Title: Demographic Timebomb? People Power and the Future of Israel as a Jewish State

Location: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

Date & Time: Thursday, February 14, 2013, 9:00 – 10:00 AM

Speakers: Aaron David Miller, Vice President for New Initiatives and Distinguished Scholar, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (Moderator)
Sergio Dellapergola, Shlomo Argov Professor Emeritus of Israel-Diaspora Relations, Avraham Harman Institute of Contemporary Jewry, Hebrew University

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Event Summary:

This event served as a discussion of demography’s role in determining the future of the State of Israel. In particular, it suggested that population size and structure, the changing demographic balance between Israelis and Palestinians, and the unique circumstances of Israel’s Arab citizens will all play an important role in future Israeli politics. Professor Dellapergola began with a brief introduction to Israel’s fragmented political parties. He noted that the liberal national and national religious parties are of nearly equal strength, with alternating modest victories by each. Because there has not been a decisive turn in a particular political direction in recent decades, Israel suffers from static decision-making over crucial problems. This trend could change in the near future, however, as the demographics of Israel’s population change.

Using national data, Professor Dellapergola explained several current trends in Israel’s population dynamics. He demonstrated that although the population of Israeli Jews is growing linearly, the rate of growth of the Arab population is much higher. Historical waves of immigration to Israel has contributed to this phenomenon: the early Israeli state saw higher emigration from the Soviet Union,
while today large numbers of migrants from Middle Eastern and North African states are arriving in Israel. Additionally, Arabs living in Israel have both a higher birth rate and lower death rate than their Jewish counterparts. This may be because the Arab Israeli population is, on average, younger than the Jewish one. According to Professor Dellapergola, these factors lead logically to the conclusion that the proportion of Jews to Arabs in Israel is diminishing, although slowly. While there are currently approximately equal numbers of each in all of Israel and Palestine, Arab growth is much faster.

In Professor Dellapergola’s opinion, this growing population of Arabs in Israel leads to a central political dilemma. Israel eventually must choose between existing as a heterogeneous conglomerate of fighting tribes, or creating a civil society that respects differences but has a shared political agenda. With its current interaction of demographics, Israel will have to decide what kind of state it wants to become. Thus far, Israel has aspired to be Jewish, democratic, and in control over its entire historical territory; however, Professor Dellapergola stressed that this may not be possible. Instead, he suggested that Israel can only have two of these three elements at a time, as each counterpart has a different agenda.

In closing, Mr. Miller asked Professor Dellapergola about Israel’s status as a preferential democracy. Mr. Miller asserted that the Arab Israeli population faces a denial of human rights on a daily basis, and inquired as to whether demographic data suggests a change in this trend in the near future. Professor Dellapergola stressed that demographic parameters and social and welfare policies will be important for any change to occur, though Israel’s answer to this may be that security must come first. Still, he noted that there is a high level of satisfaction among Arab Israelis, though it is lower than the Jewish Israeli level. This suggests that the Arab population recognizes that there is a problem.

PILPG Question and Summary of Response:

A PILPG Research Associate asked a follow-up question about Professor Dellapergola’s assertion that Israel can only have two of the three elements it desires. Specifically, she asked which combination of the elements most Israeli citizens would prefer. Professor Dellapergola’s data suggests that the majority of Israeli’s would prefer separate Jewish and Arab states, and hope for a Jewish and democratic Israel. This, however, will become an issue of feasibility as Jews and Arabs continue to vie for different political interests.