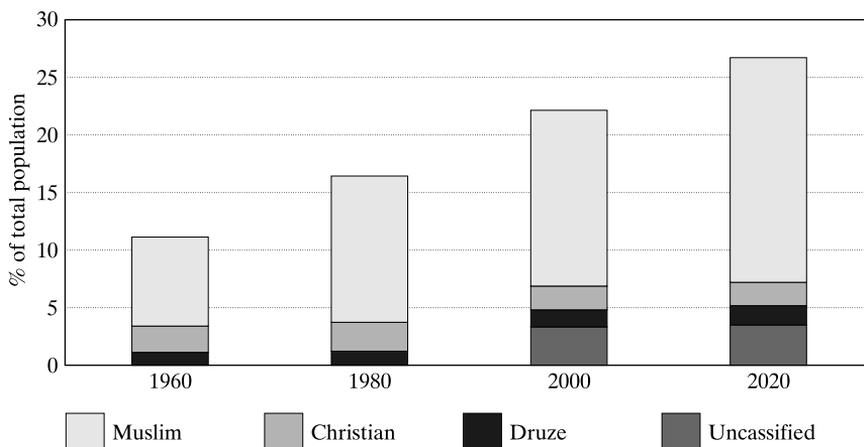
Certainly, the most significant difference between the Jewish and Arab communities in the field of population growth patterns, is the fact, that the Jewish population increase is the direct result of the immigration, whereas, the population growth among the Israeli Arabs is due to natural increase by means of high fertility rate. The higher fertility of Arabs was the counterweight to the higher Jewish immigration, and therefore, the ratio between the two groups have been safely kept at the same level throughout the years, which is approximately 4:1 of Jews and Arabs (Orenstein 2004, Kop & Litan 2002).

The population growth in Israel can be viewed in the light of traditional demographic transition theory. According to it, the Arab Israelis in 1970 reached the stage called “transition,” which is characterized by low level of mortality and high level of fertility. Nowadays, this is no longer relevant, since the fertility rate of this group has decreased. Nevertheless, it still remains higher than the fertility rate of the Jewish population, which in turn, is characterizes by low mortality rate and low fertility rate. In result, the Jewish population growth is moving towards zero, and the Arab Israelis remain in the high population growth stage. It is needless to say, that if such situation persists the population ratio in Israel will be significantly altered in the next years. As prognosis suggest,⁷ by the year 2020, the Israeli population will amount to 8.7 million people, and the Arab minority to approximately 2 million, which is over one fourth of the total number of people (Kop & Litan 2002) (see Figure 3). Such increase in the population of Arab citizens would mean that the Israeli authorities need to approach the problem of Jewish-Arab demographic and social split more seriously. One of the issues likely to appear is, for instance, the allocation of budget resources among the two groups, and definitely greater needs in this respect of the Arab population, which is not only growing in number, but also significantly younger.

⁷ The prognosis on the basis of data from Central Bureau of Statistics in Israel.

Figure 3

Proportion of non-Jewish population in Israel. *Central Bureau of Statistics, 2004*



The general trend in the fertility rate shows that the Arab population has higher⁸ fertility rates than the Jewish population, whose fertility rate is relatively low. This is however not true for all the Jews. One of the factors influencing the fertility rate of different groups in Israel is their religiousness. In other words: the higher the level of religious commitment, the higher the fertility rate of women. And thus, group, which is considerably growing in size only due to reproduction are the Ultra-Orthodox Jews who have the highest fertility rates, whereas the secular Jews tend to have less children (Goldscheider 2002).

The Arab population in Israel is also not homogenous in terms of fertility rate. There are significant differences between Moslem, Christian and Druze Arabs. In the two latter groups there can be observed a tendency to reduce the size of family, which is also determined by the better social and economic position of Christian and Druze Arabs, their higher education level, and most often residence in urban areas. The greatest fertility rate was reported between two groups: Muslim population of East Jerusalem, and Bedouin in Negev.

There are naturally several factors influencing the fertility rate in general. I only mention few of them, since it is not the major theme of my argumentation. In general terms, the differences in fertility rate can be, among others, accounted to large differences in income. Birth rates tend to decline with income increase. Historically, poor families were motivated to having more children, since they would in future provide labor force needed in the household. In addition, elements having crucial influence on the fertility rate are: the level of education, occupational opportunities, religiousness, cultural background, and several others.

⁸ The Arab population had fertility rate approximately three times greater than the Jewish population at the beginning of the existence of the state. Currently, this rate is shaping round twice as high as Jewish (Kop, Litan, 2001).

The element, which is complementing the fertility rate forming the total number of population growth, is the mortality rate. In Israel, Arab population has relatively higher infant mortality level than the Jews. Among the factors influencing the mortality rate is also the level of education and the occupational opportunities. Another significant factor working on the account of the mortality level is the distribution of the health care facilities, and thus the access to them. This in turn, is more difficult in remote Arab villages than in bigger, mostly Jewish cities (Kop & Litan 2002).

Calvin Goldscheider, who analyzed the Israeli society in the context of differences between different ethnic groups, made a valuable remark concerning the mortality rate. In his view, the link between the political and economic development and levels of mortality can be observed in process of steady decrease in the mortality rates and more even distribution of welfare and health services. In other words, resorting to the example of developed Western countries, the differences in levels of mortality by social class, economic category, and residence (rural or urban), and among ethnic or racial groups have diminished over time. On the other hand, the bigger the differences between mortality rates among various groups in the country, the more likely that these differences reflect the unequal distribution of resources and the priorities of government investments. Thus, the disparities in mortality levels among different social groups reflect both, the inequalities in social life, and the values of the political system (Goldscheider 2002).

In general, the overall mortality level in Israel, in both Jewish and Arab communities, has decreased dramatically over time. It can greatly be attributed to the improvement of the health infrastructure, bigger control over environmental conditions, and the dedication of the Israeli authorities to foster the process of nation building by actively supporting the population growth. Nevertheless, the Moslem and Druze populations in Israel continue to have significantly higher levels of mortality. One of the reasons for this is worse access to health system, quality health care and prevention of the Arab population in comparison to the Jewish population. Another reason for such status quo could be found in the location constraints, such as segregation, of the Israeli Arabs (ibid.). The government policies have been aiming at bringing the demographic transformation to all Israeli citizens and to provide equal access to health and welfare facilities for all the groups. However, the practical consequences of these policies were not the same for all the ethnic groups in Israel, and the mortality gap between the Jewish and Arab societies is still significant.

Demographic Threat

One of the indicators of an *ethnic democracy* as pointed out by Sammy Smooha, is the assumption of the state that the non-core ethnic group is a threat (Smooha 1997). It can be either real or supposed threat, as well, as it might concern different spheres of public life, such as demography, politics, economic competition, culture or national security. In Israel, the threat is an issue of great importance to the national authorities since the danger to the state security is not fictional, what frequent terrorist attacks

show. However, the threat to demographic balance, described below is of different nature, and does not directly refer to the national security threat.

The “demographic threat,”⁹ as the increasing in number population of Arab Israelis was called, was disclosed in September 1976, when leaking of confidential *Koenig Report* had place. It was the first official document, which “shows that the policies of discrimination and containment to which the Palestinian-citizens have been subjected since 1948, reflect planning and deliberations at the policy-making circles” (Sa’di 2003, p. 1). The disclosure of this report created public uproar in Israel and in the international arena. The situation created opportunity for changing the Israeli officials’ relationship to the Arab citizens. However, when the unrest calmed down, the state continued to pursue the same policy of indifference and domination towards the Arab citizens of Israel (Kimmerling & Migdal 2003).

The report was to provide then Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin, with the list of potential solutions to the arising problem of the Palestinian population in the Northern District of Israel, which was presumed to endanger the state’s control over that territory. It consisted of five sections concerning different policy areas, such as: demography, political leadership, economy and employment, education and law enforcement. According to this report, the state policy should be devoted to containment and marginalization of the Palestinian minority in Israel (Sa’di 2003). The language of the report was outstandingly racist, and as such, the Israeli official dismissed it and did not accept it as its official standpoint.

Nevertheless, Sa’di draws some valuable conclusions from the report, and maintains that the report, even though officially denounced, demonstrates the prevalent discourse regarding the minority in bureaucratic and policy-making circles. In order to give more insight into the report, the most crucial assumptions of the document shall be put forward. In the area of demography, the basic recommendations of the author of the report were: “the expansion and deepening of Jewish settlements in Palestinian populated areas, and at the same time, the exploration of ways to dilute the concentrations of Palestinian population; the introduction of a policy of reward and punishment towards leaders and settlements that express hostility towards the state and Zionism; and the establishment of an Arab political party that would raise the banner of integration instead of Palestinian nationalism” (Sa’di 2003, p. 3). In the field of economy, the recommendation was to confine the proportion of Palestinians in the workforce in the strategic enterprises to maximum of 20 percent. Moreover, the social benefits given to large families should be withheld from for the Palestinian population. The report included also some guidelines, which were supposed to help to foster development in the Palestinian communities. However, the overall undertone was discriminatory towards the Arab population in Israel. Sa’di concludes that the Palestinians are treated throughout this report not like citizens of a democratic state, but as hostile minority engaged in subversion (*ibid.*).

⁹ The issue of “demographic threat” was also dealt with by other authors, among others: Goldscheider (2002), Kimmerling and Migdal (2003), Yossi Yonah (2004).

The continuous steady increase in the Arab population in Israel confronted with the Jewish immigration from former Soviet Union, which has practically come to an end, are the two elements which constitute “potential demographic bomb threat” (Kop & Litan 2002, Yonah 2004). As suggested above, the increase of the Arab population will reach one fourth of the total population in 2020. Moreover, based on the average statistical data, by the year 2050, the percentage of the Arab Israelis will reach 35, and the ratio of Arab and Jewish children will be almost even (despite the overall grater number of Jews in the society). This, as can be estimated, will cause great deal of problems for the Israeli authorities, since the state will lose its Jewish character, at least in the demographic terms. Such a situation will also lead to severe undermining of the *ethnic democracy*, since there will no longer be political and moral legitimization for one only ethnic group to hold a dominant position in the country (Yonah 2004). The level of anxiety at the prospect of the possible significant increase, and some day maybe even domination of the Arab population in Israel, was clearly manifested in various media covers. They were dealing with topics relating to the legislative initiatives aiming to prevent this demographic problem, voluntary initiatives taken by non-government organizations addressing the “threat,” and academic conferences reporting the most urgent demographic issues. For the public opinion of Israeli Jews, the problem of increase of the Arab population in Israel is definitely a fundamental social problem (Yonah 2004).

Conclusions

The roots of the conflict between the Arab minority and the Jewish majority concern the two crucial elements: the land and the people. In this article, I attempted to present the most urgent demographic problems in Israel, which are the core of the Jewish-Arab division. The essence of the demographic problem in Israel can be reflected in the constant debate over the “proper” ratio of the Jewish and Arab communities. As mentioned above, with the increasing rate of Arab population growth, Israeli majority was said to be threatened. Arab population grew from 150,000, of those who remained within the borders of the new state after 1948, to over one million in the year 2000 (Kimmerling & Migdal 2003). The Jewish character of the state is the core principle of the Israeli *raison d’etre* as it was explicitly specified in the Proclamation of Independence and hence one of the primary objectives of the state is to encourage new migrants to settle down in the Holy Land. Only with the prevailing majority of the Jewish population, is Israel able to control its political, economic and territorial well-being.

The two main tools in managing the demographic problems are: the immigration policies and population growth due to increased fertility rate. In Israel, these two elements were counterbalancing each other for many decades, but recently the Jewish immigration to Israel has lowered, and the population growth of the Arab communities is still relatively high. Therefore, the Jewish authorities and public opinion perceive the Arab population growth as “demographic threat,” which if not managed

adequately will cause plethora of serious social, political, and economic problems. An issue of the fundamental meaning to the Jewish-Zionist character of the State of Israel is the loss of Jewish majority in Israel.

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