

Has the Demographic Transition in the Southern Mediterranean Kept its Promises?

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For the Arab countries and the whole of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the demographic and family transitions have, to varying degrees, recently encompassed the whole region. The descriptive phenomenon of this transition is quite compelling and is rooted in the spread of education. More education is, and will remain, an element of social disruption, especially when youth is dominant and will remain so for decades to come. Hence, the Arab (but also Iranian and Turkish) upheavals. However, since December 2010, the scope of events in North Africa and the Middle East has taken everyone by surprise. Three years have passed since the spark of Sidi Bouzid (December 2010), which triggered the outbreak of the so-called “Arab Springs”. Today, assessments are very mixed, ranging from greater enthusiasm, hostile rejection and mere skepticism. Our aim is not to assess the outcome of these events but to explain their rationale in the light of the cultural, demographic and family transformations of these societies.

The process of multiple transitions in Arab countries was triggered by access to education, first for boys and then girls. Most youths, largely illiterate a few decades ago, now acquire literacy skills by the age of 15-24, the starting ages of the process of union and reproduction, and of the turbulent “youth bulge”.

Ten years ago, primary education was dominant in the majority of countries, with few inequalities between girls and boys. Since then, the situation has improved, specifically in those countries where illiteracy was higher. Moreover, the gender gap in education has receded and sometimes disappeared. In Egypt, the proportion of young females able to read and write has increased from 79% to 84% in 5

years. This is not yet universal education but the improvement is significant. In Yemen, the proportion of young females able to read and write is now 74%. In just one generation, the region has moved from a situation of illiteracy throughout the whole of society, to it being a residual issue. This is a Copernican revolution, likely to undermine the foundations of traditional societies, since the acquisition of the ability to read and especially to write is a major step for the individuation of human beings and the acquisition of autonomy.

In the wake of progress in education, fertility has been the paramount factor of transformation in the family and society. More than other indicators, fertility levels and trends

encapsulate the mentality and behaviors of a large group of individuals. They reflect the collective psyche and attitudes towards modernization versus tradition.

Mortality underwent intense changes in level and structures: life expectancy has increased from 40 years in the 1950s to over 75 now. The significance of the collapse of mortality rates goes beyond mere demographics. Arab populations are often described as fatalistic, even by themselves. A major reason for this pessimistic perception of the world is the fact that they were so accustomed to death, which was such a banal phenomenon. Therefore, the fall in mortality is akin to a mental revolution with the reshaping of the psyche of populations moving away from fatalism.

Although significantly behind Europe, the southern Mediterranean family has nevertheless quickly espoused attitudes which apparently contradict their most rooted traditions: marrying later and the widespread practice of contraception. This can only inspire optimism, showing that these countries were no longer overwhelmed by ever-increasing populations and were soon to reap the demographic bonuses of the transition and proving that family modernization, measured through demographic indicators, was an irreversible phenomenon.¹

Hence, marriage is no longer a sacred and social obligation. In the critical age bracket of 30-35 years, many men and women are still unmarried, often out of personal choice. Rising marriage age has gone hand in hand with exogamy. Endogamy, the so-called “Arab marriage” which implied a sealing of the extended family and closure within social groups, has sharply declined. A shift to exog-

amic marriage results in increased potential for openness. The choice of a spouse outside the extended family stimulates the emergence of citizens of a nation-state rather than tribes-people.

Patriarchal social structures and mentalities no longer resist family and demographic changes. In many countries, if not all, women are progressively becoming heads of households for varying motives: choosing to remain single and rejecting arranged marriages, with an increasing divorce rate, more and more requested by females, widowhood (in decline), and emigration, either internal or outside the country.

The present structure of the nuclear household consisting of a couple and their children (increasingly less numerous) favors egalitarian values in the family and therefore in society at large

The nuclear family is replacing the traditional extended family, sometimes horizontal but mostly vertical, with three-generation households. The classical nuclear family of a father, mother and their children has become the norm, which was not the case a generation ago. In extended vertical families before the demographic transition, authority was normally the preserve of the older male; that is, the less educated and more conservative. Hence, the present structure of the nuclear household consisting of a couple and their children (increasingly less numerous) favors egalitarian values in the family and therefore in society at large.

These processes, triggered in Europe three centuries ago, had no reason to stop at the gates of the Arab world. Their concentration in just

1. This was the conclusion of our book, COURBAGE, Y. and E. TODD, *A Convergence of Civilizations – The Transformations of Muslim Societies Around the World*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2011, p. 134, originally published in French, *Le rendez-vous des civilisations*, Paris, Le Seuil, 2007.

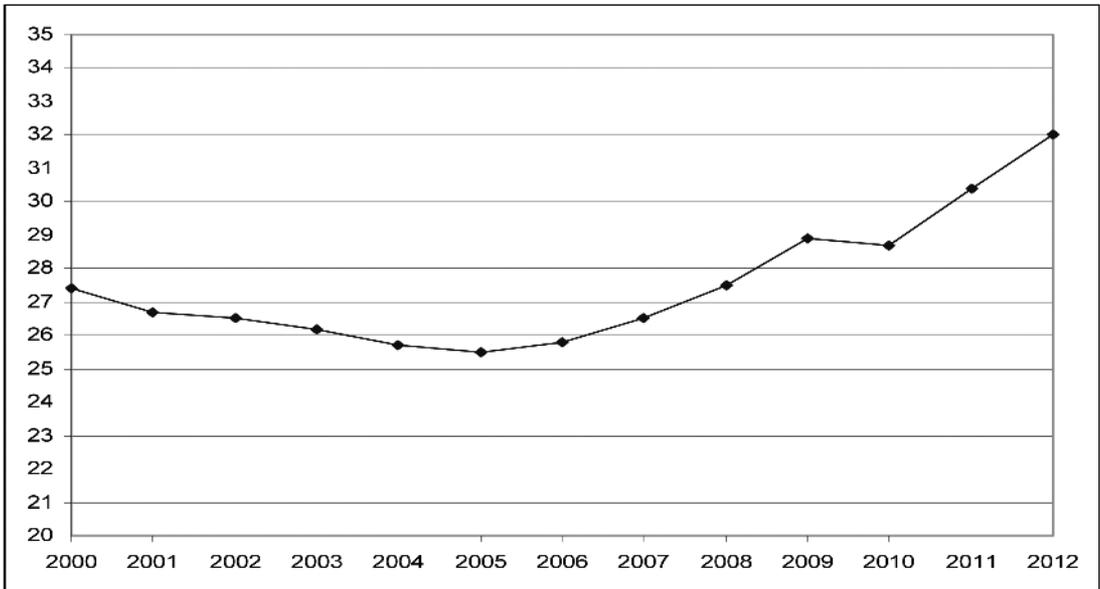
four decades is yet another example of the acceleration of history. If Arab societies have adhered to demographic and family transitions in all their phases, they are ready for the process of political transition.

In-depth transformations at the individual and family level cannot go without a reshuffling of long-established hierarchies. The absolute paternal authority of the father over his child and the uneasy cohabitation of educated children living under the yoke of an illiterate father became less and less acceptable. Becoming as, and sometimes more, educated than their husbands, women are increasingly less supportive of a passive submission to the will

of their men. The same applies to the authority that a brother traditionally holds over his sisters.

Thus began the inevitable questioning of the once immutable family structure. But what is occurring at the individual and family level will inevitably spill over into the societal level. After all, society is but the projection from the micro-family level to the macro-social level. The questioning of authority never stops at the micro-level. The simple man or woman who dares to challenge the authority of the father will soon go on the street to contest the legitimacy of the “Father of the Nation”.

Figure 1
The recent increase in Egyptian crude birthrate (per thousand)



Source: CAPMAS website and Kareem Fahim, “Egypt’s Birthrate Rises as Population Control Policies Vanish”, *The New York Times*, 23rd May 2013.

What would be the view today? Seven years after 2007,² following an optimistic view of the Arab and southern Mediterranean demographic transition, is it still possible to express the same optimism in view of the current fertility trends? Are there reversals: fertility increases followed by a long period of fertility decline? Do they reflect behavioral changes of perceptions and attitudes?

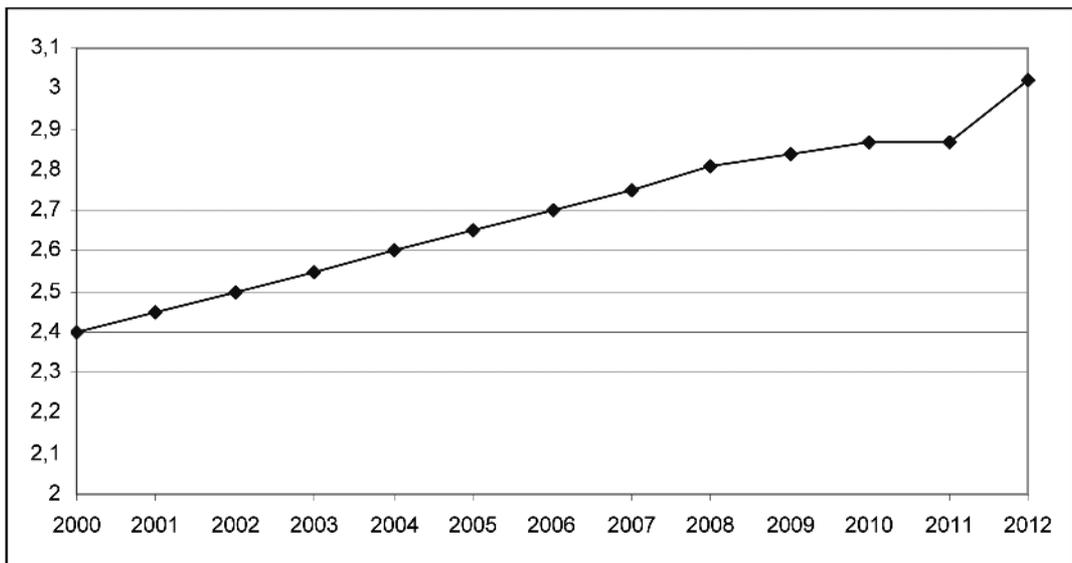
In Egypt,³ the largest Arab country (85 million inhabitants), the birthrate decreased until 2005. More recently, it started to increase from 25.5 to 32 per 1000 in 2012, a 25% rise, implying a TFR of 3.49 now, against 3.36 in 2005.

In Algeria (40 million inhabitants), fertility also steadily increased from 2.40 in 2000 to 2.81 in 2008, 2.84 in 2009, 2.87 in 2010 and 2011, passing the 3 children mark in 2012: 3.02, a 26% increase since 2000.

Little can be said about Sudan (TFR: 4.2-4.6) and Iraq (3.6-4.3), where the disruptions caused by wars have left their marks on the statistical apparatus. The large variations in international estimates show how difficult it is to appraise fertility since their statistical apparatus is so shaky.

In contrast, in Morocco a 2009/2010 panel survey showed the persistence of decreased

Figure 2
The recent increase in the Algerian Total Fertility Rate



Source: Office National des Statistiques (ONS) website, Algiers, 2013.

2. The year when *A Convergence of Civilizations...*, *op.cit.*, was first published in French.

3. The countries are presented according to population size.

fertility: 2.19 compared with the 2005 estimate of 2.43. However, the Population Division and the Population Reference Bureau (PRB) inflate Moroccan fertility to 2.78 and 2.70. Only the US Census Bureau credits the reality of fertility decline in Morocco at 2.19, which is coherent with national statistics, contrary to the Population Division and the PRB.

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In Saudi Arabia, the TFR of nationals estimated at 3.3 in 2005 was confirmed at the same value in a 2007 survey. In Yemen, the 2005 estimate of 6.23 was very high. The present UN Population Division of 4.15 seems more likely.

In contrast, Syria is an example of stalling fertility: 3.50 in 2005 and 3.47 in 2009. In Tunisia, national sources show increasing fertility, from 2.02 in 2005 to 2.15 in 2011. The number of births in 2012 increased from 192,000 to 215,000, thus signaling yet another increase in the birthrate from 18.8 to 19.9 per thousand, and a probable accompanying fertility increase to 2.27. In Jordan, fertility increased from 3.55 in 2005 to 3.85 in 2009.

In Lebanon, fertility has continued to decrease from 1.69 in 2005 to 1.5. In Palestine, in 2005 the fertility level of 3.70 was probably too low, as confirmed by a subsequent survey in 2010. The present level of 4.17 is slightly higher and is in line with the UN 4.05 and PRB 4.1 estimates. The US Census Bureau provides

separate estimates for the West Bank (2.98) and the Gaza Strip (4.57), hence 3.96 for the whole of the occupied Palestinian territories. Mauritania is probably similar to Yemen, with high fertility at 4.70 but declining.

Other cases of fertility decline are found among national populations of the Gulf States.⁴ In the United Arab Emirates, national fertility stood at 3.69 in 2005. Since then, there seems to have been a drop in fertility, although births registered by citizenship and year were not available on their statistical office website (except for the Emirate of Abu Dhabi). A survey taken in 2008 did, however, confirm fertility decline.⁵ Contrary to what occurred in most large Arab countries, fertility continued to decrease in Oman from 3.56 in 2005 to 2.67 in 2009 and similarly in Kuwait, where the fertility rate among Kuwaiti nationals estimated at 4.14 in 2005 has continued to decline. The results are mixed depending on the source but the most reliable one, registered births, shows a slight slowing down of the birthrate, from 32.6 in 2005 to 29.7 per thousand in 2011, a 9% decrease which might imply that the fertility rate of Kuwaiti nationals stands at 3.77. In Qatar, a mix of statistics of births in civil registration, censuses and surveys shows that the fertility rate among Qatari nationals, which stood at 4.44 in 2005, continued to decrease to 3.39 in 2011. Finally, in Bahrain the fertility rate among nationals estimated at 3.10 in 2005 continued to decrease to 2.78 in 2009.

Out of 19 Arab countries,⁶ it was virtually impossible at this stage of the analysis to estimate recent fertility trends in Sudan, Iraq

4. The UN, PRB and IDB estimates are of no use, due to the high proportion of their expatriate population. Some of these estimates are from ESCWA, *Bulletin on population and vital statistics in the Arab Region*, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, New York, 2012.

5. AL AWAD, M. and C. CHARTOUNI, “Explaining the decline in fertility among citizens of the GCC countries: the case of the UAE”, *Working Paper No. 1*, Institute for Social and Economic Research, 2010.

6. Excluding some officially Arab countries, members of the Arab League: Somalia, Djibouti, Comoros. The non-Arab countries of the Middle East, Turkey and Iran have continued their fertility transition.

and Libya. For the 16 remaining countries for which estimates since 2005 were deemed possible, 11 have pursued their fertility transition, whereas for 5 the fertility decline has stalled or was reversed.

Hence, a majority of Arab countries were still on board for the demographic and family modernization process. Interestingly, among the “modernizers” we find all the countries of the Gulf area and of the Arabian Peninsula in general, including Saudi Arabia and Yemen. However, this optimism must be tempered. Countries where fertility transition has been stalling or reversed are very often the heavyweights of the Arab world: Egypt, Algeria, Syria, not to mention Tunisia and Jordan. Therefore, only a minority among the Arab population of 42%⁷ were still experiencing fertility transition.

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Does this mean that the view of demographic and family transition and modernization and what they were implying in terms of “convergence of civilizations” should become obsolete? We were confident that these demographic transitions meant more than just numbers, with a lower TFR and population growth rate. It went far beyond, ultimately signifying a democratic transition in the family, society and political sphere. Does a stalling or reversal of demographic transition signal a halt to modernization, paving the way to the persistence

or return of traditional families, rigid social structures and authoritarian regimes?

There are many counterarguments which suggest that this demographic setback, if any, might not constitute the sign of reversal in the overall trend towards modernization, ultimately leading to freer families and, consequently, political regimes.

First, from a theoretical viewpoint, there is the “ratchet effect”, a phenomenon which prevents reversal of a process after a certain stage is attained, analogous with the ratchet mechanism that prevents a system going back and implicitly forces it to go forward.⁸ Hence, a halt to demographic transition in Arab countries does not necessarily mean a halt to democratic transition as other factors may relay this demographic and family transition.

Second, it is reassuring to observe that among those countries where demographic transition was still in progress after 2005, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and the Gulf countries appear in a good place. In spite of their wealth and the structure of their populations largely dominated by expatriates, thus being in favor of a high national fertility, the transition did not halt. Neither was there a reversal in their population policy.

Third, reversal of fertility trends does not mean that other demographic or family factors are also reversed, such as mortality, age at marriage, exogamous marriages, nuclearization, and women as head of the household. Important as it is, fertility is not the sole criteria of modernization.

Fourth, the reasons behind the fertility increases or its stalling are complex and vary from one setting to another. A superficial expla-

7. And even less if we had considered the national populations of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, only excluding the expatriates.

8. A well known example is the responsiveness of fertility to the price of oil in the Gulf countries. When it was high, fertility was also high. Since the oil shocks, fertility has declined. Yet, when oil prices recovered, fertility did not increase in parallel because it was no longer dependent on economic prosperity; other social factors took the lead.

nation would attribute this phenomenon to the “return of Islam”, not only at the political level (Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Ennahda in Tunisia, PJD in Morocco...) but more significantly at the family level: return to tradition, family values, the humbling of the status of women, early marriage, many offspring.

Therefore, there are very few points in common among the 5 countries that have undergone recent fertility increases. In Egypt, the increased birthrate has been erroneously attributed to the January 2011 revolution. The behavioral shifts are due to the fact that “people are under pressure” or because “no one talks about the population problem like before.”⁹ However, the Egyptian birthrate started to increase from 2005, years ahead of the revolution, showing the limits of these explanations. A more promising avenue of research should look at the labor market situation, particularly female employment. Fertility decrease might be ephemeral if progress in female education, even at the secondary and university level, is not supported by the entry of women into the labor force with rewarding jobs. Women could soon return to the status of housewives with the risk of early marriage and repeated pregnancies. In Egypt, the female participation rate is still very low: 24% of women aged 15 and above are in the labor force. Many are unemployed (officially 19%), under-employed or not gainfully employed as family employees (46% of active females are in the agricultural sector). This leaves only a handful of women for whom the opportunity cost of childbearing is significant enough to encourage them to limit their breeding.

In Algeria, over and above the marginalization of women in the labor market, the improvement in security and living condi-

tions after the end of the second Algerian war boosted marriages. The number of marriages more than doubled, increasing from 177,000 to 371,000 between 2000 and 2012. Marital fertility decreased but not sufficiently, hence the increase in the total fertility rate from 2.40 to 3.02. A different combination of factors to Egypt, but female exclusion from the labor force also played a negative role.

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In Syria, fertility has been stalling during the first decade of this century, mainly because of a two-speed demographic regime: one in the coastal region, Jabal-al Arab and the capital, Damascus, relatively privileged regarding social, economic and cultural achievements, where fertility has dropped to replacement level; and the great majority of the country which could not benefit from economic progress or redistribution of wealth, where fertility remained at a very high level.

In Tunisia, the fertility increase from 2.02 in 2005 to 2.27 in 2012 is puzzling in this forerunner in the Arab world for family and population issues. An increase to 2.1 would not have raised concerns and could have been the outcome of tempo effects or slight behavioral adjustments. At 2.27, the issue is more serious and has not yet been explained.

In Jordan, it is plausible but difficult to prove with hard data that the peculiar population composition of Jordanians and Palestinians might have played a hidden role in the persistence of relatively high fertility.

9. FAHIM, K., *Egypt's Birthrate Rises as Population Control Policies Vanish*, *op. cit.* These are the opinions expressed by Hisham Makhoulouf, professor of demography at Cairo University.

Why this stalling of transitions for 6 out of 10 Arab citizens? The marginalization of Arab women in the labor force, whose participation rate in 2012 was just 21%, meaning a gap of 53% with the male employment rate, is probably a key factor.

The Arab world has in a short generation gone through a series of cultural revolutions, with almost universal access of young people to learning to read and write or the remarkable access of females to primary, secondary and university education. In its wake came the demographic revolution thanks to the widespread use of contraception and the decline of early marriage, with a background of increasing individuation. The demographic and family changes were followed by the disruption of traditional family hierarchies: husband-wife, father-children, brother-sister, which could only have a positive impact on the social and political sphere. Hence, the cycle of Arab up-

risings since December 2010 swept away the most deeply-rooted political hierarchies, while vigorously enhancing the status of women.

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The last stumbling block is the labor market which, for the time being, is still resistant to women as their employment is far below expectations. Hence the question: what are the chances of maintaining the durability of the family and demographic transition if Arab women are permanently excluded from the labor market? What would be the political repercussions of this exclusion of one out of two citizens?