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The Demography of the
Middle East and North Africa
in a Global Context

Poul Chr. Matthiessen

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The Demography of the Middle East and North Africa in a Global Context

**Poul Chr. Matthiessen
Collstrops Fond**

Introduction

The present paper aims to provide a description and analysis of the demographic trends in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in the second half of the 20th century and the projected population growth in the first quarter of the present century. The demographic variables of the MENA region will be compared with other areas of the world and related to migration. Countries and territories included in the MENA region as defined here are listed in table 1 (Roudi-Fahimi and Moghadam 2003). The region consists of Arab countries and territories with the exception of Turkey and Iran. Disregarding a substantial Christian minority in Lebanon – and small Christian populations in a number of countries and territories – the populations of the MENA region are Muslims. The demographic description and analysis is based on the most recent edition of United Nations World Population Prospects (United Nations 2003).

The demographic profile around 1950

In 1950 the MENA region had a population of about 100 million and constituted 4.1 per cent of the world population, 18.7 per cent of the European population and 31.3 percent of the population of Northern, Western and Southern Europe (table 1). The distribution of the population among the 19 countries and territories of the MENA region varies from only 25,000 in Qatar to more than 21 million in Egypt and Turkey.

Disregarding migration, the population growth is determined by the relation between the level of fertility and mortality. The first demographic variable is measured by the total fertility rate (TFR) and the second one by the expectation of life at birth: $e(0)$. The index of fertility indicates the average number of children a woman would bear if fertility remained unchanged during her lifetime. The values of TFR signify a high fertility level in the MENA region around the middle of the 20th century. With the exception of Lebanon, all countries and territories of the region had fertility at about 7 children per woman. In Yemen the number exceeds 8. Such a level of fertility would prevail in a population with early, nearly universal, marriage and a very low degree of fertility control. In other areas of the less developed regions – defined by the United Nations as including Latin America, Africa and Asia, except Japan – we also find a high fertility level, viz. values of TFR between 6 and 7 children per woman.

The mortality level is also high, as the average value of $e(0)$ for the MENA region is only 43.2 years. In contrast to the uniformity of fertility, there is substantial variation in mortality among the 19 MENA countries and territories. The values of $e(0)$ range from 56 years in Kuwait and Lebanon to only 33 years in Yemen. The values of $e(0)$ were somewhat lower in most regions of Africa and Asia, unlike Latin America where $e(0)$ was about 50 years.

Around 1800 Europe also had a high level of fertility and mortality – although the fertility level in most countries was lower than in the MENA countries and territories due to the absence of nearly universal and early marriage. During the 19th and 20th centuries, Europe experienced a modernization of society, which implied better nutrition, an increasing standard of living, an improved level of education and health facilities combined with scientific advances in preventive and curative medicine. Hence mortality began to decline and the population growth increased. Several decades later fertility also began to fall, as big families became a disadvantage. Today all more developed regions – defined by the United Nations as including Europe, North America, Japan, Australia and New Zealand – have completed the transition from high fertility and mortality to a low level of both demographic variables, also called the demographic transition (Coale and Watkins 1986; Matthiessen 1985). Their values of TFR are now below 2 children per woman and $e(0)$ is about 75 years.

Around 1950 the MENA countries and territories – apart from Yemen – could be considered as being in the first phase of their demographic transition, as some mortality decline must have occurred prior to 1950. Their high level of fertility has generated young populations, characterized by a high proportion in the age group of children (0-14 years), viz. 41 per cent, with moderate deviations between countries and territories. The table indicates a positive correlation between fertility and proportion of children. The lower level of fertility in Lebanon corresponds to a proportion of children below 35 per cent. The average proportion of population aged 65 years and over, was below 4 percent, which means that about 56 per cent of the population belonged to the working ages (15-64 years).

The level of childbearing and mortality – including migration – produced an annual population growth rate for the MENA region of 21.2 per cent. The very high values in Jordan, Kuwait and Qatar have been caused by heavy immigration.

The demographic profile around 2000

The demographic picture of the MENA region around 2000 is very different (table 2). Its total population has now reached 377 million. It means that the region has been inhabited by 275 million more people over a 50-year span. Its population now constitutes 6.2 per cent of the world population, more than half of the population of all Europe and nearly 90 percent of the population of Northern, Western and Southern Europe. The population of Turkey numbers around 68 million and the same is true of the population of Egypt and Iran. Some part of the strong population growth in Kuwait has been caused by migration.

In the second half of the 20th century the MENA region has entered the second phase of the demographic transition, viz. the phase where fertility also begins to decline. The only exception is Yemen. A closer look at the time series of TFR and $e(0)$ indicates a substantial mortality decline during the entire period, whereas the level of childbearing did not begin to decline until after 1970, inflating the population growth rates.

The average level of TFR has decreased from 7.0 to 3.5 children per woman, and $e(0)$ has increased from 43.2 to 67.6 years. But the fertility differences between countries and territories are now very substantial, ranging from only 2.3 children per woman in Lebanon and Tunisia to more than 7.3 children per woman in Yemen. Most values of $e(0)$ are close to 70 years with the exception of Iraq and Yemen (58-59 years). This relation between the values of TFR and $e(0)$ will still generate a substantial population growth rate, viz. 2.0 per cent per year. The lower level of childbearing has reduced the average proportion of children from 40.7 to 36.0 per cent of the population. A closer look at the age structure reveals a slight increase in the proportion of population aged 65 years and over from 3.8 to 4.2 percent, unlike a more substantial increase in the proportion of population of working ages, viz. from 55.5 to 59.8 per cent. The last mentioned fact means that the population of working ages has increased by nearly 170 million.

The present demographic regime would not have been possible without some modernization of the countries and territories in the MENA region. There has been some increase of income per capita, some improvements in the level of education – also among women – and a more widespread use of preventive and curative medicine (United Nations Development Programme 2002). Several governments in the MENA region find their population growth too high and have initiated a more or less efficient population policy, aiming at a reduction of fertility (World Population Data Sheet 2004). Iran seems to provide an interesting example of such a population policy (Clausen 2004).

But although the MENA countries and territories have to a varying extent undertaken the demographic transition, the economic and social development in the region has not been satisfactory. The Arab Human Development Report 2002 (United Nations Development Programme 2002) – which by and large covers the same area as the MENA region – states, that the region is hampered by three deficits, that is, the freedom deficit, the women's empowerment deficit and the human capabilities/knowledge deficit relative to income.

The second deficit, regarding females, is an important fertility determinant in preventing a stronger fertility decline. Concerning the third deficit, it is, for example, claimed, that “in the age of knowledge intensity, poor knowledge acquisition, let alone its production, is a serious shortfall. A telling indicator of the poor level of educational attainment in the Arab Countries is the persistence of illiteracy rates that are higher, and educational enrolment rates that are lower, than those of dynamic less developed countries in East Asia and Latin America”.

The last part of the statement is underlined by a geographic comparison of fertility and mortality between the MENA region and some countries in East and South East Asia. Countries like China, Hong Kong, Republic of Korea, Thailand and Singapore were all in an early stage of the demographic transition at the middle of the 20th century. Today they have completed the demographic transition as their values of TFR are about or below 2 children per woman and their values of $e(0)$ are about 70 years or more.

The strong population growth in the last part of the 20th century has by itself contributed to the unsatisfactory economic and social development in the MENA region. It has made it more difficult to expand the health and educational facilities sufficiently fast and to increase the available amount of capital per capita. All these elements are indispensable in obtaining an increase in productivity and a higher standard of living. Today a substantial share of the age group 15-64 is either unemployed or underemployed. It has, in combination with political instability contributed to a migration pressure from the MENA region towards Europe and North America (Coleman and Wadensjö 1999; Seeberg 2000). Today countries in North, Western and Southern Europe have small populations of Muslims.

The demographic profile around 2025

Table 3 indicates the predicted values of fertility and mortality according to the medium variant of the United Nations population projection. The fertility decline is projected to continue in the first quarter of the present century, leading to an average value of TFR for the MENA region at 2.4 children per woman in 2025. Such a level is slightly above the level necessary to reproduce the population (2.1 children per woman). There is a substantial variation between the 19 countries and territories. We find values of TFR as low as 1.9 children per woman in Bahrain, Iran, Lebanon, Tunisia and Turkey and still a high value in Yemen (5.6 children per woman). Also the decline of mortality is expected to continue, so all the countries and territories in the MENA region – except Yemen – will display values of $e(0)$ close to 75 years in 2025.

The population projection predicts an annual net emigration of more than 200,000 in the first decade, followed by a decline to half that level after 2010. The heaviest net emigration takes place from Iran, Morocco and Turkey.

But although the value of TFR declines from to 3.5 to 2.4 children per woman in the first quarter of the present century, the projected population growth – due to the high proportion of children in 2000 – is still substantial. A high proportion of children means that numerous generations of women will enter their reproductive period (15-49 years) in the next decades, generating a high number of births. In 2025 the population of the MENA region is approaching 600 million people, and amounts to 7.3 per cent of the world population, more than 80 percent of the population of Europe and 130 per cent of the population of Northern, Western and Southern Europe. A strong population growth is expected to take place in nearly all countries and territories of the MENA region. More than 100 million inhabitants are expected in Egypt and the population of both Iran and Turkey would amount to about 90

million people, i.e. more than the present population of Germany. Remarkable is also the case of Yemen, with a population growth of 140 per cent in 25 years, lifting its population from 18 million to 43 million.

The population of the MENA region would be subject to an increasing aging process, as the proportion of children would diminish from 36 to 27 per cent of the population and the number of population aged 65 years and over would increase from 4.2 to 6.7 percent. Also the proportion of population at working age would change, viz. from 59.9 to 66.3 per cent, which means a growth of more than 150 million people in this age group within the next 25 years.

Conclusion

The population growth of the MENA region could make it difficult – if not impossible – to produce the necessary expansion and modernization of society to cope with the increased number of people. The expected growth of the population at working age within the next 25 years would demand a very strong effort to create a sufficient number of new jobs to make the population growth productive, plus extra jobs to reduce the existing amount of unemployment and underemployment. If such efforts turn out to be abortive, the social and economic development would not be sufficient to cope with rising expectations among the young generations, who would try to escape from societies with a low standard of living and few job possibilities by exerting a migration pressure on Europe and North America. In this scenario the amount of net emigration from the MENA region would outnumber the emigration projected by the United Nations.

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TABLES 1-3

Source: United Nations, *World Population Prospects. The 2002 Revision*.

Note: The values of TFR, $e(0)$, proportion of children and the growth rate (r) for the entire MENA region has been calculated as weighted averages, using the population as weights.

Table 1. The Demographic Profile of the MENA countries and territories around 1950

	Population (1,000)	TFR	e(0)	0-14 years (%)	r (%)
Algeria	8,753	7.28	43.1	40.1	2.1
Bahrain	116	6.97	50.9	42.3	2.9
Egypt	21,834	6.56	42.4	39.7	2.5
Iran	16,913	7.00	44.9	39.0	2.4
Iraq	5,158	7.18	44.0	45.8	2.7
Jordan	472	7.38	43.2	45.7	6.9
Kuwait	152	7.21	55.6	36.2	5.4
Lebanon	1,443	5.74	55.9	34.3	2.2
Libya	1,029	6.87	42.7	42.0	1.8
Morocco	8,953	7.18	42.9	44.4	2.5
Oman	456	7.20	37.6	42.3	2.0
Palestine	1,005	7.38	43.2	45.7	0.7
Qatar	25	6.97	48.0	42.3	6.7
Saudi Arabia	3,201	7.18	39.9	42.0	2.3
Syria	3,495	7.20	45.9	41.5	2.7
Tunisia	3,530	6.93	44.6	38.9	1.8
Turkey	21,484	6.90	43.6	40.0	2.7
United Arab Emirates	70	6.97	48.0	42.3	2.5
Yemen	4,316	8.20	32.5	42.3	1.8
Total	102,405	6.98	43.2	40.7	2.4

Table 2. The Demographic Profile of the MENA countries and territories around 2000

	Population (1,000)	TFR	e(0)	0-14 years (%)	r (%)
Algeria	30,245	3.15	67.9	35.1	1.6
Bahrain	677	2.98	73.0	29.7	2.9
Egypt	67,784	3.51	67.0	36.3	1.9
Iran	66,443	2.53	68.6	35.2	1.3
Iraq	23,224	5.25	58.7	42.0	2.8
Jordan	5,035	4.11	69.7	38.9	3.4
Kuwait	2,247	2.89	75.7	26.6	5.6
Lebanon	3,478	2.29	72.6	30.7	2.0
Libya	5,237	3.43	71.6	32.9	2.0
Morocco	29,108	3.00	66.6	33.0	1.6
Oman	2,609	5.44	71.6	37.6	3.1
Palestine	3,191	5.99	71.4	46.4	3.8
Qatar	581	3.70	70.9	27.0	2.1
Saudi Arabia	22,147	5.09	70.9	39.7	3.1
Syria	16,560	3.82	70.5	39.9	2.5
Tunisia	9,519	2.32	71.7	30.3	1.2
Turkey	68,281	2.7	69.0	31.7	1.6
United Arab Emirates	2,820	3.17	73.8	26.9	2.4
Yemen	18,017	7.3	58.0	49.1	3.5
Total	377,203	3.49	67.6	36.0	2.0

Table 3. The Demographic Profile of the MENA countries and territories around 2025

	Population (1,000)	TFR	e(0)	0-14 years (%)	r (%)
Algeria	42,429	1.91	74.3	23.4	0.9
Bahrain	1,034	1.85	77.2	20.2	1.3
Egypt	103,165	2.31	73.9	27.2	1.3
Iran	90,927	1.86	74.9	23.7	0.9
Iraq	41,707	2.90	71.2	32.6	1.9
Jordan	8,116	2.32	75.3	26.9	1.4
Kuwait	3,930	2.12	78.8	19.5	1.5
Lebanon	4,554	1.85	76.2	21.2	0.7
Libya	7,785	2.02	76.6	24.3	1.1
Morocco	40,721	2.16	73.8	24.4	1.0
Oman	4,785	3.09	75.2	31.4	1.9
Palestine	6,903	3.61	75.6	37.5	2.6
Qatar	790	2.21	75.8	20.8	1.0
Saudi Arabia	39,751	2.70	76.2	29.4	1.8
Syria	26,979	2.24	75.9	27.3	1.5
Tunisia	12,037	1.85	76.6	21.0	0.7
Turkey	88,995	1.85	74.9	21.4	0.8
United Arab Emirates	3,944	2.07	77.5	20.1	0.8
Yemen	43,204	5.55	68.0	45.5	3.4
Total	571,756	2.42	74.1	27.0	1.3

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