Demographic Changes and Perspectives in the Southern Mediterranean Region

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Whereas everything seemed to point to the contrary and the cultural and "civilisational" divide seems never to have been so wide, the demographics of the Southern Mediterranean Basin are beginning to converge with those of the Northern Mediterranean countries, though not to the point of becoming identical. There are many different scenarios: in some cases, the resemblance is very high (Lebanon and Tunisia); in other cases convergence is near at hand and will take but a few years or perhaps a decade at most (Morocco, Algeria, Libya and Turkey); and still in others, it seems yet a distant reality (Egypt, Syria, Israel and Palestine). Table 1 provides several pertinent indicators of the current demographic situation: population, fertility rate and its transition, child mortality and its correlates of literacy among boys and girls, urbanisation and per capita GDP. So as not to overload the table, we have not included other common indicators which are easily found in international demographic yearbooks.

In the following lines, we will place particular attention on the fertility rate, which is the number of children that a woman will have during the course of her reproductive life. To provide an idea, this index has varied over time and always varies over space, ranging from 8 children (in certain Sub-Saharan African countries) to little more than one, as in certain regions of Europe, namely northern Italy and former East Germany. Before the demographic transition some thirty years ago, the Arab countries had very high rates (except Lebanon and Israel) and there was no difference to speak of between the Maghreb and the Mashreq, as can be seen in the column on peak fertility rates.

At first glance, a significant difference can be seen between the Maghreb (including Libya) and the Middle East (excluding Lebanon). One cannot but see the effect of European cultural influence, stronger in the Maghreb than in the Middle East countries: geography, colonial and post-colonial history, language, the media, as well as the nearly obligatory use of European languages and above all, the effect of cultural mediators consisting of *Maghrebi émigrés* who are nearly wholly Europe-oriented, have contributed – via a series of diffuse processes (both direct and indirect) – to deeply modifying family behaviour in countries of migrant origin and to bringing about a re-evaluation of fertility intentions. Nevertheless, upon closer look, the differences among Maghreb countries are not trivial.

Morocco, despite its less satisfying demographic, cultural and economic conditions, was a pioneer in demographic change in the Arab World. Naturally, Tunisia and Lebanon began to experience demographic change earlier, but apart from factors specific to both countries, they also have a demographic size advantage over Morocco, that is, change occurs more easily in small countries than in large ones. Hence, despite its highly rural population, its low standard of living and very high infant and juvenile mortality rates at the time, Morocco began to undergo its demographic transition in the mid-1970s, 10 years earlier than the majority of Arab Countries. Today, Morocco still bears the stigma of an under-development more marked than elsewhere and the standard of living is low. The rural population is no longer predominant, but this is above all due to the effect of the administrative promotion of certain areas, which have moved from rural towards urban. Infant mortality remains very high: 40‰, which is 10 times higher than in developed countries. Boys and girls aged 15-24, who are nearly all literate in the other countries concerned, still suffer here from the past lacunae of the educational system, which has proven

unable to generalise education: 4 girls out of 10 are still illiterate in this age group. Nevertheless, despite its poor performance in these areas, Morocco ranks high in demographic transition. Its fertility rate of 2.43 children per woman is quite low, considering the other indicators. It is quickly approaching that of Tunisia. The population is increasingly pushing back the marriage age and has broadly adopted family planning, the standard of two children tending to prevail (the desired fertility rate of 1.80 is even lower, 27% less than the effective fertility rate). Though the government has not generated this evolution towards greater demographic moderation, it has efficiently attended the process.

In **Algeria**, after the militant anti-Malthusianism, which can be largely ascribed to compensating the ravaging effects of the Algerian War, the administration suddenly changed course, opting in 1983 for a population policy that was openly against a high birth rate. Several years later, the oil bust of 1986 gave an even more definitive boost to the drop in fertility rate, a process which continued steadily until the year 2000, when the fertility index reached a plateau of 2.38 children per woman, less than 3 points above the replacement fertility level of 2.10. Nonetheless, the decrease in fertility not only levelled off, but thanks to improved economic and security conditions, has now rebounded, increasing by 10% in 2005.

Tunisia displays all the features for successful demographic transition. The political will to reduce population growth is long-standing, dating back to the 1960s. Nevertheless, the decisive factor has not been so much this – profusely emphasised – political will, but rather the aspirations of the population to limit its progeny. It has been so successful in doing so that today, Tunisia's fertility rate has reached the same level as that of France: 2.0 children per woman. Due to the late average age of marriage, one of the latest in the world, generalised use of contraception and occasional abortions, Tunisians have lowered their fertility rates to match European standards. Demographers did not hesitate some years ago to forecast an even lower fertility rate of only 1.5 children. This trend can in part be attributed to the population's wish to educate their children to the highest degree possible, hoping to put them through higher education, preferably at private institutions abroad. Despite this aspiration, Tunisia is still behind in some respects. A significant proportion of young people approximately 20 years of age, especially among the female population (8%), have not had the chance to attend school and are thus illiterate. Moreover, the Malthusian trend can have negative effects in a country where the family structures have evolved less (endogamy and a marked preference for male children). Thus, as in hyper-Malthusian countries of Asia, female foeticide (which can be inferred when the proportion of male to female births surpass the normal biological rate of 1.05) is beginning to emerge to aggravate the negligence towards female children common in these latitudes (evident from the abnormally high mortality rate of girls from 0 to 4 years of age in comparison to that of boys of the same age).

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On the demographic level, **Libya** remains the least known of the countries in this region. The variation in estimates can easily make the user despair. If we rely on international data sources (World Bank, the UN, the US Census Bureau, Population Reference Bureau, CIA, etc.), Libya appears to fit in well with other Mashreq countries, with a fertility rate approaching that of Syria or Egypt. On the other hand, if we consider – and why wouldn't we? – the last and only demographic survey taken in Libya, then we find quite a modern demographic situation for a country that seems rather closed to globalisation trends, as reflected in its moderate fertility rate: 2.85 in 2005. Libya, underpopulated and rich in resources, has undergone a demographic transition like the oil-producing countries of the Arab-Persian Gulf. For a long time, official pronatalist policy has been compensated by a generous redistribution of income. The population, though highly urbanised and educated, maintained the habit of large families. Things have changed since the oil price collapse and the international embargo, which ruined the standard of living and entailed a painful yet necessary demographic adjustment to the new situation. Now that prosperity has returned due to high oil prices and that the country is once again in the good graces of the international community, it would be interesting to ascertain whether the fertility rate, which was falling irremissibly, has stabilised or is rising. Unfortunately,

the data so scantily provided by Libya obliges us to put off the answer to this question, interesting on both the theoretical and the practical levels.

The most populated country in the Southern Mediterranean Region, **Egypt's** population data is not the best known. Nevertheless, despite their random nature, the data suggest great demographic immobility, with a fertility rate that has practically not decreased at all since the 1990s. It is nonetheless in this country more than anywhere else in the Southern Mediterranean that the demographic "concern" has been the most persistent, regardless of the regime, whether royalist under Farouk or republican under Nasser and his successors. The latter had made excellent progress: between 1965 and his death in 1970, the Egyptian fertility rate had dropped, which is the least one could expect of a country where 4% of the surface area is arable. The great increase in population since then and the stabilisation of the fertility rate at a high level in 2005 – twice as high as in Lebanon and 2/3 higher than in Tunisia – demonstrate that environmental constraints (barren areas, enormous population densities and so on) and economic constraints (limited natural resources and a mediocre standard of living) are not enough to prevent the fertility rate from remaining high and the population from growing at a rhythm allowing it to double in a single generation. Egyptian facts refute the theory of modernisation: it is the fertility of illiterate or little educated women which decreases. That of more educated women, on the other hand, remains stable. The desired number of children continues to be high: approximately 3 children, that is, nearly 50% higher than in the Maghreb countries. Egypt is certainly the country in the world that offers the best refutation of Malthusianism, demonstrating that the Reverend's *positive checks* are an imposture.

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Israel is the most pronatalist and populationist in the region, attitudes which large segments of the population share. The Jewish fertility rate in Israel, 2.69 children (2005), is very high no matter what the criteria used for comparison, whether it be the Jews of the diaspora (1.5 children), the Arab Maghreb countries or Muslim countries (Iran, Turkey and so on). It is also very high for a country where the standard of living is high and the population is educated. The fertility rate has hardly dropped since the 1980s, both among Jews and Palestinians with Israeli nationality: 3.72 children. These deviations in demographic transition can be ascribed to internal rivalry and complex siege conditions, which easily take on a demographic dimension.

Six decades old, the Israeli-Arab conflict is clearly not alien to the formerly high Palestinian fertility rate and its subsequent severe plunge as of the year 2000. The **Palestine** of the Occupied Territories (The West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip) and its bits and pieces remaining in Israel (Israeli Arabs) – this is an archetypical case of interrelation between nationalism, conflict and fertility rate. Although already very high in 1987 (despite exceptional schooling and urbanisation levels), Palestinian fertility increased even more during the first Intifada. The fertility rate surpassed 7 children beginning in 1988, culminating in 7.57 in 1990 (8.76 in the Gaza Strip). In Israel, on the other side of the "green line," the fertility of Palestinians who were Israeli citizens stabilised after having decreased, with a resulting natural growth rate 3 times higher than the Jewish majority. Palestinian women had become the markers of national borders with the duty of producing the children the nation demanded of them. It was a – bygone – era in which Yasser Arafat discovered that the womb of Palestinian women was a biological weapon and implored couples to have 12 children, 2 for themselves and 10 for the struggle.

The withdrawal of Israeli settlers from the Gaza Strip in 2005 has left a disputed territory par excellence, the West Bank, where demography has become a trump card. The fertility rate of Palestinians remained constant, at about 6 children, up to the year 2000, before suffering a severe plunge to 3.4 in 2002 and 2003. The 2nd Intifada was not the only factor in this plunge, as the fall in fertility rate preceded it. The subsequent years only confirmed a movement that had begun before the uprising. This plunge has economic causes: the sealing off of Palestinian Territories and consequent difficulty of circulation precipitated a plunge in the standard of living. Nonetheless, the decrease in fertility goes back to 2000, preceding the major deterioration of economic conditions. Other causes came into play. In this context, the weight of numbers is fundamental and demography is an integral part of the conflict, such that the decrease in fertility rate has strong political connotations. It reveals the divergence

between individual and community values. For the Palestinians, demographic transition does not have the same connotations as for the Moroccans, Egyptians or even Syrians. In Palestine, the transition entails a definite political risk, because, in contrast to the Palestinians, the Israelis occupying the West Bank and East Jerusalem retain all of the assets of demographic dynamism. Their fertility rate is on the rise though it is already very high (4.75 children). Immigration remains stable and mortality very low.

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This high fertility rate is due to the expansionist, nationalist and religious views predominating among settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, as well as to the billions of dollars pouring into the settlements that lighten the load of child rearing and thus reward pro-family choices. While the settlers' standard of living rose due to direct aid and subsidies, that of the Palestinians plummeted. By 2000, the Palestinian fertility rate, which had collapsed to 4.18 (3.40 in the West Bank), had fallen below that of Israeli settlers: 4.51.

Another – emotionally loaded – matter of concern: Jerusalem. Even more than in the rest of the West Bank, the resistance to occupation/annexation went hand in hand with a high fertility rate. But in 2005, the fertility rate of the 245,000 Palestinians in the Holy City was surpassed for the first time – though by a fraction of a decimal point – by that of the 475,000 Jews: 3.94 as compared to 3.95 children per woman, respectively.

In the face of an Israel whose expansionism is also demographic, **Syria's** official policy as well as its civil society ideals prove to be just as populationist and pronatalist. In official proposals or in conversation with the citizens at large, the demographic issue immediately takes on a strong emotional bent – a heritage of the past which continues to weigh upon the Syrian mindset. The Israeli-Arab Wars have accentuated the populationist impulse, numbers being promoted as a strategic factor in a very long-term conflict. Nationalism and demography go hand in hand.

In Syria, the demand for children has always been high. The State has never needed to intervene. Syrians unanimously opt for large families (4.6 children today). Syria was and remains one of the rare countries where the ideal number of children is higher than the effective number. Demographic evolution will be slow here.

There is a dilemma. The most pro-regime communities and regions – the Alawites in the coastal mountains (2.10 children per woman in 2004), the Djebel Druze (1.80 children), the Golan community (2.66 children) and the Damascus community (2.45 children) – display very low fertility rates, as do the Christians disseminated throughout the country (their fertility rate is uncertain but is believed to be 2.0 children or less per woman). Therefore, these groups are the most threatened by the "explosive" demography of the majority (3.83 children in Aleppo, 5.46 in Rakka, 6.21 in Deir el Zor), which is two to three times higher.

The administration knows it is useless to play the battle of numbers, the war of cradles, for its community of origin and the communities backing it. High rates of procreation do not ensue in the Alawite, Druze, Ismaili or Christian traditions of Syria. Alone among the larger minorities, the Kurds are hyper-fertile. Yet the majority community, the Sunni Arab community, may be a giant in numbers, but it is also a giant with feet of clay: an artificial category, a comfortable aggregate that suits statisticians well but has no sociological consistency. In contrast, the other communities are less numerous but more unified.

Pragmatically, the current regime has employed a laissez-faire policy, not intervening in demographic matters. Even if the control of fertility could have contributed to diminishing imbalances between majority and minority populations, it would have been politically incorrect to proclaim this and thereby injure religious sensibilities. Hence Syrian demography will always be marked by its unstable balances. Its fertility rate, which had reached world record highs at 8 children in the mid-80s began to diminish after 1986. The Syrians began to have fewer children, even in the countryside and in conservative strongholds (Aleppo). Nonetheless, since the 1990s, the fertility rate has hardly fallen: 3.5 in 2005.

Lebanon has the lowest fertility rate of the region, lower even than Tunisia, Turkey and the Jewish Israelis. But this could not have occurred if some groups continued to have a fertility rate much higher than others. Paradoxically, the war and post-war period in **Lebanon** (1975-2007) has brought communities to similar levels, at least in terms of demography, whereas a hypothetical political rapprochement is yet to come. The Lebanese household is typically the nuclear

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family throughout the Muslim, Shiite and Christian communities. Shiite areas demonstrate a strong propensity towards "modernity," if we consider the fertility indicator as representing the spirit of evolution in family structure and mentality.

The speed of fertility transition from 1971 to 2005 was highest among the Shiites (-3.2% per year and falling) than in any other group: -2.3% for the Maronites, -2.3% for other Christians, -3% for the Sunnis. Modernisation directly affects reproductive behaviour; education in particular, residence in a city or suburbs, an opening to the world and the media and the globalisation of mindsets and of reproductive behaviour are no longer a privilege reserved for the Christian community.

The demographic transition also has a negative facet, that of the so-called transition due to poverty. The Lebanon War (1975-1990) and above all the post-war period (1991-2007) have caused pauperisation among all confessions without discrimination, obliging households to limit their wishes for a large family. Shiite households, which a generation ago had 6 to 8 children, must now settle for 2 to 3.

In contrast to a political situation that would seem to indicate the opposite, these demographic convergences are perhaps a presage of political and ideological convergence. If the Shiites are now in line with other Lebanese in their demographic behaviour, this means they share a number of values. In any case, they are closer to other Lebanese, whether Christians, Sunnis or Druze, than to Syrians, who continue to give birth to nearly four children per nuclear family, or to Jewish Israelis, who have three.

Turkey is a candidate for accession to the European Union despite the numerous uncertainties pending resolution: Cyprus, the Armenian and Kurdish questions, human rights and so on. Turkish demography, however, is rarely mentioned among these handicaps. Yet on the demographic level, Turkey remains well anchored in the Middle East. Its fertility rate remains high – the highest among the member states of the Council of Europe – only surpassed by the proto-State of Kosovo. Recently, Turkey was singled out by a reputed US demographer as one of the rare Third World countries where the fertility transition is "stalled." The real causes behind this stall in the fertility transition are unclear. But apart from its fertility rate, Turkey displays other demographic characteristics not very conducive to its integration into Europe. Some are well known, such as female illiteracy, which is significant even among young women, and the predominantly rural society. Little remarked is the fact that girls pay quite a heavy tribute to fertility control: the mortality rate among girls under 5 was abnormally high at the end of the previous decade. On average, girls under 5 years of age died at a rate 20% higher than the biological standard.

TABLE 1 **Several Recent Indicators for Southern Mediterranean Countries**

COUNTRY	Population	Fertility Rate	Peak Fertility Rate		Infant Mortality Rate	Literacy Rate		Urban Population	GDP per inhabitant
	(in millions)	(children per woman)	(children per woman)		(per 1,000 live births)	Boys (15-24 age group)	Girls (15-24 age group)	(%)	$ PPP
	2007	2005		Year	2005	2005	2005	2005	2005
Morocco	32,784	2.43	7.40	1972	40	80.8	60.5	55	4,360
Algeria	33,861	2.57	8.36	1962	32	94.1	86.1	49	6,770
Tunisia	10,312	2.02	7.25	1962	20	96.4	92.2	65	7,900
Libya	6,085	2.85	7.62	1982	24	98.0	97.0	86	9,900
Egypt	76,853	3.36	7.07	1962	33	90.1	78.9	43	4,440
Syria	19,988	3.50	7.80	1982	18	94.3	90.2	50	3,740
Lebanon	3,653	1.69	5.74	1948	17	98.6	98.9	87	5,740
Palestine	2,867	3.70	8.00	1962	21	99.1	98.8	57	979
Israel	6,967	2.84	4.16	1952	4	100.0	99.6	91	25,280
Turkey	75,161	2.35	6.90	1952	39	98.0	93.3	59	8,420

Source: Calculations based on the results of various surveys, namely: World Fertility Survey (WFS), Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), Pan Arab Project for Child Development (PAPCHILD), Pan Arab Project for Family Health (PAPFAM); and on the following publications: United Nations, World Population Prospects as Assessed in 2006, New York, 2007; US Census Bureau, IDB Data Access-Spreadsheet, 2006; Population Reference Bureau, World Population Data Sheet, Washington, 2006; Youssef Courbage, New Demographic Scenarios in the Mediterranean, INED, Paris, 2002.