



A question of numbers

By Sergio Della Pergola

The question of the demographic balance between Jews and Palestinians in the State of Israel and in the entire area between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River has come up repeatedly in the political discourse of recent years. Important decisions, such as the disengagement from Gaza, were explained by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon as an unavoidable necessity, in light of the erosion of the Jewish majority due to the growth rate among the Palestinian population, which is two or three times as great as the Jewish growth rate.

The natural increase in the territories continues to be among the highest in the world, both because of high fertility rates and a decline in the mortality rate, which stems in no small part from the connection to Israel. On the other hand, the Jewish fertility rate is lower than that of the Palestinians, and immigration (after subtracting Israelis who leave the country) no longer constitutes an engine for the growth of Israel's population, in addition to the fact that most of the new immigrants who have arrived through the Law of Return are not Jewish. (According to Jewish law, only a person with a Jewish mother is considered Jewish. The Law of Return uses a much broader interpretation of Jewish identity.)

But recently there has been a disturbing opinion that expresses doubt as to the data's correctness. It claims the Jewish majority in Israel is not in danger, and that there has been an exaggeration in the estimated number of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Among the reasons: manipulations of the data by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, including the addition in the present population of hundreds of thousands who are actually living abroad, and serious mistakes by Israeli academics, to the point of counting the Arabs of East Jerusalem both in the population of the State of Israel and in that of the Palestinian Authority.

This claim is based on several additional assumptions, such as a drastic decline in the fertility rate of the Palestinians, which has no basis in reality, and the anticipation of a large positive balance of Jewish immigration, which is not in sight in the present circumstances.

All these claims have already been rejected in the past on the basis of a detailed professional analysis, and we will not repeat the explanations here. Nevertheless, it is interesting to examine what the demographic situation would be, were the claim of a significant inflation of the number of Palestinians proved to be correct. At the beginning of 2005, there were 5,238,000 Jews living between the sea and the Jordan, 291,000 non-Jewish immigrants, 1,338,000 Israeli Arabs (including East Jerusalem) and 185,000 foreign workers.

Against this background we can examine two alternatives for the number of Palestinians in the territories, excluding East Jerusalem: 3.4 million (which is what I claim - a figure lower than that of the Palestinian CBS); or 2.4 million (according to the revisionists). To what extent will subtracting 1 million Palestinians from the approximately 10 million inhabitants of the country affect the demographic balance? There are different ways of calculating the percentage of Jews out of all the inhabitants between the sea and the river:

with or without including the (non-Jewish) foreign workers in the total population, and with or without including the non-Jewish immigrants in the Jewish population. Here we will present a middle alternative, which includes the non-Jewish immigrants in the numerator of the calculation, and the foreign workers in the denominator.

Of course, the smaller the number of Palestinians, the higher the percentage of Jews. But the trend of narrowing the Jewish majority until it is lost by 2020 is common to all the scenarios. Even if the number of Palestinians in the territories is significantly reduced (by about one-third), and even if their fertility rate declines to the level among the Jewish public, the demographic momentum will not stop. One of the contributing factors is a young population mix, which stems from high birth rates in the past, and which ensures high birth rates in the coming years. A change of 1 million in the number of Palestinians is equal to raising the percentage of Jews by 5 percent of the anticipated total. If the tie doesn't come in 2010, it will come in 2020.

After the exit from Gaza, the situation changed. But we can expect the quantitative ratio that existed between Jews and Palestinians before the disengagement to return about 20 years later. Neither a difference of 1 percent or 5 percent, nor advancing or deferring the date of the tie by one year or by five years, is the main thing. The main concern relates to the nature of the Israeli society, which, while ensuring the security of its inhabitants, must consolidate its historical and civil identity.

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