Why is Iran's birth rate plummeting?

written by Elie Klutstein | 24.11.2024

Iran is facing a severe demographic crisis as birth rates continue to plummet and its population rapidly ages, with officials warning the Islamic Republic could lose half its population by 2101. The government's attempts to reverse previous family planning policies have failed to convince Iranian women to have more children, highlighting growing tensions between state policies and social realities.

The demographic crisis facing Tehran is starkly illustrated by a billboard in a typical Iranian city. It depicts a solitary cyclist with a single child, rendered in dreary monochrome, trailing behind a vibrantly colored family of six on an oversized bicycle – father, mother, and four balloon-wielding children who appear to race past the wistful onlookers. The message, displayed in both Persian and English, proclaims: "More children, happier life." Some variations feature rowing boats instead of bicycles, but the underlying message remains unchanged.

This public messaging campaign attempts to address one of the most critical challenges confronting Iran over the past decade: a steadily declining birth rate that is rapidly approaching crisis levels. The situation has become so dire that Iran stands on the brink of negative population growth. At this point, deaths will outnumber births, gradually decreasing the country's population.

While the statistical evidence of this phenomenon requires careful interpretation – given the sometimes contradictory and inconsistent reporting by various Iranian officials – one fact remains undisputed: this represents a fundamental challenge that deeply concerns Tehran's authorities. The gravity of the situation is evident in the frequency of international media coverage of high-level discussions in Tehran, the regime leadership's repeated references to the issue, and multiple attempts to address the problem. Propaganda articles, official speeches, and statements by senior government officials consistently indicate that the situation continues to deteriorate rather than improve or stabilize.

The Iranian fertility crisis involves three interconnected trends: first, the decline in population growth approaching zero and potentially turning negative; second, a significant increase in life expectancy, mirroring global trends; and finally, most

concerning to regime leaders, Iran's rapidly aging population – meaning an increasing proportion of citizens are classified as "elderly."

Deputy Health Minister Alireza Raisi recently offered a stark forecast: by 2101, Iran's population could shrink to half its current size, with 50 percent of survivors belonging to the elderly demographic. Such a scenario, where Iran's population dwindles to just 42 million people, would fundamentally alter the nation's character.

Recent data reveals that Iran's birth surplus – the excess of births over deaths – has reached its lowest level in years. Furthermore, births in 2023 decreased by 17,000 compared to 2022, continuing a multi-year trend of declining births in the Islamic Republic.

The range of fertility rates among Iranian women varies according to different reports: some claim it remains slightly above two births per woman – the minimum required for population stability, where each pair of parents raises two children. Others cite lower figures, around 1.6 births per woman. This was apparently the rate in Tehran last year, significantly below the golden number of two children per family.

For comparison, Israel – a much smaller and more developed country than Iran – recorded a fertility rate of slightly more than three children per woman in 2022, the highest among OECD countries. That year, Israel's population grew by 1.86 percent. Iran's neighbors, Pakistan and Afghanistan, also enjoy impressive population growth. If Iran fails to reverse the trend, it will soon have the lowest birth rate in the Middle East.

According to official figures, Iran currently has approximately 89 million inhabitants. On the eve of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the population was much lower, estimated at about 37 million. At that time, Iran was far more Western-oriented, and family planning was part of normal life there.

Two parallel processes occurred after the revolution: the religious clergy who took control of Tehran encouraged childbirth, and the Iran-Iraq war sparked an unprecedented baby boom. During the 1980s, as a result, Iran's fertility rate was among the world's highest, with each average woman giving birth five or six times. The government urged citizens to produce "an army of 20 million" to fight for the Islamic Republic in Allah's name.

Growth was so rapid that the country's population nearly doubled within 15 years. At some point, Tehran's leadership realized the country lacked infrastructure to support such accelerated population growth. The war with Iraq had also left the national treasury empty, without the ability to advance extensive construction projects to meet the growing population's needs.

Therefore, in 1988, an internal reversal occurred in the Iranian approach: that year, Tehran's Supreme Court ruled that contraception and family planning were religiously permissible. The republic's leadership launched a campaign titled "fewer children, better life" and subsidized contraception, vasectomies, and more.

From then until 2010, Iranian fertility declined sharply: the average number of births per woman plunged from five or six to 1.7 or less. Over the past 15 years, the decline has moderated but remains consistent. The government campaign thus succeeded far beyond expectations, leading the country to ever-diminishing growth. Since then, the Islamic Republic's leaders have tried to encourage the population to reverse the trend and have more children, so far without success.

Among other measures, the government has launched a series of campaigns and programs to encourage childbirth. For example, the declared target for the current five-year period is to raise the birth rate per woman to 2.5. Since various measures on this issue have failed for a decade, this represents an ambitious goal. The government offers citizens various benefits for expanding their families, including extended maternity leave, grants, scholarships, low-interest loans, health insurance, housing assistance, and more. Iran has canceled subsidies for all contraceptives and offers free medical treatments to encourage fertility. This past August, for example, a new propaganda campaign was launched, offering substantial scholarships for any initiative promoting childbirth.

How much does the continued situation worry regime leaders? Here's an example: a senior imam of one southern city defined it as "more harmful to Iran than war," saying the reduction in births affects national identity, religion, economy, and all residents. The deputy health minister warned that if the situation doesn't improve soon, "we will fall into a demographic black hole, and it will take us about 150 years to compensate for it."

The highest-ranking official notable in his attention to the matter is none other than Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The man who set policy in

Tehran understood at the beginning of the last decade where the wind was blowing and came out openly against family planning policy. He called it a "hostile Western policy" designed to harm Muslim countries and called on all Iranian mothers to mobilize for the nation.

Already in 2012, Khamenei declared that expanding the Iranian family was a strategic goal and published a series of steps and programs to encourage childbirth. The target set by Khamenei, which he has repeated several times, is to increase Iran's population to 150 million people by 2050. The ability of Iran to support such a large population doesn't worry the supreme leader, nor does the welfare of ordinary citizens who would have to bear the burden of such great pressure on state resources.

The birth crisis stems from several sources. The first is a sharp rise in the marriage age in Iran, which naturally affects the age at which women give birth. Findings from recent surveys in Iran reveal that the average marriage age for women in the country has reached 24, while men marry on average at 28. Moreover, the marriage rate in the republic has dropped dramatically: in 2010, almost 900,000 couples married in the country, while this year, just under half a million couples registered for marriage. Accordingly, the average age for first births for women in urban areas of the country approaches 28, while men in Tehran have children at an average age of 34.5 – a statistic that indicates the depth of the crisis. The situation is better in villages, but even there, women only start giving birth on average at age 24 and above.

Another characteristic of the phenomenon that the government wages a war of extermination against is abortions. According to estimates, more than 300,000 abortions are performed in Iran each year, only 10 percent of which are legal, meaning they stem from health reasons. With an average of about a thousand abortions per day in the Islamic Republic, they constitute about one-third of the country's birth potential. Senior officials have defined the act as "execution" and claimed that abortions are an enemy plot against Iran.

Experts point to various reasons for the birth crisis, chief among them being the economic situation in the country, which has pushed almost a third of residents below the poverty line and sharply raised inflation. Meanwhile, exposure to Western norms through illegal technological means, along with desires for personal advancement, have changed the preferences of many in the Iranian

population, especially in less religious sectors. Bottom line, it appears that large parts of the Iranian public don't believe in the country's future, and children are not their primary life goal.

The challenge that declining births pose to Iranian authorities is particularly severe when accompanied by the aging problem. Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, life expectancy in the country has risen significantly, similar to other countries worldwide. In 1979, it stood at 57, and today, Iranian women are expected to live to age 78 on average and men to 76. This means the Islamic Republic is currently dealing with a growing population defined as "elderly" or "senior citizens" – meaning older than 60. About 10 percent of Iran's population, approximately 9 million people, currently fall into this category.

The forecast for the future is even bleaker: according to estimates, by 2050, this group will grow to become about one-third of Iran's population and will be the largest of its kind in the Middle East. Of those aging citizens, by 2050, almost 4 percent of the population is expected to be older than 80. In fact, the only country in the world where this problem is more severe is South Korea, which, unlike Iran, is not dealing with a failing economy and strict international sanctions.

This crisis has broad implications: the expansion of the "dependent" group in Iran will place an additional burden in coming decades on the social and economic system in the country, on health and nursing services, and more. The government needs to redesign the pension system, which is not adapted for such a large population segment, and examine how it will be able to assist an especially large number of elderly who will need help dealing with physical and mental difficulties.

However, Iran's political and military choices have brought heavy international pressure upon it, deeply affecting its economy. The sanctions make it difficult for the government to allocate funds for such long-term programs, and studies have found they also directly affect ordinary citizens. For example, surveys conducted in Iranian households found that the sanctions particularly negatively affected the elderly population, especially those without organized pensions. Additionally, since elderly people often rely on family support, the economic damage to the entire country affects citizens' ability to help their elderly relatives.

A lot could also change around the rise of the new administration in the US. If

President-elect Donald Trump takes a hard line toward Iran and even implements a “maximum pressure” campaign against it from the start of his term “to bring it to its knees” – as already reported in American media – this will not help the regime in Tehran face such internal challenges.

Experts suggest that one way to deal with the crisis is to better utilize the existing workforce in Iran. They particularly mean the low participation rate of women in the economy, which could boost local production and help deal with aging problems in the medium term. The problem, of course, is that policies to promote women are not at the top of Iran’s priorities, and it also somewhat conflicts with the desire to encourage high fertility in a traditional society. It’s no coincidence that Iranian women interviewed by international media expressed suspicion that Tehran’s fertility encouragement policy is meant to keep women “in their proper place, at home,” in their words.

That statement reflects the general attitude of Iranian citizens toward their leadership on this issue, along with their unwillingness to obey Khamenei’s entreaties or cooperate with his plans to encourage childbirth. The supreme leader himself repeatedly declares the problem and formulates plans, grants, and additional incentives – but the people ignore him. This is further evidence of the disconnect between large parts of the Iranian population from the conservative and extreme leadership in the country and the leadership’s alienation from entire segments of the Iranian people.

Here, for example, are words that Goya, a Tehran resident, told a French media network about one of the new laws to encourage childbirth and against abortion: “It’s ridiculous, interfering in citizens’ private lives. Instead of solving economic problems, the authorities want to interfere more in our lives. It’s not their business. It’s my decision. We are used to restrictions in this country and will find a way around them.”

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