

Population, Human Development and Human Security in Arab Mediterranean Countries

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What is the relationship between human security and human development in the Arab world? What is the role of the population characteristics of people in Arab Mediterranean countries, referred to in publications of international organizations as Middle East and North Africa, in the process of human development? This paper argues that the lack of human security is a major cause for setbacks in human development, at least in some of the Arab Mediterranean countries. It further argues that if a human development perspective is adopted with respect to the population of these countries, both economic development and human security in the Mediterranean would largely improve.

The focus in the paper on Arab Mediterranean countries finds its rationale in the fact that countries along the Northern and Western shores of the Mediterranean have already attained higher levels of human development and found ways of dealing with threats to their human security. This is not the case in most Arab Mediterranean countries.

Human Security and Human Development in Arab Mediterranean Countries

To start with, human security, defined as a condition in which people are freed from both fear and want, is assumed in this paper to be a basic condition for human development. This latter concept, defined as the process of expanding people's choices, including choices of the economic, social and political struc-

tures that determine these choices, is inconceivable unless a high degree of human security is enjoyed by the majority of the population concerned.

Adapting the definition of human security used in the *Human Development Report* of 1994 to the conditions of Arab countries, the forthcoming issue of the *Arab Human Development Report* has suggested eight dimensions of human security. Freedom from fear entails lessening threats from environmental hazards, foreign military occupation, inter-group conflicts, and repressive measures taken by an unaccountable government as well as aggression by others. Freedom from want requires having access to decent employment, income and social security, adequate food and proper health care. No country is completely immune from threats to human security, but a reasonable degree of human security is necessary for advances along the path of human development.

Arab Mediterranean countries are facing common threats to their human security. So far some threats are unique to some of these countries. Environmental threats are common to almost all of them. Most of them lie within a water stress region, where the per capita share of water is less than 1,000 cubic meters. Desertification has led to the loss of thousands of hectares of cultivable land in many Arab Mediterranean countries. Loss of biological diversity has also been a feature encountered in a number of them. Finally, climate change could plunge vast coastal areas in Tunisia and Egypt under sea water leading to emigration of millions of people from their homes turning them into environmental refugees with corresponding shrinking of agricultural production, difficulties in the provision of food as well as alternative employment and sources of income.

One other dimension is unique to very few countries, namely foreign military occupation. In this part

¹ All figures in this short paper are derived from the *Arab Human Development Report 2008* unless otherwise indicated.

of the Mediterranean region, only the Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza at present are subject to this threat to human security, despite Israel's incomplete withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005. The Israeli occupation is compounded by a host of measures taken by Israeli authorities in both areas, including closure of territories, sequestration of land to establish settlements, restrictions on movement and economic activities and frequent raids by Israeli troops on homes and refugee camps claiming to be fighting Palestinians intent on using arms against Israeli soldiers and settlers. Many Palestinians lose their lives in such raids and incursions, most of whom were not involved in any military action against Israelis as testified by Betselem, the Israeli human rights organization. As a result of these measures, ordinary civilian life, including study in schools, visits to hospitals and economic activities, are very often disrupted, particularly in the Gaza Strip since victory of Hamas in legislative elections in January 2006, and especially following its victory over Fatah in the power struggle in June 2007. The Lebanese have also experienced foreign military occupation at the hands of Israelis several times in the past, including a long occupation of Southern Lebanon between 1982 and 2000. They also went through the trauma of war with Israel in the summer of 2006. Syrian troops were stationed in Lebanon from 1976 until 2005. Some Lebanese considered the Syrian military presence as a foreign occupation despite the fact that other Lebanese welcomed their presence as a source of political and economic support.

Inter-group conflict, although not pervasive in all these societies, had cost thousands, if not tens of thousands, of lives in few of these countries. Lebanon had been the theater of a long civil war which continued from 1975-1991 and was about to erupt again in May 2008 before Arab mediation efforts led to a peaceful end of the confrontation between supporters of the government, including Muslims, mostly Sunnis and Christians, and supporters of the opposition who included Muslims, mostly Shiites and Christians. Identity politics was involved in the civil war and this confrontation surfaced, though in different ways, in this more recent confrontation which lasted from November 2006 until May 2008. Identity politics was also behind other bloody confrontations in Syria involving Kurds, in Gaza in the internal fight between supporters of both Hamas and Fatah and in Algeria between several Islamist groups and the government, particularly between 1992 and 1999.

The executive authority of the government in most of these States is not subject to any kind of effective accountability either through a powerful legislature, independent judiciary power or even a free and articulate public opinion. Opposition figures and nascent civil society organizations often find themselves being harassed, if not thrown into prison.

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Such threats have influenced human development in many ways. In countries which came under foreign military occupation or experienced civil wars, large numbers of people lost their lives, liberties or homes. The longest conflict has been the one that pit Israelis against Palestinians and cost the lives of nearly five thousand Palestinians and five hundred Israelis during the period October 2000-April 2008. At the moment of writing nearly ten thousand Palestinians are still in Israeli prisons. The conflict that has endured since 1948 has forced almost 4.5 million Palestinians to seek refuge in neighboring countries, particularly Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. The Lebanese Civil War is estimated to have caused the deaths of nearly 100,000 people, the internal displacement of 6,000 with 250,000 seeking refuge. As for the Algerian Civil War, it similarly cost the lives of 100,000 people. There are no exact or even approximate figures on numbers of political prisoners in all these countries. Reports of human rights organizations suggest that the highest number is probably in Egyptian prisons. But all these countries are known to have held people in jail because of their political leanings or membership in organizations the government considers of a subversive nature.

Other Arab countries which did not go through such traumatic experiences of civil war or foreign military occupation succeeded in general in reducing levels of poverty and unemployment, and improving nutritional and health levels of the majority of their population. The state of personal security in Arab coun-

tries in general tends to be the best compared to all other developing regions. According to Mustapha K. Nabli (Nabli, et al), levels of unemployment in the MENA region fell in 12 of these countries from 14.3% in 2000 to 10.8% in 2005. The same study found the rate of unemployment in Occupied Palestinian Territories rose from 16.2% in 2000 to 23.5% in 2005 (*Ibid*, p. 37). Figures on poverty were available in the World Bank's World Development Indicators for countries such as Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria. The first two countries managed to reduce the percentage of the poor in their population to a range of 16.7%/12% during the last decade of the 20th century. No recent figures were available for Tunisia where the level of poverty increased slightly from 1990 to 1995 from 7.4% to 7.8%. In Algeria, which witnessed political instability leading to civil war, the percentage of poor increased, during the first half of the 1990s, from 12.2% to 22.6% (World Bank, 2008, 64-66). The undernourished remained at 6/7% of the total population of Arab Mediterranean countries during this period. While Syria, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco succeeded in either keeping the undernourished as a small percentage of total population or even drastically reducing their numbers, there have been slight increases in the number of the undernourished in Jordan and Lebanon (*Ibid*, 106-108). In general, life expectancy at birth jumped six years in all these countries from 64 in 1990 to 70 in 2006 (*Ibid*, 120). Education levels also improved, with the percentage of those who finished primary school moving up from 77% in 1991 to 91% in 2006. Youth literacy advanced by 10 points to reach 81%, and that of girls climbed 17 points to 63% between 1990 and 2005, but with important gender differences (*Ibid*, p. 90).

Arab Population and Human Development

In terms of human development, no Arab Mediterranean country belongs to the lowest level of human development as measured by the United Nations Development Program. Seven Arab countries rank among those that have achieved a high level of human development. They are all Gulf countries, with the exception of Libya which is a Mediterranean country. All other Arab Mediterranean countries rank among countries

with a medium level of human development (UNDP, 2007/2008, 232). Arab government officials view the population factor to be an obstacle slowing down the achievement of higher levels of development in general, pointing out the difficulty of providing education, health care, employment opportunities and decent incomes to a large population relative to resources available in these countries whose population is also growing at a relatively fast rate. Arab population numbered 225.6 million in 1990, grew to 310.7 in 2006 and is projected to increase to 361.9 million by 2015, with a growth rate of 2% between 1990/2005, expected to fall to 1.7% during the period 2006/2015.

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This view is quite mistaken for several reasons. Countries with relatively large populations such as South Korea succeeded in becoming a brilliant success story in terms of economic and political development with a poor endowment of natural resources. Its major source for overcoming hurdles of poverty and under-development was its own people, with their level of education, skills and discipline together with rational, realistic and enlightened economic policies. Secondly, several Arab countries, and not only large petroleum exporters, are rich in terms of their endowment of natural resources.² An increase in population in these countries would contribute to their development as many of them require additional workforce. In fact, several reasons account for the fact that no Arab country has managed to match successes of the newly-industrialized countries in East Asia. These reasons include political instability, foreign intervention but also economic policies which focused exclusively on growth, rather than combining growth with improvement of human development. Arab countries do generally rank well on indicators of income poverty, but they rank lower on indicators of human poverty. Notwithstanding progress in improving edu-

² These countries include Syria and Lebanon. See classification of resource-rich and resource-poor Arab countries in Mustapha Nabli, et al. 2007, p. 3.

cational levels among the people, Arab countries have not attained levels of education and access to knowledge as in other parts of the developing world, particularly East Asia and Latin America. The gender gap in terms of education and employment, to say nothing of political participation, is the largest in Arab countries, compared to all other regions of the developing world. This has been well argued in Arab Human Development Reports. The time has come for Arab governments to view their population as an agent of development, not as a burden on development. Serious efforts are required not only to bridge the knowledge gap between Arab countries and, to begin with, more advanced countries of the Global South, but also to bridge that gap in terms of both political freedom and gender equality. Only then could a genuine Arab renaissance begin.

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Achieving higher levels of human development would contribute to an easing of domestic and regional

tensions. Higher levels of human development would stimulate an increase of domestic and regional investments now, as several Arab countries enjoy an influx of financial surpluses as a result of higher oil prices. This, if pro-poor growth policies are adopted, would decrease levels of unemployment, poverty and malnutrition which gave rise recently to protest actions in several Arab Mediterranean countries. This would also help stem the flow of illegal immigrants who risk their lives in order to find jobs in the black labor market in Europe. This would also broaden young peoples' intellectual horizons and render them less amenable to the discourse of radical opposition movements which call on young people to take up arms against their governments as well as those of foreign countries. In short, human development would be the way to improve human security in Arab countries and in the Mediterranean as a whole, provided foreign military occupation in Palestine and Iraq ends and political stability is restored in these two countries.

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