

How Israel's Jewish Majority Will Grow

by Yakov Faitelson

On December 21, 2017, the first-ever official census of Palestinians in Lebanon was published in Beirut. It showed that only 174,422 Palestinians lived there,¹ not up to 600,000 as previously estimated by political entities including the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

Overestimation of the Palestinian population is hardly limited to Lebanon. Similar miscalculations have also occurred in the West Bank and Gaza where the Israeli Civil Administration, which operates under the auspices of the Ministry of Defense, accepts the Palestinian Authority's demographic data at face value. Such miscalculations have also occurred inside Israel where the shift of the demographic balance over the past few decades in favor of the Jewish majority has gone largely unnoticed. So much so that by 2065, the ratio of Israel's Arab citizens will likely drop from the current level of 20.9 percent of the total population² to 15.7 percent,



A demonstrator drapes herself in a Palestinian flag, Chicago, May 2019. An overlooked aspect of West Bank and Gaza demographics is persistent Palestinian emigration from these territories to Europe and North America.

¹ *The Jordan Times* (Amman), [Dec. 21, 2017](#).

² Statistical Abstract of Israel 2019, Table 2.1: Population, by Population Group, [Israel Central Bureau of Statistics](#) (ICBS), Jerusalem.

whereas the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza will comprise a mere 26.2 percent of the total population of the Land of Israel—between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea—a far cry from the predicted Arab-Jewish equality in this territory.

Palestinian Emigration from the West Bank and Gaza

One of the more commonly overlooked aspects of the West Bank and Gaza demographics has been the persistent Palestinian emigration from these territories. As early as December 1986, Arab-American academic Janet Abu-Lughod wrote:

Nor will the Arab population within Palestine be able to grow indefinitely. Some outmigration, even in the absence of forced expulsion, is inevitable. The tiny Gaza Strip is now one of the most densely settled areas of the world, and there is a limit to its ability to contain more people, even at the appalling levels of subsistence that now prevail.³

Two decades later, on October 20, 2006, Birzeit University published the results of a public opinion poll on living conditions under the Palestinian Authority:

The most shocking result is related to willingness to emigrate. Overall, 32.4% of respondents say they are willing to emigrate compared with approximately 19% during the last few years [a

13-point increase]. The results also show that 44% of young Palestinians are willing to emigrate if given the opportunity.⁴

These results were reaffirmed four years later by Mustafa Khawaja, director of the Jerusalem department of the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS):

The net balance of arrivals and departures for the West Bank in the period from 1967-present is always negative: on average about 10,000 annually The main reason for migration by Palestinians relates to the economic factors resulting from the political instability and the infighting between the Palestinian parties.⁵

Khawaja also reported that the “number of Palestinian migrants in Europe reached about 242 thousand... Stock data from destination countries’ sources state that about 15 thousand Palestinians live in Sweden, and nearly 20 thousand have settled in Denmark.”⁶

The situation has since worsened. The “Palestinian Youth Survey 2015,” published by the PCBS in August 2016, showed that 73 percent of young people aged 15-29 in the

3 Janet Abu-Lughod, “The Demographic War for Palestine: The Bottom Line,” *The Link* (New York), Dec. 1986, p. 12.

4 “Public Opinion Poll # 28. Press Release,” Birzeit University, Development Studies Programme, Birzeit, West Bank, Sept. 20, 2006, p. 3.

5 Mustafa Khawaja, “Highly-skilled migration into, through and from the southern and eastern Mediterranean and sub-Saharan Africa. [The Case of Palestine](#),” Robert Shuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute, Fiesole, It., 2010, p. 8.

6 *Ibid*, p. 3.

West Bank and 56 percent in the Gaza Strip wanted to emigrate.⁷

Yet while people throughout the world who have not resided in their native country for more than a year are normally excluded from population registers, the Palestinians, with Israel's consent, carry out "late registration." This designation means that Palestinians born abroad can register as permanent residents of the West Bank and Gaza even if they do not live there. Moreover, the Palestinian Authority does not keep regular mortality records, nor does it account for those who live abroad, so demographic data is distorted.⁸

This, to be sure, is hardly a novel phenomenon. During the British mandate (1920-48), Arab population figures, which were based on information from rural and urban leaderships, were massively inflated to obtain greater government support, especially food rations.⁹ False population estimates were similarly observed during the period of full Israeli control of the West Bank (1967-96) and Gaza (1967-94). Thus, for example, in 1989, a gap appeared between the population listed by



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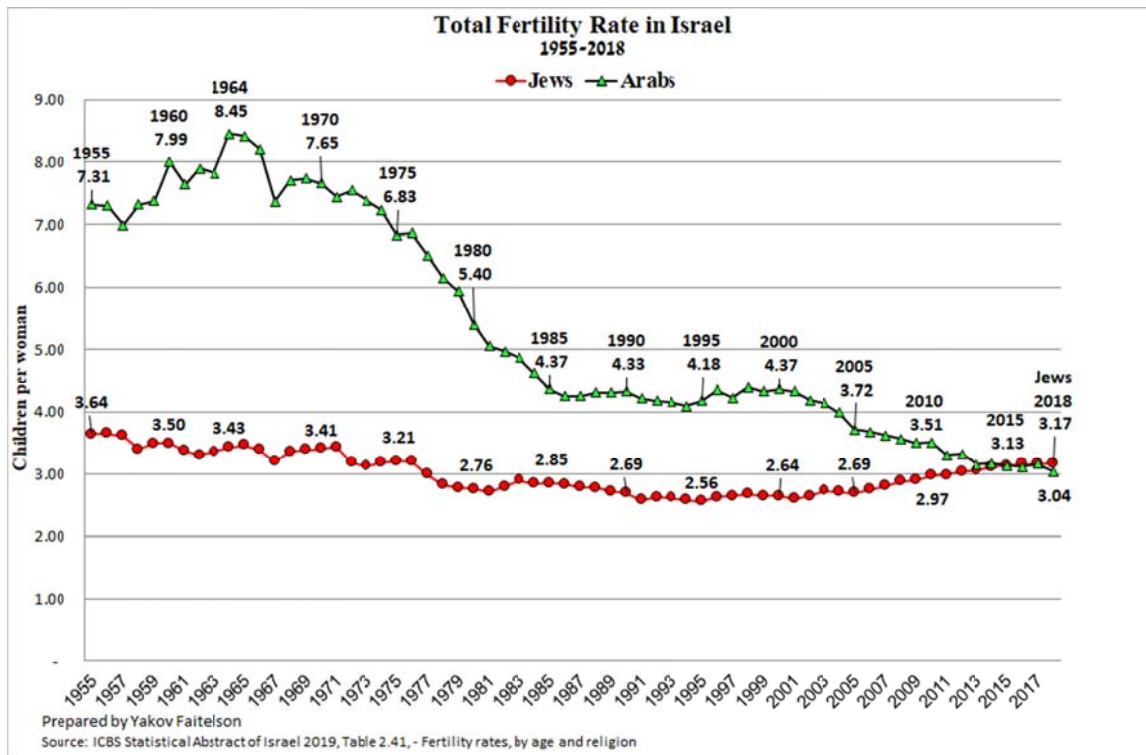
the Israeli Ministry of Interior and the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics (ICBS). While the former estimated the West Bank population at 1,328,000, the latter assessed it as being one third lower at 903,600. ICBS experts attributed this gap to two factors: The Ministry of Interior counted 163,000 emigrants living abroad, and there was no reliable information on the mortality of children and adults. The ICBS also used a statistical model that had proven accurate when assessing the Gaza population prior to the issuance of identification cards in 1989, whereby the Ministry of Interior's numbers had been significantly overstated.

These problems notwithstanding, many demographers, politicians, and public figures have relied on official Palestinian data for decades with the attendant miscalculations. Thus, for example, until 2016, the U.S. Census (which conducts demographic, economic, and geographic studies of other

7 ["International Youth Day,"](#) Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), Ramallah, Aug. 12, 2016.

8 Asaf Gabor, "Ha-sheker ha-demographi: hayim behul, nisparim ke-Palestinim," *NRG News* (Tel Aviv), Dec. 15, 2016.

9 Efraim Karsh, ["The Privileged Palestinian 'Refugees,'"](#) *Middle East Quarterly*, Summer 2018, pp. 10-11.



countries under the auspices of its international programs department) maintained that the migration balance in the West Bank and Gaza in 1997-2016 was zero. Only in 2017 did it release retroactive data showing a permanent negative migration balance since 1997.

The negative migration balance in the West Bank in 1997-2007 was 134,980 people according to the U.S. Census and 212,299 people according to the Israel Civil Administration. For the Gaza Strip, the negative migration balance was 99,999 and 97,062 people respectively.

The pattern repeated itself in Gaza in 2008-18. The average was 9,089 people per year, but according to the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the negative migration balance in 2018 through the Rafah checkpoint in Gaza alone

amounted to 24,332 people, 15,000 more than the U.S. Census Bureau's estimate.¹⁰

Based on ICBS data on Arab emigration in 1967-2007, as well as figures provided by the Civil Administration in December 2008 and the U.S. Census in 2008-18, one can conclude that during a 51-year period, at least 834,867 Arabs emigrated: 516,505 from the West Bank and 318,362 from Gaza.

Arab and Jewish Fertility Rates

Most demographers, politicians, and public figures have also been wrong about Arab and Jewish fertility trends inside Israel, failing to estimate the increase in Jewish

10 ["Gaza crossings: movement of people and goods. Rafah crossing: exits and entries of people."](#) U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Occupied Palestinian Territory, Dec. 15, 2019.

fertility, on the one hand, and the decline in Arab fertility rate, on the other.¹¹

Pragmatists in Israel relied on past birth and mortality statistics and were skeptical about future Jewish immigration. They ignored the political, economic, and security trends taking place in the Jewish diaspora and failed to foresee what was coming. Waves of Jewish immigrants from North America, Poland, the Soviet Union, and France took them by surprise. Even then, they added immigrants arithmetically without taking their effect on the future population size into account.

David Ben-Gurion saw this coming some ninety years ago:

We believe in dynamic factors that are constantly changing the composition of the population in Israel, not nuclear change, but additional change. And if you ignore the dynamic factor, then you deny the main issue.¹²

He was proven right when Jewish immigration led to an absolute Jewish majority in Israel. In 1929, Jews made up only 15.9 percent of the population of Mandate Palestine, growing to 35.9 percent



Russian Jews disembark in Israel, 1992. Waves of Jewish immigrants from North America, Poland, the Soviet Union, and France added significantly to the Jewish Israeli population.

in 1948 and to 64.8 percent in 1972.¹³ This occurred even though the total Jewish fertility rate (TFR) in 1932 was 2.78 children per woman compared to 7.98 children per woman among Arabs. And in 1972, the rate among Jews was 3.18 and 7.54 among Israeli Arabs.¹⁴

On top of this steady transformation via immigration, a revolutionary demographic change among Israel's Jewish population has taken place over the past two-and-a-half decades. While the Jewish TFR steadily declined since the mid-1950s, it grew during the last twenty-three years by 23.8 percent:

11 Rotem Sela, "Rikud ha-beten: ha-rehem ha-Falestinit hifsida," *Ma'ariv Magazine* (Tel Aviv), July 24, 2011, pp. 6-7.

12 "Protocol of discussion with members of the Brith Shalom, Tel Aviv, Nov. 11, 1929," Ben-Gurion Archive (Sde Boker).

13 Statistical Abstract of Israel 1987, no. 38, Table II/1: The Population, by Religion, Table XXVII/1: Population estimates and sources of its growth, Judea and Samaria, Gaza Strip, Israel Central Bureau of Statistics (ICBS), Jerusalem.

14 Philippe Fargues, "[Protracted National Conflict and Fertility Change](#): Palestinians and Israelis in the Twentieth Century," *Population and Development Review*, Sept. 2000, pp. 472-3.

from 2.56 in 1995 to 3.17 in 2018¹⁵ with the TFR among sabras (Israel-born Jews)—who make up 77.5 percent of the total Jewish population¹⁶—reaching as high as 3.26 children per woman.¹⁷ This is in contrast to the TFR of the Israeli Arabs, which decreased by 64 percent during the past 54 years: from 8.45 children per woman in 1964 to 3.04 in 2018, an average drop of 1.89 percent each year.

The change is emblematic of the decline in TFR in many developing countries since the late 1940s following the improvement in the general standard of living in general and in the status of women in particular. In the words of the U.N.'s 1999 report on the state of the world's population:

The more years of schooling a woman has, the fewer children she is likely to have ... In all recent studies, additional secondary education for women correlates with lower fertility.¹⁸

In 1961, when Israeli Arab TFR was at its highest (9.31 children per woman), the median education was a mere 1.2 school years. In 2018, the median education of

Older Arab age groups have seen the steepest growth in contrast to a sharp drop in young age groups.

Israeli Arab women had grown to twelve school years, while the overall fertility rate decreased to 3.04 children per woman.¹⁹

Another important driver of this trend among Israeli Arabs is the aging baby boomers born when the fertility rate was still high in 1950-73. By contrast, the median Jewish age has remained stable thanks to the rapid increase in the birth rate and, to a lesser extent, the relatively young age of most newcomers (*olim*).

These changes led to a sharp turn in the proportions of different age cohorts of Israeli Arab and Jewish populations with the steepest growth occurring among the older Arab age groups: people aged 45-54 increased by 58.1 percent in 2000-18, while the 55-64 age group grew by 59 percent and the share of people 75 or older grew by 70 percent. This in contrast to the sharp drop in young age groups in the Arab population: those four years and younger decreased by 30 percent, and ages 5-14 dropped by 15.9 percent. This trend led to a 22.4 percent growth in the median Arab age in 1995-2018, from 19.2 to 23.5 (compared to a mere 7.5 percent increase in the median Jewish age), meaning the median Arab age is rising almost three times faster than the median Jewish age.

Similar demographic changes occurred in the disputed territories where the West Bank's Arab TFR dropped from 7.9 in 1976²⁰

¹⁵ Statistical Abstract of Israel 2019, Table 2.39, Live Births, Deaths and Infant Deaths by District and Sub-District, Population Group and Religion, ICBS.

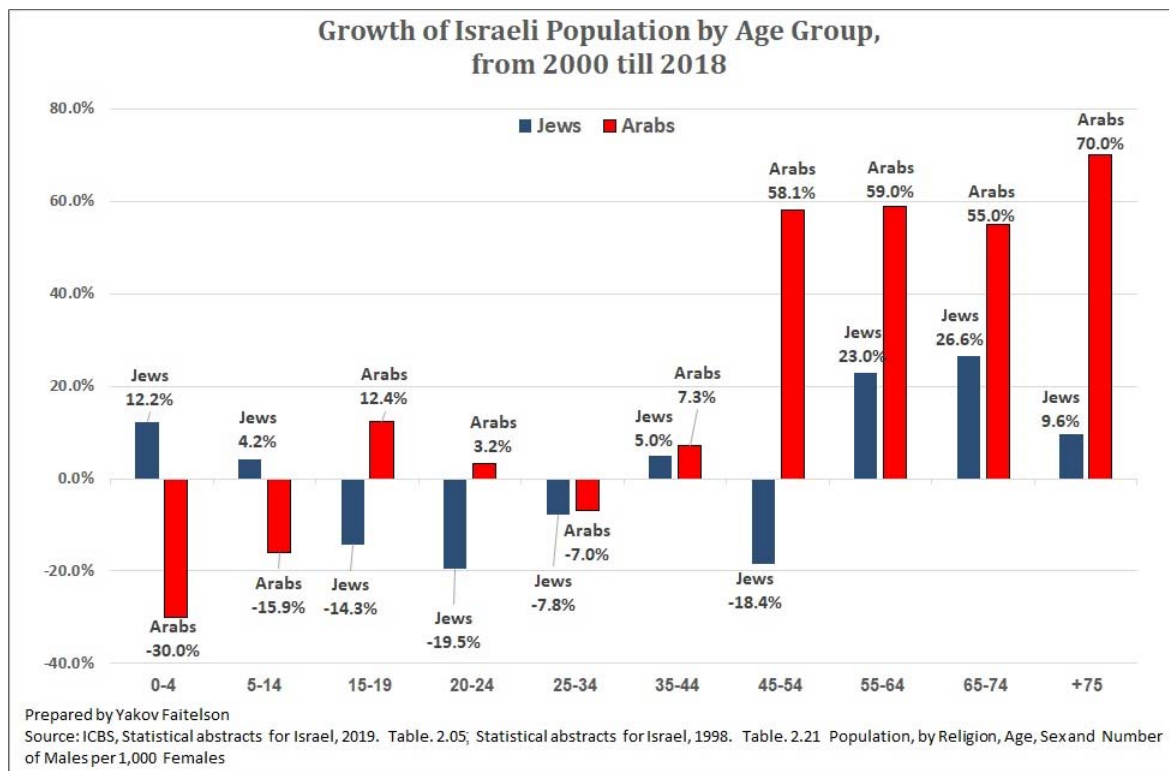
¹⁶ Statistical Abstract of Israel 2019, Table 2.6: Jews, by Continent of Origin, Sex and Age, ICBS.

¹⁷ Statistical Abstract of Israel 2019, no. 70, 2.42 Fertility Rates, Average Age of Mother and Sex Ratio at Birth, by Selected Characteristics of the Mother, ICBS.

¹⁸ "State of World Population 1999. Six billion: A time for choices," U.N. Population Fund, New York, ch. 2, p. 27.

¹⁹ Statistical Abstract of Israel 2019, no. 70, Education, Table 4.80: [Population Aged 15 and Over, by Years of Schooling, Age, Sex and Population Group](#), ICBS.

²⁰ Fargues, "[Protracted National Conflict and Fertility Change](#)," pp. 44-82.



to 3.2 in 2018²¹—a 60 percent fall and a decline of 2.14 percent per year. Likewise, it decreased in Gaza by 51.2 percent from a peak of 8.13 in 1991²² to 3.97 in 2018, an average decline of 2.6 percent per year.²³ Small wonder that Abu-Lughod lamented as early as 1986:

The weapon of Palestinians—high fertility—is also likely to grow more blunted with time. Natural increase rates, which peaked as high as 3-4 percent per year in the 1950s and 1960s, are now

beginning to decline. While they remain considerably above those in most developed nations, they have been following the secular decline experienced in most other parts of the developing world. ... But regardless of their present level, it is easy to predict that they will never again reach the highs of the past.²⁴

In a similar vein, Youssef Courbage of the French Institut National d'Etudes Démographiques (INED) argued in July 2014 that

Jewish fertility has remained high and, what is more puzzling, ever-increasing ... Hence, the Jewish

21 [Fertility Rates](#): West Bank, International Data Base, U.S. Census.

22 Fargues, “[Protracted National Conflict and Fertility Change](#).”

23 [Fertility Rates](#): Gaza Strip, International Data Base, U.S. Census.

24 Abu Lughod, “The Demographic War for Palestine.”

rate is likely to surpass the Palestinian one, for sure for the Palestinians of 1948 [i.e., Israeli Arabs] standing now at 3.32, and, later on, for the Palestinians of the West Bank and Jerusalem, whose fertility of 3.8, is rapidly decreasing. Palestinian and Jewish fertility are going against opposite trends.²⁵

The Jewish population in Israel has continued to grow thanks to the positive migration balance.

Estimates and Forecasts

Over the past two decades, the nominal annual natural increase among Israeli Arabs has grown by only 1.8 percent, from 37,346 in 2000 to 38,037 in 2018.²⁶ This was the result of the stabilization of live births, which averaged 40,641.²⁷ By contrast, the natural increase among Jews grew by 67.6 percent, from 58,515 people in 2000 to 98,062 in 2018, and the expanded Jewish population, which includes Jews, any population not classified by religion, and non-Arab Christians, grew by 101,549.²⁸ The Jewish population has continued to grow annually

thanks to the positive migration balance. From 2000-18, 467,755 newcomers arrived in Israel with an average of 26,492 per year from 2014-18.²⁹ In 2019, the number of arrivals in Israel reached 37,054.³⁰

Recent ICBS and U.N. demographic forecasts show that the birth rate of all population groups in Israel will decline over the next forty years though it will still remain higher than in other developed countries. In 2015, according to the United Nations, the number of live births per 1,000 residents in Israel was the highest among all developed countries at 19.6. According to the medium alternative of the U.N. forecast for 2065, that number will decline to 13.5 but will remain one of the highest in the world.³¹

According to this author's forecast (September 2019), Israel's total population will reach 18,234,210 in 2065, 8.6 percent less than the ICBS's medium projection of 19,954,018. The expanded Jewish population may reach 15,369,916, 4.6 percent smaller than the ICBS's medium projection of 16,112,855 while the Israeli Arab population may reach 2,864,290, 9.3 percent less than the ICBS's medium projection of

25 Youssef Courbage, "[Demography and Conflicts in the Context of Israel/Palestine: Forecasts for the Future](#)," *International Relations and Diplomacy*, July 2014, pp. 462-76.

26 Statistical Abstract of Israel 2019, 2. Population, Table 2.30: Live Births, Deaths, Natural Increase, Infant Deaths and Stillbirths, by Population Group, ICBS.

27 *Monthly Bulletin of Statistics*, C. Vital Statistics, Table C/1. Live Births, (1) by Population Group and Religion of Mother, ICBS, Nov. 2019.

28 Statistical Abstract of Israel 2019, 2. Population, Introduction: Explanatory Notes, Definitions and Sources: Population, ICBS.

29 Statistical Abstract of Israel 2019, Population, Table 2.54: Immigrants, by type of visa, ICBS.

30 *Monthly Bulletin of Statistics*, Table E/2. Immigrants and Immigrating Citizens by Type of Permit, ICBS, Mar. 2020.

31 "World Population Prospects: The 2017 Revision, File FERT/3: Crude birth rate by region, subregion, and country, 1950-2100 (births per 1,000 population). Medium fertility variant, 2015-2100," U.N. Dept. of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, New York, 2017.

3,158,256.³² This means that 84.3 percent of Israel's citizens will be Jewish and 15.7 percent Arabs.

As for Jewish-Arab population ratio in the entire Land of Israel, a March 2018 Civil Administration estimate set the number of West Bank Palestinians at three million alongside two million in Gaza and another 1.52 million in Israel. According to these figures, the sizes of the Arab and Jewish populations west of the Jordan River were equal.³³ This estimate sparked an Israeli public debate with Knesset member Ahmad Tibi saying that "the vision of an Arab prime minister is getting closer."³⁴ But the data was not the result of expertly rigorous work for the simple reason that in contrast to the pre-Oslo era, the Civil Administration has no in-house expertise.

Two months later, the ICBS released a new forecast whereby the number of Jews and Arabs between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea would be indeed equal—but only in fifty years. According to Sergio Della Pergola, who oversaw the ICBS forecast,

the number of people living between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea will remarkably increase from 13.5 million today to 30 million in 2065. ... there will be 50% Jews and 50% Arabs

32 Statistical Abstract of Israel 2007, St. 2.26, Projections of Population for 2010-2025, by Population Group, Religion, Sex and Age, Jews & Arabs, High Variant, ICBS; "Israel's population forecast until 2065," ICBS, May 21, 2017; Statistical Abstract of Israel 2018, 2. Population, Table 2.10, Projection of Population in Israel for 2020-2065, by Population Group, Sex and Age, Low Variant for Arabs and Medium Variant for Jews, ICBS.

33 [Ma'ariv](#) (Tel Aviv), Mar. 26, 2018.

34 [YNet](#) (Tel Aviv), Mar. 26, 2018.



A 2018 estimate by the Israeli Civil Administration on the Arab and Jewish populations prompted Knesset member Ahmad Tibi (above) to proclaim that "the vision of an Arab prime minister is getting closer." But the data was not based on rigorous analyses.

between the Jordan River and the sea.³⁵

Among these thirty million people, 3,750,000 will be Israeli Arabs, 6,250,000 will be Palestinians in the West Bank, and 5,000,000 will be Palestinians in Gaza.

Pergola also claimed that the Palestinian CBS data on which his accounts were based is professional and reliable. He did not bother explaining how his new projection lines up with previous Palestinian ICBS forecasts, which insisted that the populations would be equal as early as 1985. Then the Palestinian ICBS shifted the goalposts to 1990, 2000, 2005, 2010, 2014, 2016, 2018, and finally to 2020. All these forecasts proved wrong.

35 *Knesset News* (Jerusalem), [May 9, 2018](#).

They all failed for the same reasons: They used short-term statistics and downplayed or ignored security, political, economic, and societal developments, both inside and outside the country.

Taking into consideration the continuing decline of the TFR, increasing natural mortality, and the impact of continued mass emigration of young people, the West Bank and Gaza's Palestinian population may reach 2,594,780 in 2065.

Conclusion

Long-term forecasts are uncertain. But in the long run, the "demographic transition" algorithm shows that global demographic development naturally seeks a stable equilibrium as the population gradually adapts to its ecological niche's limits.

Israel will eventually reach that stage as will every nation in its time, depending on its

cultural and technological development. It can be hoped that the process of reducing the birth rate (and then the size of the population) will occur alongside technological development, enabling the Jewish state to continue providing adequate services to its population.

Given the experience of countries with a more extended and more developed past, it is likely that by the time Israel's population reaches a stable equilibrium, it will continue to enjoy the momentum of its population growth and a larger Jewish majority than today.

Yakov Faitelson is the author of *Demographic Trends in the Land of Israel, 1800-2007* (Israeli Institute for Zionist Strategies, 2008).

