

The Arab countries' demographic mosaic that Europe must not ignore



Population trends in the Arab world differ wildly, but overall soaring youth unemployment is a serious threat to stability. **Ayman Zohry** explains why this is a problem that Europe's policymakers, too, must address

The Arab world's three main regions have very different demographic and migratory characteristics. The Maghreb, Mashreq and Gulf countries have to grapple with a variety of problems that reflect their particular conditions and histories.

Despite rising growth rates in the Maghreb and the Mashreq, both regions still suffer the consequences of over-population growth over the past four decades. These are reflected in the age structures of their populations and most notably by the increase in the 15-29 age group which represents a "youth bulge." In contrast to the Maghreb and the Mashreq, the countries grouped in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) all suffer from an under-population phenomenon. This has led them to between them invite more than 15m foreign workers needed to maintain their economies, most of whom do not come from the other two regions of the Arab world.

The total population of the Arab world has more than doubled in the last three

decades, surging from 173m people in 1980 to 359.3m this year. The total population of the Middle East and North Africa is projected to reach 428.4m by 2020, with national population sizes varying considerably. Egypt's 84.5m population today accounts for 23.5% of the total Arab population, followed by the Sudan with 43.2m people (12%); Algeria with 35.4m people (9.9%); Morocco with 32.4m people (9%); Iraq with 31.5m people (8.8%); Saudi Arabia with 26.3m people (7.3%) and Yemen with 24.3m people (6.8%).

Egypt is projected to remain the most populous country in the Arab world with a total population of 98.6m by 2020. At the other end of the scale, the Comoros, Bahrain, Djibouti and Qatar will still be the countries with the smallest population sizes, each accounting for less than 0.5% of the Arab region's population.

Yet despite these dramatic increases in population, fertility levels have in fact been declining in the Arab region because of

better female education and the increased participation of women in the labour force. The total fertility rate for Arab countries declined from 6.2 live births per woman in the period 1980-1985 to 3.3 in the period 2005-2010, which compares with an average 2.6 around the world.

The main consequence of this declining fertility trend is the re-shaping of the age structure of the population of Arab countries, with an increase in the proportion of young people. This increase in the "youth bulge" population is a double-edged sword; it could help boost economic growth if Arab governments are able to integrate youths into their development strategies in ways comparable to South East Asian countries in the 1980s and 1990s. Alternatively, it could be an agent of violence and civil war, as in Rwanda and other sub-Saharan countries that lack the means to integrate youths into their economic development.

The youth bulge in the Arab region lies somewhere between these two extremes. Arab Countries have generally missed the opportunity to integrate their youths and find jobs for them, yet so far the phenomenon hasn't resulted in civil wars or major political disorders. Youth unemployment in the Arab region currently stands at about 14%, according to the Arab Labour Organisation but that figure has arguably been kept in check by continuing high rates of migration from Arab countries to the developed world, with

geographical proximity and migration networks making Europe the preferred destination.

The lack of intra-regional integration in the Arab world has resulted in steadily greater pressure on Maghreb and Mashreq governments to create enough jobs to absorb both graduates and secondary school-leavers. There has also been a shift in the GCC countries towards replacing Arab workers with South East Asian workers.

Arab workers made up around 30% of all foreign labour in the GCC countries in the 1970s, but this has since decreased to less than 10%. The GCC countries today host more than 15m foreign workers, with more than 80% of them coming from South East Asia. This shift reflects the fact that South East Asian labour costs less than Arab labour, but in political terms it's a trend that is liable to have serious consequences. Better Arab integration in labour markets would not only help strengthen ties between Arab countries in the three main sub-regions but could also ease migration pressures

from the Mashreq and Maghreb countries towards Europe. Fieldwork in Egypt suggests that a high proportion of youths prefer to migrate to Europe rather than to any of the GCC countries, quite simply because it has become so difficult to secure a work contract in the Gulf. It is also almost impossible to secure a work contract in Europe, but migration networks and migration nevertheless make it comparatively easy to

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enter "fortress Europe". Once there, they quite easily find jobs in the informal sector thanks to assistance from friends and family networks.

Europe cannot, of course, be held responsible for the poor economic conditions or the demographic pressures in the Arab region. Yet to protect its own interests, Europe now needs to help its neighbours cope with these challenges. A major boost in technical assistance and co-operation on training would help to improve the skills base of the labour forces in Arab countries, thus making it more likely that people, and young people especially, can find work locally. And in cases

where Arab job-seekers feel forced to find opportunities abroad, Europe will itself benefit from a larger pool of trained and highly-skilled people able to reinforce its own ageing workforce. Providing regional integration of Arab countries may be thought by some EU policymakers to be beyond the interests of Europe but in fact it will be essential if the EU wishes to ease migration pressures that are an increasingly volatile element in

Europe's internal political debate. □

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