

The Latest Global Population Numbers Produce Surprises.  
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Some modern historians have added geography and demography to their historic research, and not a moment too soon. We really cannot understand the psychology and future trajectories of our allies and enemies without considering why they behave as they do and whether they have too many or too few people to thrive, be offensive, or decline.

\225 Geography. Robert Kaplan tells us in his new book: The Revenge of Geography, that the one given in a country's history is its geography. The United States, for example, is flanked by two oceans, one benign neighbor (Canada), and one troubled developing neighbor, Mexico. We have been blessed by a geography that has protected us from the fate of all other countries in the world, but we cannot afford to ignore Mexico, for the good of us both.

Russia, enormous as it is, has been cursed by its geography. It is wide open to invasion from all sides, which explains their paranoia. They have also been cursed by a geography that has them too far north to effectively feed themselves. Geography has temporarily blessed them with vast natural resources that are today their only source of wealth. And their demography adds to their problematic future: their birthrate is in sharp decline. Russia's surliness is understandable, and their future not rosy.

\225 Demographics. By only looking at the surface, we may exaggerate, as menacing, countries that have a raft of problems hidden from casual view. For years now, for example, we have been told that Islam is the world's fastest growing religion and that Muslims will soon overwhelm the world in a population explosion. For many years, this seemed true. The Muslim World, thanks to their plentiful oil supply, has financed a youth bulge of young men who have fueled Islam's current fever of violence. However, what goes up also comes down.

Demographer Nicholas Eberstadt, a scholar with the American Enterprise Institute, has noted that the decline in Muslim fertility is predicting a decline in Militant Islam as well. Along with the plummeting birth rate is a flight from marriage (See David Ignatius, '23A Sea Change in the Muslim World,' 24 February 9, Santa Cruz Sentinel).

Not only are demographers noting these events, but so are national leaders themselves. The Russians, Turks, and Iranians have all spoken publicly about this birth dearth, urging young women to do their duty to the state and have babies. The young women are not listening, which is understandable, considering how their cultures treat them. One psychological reason for the flight from marriage and low fertility outcomes is a long period of despair. Having children today requires faith in the future.

Iran, for all its current menace, is experiencing the worst crash of population in the world today. Fertility rate has declined 70% over the past 30 years, and the population will decline by 50% by the end of the century if this trend continues. Their population was at its lowest ebb in 1920, down to only 10 million. Their highest was during the early Islamist period (1980) when they claimed 72 million (exaggerated, but not by much), after Ayatollah Khomeini banned contraception. Now the fertility rate has declined to perhaps 1.3; it takes 2.1 just for replacement.

Russia went through this decline under Communism, with the result that their current population is half of what it was in 1940. How does one maintain an army with such numbers?

Our military forward planners (the military is the rare institution in our government that does long-range planning) are taking note of these demographic changes and are contemplating which will bode peace and which war.

This sharp decline in human numbers may be a benefit in the long haul, relieving the stress on the world's natural resources; dampening belligerence and warfare when the stress of population explosion is removed; and with the reduction of the birth rate, women will no longer face the horrors of unremitting childbirth, a major killer of downtrodden women. Perhaps these changes will give us time to make a better world, not just a growing one. I have no problem with that.

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