

Marriage Trends in the Middle East: A Fact Sheet

Background

This Fact Sheet examines marriage and divorce trends in the Middle East. The Middle East is a group of countries situated in a geographic region where Africa, Asia and Europe meet. The countries included in this region are not necessarily agreed upon, but the United Nations identifies 23 countries extending from northern Africa to western Asia as being part of the Middle East.¹

The countries comprising the Middle East are diverse in their cultural norms and values, racial and ethnic make-up, languages spoken and political structures. There is also a variety of religions practiced throughout the region—including Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Islam is prevalent across the Middle East, and Islamic law plays a large part in dictating marriage and its dissolution in many countries in the region.

Among other sources, data in this Fact Sheet are taken from the Demographic Yearbook from the Statistics Division of the United Nations. Data on non-marital birth and cohabitation rates and trends are not available for most countries. In addition, data are not available for all countries for all years, as the civil registry of each country differs. Data from the following countries are highlighted in this fact sheet: Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon and Syria.

Headlines/Trends

Patterns of marriage are changing in the Middle East in ways similar to those in other regions of the developing world. Research reveals that, while marriage remains the norm, it is becoming less so, and the age at first marriage is increasing.^{2,3} These changes are occurring for many reasons. For example, increases in women's labor participation and education have affected marriage trends, economic challenges in the region impact marriage rates, and religious, social and legal influences play a role in couples' decisions to marry or divorce.

More women in the Middle East are seeking further education, which may contribute to the delay of first marriage, in turn reducing the crude marriage rate.⁴ A more educated population of women has resulted in more women entering the workforce, which also affects trends in marriage. While the overall job market is weak for both men and women, young single women in the Middle East have increasingly entered the labor market as the educational attainment of girls has been on the rise since 1950.⁵ For example, during



the 1980s, there was a sharp increase in the Iraqi marriage rate – which actually doubled from that of 1970. During this time, laws to increase women’s literacy, employment and voting rights were enacted by the Ba’ath Party. However, in practice, women’s rights remained restricted.⁶ In some Arab countries, it is not acceptable for married women to work, so an increase in rates of working women is leading to a decrease in marriage rates.⁷ Egypt is an exception among these Middle Eastern countries; the crude marriage rate has declined despite little gain in female workforce participation.⁸

Marriage also remains expensive for many couples,⁹ and the lack of available jobs in the region creates financial problems for couples.¹⁰ For example, in Egypt, about 70% of the costs of marriage are paid for by the groom and his family, yet fewer public and private sector jobs are available. This typically results in young men entering low-paying, informal employment and delaying marriage until a better, higher-paying job is found.¹¹

Religious ideals and customs affect marriage trends and how society views marriage and divorce. There are an estimated 315 million Muslims (20% of the world’s Muslim population) in the Middle East, and more than half of the countries in the region have populations that are at least 95% Muslim.¹² Islamic law is used throughout the region to shape policy and public opinion around marriage. Increasingly, Islamic law is being interpreted in ways that often reflect more western views and practices – particularly with respect to women’s rights and divorce practices.¹³ A reflection of this trend can be seen in Saudi Arabia where there has been a decrease in the incidence of arranged marriages and increases in inter-religious, –ethnic and –social class marriages.¹⁴ Despite some increasing westernization in marriage trends, marriage still remains necessary to legitimize a union in many Middle Eastern countries.¹⁵ Marriage continues to be viewed as a rite of passage to adulthood and the socially accepted foundation for family formation in the region.¹⁶

Compared to the United States and other Western societies, the crude divorce rate is low in Middle Eastern countries. Part of this is related to women’s legal constraints in seeking a divorce. For example, prior to a 2000 ruling in Egypt, a woman could not divorce without her husband’s consent unless it was proven that the husband was abusive, addicted to drugs, sterile or not supportive of the family.¹⁷ In Jordan, the first woman to divorce her husband did so in 2002. Previously only men had the right to divorce.¹⁸ In Iran, Islamic law dictates that there must be mutual consent between partners for divorce, but pressure by individuals or Iranian society is common and can sway women’s decisions not to divorce.^{19,20}

Definitions

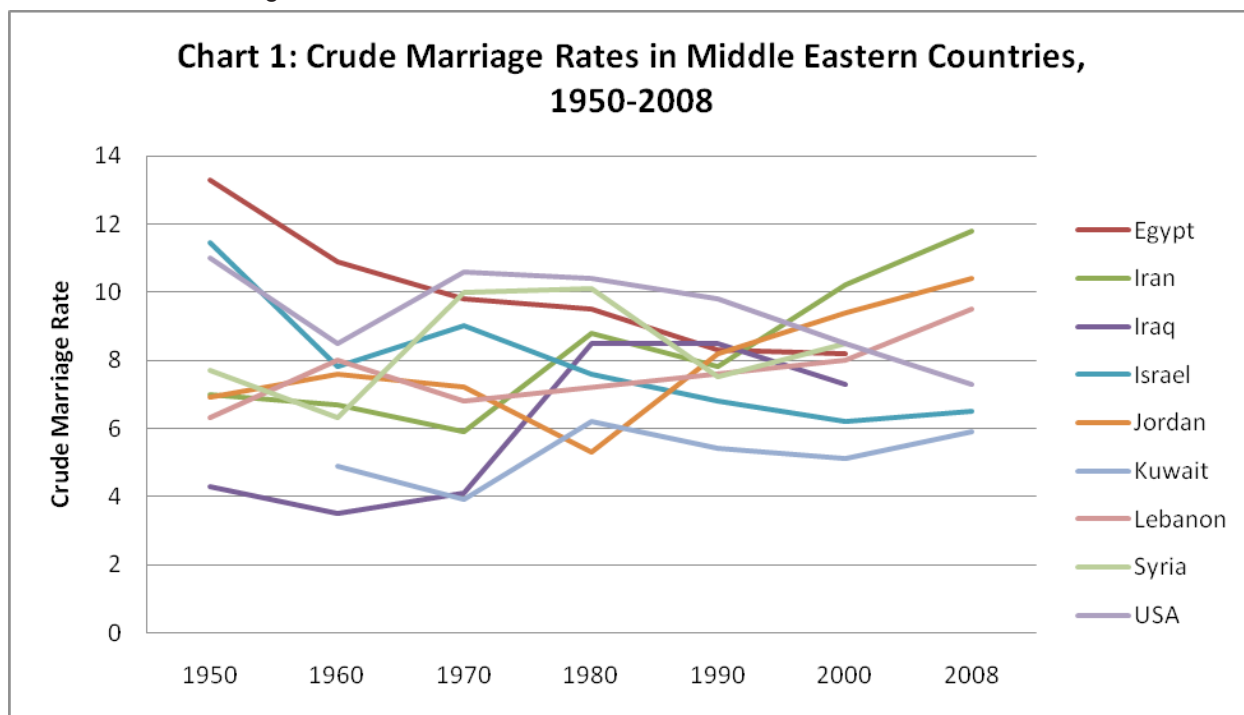
Crude marriage and divorce rates describe the number of marriages or divorces per 1,000 individuals in the population. The crude rate is mainly used to provide a sense of how common marriage and divorce is over time. The crude rate is limited in that it includes children and currently married individuals—populations that are not “at risk” of marriage. In addition, the rates only represent a single point in time. Crude marriage and divorce rates provide rough descriptions of trends in marriage and divorce over time and allow comparisons between the United States and other countries.

Data

Marriage

Chart 1 shows the crude marriage rates for Middle Eastern countries from 1950 to 2008. Egypt, Israel, Kuwait and Syria have crude marriage trends similar to those of the United States. These countries mostly show overall declines across the time period, including a brief increase between 1960 and 1980 before declining near the end of the century. Among the remaining countries, the data show increases since 1950. Iran, Jordan and Lebanon each surpassed the United States' crude marriage rate in 2008.

Chart 1: Crude Marriage Rates in Middle Eastern Countries, 1950-2008²¹



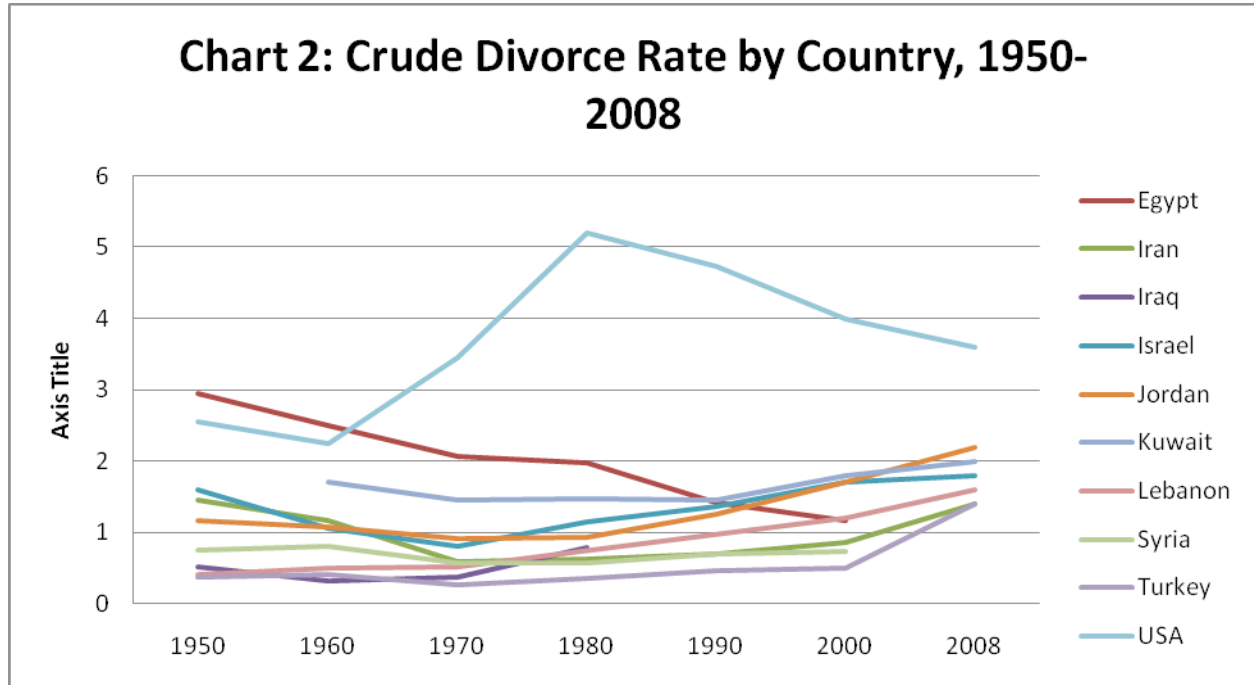
Note: In the event that data were not available for a country for a particular year, the nearest year's data were used.

Divorce

Chart 2 shows crude divorce rates for selected Middle Eastern countries by year. All of the countries except Egypt show similar patterns in their divorce rates. Rates mostly fell from 1950 to 1970 and then rose through 2008. After the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the government encouraged citizens to marry and have children. However, research suggests that many couples who did this were unprepared for marriage and, combined with an economic downturn, an increase in the divorce rate resulted.²² Unlike the other Middle Eastern countries, Egypt had a higher crude divorce rate than the United States in 1950

and then experienced a steady decline through 2000, ending with a lower crude divorce rate that year than four other Middle Eastern countries.

Chart 2: Crude Divorce Rate by Country, 1950-2008²³



Note: In the event that data was not available for a country for a particular year, the nearest year's data was used.

Conclusion

The Middle Eastern countries featured in this fact sheet have undergone a cultural westernization since the 1950s. Women are pursuing education and employment at higher rates than before. Arranged marriages are on the decline, and there has been a rise in rates of marriages between different societal groups. In many of these countries, the crude marriage rate trends are similar to the United States. New laws have passed to allow for more divorce rights for women in some countries as well. The data show modest increases in crude divorce rates for nearly all of the countries since 1980. However, divorce rates remain well below those of the United States and other Western societies.

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