



## The Million Person Gap: A Critical Look at Palestinian Demography

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*Executive Summary: Population statistics and predictions of the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) are unreliable. A BESA study that subjects Palestinian demography to rigorous analysis shows that the 2004 Palestinian population of the West Bank and Gaza stood at 2.5 million; not the 3.8 million claimed by the Palestinians. The 1997 PCBS population survey – which has been widely used as the basis for subsequent studies - inflated numbers by including over three hundred thousand Palestinians living abroad and double-counting over two hundred thousand Jerusalem Arabs included in Israel's population survey. Later PCBS broadcasts echoed the forecasts of the 1997 study, reporting unrealized birth forecasts, including assumptions of mass Palestinian immigration that never occurred, and disregarding significant Palestinian emigration from the territories to Israel and neighboring Arab countries. The resulting PCBS report for 2004 inflated the size of the Arab population in the West Bank and Gaza by over fifty percent. The BESA study and further demographic research indicate that Israeli concerns about demographic pressure from the West Bank and Gaza have been exaggerated.*

According to demographic projections by the United Nations, the U.S. Census Bureau, and the Palestinian National Authority, the Arabs of the West Bank and Gaza are the world's fastest growing population - and residents of the Palestinian National Authority will outnumber Israeli Jews in the foreseeable future. But are these estimates accurate?

Our recent study "The Million Person Gap: The Arab Population in the West Bank and Gaza", (the full 80-page study, with charts, tables and sources, is available on the BESA Center website at <http://www.biu.ac.il/SOC/besa/MSPS65.pdf>) finds inconsistencies and contradictions in the Palestinian National Authority data that make it clear that the size of the population in the West Bank and Gaza has been significantly - and increasingly - exaggerated.

The first official Palestinian number for the West Bank and Gaza, issued in 1997 by the Palestine Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), was 2.78 million people. At the same time, the PCBS forecast that its population would grow to 5.81 million people by 2015. This forecast became the basis of all future population reports issued by the PCBS. In 2004, following its pre-determined schedule, the PCBS reported that 3.8 million Arabs were living in the

territories. By combining this figure with 1.3 million Israeli Arabs, the conclusion was reached that there were 5.1 million Arabs living west of the Jordan River.

Israel estimated in at year-end 1996 that there were 2.11 million Arabs in the West Bank and Gaza. Palestinian figures diverged in 1997, when the PCBS issued a number of 2.78 million. The question then became whether the Palestinians over-counted or the Israelis undercounted.

This is what we found:

1. The 1997 PCBS population base was inflated by the inclusion of residents living abroad and of Jerusalem Arabs already counted in Israel's population survey. The PCBS augmented the definition of *de facto* residents, a term usually reserved for individuals present in a territory, to include persons living abroad.
2. The PCBS's projections with respect to birth and immigration were not met in any year between 1997 and 2004. The actual birth data recorded annually by the PA Ministry of Health and corroborated by the PA Ministry of Education showed dramatically fewer births.
3. Instead of the predicted immigration, Israel's records on actual border entries and exits showed a steady net emigration both to countries abroad and into pre-1967 Israel.

Quite simply, the PCBS predictions were never adjusted for actual reported births, deaths and emigration each year, but were instead released as official reports and accepted without question.

Here are a few details:

- Palestinian numbers include at least 325,000 residents who are living outside of the territories. This number was the main cause for the jump between the Israeli and Palestinian counts in the mid-1990s. The head of the PCBS quantified this figure in the release of the 1997 Census result.
- On top of the population base, the PCBS developed a projection for births to 2015. By 2003, the PCBS expected that there would be 143,000 births in the territories. The Palestinian Ministry of Health statistics showed a much lower rate of births in the territories. Instead of the 907,000 births predicted by the PCBS for the seven years from 1997–2003, we found consistent evidence from Palestinian agencies that actual births 308,000 fewer than forecast.
- Immigration assumptions are also an important aspect of the Palestinian forecast. The original Palestinian assumption was that statehood would occur in 1999 and that people would immigrate at a rate of 50,000 people per year, starting in 2001. This inclusion is what made the Palestinian Authority forecast the highest growth rates in the world, which over time turned into the highest forecasted birth rates in the world. However, actual activity at the borders showed net emigration of only 10,000-20,000 persons per year since 1997. From 1997–2003, the PCBS projected 236,000 new entrants, whereas Israel border records show 74,000 left; a difference of 310,000.
- Migration to Israel across the Green Line is also a significant consideration. According to an Israeli Ministry of the Interior report, 105,000 people have changed from the status of Palestinians to Israelis under family reunification programs since 1997.

- In contrast to the 3.8 million PCBS broadcast in 2004: 2.4 million in the West Bank and 1.4 million in Gaza; our study produced a significantly lower population figure of 2.49 million: 1.4 million in the West Bank and 1.1 million in Gaza by mid-2004.
- The PCBS assumed annual growth over 4.7% for Gaza and 4.4% for the West Bank; however, the actual growth rate was 2.9 percent for Gaza and 1.8% for the West Bank.
- Our study shows total fertility rates (TFRs) of 5.2 for the West Bank and 5.4 for Gaza. These numbers were comparable to the PCBS 2004 Household Survey, which yielded numbers of 5.2 for the West Bank and 6.6 for Gaza. PCBS fertility rates support the level of births found in our study for West Bank and Gaza. The PCBS forecast substantially overstated births for West Bank and Gaza because it applied reasonable rates, but included Palestinians living abroad and Jerusalem Arabs.

After correcting the current population figures, in a separate yet unpublished study, we developed a forecast based on recent growth and fertility trends.

- We found that the current 2 to 1 Jewish to Arab majority in the West Bank and Israel will remain stable through 2025 because of high Jewish fertility rates (the highest of any Western nation), high but declining Arab fertility rates, and continuing modest Jewish immigration, and neutral migration into the Israel Arab sector. The West Bank forecast starts with updated figures from our study and uses fertility forecasts published by the UN and the PCBS for the territory.
- The key assumption behind the Jewish population growth is the Jewish fertility rate. Previously, the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics (ICBS) had assumed that Jewish TFRs would top off at 2.6 births per woman (in the high case scenario), or decline to 2.4 or 2.1 (in the medium and low case scenarios, respectively).
- However, between 2000 and 2004, the Jewish fertility rate actually rose to 2.71. Our research considers three slightly higher fertility scenarios for Israeli Jews (with a base birth rate of 2.7 births per woman), and projects fertility rates in 2025 of 2.4, 2.7, or 3 for the low, medium, and high cases respectively.
- For Israeli Muslims, the ICBS projected that the 2000 rate of 4.7 births per woman would continue until 2025 in its high case scenario. The medium and low PCBS projections would fall gradually 3.8 and 2.6 respectively. However, since 2000, the actual rate among Israeli Muslims has rapidly dropped to 4.36, following along the lowest trajectory developed by the ICBS. Similarly, the overall Israel Arab (including Christian Arabs and Druze) TFR has fallen to 4.0 in 2004. Thus, we predict three new scenarios for Israel Arabs: birth rates starting at current level of 4.0 births per woman and moving to 2.4, 3, and 4 by 2025 for the low, medium, and high projections, respectively.
- For West Bank Arabs, the UN population estimates (which come from the PCBS) predict that by 2025, the TFR will drop from 5.4 to 3.2 births per woman for the middle scenario. Our study predicts a drop from 5 to 4 births per woman for the high scenario (a higher birth scenario than provided by PCBS), or a significant drop from 5 to 2.4 births per woman for the low scenario. This drop in TFR is consistent with the entire Middle East region, where dramatic drops in TFR were registered across the board between 1970-1975 and 2000-2005.

The overall mid-case scenario for Israel and the West Bank presented by our study posits that by 2025, the Israeli Jewish portion of the population will decline from the current 67 percent to 63 percent. In the lowest-case scenario, the Jewish population will decline to 56 percent of

the population, whereas in the highest-case scenario the Jewish population will grow to 71 percent of the population in Israel and the West Bank. For Israel proper, the mid-case scenario posits that the percentage of Israeli Jews will drop from the current 81 percent to 77 percent in 2025. The low-case scenario could see the percentage of Israeli Jews drop to as low as 72 percent, and the high-case scenario could see the percentage of Israeli Jews rise to 83 percent.

Ultimately, contrary to popular belief, there has been tremendous stability in the demographic balance in the area, which, barring large-scale migrations, can be expected to continue over the next twenty years. Thus, we find that Israeli concerns about demographic pressure, especially those from the West Bank, have been exaggerated. In truth, while the long-term outcome could change either way depending on fertility and migration patterns, the demographic challenges in Israeli society remain similar to the levels seen since 1967. Moreover, the false PCBS figures have influenced infrastructure planning including water and land use, and have served as the basis for American and international foreign aid to the PA.

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