Determinants of Fertility Change in the West Bank and Gaza Strip

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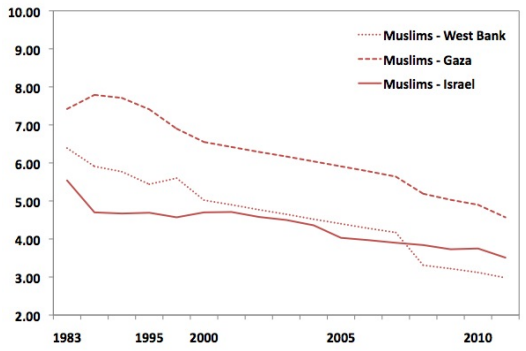
Abstract

I. Introduction

Fertility in the Middle-East is often regarded as very high, shows little signs of slowing down and is superior to that of neighboring non-Muslim countries. While such a statement is not true for many countries, Palestinian fertility is an exception and is recognized for its ever-high fertility (TFR of 4.6 and 3.90 children/woman in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and in Israel in 2007, PCBS and ICBS). The fertility transition in this region does not fit into a simple model that only accounts for a few variables. Indeed Khawaja and Randall (2006) argue that "political particularities can also be a very strong force in generating anomalous fertility dynamics".

Figure 1: *Fertility of Muslims in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, 1983-2011*



Source: ICBS, Statistical Abstracts of Israel and PCBS

A steady decline in fertility has however been observed in recent decades. Figure 1 shows that fertility is still higher in the Gaza strip than in the West Bank but the decrease follows the same pace in both regions and is faster than that of their counterparts in Israel.

II. Background

Throughout the literature, Palestinian and Israeli's high fertility is associated with nationalism. It was found that Palestinian fertility tends to increase in the aftermath of conflict and especially among the more educated people, supposedly the most politically conscious (Courbage, 1999). Conditions are however favorable for a rapid fertility transition (Fargues, 2000): Palestinian children are among the most educated in the Arab world, the infant mortality rate is among the lowest, and the population is predominantly urban. The same contraceptive prevalence as in neighboring countries is also observed but there is a smaller gap between actual and desired fertility.

The main factor associated with the decline in Palestinian fertility is the set of changes in the dynamics of marriage. There is indeed an increase in the proportion of single women (Khawaja et al., 2009). One woman out of three has never been married in the West Bank, which is 8% higher than in Gaza. Marriage postponement is however increasing more in Gaza among younger women. The mean ideal

family size is generally decreasing but remains higher in Gaza despite the economic downturn, rising poverty and employment, especially in Gaza. For these reasons Khawaja et al. (2009) argue that the classical theory of demographic transition cannot explain the continued strong demand for children in the modern yet conflictual context of Gaza or the differences with the West Bank.

Hypotheses for fertility differentials

1. **The minority group status hypothesis** is the most commonly used to study fertility differentials. This hypothesis is often cited in researches about the persistence of the high fertility levels of Jews and Muslims in the region. Khawaja and Randall (2006) went further by extanding the minortity group status hypothesis to the "Palestinian situation in the West Bank and Gaza where the population is not a minority withinh a nation state, but a minority who perceive themselves to be occupied and oppressed by a nation state."

   A minority group is considered in numerical terms and on a psychological level. The effect of being affiliated with a religious or ethnic group will be different depending on whether this group represents a major subgroup or not. Fertility of the minority group will be higher or lower than their counterparts based on factors such as acculturation and socioeconomic variables. Minority groups tend to have higher fertility rates than the majority group to ensure their survival in the community. They put more emphasis on aspects of family life that lead to procreation or reduced use of contraception (Morgan et al., 2002).

2. **Political fertility thesis**: the persistence of high fertility is a result of ideological motives conveyed by political leaders during a conflict. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict caused a change in the ideals associated with fertility and caused a "war of cradles" promoted by Arafat (Courbage, 1995). A concrete and direct evidence for this thesis is however lacking (Khawaja et al., 2009).

3. **Demand for labour**: high levels of childbearing could be the result of an expected future demand for wage labour force in the Israeli labout market (Khawaja, 2000). All throughout the occupation, the Palestinian labour market went through major changes. From agricultue being the main employer of Palestinians, the Israeli labour market became the main employer.

Other hypotheses such as the *Characteristics approach* (Goldscheider, 1967) and the *interaction hypothesis* (Alagarajan, 2003) aim at explaining fertility differentials but are rarely used in the case of Palestinian fertility.

III. Objective

Several hypotheses have been advanced on the factors surrounding the ever-high Palestinian fertility. The objective of this paper is thus to better understand the mechanisms of fertility change in both regions by estimating trends in annual marital conception probabilities.

IV. Data and methods

The most recent version of the Demographic and Health Survey of Palestine is from 2004. The survey includes information on 6574 households (4456 in the West Bank and 2118 in Gaza), including 4972 ever-married women aged 15 to 54. The survey contains a series of questions about the household, birth histories, reproduction, fertility preferences, health, etc.

The focus of this reasearch will be put on ever-married Palestinian women of Muslim faith.

Because we are interested in studying fertility change through different periods associated with the onset of the fertility transition in this region, discrete-time logistic regression models will be used. The outcome of interest is a *conception leading to a live birth in the current year* and controls will be applied for individual characteristics and duration. Conceptions will also be grouped by parity and models will be estimated for each parity. Finally, the same kind of grouping will be done with birth intervals.

To evaluate the impact of different factors on the fertility of Palestinian women in the West Bank and Gaza strip, both regions will be analyzed separetely. The demographic and socio-economic variables that will be used as controls are age at first birth, education, and place of residence (rural/urban).

V. Expected results

The litterature on Palestinian fertility shows that conflict does not affect fertility in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. In other regions of the world where there are conflicts fertility is temporary decreased until living conditions improve. Palestinians being *in limbo* (Randall, 2005) are most likely not affected in terms of conception probabilities in the short term because they are not under the impression that things will get better. The economic downturn probably has a bigger impact of the conception probabilities in the long-term.

Changes in the conception probabilities by parity will also be obseved. Given the fact that fertility is indeed slowly decreasing, the probabilities will go down when parity increases. This phenomenon should be more apparent in the West Bank where the fertility transition seems to be well under way.

Finally, we expect to see changes over time in the conception probabilities by birth interval. Bystrov (2012) noticed that among Israelis, the increase in the age at marriage does not affect overall fertility because fertility increases among older age groups. We expect to see a similar phenomenon through shorter birth interval at older ages. The conception probability should increased all throughout women reproductive span.

V.References

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