

Power to the People?

The Impact of Demography on Middle East Politics

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Brief Analysis

In the year 1000, the Middle East had a population of approximately 30 million people, and it remained around that level until 1800. Between 1800 and 1900, however, the figure grew by 75 percent, and then by another 565 percent during the twentieth century, bringing the population to 386 million, or nearly thirteen times its historically stable level. But this increase is coming to an end. In the year 2050, the population will be less than twice what it was in the year 2000, and it will stop increasing entirely by the late twenty-first century, when it will reach its maximum of approximately twice the level it was in the year 2000. In other words, the population increase over one thousand years is essentially concentrated in a 150-year period between 1875 and 2025. This anomalous period of population growth has been a time of tremendous social, political, and economic turmoil.

From a millennial perspective, this explosion comes later in some areas of the Middle East and earlier in others, but at the end of the day, it is relatively uniform across the region. For example, the population of the Arabian peninsula grew from 5 million to 9 million from 1800 to 1950, but it soared between 1950 and 2000. In fact, Arabia will probably be the last area to slow down; by the year 2050, the area's population could be up to thirty times its historic level, or at least the same as the regional average, about twenty-four times the historic level.

There is an exception to this forecast. The Arab population of Mandatory Palestine -- in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza -- is not experiencing the same slowdown in population growth that is occurring everywhere else in the region.

The Demographic Transition

The Middle East is experiencing what demographers refer to as the "demographic transition," which is a transition to sharply lower numbers of children born per woman. A similar development occurred in Europe and the United States, in the space of about thirty years during the nineteenth century. This sort of dramatic decline has been

evident throughout the region. In 1980, the total number of children born to the average woman in Syria was 7.4, but by 1998, it was down to 3.9; Algeria went from 6.7 to 3.5; Iran went from 6.7 to 2.7. In the space of twelve years from 1986 to 1998, the number of children born in Iran was nearly halved, from 2.26 million to 1.19 million. There are many explanations for this phenomenon, but the most powerful explanatory variable is female literacy. Approximately one-third of married Arab women now use birth control, compared to half the married women in the developing world as a whole. But birth control is not the only factor controlling fertility rates. After all, fertility rates declined sharply in Europe and the United States during a period in which there were effectively no techniques of modern birth control available. In general, Middle Eastern women are being empowered, but the process remains incomplete. Women participate in the labor force in the region at about one-third the rate of men. At the same time, because of poor job opportunities for women in the region, many of them are staying in the educational system longer. For example, a majority of the university graduates in the Gulf countries and in Iran are now women. Increasingly, those possessing the kinds of skills needed by their societies are women rather than men.

A Less Youthful Middle East

The Middle East is becoming a less youthful society. In the year 2000, 41 percent of Middle Easterners were under the age of fifteen. In 2025, however, this age group will constitute only 27 percent of the population. In Iran, 46 percent of the current population is under fifteen, whereas in 2025, only 23 percent will be part of that age group.

The region's future population pattern will include fewer young people without a great increase in the number of elderly (the latter increase will appear only after 2025). This is a situation that economists call the "demographic gift"; namely, a transition period in which there are relatively fewer dependent children and relatively few elderly, and in which a larger share of the population is of working age.

The "dependency ratio" is the proportion of the population that is under fifteen or over sixty-four; this ratio is declining sharply in the Middle East. In 1990, for example, Iran's dependency ratio was 49 percent, which meant that there was one dependent for each person of working age. In 2010, however, the ratio will be 30 percent, or more than two people of working age for each dependent. The challenge for the region will be using this potential labor power as fuel for dramatic economic growth, similar to what occurred in Europe and the United States during the demographic transitions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

But the "demographic gift" can be a poison chalice if young people do not have jobs. Between 1990 and 2000, there were an extra 4.8 million people of working age each year in the Middle East, and in the current decade, there will be 5.2 million extra each year. By 2010, for example, Iran will have almost twice as many people of working age as it had in 1990. The number of jobs that will need to be created in order to meet this growth represents a huge challenge for the region. Some countries will make effective use of this opportunity and experience unprecedented growth, while those countries that cannot produce jobs for their people will experience tremendous social turmoil.

Until recently, Middle Eastern countries have been approaching the issue of job creation primarily as a problem of government employment. This was apparent in the mid-1990s, when government wages constituted 10 percent of the region's gross domestic product, versus a global average of 5 percent. In the face of dramatic demographic growth, however, these countries do not have the resources to sustain such a strategy. The only solution is private sector growth, which means letting local investors create the necessary jobs. The fundamental obstacle to this solution is the antagonism that many Middle Eastern regimes exhibit toward entrepreneurial activity that challenges their authoritarian rule.

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Most policymakers are not interested in demographic change. They cannot seem to focus on applying forecasts of demographic shifting over the next fifteen years. Even if one could convince policymakers to take an interest, it is

very difficult to influence such factors through policy because they are largely dependent on culture -- particularly culture practiced in the privacy of the home.

But demography does matter, particularly as it underpins a variety of different policy concerns. Many policymakers debate whether demography is the cause or effect of the malaise in the Middle East. Whatever the case, they would do well to focus first on the nexus of economic reform and job creation. This nexus is a natural subject for government intervention, one that does not present a thorny maze of cultural sensitivities through which to navigate. Moreover, even the most conservative Middle Eastern leaders understand that some form of free enterprise is valuable to their countries. The most common approach to this sort of intervention is incremental work.

One of the lessons of the ongoing war in Afghanistan is that the education of women is the most proven force multiplier in creating an atmosphere for demographic and economic change. In general, educated women delay child bearing and have fewer children over their lifetime. Moreover, most of the new university graduates in the Middle East are women. Given such factors, interested governments may want to focus on cultural programs and educational exchanges as a second set of policy options. The Bush administration seems to be reopening this option with talk of engaging the Arab world in all its dimensions. The United States should begin to engage in exchanges with the non-English-speaking nonelites who make up so much of the Middle East.

A third cluster of issues lies in migration policy. The demographic dividend in the Middle East could be an opportunity to provide a labor force for the entire Mediterranean basin; these workers could then return to the Middle East with great entrepreneurial skills. Although there are currently serious security concerns about such migration, movement of this sort is a fact of life, one that fulfills persistent economic needs. To meet this challenge, Western societies will need to continue improving screening procedures in order to ensure that the inherent risks are as small as possible and far outweighed by the gains.

Lastly, Western leaders need to examine the demographic picture as a factor in political processes such as peace negotiations and trade agreements, wherein a long-term view might be helpful in crafting stability for individual states and for the region as a whole.

The Middle Eastern countries that have been most successful at recognizing and improving their socioeconomic situation over the last decade have been Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan, Egypt, and the small Gulf countries. They have instituted both regulatory and legislative changes that facilitate foreign investment and domestic entrepreneurial activity. Although they have had to deal with political mood shifts and security situations that required more government intervention and a reimposition of some restrictions, these countries have made the greatest improvements.

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