

Experts clash over Palestinian demographic statistics

Data predicted equal Jewish, Arab population in Israel and territories by 2016.

By ARIEL BEN SOLOMON / 01/01/2015

Israeli experts vigorously disagree over the accuracy of a new Palestinian report predicting that the number of Palestinians living in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza would equal the number of Israel's Jews by 2016.

Some criticized the report, claiming there were political motivations behind the numbers and that they were meant to scare Israel into making concessions to the Palestinians.

Others disapproved of the criticism, describing it as politically motivated and un-academic.

The report released this week by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics summarized data from 2014, determining that the projected number of Palestinians in the world is approximately 12.1 million, of whom 4.62 million live in the West Bank and Gaza, 1.46 million live in Israel, 5.34 million are in Arab countries, and some 675,000 reside in foreign countries.

The number of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza and Jews in Israel will total about 6.42 million each in 2016 if current growth rates remain constant, predicted the bureau. It determined that, by the end of 2020, the number of Palestinians in those areas would total 7.14 million, compared to 6.87 million Jews.

Kobi Michael, a senior research fellow at the [Institute for National Security Studies](#) and a senior lecturer at Ariel University, wrote a strategic assessment in October regarding the importance of the demographic factor in government policy toward the Palestinians.

In that assessment, he presented two competing narratives on the subject in Israel. One side saw "demographic processes as a threat to the future of Israel as a state that is both Jewish and democratic, thereby necessitating rapid disengagement from the Palestinians."

The other side, meanwhile, "disputes the need for panic, pointing instead to data indicating

much more moderate trends” and the growth of the Jewish population throughout the country, excluding Gaza.

Michael told *The Jerusalem Post* on Tuesday that the Palestinian bureau’s numbers appear to be exaggerated, but this does not matter so much.

“The number of Palestinians in Gaza should be excluded from the equation, because Israel has no presence there at all,” he said.

He added that it seems the report had double-counted the Palestinian residents of Jerusalem (around 300,000), as Israel already counts them in its own census. Furthermore, he continued, “I assume that they don’t include negative migration and that they don’t count all deaths.”

According to Michael, “the most important insight in this regard is that they have an agenda and a strategic goal – to impose a solution on Israel by recruiting international support based on delegitimization of Israel and demography.” This strategy includes utilizing Israeli Arabs as a demographic political tool, he asserted.

Former ambassador Yoram Ettinger echoed that sentiment.

Ettinger, who was the minister for congressional affairs at the Israeli Embassy in Washington and is a member of the American-Israel Demographic Research Group, told the Post that there are many flaws in the Palestinian numbers.

Essentially, he said, the Palestinian bureau had overestimated the numbers in the West Bank by 1.1 million. As such, he contended, the report’s West Bank number of 2.83 million residents is really 1.7 million, and the claimed 1.79 million in Gaza is really 1.4 million.

There are a few key errors that the bureau has committed since it began running its census in 1997, he continued.

For instance, he said, the Palestinian Authority counts the 400,000 Palestinians who have lived abroad for over a year as residents in its territory.

He said it is also important to note that the Palestinians continue to count the children of those who were erroneously included in the statistics. He cited Deputy Palestinian Interior Minister Hassan Illwi, who told the Ma’an news agency in October that 100,000 babies born overseas were included in the bureau’s count as well.

The Palestinian statistics also claim that there is zero net migration, when in fact “there is no such thing, since it means the total number of migrants equals the number of entries,” he said.

“My team [at the American-Israel Demographic Research Group] analyzed the data of all international passages in and out of Judea and Samaria since 1997 and compared the Palestinian numbers to other Palestinian ministry numbers, including the number of deaths, as well as those from the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics,” he said.

The results of that investigation showed that, according to the Border Police’s daily computerized documentation of all exits and entries through the international passages, there was a net-emigration of over 20,000 people from Judea and Samaria in 2013, and a 17,000 annual average net-emigration during the preceding five years.

Furthermore, he argued, the Jewish fertility and immigration rate continues to grow, while the Arab fertility rate is slowing.

Some of the factors contributing to the latter, he said, were urbanization, emigration, the use of contraceptives, and expanded education among Arab women.

Asked what might motivate the Palestinians to inflate their numbers, Ettinger said that doing so enables them to receive more foreign aid and a greater water supply from Israel.

Like [Michael](#), he said the Palestinians believe they could frighten Israelis into drastic concessions with a “demographic time bomb.”

However, Ettinger asserted that people no longer believe the Palestinian numbers and that an increasing number of people accepted his team’s data.

“There is no room for pessimism or fatalism – to conduct a policy driven by fear,” he declared.

However, Israeli academic demographic experts have strongly criticized Ettinger, arguing that he is not a qualified demographic expert. [Michael](#)’s argument is criticized for using Ettinger’s data.

Prof. Arnon Soffer from the geography department at the University of Haifa told the Post that Ettinger does not base his work on academic research and that his conclusions only serve his right-wing political agenda.

“The settlers believe this information so they can continue thinking the situation is great,” he said.

Soffer concludes that “today, the percentage of Jews [in all of Israel including the West Bank and Gaza] is 52% and in 2024 it will be just 48%.”

If there is no separation between Israel and the Palestinian territories, warns Soffer, “in two to three years the Palestinians will be the majority.”

Prof. Sergio DellaPergola, a Hebrew University expert on demography, told the Post that “the Palestinian data must be scrutinized carefully, as they do not constitute the only possible source to assess the demography.

However, the unquestionably documented fact is that the Arab population in our area is growing and will continue to grow for several years at a pace faster than the Jewish population, especially due to the young age composition of the Palestinians,” he said.

“Now, Jews are a minority of a sort already, without having to wait for the statistics from Ramallah,” he continued. “If the goal of the State of Israel is to be the state of the Jewish people and not a country that adopts political discrimination against non-Jews, the only way possible is not to include significant portions of the Land of Israel and of its non-Jewish population under the State of Israel’s sovereignty,” concludes DellaPergola.

Ettinger responded to criticism by Soffer and DellaPergola, arguing that “the two critical methods separating my data from their numbers are: auditing and due-diligence...I have been examining this issue for the past 11 years,” said Ettinger, adding that they fail to debate the merit of his argument.

JTA contributed to this report.

<http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Experts-clash-over-Palestinian-demographic-statistics-386443>