

PARENTS OF ARABIA

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Israel, we have been told, is under the demographic gun. Palestinians bear twice as many children as Israelis, therefore making Israeli settlements in the West Bank "steadily less tenable," according to New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof. Historian Paul Kennedy, who specializes in wrong-headed history of the future, goes a step further, predicting a "demographic boiling-over" in the Arab world that will eventually "obliterate Israel or drive it to some desperate action."

Now, it may well be that Israel should leave the settlements, as Mr. Kristof argues. And it may well be that Israel is in for a long, drawn-out war, as Mr. Kennedy predicts. But it won't be because of a population explosion in the Arab world. Truth is, fertility rates in Arab and Muslim countries have been falling rapidly in recent decades. Indeed, it would be remarkable were they not; it's been happening everywhere else.

Consider North Africa, using data from the United Nations Population Division. Forty years ago, the total fertility rate (number of children per woman) was 7.1. Today it is 3.1 and sinking like a stone. Egypt, the most populous Arab country, has seen its TFR plummet from 7.1 children per woman to just 2.9 today; Tunisia's is 2.1, below the rate required to keep a population stable over time in a less developed country, and down by a child in just a decade.

Go East. Syrian fertility has fallen from 7.8 to 3.6. Lebanon: 6.4 to 2.2, about replacement level and sinking. From peak year to the present, here are some other numbers: Jordan dropped from eight to

4.3 children per woman; Iraq from 7.2 to 4.8; Saudi Arabia 7.3 to 5.4. The numbers are still high by Western standards, but they're falling steadily.

Go further East. The incredible story is Iran, a theocratic and despotic Muslim country. At its peak, its TFR was seven children per woman. At a recent U.N. conference, an Iranian demographer delivered a paper which calculated the current TFR at 2.06 and falling. Like Iran, the most populous Muslim countries are not Arab. Nearly all -- including Turkey, Bangladesh and Indonesia -- have also seen major declines in fertility, only Pakistan remains high.

The Arab nations are vast in size but small in population. Beyond Egypt's 70 million there isn't an Arab nation with more than 35 million people, which is about as many folks as currently reside in California. The estimated total Arab population in all 22 member nations of the Arab League is about 280 million, slightly less than the population of the United States.

The bottom line is that the demographic situation for the Jews of Israel is not nearly as bleak as it is sometimes portrayed. The Jewish Israeli TFR is about 2.7 children per woman. It has come down some but it remains the highest of any modern country, the only one seriously above the replacement rate, and about twice the rate for Jews in the rest of the world.

Why? It is my belief that Jewish fertility in Israel concerns the 50-year war that the Israelis have been subjected to since their independence in 1948. Many Israeli families have had an additional child as an "insurance policy," fearing that one child may be lost in war. There is a certain paradox here: Waging war against Israel actually creates more Israelis. Of course,

we have also heard the converse, that Israeli repression creates more Palestinian babies to reconquer Israel.

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The U.N. issues data for what it calls the "Occupied Palestinian Territory." On average, Palestinian women are bearing 5.6 children, which is a very high rate, but down from an estimated eight in 1970 and seven in 1985.

The current population of Israel is six million, up from an estimated 1.2 million in 1950. U.N. estimates put today's population of the OPT at 3.1 million, up from one million in 1950. By the year 2025, Israel's population is slated to go to 8.5 million, boosted by continuing immigration. Meanwhile, the Occupied Palestinian Territory population, presumably to be called Palestine sometime before 2025, is slated to go to 7.1 million, but given the drop in Muslim fertility in neighboring countries, I'd guess it will be short of that. On the other hand, some of the Israeli growth will be coming from Israeli Arabs.

In short, in the next 25 years, Israel and Palestine will have grown into two countries of about 6 million to 8 million people each, living side by side, in peace or in war, one modern, one hopefully modernizing. The neighboring Arab countries, also hopefully modernizing, will grow, but they are not large countries and there will be less growth than has been anticipated.

There are many factors that go into the idea of power: armed might, economic wealth, allies, technology, an educated citizenry, spirit and, always important, numbers. But Israel vs. the Palestinians is one showdown that is not going to be settled demographically. Relax, Paul.

