*13 Mar 2012 The New York Times* David Brooks

***How falling birthrates change the world.***

When you look at pictures from the Arab spring, you see these gigantic crowds of young men, and it confirms the impression that the Muslim Middle East has a gigantic youth bulge — hundreds of millions of young people with little to do. But that view is becoming obsolete. As Nicholas Eberstadt and Apoorva Shah of the American Enterprise Institute point out, over the past three decades, the Arab world has undergone a little noticed demographic implosion. Arab adults are having many fewer kids.

Usually, high religious observance and low income go along with high birthrates. But, according to the United States Census Bureau, Iran now has a similar birth rate to New England — which is the least fertile region in the U.S.

The speed of the change is breathtaking. A woman in Oman today has 5.6 fewer babies than a woman in Oman 30 years ago. Morocco, Syria and Saudi Arabia have seen fertility-rate declines of nearly 60 percent, and in Iran it’s more than 70 percent. These are among the fastest declines in recorded history.

The Iranian regime is aware of how the rapidly aging population and the lack of young people entering the work force could lead to long-term decline. But there’s not much they have been able to do about it. Maybe Iranians are pessimistic about the future. Maybe Iranian parents just want smaller families.

As Eberstadt is careful to note, demographics is not necessarily destiny. You can have fast economic development with low fertility or high fertility (South Korea and Taiwan did it a few decades ago). But, over the long term, it’s better to have a growing work force, not one that’s shrinking compared with the number of retirees.

If you look around the world, you see many other nations facing demographic headwinds. If the 20th century was the century of the population explosion, the 21st century, as Eberstadt notes, is looking like the century of the fertility implosion.

Already, nearly half the world’s population lives in countries with birthrates below the replacement level. According to the Census Bureau, the total increase in global manpower between 2010 and 2030 will be just half the increase we experienced in the two decades that just ended. At the same time, according to work by the International Institute of Applied Systems Analysis, the growth in educational attainment around the world is slowing.

This leads to what the writer Philip Longman has called the gray tsunami — a situation in which huge shares of the population are over 60 and small shares are under 30.

Some countries have it worse than others. Since the end of the Soviet Union, Russia has managed the trick of having low birthrates and high death rates. Russian life expectancy is basically the same as it was 50 years ago, and the nation’s population has declined by roughly six million since 1992.

Rapidly aging Japan has one of the worst demographic profiles, and most European profiles are famously grim. In China, long-term economic growth could face serious demographic restraints. The number of Chinese senior citizens is soaring by 3.7 percent year after year. By 2030, as Eberstadt notes, there will be many more older workers (ages 5064) than younger workers (15-29). In 2010, there were almost twice as many younger ones. In a culture where there is low social trust outside the family, a generation of only children is giving birth to another generation of only children, which is bound to lead to deep social change.

Even the countries with healthier demographics are facing problems. India, for example, will continue to produce plenty of young workers. By 2030, according to the Vienna Institute of Demography, India will have 100 million relatively educated young men, compared with fewer than 75 million in China.

But India faces a regional challenge. Population growth is high in the northern parts of the country, where people tend to be poorer and less educated. Meanwhile, fertility rates in the southern parts of the country, where people are richer and better educated, are already below replacement levels.

The U.S. has long had higher birthrates than Japan and most European nations. The U.S. population is increasing at every age level, thanks in part to immigration. America is aging, but not as fast as other countries.

But even that is looking fragile. The 2010 census suggested that U.S. population growth is decelerating faster than many expected.

Besides, it’s probably wrong to see this as a demographic competition. American living standards will be hurt by an aging and less dynamic world, even if the U.S. does attract young workers.

For decades, people took dynamism and economic growth for granted and saw population growth as a problem. Now we’ve gone to the other extreme, and it’s clear that young people are the scarce resource. In the 21st century, the U.S. could be the slowly aging leader of a rapidly aging world.