

20.08x24.7	1/4	34 עמוד	the jerusalem report	12/11/2014	45108735-3
שמואל נאמן מוסד למחקר מדיניות לאומית בטכניון - 85300					



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ISRAEL, BY THE NUMBERS

According to the statistics, Israel is quite well off, fairly cheerful, healthy, and a great place to live and raise children

STATISTICS BORE most people. But, for me, as an economist, I find numbers fascinating.

I swim in data and usually seek the truth by crunching the numbers. I probably bore my readers with too much data, and I'm keenly aware of the phrase, "lies, damned lies and statistics," made popular by the American humorist Mark Twain and, before him, British prime minister Benjamin Disraeli.

At the onset of each Jewish New Year, the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) publishes a press release telling us how many people there are in Israel. It usually includes a wealth of additional statistics

The CBS is a superb, highly underrated government agency that expertly collects all the numbers we need to know. It was capably led for 11 years by the distinguished Hebrew University economist Prof. Shlomo Yitzhaki until he was replaced last year by Hebrew University statistics Prof. Danny Pfeffermann.

At the time, the business daily TheMarker noted that Yitzhaki "was unsparing in his

criticism of government bureaucracy over the years." In particular, Yitzhaki blasted the government for privatizing the government pension funds.

For the New Year 5775, the CBS press release is particularly interesting, at least to me, as it serves as a mirror that reflects who the people of Israel are and how they are changing.

Here are some of the key numbers collected by the CBS. I found more than a few surprises in them.

Population: At the start of 5775, Israel's population was 8,252,500. Of these, 6,186,100 were Jewish. The total world Jewish population is estimated to be 13.9 million. Thus, 55% of all Jews live outside Israel.

In 2013, according to the CBS, Israel's population grew by almost 2%. The Jewish population rose by 1.7%, while the Arab population grew 2.2%.

Israel ranks 99th in the world in population though you'd never know it from its frequent appearance in news headlines. Not included in that population figure are



190,000 legal foreign workers, mostly from Thailand, Russia and the Philippines, and an untold number of African migrants, perhaps more than 100,000, mainly from Eritrea and Sudan, who entered Israel illegally.

Speaking about migrants – a recent global study by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that fully one Jewish person in every four lives in a country other than that of their birth. This makes Jews the world's top migrants by far. In contrast, one Christian in 20 and one Muslim in 25 have migrated. Perhaps this statistic should make us Israelis more tolerant and empathic toward the African migrants. The Supreme Court apparently thinks so.

Israelis move a lot internally – 262,800 people changed their addresses in 2013. They also like to live in the central part of

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שמואל נאמן מוסד למחקר מדיניות לאומית בטכניון - 85300					



FINBARR O'REILLY / REUTERS

the country where half the population lives. In contrast, 60% of the Arab population lives in the north. In 2013, there was migration out of the city of Tel Aviv toward the suburbs, partly owing to the high cost of housing.

There has been concern about Israelis who leave the country to seek greener pastures abroad. But, according to the CBS, in 2013 only about 7,000 more Israelis left than returned home to their country. This is still worrisome since many of those who left were engineers and scientists.

Economy: Israelis are about as well off as Japanese, with per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of about \$36,000, ranking 37th in the world. A big chunk of GDP, nearly 6%, goes to defense spending, making Israel fourth in the world in this category, just

behind Saudi Arabia.

Recently, Israel has become a natural gas producer. It ranks 43rd in the world in proven gas reserves, though far behind Iran, which has 125 times more natural gas. With the Bank of Israel aggressively buying dollars to keep the shekel-dollar exchange rate from appreciating, Israel has \$81 billion of foreign-exchange reserves, ranking 28th in the world.

Land: Israel is very small. Its area, 20,000 square kilometers (8,000 sq. miles) within the 1967 borders, ranks it only 154th in the world. The world's total land mass amounts to about 150 million sq. kms, so Israel's land area comprises just one hundredth of 1% of the world's land – surely, a hugely disproportionate fuss is made over this tiny speck on the map, the Jewish homeland, too small

A great place to raise children: Kids receive instructions on how to ski at an artificial ski slope near Afula in the Jezreel Valley, October 15

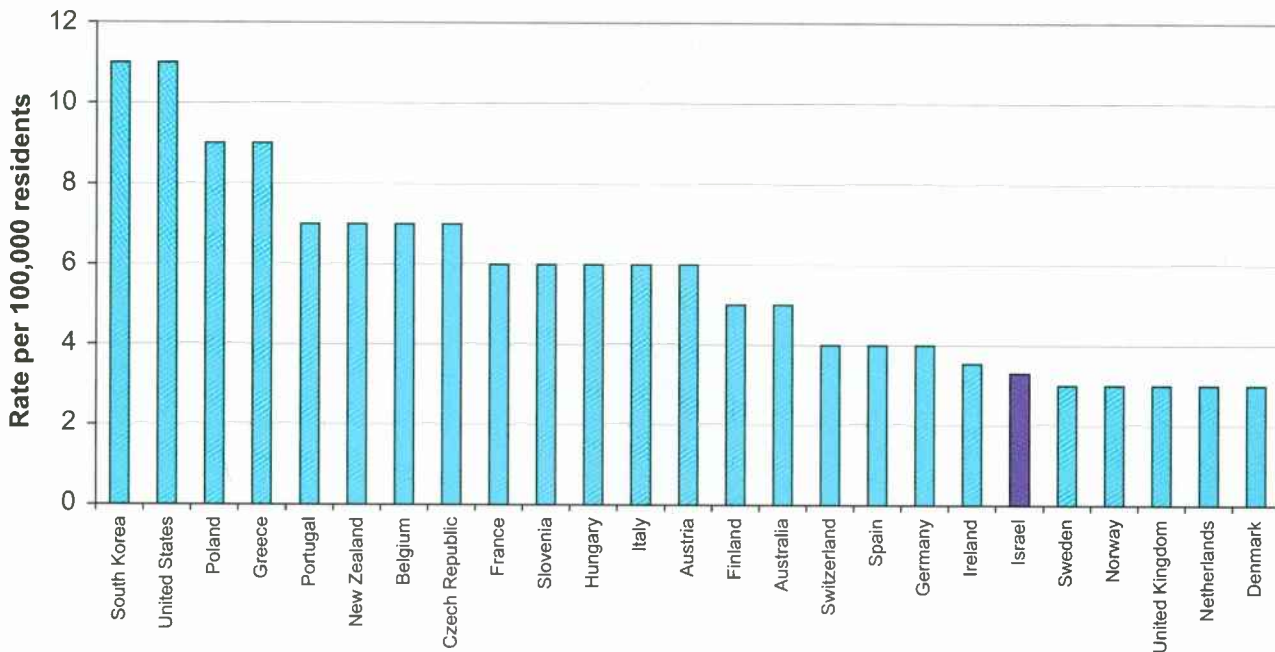
even to write its own name on it.

Children: There has been a sharp decline in the average number of children per woman among the Druze and Muslims. For Druze women, in the mid-1970s, the average number of children was 7.25; for 2013, it was only 2.21, even lower than the figure for Jewish women (3.05). For Muslim women, fertility declined from 8.47 children per woman in the mid-1970s to 3.35 in 2013.

This decline is known among demographers as the “demographic revolu-

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שמואל נאמן מוסד למחקר מדיניות לאומית בטכניון - 85300					

24.16 KILLED IN ROAD ACCIDENTS IN OECD MEMBER COUNTRIES Rate per 100,000 residents 2012



Source: IRTAD - International Traffic Safety Data and Analysis Group - OECD

Israeli roads are becoming safer

tion,” in which rising income and education levels lead to lower fertility. Once we heard frequent talk about the “demographic time bomb” and PLO leader Yasser Arafat even spoke about how “the Arab woman’s womb” was his main weapon – but no longer.

Some countries, such as Japan and Russia, have such low birth rates that their populations are declining. Not so for Israel.

In 2013, 171,444 babies were born. This makes Israel’s population relatively youthful; some 28% of the population are 14 or under. At the same time, those aged 65 and over (my own age group) make up more than one person in every 10. (In Japan, it is about one in every five.) The median age in Israel is nearly 30; in Russia, it is almost 40.

Obesity: The CBS tracks not only our numbers and our ages but our waistlines. Israelis eat very well. In 2012 (the latest data available), they consumed 3,630 calories daily, on average. (I wonder how the CBS dug up that number.) According to WebMD,

active adult men need just 3,000 calories daily and active women 2,400. Israelis also eat healthfully. Some 40% of the calories consumed come from cereals, fruits and vegetables – key food groups.

THE STATISTICS REFUTE
THE COMMONLY HELD
VIEW THAT A LARGE
MAJORITY OF ISRAELIS
ARE PURELY SECULAR

About one Israeli in four is defined as obese, but other countries fare much worse. Israel ranks 49th in the world in the fraction of the populace that overeats. In the US, 35% of the population are obese.

Marriage and Divorce: Some 50,474 couples got married in 2012 and 13,685 got divorced. The divorce rate, 2.2 per thousand, has been rising but is still about half that in

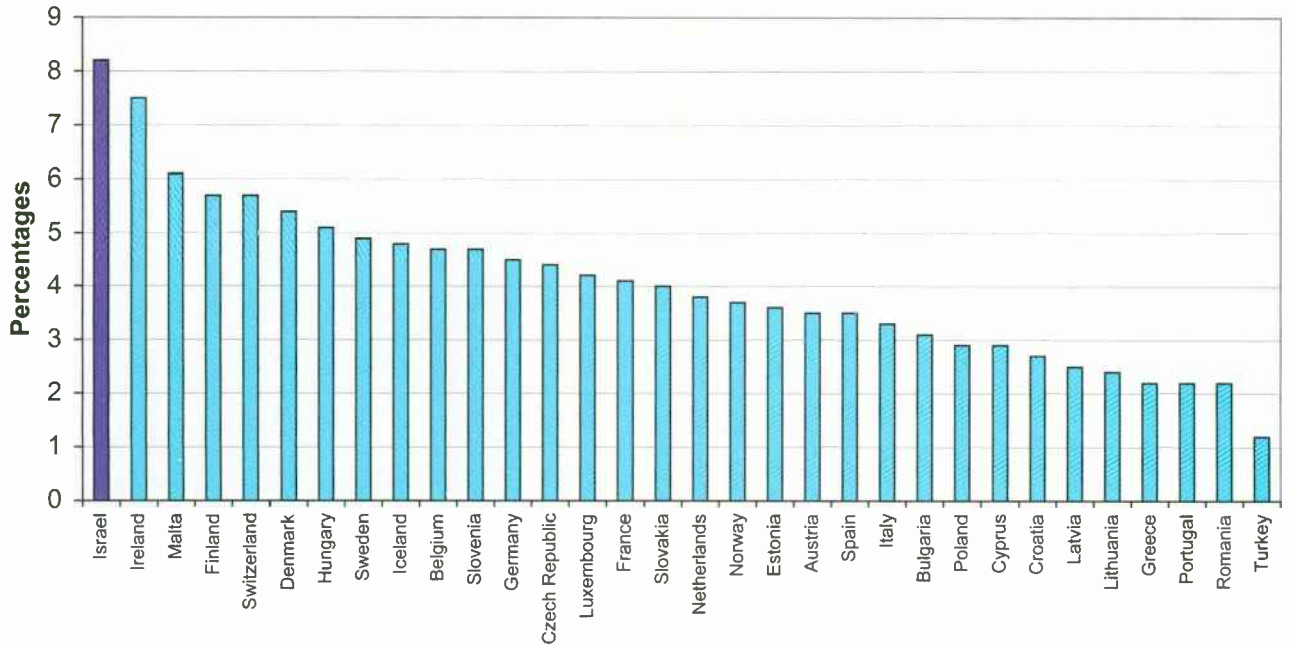
Russia and far lower than in the US (3.6).

Life expectancy: Israelis live long lives. Men live 80.3 years, on average, and women 83.6 years – in almost every country, women live three to five years longer than men. In the past 30 years, life expectancy has risen by almost a full decade. According to the US Central Intelligence Agency, Israel ranks 19th in the world in longevity, well ahead of the US (42nd). However, the gap between men and women does produce heartache. For those aged 75 and over, there are 44% more women than men. Many are widows.

Happiness: I was surprised to find that the diligent CBS even measures whether or not Israelis are happy. And indeed they are. For those 20 and older, fully 86% are satisfied with their lives, up from 82% in 2002. Two-thirds of those aged 20 to 44 think their lives will be better in the future, while for those over 20, 56% are satisfied with their standard of living. At the same time, however, the CBS reports that 27% feel “lonely” often or at times.

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85300 - שמואל נאמן מוסד למחקר מדיניות לאומית בטכניון					

12.20 PERCENTAGE OF EMPLOYED PERSONS AGED 15-74 IN THE HIGH-TECH FIELD, OUT OF ALL EMPLOYED PERSONS AGED 15-74 2012



Source: Eurostat

Israel tops the European chart for high-tech personnel

Religion: About one person in 10 defines themselves as Haredi; one in 10 as Orthodox; one in seven as traditional-Orthodox; and 23% as traditional. This means, surprisingly, that a significant majority of Israelis regard themselves as at least somewhat religious, and a minority, just 44%, are purely secular. This refutes the commonly held view that a large majority of Israelis are purely secular.

Education: Israel has not fared well in recent years in international comparisons of high school students' achievements in math and science. But, according to the CBS, it is not because of budget cuts. Israel spends 7.3% of its Gross Domestic Product on education – significantly higher than the OECD average.

One Israeli aged 18-39 in every 11 is enrolled in higher education; more study at colleges (138,000) than at one of seven universities (125,000). Fewer than 20,000 study math and science at one of the universities, worrisome for a nation that makes much of its living from high technology.

This suggests that the current shortage of trained science and math high school teachers will get much worse unless prompt action is taken.

Business: In 2013, the CBS reports that there were 517,000 active businesses, one for every 15 persons. Israel's business truly is business. But running a business is risky. One business in every 14 failed during the year. Still, hope springs eternal as some 50,000 new businesses were launched, most of them single-person and not high-tech (home repair, plumbing, etc.).

Railroads: Israel's love affair with its trains continues. Some 45 million passengers rode on trains in 2013, up 11% from 2012 and 26% from 2009-11.

Cars and traffic fatalities: In 2013, 277 persons died in traffic accidents, a bit higher than 2012 but, according to the CBS, the lowest (apart from 2012) in 51 years! Cars and roads, and the much-maligned Israeli drivers, are becoming safer. Road deaths are much lower in Israel than in, say, the US, both in proportion to population and the

number of vehicles.

There are 2.8 million vehicles, though at times it seems they are all on the Ayalon Highway in Tel Aviv at the same time. Switzerland and the Netherlands have nearly twice as many vehicles per capita as Israel.

Garbage: In 2013, the CBS says local authorities collected nearly five million tons of household garbage. That makes about 1.7 kilograms (3.7 pounds) of garbage per person, per day. That's just slightly below the world's garbage champion, the US.

What can we conclude from this statistical look into the mirror? Israel is a tiny, plucky, creative country that punches well above its weight globally. It is quite well off, fairly cheerful, healthy, highly self-critical, subject to fierce criticism abroad, a great place to live and raise children, doing its best in a bad neighborhood that is getting worse. My wife and I feel blessed that we chose to build our lives here nearly 50 years ago. ■

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