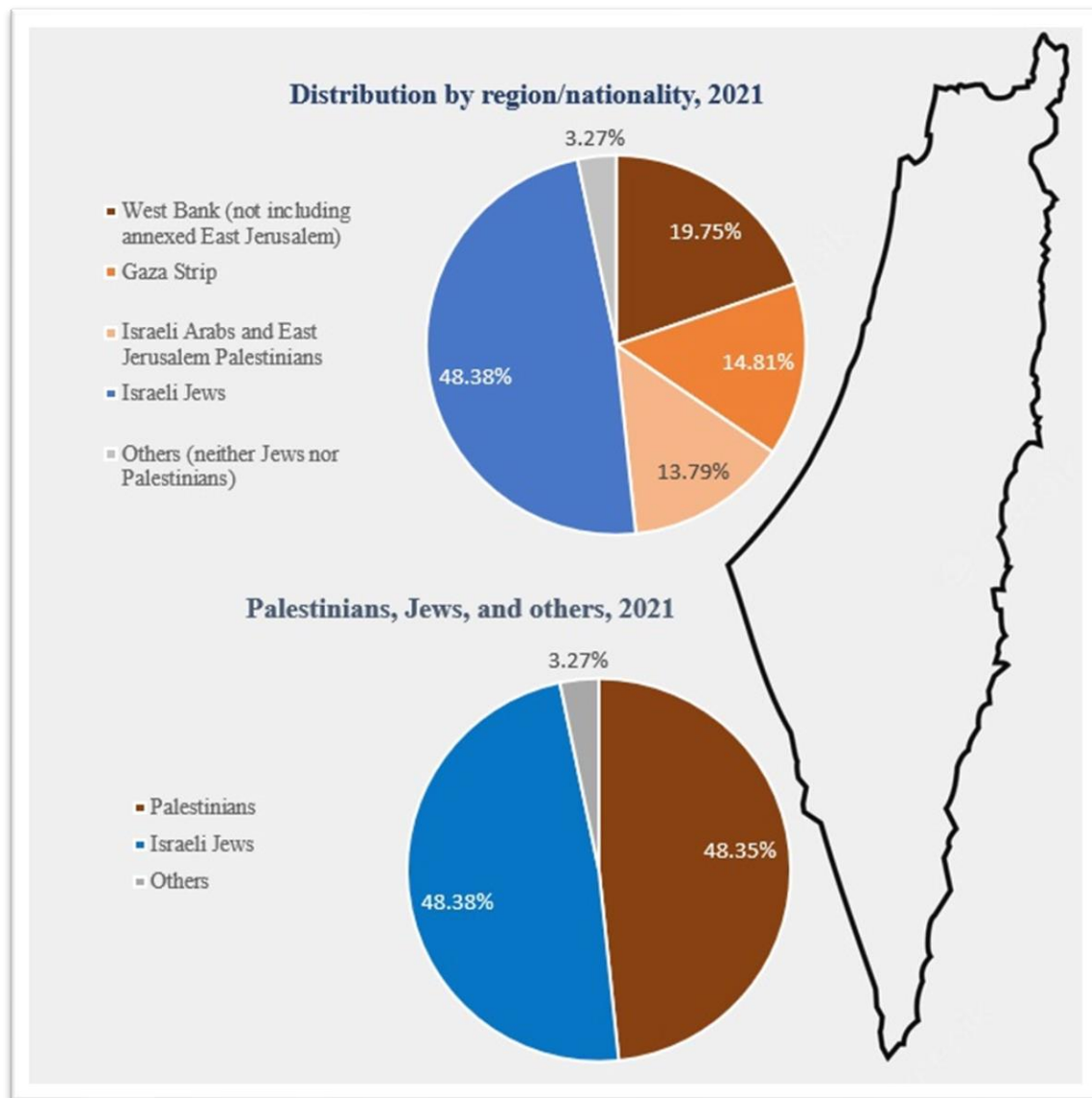


Can the Demographic Advantage be an Effective Weapon in the Struggle to Achieve Palestinian Rights?



Walid Ladadweh and Khalil Shikaki



Indiana University Press, 2010.

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papers to *The Second Palestinian Elections*, co-edited by Khalil Shikaki and Jihad Harb, one on "Methodology of Exit Polling," and the other on "Demographic Characteristics of Palestinian Voters: 2005-06." He has also contributed to the *Palestinian Democracy Index* in the years 2005-08.

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Critical Policy Brief

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Introduction:

All Palestinian attempts over the past fifty-five years to end the occupation that began in 1967 have failed. Negotiations failed because Israel, right, center, and left, refused to settle for 78 percent of historic Palestine. The armed struggle has failed because the balance of power has always tilted in Israel's favor. The failure to rely on Arab support was the product of internal and regional challenges in all Arab countries making the Palestinian issue a secondary one. Reliance on international legitimacy has failed because the Western world that established Israel has not been willing to force it to abide by that legitimacy, even though it was the West itself that laid down the foundations of the contemporary international order. Reliance on the strength of public institutions and the state-building model has failed because the ruling Palestinian elite in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip found in the Arab models of authoritarianism and political corruption a preferred system thereby losing the trust of its people before losing the confidence of the rest of the world. The non-violent popular resistance failed because of its great ability to slide quickly into armed action, its failure to gain credibility with the Palestinian public, which continued to view it as an ineffective mechanism for the struggle to end the occupation and because of the public's firm conviction that the Israelis understand nothing but the language of force.

The Palestinian side has no advantage over Israel except in its ability to win the numerical demographic "battle" by staying on its own land and seeking political alternatives based on this numerical advantage in the hope of protecting its land and achieving its rights. Can the Palestinians develop a plan for the next twenty years that could enable them to mobilize and strengthen the advantage they enjoy despite the great internal difficulties that will stand in their way?

This *Critical Brief* aims first to review the steps that the Palestinian side can take to successfully fight its demographic "battle", and secondly to identify external sources of threat and internal impediments to any Palestinian strategy that seeks to capitalize on the demographic asset. But it starts with numbers and their significance on Arab-Palestinian versus Israeli-Jewish population growth in the current situation and in the years to come.

What the status quo and the demographic numbers say:

In May 2021, the Palestinians demonstrated the unity of their national identity by joining in a common struggle against the Israeli occupation when the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and the Palestinian citizens of Israel clashed with the Israeli army and police in defense of Al-Aqsa Mosque and Jerusalem. That

The status quo has several features that threaten the vital Palestinian interest in self-determination, but it also has at least one feature that helps serve this interest. On the negative side, the status quo is described as “self-government,” one devoid of sovereignty while under full foreign military control. It is characterized by an expansion of settlements and a creeping annexation fueled by that settlement enterprise that flourishes in a clear violation of international law. There seems to be no possibility of stopping this creeping annexation. To add insult to injury, several Arab countries established strong political, security, and economic relations with Israel, reinforcing the resilience of the status quo.

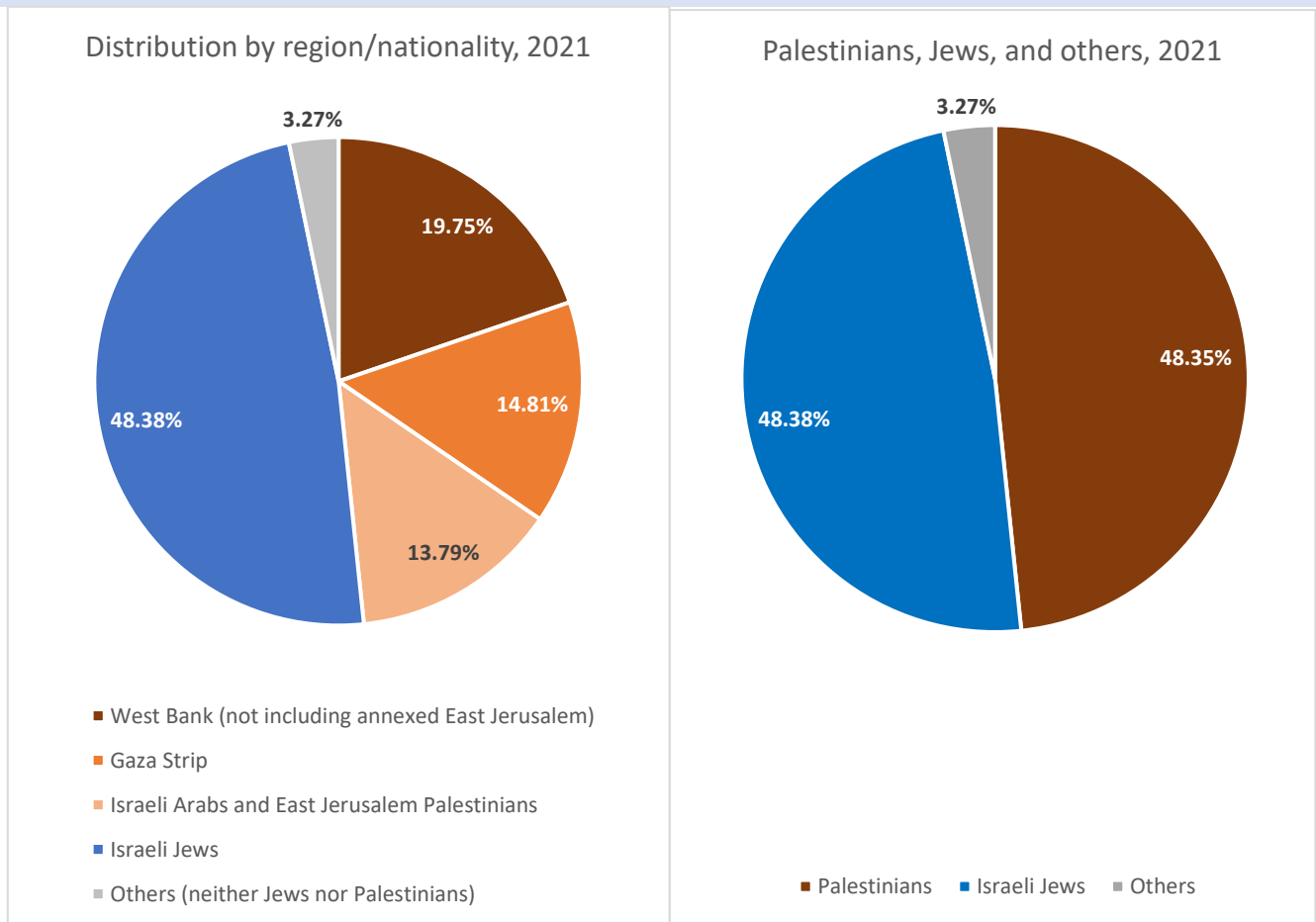
But despite its bleak reality, the status quo allows for the consolidation of the Palestinian numerical advantage. By the end of 2022 the land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River, also known as historic Palestine, will be characterized by a ruling Jewish minority that controls a majority of Palestinians. The Palestinian and Israeli statistical services, the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) and the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), agree that the ratio of the Palestinian-Jewish population in historic Palestine, namely the West Bank (including Jerusalem), the Gaza Strip, and Israel, has since the beginning of this year been tilting toward equality and that by the end of this year Palestinians will become the majority. This is clearly attested to by the end-of-2021 figures showing that the Palestinian population at that time stood, according to PCBS, at 6,976,481, of which 2,849,974 were in the West Bank, excluding East Jerusalem, 2,136,507 in the Gaza Strip, and 1,990,000 were, according to CBS, Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel as well as the Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem. Israel's Jewish population was set by CBS at 6,982,000 and the rest (472,000) were defined as “others,” neither Jews nor Palestinians¹.

¹ The source for the Palestinian figures mentioned here is the report issued by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics in 1 December 2021: *The Palestinians at the End of 2021*: ¹ <https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Downloads/book2595.pdf>. The source for the Israeli figures is the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS). In December 2021, CBS reported that the number of Jews, including those living in settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories, stood at 6.982 million, the Arabs at 1.99 million, and “others” at 0.472 million. See “Israel approaches 9.5 million residents on eve of 2022,” *Times of Israel*, 30 December 2021: [Israel approaches 9.5 million residents on eve of 2022 | The Times of Israel](#). On the eve of the Jewish new year, on 20 September 2022, CBS reported that the number of Israeli Jews has reached 7.096 million (74%), Arabs 2.026 million (21%), and “others” 0.498 million (5%). See, Yaron Druckman, “Israel’s population nears 10 million, report,” *Ynet*, 20 September 2022: [Israel's population nears 10 million, report \(ynetnews.com\)](#)

Population distribution at the end of 2021 in “historic Palestine”

		%
(1) Total Palestinians	6.976.481	48.35
-West Bank (not including East Jerusalem)	2.849.974	19.75
-Gaza Strip	2.136.507	14.81
-Palestinians in East Jerusalem and inside Israel	1.990.000	13.79
(2) Total Israeli Jews	6.982.000	48.38
(3) Others (neither Jewish nor Palestinians)	472.000	3.27
Grand total	14.430.481	1

Percentages of population distribution in historic Palestine at the end of 2021

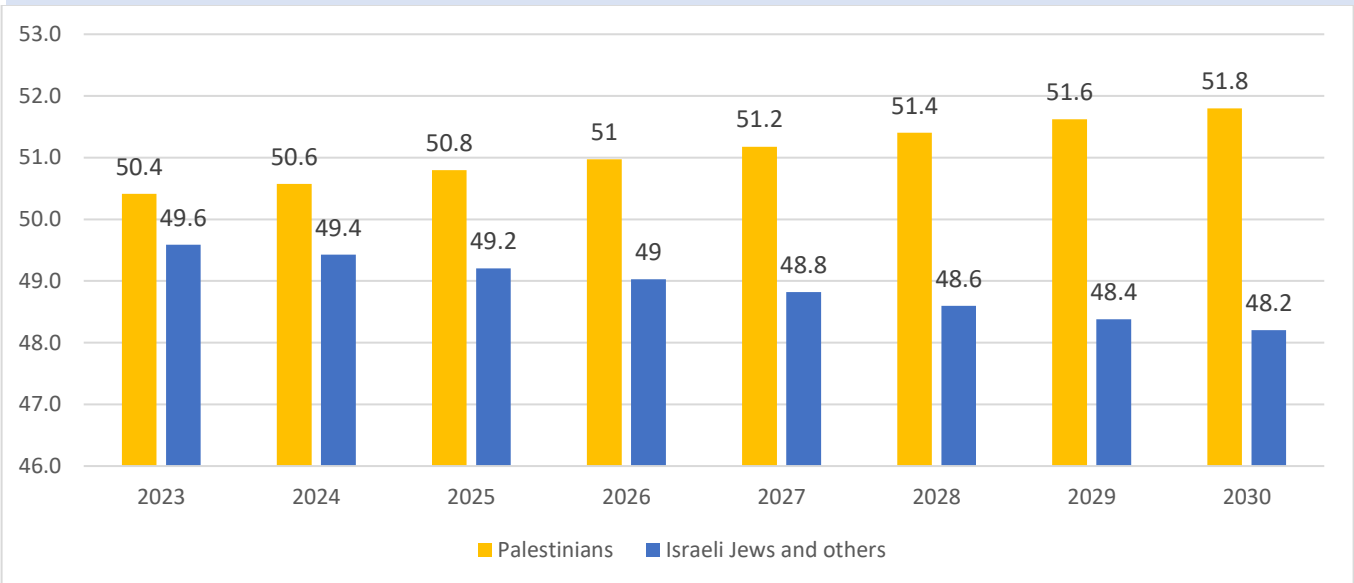


As the following figure indicates², the percentage of projected population increase, including projections of immigration to Israel, indicates a Palestinian population growth over the coming years driven by the small average age of Palestinian society compared to the Israeli society, with birth rates in Palestine for 2021, as UN data indicate, reaching 27.76 per thousand people compared to 19.39 in Israel (including the Palestinian citizens of Israel). The mortality rate in Palestine for the same year was 3.45 per thousand people and in Israel 5.30. The relatively high mortality rate in Israel is due to the older average

² Data from PCBS, *Palestinians at the End of 2021*, p. 22.

age of the population. However, it should be noted that life expectancy at birth is higher in Israel than in Palestine (82.74 and 73.82 respectively)³.

PCBS predictions for the demographic balance between Palestinians and Jews and others in “historic Palestine”



The discourse among Israeli specialists on the demographic issue and its expected significance to possible solutions to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the prospects for the continuation of the status quo have recently intensified. In March 2018, the demographer at the Hebrew University of Israel, Sergio Della Pergola, noted that the number of Jews and Arabs in historic Palestine had become almost equal.⁴ Pergola was commenting on Uri Mendes, from the office of the Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), presentation of demographic data to a Knesset committee. The presentation indicated the realization of a parity of the Palestinian and Jewish population in historic Palestine. Member of the Knesset Mordechai Yogev of the Jewish Home commented on the data by saying they were based on false Palestinian data, while MK Nahman Shai of the Zionist Union referred to the same data as the final warning to every Israeli who wants his state to remain Jewish and democratic⁵.

In August of this year, three Israeli researchers from the Reichmann University in Herzliya described the 2022 demographic change as a "coup" and said that the State of Israel was heading towards a reality that might undermine the entire Zionist project while asserting that the Palestinians have already become the majority in historic Palestine, citing recent information published by the Israeli Civil Administration.⁶ Arnon Sofer, a professor of geography at the University of Haifa, who is a careful follower of Israel's

³ World Bank, *World Development Indicators*, 2021:

<https://databank.albankaldawli.org/reports.aspx?source=2&type=metadata&series=NY.GDP.PCAP.CD>

⁴ See, Aron Heller, "Expert confirms Jews and Arabs nearing population parity," *Times of Israel*, 27 March 2018:

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/expert-confirms-jews-and-arabs-nearing-population-parity/>

⁵ See, Sue Surkes and Michael Bachner, "MKs argue over claim that Palestinians have reached demographic parity with Jews," *Times of Israel*, 26 March 2018: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/mks-argue-over-claim-that-palestinians-have-reached-demographic-parity-with-jews/>

⁶ *Haaretz*, 5 August, 2022.

demographic affairs, commented on the article by these three researchers by saying that Israeli Jews have already become a minority in historic Palestine, stressing that the real percentage of the population officially recognized by Israel as Jews is between 46% and 47% only and that there are about 650,000 Israelis who are neither Arabs nor Jews⁷.

Sofer explained to Israel Army Radio that the reason for the Palestinian population increase was the small average age of Palestinians compared to Israel.⁸ Indeed, figures from PCBS indicate that the percentage of Palestinians under the age of 25 stands at 60% while the corresponding Israeli percentage stands at only 43% (including Palestinian citizens of Israel). Non-Israeli Jewish figures have also expressed great concerns about the demographic developments, with Ronald Lauder, president of the World Jewish Congress and former U.S. ambassador to Austria, posting an op-ed in the *Washington Post* in which he described the Palestinian numerical demographic advantage as a "grave existential threat" to Israel⁹.

But the Israeli public does not seem to be very interested in the demographic issue. With Israel's growing economic growth, military power and technology unmatched by any other regional power, and with rising international and regional standing, the Israeli public tends to believe that the Jewish majority will be guaranteed, either because the figures on Palestinian population growth are exaggerated, as the right in Israel claims,¹⁰ or because the Gaza Strip is not in fact part of the demographic equation, or because Israel has the ability to expel or displace the Palestinian population when it has the opportunity to do so.¹¹ Above all, just under half of Israeli Jews prefer that the response to the Palestinian demographic advantage, if it occurs, be to deny equality to the Palestinian majority.¹²

How would a strategy of demographic advantage look like?

A strategy based on numerical demographic advantage does not need to adopt in advance, that is, at the present stage, a specific political solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, such as a two-state solution, a one-state solution, or any other solution. Failure to commit in advance to a specific political settlement would not pose a threat or even weaken a strategy aimed at maximizing Palestinian numerical demographic advantage. But such a strategy is required to do four things: (1) preserve what exists while looking for ways to enhance steadfastness on the ground and seek ways to compete with Israel in the qualitative realm in order to reduce the qualitative gap that exists today, (2) reduce the size of Palestinian emigration, (3) strengthen public institutions capable of accomplishing the two things

⁷ Haaretz, 29 August, 2022

⁸ See, *al Ayyam*, 30 August 2022.

⁹ Ronald S. Lauder "Even as it flourishes, Israel faces a growing demographic challenge," *Washington Post*, July 13, 2022: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/07/13/israel-demographics-arabs-biden-future/>

¹⁰ Sara Hatzani Cohen, "The empty bottle of the demographic demon," *Israel Hayom*, 1 September 2022: <http://israelhayom.co.il/הבוקר/הריק-של-השד-הדמוגרפי>

¹¹ See footnote #7 above.

¹² The most recent 2022 report by the Israel Democracy Institute shows that 48% of Israeli Jews agree with the statement that "Israeli Jewish citizens should enjoy more rights than non-Jewish citizens." See, Tamar Herman, *The Israeli Democracy Index, 2021* (The Israel Democracy Institute, 2021): [final-madd-d2021-eng_web.pdf \(idi.org.il\)](https://www.idi.org.il/2021/07/20/final-madd-d2021-eng-web.pdf). It is worth mentioning that the piece by the three Israeli researchers referred to earlier in footnote #6 indicate that one third of Israeli Jews said that they support the establishment of a non-democratic state between the [Jordan] River and the [Mediterranean] Sea. The Peace Index, issued by Tel Aviv University in July 2022 show that 35% of Israeli Jews are in favor of annexing the Palestinian territories while giving the Palestinians restricted rights. See, "The Peace Index," July 2022.

mentioned above, and (4) search for means of integration and socio-economic alignment between the different Palestinian communities in order to strengthen identity and maximize common interests.

Historically, the demographic question and the conflict between Palestinian and Jewish identities have been central to the partition of Palestine and the two-state solution. Today, demography plays a similar fundamental role but for some it is based on the argument that it is impossible to implement a two-state solution, which leads them to call for a one-state solution with equal rights for the Palestinian and the Israeli Jews. However, some of the steps required for an effective one-state solution, such as an immediate dissolution for the PA or the official abandonment of the two-state solution, may bring with them high political and economic costs that would generate enormous pressures on the population to emigrate, which could compromise the Palestinian numerical advantage. In contrast, a strategy that preserves a two-state solution may be able to provide a political, legal, and administrative framework that would create conditions that would enable the protection and maximization of the demographic advantage if accompanied by other conditions, such as good governance and an effective governing elite characterized by integrity and a commitment to democratic values. In other words, a strategy based on demography favors moving away from adopting a one-state solution, at least for now. This flexibility allows for a subsequent reassessment of the situation according to developments on the ground and the attendant Palestinian success or failure in dealing with the challenges that ensue.

The basis for protecting the demographic advantage lies in blocking any threats to the territorial integrity of the Palestinian territories and in strengthening the resilience and steadfastness of the Palestinian society. Needless to say, this cannot be done without the restoration of unity between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip while ensuring political stability, economic prosperity, a reasonable degree of social trust and national unity, and a minimum consensus on a national strategy.

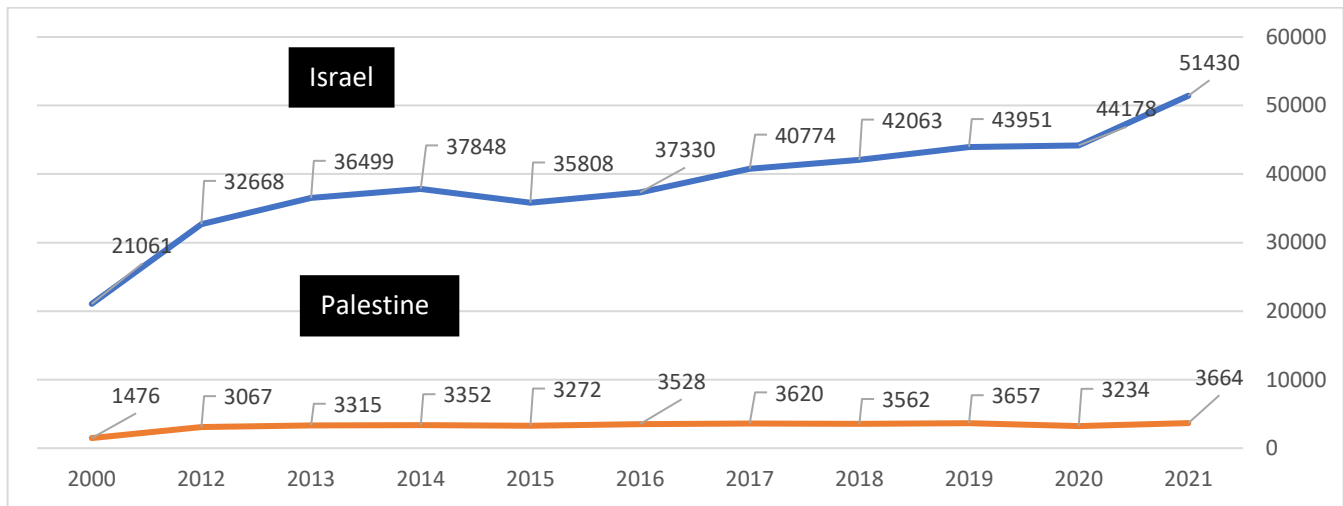
Numerical demographic advantage requires reducing the demand for emigration, especially among young people and particularly in the Gaza Strip. The findings of public opinion polls conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research over the past ten years indicate that a high percentage of Palestinians want to emigrate. The overall rate of demand for emigration over the past ten years is 30%. Available data from this period indicate that one of the main reasons for the demand for emigration is the negative assessment among those seeking emigration of the general conditions in their area of residence, the lack of security and personal safety, and the high degree of pessimism about reconciliation and the prospects for reunification of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. As expected, the average demand for immigration in the Gaza Strip rises to 41% compared to 23% in the West Bank.

Demand for emigration in the Gaza Strip has risen to more than 60% during certain period of the past decade. These rates were recorded in March 2013, June and September 2015, and in January 2018. In the West Bank, the rate of demand for emigration has sometimes reached 40 percent or more, as seen in March 2013, September and December 2013, June 2016, June 2017 and September 2020. The results also indicate that youth, between 18 and 29 years old, is the group most willing to emigrate, both in the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip. Among this group, the desire for emigration during the past ten years, has reached an average of 42% (35% in the West Bank and 53% in the Gaza Strip).

The demographic-based strategy favors strengthening PA public institutions because any effort to maintain the numerical advantage and reduce the qualitative gap with Israel requires enormous efforts that would not be possible without such institutions. It should be borne in mind that a weak PA poses a strong internal threat to Palestinian numerical advantage and condemns to failure any efforts it may make to improve the quality of Palestinian demography. Israelis outperform Palestinians in all indicators related to scientific and technological progress, individual productivity, human development, and per capita income. For example, in the annual global Human Development Index, Palestine ranks 106th while Israel comes in 22nd place. The following figure, which traces the annual per capita income in

dollars over the previous twenty-one years, shows a more devastating picture. The figure shows that the current 2021 per capita income in Palestine stands at \$ 3,664 while in Israel at \$ 51,430, a ratio of 1:14.

GDP per capita income in US dollar¹³



Finally, the demographic-based strategy favors strengthening Palestinian identity by creating alliances and large-scale cooperation with the Palestinian citizens of Israel. This requires building joint civil society institutions for both sides, undertaking joint investment cooperative projects, and building political and economic partnerships between them. Achieving this requires a shared vision and institutional leadership at the highest political, religious and societal levels and will not be possible to achieve through initiatives from civil society or the private sector alone despite the great importance of their role in this strategy.

Threats and impediments:

Any Palestinian strategy aimed at maximizing the Palestinian numerical advantage must identify the sources of the external threat and internal impediments to that advantage and, if possible, neutralize them. Although internal constraints are the most important, because they are the ones Palestinians can fix if they so desire, we must first begin by assessing the magnitude of external threats.

External threats stem from three sources: Israel's military and economic power and qualitative demographic advantage, the loss of the Arab depth, and the absence of effective international legitimacy.

Israel's military and economic power, occupation policies, and qualitative demographic advantage: Israel can annex the occupied Palestinian territories without posing a direct threat to Palestinian numerical advantage. But the direct Israeli threat comes from Israel's superior military power, reinforced

¹³ World Bank, *World Development Indicators*, updated 20 July 2022:
<https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators#>

by Israel's qualitative advantage over the Palestinians in most human and economic development indicators that work together to make Israel's per capita income higher than that of fourteen Palestinians combined. The military component of the threat means that the Palestinian side lacks the ability to prevent the Israeli army from expelling its people from its homeland under certain circumstances, as happened in 1948 and in some areas in 1967, and weakens Palestinian numerical advantage in favor of Israeli qualitative advantage.

In other circumstances, Israel can work to displace the Palestinian population and expel them from their lands by administrative and economic means that force residents to seek a better life in neighboring countries and elsewhere. In this context, the settler arm of the State of Israel may be the most effective force in creating those conditions that contribute to the displacement of the Palestinian population. Above all, Israeli occupation policies constitute daily incitement and motivation for individual and collective armed resistance. All of this contributes to threatening internal stability and reducing the chances for the steadfastness of the Palestinians.

The loss of Arab support: The second external threat comes from the Arab regional environment, which gives Israel declared and undeclared acceptance and normalization from most Arab regimes. This normalization reinforces right-wing Israeli militancy and generates Palestinian frustration at the leadership and popular levels, while strengthening the sense of betrayal and abandonment of the cause of Palestine and its people, which may lead them to adopt angry responses that do not serve their interests. This development translates into minimum or no Arab support for Palestinian steadfastness; it also contributes to enhancing Israeli capabilities and widening the quantitative gap against the Palestinians.

Ineffective international legitimacy: The third source of the external threat comes from the international environment in which Israel is treated with grand exceptionalism, the result of the historical circumstances that accompanied the Second World War and the establishment of the State of Israel, the most important of which of course is the Holocaust. This exceptionalism means that the Western world remains a military and political ally of Israel, despite the fact that its continued occupation of the Palestinian territories constitutes a clear violation of international laws and values, the same laws and values that have been established by the Western world. This threat means that the solution to the Palestinian issue will always lack a route based on international legitimacy, no matter how willing the victims are to give up some of their rights and their historical narrative. But more importantly, the conclusion is that this Western world may stand by and watch, as it is doing now, even if it becomes clear to it without a shadow of a doubt that Israel has indeed become an apartheid state ruled by an Israeli Jewish minority over a Palestinian majority.

The internal obstacles boil down to four: the struggles for power between the ruling elites; the diminishing legitimacy of the political system; serious political and security instability and economic decline; and finally, a weak performance of the PA institutions and economy, each of which strikes at aspects of the Palestinian demographic advantage and hinders the possibility of formulating an effective strategy to use it.

The struggle for power among the ruling elites in the West Bank and Gaza Strip: The struggle for power and influence between the two main forces of the political system, Fatah and Hamas, prolongs the period of the split and geographical separation between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, reinforcing beliefs among Palestinians and others that it has become, or will soon become, permanent. This result takes the Gaza Strip out of the demographic equation and restores Israel's numerical advantage.

An illegitimate political system: The components of the political system lack constitutional and electoral legitimacy, as well as public trust and satisfaction. The presidential term has ended more than 12 years ago, no general elections has taken place since 2006, and no Palestinian government has received the mandatory parliamentary vote of confidence since 2007. For these and other reasons, the resulting

system lacks separation of powers, independent judiciary, and oversight and accountability. The parliament that was elected in 2006 has been dissolved by the head of the executive branch, who himself lacks electoral legitimacy. He ignored the constitutional requirement of periodic elections and cancelled, in April 2021, the only election that reached its final stage of preparation. Inevitably, under these conditions, PA policies have led to a significant erosion in liberties and inflicted an enormous damage on pluralism in civil society.

All of this generates a lack of trust in the government and the presidency among the vast majority of the public, as opinion polls indicate, and a near-mass consensus that corruption exists in PA public institutions. These developments contribute to the decline of societal trust, that is, people's trust in each other, and weaken national identity in addition to its secondary role in increasing emigration rates.

Diminishing political and security stability and greater economic weakness: There is no doubt that the collapse of the political settlement and the two-state solution and the increased prospects for armed conflict and popular confrontations generate various levels of instability. This situation is reinforced by the weakness of the Palestinian Authority and its loss of legitimacy and popular satisfaction. The longer this reality lasts, the closer the situation will arrive to a major turning point in which an explosion against the PA and Israel becomes inevitable. One can easily imagine a situation in which the ability of the PA to provide services, especially to enforce law and order, collapses, as happened during the second intifada, which could generate widespread security chaos. An escalation of armed action led by armed groups that are not subject to a well-known and publicly accepted political leadership could lead to a resounding fall of public order and create an internal security vacuum leading to increased crime, a decrease in economic activity, and a decline in social services, all of which are major incentives for large-scale emigration.

Weak institutional and economic performance: This weakness is manifested in the PA's declining ability to provide services as well as poor individual productivity. It negatively affects the quality of Palestinian demographic advantage in favor of an Israeli qualitative advantage.

Conclusions:

The demographic trajectory, not the military and economic balance of power, may decide the future of the Palestinian and Jewish-Israeli peoples. But for Palestinians to compete in this field, they must adopt a strategy that maximizes their numerical advantage and reduces the gap that currently exists in the qualitative realm between the two peoples. What are the prospects for success in doing so under the current reality?

It is inevitable to conclude sadly that a review of the current reality, especially official and partisan Palestinian performance, suggests that the chances for success of a strategy based on numerical demographic advantage do not seem high, and may even be very small. This is due to the severity of the threats and obstacles, especially the internal ones, which can be summarized as follows:

- The ongoing relinquishment of the numerical demographic advantage driven by the policies of the two major political parties responsible for sustaining the current Palestinian split is the most prominent threat today to an effective Palestinian strategy based on demographic advantage. It goes without saying that these policies unwittingly take the Gaza Strip out of the demographic equation.
- The lack of legitimacy in the political system, the erosion of trust in it by the vast majority of the Palestinian public, and the decline in societal trust over the past decade are the two most

prominent threats to Palestinian national identity, despite the widespread popular rally around the Palestinian flag in May last year.

- Instability, economic decline, low incomes, and weak law enforcement capacity of the PA and the Hamas authorities are the main drivers of emigration, especially from the Gaza Strip.
- Finally, the institutional weakness of the Palestinian Authority, in addition of course to the severe impact of the Israeli military occupation, contribute significantly to the current widening of the gap in qualitative demographic competition between the two peoples in terms of science, knowledge, technology, and the economy.

These four challenges are primarily the product of our own doing before they are due to the superiority and success of our enemy. But this conclusion does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that it would be easier for us to overcome if we are able to summon the will to do so. The internal impaired performance is not limited to the regime and its ruling elite, despite the importance of their role; it applies equally to the political opposition as well as the society. Nonetheless, this is a path to conflict management that should not be neglected.

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October 2021

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