

Demographic Dynamics in the Middle East:

A View from the United Nations

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Brief Analysis

There is no doubt that demographics and population are linked to political stability. Although water and food resources are topics of great concern in the Middle East, there is another vital resource that deserves attention: young people. Today, growing unrest and perceptions of inequality and injustice pervade the region. Although suicide bombers currently claim the world's attention, another very serious phenomenon demands similar attention: the radicalization of Middle Eastern youths. When chronic poverty is combined with feelings of injustice or neglect and a lack of legitimate means to address problems, a path is paved for extremism.

Some issues that have accelerated the radicalization of young people all over the world -- but more so in the Middle East -- are rapid population growth, poverty, and lack of opportunities for both men and women. As a result of the communications revolution, images of what a quality life should be are projected daily onto television screens at home and in public. These images, though greatly admired, are illusions to the young people in many of the region's countries. Such images merely add to their frustration because they know they will never be able to attain anything like them. In addition, the technological and social changes that have taken place in these Middle Eastern societies create a new tension for youths -- one between traditions, as they understand them, and modernity, as projected by the media and as exercised by the elites. Feelings that the drawn-out Palestinian plight and the suffering of the Iraqi people are unjust also add to the radicalization.

Unfortunately, political and religious extremism have a powerful pull on these youths. If young people do not have constructive outlets for their energy and talent, they may turn to violence and align themselves with extremist groups. Often, their only other option is to drop out of society through drug abuse, yet another illness that kills young people and takes away from a society's capacity for regeneration. One of the solutions to this downward spiral lies in balanced development that encompasses education, health, human rights, good governance, rule of law, strong institutions, and environmental protection.

The Challenges of Population Growth

The Arab population is expected to double in the next twenty-two years. This is an improvement from earlier projections that it would double in nineteen years, a change that can be attributed to declining fertility rates. The projected population increases over the next half-century are daunting: Syria's population is forecast to rise from 16.6 million to 36.3 million; Saudi Arabia's from 21 million to almost 60 million; Iraq's from 23.6 million to 53.6 million; Egypt's from 69 million to nearly 114 million; and Yemen's from 19 million to 102 million.

One of the critical aspects of population and development policies is access to reproductive healthcare, which includes family planning. If a woman cannot control the number, spacing, and timing of her children, she has little control over the rest of her life, making it more difficult to break the cycle of poverty and poor health. Another major factor influencing population growth is education, which affects the age at which individuals marry and their use of contraceptives. In Oman, for instance, surveys show that women with no education have an average of eight or nine

children, compared to three or four children for women who have completed secondary schooling. Today, in many countries of the Middle East, higher levels of schooling, better survival rates of infants and children, and increased access to contraception have led to smaller, healthier families. In most countries around the world today, people are having and also desire fewer children. Similarly, fertility rates in the Middle East are falling: the average number of children in the Middle East has dropped from 6.6 in 1950 to 3.0 in 2002. About 40 percent of married couples are using contraceptives.

Iran is a success story in its national effort to stabilize population. The government has made women's and children's health a priority, and voluntary family-planning programs have cut the birth rate in half during the past decade. Today, the population structure of Iran looks like that of a developed country -- the average woman chooses to have two children, and young women make up more than 40 percent of the country's university students. Teenage pregnancy is very uncommon, and three-quarters of married women use contraception. Another success story is Egypt, where population growth is slowing. Egypt received the UNFPA Population Award in 2000 for government and civil society efforts to expand reproductive health services (including family planning) for the people.

UNFPA's Role

The UNFPA has worked for three decades in close partnership with developing countries in all regions. The organization is mobilizing human and financial resources to provide universal access to primary education and reproductive health care, which includes voluntary family planning, care during pregnancy and birth, and the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV and AIDS.

Although the need for these services is great, the UNFPA is currently confronting a shortage of funding. As a UN agency, it relies on voluntary contributions, the bulk of which come from governments. The UNFPA has 126 donor countries, but 15 industrialized countries provide 90 percent of its budget. Every industrialized nation supports the agency, some of them -- like the Netherlands and Norway -- with extreme generosity. The big exception so far this year is the United States. A bipartisan majority in both houses of Congress approved a \$34 million contribution to the UNFPA for the year 2002 based on the budget proposal submitted by President George W. Bush. So far, however, this contribution has not been released, despite the support of Secretary of State Colin Powell. According to Senator Barbara Boxer, it is being held up by domestic politics.

Good health and education are the very foundations for escaping poverty and building a decent life. Reducing poverty and widening choices will reduce the prospects for conflict and instability. Just as developing countries themselves must spend more money on the poor, fight corruption, and respect human rights and the rule of law, wealthier countries must support them by providing more debt relief, opening their markets, and providing more and better-targeted aid and investment.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Mohamed Abdel Dayem.

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