The Demographic Security Dilemma

By Christian Leuprecht, Ph.D.

Why do minority populations often grow faster than majorities? States in dyadic conflict with a minority whose population growth exceeds that of the majority are prone to protective measures to bolster the majority’s grip on power. Under conditions of ethnic control, however, such measures appear to precipitate higher fertility rates among the minority. Christian Leuprecht develops the logic of a demographic security dilemma to account for this pervasive puzzle.

Minority ethnic groups often have higher fertility and population-growth trends than those ethnic groups that are in the majority. This article posits a hypothesis for this hitherto unexplained puzzle. Drawing on neo-realism, social psychology, and the paradigm of the security dilemma first advanced by Robert Jervis, it generates a working hypothesis which it then subjects to a test case: Demographic behavior among minority ethnic groups is (at least partially) a function of relative political, economical, and social deprivation. Clamping down politically and economically on ethnic minorities that are perceived to pose a security threat may precipitate an unintended demographic reaction. That change in fertility among the minority ethnic group is perceived by the hegemonic majority as worsening its security prospects. In return, the majority tightens the reins on the minority, which aggravates the vicious cycle posited herein as the “demographic security dilemma.” The article will use demographic
trends among the Palestinian population in the Occupied Territories as a test case.

The notion of a demographic security dilemma denotes a circumstance where one group—usually the demographically, economically, and politically dominant group (although it need not dominate in all three areas)—“securitizes” another—usually the minority (which may be dominated demographically, economically, and politically but often shows signs of being demographically more dynamic, that is, relatively smaller in size but with higher fertility). In instances where the dominant ethnic group enjoys overwhelming political, economic, and military control, the sole remaining retaliatory “weapon” at the minority’s disposal is demographic: fertility. Insofar as the hypothesis does not make any claims about a proximate causal relationship between decisions taken by the dominant group and subsequent perceptions and reactions by elites of the minority group, however, it deviates from the realist variant of international relations: conditions of anarchy give rise to a “security dilemma” in which even non-aggressive moves to enhance one’s security are perceived by others as threatening and trigger countermeasures that ultimately reduce one’s own security.

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Rather, the notion of a demographic security dilemma is premised on an evolutionary psychological account of individual psychology and its relationship to ontological security. The notion of “ontological security” transcends the confines of physical security. Ontological security is security writ large, that is, security of the self, of individual and group identity and the environment(s) necessary to sustain that identity. The presumption is that ontological security is no less important to states, groups, and individuals than physical security. To this end, the particular notion of ontological security has recently been applied to international relations - and to the security dilemma specifically. It is helpful not only in coming to terms with demography as a measure of last resort in dealing with a group’s existential anxieties and dangers; it also, and perhaps more importantly, explains why it might be perfectly rational for actors to continue to engage in security-seeking behavior which ostensibly aggravates the situation.
This article is more of a hypothesis-generating thought experiment than a conclusive analysis. It is meant to demonstrate that the logic of a “demographic security dilemma” is plausible (in theory, at least), not to make a positivist claim as to the incontrovertible existence of a causal mechanism. At the same time, though, the author believes this to be an important advance in positing an explanation for pervasive demographic puzzles for which it is otherwise difficult to account.

The first section of the article reviews the security dilemma and sets the stage for fertility as a structural enabler of the security dilemma in domestic conflict. The second section operationalizes the demographic security dilemma by applying it to a critical case study. The third section discusses the findings and implications: The way to break the negative feedback loop between demography and insecurity is to enact policies to bring down fertility by speeding up the onset of the demographic transition. Instead of provisions that only aggravate the security dilemma further, these policies have the advantage of ample precedent throughout the democratic world and of being commensurate with liberal–democratic principles. Yet, such policies prove difficult to enact because they turn out to run counter to the majority’s intuition about security. The final section proposes an additional test against which the security-dilemma proposition that is being advanced in this article can be measured: Since demographic behavior can be both measured and projected, the real value of the notion of the demographic security dilemma is that it transcends the ubiquitous realm of *ex post facto* explanations and instead facilitates analysis to anticipate how a conflict is likely to develop. That is, with demography as a structural variable, the analyst can project whether the security dilemma between groups in conflict is likely to worsen (or improve). In closing, the article issues a challenge to skeptics: While the idea of a demographic security dilemma may be controversial, it is able to account for the logic behind a pervasive puzzle that had hitherto lacked a viable explanation: Why population growth among minorities often exceeds that of majorities, a trend that has significant security implications for both domestic conflict and its analysis.

**The Security Dilemma and its Application to Conflict**

The concept of the security dilemma is primarily employed in the neorealist branch of international relations theory and emphasizes the anarchic environment in which states exist. States tend to be motivated by mistrust and fear, and thus tend to act on worst-case assumptions. Hence, if a security-minded state acquires marginal improvements in its defenses, other states may perceive that their security is now threatened. These states will then move to improve their own security, resulting in an action-reaction dynamic.
between states that may “spiral” towards unintended conflict. The situation is a dilemma insofar as states must provide for their security, but attempts at doing so may end up making them less secure.

Under conditions of imperial collapse, the conditions that make the security dilemma so dangerous between states can be present in relations between ethnic groups, specifically, the inability to distinguish between offensive and defensive measures, and the superiority of offensive operations. The more closely the environment in which relations between ethnic groups mirrors that of the anarchic environment of international relations, the more likely it is to give rise to a security dilemma. An anarchic environment can also provide minority ethnic groups with a window of opportunity to seek full statehood. *De facto* anarchy reigns in states that lack the will or institutional capacity to ensure minority participation and support for laws that guarantee their freedom and physical security. Consequently, ethnic groups become responsible for their own security, and efforts to protect themselves can often be construed as threatening to other groups in under-institutionalized multi-ethnic states. An inter-ethnic security dilemma ensues where efforts by one group to make itself more secure have the effect of making other groups less secure.

The ethnic hostility, kindled by ethnic entrepreneurs, that ultimately drives this interactive process results from both ethnically defined rational dissatisfactions and “emotional heat” generated by hatred and fear of extinction. Structural conditions amenable to fostering an emotional reaction include a threatening demographic situation. Demographic decline and memories of ethnic domination exacerbate collective insecurity and add plausibility to the threat of extinction. Demographic fears can be conjured up in different ways. First, ethnic groups can develop fears of extinction when their size declines in absolute terms. Second, the absolute numbers of an ethnic group may be stable or even growing, but fears can develop if their size relative to other groups in the same region is declining, leading to fears of cultural extinction rather than physical extinction. Third, ethnic groups are concerned with preserving their cultural heritage; so, declining birthrates are particularly troubling to nationalists because they cast doubt upon the existence of the group in the future. Fourth, fears can develop if an ethnic group is located in an area in which it is surrounded by one or more other groups, thus subjecting it to the mercy of others. In any of these situations, but usually in combination with each other, ethnic groups are likely to ratchet up the rhetoric of survival. The potential for violence increases in the case of mutual demographic fears between groups, which leads to successive extreme measures that reduce the security of others, yet are perceived as necessary under the circumstances.
The Demographic Security Dilemma: A Critical Case Study

Although a comprehensive empirical comparison is beyond the scope of this article, a critical case study is indispensable to operationalize the demographic security dilemma as a tangible concept. The Israeli–Palestinian conflict is ideally suited to this end. First, Palestinian demographics in the Occupied Territories are well established as aberrant compared to fertility among Palestinians elsewhere in the region and to Israel proper. While Palestinian populations throughout these regions are at various stages in the demographic transition, fertility rates among Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza remain intriguingly high. Second, it is actually possible to control for demographic data since reliable demographic data on Palestinians exist for the Occupied Territories, for Arab Israelis, and for the Palestinian diaspora in the Middle East. Third, with the onset of the First and Second Intifadas, there is clear variation on the security variable with evident escalation over time. And since the Israeli–Palestinian conflict has already been framed as a security dilemma, all this section needs to do is establish demography as an enabling structural variable.

At growth rates that are almost double those of the rest of the region—and thus among the highest anywhere in the world—Palestinian demographic trends in the Occupied Territories are exceptional. Other countries have higher fertility rates still, but the United Nation’s 2005 World Population data show the Palestinian Territories have the world’s highest rate of natural increase—the difference between crude births and crude deaths. At 3.8 percent, natural increase is almost double the rate of 2 percent for the region of Western Asia. Its current fertility rate is 5.6, which is 2 points above the regional average and, in the region of Western Asia, is exceeded only by Yemen. The same holds for its Crude Birth Rates (CBR)—the number of live births per 1,000 population—which at 42 is only slightly below Yemen’s 44. Ceteris paribus, the Palestinian population in the Occupied Territories will double in the course of a generation whereas it will take much of the rest of the region two generations to double in size.

These metrics are all the more curious because historically populations in other countries in the region continued to grow, whereas trends in the West Bank and Gaza were pretty stable. Figure 1, for example, compares the Palestinian populations of select Middle Eastern countries and shows no remarkable aberration prior to the 1980s. Since then the relaxed demographic circumstances of Palestinians in Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Lebanon contrast starkly with Palestinians in Jordan, the Occupied Territories, and smaller Israel.
By 1993, nearly 1.1 million Palestinians were living in West Bank and 700,000 in the Gaza Strip. That is almost twice the population of 600,000 and 400,000 in each area respectively in 1967. However, data also show that during this same interval, Palestinian population growth in these areas notwithstanding, rates of growth differed. Initially, natural increase in the Occupied Territories was actually negative. That is, due to out-migration the population of the Occupied Territories was actually in decline prior to 1969/70.

However, as exit options for Palestinians in the Occupied Territories closed, population growth picked up with growth in the Gaza Strip out-pacing the West Bank. Figure 2 depicts a marked difference of 0.73 percent in 1986, when natural increase was 3.37 percent and 4.1 percent in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, respectively. This gap widened to a 1.12 percent difference by 1989, but growth rates—the percentage by which a population grew in a given year due to natural increase and net migration—converged by 1993 at 4.9 percent in the West Bank and 5.03 percent in the Gaza Strip. To put
these extraordinary rates in context: Population growth among Palestinians in the Occupied Territories was more than three times the global average at the time and thus among the highest of any population group in the world.

**Figure 2:** *Population and Natural Growth Rates in the West Bank and Gaza, 1967–1993*\(^{14}\)

A closer look at fertility among Arab Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza and Israel depicted in Figure 3 reveals three further distinct rate patterns. Since 1968, the Total Fertility Rate (TFR)—the average number of children a woman would bear during her lifetime (assuming her childbearing conforms to her age-specific fertility rate every year during her childbearing years, typically 15 to 44)—among Arab Israelis has declined steadily, holding at a rate of approximately 4 since 1986. Among Arab Palestinians in the West Bank, there has also been a steady decline but rising to 6.44 in 1990/91 and spiking in 1998 (5.85) and 2003 (5.2). Consistent with a demographic security dilemma, these dates and figures happen to coincide with the First and Second Intifada. Notwithstanding a steady decline between 1975 and 1985, Gaza experienced rapid increases in the TFR reaching its peak at 8.13 in 1992, followed by a steady decline to 5.6 in 2000.
As depicted in Figure 4, the CBR in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank followed similar trends until 1985 at which point the CBR in Gaza continued to increase while that of the West Bank began to wane. The years between 1985 and 1989 mark a period of clear divergence. Both areas experienced a spike in their respective CBRs in 1991, at 47.3 live births per 1000 people in the West Bank and 56.1 live births per 1000 people in the Gaza Strip. Since that time, demographic trends among both population groups have started to decline.
Between 1983 and 1994, the TFR of the West Bank is comparable to fertility patterns in Jordan and Lebanon. Gaza’s TFR, by contrast, remains an anomaly, which, as shown in Figure 5, manifests itself in the form of a consistently high fertility rate among its Palestinian population with only a marginal decline of only 0.08 points.

**Figure 5:** Total Fertility Rate of Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, and Lebanon, 1983–1994

In comparison to other areas including Israel, Jordan, Syria, Egypt, and Lebanon, Figure 6 shows the Gaza Strip to have a relatively high and steady CBR between 1968 and 1993. Between 1989 and 1992, while the CBRs in all other areas were in sharp decline, CBRs in the West Bank and Gaza Strip reached unprecedented heights. Concomitantly, Israel experienced quite a low CBR that continued to decline over time.

**Figure 6:** Crude Birth Rate in the West Bank, Gaza, and Select Middle Eastern Countries, 1968–1993

In terms of natural increase, declines in Lebanon and Israel are steady. Jordan and Syria experienced erratic growth during this time, with Syria reaching the highest natural increase in 1980. In Figure 7 the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, by contrast, showed steady increases in their populations between 1968 and 1993, diverging in 1990 when growth in the West Bank began to decline while growth in Gaza continued apace until it peaked in 1993.

**Figure 7:** Natural Increase in the West Bank, Gaza, and Select Middle Eastern Countries

In sum, compared to other countries in the world and in the Middle East, to demographic patterns among Palestinians residing in countries that border Israel, and to Israeli Arabs, demographic patterns among Palestinians in the Occupied Territories are exceptional. Can the demographic security dilemma explain this exceptionalism?

**Discussion**

Individuals are prone to minimize cognitive dissonance—which occurs when one set of beliefs clashes with another—while avoiding information and situations that likely will make it worse. For example, to justify one’s actions, in an attempt to minimize a clash of beliefs a person can find new reasons or rearrange his beliefs so as to support the original actions. This psychological mechanism can support continuing a policy even in light of evidence that should induce a policy change. This tendency is further reinforced if there is a need to justify high costs related to the policy, thus leading one to hold a stronger view in favor
of the policy. A major consequence of dissonance is “anti-learning,” in which failure leads an actor to hold more strongly to his policy rather than “learn.”

This describes Israeli policy towards the Occupied Territories. If clamping down on Palestinians sustains their fertility and population-growth at unusually high levels—or, at least, has a major impact on the rate at which those trends would decline under normal circumstances—the inference to draw is that “securitarizing” the Palestinian population in the Occupied Territories actually produces sub-optimal outcomes. The analysis suggests that rather than securitarizing populations, governments such as Israel that perceive a minority population as a threat, especially where its demographic development is concerned, may quite possibly be better off pursuing the exact opposite policy. That is, they may seriously want to consider providing all the accoutrements, services, and social safety nets of a modern welfare state to the minority population to provide the necessary incentives to bring that ethnic minority group’s demographic behavior in line with their own. The longer a state continues to securitarize a population, the greater the demographic differential and thus the harder it will become to “normalize” the situation.

This also explains why states may cling to security policies that produce increasingly sub-optimal outcomes. An emergent feature of the security dilemma consists of the ongoing reinforcement of an identity that, rationally considered, is an unsound security policy. As actors hold on to relationships that result in these sub-optimal outcomes, they ‘take on’ an identity that ultimately comes to be rational. For such arguments to obtain, states should more often be pushed into war by the fear that the alternative to fighting is a deterioration in their position—both psychological and existential. Rather than improving the security situation, their policies actually worsen it but the worse the situation and differentials get, the harder it becomes to change policy.

In short, in circumstances such as those in the Occupied Territories where a dominant state such as Israel has to confront security threats with a minority population that is immobile and enjoys a demographical plurality, that state may actually be best served by pursuing a policy that does not securitarize that population, for coercion has been shown to conserve the status quo rather than alter it. Rather, a policy that treats all citizens with equal concern and respect is likely to produce more optimal outcomes.

This finding is in line with the measures proposed by Jervis to decrease misperception. His main theme is that decision-makers should confront reality with an awareness of the cognitive mechanisms that tend to yield misperception. Jervis recommends that decision-makers make beliefs and values (and therefore assumptions and predictions about outcomes) more explicit. The difficulty with that finding, of course, is that making a particular
population group’s demographic decline a deliberate state policy is politically and historically difficult to justify. It can, however, be justified based on normative liberal–democratic theory. That is, rather than justifying it as a population policy, the policy could simply be justified as precisely the sort of treatment and policy one would reasonably expect from a liberal democracy.

This liberal policy implication is significant for it makes clear that the existential fear of competition or even death that underpins dyadic conflicts (and presumably led to the development of a perceptual architecture keenly attuned to differences between ethnic groups that makes such relationships prevalent) need not be understood as the sole mode of social or ethnic relations. Ethnic-group formation, relying as it does on the solipsistic identification of the ‘ethnic other,’ should be qualified with two important caveats. Firstly, it should be clear that ethnically biased perceptions do not rely on specific markers of ethnic kind but are instead adaptively beneficial because treating non-kin as an essentialized ‘natural kind’ helps clarify and normalize transactions with outgroups. Thus if we treat others as if they were naturally distinct from ourselves, keeping track of these differences reduces transaction costs between ethnic groups.

Nor need other-regarding behavior (i.e. non-kin, non-ethnic) always be conflictual. A Hobbesian state of nature need not necessarily arise from the epistemic uncertainty concerning others’ intentions. Ethnic relations need not be violent or even conflictual and can in fact be characterized not just by either benign or hostile attitudes, but also by attitudes of trust. In other words, relations between distinct ethnic groups need not immediately imply that all relationships between non-kin groups are necessarily hostile. The features of a relationship characterized in terms of a security dilemma rely not only on the collective psychology of ethnic groups but also suggest that the emergent features of this particular form of conflict in effect ‘create’ particular identities. The reinforcement of group identity in turn may account for an otherwise puzzling increase in fertility.

Conclusion

For the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the concept of a demographic security dilemma must account not only for high fertility rates among Palestinians in the Occupied Territories but also for population growth among a group whose fertility is even higher than that of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories: ultra-orthodox Jews. Registering six to seven children per woman, they are a genuine demographic exception. The demographic security dilemma can account for this phenomenon. The conflictual relationship between Palestinians in the Occupied Territories and ultra-orthodox Jews is dyadic: Each perceives the other’s security and demographic moves as threatening,
thereby exacerbating the dilemma. The higher fertility rate among the Ultra-orthodox relative to the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories may be explicable by virtue of Palestinians posing an even greater ontological security threat to the Ultra-orthodox than Israel poses to the Palestinians. For the Palestinian community in the Occupied Territories are already substantially more numerous than the Ultra-orthodox community in Israel which numbers about one million. Although fertility among Palestinians in the Occupied Territories is lower, by virtue of being more populous their population growth still outpaces that of the Ultra-orthodox. If the ontological security threat is indeed dialectical, then it is conceivable to hypothesize that the Ultra-orthodox respond to the dilemma with a fertility rate even greater than their perceived adversary’s. Conversely, of course, the dilemma suggests that Palestinian fertility is likely to remain elevated disproportionately as long as Ultra-orthodox fertility remains high. Furthermore, since Israel is a democracy, as the Ultra-orthodox influence over the state of Israel consolidates demographically, the security dilemma can be expected to deepen as the Ultra-orthodox influence grows over the security, political, and economic hegemony of the state of Israel over the Occupied Territories.

One way to test the hypothesis generated in this article with respect to the demographic security dilemma is to see whether fertility trends among Ultra-orthodox Jews and Palestinians in the Occupied Territories continue to correlate. As long as the security dilemma persists—as the demographic trends among Palestinians in the Occupied Territories and the Ultra-orthodox indicate—if a demographic security dilemma indeed exists, one would expect fertility among both groups to remain high. Only defusing the security dilemma will accelerate their demographic transition. The path-dependent coincidence between the two Palestinian Intifadas and rather peculiar demographic developments underscores this claim.

Is it conceivable that the demographic behavior among Palestinians in the Occupied Territories can be ascribed to a “demographic security dilemma”? Has the securitarization of the Palestinian population in the Occupied Territories precipitated a situation where Palestinians are retaliating with the one structural weapon where they have the upper hand: demography? And where Israel’s ultra-orthodox community, feeling threatened ontologically by demographic developments in the Occupied Territories, is responding in kind? Introducing the notion of a demographic security dilemma postulates an explanation that is at least theoretically conceivable for a phenomenon for which it might otherwise be difficult to account. The author challenges the skeptical reader to propose a viable alternative. Y

—Mai Truong served as the lead editor of this article.
NOTES


There is disagreement over the degree to which economic prosperity can be any more than loosely correlated with demographic transition, particularly in cultures where female political equality is not firmly established.

Canada’s treatment of Quebec after the 1960s—where Quebec received considerable political concessions and by far the greatest portion or equalization and transfer payments among Canadian provinces—may, if we consider the dramatic decline in fertility among francophone Quebeckers, actually be preferable. Quebec, of course, is just one example. Demographic trends among minorities right across liberal democracies—be it Catalans, Basques, Galicians, Corsicans, Scots, Russians, Hungarians, and even Northern Irish nationalists—bolster the case for an ideologically “liberal” treatment of minority groups that could pose a demographic security threat. Conversely, one can come up with dozens of cases—be it Kosovar Albanians who have the highest fertility in Europe, or indigenous peoples who have the highest fertility the world over—from which one can infer that illiberally “securitarizing” ethnic minorities may precipitate a demographic security dilemma. The trouble, of course, is that such a policy is not always easy to justify in a liberal democracy, let alone under conditions of a prolonged intractable conflict as in the Israeli–Palestinian case.


Ibid, 54.

Mitzen, 2006.