

## POLITICS OF DEMOGRAPHY AND URBAN SPACE IN ‘THE LAND OF PROPHETS’: ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT AND OCCUPATION POLICY

(Politik Demografi dan Ruang Bandar di ‘Tanah Nabi’: Konflik dan Polisi  
Pekerjaan Israel-Palestin)

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### ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyze the present condition of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by focusing on demography and space, in particular the urban space of the sacred cities, and examine the relationship between these two issues in the conflict. Obviously, demography and space are indivisible factors of Israeli-Palestinian conflict. At the national level, it concerns the demarcation between Israel and Palestine, and at the city level, urban space is a tying node of the politics of demography and space. Particularly, the conflict in the urban space of sacred city, the legitimacy of existence is contended. In such a case, even at the level of representation, demography and space have great deal of importance to decide how the conflict develops. So, demography and space are important both at national and city level, this might be an element to link between the macro and micro level of Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

**Keywords:** Politics; demography; urban space; Israeli-Palestinian conflict

### ABSTRAK

*Artikel ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis keadaan semasa konflik Israel-Palestin dengan memberi tumpuan kepada demografi dan ruang, khususnya ruang bandar di bandar suci, dan mengkaji hubungan antara kedua-dua isu dalam konflik tersebut. Jelas sekali, demografi dan ruang adalah faktor terpisah dalam konflik Israel-Palestin. Di peringkat kebangsaan, ia berkaitan dengan sempadan antara Israel*

*dan Palestin, dan di peringkat bandar, ruang bandar adalah nod yang mengikat politik demografi dan ruang. Terutamanya, konflik di ruang bandar di bandar suci, legitimasi kewujudan dipertikaikan. Dalam kes sedemikian, walaupun pada tahap perwakilan, demografi dan ruang mempunyai banyak kepentingan untuk menentukan bagaimana konflik itu berkembang. Oleh itu, demografi dan ruang penting di peringkat kebangsaan dan bandar, ini mungkin menjadi elemen untuk menghubungkan antara tahap makro dan mikro dalam konflik Israel-Palestin.*

***Kata kunci:*** Politik; demografi; ruang bandar; konflik Israel-Palestin

## INTRODUCTION

The establishment of the state of Israel brought about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And the Zionist movement was the seed of this establishment, and its famous slogan was 'a land without a people for a people without a land'. As indicated by these words, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has developed along the axes of demography and land (space). Furthermore Israel was established as the Jewish national home, so naturally the founders of Israel aimed to build a state with a Jewish majority.

The two issues of demography and space have gained more importance since the Six-Day War in 1967, which caused three important changes. Firstly, Israel started controlling the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, secondly occupying their lands, and thirdly in both Israel and Palestine, the religious revival appeared and religious groups gained power. By these changes, firstly, the demographic balance between Jews and Arabs became a political issue concerned with the legitimacy of control or the existence of Israel as a Jewish state. Secondly, the occupied lands also became an important issue concerning the national security and the demographic balance. And, influenced by the religious revival, new ways of thinking emerged and the whole land including the occupied one was conceived of as a promised and indivisible land. At the same time, with the inclusion of Jerusalem and Hebron, the sacred cities started to be seen as important places from the perspective of conflict and religion.

Reflecting these changes from 1967, this article aims to analyze the present condition of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by focusing on demography and space, in particular the urban space of the sacred cities, and examine the relationship between these two issues in the conflict.

## **ISRAELI POLITICS ON DEMOGRAPHY: ARENAS AND MEASURES**

### **Two Arenas of the Politics of Demography**

For the Israeli government, the politics of demography has two arenas. The former is Israeli domestic politics and this can be seen from the problem of the relationship between the Arab citizens living in Israel (Israeli Arabs) and Israeli democracy. According to the announcement of the Central Bureau of Statistics of Israel, in 2013 the proportion of Israeli Arabs in relation to all the Israeli citizens amounts to 20.7% (CBS 2013a) and additionally in 2012 the population growth rate of Israeli Arabs was 2.3% and this is higher than that of Jewish citizens (1.8%) (CBS 2013b). From such circumstances, in the near future, the Israeli government will be obliged to make efforts to cope with the growing social and political demands of its Arab citizens while preserving the Jewishness of the process of policy making (Bystrov & Soffer 2008). The issue of Arab demography in Israeli domestic politics is deeply related to the problem of 'ethnic democracy', which is generated by the two contradicting Israeli national policies; liberal democracy and Jewishness.

The second arena is Israeli-Palestinian conflict and here the matter is the demographic balance of Jews and Arabs all over historical Palestine. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, in 2013 the Palestinian population growth rate is 2.6% in the West Bank and 3.4% in the Gaza Strip and the average is 2.9% (PCBS 2014). Although the population growth rate of Palestinian people has been declining year by year, the rate is still higher than that of Israeli Jewish people. In the politics of demography, the Palestinians are situated in an advantageous position over the Jewish people. The high rate of Palestinian population growth has been referred as 'demographic time bomb' by the Israeli demographer and policy makers (Faitelson 2009).

Such a relationship between Jews and Arabs in the politics of demography is also expressed as the parity year, which means the year when demographic balance is achieved. The exact year of parity differs among the demographers, but what is common is the projection that the Jewish people will become the minority in historical Palestine in the near future. For instance, a demographer Youssef Courbage projects that the Jewish and Arabic people will be competing in 2020 and in 2025 the Jews number 7,268,000 and Arabs amount to 7,514,000 (Courbage 2012). Also, the demographer Sergio Della Pergola says in 2015 the number of the Arabs surpass the Jews (Della Pergola 2011).

From the above, the possible problems arising from these characteristics of demography are the following two situations. The first is that the Israeli Arabs will

destroy the Jewishness of Israeli democracy and the second is the formation of a 'Bi-national state' comprised of an Arab majority.

### **Israeli Policies toward the Problem of Demography**

Israel is in an unfavorable situation from the perspective of demographic dynamics, so in order to solve the future problems mentioned above, the Israel government has adopted many kinds of policies.

The first policy is encouraging the immigration of Jews, which has historically played an important role to form the Jewish majority and establish the Jewish state. What supports the Jewish immigration is 'the Law of Return', which defines who is the Jew and who has the right to be an Israeli citizen. The law in use says that whoever has even one Jew among their parents and grandparents is entitled to 'return' to Israel. This definition is criticized because this law would give citizenship to people who don't necessarily live according to Jewish traditions, and a researcher points out that the law signifies the government's political aim to try to include as many Jews as possible in order to preserve state of Jewish majority (Hayao 2008). Israel government has taken measures for the mass immigration. For example, the measures for the Ethiopian Jews were known as 'Operation Moses' and 'Operation Solomon' (Hayao 2008). This kind of policy can be observed as a basic measure on the Israeli politics of demography in that this tries to increase absolute quantity of Jews.

The second policy is the encouragement of the emigration of Arabs and this has been referred also as the 'Transfer' policy. The policy of Transfer has been discussed a lot among the Israeli policy makers (Blecher 2002; Zureik 2003), however the forced mass Transfer was criticized as racist and it is contrary to Israeli democratic thought, so this has never been put into practice. On the other hand, the theme about the deprivation of citizenship of Israeli Arabs, so-called 'the Transfer of citizenship' and the plan of Transfer of Israeli Arabs by economic incentives have been discussed actively (Zureik 2003). The main goal of this kind of argument is to accomplish both the preservation of Jewishness and democracy in Israel. And in the Herzliya Conference in 2000, which was deeply related to Israeli policy making, it was suggested that the Israeli government should force Israeli Arabs to choose either to confirm their second-class status in a Jewish state or to abandon their Israeli citizenship (Blecher 2002). Collective Transfer has been seen as a racist policy and it was anticipated that it would be criticized by international society (Zureik 2003), so the argument of Transfer focuses mainly on the Israeli Arabs, who number less than the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Policies of Transfer are mainly

reflected in the first future problem, which is about the contradicting Israeli national policy of Jewish and democratic state.

The third policy is to demarcate a favorable border for Israel by reflecting demographic conditions. The demarcation of the border centers on the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. This policy focuses mainly on the second future problem, which is about the expansion of Israeli state land and demography. A policy to prevent the formation of a Bi-national state comprised of an Arab majority was introduced by the former Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon. His major policies were the construction of a separation wall and the plan of disengagement from the Gaza Strip. Although these policies were both based on the fact that the Palestinian population growth rate is much higher than the Jewish one (Ghanem 2007), Sharon did not only focus on demography when he made these policies. If he had decided policies only by the demographic dimension, there would have been no need to build the wall over the Green Line, which is the armistice line. According to Mori (2008), Sharon did not show any interest in building the wall at first, because of his desire to make the state of Israel equal to 'Erez Israel', which is the Promised Land written in the Old Testament (Mori 2008). So, he wanted to demarcate the border without compromising his desire at all and consequently the wall took some of the Palestinian lands into Israeli proper (Ghanem 2007). From this point, it is true that Sharon executed policies by reflecting the demography, however he also couldn't abandon his dream of 'Erez Israel', so he made the decision to build the wall and disengage from the Gaza Strip in a dilemma between territorial expansion and demography.

Following Sharon, Ehud Olmert became the Prime Minister in 2006 and he said clearly that Israel should give up the expansion of its territory and put precedence on the preservation of the Jewishness of the state of Israel. Moreover, Olmert asserted, "the abandoning of territorial expansion in order to accomplish the democracy and Jewishness of the two principal national policies was not in opposition to Zionism" (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2006), and furthermore "the failure of the two-state solution with Palestinians means the demise of the state of Israel as a Jewish State" (Faitelson 2009). In the end he couldn't accomplish the two-state solution, and Benjamin Netanyahu took office as his successor. Netanyahu has almost same political ideology as former Prime Minister Sharon, so it may be inevitable that Netanyahu also confronts the dilemma, as Sharon did, between the expansion of the territory and demography. Sharon carried out some measures to separate Israel and Palestinian territories, but some of the members in Likud party including Netanyahu opposed these policies, so Sharon made the new Kadima Party, and the *raison d'être* of this party was 'disengagement' (Yiftachel 2009).

From the above argument, the following things can be confirmed as a summary. There are two political spectrums over the politics of demography. One is what I call 'Less Israelist', which mainly focuses on the small Israeli territory and the issue between democracy and demography. Another is 'Greater Israelist', which try to maximize territory with attention on Jewishness of Israel and confronts the dilemma of these. And thus, it can be said that for both political spectrums, demography has considerable importance and the Israel government cannot ignore this point when deciding any measures, concerning the existential legitimacy of the state of Israel as a Jewish State or the controlling of a certain area as a territory of Israel.

### **ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT OVER URBAN SPACE**

As clarified in the argument about the politics of demography, the element of the space is a matter deeply related to the demography. In addition to the settlements and separation wall, typical Israeli policies concerning land/space are land grabbing, house demolition and so on. This chapter firstly focuses on the issue of space in the general structure, and after that deals with the conflict on an urban scale.

#### **Israeli Occupation Policy and Space: Spaciocide Theory**

The matter of space in the conflicts has emerged since 1967 as a meaningful point in dispute, because Israel got the West Bank and the Gaza Strip as an occupied territory and the government had to decide how to manage the occupation. The then government was controlled by the Labor party and in order to accomplish national security, the party planned to build settlements along the border with Jordan. However, influenced by the religious revival, some settler groups such as Gush Emunim (the Block of Faithful) began to settle all over the West Bank and they aimed to identify the territory of the state of Israel with the Promised Land 'Erez Israel'. Movements like this gained more power after the 'Greater Israelist' Likud party took office in 1977 and the treatment of occupied land, in particular the West Bank, became the point of dispute in the Israeli politics.

Concerning the meaning of the space in the conflict, Palestinian sociologist Sari Hanafi identifies Israeli policies as 'Spaciocide'. The fundamental point of Hanafi's view is the fact of the small number of deaths in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict when compared with another war like Rwanda in the 1990's. And he comments as follows, "The Israeli colonial project is 'spacio-cidal' (as opposed to genocidal) in that it targets land for the purpose of rendering inevitable the 'voluntary' transfer of the Palestinian population, primarily by targeting the space upon which the Palestinian people live" (Hanafi 2009). From this description, the close relation with demography and space may be obvious. And also, he says, spaciocide is

“more holistic, incorporating ‘sociocide’ (targeting Palestinian society as a whole), ‘economocide’ (hindering the movement of people and goods) and ‘politicide’ (destroying Palestinian National Authority (PNA) institutions, and other physical embodiments of national aspirations)” (Hanafi 2006). Spaciocide can include almost everything about the Israeli policies on the Palestinians.

### **Historical Development of the City of Hebron**

Thus, based on the argument of ‘Spaciocide’, the following paragraphs analyze the conflict in the urban space, focusing on the conflict in Hebron in particular.

The main reason why Hebron has been seen as a sacred city both from Judaism and Islam is the existence of the burial place of Prophet Abraham and his family. This city is referred as al-Khalil in Arabic by the Muslims and Hebron in Hebrew by the Jews and both are named after the tradition by which Abraham was seen as the friend of Allah. Quran says “Allah did take Ibrahim for a friend” (al-Nisa’ 4:125). So this city has often been mentioned as the fourth-sacred city of Islam and the second of the four holy cities of Judaism. Jewish people often refer Hebron as cradle of their religion and ethnicity (Suissa 2009). More specifically, the mosque built over the burial place of Abraham is named ‘Ibrahim Mosque or Haram Ibrahim’ and the burial site itself under the ground is called the ‘Cave of Machpela or Cave of Patriarchs’ by the Jewish people.

There were massacres in Hebron in 1929 and 1994. In the former, 67 Jewish people were killed and the then Jewish community was driven out, and in the latter a Jewish settler opened fire on Muslims while they were praying and 29 Muslims were killed and over 100 people were injured. After this massacre, Israel and Palestinian authority contracted the ‘Hebron Agreement’ in 1997 and this decided the division of Hebron city into H1 and H2. While H1 is under Palestinian control, H2 is under the Israeli sovereignty and the Israel Defense Force (IDF) is on the alert there, watching the Palestinians closely all the time.

### **Destruction of the Urban Space and the Judaization Policies**

Until now, in Hebron, there have been ‘Judaization’ policies made by Israel and through this the Palestinian urban space and social life have been destroyed. This can be seen as one of the examples of ‘Urbicide’, the killing of urban space. Urbicide can be defined as (1) assault on urbanity and (2) the characteristics of urbanity are shared spatiality, heterogeneity or its communal identity (Abujidi 2014; Coward 2009). In short, urbanity is a multiplicity and consequently Urbicide is a motion of monopolization. Additionally, Abujidi says there are two forms of Urbicide

in Palestine. The first is direct Urbicide, and this is also referred as ‘Urbicide by destruction’ of living infrastructures or historical symbolic buildings. The second is indirect Urbicide and this is also called as ‘Urbicide by construction’ of settlements or separation wall (Abujidi 2014). And the policies to kill the urban space or Judaization have two dimensions. This way of thinking was provided by the analysis of (Pullan et al. 2013), which studies the conflict in the urban space of Jerusalem. According to these authors, the Judaization in Jerusalem, firstly, has been carried out from the perspective of demographic balance in the city and secondly, the matter is “the privileging of a Jewish interpretation and representation of Jerusalem to the exclusion of other religious and ethnic histories, claims and visions” (Pullan et al. 2013). The first is the Judaization on the ground and this concerns anything existing on the ground of conflict like demographic change. And the second is Judaization in representation, which tries to represent the city as a Jewish city by promoting this externally. In fact, these two dimensions cannot be understood separately. Increase of the Jewish population will support the successful representation of city as a Jewish city and will encourage the Judaization at the discourse level.

Concerning the ground condition of conflict, the element of demography is definitely important. In 2005, the four settlements in the Old City (Avraham Avinu, Beit Romano, Beit Hadassah and Tel Rumeida) had 600 settlers and 1500-2000 IDF soldiers around it. Moreover, in the two settlements outside the Old City (Kiryat Arba and Givat Ha’avot), approximately 6400 settlers lived (OCHA 2005) and they usually came into the Old City to pray.

On the other hand, the population of the Palestinians has been declining in H2 area. In 2005, the number of the Palestinians in Hebron was 170,000 and the population in the Israeli-controlled H2 area was 35,000 (OCHA 2005). Although the population in the Old City in 1967 was said to be 7500, by 1990 this had declined to 1500 (Sellick 1994). However the exact statistics of the decline of the Palestinian population in the Old City is not available, but in 2007 42% of the houses in the Old City were vacant (B’Tselem 2007), so it is clear that the Palestinian de-population is still under way.

The socio-economic condition is one of the main causes of Palestinian de-population. According to the research by B’Tselem, the curfew order was issued 377 times from 2000 to 2003, and among these, the 180 days long curfew was ordered (B’Tselem 2007). Besides this, IDF often carried out the closure policy, which restricts the use of a specific place or street. The major case of this policy was the closure of al-Shuhada Street in 1998. Al-Shuhada Street was used to be a popular market place and the socio-economic center of the Palestinians. By these policies,

76.6% of the shops in the Old City were not opened all the time or just opened sporadically (B'Tselem 2007).

The main goal of such policies is two-fold; the first is to encourage the Palestinian voluntary Transfer by making their lives in the Old City difficult. As Hanafi mentioned, this intend to grab the Palestinian space by targeting the space upon which the Palestinian people live and thus decrease the population. The second is to divide the living space of the Jews and Arabs in the Old City by closure policy and the Israeli government tries to make a part of an 'Arab free Jewish city' (B'Tselem 2007) and aims to enlarge such a part. As one of the measures to make Hebron a Jewish city, the Israeli Ministry of Tourism planned to build the 'Settler Promenade' leading from Tel Rumeida to Kiryat Arba (AIC 2004). Combining these two, the Israeli government aims to change the facts on the ground.

Next, as the dimension of Judaization in representation, the Israeli government and the settler organization promote the Jewish character of Hebron externally. The major measure for this was the Israeli governmental decision to put the Cave of Machpelah on the 'national heritage list' in 2010 (The Guardian 2010). And also Israel and Palestine contend about the heritage in the international arena like UNESCO (Huffington Post 2011). The other cases are the tours organized by the settler groups in Hebron. In this kind of tour, there are IDF soldiers along the tourists (Open Democracy 2011) and one of the tours is said to put centrality on resurrection of the Jewish community, which was destroyed in 1929 by Arabs and in this tour the violent character of the Arabs in Hebron is emphasized (Clarke 2002).

Of course, it is unclear how effective these Israeli policies for Judaization in representation are. However, as mentioned by Khalidi, by the asymmetrical relation of the sovereign state of Israel and the quasi-state of Palestine, Israel can mobilize its own narrative or representation as an 'official' opinion of some places or the conflict itself (Khalidi 2007). Even if one of the main actors of this Judaization is the settler organization, the sovereign state of Israel is the critical factor as a supporter of Jewish narrative and representation.

As such, Israel actively carries out measures to Judaize Hebron both on the ground and by representation. In such circumstances, the organization to resist Judaization is Hebron Rehabilitation Committee (HRC). HRC sets its objectives (1) to preserve the cultural heritage by maintaining the constitutional elements of old buildings, (2) to revive the Old City by consolidating ties with the population and upgrading the infrastructure and (3) to counter and limit Israeli settlements inside the Old City by surrounding settlements with inhabited buildings to prevent their horizontal expansion and to avert the urban interconnection of these settlements

by increasing Arab demographic density between them (HRC 2008). In fact, HRC repairs some of the historical buildings in the Old City, encourages Palestinians to settle there, and supports the inhabitants there economically. Through such activities, HRC aims to revive the whole community of the Old City with the restoration of its historical heritage as an axis. From such activities, De Cesari names HRC 'new Heritage Movement' (De Cesari 2010).

The above argument concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the urban space clarifies the following points. Urban space is directly connected to the social life, so it can easily be a battlefield of the politics of demography and space. And Judaization by Israel is proceeding bidirectionally from facts on the ground and in the representation. Furthermore, in the urban space of sacred city, many people pay much attention to the level of religious discourse or representation, however from the case of Hebron, it is obvious that the urban space as a living space deeply concerns the conflict over 'identity of the city'.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, this article analyzes how the two issues of demography and space work in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And this can be summarized as follows. From the argument above, it may be obvious that demography and space are indivisible factors. At the national level, it concerns the demarcation between Israel and Palestine, and at the city level, urban space is a tying node of the politics of demography and space. And in particular, the conflict in the urban space of sacred city, the legitimacy of existence is contended. In such a case, even at the level of representation, demography and space have great deal of importance to decide how the conflict develops. Therefore, demography and space are important both at national and city level, this might be an element to link between the macro and micro level of Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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