

April 8, 2010

“The Arabs are multiplying twice as fast as the Israelis”

Q & A with Professor Sergio Della Pergola

MURRAY FROMSON

http://www.jewishjournal.com/israel/article/the_arabs_are_multiplying_twice_as_fast_as_the_israelis_20100408/



Professor Sergio Della Pergola

Professor Sergio Della Pergola is widely considered Israel's leading specialist in demography. He is the Shlomo Argov professor of Israel-diaspora relations, at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. On March 16, while on a work visit to Los Angeles, he sat for an interview at Jerry's Deli in Westwood with professor emeritus Murray Fromson of the USC Annenberg school for communication and journalism.

Murray Fromson: What was your evaluation of the dispute over Ramat Shlomo which happened while you were in Los Angeles?

Sergio Della Pergola: Anger and frustration. It was another example of the Israeli government's total inability to grasp the need to exercise public relations. It could easily have explained the issue well before it became a story in the international press. That would have headed off universal criticism of a bureaucratic decision affecting a relatively insignificant piece of land in a neighborhood that was an orthodox Jewish settlement, begun shortly after the Six Day War ended in 1967. It was by no means a new settlement.

MF: What's a coherent explanation for decisions like it?

SDP: Procedures to improve land usually are undertaken by the local planning department. Generally, these are decided. Not as political issues, but planning ones. They

are time-consuming. This one apparently reached the Minister of Interior, Eli Ishay, a politician who is the chairman of the ultra-orthodox Shas party and a member of Netanyahu's kitchen cabinet. But it does not mean that a routine planning decision like this would necessarily have been brought to the prime minister's attention. It probably was not, so the notion that Bibi wanted to put pressure on Biden or the United States seems absurd.

MF: Beyond this minor matter that has overshadowed the major one, which is a resolution of an Israeli-Arab peace accord, how would you first describe the differences between the Palestinians on the West Bank and those in Gaza?

SDP: While they are both part of the larger Palestinian population, they have different dialects, different family structures. Different political and religious orientations.

The West Bank is mostly secular. Gaza is principally Muslim and religious. Gaza is less developed and more influenced by ties with Egypt and Bedouins in the Sinai Peninsula. A high percentage of the population lives in poor neighborhoods that are little more than refugee camps financed by the United Nations. The U.N. rescue service plays an important role there. The West Bank, on the other hand has more links with Israel, a higher educational standard and lifestyle.

I find the international political attitudes toward Israel and Palestine quite uninformed and affected by a double standard. There is, for instance, a lot of misunderstanding of the Jewish democratic state, but widespread understanding for smaller, weaker ethnic territories like the West Bank and Gaza. The result is a civil war is going on between the leaders in the two territories that simply is ignored.

MF: What is the prospect for the future?

SDP: Demography is changing rapidly. The Arabs are multiplying twice as fast as the Israelis. The Israeli majority over the whole territory between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River is shrinking so that they may have at the moment an advantage of 52%, but they cannot govern effectively with such a slim majority. It was as if the democrats in America were trying to govern the U.S. with a 52% majority in the congress.

If we limit our geography to Israel plus the West Bank—Gaza, having been effectively evacuated in 2005—the Jewish majority in Israel overall would still be slightly above 60%. There is no way that Israel might call itself a Jewish state with a Palestinian minority of 40%.

But if we consider Israel within the 1967 boundaries, plus east Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, the Israeli majority would be less than 79%, a significant difference.

The demographic question continues to loom high, and only some territorial sacrifice (beginning with the Arab neighborhoods of Jerusalem) on the Israeli side will guarantee that Israel remains Jewish and democratic. By denying the right of Palestinians who are under Israeli control to vote, might eventually generate unbearable international pressure on Israel, causing damage to both its image and economy.

MF: Has there ever been any awareness of the problem among Israeli leaders?

SDP: In December 2002, at the Herzliya conference, there was a big dinner at which Ariel Sharon was to give the keynote speech. Sharon, then the prime minister, was sitting at a table with the U.S. ambassador. I was two tables away from him, when he took the microphone and declared that Israel could not "continue to dominate another people. If we want to preserve Israel as a Jewish state, we have to let them rule themselves."

MF: He said that?

SDP: Yes, when he said that, I thought I had too many drinks ... but it turned out that I had heard it right. It truly was an important, keynote speech by Sharon. To a gathering of the country's important who's who—politicians, economists, military people. Anyone who counted. They heard Sharon clearly and loudly. The fact is that by 2005, Sharon pulled out of Gaza as he had mentioned it and he did it.

MF: What do you think changed his mind?

SDP: Demography. At least so he said.

MF: Did you talk to him about his speech?

SDP: Yes, I met with him twice more; at least one hour each time.

MF: What was your impression of him?

SDP: Physically, he was short, quite shorter than I had thought seeing him from pictures. I was surprised. While he could be coarse, he also was very kind and a good listener. He never interrupted me. He took notes. He asked questions like a good student. He analyzed what I was saying. In the interviews, the audience included his senior staff.

MF: Have you ever had the same kind of contact with Netanyahu?

SDP: No. Only once when I attended a large collective session at which he quoted me as a source without knowing I was in the room. When I introduced myself to him, he looked surprised.

MF: Has Bibi shown any intellectual interest in the demographic problems confronting Israel or in solving them?

SDP: I am sure he understands the issues, but his strategy seems to be rather in preserving the current government coalition. The West Bank seems to be a low priority.

MF: If Barak is unpopular and Tzipi Livni is considered too weak to lead, who in the political landscape is capable enough to negotiate with the PLO or Hamas from what you can determine?

SDP: I am not denying that Netanyahu is the more expert politician, that he has good rhetorical skills and speaks the better English. The real question is what team is capable of leading? From what I can tell, it would be Bibi+Livni+Barak.

MF: What has been your impression of the Palestinians?

SDP: We have a free press, free speech, an elected parliament and a judiciary that is balanced. The Palestinians see this and know they do not have it. Those Arabs who now are Israeli citizens know they can have it and they do not want to lose it. Nevertheless, they want to fly the Palestinian flag flying over their own municipality and yet when you ask them if they would prefer to be part of the new Palestinian state, they say, "oh, no."

That is part of the complexity. Whatever you do, you could do the wrong thing. On one hand, you may try to assimilate the Arabs in Israel as much as possible and then they will be equal and perform as equals. But as soon as you r[sic] their own identity. They may want Israeli citizenship, but they also want to have Arabic taught in their schools. That's what happens now. They study Arabic, they don't go into the army, they are equal but they are different. They miss a lot of opportunities by not knowing Hebrew as well as Israelis, and by not having been in the army which is less a place to learn firepower than a civilian army which amounts to a great socializing experience... If they had that experience, they would lag less behind.

MF: Is there any effort by the Israeli government to bring this about?

SDP: There is a proposal to establish a civilian service for the Arabs, allowing them to serve in their communities, in their hospitals, nurseries, schools in lieu of military service.

MF: A kind of Peace Corps?

SDP: Exactly. A recent survey showed that 75% of the Arabs like the idea. But their political leaders in the parliament oppose it.

MF: What is the future of the territories?

SDP: If you were to have a poll among the Israelis, there would be 70% that are in the majority of giving up the territories, of having two states. But there is no determined majority inside the government that would reflect the sentiment of the people. That's because the government consists of a coalition of small parties that have different points of view.

MF: What about the people who are members of the parliament?

SDP: I did an assessment of the 120 members of the Knesset and found that 37 are against withdrawal from the territories, which meant that 83 would be in favor of withdrawal. But the 37 are the larger part of the government and the minority rules because it is in power.

MF: You mentioned withdrawal from Gaza, which has happened. What about the West Bank?

SDP: I am in favor of withdrawing from most of the West Bank and territorial exchanges between minor parts of the West Bank and equivalent parts of "old" Israel.

MF: Can you envision Israel ever withdrawing from it completely?

SDP: I do not think total withdrawal can happen and it would not be wise to work to achieve return to exactly the same boundaries of June 4, 1967.

MF: If so, under what conditions would withdrawal of any kind be necessary?

SDP: Probably international pressure, but especially a resolute proposal made both to Israel and the Palestinians by the United States, including firm and explicit guarantees of maintenance of the new status and clear sanctions if the new status is not respected.

MF: Where would the settlers who leave the West Bank be re-settled? The Negev? Where else? How would they be welcomed?

SDP: Probably in the Galilee and in the Negev to help preserve or strengthen the vanishing Jewish majority there.

MF: Presuming withdrawal might ever occur, can you imagine what the West Bank would be like as a neighbor of Israel?

SDP: In the best of possible worlds, Israel and the Palestinian state would grow to become an unbeatable regional power, given the superior skills, presence of complimentary labor and critical mass.

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