GAZA, AN EVER REBELLIOUS DEMOGRAPHY?

Youssef Courbage
IALIIS-BZU-WPS 2011/14 (ENG)
CPE Module

Editor-in-Chief: Asem Khalil
Editorial Board: Yaser Amouri, Raed Bader, Helga Baumgarten, Youssef Courbage, Philippe Fargues, Roger Heacock, Marwan Khawaja, Ray Jureidini, Mahrene Larudee, Majdi Al-Malki, Magid Shihadeh
Design & Layout: Yasser Darwish

2011

* Co-financed by the Ibrahim Abu-Lughod Institute of International Studies (IALIIS) - Birzeit University (BZU) & the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada. The views expressed in this publication cannot in any circumstances be regarded as the official position of IALIIS, BZU or IDRC. The IALIIS can be reached at: ialiis@birzeit.edu
Forced Migration and Refugee Unit

1. Foreword

Gaza was presented some decades ago as a case of atypical demography in the world, and it still retains many population characteristics that have not been fully explored. To explain this demography it is crucial to look at the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a conflict in which population matters are deeply embedded (Anson 1996; Goldsheider 1991). The peculiar nature of the Gazan demography raises innumerable questions linked to the political conditions of the strip (Roy 1995). Foremost among them is whether the high fertility rate is sustainable. A second question is what determines migration of the Palestinian population, either within historic Palestine – to other parts of Palestine including the West Bank, East Jerusalem, or even Israel – or to other countries.

We can begin by looking at Gaza’s demographics without considering its immediate geopolitical environment – Israel and the West Bank. This is feasible provided we first mention some considerations:

a. Gaza has been a case apart in the history of Palestine since 1948, when the Jewish state wiped out almost all of Palestine, causing Palestine almost to vanish from the international legal and political scene. On its fragments, two entities were established, one in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, that was soon incorporated into the Hashemite Kingdom of Transjordan, and the second in the Gaza Strip, which was placed under Egyptian administration, but not annexed by Egypt. This strange status would last 19 years, until the war of June 1967, which saw Gaza and the West Bank “reunified” under the yoke of the Israeli army. In 1993, following the Oslo agreement, Gaza, together with Jericho, became the first liberated Palestinian area, with Israel agreeing to turn over administration and policing to the new Palestinian Authority.

b. More than five years ago, in September 2005, Gaza was cleared of Israeli settlers (Courbage 2006). Even before this date, the number of settlers in Gaza was limited; yet colonization of the land proceeded under a series of Israeli governments, both on the political right and on the left, taking up some 30% of an area of only 360 km² (41 km long and 12 km wide). The foremost
(undeclared) objective of withdrawal from Gaza was to boost colonization in the West Bank and East Jerusalem by supplying the existing settlements with more than 9,000 newcomers. The West Bank remains occupied more than ever. Military checkpoints are part of the ordinary landscape. Maybe a different status for Gaza was the pre-condition to implement the bantustanization scheme, after the South African model, so admired by Ariel Sharon? At any rate, this was also a strong argument for differentiation of Gaza from the rest of Palestine. In his speech on the Gaza pullout, Sharon insisted that the demographic disequilibrium – less than ten thousand Jewish settlers facing over a million Palestinians – forced Israel to forsake the settlements. Israel therefore paid only a limited price by leaving the strip, against a foreseen boom in the settlement of the West Bank and Jerusalem (550 thousand settlers, and according to forecasts barely concealed by Israel, to reach one million before 2020). "Freed" Gaza is nonetheless locked by land, sea and air, creating a Kafkaesque situation: life is much harder than in the West Bank, although the West Bank is militarily occupied and is in the process of gradually being annexed to Israeli settlements.

c. Gaza is Mediterranean, although deprived by Israel from enjoying the richness of the sea. The coastline of the West Bank is ironically the Dead Sea. Hence, there might be subtle differences in the mentalities of the two parts of Palestine. Regional differences in mentalities may impact attitudes and demographic behaviour.

d. The “native” population in Gaza is but a tiny minority. Refugees expelled by Israel between 1947 and 1949 and their descendants make up 74% of the population of Gaza, compared to 33% in the West Bank (Khawaja 2002). This profound difference of origins of the population might weigh on demographic conditions.

e. The elections of 2006 that sealed the defeat of Fatah to Hamas, and ongoing political developments since that event, may also influence the demography, although since these events are recent, it is perhaps too soon to tell. These rivalries culminated with the mini-civil war in June 2007 and the takeover of Gaza by Hamas. With the passing of time, the gap might become structural, with the risk of creating a larger political gap between the two Palestinian entities, in addition to the 40 km physical distance between them.

Nevertheless, other considerations encourage us not to detach the demographic study of Gaza from the rest of Palestine:

a. Gaza is hardly separable from the Palestinian context. The population of the strip does not come from elsewhere, but mainly from the south of Palestine, just as the refugees in the West Bank came mainly from the north. And the regions are quite close: the whole of historic Palestine is only 26,000 km², which can be travelled from north to south in less than three hours.

b. The occupying power may be tempted to accentuate differences between Gaza and the West Bank, just as in the case of South Africa during apartheid, the white authorities did everything
possible to highlight the differences and aggravate the rivalries among the Homelands (Bantustans). But that is all the more reason why we should not do so.

2. Paucity of data

The national data compiled by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) in Ramallah have become the victim of events, precisely because the office is located in Ramallah. With the establishment of a dual authority in 2007, the study of the population of Gaza has deteriorated. The census of December 2007 was taken in the entire Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem. But only the total population size of Gaza has been released: 1,416,542 inhabitants; we know nothing about recent demographic, socio-economic and cultural features. We must therefore rely on the 1997 census and the more recent survey, taken in 2006 (PCBS 2007). In addition civil registration: births and deaths, published by the Ministry of Health, are essential sources, although there are some inconsistencies between civil registration statistics and census and survey figures.

3. A universal record of population growth, a tiny territory

As of the middle of 2010, Gaza has, in its minuscule territory of 360 km², a huge population: 1,600,000 inhabitants, a third (35%) of the total population of 4.6 million in the occupied Palestinian territories. The population density, about 4 400 inhabitants per km², is extraordinary. Let us think a moment about this figure. When one considers such countries as Indonesia (especially Java), Bangladesh or Egypt (at least the population density on Egypt’s usable land), high population densities might be synonymous with misery. However, contrary to conventional wisdom, population density does not ipso facto mean poverty. Among the richest countries in the world are Monaco (16,235 inhabitants per km²), with a high density of billionaires, but also Singapore (6,389), Hong Kong (6,700) and the Vatican (2,093), where inhabitants are not particularly poor. Hence, the correlation between population density and poverty is not obvious. Gaza’s neighbours are also highly densely populated: Israel in its 1967 borders (340 inh./km²) and the West Bank (480), but Gaza is much more so.

The huge population in this small land is primarily, but not only, the outcome of the exodus that preceded and followed the war of 1948. Nothing prepared the strip of less than 60,000 inhabitants in 1948 to absorb, in few weeks, some 200,000 refugees expelled from what was becoming the Jewish State. Setting out from the villages and towns of a large region from Jaffa to Beer Sabaa conquered by the Haganah in the wake of the war, these refugees could not imagine that they were to remain in Gaza for more than a few days or weeks.
4. Gaza: a demographic “miracle”?

The "miracle" for Gaza is to have sustained an incredibly high rate of population increase since 1948. Far from returning back to the 'indigenous' Gazan population of 1948, population size moved from a quarter of a million to 1.6 million – a more than sixfold increase – in only sixty years (1950-2010). The rate of increase (birth rate minus death rate plus immigration minus emigration), has been 3.1% per year on average. This is the same as in Israel, where it was fuelled by immigration, but much higher than in the West Bank, where the rate of increase has been 2.0%. Only Jordan, whose demographic changes have been largely based on the Palestinian population, had a higher 4.5% rate of increase (Chart 1).

5. Battle of numbers, war of cradles

How do we account for these unusual demographics? Let us start with a frequent and well advertised explanation: the numbers of the Palestinian population in general and those of Gaza, are wrong. In 2005, two years before the Palestinian census of 2007, Israeli researchers close to the Likud and American neocons of the American Enterprise Institute questioned the Palestinian demographic data in a widely publicized report (Zimmerman et al. 2006). They claimed that the figures had been manipulated and exaggerated for political motives. Instead of 1.41 million inhabitants in the Gaza strip at this date, the report said, the "true" figure was 1.08 million! 23% less. This “battle of numbers” is widely debated in Israel and Palestine, a confrontation between Palestinians and Israelis but also between rightists and leftists in Israel.

“Leftists” from the Labour party or from MAPAM, affirm that the very existence of Israel is threatened by the Palestinian population, its size and explosive growth. Hence the necessity to return to the (adjusted) 1967 borders and leave the occupied territories: 100% of Gaza, and perhaps 95-97% of the West Bank, to prevent a Palestinian majority inside the state of Israel. Nonsense, claims the demographic revisionist school whose main voice, former ambassador Yoram Ettinger, has written numerous provocative articles such as: “Bursting the demographic bubble: from baseless demographic fatalism to well-documented demographic optimism.” Ettinger argues that the rise of the Jewish population in Israel has been exceptional in view of the relative decline or stability of the Palestinians in Israel and in the occupied territories. Obviously if the numbers presented by the "revisionists" were taken at face value, this would mean that Gaza’s population has been growing much more slowly than the PCBS has found. However, the Palestinian census of 2007, done using scientific methods standard in the field, has restored credence to the figures.

6. Fertility, unbridled or political?
If Gaza’s population growth is exceptional, it is primarily due to fertility, itself exceptional (Khawaja 2003; Khawaja and Randall 2006; Khawaja et al. 2009). After the 1967 war, and until recent years, the crude birth rate and total fertility rate remained on a high plateau. Between 1960 and 1970 the birth rate was 53 per thousand in the Palestinian territories as a whole, and the total fertility rate was 8 children per woman. Only outward migration could slightly alter the level of fertility: during years when there was large temporary migration of Palestinian men to the Gulf, fertility was slightly lower due to the disruption of the marriage market.

Palestinian fertility has remained atypical, insensitive to critical factors such as the high degree of urbanization in the Gaza Strip, the high population density, active population dominated by secondary and service activities, where child labour is not an asset for the parents, contrary to the agricultural sector where children may participate in, thus giving a boost to fertility. In Gaza, fertility has always been higher than in the West Bank, in spite of the accumulation of inhibiting factors. Most important is the high level of school attendance and the eradication of illiteracy, which are the keys to the universal phenomenon of demographic transition and fertility reduction. High level education (preparatory, secondary, university) is more prevalent in Gaza than in the West Bank: enrolment rates of 59% against 57% for males, 57% against 52% for females. In proportions, there are less illiterates in Gaza and more university graduates. Finally the gender gap in higher education is lower in Gaza (-2%) than in the West Bank (-6%) (Chart 2).

Though several indicators would predict a lower fertility rate in Gaza, the one exception is the female participation rate in the economically active population – usually negatively correlated with fertility – which has always been lower in Gaza than in the West Bank.

7. Political factors

The first intifada had fuelled an increase in the already quite high level of fertility. Fertility was then regarded by the Palestinian establishment and Yasser Arafat as one type of peaceful weapon to fight the occupation (Courbage 2005; Fargues 2000; Kanaaneh 2002). This was especially the case in Gaza, where the rise in fertility was more pronounced. A survey of the Gaza strip in 1989 showed that 43% of respondents considered the demographic factor as a key pillar in the struggle against occupation. In 1992 a medical doctor specializing in sterility problems said when interviewed by Agence France Presse: “I help my people to procreate and therefore not disappear under the waves of Jewish immigration. Palestinians and Israelis, we are fighting a demographic war to the finish” (AFP). Gazans took this motto even more seriously than West Bankers. (Chart 3).

Gaza has always been involved in the demographic battle of numbers or the war of cradles. Before the second intifada in 2000, the birth rate and fertility of Gaza already consistently distinguished themselves from those of the West Bank. This is shown in the crude birth rate.
Forced Migration and Refugee Unit

recorded in the vital statistics in Israel, and in the fertility rates calculated from three Palestinian population surveys. According to Israeli statistics, there was a rise in the crude birth rate in Gaza from 45 to 56 per thousand between 1986 and 1991. It was later confirmed by of the rise in the Total Fertility Rate from 7.73 to 8.76 during the same period, according to Palestinian statistics drawn from surveys. Fertility increase was more marked in Gaza than in the West Bank. In addition, the increase in fertility has been more pronounced among more educated women – supposed to be the most politically conscious – than among the illiterate and less educated.

The first intifada left Gaza with a TFR of 7.4 children in 1994 (5.6 in the West Bank). The years of the Oslo accords, which were also those of increased colonization of Palestine, saw a modest decline; on the eve of the second intifada in September 2000 the TFR in Gaza was 6.8 children per woman.

8. The fertility effects of the second intifada

The second intifada shook things up in Gaza as in the whole of Israel-Palestine. In this hyper-pronatalistic context the demographic weapon changed hands. Israeli Jewish fertility, not Palestinian fertility, increased – a very rare occurrence in a country with high living standards: GDP per capita of more than 30,000 USD for Israeli Jews and levels of education higher than in Europe. Fertility of Israeli Jews, already high at 2.6 children per woman in 2000, grew to 2.9 in 2009 (Central Bureau of Statistics 2010) and is about to reach 3 children in 2010 according to the current trend, twice the average rate of Europe or of diaspora Jews. But more importantly, fertility is particularly high in areas of friction: politico-ideological settlements implanted in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, where it is now close to 5 children per woman (Central Bureau of Statistics 2010). From the saturated areas of West Jerusalem (like Mea Shearim) where the ultra-Orthodox fertility rate is around 7.5 children (Friedlander 2002), streams of migrants fuel the settlement movement of the West Bank in and around Jerusalem.

Contrariwise, in Israel proper, the fertility of the 1948 Palestinians is falling: their birth rate dropped from 38 to 28 per thousand and the total fertility rate from 4.3 to 3.5 from 1990 to 2009. In a few years it is possible that Israeli Arabs will bear no more children than Israeli Jews. Hence, the second intifada dealt a severe blow to fertility in the West Bank and Gaza (Charts 4 and 5). Palestinian demography has been reshuffled, but this time downward, unlike what happened during the first intifada. Between 1999 and 2006, fertility in the West Bank fell from 5.4 to 4.3, that is to say, it fell significantly below that of the Israeli settlers in “Judea – Samaria” and East Jerusalem. Statistics from the Ministry of Health show an even more marked decrease, with fertility rates of about 3.4 at the beginning of the decade. Rebellious Gaza has been even more affected, with fertility falling from 6.8 in 1999 to just 5.4 in 2006 – still a very high rate by
world standards, even relative to Muslim or Arab countries and even compared to Palestinians in the West Bank. But this is a sharp fall since the first intifada.

Obviously, a fertility rate of 5.4 children per woman is still considerable, given the abject living conditions in Gaza. But not if one considers that children are almost the unique source of comfort, plus a strategic asset in the precarious balance of forces in Israel-Palestine. We can almost paraphrase the Israeli filmmaker Amos Gitai in his film *Kadosh* on the ultra-Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem. One of his characters states that children are the best weapon to fight their enemies (in this case not the Palestinians, but the secular Jews).

But today, things are changing. Demographic rationality is sweeping Palestine and Gaza in particular, at the moment when it appears to be abandoning Israel.

**9. Mortality**

Fertility is not the only component of the growth of a population. To be exhaustive in describing population characteristics, we should mention mortality and international migration. “Normal” mortality, somehow surprisingly, is rather low in Gaza. Yet, during crisis situations, such as the second intifada and Israel's war against Gaza in December-January 2008-2009, mortality reached peaks higher than in the West Bank. Infant mortality reached 30.7 per thousand in 2002-2006, slightly higher than the West Bank's 25.5 per thousand. Life expectancy at birth is around 72 years, higher than in many Arab countries. The effectiveness of health care, and the role of NGOs and of UNRWA, are responsible for these remarkable achievements. But in addition, there is in this family-oriented context a love and desire to protect children, and this includes children of both sexes. In Gaza one does not find the excess mortality of girls that one does frequently find in macho societies where girls are less well treated than boys during their infancy.

**10. Migration**

We too often forget, given Israel’s full lock on the borders of Gaza by land, sea and air, and the semi-full lock by the Egyptian side on Rafah, that Gaza once was also a land of emigration. After Gulf economies exploded with the oil boom in 1975 and until the decline in oil prices a decade later, 114,000 Gazans emigrated, most often without returning, thanks to the benevolence of the occupation authorities happy to get rid of these turbulent youths. The second intifada has also seen slight net emigration, but nothing comparable to that of the West Bank, where 100,000 departures were reported –with exaggeration – in the Israeli press. Actually, a recent survey has shown smaller figures: 32 000 emigrants and 6 000 returned emigrants in 2005-2009 (PCBS 2010).
11. Outlook for the future

What future for Gaza? The optimistic scenario would be one where a real Arab-Israeli peace would be accompanied by the return of Palestinian refugees (or a substantial fraction of them) to their homes. For the moment, there is nothing in politics at the local level, nor at the level of the international community, that suggests that this will happen, that is, that the UN resolution of 1948 will be implemented. But if this optimistic scenario did come to pass, population pressure in Gaza would likely be relieved through migration. As long as migration is excluded, however, population will grow only under the combined effects of fertility and mortality.

As everywhere, but even more in this puzzling context, fertility trends in Gaza are hard to predict, since it is always difficult to conclusively predict the attitudinal and behavioural changes which guide human reproduction. However, in view of the fertility decline in Gaza in 1994-1999 before the second intifada, as well as in 1996-2006, one can surmise that the Gazans have renounced high fertility as a political tool. The resistance against blockade and occupation seems to be taking other forms – maybe more effective – such as the appeal to universal consciousness, international tribunals and so on.

Amira Haas, a journalist for the Israeli daily Haaretz and a renowned specialist on Gaza, reported in an interview in *Le Monde Diplomatique* a quote from a Gazan father of four, who said "All what concerns us is the care for subsistence, electricity, water, sewage. You end up wondering why you brought children into this world " (emphasis added) (Amira Haas 2008). This was just before the Israeli war of December 2008. How will fertility evolve after the disaster?

12. Future fertility trends

Chart 6 shows the evolution of population size in Gaza based on three different assumptions about trends in fertility, the main component of population growth. The highest projection is based on fertility remaining constant at its present level of 5 children per women. Although unlikely in view of previous trends and after the disasters of 2008-2009, this prognosis is helpful to forecast the maximal envelope of Gaza population in the next forty years, 2010-2050. The second projection makes the more likely assumption that fertility will decrease, to reach the replacement level of TFR of 2.1 in 2050 (the ideal size of two children per woman); this is the medium prognosis. The third projection is based on the assumption that fertility will fall more rapidly to 1.7 in 2050, the present level of Lebanon; this is the low prognosis.

A cohort-component population projection by age-group and sex is then done on the population as it stands in 2010 (the age-pyramid in green on chart 7).

13. From 4 to 6 million inhabitants in 2050
Consider the absurd case that fertility will remain forever at 5 children. To say that the population will explode in this case is an understatement. The 1.6 million of today will become 6 million in 2050, a multiplication by almost 4, an annual growth rate of 3.4%, resulting in a population density of 16,400 inhabitants per km$^2$. This is absolutely unthinkable.

What would be the future if Gaza tends to adopt “modern” patterns of reproduction to reach the symbolic threshold of 2.1 children per woman in 2050? Even with such an optimistic view, the outcome might be disastrous: 4.1 million in 2050, a 2.6 fold increase, a growth rate of 2.4% per year, reaching a density of 11,400 inhabitants per km$^2$. This too would be unsustainable.

Let us go even further. Suppose that fertility reaches a western European level of 1.7 children (say, half the current level of Israeli Jews). In this case, there would be 3.9 million inhabitants in Gaza by 2050, with the stifling density of 10,800 inhabitants per km$^2$ (Chart 8).

Among the most serious implications of high population growth is the youth bulge, especially if insufficient employment, or none, is provided by the national economy or by the state.

14. Where to find jobs?

High population growth will translate into a tense labour market. The number of new entrants, now estimated at 37,000 each year, will double to reach 76,000 in 2050 (Chart 9). However, the likely aging of the population will lead an increasing number of Gazans to exit the labor force, although in small numbers. Hence the number of net entrants annually will increase – but at a slower pace – from 34,000 presently to 54,000 in 2050. This is an impressive increase peculiar to Palestine and especially to Gaza. In Arab countries, annual numbers of net entrants have started to decline in many cases, or will start to do so soon. In the Gaza Strip there is much slack in the labour market now, with an unemployment rate of 39% in the second quarter of 2010. Every year new entrants add to the already high numbers of the unemployed or the underemployed, particularly among Gazans ages 20-24, who currently suffer 67% unemployment.

The low participation of women in the labour force should also be emphasized: women are only 8-10% of the economically active population, among the lowest in the world. Recent figures also show increasing gender inequity. Although women were already marginalized in the labour force, now they tend to be even more so. Whereas the number of employed women in the West Bank increased from 95,000 to 111,000 between the beginning and the middle of 2010, it decreased from 25,000 to 23,000 in Gaza. Out of 443,000 women in Gaza aged 15 years and over, only 23,000, or 5.2%, are employed, also among the lowest rates in the world. When jobs are rare and pressure on employment high, women tend to remain out of the labour force for decades.
15. Summary and conclusion

In conclusion, although there are many similarities between Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, we have pointed to some demographic and socio-economic differences which might increase in the future:

- The demographic transition is much more advanced in the West Bank.
- The future demographic outlook in terms of population growth and densities is less gloomy in the West Bank than in the Gaza Strip.
- Gazans are slightly more educated than West Bankers, but this does not translate into a better standard of living. Quite the opposite.
- Labour market conditions in terms of participation rate and unemployment are improving in the West Bank but becoming unbearable for the Gazans, especially for youth.
- Women’s status in terms of accession to the labour market is much worse in Gaza than in the West Bank, especially for young females, with 7 persons out of 10 unemployed (twice the rate in the West Bank).

Usually, demographic trends have been among the few reasons for optimism in the Arab region. But for Gaza, unfortunately there are few glimpses of hope if things remain as they are. Only a drastic geographical redistribution might give the population some expectation of improvement. But where would Gazan emigrants go? Certainly not to an overcrowded Egypt. The Gulf countries and Saudi Arabia, assuming they regain their former glory, do not want emigrants from Gaza stamped (sometimes despite themselves) as Hamas partisans. There remains the migration to the West Bank – and even (why not?) to Israel. This, however, would require an end to the blockade, open borders, liberty of movement, and so forth – in other words, a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
16. Bibliography

AFP, Interview of Dr. Faraoune, 19 december 1992.


Chart 1: The long-term rate of population growth (%) in Gaza and neighbouring countries 1950-2010

Y axis, Rate of Increase (p.100)
Chart 2: Higher levels of education in Gaza than in the West Bank, lower gender gap, 2006

Y axis, Total fertility rate (children per woman)
X axis, Years
Chart 3: A higher intifada effect on fertility in Gaza than in the West Bank?
Chart 4: Age specific fertility rates in Gaza and the West Bank, 1994 and 2006

Y axis, Age specific fertility rates (p.1000)

X axis, Age
Chart 5: Total Fertility Rate in Gaza and the West Bank, 1994 and 2006

Y axis, Total fertility rate
Chart 6: Future fertility trends in Gaza, 2010-2050

Y axis, Total Fertility Rate

X axis, Years
Chart 7: The population age and sex structure in Gaza, 2010 and 2050

Y axis, Males
Females
X axis, numbers (p. thousands)
Chart 8: The ineluctability of high population growth in Gaza 2010-2050

Y axis, Population per thousands
X axis, Years
Chart 9: The labour market in Gaza: entries, exits, net entries

Y axis, numbers (per thousands)
X, axis, Years