

Prospects for Ahmadinejad's Call for More Rapid Population Growth in Iran

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's recent remarks, appealing to Iranian legislators to take steps to boost the country's population from 70 to 120 million and condemning the country's recent attainment of the two-child family, raise questions about the Islamic republic's demographic future. Because Iranian women's average fertility is near (and perhaps below) the replacement level,¹ demographers project the country's youthful population (15-to-29 year olds comprise about one-half of all adults) is on track to develop, within a decade, into an older, more manageable age structure resembling those of East Asia's industrializing economies in the 1990s. Should it remain on this path, Iran's population will evolve away from the politically volatile age structures plaguing neighboring Iraq, Syria and Saudi Arabia to the west and south, and Afghanistan and Pakistan to its north and east (Figure 1). While Ahmadinejad may intend to reverse this trend, he could find it hard to limit the provision of family planning services, which are popular and fully integrated into the local health infrastructure. And there is little evidence suggesting that a shift to pro-natalist policies would have a substantial effect on Iranian women's fertility. Ahmadinejad's next moves to influence fertility — if they materialize — may demonstrate the extent of the Iranian president's influence on domestic programs, the popularity of hard-line policies, and the depth of his relationship with the Shiite theocracy.

Not the First Time

The target of Ahmadinejad's discontent is Iran's effective state-run family planning program, which supplies free contraceptives to married couples and provides counseling on methods reducing the risk of unplanned pregnancy and sexually-transmitted infection. The goals of the program have been to encourage families to delay their first pregnancy and to space out subsequent births; to discourage pregnancy among women younger than 18 and older than 35 years; and to encourage couples to limit family size to three children.² First established by the Mohammed Reza Shah's government in

1966, the state program succeeded in training a countrywide cadre of clinical workers, volunteers and physicians, and in making contraceptives and information easier for low-income couples to obtain. Nonetheless, by the onset of the 1979 Revolution, demographers estimated that Iran's total fertility rate still hovered above 6 children per woman.

With the Shah deposed, Iran's Islamic government turned the state's population policy in the opposite direction. Political hard-liners quickly dismantled the family planning program. The closure was closely followed by a pro-natalist campaign fueled by a costly war with Iraq, and pro-poor state subsidies that helped support large families. Nonetheless, limited contraceptive distribution continued through the 1980s, and contraceptive use increased slowly.

A Determined Social Undercurrent

Despite the dissolution of the family planning program, supporters in the Ministry of Health and Medical Education continued to work for its reinstatement. Shortly after the revolution, health officials obtained a *fatwa* from Imam Khomeini and other top-ranking clerics declaring that "contraceptive use was not inconsistent with Islamic tenets as long as it did not jeopardize the health of the couple and was used with the informed consent of the husband." The issue of a population policy resurfaced after the close of the Iraq-Iran War in 1988, when national planners projected that sustained rapid population growth (then at more than 3 percent per year) and a youthful age structure would escalate costs for the expanded set of services promised by the new constitution, plus exacerbate already high rates of youth unemployment. To promote the issue, finance and health officials organized a parallel series of technical and religious conferences aimed at convincing Iran's dual political and religious hierarchies to restart the family planning program.

In newspapers and on television and radio, religious scholars, students, academics and professionals (many of them, women) engaged in debates over contraception's social and health benefits and risks. Hard-line religious conservatives identified modern contraception as a technology developed and financed by the West, and argued that it was

designed to limit Muslim numbers. More moderate Islamists countered that only through embracing a small-family norm could Muslim societies afford to provide children with sufficient education and healthcare to achieve the Islamic ideal of equality. And, moderates asserted, only by ending population growth, relying on their own resources, educating their populace, and achieving political stability could Muslim governments hope to eliminate chronic dependence on Western powers and to assume a respected position in the international community.

With support from religious and political leaders, the Family Planning Board resumed activity in December of 1989. The board moved quickly to expand beyond the former program by disseminating modern contraceptives and information through a country-wide network of “health houses” staffed by workers from the local community. In the following year, health officials obtained a ruling from the High Judicial Council stating that male and female sterilization was not against Islamic principles or existing laws. In 1993, Iran’s parliament removed most of the remaining incentives for large families. And today, Iran is the only producer of condoms in the Middle East.

Iran’s Rapid Fertility Decline

Revitalized in response to largely economic concerns, the family planning program’s target for success (stated in the Islamic government’s first five-year development plan) was initially modest: to reach the fertility level of four children per woman by 2011. By 2000, however, Iran’s total fertility rate was estimated at, or near, the two-child level, a decline as rapid as those experienced in the 1970s and ‘80s in Taiwan, South Korea and Thailand. In an environment more favorable to foreign investment and private sector development, it is not unimaginable that Iran — endowed with a highly educated and resourceful middle class — might now be evolving into the Middle East’s economic bright spot. Also, the rapid rate of fertility decline, coupled with women’s public participation in debates about contraceptive use, suggest that Iranian women experience a degree of personal autonomy that is unusual in the Middle East despite their diminished legal status and marriage rights under *shari’a*. The supportive role of clerics in Iran’s demographic transformation indicates that many in the Shiite

leadership, with roles in state religious councils and judiciaries, may be more flexible and pragmatic, and more responsive to public opinion than outsiders assume.

Long Range Considerations

Ahmadinejad may find it difficult to substantially reduce the availability of contraceptives and other family planning services in Iran. If he does succeed in cutting back the state-funded program, his ability to significantly unsettle Iran's established small-family norm is probably limited, particularly if affordable contraception remains available through clinics, the private sector and physicians.

Though unlikely, if Ahmadinejad were successful, an Iran restored to rapid population growth and a more youthful age structure could face a future with a more daunting set of challenges, much like those contributing to Pakistan's political instability today. Pakistan's sustained high fertility (now at about 4 children per woman) and rapid rate of population growth (2.7 percent per year) have surely played a role in its government's incapacity to provide adequate secular schooling and employment for its youth. Alongside added economic and social strains, an Iran of 120 million people would experience a level of per-capita fresh water that could limit the country's domestic agricultural and industrial development options. Even maintaining its currently low level of fertility, demographers project that Iran's population in 2030 is likely to surpass 90 million people (UN medium variant), pushing the country into the hydrological category associated with water-stressed populations (Figure 2).³

There should be little doubt that President Ahmadinejad's recent call to boost Iranian women's fertility rate and to resume a rapid rate of population growth, if carried through successfully, would force a dramatic deviation from the development model that was embraced by Iran's theocracy nearly two decades ago. However, Ahmadinejad's ability to significantly trigger such a change at this time appears to be limited. Whatever happens next promises to disclose a great deal about the extent of Ahmadinejad's domestic powers, the degree of public support for his hard-line policies, and the closeness of the president's relationship with Tehran's powerful theocrats.

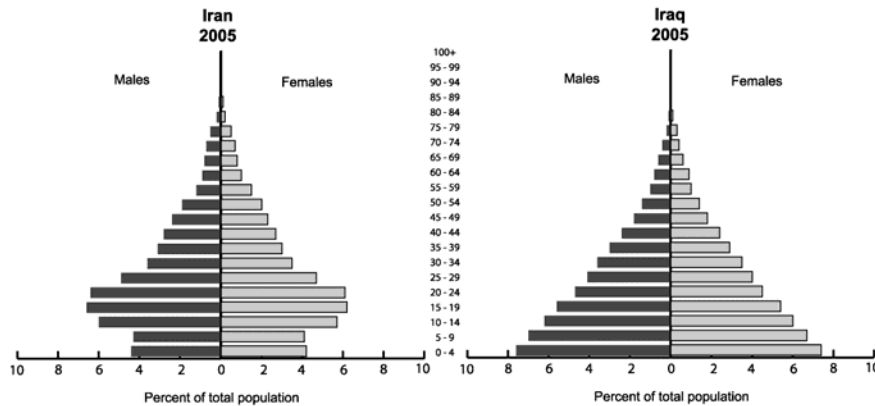


Figure 1. **Population age structures of Iran and Iraq, 2005.** While both populations comprise a large proportion of young adults, Iran’s age structure has been reshaped by a precipitous fertility decline that began in the late 1980s. The profile of Iraq’s current population age structure suggests that it will continue to experience a large proportion of young adults and rapid growth in the working-age population for at least another two decades. Most demographic sources place Iran’s present population growth rate between 0.6 and 1.3 percent per year, and estimate Iraq’s rate of growth around 2.7 percent per year.

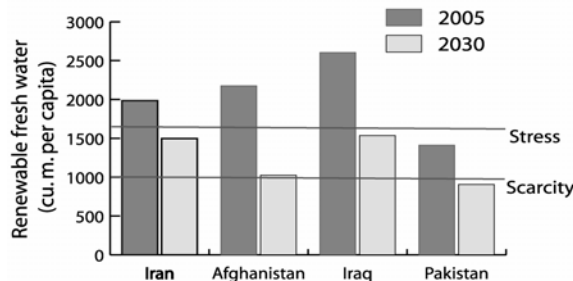


Figure 2. **Iran’s freshwater future.** Although Iran’s population growth has slowed dramatically, before 2030 the Islamic Republic and its neighbors are each projected (assuming the current UN medium variant projection) to range below the internationally recognized benchmark indicating *freshwater stress* (1667 cubic meters per capita). Countries in stress tend to risk numerous chronic, localized freshwater supply problems. By 2030, Pakistan is projected to enter *freshwater scarcity* (1000 cu. m. per capita). In this category, supply problems tend to be widespread, and can impede economic development and lead to extensive degradation of freshwater sources.

¹ UN Population Division projects 2005-2010 total fertility rate (TFR) under its medium variant at 2.04 children per woman. The U.S. Census Bureau's International Program Center currently estimates Iran's TFR at 1.7 children per woman. TFR is a composite indicator synthesized by averaging women's current yearly fertility for each five-year age cohort. Population data are drawn from the following sources: UN Population Division. 2005. "World Population Prospects: 2004 Revision." New York: United Nations; U.S. Bureau of the Census, International Program Center. 2006. "International Database," www.census.gov/ipc. Also see, Abbasi-Shavazi, M.J. and Peter McDonald, 2005. "National and Provincial-level Fertility Trends in Iran, 1972-2000," *Working Papers in Demography*, No. 94. Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University: Canberra.

² This paper's historical account of Iran's family planning program draws from the following essays: Hoodfar, H. 1994. "Devices and Desires: Population Policy and Gender Roles in the Islamic Republic." *Middle East Report* 190:11-17; Aghajanian, A. and A.H. Merhyar. 1999. "Fertility, Contraceptive Use and Family Planning Program activity in the Islamic Republic of Iran." *International Family Planning Perspectives* 25(2):98-102; Hoodfar, H. and S. Assadpour. 2000. "The Politics of Population Policy in the Islamic Republic of Iran." *Studies in Family Planning* 31(1):19-34; Roudi-Fahimi, F. 2002. "Iran's Family Planning Program: Responding to a Nation's Needs." *MENA Policy Brief*. Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau; Abbasi, M.J., A. Mehryar, G. Jones, and P. McDonald. 2002. "Revolution, War and Modernization: Population Policy and Fertility Change in Iran." *Journal of Population Research* 19(1):25-46.

³ For a discussion of freshwater per-capita benchmarks, see: Falkenmark, M. and C. Widstrand. 1992. "Population and Water Resources: A Delicate Balance." Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau. Freshwater resource estimates for Iran and Pakistan were obtained from: World Resources Institute. 2003. "Earthtrends: Country Profiles," Available on the web at: earthtrends.wri.org. Population projections used in this freshwater availability analysis are from: UN Population Division, 2005 (medium variant).