

## ISRAEL'S CAPACITY TO ABSORB PALESTINIAN REFUGEES DEMOGRAPHIC SCENARIOS 2008-2058

According to international law, all Palestinian refugees have a right to return to their original homes, most of which are located in what has become Israel.

The PLO has made a historical compromise by accepting to negotiate the implementation of the Right of Return and adapt to some legitimate interests and concerns Israel may have. One of these legitimate concerns is Israel's capacity to absorb future streams of immigration, which would be composed of Palestinian "returnees" to Israel.

Thus, a reasonable approach commands that the negotiations over the number of Palestinian returns to Israel should take into account Israel's capacity of absorption. Therefore, the NSU has commissioned an expert to assess the demographic implications of different scenarios of returns on Israel's demographics. The main assumptions and results of this study are summarized below **[the comprehensive study is available upon request – to be discussed with Y. Courbage]**

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- Israel's population approximates today 7,011,000 inhabitants. Contrary to the publicly reported figure that Palestinians are over 20% of the population in Israel<sup>1</sup>, the accurate figure is lower: 1,175,000 or 16,8% of the citizens of Israel.
- Immigration has played an important role in the evolution of Jewish population: the records of past trends of Jewish immigration into Israel show an average of 41,000 net immigrants per year from 1948 until 2007. These trends have however recently decreased. Israel has received 38,000 net immigrants during the last 11 years, from 1996 to 2007.
- Forecasting the return of the Palestinian refugees living outside Israel is a complex issue because:
  - o the exact current number of Palestinian refugees remains uncertain: this figure is beyond UNWRA's [ ], which only comprises registered refugees; the most recent assessments suggest that the current figure would be around 7 million.
  - o One can only speculate as to the exact number of refugees who would really want to return to Israel (according to international law refugee's right to chose his/her definitive location option must be respected).

### ASSUMPTIONS

- The global size of the population groups is not sufficient to asses their demographic development in the coming 50 years, i.e. from 2008 until 2058. The age-and sex structure determines to a great extent future growth irrespective of the trends of mortality, fertility and international migrations. In this regard, the Palestinians have a natural advantage when compared to the Jews, due to the youthfulness of their population.
- The fertility assumptions from 2008 to 2058 which were considered for this study are the following:

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<sup>1</sup> The Israeli official population figure requires an adjustment: it includes the Arab populations of the Golan Heights and East-Jerusalem as part of the Israeli population, whereas these territories are illegally occupied lands according to international law.

- Instead of forecasting an increase in Jewish fertility indicated by recent trends, the study kept this variable constant at 2.61 children per woman, the average since 2006. Alternately, the assumption of an ‘Europeanization’ of Jewish fertility was also considered, decreasing to the levels of Western Europe today: 1.59 children per woman.
  - Palestinian fertility is assumed to carry on its modernization. Based on this trend, in one scenario, the assumption is that it will converge with the Jewish fertility five years from now, and both will stall at a high level of 2.61. In the second scenario, it will continue decrease, converging in 2058 with the Jewish fertility at the low level of 1.59.
- In all the scenarios considered, no Jewish immigration was taken into account as its evolution could not be reasonably assumed over period of 50 years because it is subject to domestic and external variables which fall beyond the scope of this study. The evolution of the Arab component of the Israeli population which is presented is therefore very conservative as further Jewish immigration may indeed take place in the coming 50 years.
  - With the exception of the “limited return” scenario which envisages the implementation of returns over a period of 50 years, it was assumed in other cases that the process of return would start in 2013 and would expand for a first period of 15 years (Israel and Palestine could then possibly agree a new returns). In all scenarios, the demographic impact of the Palestinian refugee returns was assessed in the long term, over a period of 50 years.

## THE SCENARIOS

By combining the different assumptions on mortality, fertility, and immigration of Palestinians, the study considered a large number of population scenarios from which only the most significant are exposed below.

1- Considering records of past trends of Jewish immigration into Israel (an average of 41,000 net immigrants per year from 1948 until 2007) it was assumed that **41,000 Palestinian refugees would return annually to Israel during 15 years from 2013 until 2028, a total of 600,000**. As a result of this number of returnees, the Palestinian population in Israel would **increase from 1.1 to 2.9 million, slightly increasing in percentage from 16.7% now to 26.6% in 2058**.

<b>1- Without Jewish migration, converging fertility at "European level",</b>												
<b>return of 41 000 refugees per year, from 2013-2028</b>												
	<b>2008</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2023</b>	<b>2028</b>	<b>2033</b>	<b>2038</b>	<b>2043</b>	<b>2048</b>	<b>2053</b>	<b>2058</b>
Jews (extended)	5839	5909	6179	6494	6783	7044	7277	7492	7683	7837	7942	7995
Palestinians	1174	1202	1294	1622	1965	2319	2463	2585	2686	2772	2844	2901
TOTAL	7013	7111	7473	8116	8748	9363	9740	10077	10369	10609	10786	10896
% Palestinians	16,7	16,9	17,3	20,0	22,5	24,8	25,3	25,7	25,9	26,1	26,4	26,6

**2. Israel has received 38,000 net immigrants during the last 11 years from 1996 to 2007.** With this same figure applied to the return of Palestinian refugees from 2013 to 2028, thus a total of **570,000 returns, the Palestinian population would reach 2.9 millions in 2058, 26.5% of the total population of Israel 10.9 millions.**

**2. Without Jewish migration, converging fertility at "European level", return of 38 000 refugees per year, from 2013-2028**

	2008	2009	2013	2018	2023	2028	2033	2038	2043	2048	2053	2058
Jews (extended)	5839	5909	6179	6494	6783	7044	7277	7492	7683	7837	7942	7995
Palestinians	1174	1202	1294	1607	1934	2273	2417	2538	2640	2725	2798	2885
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>7013</b>	<b>7111</b>	<b>7473</b>	<b>8101</b>	<b>8717</b>	<b>9317</b>	<b>9694</b>	<b>10030</b>	<b>10323</b>	<b>10562</b>	<b>10740</b>	<b>10880</b>
% Palestinians	16,7	16,9	17,3	19,8	22,2	24,4	24,9	25,3	25,6	25,8	26,1	26,5

**3. Another scenario assumes the possibility that a limited number of Palestinian refugees entitled to return would in fact be interested in returning to Israel from 2013 to 2058.** Some refugees, namely those of the second and third generation, may have become integrated into their country of resettlement and might not be willing to permanently settle in Israel. In case of selective returns, which are adjusted to account for the living situations of Palestinians living in countries where they are more vulnerable because of economic and political risks (Gaza and Lebanon are often mentioned), an estimated **2 millions would return.** In this case, **the overall Palestinian population would reach 4.4 millions in 2058, or 35.7% of the population.** Thus, 2/3rd of Israel's population would remain Jewish.

<b>3- Without Jewish migration, converging fertility at "European level",</b>												
<b>selective return of part of the refugees, from 2013-2058</b>												
	2008	2009	2013	2018	2023	2028	2033	2038	2043	2048	2053	2058
Jews (extended)	5839	5909	6179	6494	6783	7044	7277	7492	7683	7837	7942	7995
Palestinians	1174	1202	1297	1645	2012	2391	2770	3135	3485	3821	4145	4438
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>7013</b>	<b>7111</b>	<b>7476</b>	<b>8139</b>	<b>8795</b>	<b>9435</b>	<b>10047</b>	<b>10627</b>	<b>11168</b>	<b>11658</b>	<b>12087</b>	<b>12433</b>
% Palestinians	16,7	16,9	17,3	20,2	22,9	25,3	27,6	29,5	31,2	32,8	34,3	35,7