

3, 2 or 1 State Solutions: Israeli-Palestinian Population Projections

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The near-term prospects for a peace settlement between Israelis and Palestinians appear remote. Nevertheless, despite the formidable challenges posed by the many contentious issues and the dispiriting paralysis in the current negotiations, this paper offers four general scenarios as possible options providing likely demographic trends and their implications for the future of these two populations in this troubled region of the world.

In addition to a “status quo” scenario, the paper considers three population projections up to mid-century for 3, 2 and 1 state scenarios. The second scenario is the “three-state” option: three independent states consisting of Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The third scenario is the “two-state” option: Israel and the new Palestinian State consisting of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The fourth scenario is the “one-state” option: Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip would be combined into a single democratic state.

To be sure, other scenarios are possible. For example, one scenario advanced by some envisions the expansion of Jewish Israel over all of biblical Israel and the transfer - both voluntarily and involuntarily - of Arab-Israelis and the Palestinians into nearby Arab countries. While such alternative scenarios are certainly possible, given the current state of affairs they seem outside the likely realm, at least for the time being. In contrast, the four scenarios described herein offer a broad range of likely future outcomes and the resulting demographic implications, which are especially relevant to the on-going negotiations and future policies for this region.

Perhaps the most obvious observation from these scenarios is that whatever scenario, outcome or solution one envisions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is abundantly clear that demography plays a decisive role. Over the coming decades barring a large-scale

disaster, the Israeli and Palestinian populations will be substantially more numerous than today. Consequently, among other things, this contested region will become even more densely populated than it is already. The densities for Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip – today around 350, 450 and 4,300 persons per sq. km., respectively - are expected to increase to approximately 500, 1,000 and 12,500 by 2050.

In addition, the Palestinian population is expected to grow more rapidly than the Israeli population due to differential rates of demographic growth, primarily the result of higher birth rates among the Palestinians. By mid-century, for example, the Palestinian population in the Occupied Palestinian Territory is projected to more than double in size while the Israeli population increases by about 50 percent. As a consequence, these two populations will be roughly the same size by 2050, i.e., about 10.5 million.

The projected demographic trends also indicate that it will be increasingly difficult for Jewish-Israelis to maintain their current dominant majority of about 80 percent within Israel. The major underlying reason for this is the well-known demographic fact that fertility rates are higher among Arab-Israelis than Jewish-Israelis, i.e., around 4 versus 2.7 children per woman. Another factor, but having a decidedly smaller impact, is the growing illegal migration of non-Jews into to Israel. The current number of illegal aliens residing Israel is estimated at around 250,000, including about 90,000 people who have entered Israel as tourists, 120,000 migrant workers without permits, and 10,000 border infiltrators. The number of illegal aliens is growing by 2,000 each month, with between 400 and 500 people infiltrating Israel each month via the southern border. As a result of these differential rates of demographic growth, the Arab-Israeli population is expected to grow more rapidly than the Jewish-Israeli population over the coming decades. For example, whereas Arab-Israelis now account for one-fifth of the total population of Israel, they are expected to increase to one-quarter by 2025 and likely to 30 percent by 2050.

Moreover, incorporating Palestinians from the Occupied Palestinian Territory or refugees in neighboring countries into Israel will accelerate the decline in the majority proportion

of Jewish-Israelis. For example, if only the Palestinians in the West Bank were incorporated with Israel, then Jewish-Israelis would become the minority of this expanded population within about three decades.

Furthermore, whether they remain in their current locations or relocate to another state or states, the demographic impact of more than 3 million Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan and Syria will be enormous. Israel continues to rule out accepting any Palestinian refugees from neighboring countries. To do otherwise would contribute to diminishing the dominant Jewish-Israeli majority within Israel. It seems likely that many of the Palestinian refugees, perhaps several million, would move to the new state, which would effectively double the size of the current Palestinian population in the West Bank.

Considering the current state of political affairs both inside and outside the region, the status quo scenario seems to be the most probable outcome at least in the short term, i.e., for the next year or so. This outcome is also reflected in the views of most political leaders who do not believe a permanent status agreement to end the conflict can be reached soon.

However, the continuation of the status quo undermines the credibility and diminishes the chances of a two-state solution. With more than 100 Jewish settlements, approximately a half a million settlers and an extensive Israeli presence throughout the West Bank, including bases, barriers, checkpoints, military areas, nature reserves, roads and other infrastructure, Israel has become for all practical purposes integrated into the West Bank. Consequently, and in stark contrast to Israel's disengagement from the Gaza Strip, disengaging from the West Bank, if it were ever to occur, would be a logistical nightmare for Israel.

Given these facts on the ground, Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, in particular those in the West Bank, may eventually decide to push for the right to be Israeli citizens and to vote in Israel, i.e., the one-state solution. Indeed, the lack of tangible progress, the violations or lack of implementation of commitments, and the

difficult and humiliating living conditions are swaying increasing numbers of Palestinians toward the conclusion that a two-state is not viable and may never be realized, and therefore they should press in favor of citizenship and equal rights in an expanded democratic state of Israel.

In sum, current and projected Israeli and Palestinian demographics are impacting political calculations, negotiating positions and public opinion. Differential rates of population growth are redefining the relative demographic standing of Arab-Israelis, Jewish-Israelis and Palestinians. In the short term, demographics may not be the primary forces behind resolving the conflict. However, in the long term, the projected changes in human numbers in both Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory will greatly impact the resolution of this conflict.