



The Reciprocity of Demography, Territory and Time in Shaping Zionist and Israeli Policy—1897-1951

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This paper discusses the relationship between three variables that shaped Zionist and Israeli policy: **Demography**, which refers to statistical data and their interpretation, assumptions regarding future developments, and even wishful thinking about the absolute and relative number of Jews in Eretz Israel, and the number of Jews in the world who need, want or are able to immigrate; **territory**, that is, the boundaries of the Jewish state; and **the time** available to Zionism to create a Jewish majority in Eretz Israel, as well as the time available to the *State* of Israel to ensure the Jewish majority on its territory.

At the heart of the paper lies the claim that, since the adoption of the resolution on “Zionism of Zion” by the Zionist Organization in 1905, and even more intensely from the start of the British Mandate in Palestine until 1951, demographic considerations were dominant and decisive in shaping Zionist policy. A further claim is that in the history of Zionism and Israel, the demographic issue has been comprised of two aspects—Eretz Israel and the Diaspora—and that until 1951 the interests of the *Yishuv* and of Israel dictated Zionist and Israeli immigration policy.

This paper has a dual purpose: to confirm the claim regarding the dominance of demographic considerations and the priority of Israeli concerns, by describing and analyzing test cases at the junctures of fateful decisions; and to propose alternative or additional interpretations to those already existing in research and the public discourse regarding the motives that led to the decisions taken at those junctures.

Keywords: demography, Aliyah, Jewish immigration, 1937 Partition Plan, Biltmore Plan (1942), the Million Plan, the West Bank, the Mass Aliyah (1948-1951), Aliyah Regulations 1951.

Introduction

The Zionist Movement was founded as a national liberation movement that sought to establish a political entity for a people scattered all over the world, on territory ruled by an external power (first the Ottoman Empire and then

Britain), with an existing Arab population. At the heart of this paper is the claim that since the 1905 Zionist resolution on “Zionism of Zion,” and more intensely after the establishment of the British Mandate in Palestine following the First World War, demographic considerations

were dominant and decisive in the formation of Zionist policy. Demographic considerations refer to statistical data and their interpretation, assumptions regarding future developments and even wishful thinking about the absolute and relative number of Jews in Eretz Israel, and the number of Jews in the world who must, want or are able to immigrate. Alongside demographic considerations, there were two additional variables: territory—the boundaries of the Jewish state to be founded in Palestine, and from 1948, of the State of Israel—and time—the time available to Zionism to achieve a Jewish majority in order to justify Jewish sovereignty in Palestine, and the time available to the State of Israel to ensure the Jewish majority within its territory.

In Ruppin's view, the goal of Zionism was Jewish autonomy in Palestine, and this he believed would only be possible when the Jews became a decisive majority and owned most of the land.

The article therefore discusses the interaction between these three variables: demography, territory and time, and has a dual purpose. The first is to confirm the claim regarding the dominance of demographic considerations by describing and analyzing test cases at the junctures of fateful decisions. The second is to propose an alternative or additional interpretation to those already existing in research and the public discourse concerning the motives that led to the decisions taken at those junctures.

The demographic question appeared on the Zionist agenda as an issue requiring practical attention only in the mid-1930s, when it became clear that the time was approaching for a decision on the political future of Palestine, and it assumed its full significance following the recommendations of the Peel Commission (1937). The discussion throughout the first four decades of the Zionist Organization was

therefore a kind of preface to the main one, comprising the following junctures:

1. The resolution of the twentieth Zionist Congress regarding the Partition Plan proposed by the Peel Commission (1937).
2. Outlining Zionist policy for the period following World War II (1942).
3. Defining the political goals of Zionism at the end of World War II (1944-1946).
4. The question of conquering the West Bank in the War of Independence (1948).
5. Israel's immigration policy in its early years (1948-1951).

1897-1937: The Zionist Organization's Early Engagement With the Demographic Issue

In its first platform (The Basel Program, 1897), the Zionist Organization presented the aim of Zionism as “establishing for the Jewish people a publicly and legally assured home in Palestine.” From the start the Zionist leaders were aware of the limitations of Palestine as a destination for mass immigration, and after the 1905 resolution on “Zionism of Zion” it was clear that the demographic dimension of the Zionist solution to the Jewish problem depended on the immigration absorption potential of Palestine. A short time afterwards, the Zionist Organization embarked on practical work in Palestine, directed by Arthur Ruppin, who was the first to point out the link between demography and territory for the realization of Zionism's goals in Palestine. During his tour of the country in 1907, Ruppin noted that the Jews, who formed 10% of the population, occupied only 1.5% of its area, and that the land they owned was concentrated in three geographical blocs. In Ruppin's view, the goal of Zionism was Jewish autonomy in Palestine, and this he believed would only be possible when the Jews became a decisive majority and owned most of the land. The data he collected in 1907 showed him that it would not be possible to achieve these two objectives in the near future, and he therefore saw “an absolute imperative to

limit the Zionist goal in terms of territory for the time being. We must try to achieve autonomy not in the whole of Palestine but only in certain areas" (Ruppin 1937, 2).

The two aspects of the demographic question—the number of Jews who needed, wanted or were able to immigrate to Palestine, and the ability of the country to absorb them—did not at that time top the Zionist agenda. Palestine was controlled by a regime that objected to mass Jewish immigration, while the pressing difficulties of the Jews in eastern Europe had a solution at that time over the Atlantic ocean. The Balfour Declaration and the occupation of Eretz Israel by the British Army aroused hopes and the desire to move to Palestine, above all among the Jews of eastern Europe, who were suffering from persecution and pogroms. Particularly difficult was the situation of the Jews of Ukraine, who in the winter of 1918-1919 became trapped in the battlefield between the "Whites" and the "Reds," and from the end of 1917 to 1920 tens of thousands of Jews were killed there, many others were wounded, women were raped, and large amounts of Jewish property were stolen and destroyed. However, since at that time Palestine was under British military rule that did not permit Jewish immigration, the heads of the Zionist Organization tried to dissuade potential immigrants from coming to the country, citing the lack of clarity over the political fate of the country, and above all the economic conditions that made immigrant absorption impossible (Halamish 2006, 15-17).

The standard bearer of the opposition to the moderate and cautious line taken by the Zionist leadership was Max Nordau, who in 1919-1920 delivered a series of speeches and published numerous articles focusing on the slogan: "Mass immigration and without delay to Palestine" (Nordau 5722, 98). He explained it as follows: "Our masses in the lands of pogroms yearn to shake from their feet the dust of those countries, which is soaked in their blood—not after fifty years, not tomorrow, but today!"

(Nordau 5722, 64-65). His practical proposal was to bring half a million Jewish immigrants to Palestine immediately: "Either we create a decisive majority in Palestine now, or the land will be lost to us forever" (Nordau 5722, 133). While he spoke of the urgent need to help the distressed Jews of eastern Europe, the number stated by Nordau was essentially based on political Zionist needs: to create a demographic fact before Britain obtained the Mandate for Palestine (Nordau 5722, 98).

When Sir John Hope-Simpson visited the country in 1930, he posed a question to the Jews he met: "Did you not have enough time to become a larger force in the country, why did you not make use of this time?"

The main practical aspect of the demographic question was the extent of Jewish immigration to Palestine, which was one of the central issues in the history of Mandatory Palestine. The question of immigration played a decisive role in the positions taken by the three sides of the Palestine triangle: the British rulers, the Arab majority that consistently opposed Jewish immigration, and the Jewish minority who saw it as a non-negotiable issue (Halamish, 2020). The guiding line of the Mandatory immigration policy was the principle of the country's economic absorptive capacity (Halamish, 2003), to which the Zionist Organization gave its consent (Peel Report, Chapter 10, Paragraph 65),¹ partly because it believed (until the beginning of 1936) that immigration to the full absorptive capacity would, with the financial help of Diaspora Jewry, lead to a Jewish majority in the foreseeable future. During the 1920s the demographic question did not dominate the Mandate authorities' agenda and did not play a significant role in Zionist policy. The 1920s are often labelled the decade of Zionism's great missed opportunity, because it did not manage to significantly increase the Jewish population

in the country at a time when Arab opposition to Jewish immigration was dormant and Mandate immigration policy rested purely on the principle of economic absorptive capacity. When Sir John Hope-Simpson visited the country in 1930, he posed a question to the Jews he met: “Did you not have enough time to become a larger force in the country, why did you not make use of this time?”²

A short time later, in the early 1930s, the Zionist leaders were gripped by the sense that time was running out for Zionism in Palestine, and the political future of the country would soon be decided. Looking at the British political reaction to the disturbances of 1929, and considering the moves towards greater independence in neighboring countries under Mandatory rule, it was clear to them that there had to be a critical mass of Jews in Palestine before any political decision was taken that would perpetuate the minority status of the Jews.

The Zionist Organization avoided any public declaration of its goals, as long as the demographic reality did not justify the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. In this regard the time dimension refers to timing: when was the time ripe to declare the aim of creating a Jewish majority in the land? At the seventeenth Zionist Congress in 1931, the Revisionists proposed that the Congress should openly declare that the “ultimate goal” of Zionism was the establishment of a Jewish state with a Jewish majority in the whole area of the Mandate for Palestine, on both sides of the Jordan River. By a majority of 162 to 62 it was decided not to put this proposal to the vote, not because of opposition to its content, but for considerations of demography and timing: at that time Jews constituted less than 17% of the population of Palestine west of the Jordan River, and far less if both are included in the calculation. At the same time, in the Zionist Organization there was opposition to any expression of willingness to renounce the desire for a Jewish majority in Palestine. When

Chaim Weizmann said in a press interview: “I have no sympathy or understanding of the demand for a Jewish majority,” his words were received with reservations and even anger, and contributed to his failure to be elected President of the movement in 1931 (Golani & Reinhartz 2020, 323-340, quote on 329).

Until the mid-1930s, the desire for a Jewish majority in Palestine was therefore a kind of “unwritten rule.” However, loyalty to this aim was a litmus for allegiance to the Zionist camp. For example, Hashomer Hatzair, who for many years supported a binational solution to the Palestine question, never renounced two principles: the continuation of immigration with no numerical restriction, and no compromise on the goal of a Jewish majority in the country. In this way the movement differed from other bodies who supported a binational solution, such as Brit Shalom and Ichud, who were ready to give up the demand for a Jewish majority and compromise on the extent of immigration, and thus removed themselves from the Zionist circle.

In June 1932, Chaim Arlosoroff (head of the Political Department of the Jewish Agency) predicted that the end of the British Mandate for Palestine and a decision on its political future were imminent. He inferred that the Zionist Organization must “strive to settle hundreds of thousands of Jews in the country as quickly as possible, in order to ensure at least a substantial equilibrium between the two peoples there.” Based on the demographic data and the geographical dispersal at that time, Arlosoroff returned to the idea proposed by Ruppin in 1907—to limit the area for the realization of Zionism: “Instead of the whole of Palestine, only certain regions or parts of it,” however even in these areas the Jews were a minority. This sad demographic reality led Arlosoroff to a revolutionary conclusion (as he wrote in a secret letter to Chaim Weizmann that was not made public until after the establishment of the State): a transitional period is needed in which the Jewish minority will rule “in order to

prevent the danger of the non-Jewish majority taking control and revolting against us [...] During this transitional period there will be a systematic policy of development, Jewish immigration and settlement,” creating a new demographic and territorial reality (Arlosoroff undated, 333-342).³

A short time later, after the Nazis rose to power and the deterioration of the situation for Jews in eastern Europe, the significance in general and particularly the demographic one of an event that had occurred in 1924 became clear: the change in United States immigration laws that had almost completely closed its gates to migrants from Eastern Europe. At first this had a positive effect on the volume of Jewish immigration to Palestine: In 1924, 59% of all Jewish migrants went to the United States while only 16.4% went to Palestine, but in 1925 the picture was reversed—52.1% of all Jewish migrants went to Palestine, while only 15.6% made their way to the United States (Gurewitz & Graetz 5705, 13). The fourth wave of Aliyah, which reached a peak in 1925, led to a sense of “it’s happening,” masses of Jews are coming to Palestine and there will soon be a demographic Jewish mass. But this optimism faded at the end of 1925 when the Jewish economy went into crisis, and in 1927 the number of Jews who left the country was almost double the number of new arrivals. There was some recovery in the early 1930s, and in the years 1933-1935 more than 130,000 people immigrated. As the mirror image of the Zionist optimism aroused by the huge wave of Jewish immigration, it increased Arab fears of losing their majority status in their country, and was the main cause of the Arab revolt that erupted in the spring of 1936 (Peel Report, Chapter 10, Paragraph 5).⁴ This signaled the start of a new era in the history of Palestine, during which the Zionist Organization formulated its policy while considering the interaction of the three variables: demography, territory and time (timing).

The Partition Controversy, 1937: Willingness to Accept Territorial Constraint for Reasons of Demography and Time

July 1937 saw the official publication of the report of the Royal Commission (known as the Peel Commission), which was charged with investigating the causes of the Arab revolt and recommending moves for the future. The Commission reached the conclusion that “an irrepressible conflict has arisen between two national communities within the narrow bounds of one small country,” where “about 1,000,000 Arabs are in strife, open or latent, with some 400,000 Jews” (Peel Report, Chapter 20, Paragraph 5). The Peel Commission proposed ending the Mandate and dividing the country into three parts: an independent Jewish state along the coastal plain and in the Galilee; an Arab region to include about 85% of Palestine and to be united with Trans-Jordan as an independent state; and an area that would remain under permanent Mandatory government: Jerusalem and Bethlehem, and a corridor leading to Jaffa.

The conclusions of the Peel Commission were formulated against a background of the existing demographic situation (and assumptions about its future development) and the geographic distribution of the population. The idea was “separate the areas in which the Jews have acquired land and settled from those which are wholly or mainly occupied by Arabs” (Peel Report, Chapter 22, Paragraph 17), and make reasonable allowance within the boundaries of the Jewish State for the growth of population and colonization (Chapter 22, Paragraph 18). That was why the Galilee was included in the Jewish state, although parts of it were inhabited almost entirely by Arabs. The Commission’s main problem when deciding the lines of partition lay in the inability to draw lines that would completely separate Jews and Arabs—lines that had only Jewish-owned land on one side and only Arab-owned land on the other. According

to the Commission's calculations, there were almost 225,000 Arabs in the area designated for the Jewish state, while there were only 1,250 Jews in the intended Arab area. The Commission therefore proposed reaching an agreement on land and population exchanges, that "should be part of the agreement that in the last resort the exchange would be compulsory." (Chapter 22, Paragraphs 35-43, quote from para. 43).

In addition to these more familiar recommendations, the Commission also suggested a less known option, if the partition plan was rejected and the British Mandate remained in place. The core of this recommendation was a dramatic change in the Mandate immigration policy. Instead of the practice (formally, at least) of regulating Jewish immigration solely according to economic considerations, in the future, political, social and psychological factors would also be considered when determining the extent of Jewish immigration (Chapter 10, Paragraph 73; and Chapter 19, Paragraph 10). And in practice:

We advise that there should now be a definite limit to the annual volume of Jewish immigration. We recommend that Your Majesty's Government should lay down a "political high level" of Jewish immigration to cover Jewish immigration of all categories. This high level should be fixed for the next five years at 12,000 per annum, and in no circumstances during that period should more than that number be allowed into the country in any one year. (Chapter 10, Paragraph 97).

The alternative recommendation was implemented immediately in the White Paper published in July 1937, which stated that for the next eight months, no more than 8,000 Jews would be permitted to immigrate (Great Britain, 1937).

The logic behind this number was clear to everyone: freezing the demographic balance

between Jews and Arabs in Palestine and perpetuating the status of Jews as a minority, comprising about a third of the population. In 1937 the British estimated that the difference between the natural rate of increase of the Arabs and that of the Jews was about 12,000 per annum, and two years later the number rose to 15,000. In May 1939 the British government unhesitatingly announced that the number of Jewish immigrants over the next five years, 75,000, had been determined so that the Jewish population in Palestine would reach about a third of the Arab population, and Jewish immigration thereafter would be conditional on Arab consent (CMD 6019).

The Twentieth Zionist Congress that met in the summer of 1937 accepted the idea of partitioning the country and establishing a Jewish state in only part of the territory, and empowered its Executive "to enter into negotiations with a view to ascertaining the precise terms of His Majesty's Government for the proposed establishment of a Jewish State in Palestine," and "in the event of the emergence of a definite scheme for the establishment of a Jewish State, such scheme shall be brought before a newly elected Congress for decision." (The Twentieth Zionist Congress undated, 359-360).

The academic and public discussion of the partition controversy usually focuses on the territorial aspects of the partition proposal, but it is impossible to understand the support for the idea of partition without considering the alternative proposal and its demographic significance—arbitrary restrictions on Jewish immigration, eliminating the chance of a Jewish majority in Palestine and putting an end to the possibility of setting up a Jewish sovereign entity. The Zionist leadership realized that it would not be possible at that time to set up a Jewish state on the whole of Palestine, and they were therefore prepared to discuss the option of the immediate establishment of a Jewish state on part of the land, assuming that a small but sovereign Jewish state could manage its own

immigration policy and bring in more Jews than the quota allotted by the British.

“The position of the Zionist Organization regarding the conclusions of the Royal Commission and the decision of the British Government” refer directly to demographic matters (The Twentieth Zionist Congress undated, 359-360) stating that “The Congress condemns the ‘palliative proposals’ put forward by the Royal Commission as a policy for implementing the Mandate, such as curtailment of immigration, fixing of a political high-level in substitution for the principle of economic absorptive capacity;” and “The Congress enters its strongest protest against the decision of His Majesty’s Government to fix a political maximum for Jewish immigration of all categories for the next eight months.”

Similar to the disagreements during British military rule (1918-1920) over Jewish immigration to Palestine at a time of acute distress in the Diaspora, in the controversy over partition and the formation of Zionist policy from then on, there were two sides to the demographic piece. On one side: the need to increase the Jewish population in order to create a majority that would lead to sovereignty, or at least a demographic mass that would make it impossible to ignore the Jewish *Yishuv* in any plan for the political future of the land; and on the other side, the number of Jews in the Diaspora who were in need, or wished, to immigrate to Palestine. Both sides of the partition debate raised the distress of Europe’s Jews as a reason for their position, but an examination of their statements shows that they were thinking in terms of Palestine. This is clearly shown by the number of immigrants stated in the arguments—around 100,000 a year for the next ten to twenty years. These numbers would bring about a demographic change in the country, but they were far from providing a solution to the growing suffering of Europe’s Jews, and did not even cover their population’s natural rate of growth.

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The sense that time was running out, felt by the Zionist leaders since the early 1930s, derived from an analysis of the situation in **Palestine**. Again and again they warned and worried of approaching war and in their view, the future of the country demanded mass immigration, and fast. This can be seen in Arlosoroff’s secret letter in 1932 (Arlosoroff undated), and in a speech by Berl Katznelson in 1935: “Anyone who sees what surrounds us **here**, and what lies in wait for us **there**, anyone who sees the global political situation [...] the danger of war that fills the space of our world, cannot dismiss the grave command: **to strive for the maximum number as soon as possible**” (Meeting of the Zionist Executive Committee 1935, 151 [my emphases]).

Towards the end of the 1930s, when it appeared that world war was likely, the demographic aspect acquired further significance, that was well expressed by the Peel Report:

Jews must realize that another world-war is unhappily not impossible, and in the changes and chances of war it is easy to imagine circumstances under which the Jews might have to rely mainly on their own resources for the defense of the National Home. There, then, is a second and a very potent reason for haste. The more immigrants, the more potential soldiers. “There is safety in numbers,” said a Jewish witness. And again: “If we are kept in

a state of permanent minority, then it is not a National Home, it may become a death-trap.” (Peel Report, Chapter 5, Paragraph 21).

And what about **Jerusalem**, which according to the partition plan was supposed to be part of a permanent Mandatory area? Even those who accepted the idea of partitioning the country objected to the map proposed by the Peel Commission, and their suggestions for changes included the demand to bring Jerusalem into the future Jewish state. They were referring to the new part of Jerusalem (and not the Old City), and even if their position involved national and emotional elements, at its basis were demographic considerations: about a sixth of the Jews in the country were living in Jerusalem. This is what Weizmann said to the Congress:

So what are the essential changes in our opinion, for the proposal to serve as a basis for negotiations? Firstly, it concerns the question of **Jerusalem**; the 70,000 Jews in Jerusalem are very important to us, and we have a justified demand that the new Jerusalem, largely inhabited by Jews, be annexed to the Jewish state (The Twentieth Zionist Congress undated, 71 [emphasis in the original]).

The Biltmore Program, 1942: Demographic and Territorial Maximalism

The Zionist leaders estimated that after the Second World War there would be political changes in the Middle East, and just as Zionism had obtained a promise for a “national home” in Palestine during World War I, so at the end of World War II it would obtain international support for the establishment of a Jewish state in the whole of Palestine. In the spring of 1942 the Zionist Organization outlined its policy for

the day after the war in a document known as The Biltmore Program. For the purposes of the present discussion, its main points were the opening of the gates of Palestine for Jewish immigration and the establishment of a Jewish state in the whole area (the text speaks of a “Jewish commonwealth” for tactical reasons; it was clear to everyone that the intention was a state) (Jewish Agency Executive meeting 1942b).

In the discussions held before ratification of the plan (early October 1942—the date is important, as will become clear) Ben-Gurion stated:

The role of Zionism after the war is to use state means, in different dimensions, to take two million Jews and settle them in Palestine in one go, to transfer two million Jews, the younger generation from Europe, **if any remain**, to settle in Palestine [...] Something of this kind did happen nowadays, they settled 2 million Greeks in the course of 18 months” (Jewish Agency Executive meeting 1942a [my emphasis]).

The Biltmore Program was passed at the height of a war that changed the world order and laid the foundation for optimism over the chances of a Jewish state, **before** the systematic extermination of the Jews in Europe was known. Nevertheless, in early November 1942, Ben Gurion qualified his remarks about the younger generation in Europe—“if any remain,” but even as the Zionist leadership gradually internalized the scale of the catastrophe that had befallen the Jews of Europe, in public they kept to the slogan of “two million” until the middle of 1944.

When preparing the demands to be submitted to the Allies at the end of the war (mid-1944), Ben Gurion clarified that the real content of the Zionist demand was to bring a million Jews immediately to Palestine. He admitted that the original meaning of the Biltmore Program was to bring two million Jews to the country

immediately after the war, but “I am taking into account what has happened in the meantime [...] the extermination of 6 million Jews [...] For that reason I am now stating a number, but that number derives from this fact. In my opinion the real content of our demand is to bring a million Jews immediately to Palestine.” He said this before the tragic destruction of the Jews of Hungary, with the hope that “the fate of the million remaining in Hungary [will be] better” (Jewish Agency Executive meeting 1944). Where would the million Jews come from? First we should bring “all the Jewish refugees remaining in Europe” and “then all the Jews from the Arab countries,” whose number he estimated at about 800,000. Even at this critical juncture the numbers used were rooted in the Palestinian reality: “If a fact is created by bringing a million Jews to Palestine—the conflict with the Arabs is finished [...] If there are a million and a half Jews in Palestine—this conflict is finished” (Jewish Agency Executive meeting 1944). The Million Plan was the official policy of the Zionist Organization before the end of the war (Hacohen, 1994).

In view of the scale of the destruction of the Jews of Europe, and the fear that there would not be sufficient numbers to realize the vision of a Jewish state in the whole of Palestine, Zionist Organization institutions began to discuss bringing the Jews from Islamic countries (Weitz 1989; Meir-Glitzenstein 2001). As soon as the facts about the systematic murder of European Jewry became known, the head of the Jewish Agency Aliyah Department, Eliyahu Dobkin said: “The Jews of the East will perhaps be the first **to add strength to the country**, because who knows when we will be able to reach the Jews of Europe, and **our job is to increase the Yishuv by all means possible**” [my emphases] (Dobkin 1942).⁵ In fact, it was only in mid-1944 that the Zionist Organization began to relate to the demographic potential of the Jews in Islamic countries as a new Archimedean point to leverage the Zionist enterprise. But while the immigration to Palestine of Jews from Islamic

countries was included, explicitly and implicitly, in all the declarations, the testimonies, the memoranda and the demands of the Jewish Agency from the end of World War II to the establishment of the State of Israel (Meir-Glitzenstein 2004, 44), it was not possible to realize the demographic potential of the estimated 750,000 Jews in Islamic countries to the Zionist struggle in the years 1945-1947, as will be explained later.

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The Paris Conference, Summer 1946: Again, Willingness to Accept Territorial Restraint for Reasons of Demography and Timing

The Zionist struggle was resumed at the end of the war under a dual slogan: the establishment of a Jewish state in the whole territory of Palestine, and the immediate immigration of a million Jews. The two elements of this slogan quickly underwent changes. Almost immediately regarding the demographic element, and later (summer 1946) for the territorial element, for demographic reasons. At the end of the war the Zionist leadership distinguished between the declarative demand for the immigration of a million Jews, and the official concrete requests to allow 100,000 Holocaust survivors and displaced persons to enter the country immediately. The more general request for the one million referred to Jews “from European, Oriental and other countries who desire, and need, to settle in the ancient home of the Jewish people” (Ch. Weizmann to W.S. Churchill 1945). The more specific and actual plea for 100,000 was focused on Jewish Displaced Persons in

Europe (M. Shertok to The High Commissioner 1945). 100,000 was widely quoted for the extent of Jewish immigration to the country in the two years after it was first officially raised in public in August 1945, by US President Harry Truman in his request to the British Government. This number reappeared in the report of the Anglo-American Committee in Spring 1946, and in the report of the Morrison-Grady Committee a short time later.

The British government's refusal to grant President Truman's request to permit the immigration of 100,000 Jews to Palestine within two years rendered the displaced persons as a lever for promoting the establishment of a Jewish state through the illegal immigration project. Illegal immigration served to prove the link between a solution for the problem of displaced Jews in Europe and the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. The apparently obvious goal of increasing the Jewish population in the country was not the main focus of the project in those years, and indeed it did not lead to an increase in the number of Jews who entered the country in the years 1945-1948 (until the establishment of the state) beyond the allocated British quota, because the authorities simply deducted the number of illegal immigrants from the 1500 monthly permits (Sicron 1957, 2, Table 1A). The demand to bring the Jews from Islamic countries could not play a role in the struggle for the Jewish state according to the Zionist Organization's tactics, and the number of Holocaust survivors in Europe was too small to make a significant demographic impact in Palestine.

The process of internalizing the new demographic reality, that of the Jewish people and of Palestine, came to a head in the summer of 1946. After a year of struggle in which the Yishuv had achieved some military gains, Zionism had made no progress towards the realization of its goal as defined at the end of the war. On the contrary, it appeared to be in retreat. In spring 1946 the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry recommended that the country should

be neither Arab nor Jewish for the present, and eventually become a binational state (Report of the Anglo-American Committee 1946). It did recommend the immigration of 100,000 Jews within two years, but even if Britain had responded to this recommendation, it would not lead to a dramatic demographic change in the country, where there were 600,000 Jews at the time and twice as many Arabs. Even worse, from the Zionist perspective, was the Morrison-Grady plan that was published in summer 1946 and which indicated the continuation of the British Mandate with no signs of an independent Jewish state on the horizon.

At this crucial confluence of the three variables that shaped Zionist policy—demography, territory and time—the Zionist leadership understood that it had no choice but to reformulate its territorial demands, before the political window of opportunity closed and the chance for a Jewish state was entirely lost. At an emergency meeting of the Jewish Agency Executive convened in early August 1946 in Paris, it was decided that, “the Executive is prepared to discuss a proposal for the establishment of a viable Jewish state in an adequate area of Palestine.”⁶ The driving force behind this decision was Nahum Goldman, who told the participants:

I felt for years that partition of Palestine is the only way out. Biltmore is no realistic policy at the moment, because we have no Jewish majority and we cannot wait until we have the majority to get the State. I know it is a tragic decision, but we have only the choice between two things: British rule with the White Paper policy, or a Jewish State in part of Palestine.⁷

In research and the public discourse there is disagreement over a possible causative link between the Holocaust and the establishment of the State. For the present discussion, it is sufficient to mention two elements

of this debate. Firstly—the demographic consequences of the Holocaust had almost destroyed the chances of establishing a Jewish state in Palestine. Before the war, the Zionist Organization had claimed that a Jewish state was the only solution to the distress of Jews in Europe, and that the Jews of Europe who would come to the country would create a demographic reality that would justify the formation of a sovereign Jewish state. The Holocaust destroyed both aspects of this claim. Secondly—while the question of whether the Holocaust had influenced the positions of policy makers in UN member countries is controversial, there is agreement that it had a resounding impact on the positions of Jewish leaders, both Zionist and non-Zionist, so that even those who objected to the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine before the Holocaust changed their minds, and some of those who were strongly against any partition of the land understood that there was no alternative to limiting the territorial ambitions of Zionism, in view of the demographic situation of the Jewish people.

At the time of the controversy over partition in 1937 the Zionist leadership was worried that the proposed boundaries of the Jewish state were too small to accommodate all the Jews who needed Palestine, but after 1942 the fear was that there would not be enough Jews to establish Jewish sovereignty over the whole territory. We saw how dealing with the new demographic situation led immediately to an expansion of the circle of potential Jewish immigrants to Palestine; in mid-1946 the Zionists adjusted the **territorial** dimensions of their ambitions to the **demographic** reality of the Jews worldwide, while taking account of the **time** factor. Or to put it another way, the demographic catastrophe of the Holocaust for the Jewish people obliged the Zionists to limit their territorial aims in order to obtain international agreement for the establishment of a Jewish state on part of Palestine, and the sooner the better.

1948: Accepting a Territorial Minimum for the Sake of a Demographic Majority

In research and public discourse there is an ongoing discussion about why the West Bank was not captured during the War of Independence. The debate has drawn attention to the meeting of the temporary government held on September 26, 1948, where Ben-Gurion ostensibly presented a proposal to conquer the West Bank and it was rejected by one vote (six for and seven against). Careful scrutiny of the minutes of that meeting shows that the subject of conquering the West Bank or any part of it did not arise, and Ben-Gurion had not presented detailed plans for such a conquest (Lavid 2012). It appears that the discussion emerged later from a feeling of a double missed opportunity: the missed opportunity to increase the area of the State of Israel by taking the West Bank, and that of establishing a Jewish majority there by increasing and accelerating the exodus of Arabs from Israel (Shalom 1998).

Obviously, increasing the exit of Arabs from Israeli territory and then preventing their return (a subject that is not discussed in the present paper) was done first and foremost for demographic considerations. The conquest of the West Bank involved other considerations: while there was no doubt as to Israel's **military** capability of execution, there were concerns as to its **political** implications. And still, even the decision not to conquer the West Bank was taken mainly because of **demographic** considerations. As time has passed, more emphasis has been placed on the demographic aspect, which is bound up with the question of the Jewish and democratic nature of Israel.

In the Knesset discussion of April 1949 on the armistice agreements, Ben-Gurion tied the two “misses” of the war to the two desired features of the State—its Jewish and democratic nature, with the words Deir Yassin denoting an active step by the Israel to encourage the Arabs to leave its territory:

A Jewish state without a Deir Yassin in the whole country can only exist with a dictatorship of the minority. [...] A Jewish state in the current situation, even in the west of Palestine only, without a Deir Yassin, is impossible, if it is to be democratic, because the number of Arabs in the west of Palestine is greater than the number of Jews—and Deir Yassin is not our program! [...] Do you [supporters of taking control of additional areas of the country] now in 1949 want a democratic State of Israel in the whole country, or do you want a Jewish state in the whole of Palestine and for us to expel the Arabs [...]? (Twentieth Session 1949).

It was demographic considerations more than any other that also shaped the position of the government on the question of annexing the Gaza Strip to the State of Israel in 1949. At the government meeting that discussed this matter, Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett presented the arguments for and against, and summarized them as follows: “If we demand the area for ourselves, we are taking on one hundred and fifty thousand Arabs, and most of them will want to return to their homes in the State” (Meeting 1949 5709/42). Sharett made similar remarks at the Knesset Foreign Affairs Committee: “Annexation of the [Gaza] strip means willingness to accept one hundred and seventy thousand Arabs within Israel. Our Arab minority will in one leap reach three hundred thousand” (Knesset Foreign Affairs Committee 1949).

Ben Gurion returned to the question of the link between territory and democracy and what he considered the missed opportunity of the War of Independence, when he wrote in his diary in the summer of 1954:

I am against a war of expansion unless it is forced upon us. Our problem is a

lack of Jews, not a lack of land—at this time. Conquering land up to the Jordan River would be a doubtful gain at present. If the Arabs remain—that means an additional million Arabs in the country, more than we can bear [...]. During the War of Independence we missed something important—but we can’t take back what has been done (Ben Gurion’s diary 1954).

In a private letter sent 14 years after the War of Independence, Ben Gurion clarified that he did not intend to conquer the whole of the country, “because I knew that a small state with only about seven hundred thousand Jews cannot materialize if the Arab population exceeds the Jewish population, or even if it is slightly smaller.” However, he considered the conquest of Jerusalem and access to the Dead Sea very important. He noted that he had suggested to the government (in 1948) “to conquer **all of** Jerusalem and the southern pocket including Bethlehem and Hebron, where there were a hundred thousand Arabs.” And what about the demographic aspect? “I assumed—without absolute certainty, but with sufficient probability—that most of the Arabs in Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Hebron would flee, like the Arabs of Lydda, Ramla, Jaffa, Haifa, Tiberias and Safed, and we would control the whole width of the country up to the Jordan (to the north or south of Jericho) and all the western Dead Sea will be in our hands,” but “there was no suggestion from me to conquer the triangle” (Ben Gurion letter 1962).⁸

Many years after the war, in a conversation with Haim Gouri, Ben Gurion specified his reasons for not seeking to expand the territorial framework of the State of Israel at the end of the War of Independence. In his eyes, conquering the West Bank would amount to “over-reach:”

Getting involved in a hostile Arab area would have forced upon us a choice that we could not and would not bear:

to use Deir Yassin methods to expel hundreds of thousands of Arabs who at that time would not have abandoned their homes and fled, or to accept them among us. They would have exploded the young state from within (Gouri 1986).

Soon after the end of the War of Independence, Ben Gurion expressed what he saw as the desirable ratio between land and population, moving decisively away from the territorial aspect to the demographic one:

“The question is, what is the interest of the State of Israel at this time. Well, the interest is to **absorb Aliyah**. That is the long term interest [...] Perhaps we could have conquered the triangle, the Golan, the whole of Galilee. But these conquests would not improve our security as much as absorbing Aliyah is likely to do. The fate of the country lies in Aliyah (Remarks during a consultation 1949 [emphasis in the original]).

And indeed, increasing the number of Jews in the state became central to Israel’s policy immediately after its establishment.

The Open Immigration Policy, 1948-1951: Demographic Needs and Time Considerations in a Given Territorial Reality

Immediately after its establishment, Israel adopted a policy of free immigration, or more precisely—open immigration. The section of the Declaration of Independence that defines the character of the new state opens thus: “The State of Israel will be open for Jewish immigration and for the ingathering of the exiles.” One of the objectives of the first elected government was to double the Jewish population of the country within four years (Eighth Meeting 1949). Ben Gurion, in

his determined way and with his talent for identifying a central target, pushing aside every other consideration, announced in the Knesset that the government’s position was that “At the present time, Aliyah takes precedence over absorption [...] Aliyah is not conditional upon and limited to possibilities for absorption, and some time may elapse [...] between the Aliyah and its economic absorption. That is the decree of fate” (Eighty Seventh Session 1949). About 26 months after the establishment of the state, during which some 415,000 people arrived (Hacohen 5744, 328), the Knesset passed the Law of Return, whose essence is contained in these words: “Every Jew has the right to immigrate to Israel.” This was an immigration policy without equal and without precedent in other countries, with the government intervening in the immigration process at every stage: encouraging Jews to come, paying their travel expenses, and in some cases even paying a ransom to the country of origin (Halamish 2008).

Two variables dictated Israel’s open immigration policy: demography and time. We saw that in the early 1930s Zionism was in a dual race against time: in Palestine and in Europe. The establishment of the State did not put an end to this race in both arenas. In Eretz Israel, the desire for a Jewish majority that had accompanied Zionist policy at least since the start of the British Mandate did not diminish, even after the establishment of the State. Indeed in 1948 it simply became a matter of strengthening the Jewish majority within Israel and strengthening Israel against its external enemies. As for world Jewry, those who shaped and implemented policy were worried about changes in the exit policies of countries with concentrations of Jews (Islamic states and eastern Europe) that may close the window of opportunity; and also concerned that the Jews in other places, mainly the remaining Holocaust survivors in western Europe, would settle down and build a new life where they were, or be tempted to try other destinations.

And so at the end of 1951, the Jewish Agency Executive decided on a series of rules for regulating immigration, with the intention to apply them only to countries where “potential immigrants have the option to choose”—code for countries where there was no urgency for the Jews to leave—, notably “Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Turkey, Persia, India, central and western European countries, etc.” The regulations, which became the official policy of the Israeli government, referred to the age of the immigrants, their health situation and their ability to earn a living in Israel. They were fundamentally similar to the rules in force during the Mandate and harmonized with the accepted principles in other countries that receive immigrants (Jewish Agency Executive meeting 1951, 12).

In both scholarly and public discourse the question often arises: Why did the Israeli government change its policy on immigration so suddenly? Perhaps it would be more correct to ask why it took so long to step on the brakes. The reason proposed here is the continuation of the Zionist and Israeli race against time in its two tracks—both in the country and in the Diaspora—, and so even though the difficulties of absorbing the immigrants were known earlier, the attempt to limit Aliyah and set quotas failed. Even if decisions were taken to limit the number of immigrants in given time periods, until the end of 1951 they were bypassed and not enforced.

So what changed in November 1951 compared to the 42 months that had elapsed since the establishment of the State (Picard 2013, 69-87)? Whole libraries of assessments and interpretations have been written about the motives for deciding to limit Aliyah, above all the claim that the intention was first and foremost to limit immigration from North Africa, and Morocco in particular (Picard 1999; Picard 2013, 63-110; Tzur 2000). To this was added the economic crisis in 1951 and the fears of the collapse of the health and education systems. This paper does not address the validity of these

explanations, but rather proposes to examine the attempt to change Israeli immigration policy in a broader context, beyond the lessons of the mass immigration of the early days of statehood and the absorption difficulties of that time. By late 1951 it appeared that the Zionist race against time had reached the finish line on both tracks: within Israel there was already a solid Jewish majority, and no Jewish community was in immediate existential danger.

The 1951 regulations did not last long. They were gradually relaxed and finally disappeared in the second half of the 1950s. In the middle of that decade there was a gradual return to the policy of open immigration with no filtering mechanisms, when it appeared that the North African Jewish communities could be in danger, due to the process of decolonization and fears that the newly independent states would limit or prohibit the exit of Jews from their territory (Picard 2013, 294-352). This time the decisive factor that shaped policy was the situation of Jews in the Diaspora rather than Israeli demographic factors.

The Supremacy of Palestine/ Israeli-centered Demographic Considerations in Shaping Zionist and Israeli policy, 1937-1951

The central claim of this paper is that since 1905, the shaping of Zionist policy has been dictated by an interaction between three variables: territory, demography and time, and that from the start of the British Mandate over Palestine until 1951, demography was the dominant consideration. For some time in the years 1933-1935 it appeared that the objective of creating a Jewish majority in Palestine, that would justify the claim for a sovereign Jewish state over the whole of Palestine, was within reach. But external forces—economic, political and military—blocked the growth of the Jewish population through immigration, and the desired goal rescinded. Then in 1937 emerged an agreement to partition the country and establish a Jewish state on only part of it,

and thus to change the order of the realization of Zionism: no longer immigration to create a majority leading to sovereignty, but rather the instant establishment of a state, which, with its other benefits, would enable the Zionist Organization to manage immigration policy as it wished. During World War II the Zionist Organization retreated for some time from the idea of territorial restriction, but the demographic catastrophe of the Holocaust for the Jewish people not only restored it to the Zionist agenda but also persuaded the Organization's leaders to initiate moves to recruit international support for a Jewish state on only part of Palestine, with a sense of now or never. The superiority of demographic considerations is also clear in resolutions of the Israeli government regarding territorial expansion in the War of Independence and the policy of open immigration in the early years of statehood.

Another claim presented in this paper is that in the history of Zionism and Israel the demographic element comprised two aspects—Eretz Israel and the Diaspora. From the start, Zionist leaders were aware that Palestine could not contain all the Jews in the world, not even those who needed to migrate from their countries of origin due to persecution. Until 1951 it was the situation and interests of the Yishuv and the State of Israel that dictated Zionist and Israeli policy. Once there was a solid Jewish majority in the State of Israel, the Israeli demographic concerns became less important for shaping Israel's immigration policy, and were overtaken by the State's obligation to the Jewish People in the spirit of "All Jews Are Responsible for One Another." This was one of the manifestations for the role reversal between "immigration" and "state," on the means vs. goals axis in the definition of the supreme aims of Zionism which occurred after 1948. After immigration had served as a means for establishing the State, it was the turn of the State to serve as the means for the ingathering

of the exiles, as stated in the Declaration of Independence. Reciprocity for the monetary aid that Israel received from the Jews of the free world was the opening of its gates to every Jew who needed or wished to come. After 1951 demographic considerations no longer played a central role in shaping Israeli policy, and the open immigration policy was largely driven by the fact that Aliyah was the State's *raison d'être*, the unifying ethos within the country and the recruiting ethos abroad.

After immigration had served as a means for establishing the State, it was the turn of the State to serve as the means for the ingathering of the exiles, as stated in the Declaration of Independence.

From the end of 1951 to mid-1967 Israeli policy makers were no longer required to navigate between the three variables—demography, territory and time. An examination of the relationship between the three after the Six Day War—with reference to the question to what extent Israeli policy since 1967 is consistent with the vision, the principles and the policies that guided the Zionist movement from its earliest days, and the State of Israel in its first two decades—is a subject for another paper.

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CMD 5479. [hereinafter: Peel Report]; letter to the High Commissioner Arthur Wauchope from Moshe Shertok, Jewish Agency Executive, February 15, 1938, Central Zionist Archive (hereinafter: CZA), S25/2615.

2 David Bloch at the second sitting of the Mapai Council, October 25-26, 1930, Labor Party Archive (hereinafter: LPA), 22/4.

3 Letter from Chaim Arlozorov to Chaim Weizmann, June 30, 1932, <http://tinyurl.com/3ypfrmn>.

4 In 1937 the Peel Commission calculated that the immigration of 60,000 Jews a year would lead to equal numbers of Jews and Arabs in Palestine within ten years.

5 The discussion on the position of the Zionist Organization regarding the Jews of Islamic countries is limited here to the demographic aspect only.

6 CZA, S25/7161

7 Minutes of the Jewish Agency Executive Emergency meeting, Paris, August 1946, CZA.

8 The end of the quote refers to the area to the west of the Green Line, east of the Sharon plain, at the lower slopes of the Samarian Mountains, where there were numerous Arab villages. This area, that was not captured by Israel in the War of Independence, was transferred from Jordan to Israel following the armistice agreement with Jordan in 1949, and given the name “the triangle.”

Notes

- 1 Palestine Royal Commission Report: Submitted to Parliament by the Government Secretary for Colonial