

# Recent Trends in Marriage and Divorce in Israel

**Alex Weinreb**

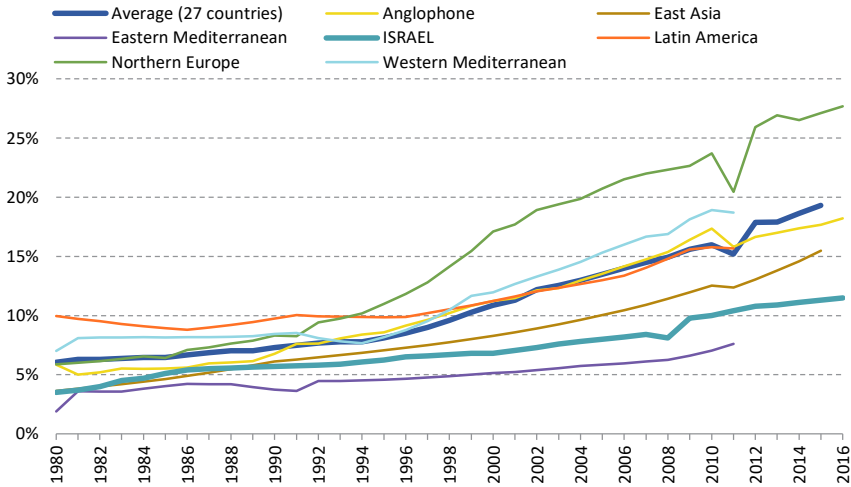
## Introduction

One of the quiet global social transformations of the last 40 years has been the movement away from near-universal marriage among younger cohorts. Clear signs of this can be seen in Figure 1, which graphs the percentage of women aged 40 who have never married in 28 countries representing several distinct regions or culture areas.<sup>1</sup> Across the 1980s, even with sharp rises in this percentage observed in Northern European and Anglophone countries, variation remained within the 3–10% range. By 2016 — within a single generation — the share of women never having married by age 40 had climbed to 28% of women in Northern European countries, was pushing toward 20% of women in Anglophone and Western Mediterranean countries, and was trending upward almost everywhere.

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1 Trends are similar for men.

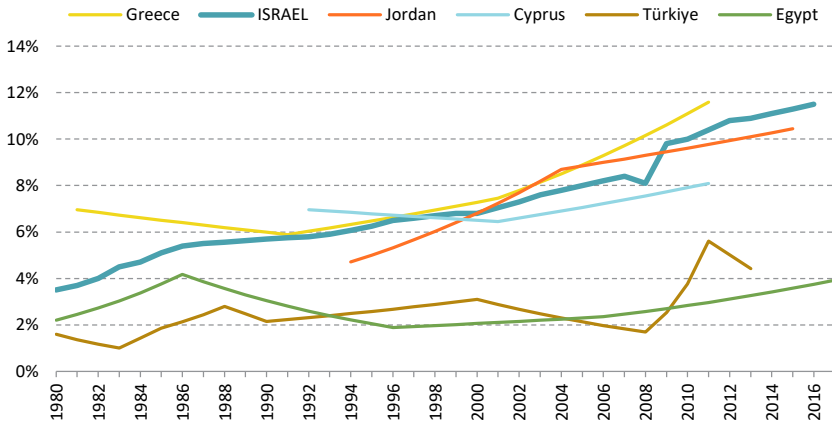
**Figure 1. Percent of women age 40 who have never married, by region**

Note: *Average* does not include Israel. Northern European countries: Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden; Western Mediterranean countries: France, Italy, Portugal, Spain; Anglophone countries: Australia, Canada, UK, US; Latin American countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico; East Asian countries: Japan, Singapore, South Korea; Eastern Mediterranean countries: Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Jordan, Türkiye.

Source: Alex Weinreb, Taub Center | Data: [United Nations](#)

Upward trends in Israel over the same period, alongside other countries in the Eastern Mediterranean region, were more modest, pointing to a region-wide retention of more traditional marriage norms (Figure 2). In Israel, in particular, the percentage of women who had never married by age 40 rose from less than 4% in 1980 to almost 12% in 2016. Similar trajectories and levels were found in Cyprus, Greece, and Jordan.

**Figure 2. Percent of women age 40 who have never married, selected countries in the Eastern Mediterranean**



Source: Alex Weinreb, Taub Center | Data: [United Nations](#)

There is an extensive scholarly literature across the social sciences on factors driving this change, distinguishing it from non-marital cohabitation, looking at variation by class, race, and ethnicity, and judging whether or not it is a good thing for societies across a range of personal and societal dimensions (Bloome & Ang, 2020; Cherlin, 2004; Grossbard-Schechtman et al., 2003; Perelli-Harris et al., 2019; Waite, 1995). The goal of this chapter is not to summarize that literature,<sup>2</sup> or explain why societies in the Eastern Mediterranean, including Israel, have been adopting these new patterns more slowly.

2 Among the key reasons: a rise in women's education and employment allowing for more financial and emotional independence, and less gender specialization in household and market work; increasing individualization of marriage and deinstitutionalization of marital norms like monogamy; the rise of *emotional capitalism* (economic and political models of exchange and equity increasingly influencing emotional relationships); a decoupling of marriage and fertility and growing acceptance of cohabitation and non-marital relationships in general; escalating university-related debts and rising costs of living in general, which delay marriage for the poor in particular, sometimes indefinitely; the decline of manufacturing employment for the less educated; and underlying ontological goals shifting toward personal fulfillment and heightened autonomy — augmented by contemporary consumer culture's drive to accumulate — rather than family-formation (Addo et al., 2019; Autor et al., 2019; Becker, 1973; Bumpass et al., 1991; Cherlin, 2004; Goode, 1963; Illouz, 2007; Lesthaeghe, 2020).

Rather, it is to provide a brief empirical survey of more recent trends in age-specific marriage and divorce rates across Israel's distinct subpopulations.

## Returns to marriage

Tracing trends in marital patterns is important because, despite the rise in non-marital cohabitation across wealthy countries, families, legitimized through publicly recognized marriage, remain the core unit of social and economic organization in most contemporary societies. This is certainly the case in Israel, where rates of marriage have historically been higher than in most developed countries (Lavee & Katz, 2003; Peres & Katz, 1981). Identifying trends in marriage and divorce, therefore, helps us understand emerging patterns of poverty, inequality, employment, welfare, and health — the classic foci of the Taub Center.

More specifically, although any given marriage may not be good for its two key players, wealthy societies in general benefit from more and more stable marriages, especially egalitarian or *companionate* marriages (Grossbard-Schechtman et al., 2003). Among these benefits:

- Married couples have more disposable income than their unmarried counterparts, and increasingly so given the rise in assortative mating on educational characteristics. These higher levels of disposable income stem from greater selection of wealthy and educated individuals into marriage (as opposed to cohabitation), pooled resources of two incomes, or a *marriage premium*. Deviations from the pooled resources model are reviewed in a recent issue of the *European Journal of Population* (Lersch et al., 2022), and the marriage premium in Israel is discussed in detail by Debowy et al. (2022).
- Where both partners work, or where marriage has facilitated greater accumulation of wealth, or can allow for more flexible labor supply at the household level, married households are less susceptible to economic shocks (Blundell et al., 2016).
- Married couples' higher household income facilitates more saving and more investment in children. Respectively, these have positive macroeconomic effects and influence social mobility, and intergenerational inequality (Lundberg & Pollak, 2015).

- Married couples have higher levels of subjective well-being (Kappelle et al., 2022) and also tend to be healthier and live longer, conditional on mutual contributions (Stolzenberg & Williams, 2008). Note that these effects are seen after controlling for health-related selection into marriage — that is, healthier people are more likely to marry in the first place.
- Married couples are more likely to be connected to other important social institutions (e.g., religion) that increase the marginal benefits on health and subjective well-being (Kappelle et al., 2022), and that are also associated with higher levels of volunteering.
- Being married can also provide a psychosocial anchor that limits irresponsible behavior, especially among young men in areas that have experienced educational expansion (Hudson & Boer, 2005; Weber, 2019).

These are general returns to marriage across countries. In Israel, additional factors may magnify some of these effects. First and foremost, people of all classes have frequent interaction with family members, especially intergenerationally, and there are higher levels of emotional connection (affect and consensus) than in many European countries (Katz, 2009). Non-religious prime-aged individuals in Israel also receive considerable material and in-kind assistance from grandparents. This is one of the mechanisms that underlies Israel's extraordinary high fertility (Okun & Stecklov, 2021).

All these factors suggest that Israeli society has benefited from its high historical rates of marriage, relative to most other wealthy countries. Put simply: were it not for Israel's high levels of marriage, levels of inequality would likely be higher, life expectancy lower, and people less happy. For this reason, any shift in Israel's marital regime, like those implied in Figures 1 and 2, deserves attention. The effects of falling marriage rates will not be limited to individuals and their close support circles. They will also be felt across society at large.

## Changing marital norms?

The rising share of Israelis remaining unmarried at age 40 arguably reflects compositional changes within Israel's national population, the percent choosing to cohabit, and shifts in public discourse about marriage. I briefly review these connected issues.

Relative to other OECD countries, the special characteristic of Israeli marriage is the absence of civil marriage. Like its Arab neighbors, Israel does not recognize civil marriages conducted in the country. Instead, domestic marriages must be conducted by recognized authorities within a single religious faith. All this is well known by the Israeli public. Given the absence of civil marriage, it is impossible for people of different religions to wed in Israel — one partner must convert to the other partner's religion. Israeli law also makes it impossible for people categorized as having *no religion* (חסרי דת) to wed within the country, since there is no religious official who can give a formal certificate. This is problematic in terms of sheer numbers since those characterized as having no religion are the fastest growing population in Israel — there are around 0.5 million people in this group — and they are fully integrated into secular Jewish society in terms of residence, schooling, military service, language, participation in the labor market, and so on. The shared social spaces that arise from this high level of integration create a fertile environment for romantic relationships, some of which develop into long-term partnerships and marriage.

Within the Jewish population, there are even more limits on marital choice since only the Orthodox rabbinate is recognized. As a result, a halachically Jewish Israeli cannot wed someone who is not halachically Jewish according to Orthodox interpretations of Jewish law, even if that partner is ethnically Jewish on the paternal side, or would have citizenship rights because of Jewish heritage up to two generations before. The Orthodox rabbinate's hold on marriage also bars same-sex marriage, marriage between a male *Cohen* (member of a priestly family) and a divorcee or convert, and other marriages where doubt can be cast on the religious, marital, or birth status of either partner (e.g., *mamzerut*, which broadly refers to conceptions arising from a range of prohibited sexual relations).

The quantitative effects of these legal barriers on marriage rates are not fully known. Coverage of these issues by journalists and advocates (e.g., the organization *Hidush*) reveals quite varied estimates. What is clear is that many who cannot wed in Israel, and some who can, contract a civil marriage

overseas<sup>3</sup> — some data on this are presented below. Equally clear, many Jewish couples who can marry in Israel choose to engage rabbis associated with organizations like *Tzohar*, which offer halachically Jewish weddings that are one step removed from the standard state-rabbinical framework, or *Mavoi Satum*, which offers completely independent religious weddings while also adding other benefits like more protection for the wife in case of divorce (e.g., through halachically-anchored prenuptial agreement guaranteeing a woman's rights to divorce).

These different pathways into marriage, and their associated discourse, are important to understand as a cultural phenomenon, and as pointers to debates and emerging divisions within Israeli society, especially within its Jewish majority. But from the narrow empirical perspective of this paper, because official statistics include marriages conducted both by religious authorities in Israel and by civil authorities overseas, these alternative pathways into marriage are largely irrelevant. They only become relevant when a couple decides to cohabit and forego traditional marriage entirely. Only then is there an actual effect on marriage rates.

## Recent trends in cohabitation in Israel

Foregoing marriage in this way has become a more common and legitimate path in many developed countries, as implied in Figure 1. In absolute term, this is also true in Israel. There were 87,000 unmarried cohabiting couples in Israel in 2015 and 101,000 couples in 2020. This increase is also reflected in other developments. Notably, Domestic Union certificates issued by the New Family organization — basically recognition of Common Law marriage that has legal

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3 I include *Utah marriages* in this category, that is, marriages officiated virtually from Utah, and the couple does not need to physically travel overseas.

Note, too, that this type of marriage is not only the choice of people categorized as lacking religion, or wanting to wed a same-sex partner. A significant share of heterosexual couples now do this even where they could halachically get married in Israel. Between 2010–2014, between 2,000–2,400 foreign weddings were registered every year in which both partners are Israeli. In 1,300–1,500 cases per year over this period, both partners were registered as Jewish in the Ministry of Interior files, and of these, between 0.9 and 4.5% were same-sex marriages. Roughly 5,000 more weddings per year were also registered with the Ministry of Interior in which only one partner was Israeli, though it is unknown how many of these couples reside in Israel.

weight in EU countries — have become more popular: 2,800 of these were issued in Israel in 2008. The numbers increased every year up to 2014, when 5,400 were issued.<sup>4</sup>

In percentage terms, however, unmarried cohabitation has remained remarkably stable. The share of cohabiting couples choosing to remain unmarried was around 5% across the entire 2013–2020 period. In other words, the rise in absolute numbers of unmarried cohabiting couples reflects growth in the number of couples, not a compositional change in type of union. It is also worth noting that this 5% figure is much lower than the share reported in other developed countries at the beginning of this period (2013): 12% in the US, 13% in Germany, 14% in Ireland, 21% in the Netherlands, 24% in Denmark, and 27% in Norway (Tal Spero, 2015).

Looking at the data in more detail — specifically, disaggregating them by birth cohort and year — shows that this stable 5% share is actually hiding two distinct patterns. This is where emerging signs of change can be seen, as shown in Table 1.

First, among couples in their 30s and early 40s in 2015, there was substantial movement toward marriage by 2020. This was most notable among people aged 30–34 in 2015 (born in the late 1980s). In 2015, 13.8% of women in this birth cohort who were cohabiting with someone, and 18.2% of men, were not married. By 2020, the share in this same birth cohort had fallen to 6.8% and 9.5%, respectively. Reductions with age can also be seen in groups aged 35–44 in 2015. In other words, there is a clear *age-effect* in terms of movement toward marriage.

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4 Data after 2014 are not available on the organization's website.

A less popular option is provided by the State. Since 2010, people with *no religion* have been able to request that their relationship be legally recognized. After five years on the books, only 120 couples had requested this change in status.



**Table 1. Percent unmarried and cohabiting out of all coresident couples, 2015 and 2020, by birth cohort**

Year of birth	Age (2015)	Age (2020)	Women		Men	
			2015	2020	2015	2020
1996–2000	20–24	25–29		14.8		18.2
1991–1995	25–29	30–34	11.8	14.1	13.6	18.0
1986–1990	30–34	35–39	13.8	6.8	18.2	9.5
1981–1985	35–39	40–44	5.8	4.7	7.9	4.9
1976–1980	40–44	45–49	4.1	3.2	4.1	3.8
1971–1975	45–49	50–54	3.5	4.6	3.4	4.1
1966–1970	50–54	55–59	2.6	4.2	2.9	3.5

Source: Alex Weinreb, Taub Center | Data: CBS (from tables released annually in honor of Family Day)

In contrast, and this is the second pattern, among both younger and older couples there are signs of *increasing* rates of non-marital cohabitation. In the 1991–1995 birth cohort (aged 25–29 in 2015), for example, the share of unmarried cohabiting couples increased from 11.8% to 14.1% among women between 2015 and 2020, and from 13.6% to 18.0% among men. We cannot yet know how many of these cohabiting individuals in their early 30s will follow the older cohorts into marriage.

Among older couples, too, there appears to be a small rise in the percentage of unmarried cohabiting couples. In 2020, around 4.4% of cohabiting women born in the 1966–1975 period were unmarried, up from around 3.1% in 2015. A more modest increase — from 3.2% to 3.8% — can also be seen among older men. These almost certainly reflect second relationships after a divorce.

In summary, there has been a moderate increase in non-marital cohabitation in Israel at the national level. But it remains quite uncommon above age 40, the threshold age used in Figures 1 and 2. This implies that most of the increase in the percent of people remaining unmarried reflects an increase in the share of people who are single, not cohabiting.

## Marriage and divorce

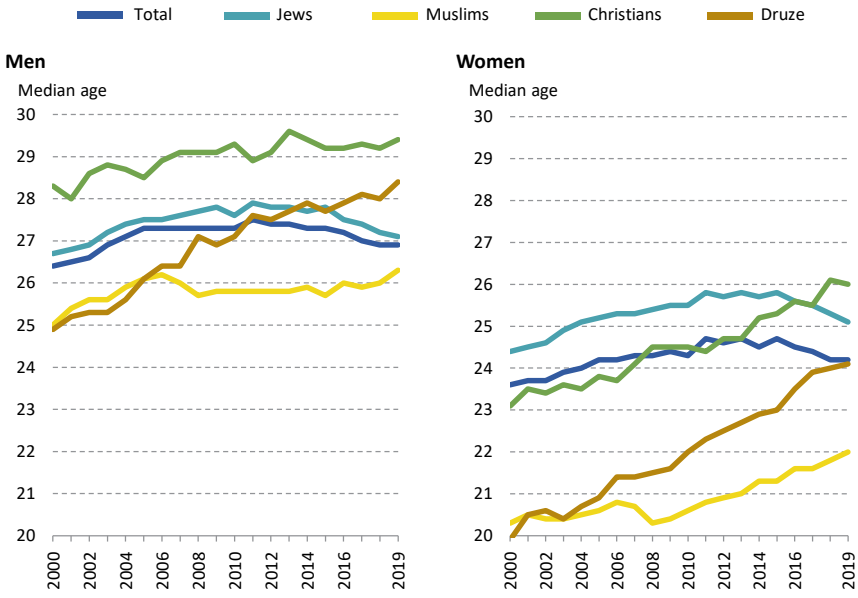
We now look at trends in marriage and divorce data in more detail, including by religion, since this is the principal divider between marriage markets within Israel's population, and it also overlaps with distinct educational and aspirational gaps between young women and men in Israel (Fuchs, 2017; Weinreb, 2021). We look specifically at age at marriage, age-specific marriage rates, and the total marriage rate; then at crude and age-specific divorce rates. Overall trends in these measures point to signs that the incidence of marriage is falling in all subpopulations, but this appears to be a relatively recent, post-2016 phenomenon. In addition, in most Israeli subpopulations, the incidence of divorce is also rising. Together, these trends point toward a moderately less marriage-centered society.

### Marriage

#### Age at marriage

Trends in the median age at first marriage over the 2000–2019 period look quite different across Israel's subpopulations. Among both men and women, there was a distinct curvilinear change. This is shown in Figure 3. For men it increased from 26.5 in 2000 to 27.5 in 2011 before falling again to 26.9 in 2019. Among women, it increased from 23.7 in 2000, peaked at 24.7 in 2013, and then fell to 24.2 in 2019. Among both men and women, these average fluctuations at the national level largely reflect the shifts in median age at first marriage in the Jewish population.

In Israel's three other subpopulations, the trends across time look quite different. There were particularly sharp increases across the entire 2000–2019 period among Druze women and men (both exceeding 3.5 years) and Christian women (3 years). Among Muslims, women's median age at marriage was initially quite stable. It began to increase in 2008, rising by 1.7 years by 2019. At the same time, men's stayed quite stable, suggesting that there has been a reduction in spousal age difference.

**Figure 3. Trends in median age at marriage, by subpopulation**

Source: Alex Weinreb, Taub Center | Data: CBS

A rise in median age at marriage is expected, especially in populations undergoing a rapid expansion in enrollment in higher education, as is the case in all of Israel's subpopulations. Higher education delays marriage. It also increases men's and women's available choices about who to marry and also, crucially, the choice of whether to marry (Manglos-Weber & Weinreb, 2017).

This makes the curvilinear change in the Jewish population all the more puzzling, at least at first glance. For the fall in the median age at marriage in Israel's Jewish population could also reflect a weakness of this measure: the median age at marriage is only based on the ages of those who actually marry. This begs the question: what proportion of people marry in Israel, and is that changing?

### Age-specific rates of marriage

The most conclusive way to answer this question would be to wait until everyone in a given birth cohort had reached a given age — say 50 — and then estimate the proportion that ever married. Since that approach does not allow us to look at ongoing or recent shifts in marriage at younger ages, we use an indirect measure based on age-specific rates of marriage.

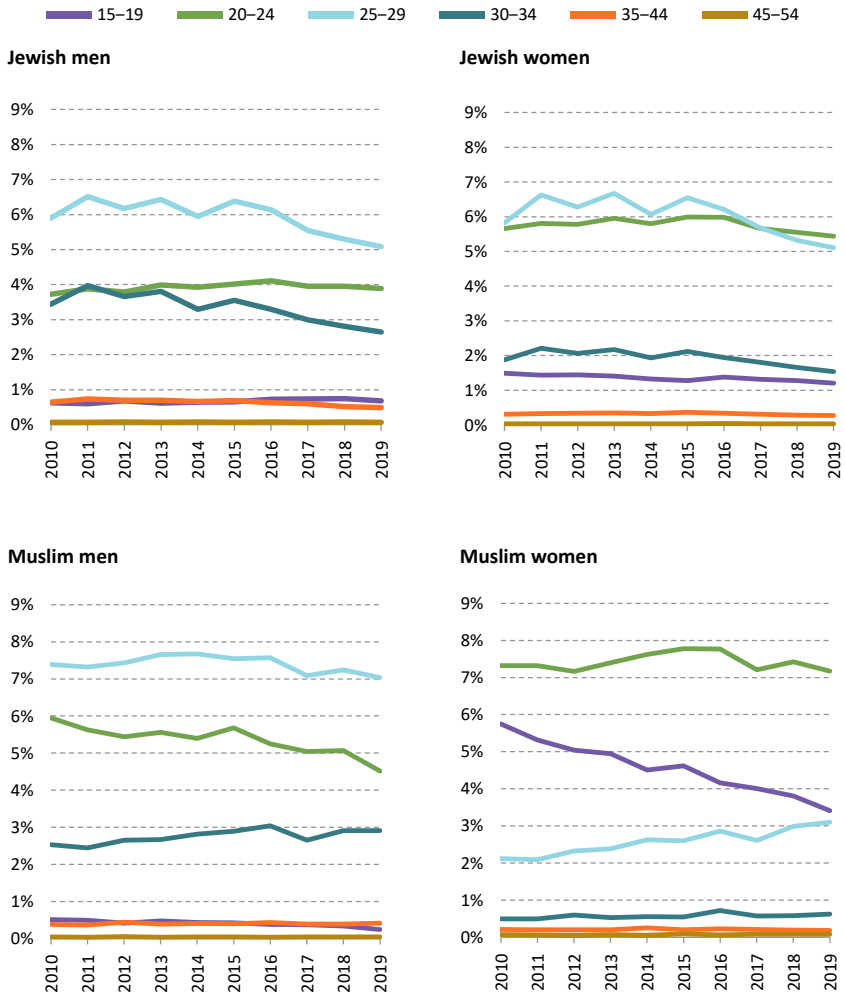
Those age-specific rates of marriage are shown in Figure 4 for each of Israel's major religious subpopulations. They are presented as the annual percentage of men and women in a given age group that have a first marriage. There are two notable sets of results: those related to variation in modal age group of first marriage across the four subpopulations; and those related to shifts in this modal age group within the 2010–2019 period.

Among women, there is considerable variation in modal age group at marriage across these four subpopulations. Marriage rates are highest at ages 20–24 for Muslim and Druze women, very similar across the 20–24 and 25–29 age groups for Jews, and among Christian women there was a marked shift across the 10-year period. In 2010/2011, 7–8% of Christian women aged 20–24 married in any given year. By 2018/2019 their marriage rate at this age had almost halved, though this was partly offset by a relatively sharp rise in rates in marriage rates in women's late 20s.

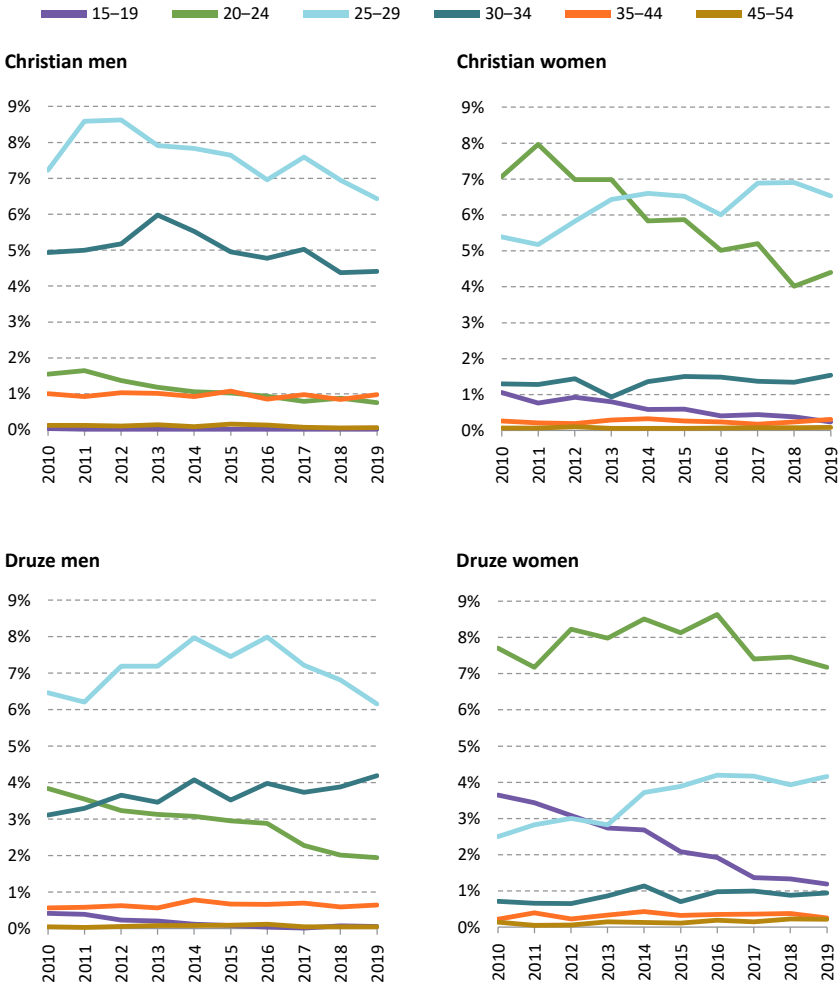
In percentage terms, the reductions in marriage rates in the non-Jewish populations were even sharper below age 20: they fell by around two-thirds in the Druze and Christian populations and by around 40% in the Muslim population. Interestingly, the marriage rates of Jewish women below age 20 remained relatively stable. This group is almost certainly dominated by Haredi (ultra-Orthodox Jewish) and religious women.

Finally, in all four subpopulations, marriage rates of women aged 35+ were low and stable across the 10-year period. Even in the Jewish and Druze populations, where rates were highest at these ages, they never exceeded 0.4% of women per year, a fraction of the 6–8% rates of women in the modal marital age groups. The low and relatively stable rates in themselves imply that any rise in women's median age at marriage, as noted above, is hardly extending into age groups above 35. The rise is being driven by shifts from early-20s into late-20s, or from late-20s into early-30s.

**Figure 4. Age specific marriage rates (first marriage only) of women and men, by religion**



**Figure 4 (continued). Age specific marriage rates (first marriage only) of women and men, by religion**



Source: Alex Weinreb, Taub Center | Data: CBS

Men’s modal age group at first marriage in the 2010–2019 period did not vary. It was uniformly highest in the 25–29 age group. Variation across groups was found in the next highest age group, and in trends over time for this second-

and third-highest age group. For Jewish men in 2010–2013, marriage rates were very similar in the 20–24 and 30–34 age groups. Thereafter, marriage rates fell steadily at ages 30–34, even as they remained stable at ages 20–24. No other Israeli subpopulation has this pattern. Marriage rates of Muslim and Druze men both fell at ages 20–24 and increased at ages 30–34. Marriage rates of Christian men fell in both age groups.

These trends across the 2010–2019 period point to a potentially important shift in marriage in Israel. Across Jewish, Muslim, and Druze men and women, 2015–2016 appears to have been a pivotal period, especially for marriage in the three most important age groups, 20–34. Among Jews, age-specific marriage rates began to fall for women in all three age groups, and for men ages 25–34, beginning in this 2015–2016 period. Among Muslim women, from 2015–2016 we see reductions at ages 20–24, slower increases in marriage rates at ages 25–29, and no continued increase at ages 30–34. Among Muslim men, there are reductions at ages 20–29, and no continued offsetting increase at older age groups. And among the Druze, this is the period where women’s rates of marriage at ages 20–24, and men’s rates at ages 25–29, start to decline, and where the pace of decline for men at ages 20–24 accelerates, and among women in the 25–29 age groups flattens out. Only in Israel’s Christian population is there no clear difference in marriage rates between the pre- and post-2015/2016 period.

### Proportion marrying

To estimate the proportion marrying, I sum these age-specific marriage rates (ASMRs) into a Total Marriage Rate (TMR).<sup>5</sup> Figure 5 presents the TMR for Israel. Among both men and women in all four subpopulations we see reductions in the TMR across time, though timing varies across gender and group.

- 5 Sometimes referred to as the *total first marriage rate*, this is an estimate of the proportion of men or women that would marry at least once if they survived to the end of a marital window and experienced the observed age-specific marriage rates (ASMRs) up to that point. It is conceptually identical to a period Total Fertility Rate (TFR) in that it provides an estimate for a hypothetical cohort, based on cross-sectional data. As such,

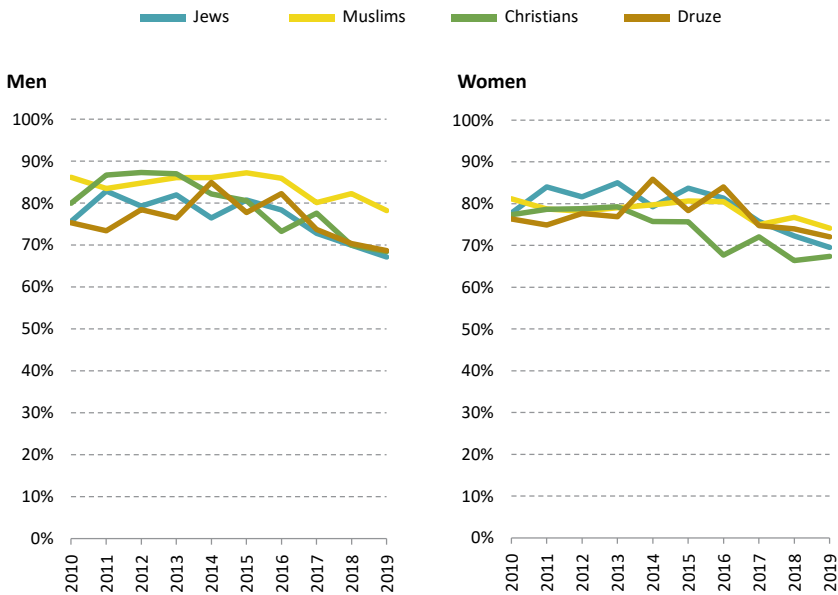
$$\text{TMR} = n \cdot \sum_{x=\alpha.n}^{\beta-n} M_x$$

where  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  are the minimum and maximum ages at marriage — 15 and 55 in these calculations —  $M$  is the marriage rate,  $x$  indexes age, and  $n$  is the size of the age-interval (typically 5 years, as in 15–19, 20–24, and so on).

Among women, despite quite different age-specific marriage rates in the Jewish, Muslim, and Druze populations, the TMR follows a very similar trajectory across most of these 10 years, but especially since around 2015. The TMR in these populations declined from around 80–84% in 2016 to 70–74% in 2019. Note that for Jewish women, this is a particularly sharp decline: from more than 80% in 2012–2014 period to 70% in 2019. The TMR of Christian women declined earlier and has been around 70% since 2016.

Among men, the TMR was a little more varied at the beginning of the period, with lower rates among Jews and Druze. Among Christian men, as with the case with Christian women, the decline in the TMR began a little earlier. By 2015, it had converged to the TMR of Jews and Druze, and together these three declined to below 70% by 2019. The decline in TMR for Muslim men began later. Between 2010–2016, it averaged in excess of 85%. By 2019, it had fallen to 78%.

**Figure 5. Total marriage rate by religion**



Source: Alex Weinreb, Taub Center | Data: CBS



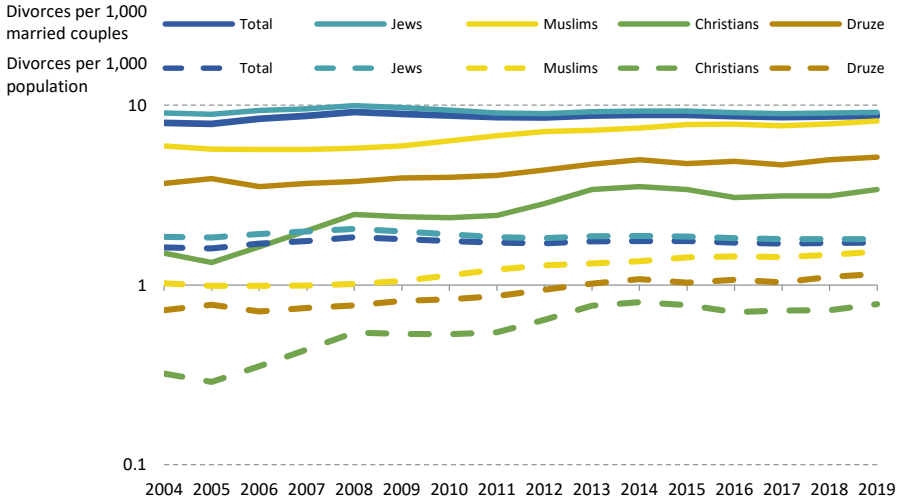
These reductions are very substantial. They hint that Israel is becoming less marriage-centered. After all, if the observed 2019 age-specific marriage rates remain stable for the next 30 years, at least a quarter of women in Israel will never marry; 30% of Jewish, Druze and Christian men will never marry; and 20% of Muslim men will never marry. We revisit some of the implications of these trends, and the limitations of these measures, in the summary.

## Divorce

Figure 6 presents two types of crude divorce rate by subpopulation. The solid line is the annual number of divorces per 1,000 couples in the subpopulation. The dashed line is the annual number of divorce per 1,000 people in the subpopulation. Given the differences in denominator, the y-scale is logged.

The overall patterns in both are very similar. They point to relatively stable national trends, with a slight reduction since around 2008. Across the four subpopulations divorce rates are highest in the Jewish population, though between 2008 and 2019, those fell from around 10 to 9.1 per 1,000 couples. Rates in the Muslim population increased from around 5.6 per 1,000 couples in the 2005–2007 period to 8.2 in 2019, coming close to levels in the Jewish population. Rates have also been increasing in the Druze and Christian populations, though from much lower levels. By 2019, rates in these populations were, respectively, around 60% and 40% of the level in the Jewish population.

**Figure 6. Crude divorce rates by subpopulation**

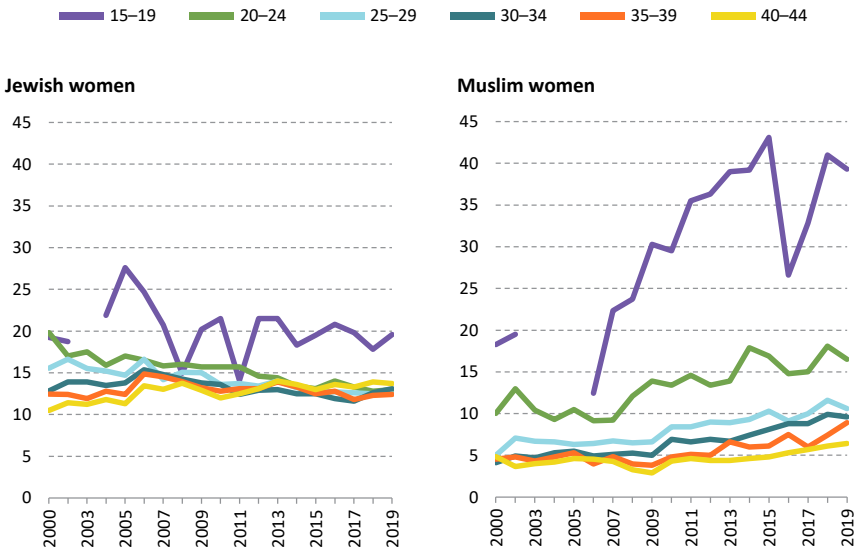


Notes: All rates are cumulative 3-year averages. The solid line is the annual number of divorces per 1,000 married couples. The broken line is the annual number of divorces per 1,000 population.

Source: Alex Weinreb, Taub Center | Data: CBS

More specific information on these trends can be found in age-specific divorce rates. The only disadvantage of these is that the relatively small size of the Druze and Christian populations in Israel, alongside the generally low levels of divorce in those populations, means that we focus only on the Jewish and Muslim populations. These are shown in Figure 7.

**Figure 7. Women's age-specific divorce rates per 1,000 married women in the same age group, by religious subpopulation**



Source: Alex Weinreb, Taub Center | Data: CBS

In 2000, among Jews, for every thousand married women in each age group between ages 20–44 — we ignore trends in women under age 20<sup>6</sup> — between 11 and 20 women divorced. Age-specific rates were lower at higher age groups: they were highest at ages 20–24, somewhat lower at ages 25–29, and so on.

By 2019, the age-specific divorce rates above age 20 had converged into a much smaller range, all between 12–14 divorces per 1,000 marriages per year. This convergence points to an interesting phenomenon: the relative stability in divorce rates in the Jewish sector as a whole — reflected in the crude rates seen in Figure 1 — disguises divergent trends across different age groups. Among younger women, divorce rates fell: by around 18% among women aged 20–29; and by around 9% among those in their 30s. Yet among older women, divorce rates increased: by 3% among women aged 40–44, 17% among women aged 45–49, 23% among women aged 50–54, and 11% above age 55.

6 There are an insufficient number of marriages below age 20 to generate reliable estimates every year, but all indications are that rates are even higher at these youngest ages — this is a standard pattern across all wealthy countries (Kalmijn, 2007; Kennedy & Ruggles, 2014).

Among Muslim women in 2000, divorce rates were less than half of those of Jewish women. This is an even larger difference than that implied by the crude rates. At all ages 25 and over, only around 5 women divorced per 1,000 marriages. It was higher at ages 20–24, though still only half the level in the Jewish population.

By 2019, Muslim women's divorce rates had climbed in all age groups: by 33% at ages 20–24; 70% at ages 25–29; 90% at ages 30–34; and more than 100% between ages 35–44. Overall, even though it remains below the levels observed in the Jewish population, especially lower at older ages, the rates are converging. And under age 25, divorce rates in the Muslim population are much higher than among Jews.

There is one final noteworthy trend in terms of divorce: its visibility. One measure of visibility is the change in the absolute number of divorces, which is a joint product of changes in the number of people and in the rate of divorce. In the 2002–2019 period, the annual number of divorces in the Jewish population increased by 25%. Since age-specific rates of divorce were falling, this increase in absolute number is driven solely by population growth. The Muslim population, in contrast, experienced both increases in population and increases in the age-specific divorce rates. As a result, the annual number of divorces increased by 130%, from around 1,100 each year in the 2000–2007 period, to almost 2,600 in 2018 and 2019.

### Summarizing divorce

Overall divorce rates in Israel over the last 20 years have been quite stable. However, that stability is largely the product of offsetting trends in different age groups within Israel's Jewish population. While divorce rates have been falling among Jews below age 30, they have continued to rise among older Jewish couples, especially above age 40. They have also been rising sharply — albeit from much lower levels — in all age groups in the Muslim population. Crude divorce rates have also risen substantially in the much smaller Druze and Christian communities, though we cannot identify discrete age-specific patterns in those populations.

These trends raise a number of questions. First, and perhaps most important, to what extent do the reductions in divorce rates among younger Jewish women and men reflect differential selection patterns into marriage? Given the rise in age at marriage and reduction in marriage rates, selection has likely played a role in the reduction in divorce.

Second, what is driving the increasing frequency of divorce, especially in Arab communities? Assuming that this increasing frequency is also boosting the visibility of divorce, what sociocultural effects is this having on Arab communities, in particular on younger Muslim women's and men's marital choices? Assessing these effects is outside the purview of this paper. But in a society undergoing a wide array of transitions, these are important questions.

## Conclusion

Israelis have historically married at high rates, relative to other developed countries, and Israeli society has reaped the rewards of this marriage-centered norm. Were it not for its high levels of marriage, inequality would likely be higher, life expectancy lower, and people less happy.

This chapter has documented some signs of change in these patterns, especially in the 2015–2019 period, that point toward Israel becoming a less marriage-centered society. In all four religious subpopulations in Israel, both men and women experienced substantial reductions in marriage at peak ages and in the total marriage rate (TMR) in those pre-COVID years. Among women, despite quite different age-specific marriage rates in the Jewish, Muslim, and Druze populations, the TMR declined by about 10 percentage points to 70–74% in 2019. Among men, the TMR of Jewish, Druze, and Christian men was in a tight cluster around 70%. The TMR of Muslim men, which between 2010–2016 averaged in excess of 85%, fell to 78%.

These are significant shifts. They primarily reflect an increase in the share of people who are remaining single. In other words, Israel is not yet experiencing a substantial movement towards non-marital cohabitation as a long-term substitute for marriage, at least as a share of the total number of unions. We know this because alongside the reduction in TMR in all groups, the percentage of cohabiting partners who are unmarried remained stable at around 5% of all unions from 2013–2020.

That said, cohabitation rates are increasing in particular pockets of Israeli society. They are rising at older ages, these are likely to be second (or later) partnerships. This parallels the increasing divorce rates at older ages among both Jews and Muslims. They are also rising among younger Jews, though this may be an artifact of them lasting longer before, say, a transition to a first marriage.

A related shift documented here is the increasing divorce rates at younger ages among Muslims. This is consistent with the rising educational and employment prospects of Arab women, and the emerging gender gap between them and their male counterparts on these same parameters. Among younger Jews, in contrast, divorce rates have been falling, likely a function of lower marriage rates and more careful selection into marriage at younger ages.

Even if these changes in marital patterns in Israel are more modest than their parallels in most developed countries, they hint at important behavioral shifts *downstream* that will affect Israeli society in a number of ways: the loss of the marriage-premium among those who elect to remain single — discussed in the following chapter; reductions in Israel's fertility levels — since more than 90% of fertility in Israel is within marriage; increased demand for smaller apartments suitable for singles rather than the 4–5 room models that predominate today; leisure and consumption patterns centered around older single and childless/childfree individuals rather than *breeders*, as the former sometimes refer to those with children.

It is beyond the goals of this chapter to document the motives driving these mild movements away from marriage. A priori, we assume this transition is concentrated among more secular Israelis in all religious sectors. As such, we assume that it reflects Israel's increasingly heterogeneous and transnational population, and also the same type of ideational and ontological shifts that have driven parallel movements in other western countries. These include a reorientation of meaning-seeking life goals away from *bourgeois* concerns with family formation and home-owning toward more egocentric goals shaped around enriching experiences. These and similar ideational characteristics are associated with what demographers call the Second Demographic Transition (2DT). Israel is late to this transition — it has not even completed the primary Fertility Transition — and its large traditional, religious, Haredi, and Arab populations will almost certainly prevent it from converging to 2DT norms on the national level. But subpopulations within Israel are on that 2DT path, or close to its starting point.

It is worth ending on a more general note. Even if marriage rates are falling in Israel, they remain high relative to most developed countries — this is one of the take-away messages of Figure 1. There is some irony in this resilience given that one of the frequent critiques about limitations on marital freedom in Israel is that it depresses marriage rates. The empirical patterns documented here point in the other direction. This makes it at least plausible to suggest that the limitations placed on marital freedom in Israel have, ironically, helped sustain Israel's high marriage rates above the international average. This unintended effect would be consistent with what can be called the *forbidden-fruit* principle of public policy. That is, by placing limits on a given phenomenon, governments in liberal societies augment that phenomenon's symbolic value and importance. There are other examples of this effect. Americans are more religious than Europeans despite the much clearer separation of church and state in the US than in Europe, and the fact that state-sponsored expressions of religion are prohibited in the US; post-totalitarian regimes (and European Catholic countries) experienced lower fertility earlier despite leaders' more pronatalist polemics. By extension, limits on marital freedoms in Israel may have sustained the symbolic value of marriage in much the same way. In turn, that suggests that arguments to remove those limitations may be better framed in terms of citizenship rights than in terms of likely effects on marriage rates themselves.

To return to the main focus of the analyses. The empirical bottom line is simple. Despite the rising share of people who are not in a long-term cohabiting relationship — a share that rose more sharply in the final pre-COVID years — marriage has largely retained its allure for those who choose to be in such a relationship. Marital norms in Israel remain quite different to those in most wealthy European and American societies. Change is nibbling at the edges, but it is not yet threatening the core.

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