

1998 : “ISRAEL-PALESTINE : GLOBALISATION AND MICRONATIONALISMS” – ISSUES THAT ARE RARELY DISCUSSED: DEMOGRAPHY AND WATER

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THE DEMOGRAPHIC ISSUE

Demographics in Israel is a strategic issue and undoubtedly the most pressing problem facing the authorities. Demographic data is almost a state secret. Professor David Grosman revealed in a letter dated 24 November 1992 to *Ma'ariv* that Israel has a double set of accounts when it comes to demographics: official statistics for the general public and real statistics for decision-makers.

There were 480,000 Jews in Mandatory Palestine in 1946. Over the years, more than a million immigrants from Europe and America have arrived. After 1990, about half a million immigrants, mainly from the former Soviet Union, arrived.

Israel: a project for Ashkenazi Jews

The initial Zionist project did not concern Eastern European Jews. When pogroms broke out during the Second World War in Syria and Iraq, no plans were made to bring them to Palestine, even though its borders were porous. While Ben-Gurion and President Weizman believed that

millions of Jews from Europe and America would emigrate to Israel in the 1940s – Weizman even mentioned the figure of five million in a letter ¹ – between May 1948 and January 1950, only 210,000 European and American Jews emigrated, including 50,000 Bulgarian Jews or Jews from the Balkans, who were classified as European Jews for the sake of the cause. During the same period, 130,000 Eastern European Jews immigrated. The very existence of the new State of Israel seemed threatened by a demographic deficit, which the authorities remedied by calling on a million Eastern European Jews. By 1953, 720,000 people had immigrated, only half of whom were Ashkenazi. All of these immigrants were young, with 84% under the age of 50 (*Yedioth Haharonoth*, 18 June 1986). Ben-Gurion welcomed the immigration of European Jews, which he believed would “de-Levantise” the Israeli population.²

The Ashkenazi Jews should have remained the largest group in Israel, but two phenomena reduced their percentage of the population relative to the other two demographic groups, the Jews from Eastern Europe and the Palestinians:

- a very high *emigration* rate among young people of childbearing age;
- strong natural growth, especially during the first two decades of the state, among Eastern Jews and indigenous Palestinians.

In 1951, a senior Jewish Agency official, J. Zerubavel, made a surprising statement: “We will be called upon to consider a completely new problem in Jewish public life, namely, the problem of Eastern Jews,” he said; “this problem has never been addressed; in any case, it has never received serious attention,” confirming the thesis of initial disinterest in Eastern Jews. “The Zionist movement must take on the task of saving *the forgotten million*” (emphasis added) ³.

1 See Walter Laqueur, *History of Zionism*, Calmann-Levy, 1973.

2 “David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s founding prime minister, sought to prevent what he himself identified as the “levantinization” of the Jewish state by segregating the North African and Oriental Jews in remote development towns, thus preventing them from influencing the new “Israeli” identity of the transplanted Eastern and Western European elites. The uncompromising terms of Ben Gurion’s imperative were: “We do not want the Israelis to be Arabs. It is our duty to fight against the spirit of the Levant that ruins individuals and societies.” Ranen Omer-Sherman, “Longing to Belong: Levantine arabes and Jews in the Israeli Cultural Imagination”, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.act2080.0049.223> (NOTE 2025)

3 J. Zerubavel “The immigration of Oriental Jewry’ in *Problems of Oriental Jewry*, The Jewish Agency of Palestine, Jerusalem, 1951.

Hundreds of emissaries were sent to Jews in the diaspora to encourage them to come and settle in Israel. Only Eastern Jews responded significantly to the call: the economic and social context, rather than religious or ideological motivations, was the determining factor in their decision to leave.

Between 1948 and 1953, the following settled in Israel:

- 0.04% of the Jewish population of the United States;
- 2.6% of Western Europe;
- 11.5% of Eastern Europe;
- 17% of the Maghreb;
- 28% of other Middle Eastern countries.

There is therefore a clear link between the proportion of immigrants and the socio-political context of their country of origin. In countries with a democratic tradition and a high standard of living, Jews living in favourable social, economic and intellectual conditions never emigrated en masse, with the exception of a few extremists, many of whom returned to their country of origin shortly afterwards. Roger Ascot calls them “Sunday Israelis”, who are all the more intransigent because they will not go to war, “except through [their] Israeli brothers”⁴.

The Ashkenazi Jews who emigrated came mainly from countries undergoing serious crises. There has also been a virtual disappearance of the diaspora from Arab countries: out of a population of 800,000 in 1948, there are now only 10,000 Jews in these countries; the State of Israel's policy on the Palestinian question does not make life particularly easy for Jews in Arab countries... Today, Eastern Jews and their descendants make up more than half of Israel's population.

Jewish communities dating back several millennia, such as those in Iraq and Yemen, have virtually disappeared, and their members have been turned into proletarians in Israel. Michel Warschawski refers to “the right that Zionism grants itself to manipulate Jewish communities in the diaspora. Indeed, if these are degenerate communities [*sic*], it is the duty of Zionism to extract them from their unhealthy environment, regardless of their own wishes. Thus, Zionist agents will plant bombs in Baghdad synagogues and negotiate a sordid deal with Nuri Said,⁵ with the aim of hastening the transfer of Iraqi Jews to Israel, or the Jews of Yemen will be

4 Roger Ascot, *Le sionisme trahi ou les Israéliens du dimanche*, Balland.

5 Nouri Said (1888-1958) was an Iraqi statesman. He served several times as Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Iraq.

told that the planes coming to fetch them are the ‘eagles of eagles’ of the Messiah spoken of by the prophet”⁶.

The Jewish diasporas in Iran, India, Turkey and Afghanistan, which in 1948 had a total population of around 200,000, numbered only 50,000 in 1984, most of them elderly. Their potential contribution to the growth of Israel's population is nil. If they leave their country, they go to the United States, as is the case with Iranian Jews. Israeli leaders often cite the backward living conditions of Eastern Jews as the reason for their departure. In reality, a large proportion of Iraqi and Iranian Jews belonged to the various strata of the bourgeoisie, whether upper class, medium or petty. Their settlement in Israel led to a sharp decline in their standard of living.

Depending on whether one was an Eastern Jew or an Ashkenazi Jew, one received a different welcome, the consequences of which are still heavily felt in Israeli politics today: the descendants of these immigrants retain the memory of this discrimination and their behaviour is reflected in their voting choices. During the Mandate period, i.e. the British occupation of Palestine, Eastern Jews received only a trickle of immigration certificates from the Jewish Agency, except in certain special cases: when it was necessary to bring in Yemenite Jews to replace Arab agricultural workers in the citrus orchards of the moshavots; when Jewish dockers had to be brought in from Salonika to replace Arab dockers in Haifa and Jaffa, when the port of Tel Aviv was opened and during the general strike of the Palestinians in 1936. After the creation of the State of Israel, they provided a source of underpaid labour to colonise the barren land that the kibbutzim did not want, to work in labour-intensive industries, on large construction sites, the citrus orchards of Jewish capitalists, and to provide the soldiers needed for the new state's expansionist policy. Michel Warschawski speaks of the “falsification of Jewish history” that destroys “the memory and cultural identity of the various Jewish immigrations”.

At the end of 1988, the official population of Israel was 4.5 million, including 3.7 million Jews and 0.8 million Palestinians. *The migration balance was negative*. The number of people *leaving* Israel exceeded the number of people *settling* there by 1,000 (Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics). Only the policy of bringing in Soviet Jews en masse was able to

6 Michel Warschawski, "Etat, nation et nationalisme. – Actualité du sionisme," *L'Homme et la Société* no. 114, 1994, p. 31.

counterbalance this trend, but this population was largely made up of elderly people.⁷

Demographic outlook

What are the prospects for increasing the Israeli population by appealing to the diaspora? The number of Jews in the diaspora likely to settle in Israel is now very small, whether they are Jews from Europe and America or Jews from Eastern Europe. The Jewish diasporas in Arab and Muslim countries have virtually disappeared.

The diasporas are not looking very promising for Israel's demographic plans. There has been a significant reduction in the number of Jews worldwide, due to assimilation, an increase in the number of single people, later marriages, an increase in divorces, mixed marriages and a fall in the average number of children per couple to well below 2.1. This trend was particularly evident among Soviet Jews, whose numbers were reported as 2.24 million in 1959 and 1.8 million in 1979⁸. The number of Soviet Jews married to non-Jews, including their children, was between 1.3 and 1.5 million. In the 1980s, a third of Soviet Jews were said to have entered into mixed marriages. The decline in the Jewish population in the former USSR was due in equal parts to mixed marriages⁹ and low birth rates. The Jewish population in the diaspora, which stood at 10 million in 1983, is expected to fall to 8 million in 2000 and 6 million in 2025 if current trends continue¹⁰. There is even talk of a “demographic Holocaust”.¹¹

7 Note 2025:

In October 2023, Israel's population is estimated at approximately 9.5 million. It is distributed as follows:

Jews: Approximately 74-75% of the population. This group includes Jews of Ashkenazi, Sephardic and Mizrahi origin, as well as recent immigrants from various parts of the world.

Arabs: Approximately 20% of the population. This mainly includes Palestinian Arabs, who may be Israeli citizens, as well as Druze and Bedouins.

Other groups: Approximately 5% of the population. This includes Christians, residents of foreign origin, migrant workers, and other minorities.

8 Liast, I., “Demographic Study of Jews in the Soviet Union”, Haaretz, 18 March 1983.

9 After 1970, the percentage of mixed marriages was 78% in Germany, 61% in Switzerland and 31% in Canada (Schmeltz U.O. - Jewish survival. The demographic factor. *American Jewish Yearbook*, 1981, pp. 61 -117.)

10 Roberto Bachi, demographer, based on a study conducted with Ouziel Scheltz and Sergio Della Pergola, *Yedioth Hahronoth*, 16 August 1993.

11 NOTE “Expanding the Jewish birth rate thus became a matter of national policy, and women were encouraged to have more children as part of their “national duty.” In the 1950s, : Israeli prime minister David Ben-Gurion implemented a financial reward for

Little is said about Israelis emigrating from their country. In fact, a reverse migration phenomenon is taking place, the figures for which are difficult to obtain as they constitute vital strategic data for the State of Israel. It is mainly members of the wealthy Ashkenazi population who make up 80% of university graduates. Educated young Ashkenazi Israelis, whose training is likely to secure them jobs in Europe or the United States, make up the majority of Israeli emigrants. This emigration is accentuating the ageing of the Ashkenazi population. The flight of graduates has little impact on the “available stock” as the immigration of Soviet Jews makes Israel the country with the highest proportion of graduates in the world – and also undoubtedly the country with the highest proportion of doctors, engineers and scientists who earn their living as street sweepers...

Of the 9,000 Jewish immigrants who arrived from the United States (and a small number from Canada) between 1975 and 1977, only 5,400 were still in Israel in 1978, or 60% of the total, according to *Haaretz* on 2 February 1978. The Minister of Immigration, Yaacov Tzour, told the Knesset in 1986 (*Haaretz*, 10 June 1986) that only 50,000 Jews from the United States, or 1%, had settled permanently in Israel since its creation. On the other hand, it is estimated that between 400,000 and 600,000 Israelis reside legally or illegally in the United States, which absorbed, between 1970 and 1985, about 10% of Israel's Jewish population and an even higher percentage of its young people. The number of Israeli citizens living in the United States is a subject of heated debate. Shmuel Lahis, former director general of the Jewish Agency,¹² claimed in April 1990 that the number of Israeli emigrants to the United States was 500,000.¹³ He was forced to resign from his post in the early 1980s because he had put

“heroine mothers” who had ten children or more.³⁵ The prize was quietly discontinued some ten years later, when it was revealed the majority of recipients were Palestinian women.” Sarah Ihmoud, “Policing the Intimate, Israel’s Anti-Miscegenation movement”,

[https://www.palestine-studies.org/sites/default/files/jq-articles/Pages_from_JQ_75 -
Ihmoud.pdf](https://www.palestine-studies.org/sites/default/files/jq-articles/Pages_from_JQ_75_-_Ihmoud.pdf)

12 Shmuel Lahis was prosecuted for the murder of 33 people during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. He was found guilty of murdering 15 people and sentenced to seven years in prison, a sentence that was reduced to one year, which he served in comfortable conditions at a military base. He was then granted amnesty in 1955. He was appointed president of the Jewish Agency in 1978.

13 Roberto Bachi, demographer, based on a study conducted with Ouziel Scheltz and Sergio Della Pergola, *Yedioth Hahronoth*, 16 August 1993.

forward a figure of 400,000, which was disputed by the Israeli authorities. Some estimates go as high as one million.

Today, paradoxically, it is the Jewish diasporas in Western countries – especially the United States, the country with the largest Jewish population since the Second World War – that have become the reception centres for hundreds of thousands of Israelis, whereas in the Zionist project they were supposed to be the main source of immigrants.

This development has dramatic effects on the situation in Israel. The relative ageing of the population will be borne by the remaining population, i.e. mainly by the younger generations of Eastern Jews, whose living conditions and access to education are far inferior to those of the Ashkenazi Jews. The high birth rate in this community in the early years of the state's creation prompted the authorities to encourage a vigorous birth control policy (although the birth rate remains significantly higher than that of the Ashkenazi Jews), which will further increase the burden on the younger generations of Eastern Jews. The demographic deficit has forced the Israeli authorities to adopt sometimes surprising strategies to cope with it. In the past, large numbers of Falashas, Ethiopian Jews, were brought in, who today suffer extreme racial discrimination. Now there are plans to call on... Hindus who are said to be descendants of ancient Jewish communities. Anyone but Palestinians.

Ethnic conflicts or class conflicts?

In the early 1960s, riots broke out among Eastern Jews in Israel, starting in the Wadi Salib neighbourhood of Haifa in 1959 and spreading throughout the country. The political authorities realised that this section of the population was growing at a rate four times higher than that of the Ashkenazi Jews. A committee was set up in 1962 to propose birth control measures. Its report concluded that “too many children among Jews of a low socio-economic status exacerbate social problems within the Jewish community”. By Jews of low socio-economic status, it obviously meant Arab Jews. “Too many children in the Arab community,” the report went on to say, “constitute a mortal danger to the Jewish community.” There could be no clearer admission that ethnic tensions and class conflicts were one and the same thing in this case.

The authorities would promote a substantial decline in the birth rate in both the Sephardic and Arab communities and a no less substantial increase in the Ashkenazi community. A propaganda campaign was

launched to discourage childbirth among families considered culturally backward and low-income, and to encourage it among wealthy, educated and established families. In an article published in *Haaretz* on 14 September 1966, “The New Generation of 1966”, Shabtai Teveth, Ben-Gurion's biographer, urged Ashkenazi women to have more children, as this was “the only hope of significantly increasing the number of people of European and American origin among the Jewish population and the younger generation”. It may seem surprising that things were stated so bluntly. By analogy, one might wonder what the reaction would be if a French politician campaigned to promote birth rates in the northern departments of the country because there are too many French people of Mediterranean origin.

An arsenal of measures was put in place to reduce the birth rate among Eastern Jews and Palestinians in Israel, and to encourage it among Ashkenazi Jews. Jewish women of Eastern origin were taught contraception methods. The allocation of social housing to young Eastern Jewish couples was restricted. Their wages were kept low. In contrast, relatively spacious apartments were offered to the middle classes, who were predominantly Ashkenazi. The religious parties, which were all Ashkenazi at the time, were allocated land and loans in the big cities to build housing for their followers, who marry young and have large families.

These measures effectively reduced the birth rate among Eastern Jews and significantly increased it among Ashkenazi Jews. However, the discriminatory measures had no effect on the Palestinians in Israel: the birth rate, through a kind of unconscious (though not always...) and collective reaction, became the primary means of resistance.

Israeli demographic policy seems to be characterised by a contradictory double injunction:

- to increase the Jewish population of the country;
- to prevent the growth of the Eastern Jewish population.

The contradiction lies in the fact that preventing the growth of the Eastern Jewish population is equivalent to preventing the growth of the Jewish population... The application of the second injunction seriously hinders the application of the first, which, given what is at stake, would seem to be a priority.

An analysis of the underlying causes of high birth rates – poverty and the destruction of social solidarity¹⁴ – shows that a policy of improving living conditions, housing and education – the only real factors in reducing birth rates – could have been pursued, particularly with the billions in aid from the United States and the diaspora.

In fact, the Ashkenazi establishment feared being overwhelmed by Eastern Jews as much as by Palestinians; therefore, its policy was not to allow Eastern Jewish families to raise their children in good conditions and provide them with an education equivalent to that of Ashkenazi youth, but to encourage immigration from Europe and America and promote births among ultra-Orthodox Jews, the vast majority of whom were Ashkenazi. The closure of the US borders to Jewish emigrants from Russia in 1990, leaving them with no choice but Israel, must have been seen as an extremely positive development by the authorities.

As for the indigenous Palestinians, in 1948 there were approximately 870,000 living in the territory of Israel, as defined in 1949 by the Treaty of Rhodes. After the expulsion of more than 700,000 people, only 160,000 Palestinians remained in the new state. Due to their high natural growth rate, by the end of 1993 they officially numbered nearly one million out of a total of 4.48 million Israelis, or 18.3%. The Palestinian population is now estimated at over 20% of the total population. In 1967, when East Jerusalem was annexed, 60,000 Palestinians were incorporated into the State of Israel, but without becoming citizens: the land was annexed, but not the inhabitants.

Assessment

Although the initial goal of the Zionist project failed – the creation of a state made up of Ashkenazi Jews – the demographic outcome of the State of Israel's policy remains positive in that it has brought together three

14 Speaking about the government's policy towards Eastern Jews, Arieh Eliav, former MP and former secretary-general of the Israeli Labour Party, acknowledged that “one of our mistakes was the “nuclearisation” of extended families’. The Israeli authorities dismissed the elders, the custodians of their community's collective memory: “We turned these old men, these rabbis, these wise men, these natural leaders of their small community into “inferior” and unproductive people.’ “We almost forcibly took away one of their most precious possessions that they had brought with them: the Arabic language.’ “We cut off Eastern Jews from their past, their origins and their prestige.’ “We very quickly arrived at the myth of the “illiteracy” and “backwardness” of Eastern Jews...’ (A. Eliav, “Les laissés-pour-compte’ [The Forsaken], *Les Temps Modernes*, special issue, Le Second Israël, pp. 18-23, 1979.)

quarters of the Jews from the Arab and Islamic world. The situation created by the Israeli-Palestinian crisis prevents them from returning to their countries of origin, even if the second or third generation wishes to do so, and their lack of professional qualifications prevents them from emigrating to Western countries, except to swell the ranks of immigrants from Third World countries.

These Jews now represent 60% of Israel's Jewish population, but a much higher proportion of its young people, due to the fertility of this community. The vast majority of this population is likely to remain where it is and will form the “hard core” of tomorrow's Israeli society. However, it would be illusory to deduce from this demographic predominance of Eastern Jews in Israel that it is a factor favouring rapprochement with the Palestinians, contrary to what some somewhat demagogic views suggest, based on the idea that “Arab Jews” are Arabs by culture or Arabs of the Jewish faith.

From 1978 to 1987, there was a negative net migration for Israel every year¹⁵. During this period, 160,000 residents left the country and did not return, while the number of immigrants was only 100,000. However, the nature of these flows must also be taken into account. Those who leave are young people who have completed higher education and obtained skilled training, and are of an age to have children. Their motivations are essentially pragmatic: they want to leave a difficult, unsafe environment that requires three years of military service and annual military periods, while those arriving are dogmatic young religious people with no defined profession, exempt from military service and often with large families. They are the ones who will colonise the occupied territories.

There is an ageing population among Jews in the diaspora, mainly Ashkenazim. Their natural growth is zero or negative and is not sufficient to ensure population renewal. In the United States, home to the largest Jewish community in the world, the number of births per woman fell from 3.2 in 1957 to 1.4 in 1971.¹⁶

15 *Israel Monthly Bulletin of Statistics*, Vol. 39, May 88, pp. 10-13.

16 NOTE 2025.

“In the 2020 survey, Jewish adults ages 40 to 59 report having had an average of 1.9 children, the same as in the 2013 survey and slightly below the comparable figure for the general U.S. public, which is 2.3 children per adult in the same age cohort. (...)

“Based on reports from adults of all ages, the survey finds that, on average, Jews by religion have more children than Jews of no religion (1.7 vs. 1.0), and Jews with spouses who are also Jewish have more offspring than religiously intermarried Jews (2.3 vs. 1.5).

This phenomenon is also apparent in Israel, but less pronounced, and if ageing is not more significant among Ashkenazim, it is due to the high birth rate among the 100,000 or so “seminary” students.

After the periods of high immigration in the early 1950s, Israel's migration balance also became negative between 1985 and 1988: departures were not offset by arrivals. When the USSR authorised the emigration of Jews in 1990 and 200,000 of them arrived in a first wave, the Israeli authorities expected to see hundreds of thousands, even a million, more. Three years later, the movement came to a halt, but re-emigration continued.

In an article published in *Foreign Affairs*¹⁷, Yitzhak Shamir acknowledges that, during its early years, Israel absorbed and integrated 1.2 million Jews; but, he says, “contrary to common perception, the majority of these immigrants were not Holocaust survivors, but Jews from Arab countries, indigenous to the region.” Almost 800,000 of them came to Israel, he says, “and currently, more than half of Israel's population is of Middle Eastern or North African origin.” Eli Eliachar, leader of the Eastern Jews party in the Knesset from 1949, estimated in the early 1980s that this population represented 70% of the total Jewish population of Israel.

At the end of 1993, Israel's population was officially estimated at 5.5 million. Eastern Jews numbered about 2.25 million, Ashkenazi Jews, including Sephardic Jews from the Balkans, 1.35 million, and indigenous Palestinians one million. “Demographically,” writes Maurice Jacobi, “the population of Israel is that of an Arab country with Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Druze and other faiths, politically dominated by a minority of 2 million Ashkenazi settlers from Europe and America, founders of the state and holders of all power.”¹⁸ The Ashkenazi population, a minority and ageing, nevertheless holds, fifty years after the creation of the state, most of the political, military, economic and cultural power.

In reality, Israel is therefore already an Arab-Eastern state, where 70% of the Jewish, Muslim and Christian population originates from the Near or Middle East. These populations are young and growing rapidly.

“The survey also indicates that fertility among Orthodox Jews is at least twice as high as among non-Orthodox Jews. Orthodox Jewish adults report having an average of 3.3 children, while non-Orthodox Jews have an average of 1.4 children. Orthodox Jews also are five years younger, on average, when they give birth to their first child (23.6 vs. 28.6 among non-Orthodox Jews).”

PEW Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-demographics/>

17 ‘Israel at 40: Looking Back, Looking Ahead,’ *Foreign Affairs*, 1987/88.

18 ‘Palestine-Israel: The Moment of Truth?’, *Silence* No. 212-213, January 1997.

Ashkenazi Jews, who were behind the creation of the state, now represent only about 30% of its population, which is also ageing. If current trends continue, i.e. low natural growth and constant annual emigration of young people equivalent to twice the natural growth rate, they will represent only a small proportion of the total population.

We have seen that demography and politics are closely linked. To a certain extent, the left-right divide in Israel reflects group solidarity, beliefs and ethnicity rather than political choices. According to Uri Avnery, an Israeli journalist, “the ‘left’ includes the vast majority of Jews of European descent (known as Ashkenazim), who are economically better off and more culturally educated, secular liberal Jews (secular and atheist), and Arab citizens. The “right” is made up of the majority of Jews of Eastern European descent (known as Sephardim), who are victims of economic and social discrimination and less educated, but also the entire spectrum of religious Jews, voters for the National Religious Party, including extremist settlers in the occupied territories, and the ultra-Orthodox.”¹⁹

A real political revolution is foreseeable, which will consist of returning power to the Eastern Jewish majority, but such a prospect poses two problems in the long term:

- the relations that this new power will maintain with the Western powers;
- the policy it will pursue towards the Palestinians.

On this second question, we are faced with a paradox. A priori, one might think that Eastern Jews, by virtue of their traditions, are better able to understand the Palestinians and accept a compromise.

However, three factors prevent such a compromise:

- the destruction of the original culture of this community, whose younger generations have been raised to hate Arabs;
- the poorest sections of the population have been encouraged, through tax and social measures, lower rents, etc., to settle in the settlements in the occupied territories; these populations, mostly made up of Eastern Jews, are obviously not willing to leave their homes;
- the Labour Party, which had long dominated the country's political life, was responsible for the discriminatory measures against these populations, which they still remember. As a result, Eastern Jews traditionally support the right wing. During his election campaign, the attitude of Shimon Peres, Rabin's successor, did little to change this trend,

19 ‘The Handicaps of Israeli Pacifists’, Uri Avnery, *Manière de voir* No. 37.

and the fact that the new leader of the Labour Party, Ehud Barak, publicly apologised to Eastern Jews probably did little to alter the situation, as everyone saw this as a commendable but opportunistic gesture.

The myth of population exchange

One of the myths on which the Israeli authorities base their position is that of a population exchange between Israel on the one hand and the Arab countries on the other.

While there were indeed agreements between the Zionist authorities and certain states, such as Bulgaria, Yemen, Iraq and the North African states, these agreements consisted either of paying the governments of these countries a tithe per Jewish immigrant, or of transferring the property of Jews who left for Israel to the ruling classes of these countries. In all cases, these “transfers” were carried out over the heads of those being transferred, as part of a policy aimed at compensating for the lack of immigration of Ashkenazi Jews, who were reluctant to settle in Israel, by bringing in Sephardic Jews or Arab Jews in a more or less forced and provoked manner.

Socially speaking, Eastern Jews in their countries of origin were part of the middle or lower middle class – this was particularly true of Jews from Iraq. In Israel, they were transformed into proletarians, low-level supervisors of Palestinian workers and soldiers indispensable to the implementation of the state's territorial expansion policy.

As for the Palestinians, they were simply expelled during the wars of 1948 and 1967, their property and land confiscated. It would be interesting to know who benefited from the villas and prestigious apartments of wealthy Palestinians in Jerusalem and Haifa, the citrus plantations, fertile land and water resources of the expelled Palestinians: undoubtedly the ruling classes of the Yishuv rather than Jewish immigrants from Yemen, Morocco or Iraq. Nissim Rejwan, in the *Jerusalem Post International* of 15 February 1986, reveals that when Shlomo Hillel, the Iraqi-born president of the Knesset, suggested in the 1950s that some of the Palestinians' property be transferred to Iraqi immigrants in exchange for the property they had lost in Iraq, Ben-Gurion got rid of him by appointing him ambassador. In any case, if there was indeed some form of property transfer, it was not the Eastern Jews who benefited from it... It is no exaggeration to say that this was outright theft by the ruling class of a

state, legitimised by the argument of exchanging populations and their real estate and land.

One of the main host countries for the expelled Palestinians was the aborted Palestinian state, part of whose territory was to be occupied by Jordan and another part, the Gaza Strip, by Egypt.²⁰ Even Israel, which had occupied the rest of the aborted Palestinian state, became a host country, as Palestinians who were then in Galilee as a result of the acts of war were not allowed to return to their homes. Even after the end of hostilities, the creation of new uprooted communities continued, as was the case with the villagers of Ikrit and Biram, who were obliged to leave their homes and were never allowed to return. The kibbutzim and moshavim divided up their land. In 1950, the inhabitants of the town of Majdal were expelled to the Gaza Strip. The Six-Day War erased the borders between Israel and the other territories of Mandatory Palestine. The dispossession of the inhabitants' land began and has continued unabated since 1967, so that the inhabitants of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip would no longer be attached to their land. The work of Meron Benvenisti, director of the West Bank Database Project, gives an idea of the land dispossession that took place until 1987.

Of the 4.5 million Palestinians in 1981, 1.84 million lived in Greater Israel and about 2.6 million in the diaspora. The countries bordering Greater Israel took in more than two-thirds of the diaspora population, a total of 1.8 million people. Jordan alone gave asylum to 44% of the expelled Palestinians, but did not provide a single Jewish immigrant. The three neighbouring countries – Syria, Lebanon and Egypt – took in 600,000 Palestinians, but provided only 85,000 immigrants to Israel. The three Maghreb countries – Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia – provided half of all Jewish immigrants from Arab countries, a total of 600,000, but took in almost no Palestinians on their territory.

With the exception of the United States, which took in around 100,000 Palestinians, and a few other Western countries that took in 140,000, the rest of the Palestinian diaspora was taken in by oil-producing Arab states. Approximately 600,000 Palestinians settled in these countries, representing 23% of the Palestinian diaspora in 1981. Nearly 12% of the Palestinian diaspora lived in Kuwait, and nearly 10% in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf emirates. However, the countries that contributed most to Jewish

²⁰ This passage refers to the geopolitical situation in the Middle East at the time of the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 and the period following the 1948 war. The “aborted Palestinian state” refers to the state that failed to materialise at the time and the occupation of parts of Palestinian territory by Jordan and Egypt.

immigration to Israel took in almost no Palestinians. Iraq, from which 270,000 Jews originated, took in only 21,000 Palestinians. Libya, which provided 78,000 Jewish immigrants and their descendants, took in only 24,000 Palestinians. The two Yemens, which contributed to increasing Israel's population by 165,000, did not take in any Palestinians.

It is clear that there was no exchange of populations and their property between Israel and the Arab states located between the Atlantic and the Persian Gulf. The transfer of Jews from Arab countries to Israel was primarily intended to provide the new state with settlers for marginal lands, manual labourers for industry, construction and plantations, and foot soldiers for the armed forces. The total Palestinian population was estimated at 5.5 million in November 1988. According to Benvenisti, the population of the occupied territories at the end of 1987 was 1.73 million, and in what would correspond to "Greater Israel" there were 2.53 million Arabs. The Palestinian diaspora is therefore currently estimated at three million, living in countries that have provided almost no immigrants to Israel.

New immigrants to Israel

"After years of denigrating Palestinian workers living next door and drastically reducing the number of those allowed to enter the country, Israel is discovering the unexpected consequences of the alternative. The country is now importing hundreds of thousands of single people from Asia, Africa, Arab countries, Eastern Europe and even South America to work in the fields and build housing," according to the *International Herald Tribune* of 20 August 1996.

One hundred thousand immigrant workers – Chinese construction workers, Thai farm workers in the occupied territories, Filipino domestic workers and other Africans and Asians – have taken the place of the Palestinians. These foreigners – on temporary contracts or illegal immigrants – have formed a veritable enclave in the city, in the south of Tel Aviv, from which they have driven out the inhabitants. There was even a demonstration by Chinese coolies protesting against their subhuman living conditions... In addition to problems related to alcoholism and prostitution, the country has to deal with the fact that workers bring their wives or marry Israeli women, send their children to school and show no desire to leave...

Religious parties view this uncontrolled influx of people, which threatens the very definition of the State of Israel as a Jewish state, with

great suspicion. In August 1996, the new Netanyahu government recommended reducing the number of legal work permits from 103,000 to 83,000 per year within a year. Between 100,000 and 150,000 foreigners whose tourist visas have expired are expected to be sent home.

“Per capita income in Israel is \$16,000, more than in some European countries. Part of this wealth comes from \$3.2 billion in annual aid from the United States. Amid such prosperity, young Israelis do not want to work for minimum wage in restaurants or construction. The resources needed to track down illegal workers and send them home, not to mention the new social security contributions, have suddenly made Palestinian labour attractive to many Israelis²¹.”

The number of Palestinians working in Israel fell from 180,000 in 1989 to around 32,000 in 1996.

The advantage of the Palestinians, it is said, is that they have very little desire to live with the Israelis. “Palestinians don’t create the same kind of problem because they go home at the end of the day,” notes a Labour Ministry official quoted by the *International Herald Tribune*. It is also suggested that a Palestinian who can feed his family is unlikely to blow himself up with a bomb.

Construction contractors are pushing for foreign workers because they cannot rely on Palestinians, who are regularly sealed off in the Gaza Strip or on the West Bank during incidents. They are largely unaffected by government threats to raise wages in the construction industry to make the work more attractive to Israelis, as higher construction costs would lead to inflation, which the government is keen to avoid...

The closure of the territories costs the construction industry around \$1 million a day, according to the *Jerusalem Post*, in an article significantly entitled “The closure of the territories and property prices” (Weekly Selection, 14-20 April 1993). Despite urgent requests from construction employers, Palestinian job cuts have become irreversible. Even the unions are getting involved:

“The secretary of the construction workers' union, Shlomo Dahan, has expressly asked Mr Shohat [*Minister of Finance*] not to give in to this demand [*to increase the number of*

21 It should be noted that Palestinians from the occupied territories who come to work in Israel do not receive any social benefits. Or, more accurately, they pay social security contributions that go into Israeli agencies but do not receive any benefits.

Palestinians working in Israel] and not to allow thousands of Palestinians to return to the construction sites. Mr Dahan explains that this is a unique opportunity for the country to 'Israelise' the construction sector and that it would be foolish not to seize it because of the initial difficulties encountered." (*Jerusalem Post, loc. Cit.*)

This valiant trade unionist declared in the daily newspaper *Haaretz* on 1 January 1992 that "workers from the territories should be the first to leave". While Palestinian workers have indeed "left", those who have replaced them are creating even more problems. Shlomo Dahan's demand, which is hardly marked by proletarian internationalism, to "Israelise" the construction sector has apparently not been heard by contractors, who couldn't care less about the nationality or religion of their workers as long as they can exploit them in peace, and who would never dream of hiring Israeli workers if it meant paying them more. One can easily imagine the reactions that such statements would provoke if made by a French trade unionist.

Foreign workers still have a "niche" insofar as many residents of Tel Aviv's affluent and wealthy neighbourhoods do not want to entrust domestic work to Palestinians. Foreign workers live in appalling conditions, with some crammed into rooms of 15 in half-finished buildings, according to the *International Herald Tribune*. The organisation The Worker's Hotline²² is trying to expose this situation, without success. Some employers confiscate the passports of foreign workers when they arrive legally and, when their contract is about to expire, they fire them without paying them and replace them. "They use security agencies to deport them, and it's not done gently. There is usually violence and they never pay the last salary," says Hanna Zohar of the *Worker's Hotline*.

The existence of the State of Israel is based on a fundamental contradiction: created for the exclusive use of a community on the basis of religion, it owes its identity and internal legitimacy solely to that religion. A "law of return" enacted in 1950 allows any Jew on the planet to become a citizen of this state without ever having lived there, without anyone in their family having even set foot on this land for two thousand years. The same law denies all rights to millions of expelled Palestinians, whose ancestors have always lived on this land.

22 "Kav La'oved" — Worker's Hotline, 78, Allenby St., Tel Aviv, POB 2319 Zip 61022. – Tel. 03-5102266, Fax 03-5173081.

The Law of Return is intended to provide the state with the population it needs to justify its existence in its own eyes and in the eyes of world opinion. The demographic policy of this state has been to convince Jews around the world to immigrate, something they have not shown much enthusiasm for, to the point that it has been considered to bring in, through a completely artificial process, so-called Jews from India or South-East Asia, while the expelled indigenous population is denied any right of return, all because the natural growth of the Jewish population will not allow it to remain in the majority in its own state after 2010: by that date, Arabs will exceed the numerical majority in the area controlled politically by Israel ²³. The artificial nature of such a society, which can only maintain itself in its chosen form through constant immigration, which is in any case bound to dry up, is obvious.

“A promised land they no longer want”

Charly Wegman,

Le Droit, Ottawa, jeudi 22 janvier 1981

<https://numerique.banq.qc.ca/patrimoine/details/52327/4431855>

According to a report by the director of the Jewish Agency, Mr Shmuel Lahis, which caused a scandal, there are between 350,000 and 500,000 Israelis living in the United States, approximately one tenth of Israel's population. The figures are sometimes disputed, but there is no doubt that the exodus, although slow, is steady. Every month, nearly 2,000 Israelis choose exile. For most of them, their new kingdom is America, with its two poles: Los Angeles on the one hand and New York on the other, the largest Jewish city in the world, often called “Jew-York” with its theatres, newspapers and even radio programmes in Yiddish and Hebrew. In front of the US Embassy in Tel Aviv, the queue of visa applicants is often 100 to 150 metres long. In 1980 alone, 18,000 Israelis emigrated, twice as many as the previous year.

23 Philippe Fargues suggests that there is a collective unconscious that drives Palestinian families to resist through childbirth: on three occasions, the already high Palestinian fertility rate increased even further during political turning points: in the 1930s during the Great Revolt; around 1965 when resistance organised around the PLO; and between 1988 and 1991 with the Intifada. “Demography of war, demography of peace”, Philippe Fargues, in *Proche-Orient, les exigences de la paix*, ed. Complexe.

Some do not hesitate to talk about the failure of Zionism. For others, the phenomenon is simply in line with two thousand years of Jewish history, torn between the diaspora and the return to Zion. In the 1960s, David Ben-Gurion stated that “the real challenge is that of the ‘Alyah’ for Israel.” A word that means “ascent” in Hebrew, i.e. immigration to the Promised Land. The term “yordim”, with its pejorative connotation, is used to describe emigrants, “those who descend”.

In fact, the ebb and flow of the Jewish population in Israel is not a new phenomenon. Long before the creation of the State in 1926, for example, the number of Jewish emigrants from Palestine was three times higher than the number of arrivals. In 1966, during the Jewish state's first serious economic crisis, those fleeing the country en masse were told with a hint of bitterness: “The last one to leave should turn off the lights at Lod-Tel Aviv airport.”

“Brain drain”

What really concerns Israeli politicians is the nature of this emigration. There are, of course, the traditional underprivileged members of consumer society, the poor and marginalised, attracted by the “American dream” and who, over the years, have swelled the ranks of what the American magazine *Newsweek* calls “the Israeli mafia”, specialists in insurance fraud, blackmail and drug trafficking. But in 1980, emigrants were part of the elite, often army officers, kibbutz natives, doctors or wealthy merchants who burned their bridges without the slightest qualms of conscience. According to Mr Lahis' report, this phenomenon of “brain drain” is all the more serious as the emigrants in question are gradually becoming less and less concerned about the fate of Israel.

An Israeli consul in the United States who asked 17,000 of them to donate to a fund for Israel's national defence received only 40% favourable responses. What is more, Mr Lahis' report continues, the vast majority of these emigrants' children do not receive any Jewish education.

The majority of Jews from the USSR choose the United States. Under Israeli law, anyone who has not returned to Israel after four years abroad is considered an emigrant. According to the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, 31,400 people left Israel in 1980: how many of them will return? The question remains unanswered. But in the same year, only 20,700 new immigrants were registered, a 44% drop compared to 1979...

“The Israelis do not continue the Israelites, they transform them,” wrote André Malraux. However, there are fewer and fewer candidates for the Israeli adventure in the West, and the wild hope invested in Soviet Judaism ended in failure. In 1980, the USSR opened its doors to only 7,000 Jews; 77.5% of them chose America over Israel. The pattern is quite simple. Upon arrival in Vienna, Russian Jews are taken in by two American Jewish organisations, the Joint Distribution Committee and HIAS, and then transferred to Rome, where they await their visas for the United States. These visas are automatically issued to

them under an amendment to the US Immigration Act, which grants political refugee status and rights to anyone fleeing a totalitarian regime.

The refusal of Russian Jews to settle in Israel is symptomatic. It is expressed above all by the general unease of Israeli society, which is facing annual inflation of 150%, glaring social injustices and a climate of constant tension. The occupation of Arab territories does not help matters. For many, it is perceived as a symbol of oppression contrary to the values desired by the founding fathers of the state. The very foundation of Israel is the Zionist creed. The emigration of the elites and the considerable decline in immigration appear to be two sides of a crisis of values unprecedented in the country's history. Paradoxically, this is happening at a time when Israel has signed a peace agreement with Egypt, the most powerful of the Arab countries. Is Israel in danger of peace?

“Faced with the Arab multitude, the problem of emigration is not just a question of numbers, but above all a fundamental spiritual phenomenon,” says Israeli poet Haim Gouri. For those who have not seen the meeting of memory and landscape come to fruition, the despair is terrible. Beyond the promised land there is nothing, and all exiles are possible.

Note October 2025:

A report by the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, published at the end of December 2024, reveals a significant exodus of Israelis, with 82,700 long-term departures in 2024. Since the outbreak of war on October 7, 2023, thousands of citizens have been fleeing to Europe and the United States, questioning the foundations of the Zionist project and threatening the future of the Hebrew state. This movement mainly concerns people from the higher-educated classes and young people, with no intention of returning. The United States remains the main destination, followed by European countries such as Germany, Portugal, Greece and the Netherlands, where ancestors of these emigrants live.

The historical goal of Israel to provide a secure national home for Jews appears to be failing, as indicated by studies showing that a significant number of Israeli Jews are considering emigration due to current political and social trends. Emigration, or *yerida*, has consistently outpaced immigration, with around 650,000 Israelis having left the country for over a year by 2005, mostly Jews. Polls reveal that a majority of remaining Israeli Jews sympathise with those who leave. Many are seeking foreign passports for security, viewing them as insurance against potential instability.

Two main explanations for this trend are presented: one argues that the perceived safety of Israel is diminishing, prompting consideration of emigration, while the other suggests economic motivations for those who remain abroad. However, the increasing desire for foreign passports indicates deeper concerns about the future of the Israeli state. If these trends continue, demographic shifts will likely result in a shrinking Jewish majority and an increasing Arab population due to higher birth rates. This could exacerbate tensions between Palestinian and Jewish communities. Moreover, the remaining Jewish population may increasingly consist of ideological extremists and those without the means to leave, potentially leading to a more dictatorial regime.

As the ideological divide deepens, those advocating for peace with Palestinians may be silenced or marginalised, creating a society where dissent is punished. This scenario reflects a broader historical pattern where groups, when consumed by rigid ideologies, can devolve into victimisers rather than victims. The implications for Israel's future are dire and warrant serious concern.

WATER

After demographics and land, water is one of the vital strategic issues for the State of Israel, and we will see that this issue explains why *it is impossible for Israel to return the occupied territories*. These three issues are closely intertwined, as a policy of mass immigration of Jews from the Soviet Union requires more space to house them and a greater quantity of water for the population. In fact, Israelis consume more water than their renewable resources can provide, which, in the absence of any political will to rationalise its use, imposes a policy of appropriating water from neighbouring countries.

Institutionalised waste

The water reserves of Israel and the territories it occupies are overexploited and squandered. Institutionalised waste allows domestic, agricultural and industrial needs to be met with a quantity of water that is not typical for a country in the Middle East. The water shortage, which will worsen if the same policy is maintained, is largely caused by

consumer prices for agriculture that are below cost price and encourage waste.

More than two-thirds of water is consumed by agriculture and more than half of agricultural water is used by kibbutzim, i.e. 2% of the Israeli population, which has almost complete control over the aquifer resources of the inland plains, the Jordan River and Lake Tiberias, the Beit Shaan springs and all the boreholes drilled in the surrounding area.

The sale price of water to agriculture is three times lower than its cost price... If water were sold to agriculture at its true price, including the cost of depreciation of the facilities, the waste of groundwater would be significantly reduced. However, the cost of investments and their depreciation are not taken into account; even the daily operating costs of water are not fully taken into account. The state, in the form of subsidies, pays the difference between the daily operating costs and the price paid by the farmer. When, in 1988, the authorities wanted to increase the price of water by 40% during the summer months, pressure from the kibbutzim, absentee owners of irrigated vineyards, and wealthy owners of moshav land near large urban areas prevented this increase. It is domestic consumers and, to a lesser extent, industrial consumers who partially compensate for this price imbalance.

During the second half of the 1980s, Israel experienced a very serious water crisis; the water table had fallen so low that dozens of boreholes were salinised by sucking in water from the Mediterranean Sea. All of the country's water resources was being exploited, and there was a deficit of 600 million cubic metres. Furthermore, the state of Israel no longer has the capacity to increase its resources by force, as it did in 1967, 1978 and 1982 at the expense of neighbouring countries.

There are ways to prevent water wastage, but this requires the implementation of an ambitious, long-term investment policy, whereas the state seems more concerned with developing the colonisation of the occupied territories.

The northern part of Israel is not a dry country, with between 500 and 1.100 mm of rainfall per year. Rainfall in the country amounts to 10 billion cubic metres, of which only one billion feeds the water table. This leaves experts with a wide scope for action to recover water. Storing winter rainfall, recovering runoff water that is lost in the Mediterranean, and building dams could, together with selling water at its true price, save large quantities of water.

But it would also be necessary to reconsider certain economic choices, such as cotton cultivation, which requires large quantities of water. For the time being, the Israeli authorities seem to find it easier to carry out large-scale theft of water from neighbouring countries.

But certain economic choices, such as cotton cultivation, which requires large quantities of water, should also be reconsidered. For the moment, the Israeli authorities seem to think it is easier to carry out large-scale theft of water from neighbouring countries.

The longer the authorities wait, the greater the investment required for a rational water policy will be, but also the more secondary it will appear in the face of the immediate expenditure required to simply renew the existing water network, which is ageing and, as a result, causing significant water loss... and the more the authorities will be tempted to tackle the problem by adopting the easy solution of capturing ever-increasing quantities of water from their neighbours.

Water, a strategic issue

It is often overlooked that the first conflict between the State of Israel and an Arab country took place in 1953 with Syria. Israel attempted to implement a plan to divert water from the Jordan River to irrigate the Negev desert. After Syria complained to the UN Security Council, the United States threatened to suspend its economic and military aid of \$50 million per year.

After this initial conflict, several plans were proposed to resolve the issue of water sharing, which included Israeli-Arab cooperation for the exploitation of the Jordan River's waters and distribution according to a quota system. The Arab countries refused, believing that this was a means for Israel to control the water. Israel refused because the project did not include the waters of the Lebanese river, the Litani.

By agreeing to discuss the issue, the Arab states would have recognised, for the first time, the de facto existence of Israel. With no agreement possible, Israel continued with its water projects, which would enable the irrigation of the Negev desert in the south thanks to a huge pipeline fed by enormous turbines built on Lake Tiberias in the north of the country. It is significant that the first terrorist operation by Fatah against Israel, on 1 January 1965, was an attempt to sabotage the Israeli national aqueduct.

To counter the consequences of Israel's water capture policy, the Arabs decided to divert the Banyas River to Syria and Jordan and to build two artificial reservoirs on the Yarmouk River to prevent water from the Jordan

River's sources from reaching Lake Tiberias, which fed Israeli pipelines to the Negev. Israel bombed the Syrian structures on the Banyas in March and May 1965, then the Syrian-Jordanian dam on the Yarmouk in April 1967.

The 1967 Arab-Israeli War put an end to the controversy with Israel's occupation of the Golan Heights' water sources, giving it control over the Al-Dane and Banyas tributaries and other resources, amounting to 200 million cubic metres per year.

The occupation of the right bank of the Jordan River made it possible to increase the amount of water pumped. The volume of water drawn from the Jordan River by Israel averages 520 million cubic metres per year, to which must be added the 80 million cubic metres pumped from the river between Lake Tiberias and the Dead Sea.

In 1978, the occupation of southern Lebanon enabled the Israelis to take control of the Litani and Wazani rivers. The Litani has an average flow of 987 million cubic metres per year; the Israelis intend to capture half of this to feed into Lake Tiberias. The sources of this river are 3 km from Israel's northern border. It is clear that this region of Lebanon occupied by Israel is of vital strategic importance.

A weapon against the Palestinians

Between 35 and 40% of Israel's water resources come from the three aquifers in the occupied West Bank.

Since the occupation of this region began in 1967, the water resources of the West Bank – as well as those of Gaza – have been declared “strategic resources under military control”, allowing Israeli settlers to grow grass while Palestinian farmers are prohibited from drilling wells. Israel set about reducing Palestinian consumption. Palestinians were prohibited from pumping water from the Jordan River for “security” reasons. Palestinian farmers were no longer able to irrigate much of the extremely fertile land along the river.

An order limits the depth of drilling by Palestinians to 100 metres, while settlers can drill up to 600 metres. Palestinian wells are often dried up because of drilling for new wells in neighbouring Israeli settlements. One hundred and fifty hectares of banana plantations and 500 hectares of vegetable crops have been dried up in the village of Owja, north of Jericho, because settlers from Gilgat and Yitav dug three wells, drying up the spring that supplied water to the village.

The price of water is also four times higher for Palestinians than for Israelis. At the end of the 1980s, one million Palestinians were allocated 137 million cubic metres of water, while 100,000 Jewish settlers had 100 million cubic metres.²⁴ The Palestinian population is therefore subject to widespread rationing, resulting in deplorable sanitary conditions and the collapse of the agricultural economy, as only 25% of irrigable agricultural land is actually irrigated (compared to 95% of irrigable land within Israel). The increase in the Palestinian population will make the situation even worse, as Israeli plans have frozen the amount of water available to them.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is based on Israel's occupation of territories claimed by the Palestinians. This conflict is in fact secondary if we take a regional perspective in which Israel occupies territories and captures the water of neighbouring states: Lebanon and Syria for territories and water, Jordan for water. For these states, resolving the conflict with the Palestinians is not a priority, and it cannot be ruled out that the negotiations that began in Madrid in 1991, which are strictly bilateral, will result in agreements on water that will be at the expense of the Palestinians, despite the support of their so-called "Arab brothers".

Jordan is undoubtedly the state that would be most tempted to sign an agreement on this issue. The Jordan River, whose waters are coveted by both countries, forms a common border with Israel. In 1991, 30% of its agricultural land remained fallow due to lack of water. Its water resources are very limited, as are the possibilities for increasing them. The construction of the Al-Wihda dam on the Yarmouk would increase its resources, but Israel refuses to allow the dam to be built unless a final agreement on the sharing of the waters of this river and the Jordan is signed.

The Al-Wihda dam, a project dating back to 1953, would hold back 225 million cubic metres of water per year and irrigate an additional 3,500 hectares in the Jordan Valley. An 8 MW power plant would supply electricity to Syria. This project is being blocked by the Israelis and Americans, with international donors, led by the World Bank and USAID, refusing to provide any funding until an agreement on the sharing of the Yarmouk's waters has been signed with Israel.

The problem is that the Yarmouk is also a border river between Jordan and Syria, and any work on this watercourse requires the agreement of the latter, which is in no hurry, as Damascus is demanding the prior return of

24 Which corresponds to 7 litres per Palestinian and 1,000 litres per Israeli

the Golan Heights. In short, in order to build a dam on the Yarmouk, Jordan must wait for Damascus and Tel Aviv to normalise their relations.

Clearly, the Israeli-Arab conflict is directly linked to regional water policy and goes beyond the simple Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The return of the Golan Heights to Syria means the return of 200 million cubic metres of water per year (22% of Israel's consumption). The return of the occupied Lebanese territories would mean the return of 480 million cubic metres, if the water collection project is completed. Israel, Jordan and the West Bank are totally dependent on the waters of the Jordan River. The West Bank's groundwater reserves (335 million cubic metres per year) and the tributaries of the Jordan River account for 35% to 40% of Israel's water resources. According to a United Nations report, 67% of Israel's water consumption comes from territories annexed after 1948.

Is it conceivable, from the occupying power's point of view, to give up such a large amount of water?

Excerpt from from Israël-Palestine, Mondialisation et micro-nationalismes (1998) – Éditions Acratie.....1

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