

## Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on Iran's Population Policy

*Iran has experienced a remarkably rapid fertility decline, from above 6 births per woman at the time of the 1979 Islamic Revolution to 1.9 today, according to UN Population Division estimates (2012 Revision). Among predominantly Muslim countries, only Albania has a lower fertility rate. A result of the decline has been rapid aging of the population, with the median age rising from 18 years in 1979 to 29 today. Under the Population Division's medium variant projection, the median will exceed 40 by 2050, accompanied by a rise in the old-age dependency ratio (population over 65 per 100 aged 15–64) from 8 to 35.*

*Iranian demographers cite a wide range of factors that, in their view, have combined with a well-run family planning program to bring down fertility: a later age at marriage (now 24 for women); increased girls' education, especially at higher levels; the decline in infant mortality; rural development; economic hardship; and the high cost of raising children.*

*In response to projected changes in the age structure as well as the possibility of population decline, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei, on May 20 instructed relevant government agencies to implement a new population policy designed, inter alia, to boost fertility. This marks a radical volte-face. When, in the early 1990s, rapid population growth was seen to be a constraint in the context of the first national development plan, Iran's leadership, including Ayatollah Khamenei himself, shifted from a pro- to an anti-natalist stance. The national family planning program, which had been suppressed after the Revolution, was re-instituted.*

*Among the measures being debated to implement the new policy are eliminating the family planning program in the Ministry of Health, prohibiting the promotion of contraception, stricter enforcement of the law against abortion, tightening rules governing sterilization, and increasing public support for young couples, new mothers, and large families. Goals concerning migration, population distribution, and population and the environment are also covered by the policy guidelines. More general aspects include discouraging the spread of "the western lifestyle"—implicit recognition that the small-family norm has become deeply entrenched among the Iranian middle class. According to the Iran National News Agency (IRNA), the goal is to raise Iran's population from near 80 million today to 150 million by 2050. (Under the UN's medium variant, the population is projected to peak at just over 100 million around 2050 and then begin a slow decline.)*

*Expert opinion casts doubt on the likely effectiveness of the policy changes as they bear on fertility. Family planning is fully integrated into Iran's dense public health network, and nothing in the new policy suggests that contraception will be discouraged outright. Iran's religious leaders, even at their most pronatalist, always took care to state that voluntary con-*

traception with the consent of the husband was permissible. A 2010 national survey found that 77 percent of Iranian women aged 15–49 practice contraception and 57 percent use a modern method. The dismantling of the national family planning program after the Revolution, and accompanying pronatalist measures, contributed to a modest rise in fertility, but family planning services continued to be available and fertility resumed and accelerated its long-term decline in the mid-1980s. By all accounts, desired fertility remains below replacement in Iran, not only because the small-family norm has been accepted, but also because of the strained economic situation of young households. Jobs are precarious and housing is scarce. More important for the future course of fertility than the government's pronatalist policies will probably be Iran's future economic trajectory, currently adversely affected by international economic sanctions.

*A full text of the Supreme Leader's statement, in the translation issued by IRNA, is given below.*

### **In the Name of Allah the Beneficent, the Merciful**

Considering the significance of the issue of population in achieving national power and considering the dynamism, development and youthful nature of the population of the country as an opportunity and advantage and with the purpose of making up for population decreases in recent years, I hereby announce the general policies on population.

In view of the affirmative role of population in the progress of the country, it is necessary to formulate comprehensive plans for achieving the economic, social and cultural growth of the country in line with population policies. It is also necessary to adopt essential measures in a careful, rapid and powerful way. This should be done through cooperation and collaborative work by the organizations which are in charge of such affairs. It is necessary to report the results of the pursuit and implementation of these policies.

*Sayyid Ali Khamenei  
30th Ordibehesht, 1393*

### **In the Name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful**

#### **General policies on population:**

1 Improving the dynamism, development and youthful nature of the population by increasing the fertility rate to a higher rate than the rate of sub-replacement fertility.

2 Removing the obstacles of marriage, facilitating marriage, promoting the formation of family and giving birth to more children, encouraging youth to marry at a younger age, supporting young couples and enabling them to afford the cost of living and to raise righteous and competent children.

3 Providing mothers with special resources—particularly during pregnancy and breast-feeding—and with childbirth insurance, treating men's and women's infertility and supporting the organizations in charge of such affairs.

4 Strengthening the foundation of the family by improving and completing the public educational plans about the essential nature of family and child-rearing, encouraging people to learn the skills which are necessary for life, providing consultative services on the basis of Islamic-Iranian culture and values, developing and supporting the Social Security Organization, improving health and treatment services and paying attention to medical care with the purpose of ensuring fertility.

5 Promoting and establishing an Islamic-Iranian lifestyle and confronting the negative aspects of the western lifestyle.

6 Increasing hope about life, ensuring the health and proper nutrition of the people and preventing social detriments particularly addiction, accidents, pollution and diseases.

7 Creating a culture for respecting the aged, preparing the ground for ensuring their health and for preserving them in families and developing necessary guidelines for benefiting

from the experiences and capabilities of old people in appropriate arenas.

8 Empowering the working population by creating an appropriate culture, by improving and strengthening educational organizations and public, entrepreneurial and technical instructions and lessons and by coordinating these instructions with the needs of society, and with talented individuals and their interests with the purpose of creating efficient and productive employment.

9 Environmental and geographical redistribution of the population—in line with environmental capacities—by stressing the necessity of water with the purpose of fair distribution and reducing population pressures.

10 Preserving the population of villages and border and sparsely populated areas and creating new population centers in the Persian Gulf and Sea of Oman coastal areas and islands by developing infrastructural networks, encouraging investment and creating an ap-

propriate environment for business with appropriate levels of income and profit.

11 Managing immigration from and to the country in line with the general policies on population and by developing and implementing necessary guidelines.

12 Encouraging the Iranians who live abroad to be present and to invest in Iran and utilizing their capacities and capabilities.

13 Strengthening the factors (Iranian, Islamic and revolutionary) which bring about national identity, promoting consensus and social convergence nationally, particularly among the residents of border areas and the Iranians who live abroad.

14 Constant follow-up—quantitative and qualitative—of population policies by developing appropriate guidelines, defining domestic standards for human development and carrying out research on population and human development.