

lives of some other regional leaders. His regime has “wrapped itself in the banner of Islam” ever since he seized power in 1969. Yet still the Islamists have attacked.

Because of the paucity of reliable information, it’s hard to say how serious the Islamist threat has been. In 1987, the government staged televised executions of nine alleged members of the Islamic Jihad organization (three of them soldiers), accusing them of treason and sabotage. Two years later, after riots and other disturbances in Tripoli, the regime made many arrests and “secretly executed” 21 Islamists. The Islamist threat, warned Qaddafi, was “more dangerous than cancer and AIDS, even more than war with the Israelis or the Americans.”

Qaddafi was preoccupied with other matters during the early 1990s—the Persian Gulf War and its fallout, Anglo-

American accusations of responsibility for the 1988 explosion of a Pan American airliner over Lockerbie, Scotland, and the resultant United Nations sanctions against Libya. Then, in 1995, Militant Islamic Group activists clashed with authorities in the northern city of Benghazi. The Islamic Martyrs Movement claimed responsibility for an attack on the Egyptian consulate in Benghazi in 1996. The two main Islamist groups each claimed to be behind a 1998 attempt on Qaddafi’s life.

Thanks to the regime’s “uncompromising repression” and the loyalty of the army, Ronen says, the Islamist threat receded by the end of the decade. Economic optimism after the end of UN sanctions in 1999 also helped Qaddafi’s cause. Now, after a remarkable 34 years in power, the Libyan dictator seems “firm in the saddle.”

Vietnam’s Favored Sons

“Son Preference in a Rural Village in North Vietnam” by Danièle Bélanger, in *Studies in Family Planning* (Dec. 2002), Population Council, One Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza, New York, N.Y. 10017.

In the space of only two decades, Vietnam has seen a drastic decline of more than 60 percent in its fertility rate, sped along by a two-child policy implemented in the late 1980s. As recently as 1979, women bore an average of six children; by 1998, the average had dropped to 2.2. Vietnamese women generally enjoy more rights than their counterparts in China. But instead of further advancing female equality in this land of 81 million, the lessened childbearing has increased the pressure on women to have sons.

Unmarried girls in rural Vietnam traditionally have helped their mothers “cultivate the land, cook, clean, and care for siblings, particularly their brothers.” But with fewer siblings in need of care, and land holdings shrunken in recent decades by the need to divide them among an ever-growing population, such contributions are not needed as much as they were in the past, according to Bélanger, a sociologist at the University of Western Ontario. Her conclusions are based on close study of an unnamed village of 6,000 people near Hanoi.

Decades of communist rule have failed to

eradicate the strong preference for sons, even among professional women. Sons are prized because they are responsible for caring for their parents in old age and the afterlife. Only sons can conduct the rituals in the cult of ancestors, which is at the center of family life. And since the rituals “must be carried out in the physical space where the ancestors’ souls live,” Bélanger notes, the parental home can be passed on only to a son.

Sex-selection abortion, which is common in China, with its one-child (or in some cases two-child) policy, doesn’t seem to be common among the Vietnamese villagers, though there’s some evidence of it in nationwide census and hospital data. The two-child policy is unevenly enforced. Fines are substantial in some rural areas, but not for the female farm workers in the village Bélanger studied. Female government workers, however, face job-related sanctions as well as fines. A 33-year-old teacher with two daughters told Bélanger’s research team that she planned to have another child in hopes that it would be a boy, even though a third child would cost her her job.