

NOREF Policy Brief

Demographic challenges and opportunities ahead in the Middle East and North Africa: “Arab Spring” or “Islamic winter”?

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Executive summary

Since December 2010 the speed, suddenness and scope of events in North Africa and the Middle East have taken everyone by surprise. They nevertheless had to happen. Given the universality of human nature – differences between a European and an Arab are ultimately of minor importance – the processes that began in Europe in the seventeenth century and spread throughout the world would have inevitably reached the Arab countries.

For the past four decades, depending on their level of advancement, the Arab countries have experienced

cultural, ideational, demographic and anthropological transformation similar to what Europe had been through since the English (1640-1660) and French Revolutions (1789).

Fertility in some Arab countries is similar to or lower than in Norway, due to the rising age of marriage and the increasing use of contraception. At the same time, secularism is on the rise in society, if not in politics. There is no reason to believe the Arab world would be an exception to such changes, because Arabs are not inherently averse to human progress.

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Causes of demographic changes

Several factors have contributed to the demographic shifts under way in Arab countries. *Fertility*, the most significant, has fallen on average from seven children per woman in pre-transitional years to less than three now, with several countries around or below replacement level (2.1 children per woman). Hence, today fertility in Iran (1.8) and Lebanon (1.6) is lower than in Norway (1.9). Tunisia (2.05), Morocco (2.19) and Turkey (2.1) are very close to this level.

The process of transition was triggered by an increase in *education* for boys and then for girls, which has resulted in most young people being able to read and write by their early twenties (20-24 years), the starting years of the process of marriage and reproduction.

The advance in education has engendered *delays in age at marriage* and the spread of *contraception* and thus contributed to this speedy decrease in the fertility rate down to the low "European" average of two children per woman in the most advanced parts of the region such as North Africa, Lebanon (among not only the Christians, but also Muslims, Sunnis and Shias alike), Turkey and Iran.

Education, in and of itself, and *contraception*, which follows in its train, are ambivalent factors, at the same time both positive and negative. On the one hand, this development is welcome, since limiting the number of children allows parents to focus more on each child, who is then better fed and better educated. Parenting in a smaller family, particularly with regard to father-mother interactions, becomes more democratic and freer, and this can have an overall positive impact on society and its governance. On the other hand, a household in which an illiterate father wields authority over educated children with access to knowledge beyond their parents' reach – especially in a patriarchal society – could generate an explosive combination.

Education of women could at first be a destabilising factor. They then begin to use contraception – as do some two-thirds of North African women. But who will then guarantee that they will not cheat

on their husbands? This sort of psychological tension cannot be underestimated, especially in such patriarchal societies.

A significant demographic change has been the decrease of marriages between cousins and other relatives, with the proportions sometimes cut by half in a matter of two decades. *Endogamy*, which implied a sealing of the extended family, results in the closure of social groups and the rigidity of institutions. When society becomes less endogamous, as has been the case with Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and Syria, it is potentially more inclined to openness, which is conducive to revolt, especially when a country is governed by autocrats, as is the case almost everywhere in the Arab region. Combined with mass education and declining fertility rates, it can contribute to greater awareness and inclination to rebel against abject living conditions combined with the absence of freedom.

In Europe, the demographic shift can be dated to the eighteenth century, when advances in medicine lowered the *mortality rate*. As a result populations realised that voluntary control of fertility was indispensable to cope with the growing population. By means of *coitus interruptus* and the use of condoms made out of animals' intestines, French women in the mid-1700s went against the explicit teachings of the church to actively curtail their reproduction.

This inevitably accompanied the increased *secularisation* of society. The act of voluntarily limiting the number of children implies that people start to feel responsible for their own reproduction. "Divine intervention" is no longer felt as the origin of the process of procreation.

Contrary to many alarmists who warn of a "clash of civilisations", the Arab and Muslim world in general, and more particularly North Africa, is now undergoing a phenomenon of secularisation similar to what Europe experienced. Secularisation, however, should not be equated with either atheism or even agnosticism. Rather, it means that an individual can be totally secular in his/her daily behaviour – notably with regard to important questions linked to procreation – while at the same time going to church, or the mosque, or the synagogue. There is no radical

contradiction. We are witnessing a phenomenon of "disenchantment" in the Arab world, in the sense used by Max Weber, which occurred in the West two centuries ago.

Forty years ago the first surveys on the attitudes toward procreation in the Arab world were made. One of the questions was: "What is your ideal number of children?" A significant number of women used to give non-numerical responses. Instead of answering two, three or ten children, they would respond with something like: "It is God's will." Today, such non-numerical responses have almost completely disappeared from such surveys.

Nevertheless, while an analogy can be drawn between demographic shifts in Europe over the past two centuries and those occurring now in this region, it is taking place in a fraction of the time: a matter of four decades for fertility in the Maghreb to be slashed from 7.5 to two children, compared with the century or more it required in Europe.

Effects of demographic changes

Many recent analyses pointed to demography in the Arab and Muslim world as a potential cause of increased radicalisation – NATO's *Towards a Grand Strategy for an Uncertain World*,¹ to name just one. This assessment points to the Arab and Muslim world as the world's most volatile area because of its demographic "youth bulge" and the increase in the numbers and proportions of those aged 15-24 years. This causes an increase in uncertainty that allows political fanaticism and radical Islam to spread with ease, fuelled by the demographic "explosion".

Contrary to this line of reasoning, we are currently experiencing a demographic transformation, an effect of increased secularisation. However, history shows that such modernisation at first leads to disruption in society, like the one we are witnessing now. It might seem ironic, even provocative, to raise this secularisation of the

Arabs at a time (January 2012) when the Islamist parties are accumulating electoral victories one after the other, from Ennahda in Tunisia to the Justice and Development Party in Morocco, not to mention the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists in Egypt and their emergence elsewhere (Libya, Syria and Yemen).

Yet these Islamist victories have more to do with the pusillanimity and irresponsibility of the liberal and leftist parties, split into a multitude of tiny groups, than with the seductions of Islam as such. Added to this, most Arabs have only known secular powers and despotic autocrats: the Syrian and Iraqi Baath parties, or in a milder form Ben Ali in Tunisia, Qaddafi in Libya or Mubarak in Egypt.

Let us be more optimistic. Demographic transition now opens up new avenues that should induce such optimism, particularly on economic grounds. The youth bulge, a favourite bugbear of the enthusiasts for the clash of civilisations, has started to decrease to such an extent that the proportion of 15- to 24-year-olds will converge with what it will become in Europe in four decades. Henceforth, decreasing pressure on the labour market, which is mainly caused by the booming young population, will be noteworthy.

The metamorphosis of the *age structure*, a straightforward result of fertility decrease, will accommodate an expansion of the economic sphere. Labour productivity will be the winner in this shift from quantity to quality. Hence, each member of the labour force will be in a position to transfer more in cash or kind to his/her parents, thus limiting the impact of *ageing*, which will become an even more serious issue in the Arab countries than it is in Europe, because of the suddenness in the growth of the size and proportion of the elderly population.

The slowdown of *demographic investments*, as distinct from economic investments, allows the state as an economic actor to turn its attention to the more directly production-related, job-creating sectors. The private sector will also win as a result of this demographic transition. The changing age structure translates into an increased ratio of adults to young people, thus the ratio of producers to consumers. The falling fertility rate is generating an expansion of the age groups with

¹ Klaus Naumann et al., *Towards a Grand Strategy for an Uncertain World: Renewing Transatlantic Partnership*, Lunteren, Noaber Foundation, 2007..

a higher propensity to save, thus increasing the national saving rate.

Less visible, but nonetheless real, is the impact on narrowing the *income distribution* gap. Before demographic transition started, not only did a smaller share of national income go to poorer workers, but they had also to support larger families. Differential fertility in Arab countries between rich and poor was a significant factor in living standards disparities. The reduction of the

rich/poor fertility gap is a lever for economic take-off (see the example of the Asian tigers).

Reduced wealth disparities and a fairer distribution of knowledge give fresh impetus to the middle classes and favour pluralism. Therefore, it is not much of an exaggeration to equate *demographic transition* with democratic transition. All in all, *demographic transition* implies a certain amount of risk. Yet its advantages clearly outweigh its drawbacks.

