The State of the Field: Demography and War

MONICA DUFFY TOFT

The Rise and Fall—and Rise—of Interest in Demography and War

At its root, the importance of the link between demography and war is the relative capacity of a given political unit's population to aid in its defense or to threaten other political units. For this reason, population increase and decrease have always been identified as vital security issues; however, the importance of raw population as an increment of state power has waxed and waned across time in response to technological innovations and broad normative social changes (de Bliokh, 1977; Mearsheimer, 2001).

Contemporary interest in population as a source of state military power has its origins in the French Revolution, which unleashed the power of the mass army on what was then a Europe ruled by monarchs in possession of highly specialized and relatively small professional armies (Posen, 1993). Thus beyond its normative implications regarding the proper basis of legitimate government, the French Revolution established demographics—including its emphasis on comparative birth rates—as an enduring interest of states, whether motivated by greed, insecurity, or aggression.

The Industrial Revolution threatened to change this relationship, as the railroad and the steamship made it possible to field and maintain mass armies, but the technology of automatic weapons and heavy artillery made it equally possible to destroy masses of soldiers with alarming alacrity. World War II confirmed the importance of machine over man, because the armored vehicle and—in particular—the strategic bomber appeared to make populations more vulnerable and at the same time less relevant to fighting power, except as logistical support in the form of factory workers and farmers.

Since the end of World War II, the importance of population as a key component of national security again began to rise after a series of colonial wars in which high-tech, capital-intensive militaries lost bitter contests to relatively low-tech, labor-intensive militaries in Asia and Africa, such as the United States in Vietnam or the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Moreover, interstate wars between major powers—the type of conflict that had appeared to relegate population to insignificance from the 1880s to the 1940s—ceased to exist, while civil wars—in which population becomes a much more direct representative of a political unit's military capacity—became the norm for large-scale political violence.

Today, interstate wars seem poised to make a slow comeback, but the combination of cheap transportation technology, high birth rates in the so-called developing world, and pride in national identity have combined to make refugee and emigration flows a significant new factor in the security calculations of major states and indeed entire regions (Nichiporuk, 2000; Weiner & Teitelbaum, 2001).

Demography Matters

In short, demography matters, especially because of another long-term, post-World War II trend: the increasing democratization of states, including major states such as the Russian Federation. Because the foundation of

Monica Duffy Toft is an associate professor of public policy at the John F. Kennedy School of Government and the assistant director of the John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies, Harvard University.

democracy is the principle of majority rule, states adopting democratic forms of government find themselves keenly interested in the proportions of politically active groups that inhabit their territories (Toft, 2003).

On the other hand, despite the conventional wisdom that changes in the demographic composition of states correlate with political instability and war, surprisingly little sustained scholarly research has addressed the issue. A search of the major journals devoted to war and conflict reveals that in the last 15 years only a handful of articles have sought to understand how demographic shifts contribute to large-scale violence both within states and beyond them.[1]

There are different ways to examine the impact of demography on war. Of the major studies in existence, two factors have received the most attention: age and sex ratios.[2] Age ratio studies examine whether a higher proportion of youth is associated with a higher likelihood of revolt and war (see, e.g., Huntington, 1996). The sex ratio hypothesis holds that the greater the imbalance in favor of men, the greater the likelihood of instability and war (Hudson & den Boer, 2004). Although these hypotheses have been examined, the underlying logic and empirical support for them remain speculative. Despite dire warnings about seething populations of too many young males, neither factor has yet been shown either necessary or sufficient for violence to erupt.

Differential population growth among identity groups has been less systematically studied than other demographic factors associated with conflict and war (Weiner, 1971; Toft, 2002, 2005; Strand & Urdal, 2005). However, historical wisdom holds that identity-group balances are key to the stability of multi-ethnic states. The civil war in Lebanon, for example, has largely (and accurately) been attributed to a shift in the delicate ethnic balance in that state (O'Ballance, 1998). Similar population pressure has been used to explain Israel's pullout from Gaza and parts of the West Bank, and demographic balances are key to stabilizing Iraq's government. Given that demographic balances and shifts are vital to the stability of multi-ethnic states, and the vast majority of states on the globe are multi-ethnic, the lack of attention is surprising.

What Causes Shifts?

The relative proportions of ethnic populations in states might shift for a variety of reasons; differential birth/fertility rates and economic immigration are just two explanations. Other reasons include deliberate state manipulation (usually in the form of monetary incentives to "desired" groups to bear more children), man-made disasters such as warfare (e.g., genocide in Rwanda and Burundi), and natural disasters such as drought (e.g., famine in Sudan and Somalia). Mass migration and resettlement, both spontaneous and forced (e.g., ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia), may also cause a shift in the size of the population or shifts among key factors (e.g. sex, age, identity-group ratios).

Consider the United States: the 2000 census revealed that Latinos are growing at a far faster pace than other ethnic groups. Latinos tend to have larger families (i.e., higher fertility rates) and many immigrants—largely economic—come to the United States from Latin American countries with Hispanic populations. According to U.S. census projections, if current trends continue, Hispanics—who in 2000 constituted 13 percent of the American population—will comprise 25 percent by 2050. In his most recent book, Samuel Huntington (2004) claims that the shift from a predominately white, Protestant culture to a majority Hispanic one could potentially lead to serious discord within the American polity. Whether this discord results in conflict or violence depends on a host of factors, including whether Hispanics assimilate and American political institutions adapt to the demands of this increasing population.

Why So Little Sustained Research?

Little research has been devoted to this important issue for two reasons. First, citizens of advanced industrial countries popularly believe

that technology trumps people. This prejudice, in most cases unfounded and in some cases positively dangerous, underpins a general lack of attention to everything from demographics and war, to the strategy and tactics of labor-intensive military organizations. Faith in technology extends across a wide array of social, economic, and political problems. Second, to put it bluntly, the study of demography and war is incredibly tough: data are often not available or reliable, and it is hard to separate out demographic determinants of conflict and war from more traditional factors.

Data Availability and Reliability

In order to secure reliable demographic data, a country must conduct and publish regular censuses. Censuses are not only expensive, but conducting them adequately also requires proper training of field agents and analysts. Many countries simply lack the resources and knowledge to conduct censuses properly. In addition, the process of counting a state's population requires a relatively stable environment. Countries undergoing civil strife are precisely those for which we need data, but also those in which census-taking is hampered by conflict and violence.

Population figures are easy prey for political machinations. Although censuses are vital for determining how to allocate goods and services equitably among a country's population, they can also be used as the basis for restricting opportunities to members of preferred identity groups. Data on identity groups can be manipulated in at least three ways: (1) the size of identity groups might be increased or decreased; (2) groups themselves might be excluded altogether or added to the figures of other groups; or (3) entire censuses could be withheld from publication and public debate.

Under Josef Stalin, the Soviet Union used all three methods: as part of the "Sovietization" project, officials were pressured to reduce the number of groups enumerated by the census (Clem, 1986). After the 1930s, the Migrelians, Svans, Laz, and Batsbiitsky—once identified as separate nationalities—were merged with the Georgians. In addition, when censuses in the 1930s revealed that the size of the population was not what Stalin thought it should be, the state classified the results, fearing widespread outrage had they revealed the true extent of the famine caused by the Soviet regime's collectivization efforts.

Some blame a contested census for the civil war in Lebanon, which has not conducted an official census since 1932. The "estimated" census of 1956 was largely seen as rigged, as it excluded a large number of Muslims, whose population had grown at a far faster rate than Christians (Deeb, 1980). Since political power in Lebanon is distributed among the different sectarian groups on a proportional basis, if the census revealed that the ethnic composition of the population had changed, then the distribution of power should change, too. But the Maronite Christians, who controlled the census process and data, did not want to cede any power, and as a consequence they fudged the results of the census—or at least accepted a less-than-accurate count as fact. Most outside observers agree that Christian numbers were inflated, while Muslim numbers were deflated. Although the census was discredited, it nevertheless provided the seeds of protest and grievance that subsequently led to civil war in Lebanon.

Another prominent example of how knowledge of shifts in the demographic balance can lead to instability and perhaps war is Israel, which has to adjust to demographic shifts among its Palestinian and Arab populations, as well as population differentials among Jews themselves, with Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox having population growth rates far greater than the secular Jewish population (see Fargues, 2000; Berman, 2000). Israel has pulled out of the Gaza Strip and some of the West Bank, thus ameliorating the notion of a greater Israel with a growing Palestinian population. However, Israel will still have to deal with increasing Arab and Jewish-religious populations. As in Lebanon, the nature of the Israeli political system affords these different groups political power, so as their numbers grow, so will their demands from the political system. Will Israel's

Despite the conventional wisdom that changes in the demographic composition of states correlate with political instability and war, surprisingly little sustained scholarly research has addressed the issue.

political system be resilient enough to handle these future demographic challenges without reverting to a form of apartheid, in order to hang on to large portions of the West Bank and maintain the particularly Jewish character of the state of Israel?

Conclusions

In summary, demographics and war will continue to be an important and policy-relevant topic. Shifts in facilitating technologies—along with, in some cases, deliberate demographic strategies for attaining power and resources—continue to be under-researched and poorly understood, which leads in many cases to counterproductive or destructive aid and intervention strategies. Progress on the independent causal impact of demography on war will therefore demand careful research designs and may not be susceptible to the kind of parsimony currently so popular among social scientists in general, and political scientists in particular. Only by building a community dedicated to sustained and quality research can we redress this situation.

Notes

1. Exceptions include Goldstone (1991), Toft (2002, 2005), and Hudson and den Boer (2004). Excellent surveys include Levy and Krebs (2001) and Cincotta, Engelman, and Anastasion (2003).

2. See commentaries in this *Report* by Sarah Staveteig on age ratio and conflict, and by Valerie Hudson and Andrea den Boer on sex ratio and conflict.

References

Berman, Eli. (2000). "Sect, subsidy and sacrifice: An economist's view of ultra-Orthodox Jews." *Quarterly Journal of Economics 115*(3), 905–953.

Cincotta, Richard P., Robert Engelman, & Daniele Anastasion. (2003). *The security demographic: Population and civil conflict after the Cold War.* Washington, DC: Population Action International.

Clem, Ralph S. (Ed). (1986). *Research guide to the Russian and Soviet censuses.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

de Bliokh, Ivan Stanislavovich. (1977). "Population pressure as a cause of war." *Population and Development Review 3*(1/2), 129-139. (Reprinted excerpts from Volume 5 of *The future of war from the point of view of technology, economy, and politics*, St. Petersburg, 1898, translated by Michael Bolysov).

Deeb, Marius. (1980). *The Lebanese civil war.* New York: Praeger.

Fargues, Philippe. (2000). "Protracted national conflict and fertility change: Palestinians and Israelis in the twentieth century." *Population and Development 26*(3), 441-482.

Goldstone, Jack A. (1991). *Revolution and rebellion in the early modern world.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hudson, Valerie, & Andrea den Boer. (2004). *Bare branches: The security implications of Asia's surplus male population.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Huntington, Samuel P. (1996). *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order.* New York: Simon and Schuster.

Huntington, Samuel P. (2004). *Who are we? The challenge to American identity.* New York: Simon and Schuster.

Levy, Jack S., & Ronald R. Krebs. (2001). "Demographic change and sources of international conflict." In Myron Weiner and Sharon Stanton Russell (Eds.), *Demography and national security (*pages 62-105). New York: Berghahn Books.

Mearsheimer, John. (2001). *The tragedy of great power politics.* New York: W.W. Norton.

Nichiporuk, Brian. (2000). *The security dynamics of demographic factors.* Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.

O'Ballance, Edgar. (1998). *Civil war in Lebanon, 1975-92.* New York: St. Martin's Press.

Posen, Barry. (1993). "Nationalism, the mass army, and military power." *International Security 18*(2), 80-124.

Strand, Håvard, & Henrik Urdal. (2005). *Differential growth, political instability and violent conflict.* Paper presented at the International Studies Association Conference, Honolulu, Hawaii.

Toft, Monica Duffy. (2002). "Differential demographic growth in multinational states: Israel's two-front war." *Journal of International Affairs 56*(1), 71-94.

Toft, Monica Duffy. (2003). *The geography of ethnic violence.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Toft, Monica Duffy. (2005). *Population shifts and civil war.* Manuscript in preparation.

Weiner, Myron. (1971). "Political demography: An inquiry into the political consequences of population change." In National Academy of Sciences (Eds.), *Rapid population growth: Consequences and policy implications* (pages 567-617). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Weiner, Myron, & Michael S. Teitelbaum. (2001). *Political demography and demographic engineering.* New York: Berghahn Books.