



Youth Bulge Dynamics in the Mediterranean Region: The Geopolitical Implications of Human Capital on Security and Stability

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1 INTRODUCTION: THE YOUTH BULGE THEORY AND THE GEOPOLITICAL VULNERABILITY

The term ‘youth bulge’ is used to define the quantitative and proportional increase in the share of a country’s youth population, conventionally in the 16–25 age bracket or the 16–30 age bracket (Castree et al., 2013).

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According to Gunnar Heinsohn (2003)—who attempted a general interpretative formulation of the theme coined by Gaston Bouthoul (1970), and developed and applied it to around seventy countries—this condition comes about when at least 30% of the population belongs to the 15–29 age bracket, or when at least 20% is in the 15–25 age bracket. Technically, what happens is a swelling in the youth cohorts of a country's population pyramid (Newbold, 2017). The theory asserts that societies characterized by high numbers of young people, scarcity of resources and, in particular, a lack of social positions of prestige for the youth surplus—third, fourth, fifth children—are more likely to experience social disorder and act in a warlike manner in comparison to those societies in which factors of demographic stress are absent.

However, the idea that a large percentage of young people in a society, particularly males, can be the cause of violent conflict is not new. Various scholars (Choucri, 1974; Feuer, 1969; Moller, 1968) have already examined the question of how and to what extent the two phenomena are connected, yet scientific discussion about this possible correlation and the public debate that ensued only became widespread in the 1990s. The term 'youth bulge' was used by Gary Fuller (1995) in his article, 'The Demographic Backdrop to Ethnic Conflict: A Geographic Overview', presented during a conference organized by the CIA—Central Intelligence Agency—the foreign intelligence service of the United States. As well as the publications by Fuller (1995, 2004) and the aforementioned Heinsohn, the work of Jack Goldstone (1999, 2002, 2012), Richard Cincotta (2009, 2013, 2015a, 2017) and Henrik Urdal (2004, 2006, 2008) should also be cited as having contributed to the creation of a convincing theoretical framework.

These authors argue that developing countries undergoing a phase of demographic transition, specifically those moving from high to low fertility and mortality rates, are particularly vulnerable to geopolitical instability and civil conflict. The combined effect of large numbers of young people, rapid growth in the working-age population and lack of employment opportunities within the job market produce a potentially explosive situation. As underlined, 'a large proportion of young adults and a rapid rate of growth in the working-age population tend to exacerbate unemployment, prolong dependency on parents, diminish self-esteem' (Cincotta & Mesquida, 2007: 3).

Although this kind of frustration and competition for jobs does not directly fuel violence, it increases the probability that young unemployed

people will seek social and economic advancement through alternative, extra-legal means (Lam, 2014). 'If you have no other options and not much else going on, the opportunity cost of joining an armed movement may be low' affirms Michelle Gavin, expert in African affairs and member of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations under the Obama administration (Blanton & Kegley, 2020: 399). Not by chance, between 1970 and 1999, eighty percent of civil conflicts took place in countries in which at least sixty percent of the population was below the age of thirty, as ascertained in a report by the PAI, Population Action International (Leahy et al., 2007). Currently, most countries with an abundance of young people are likewise undergoing social unrest, instability, violence and migration.

Scholars tend to argue that these conditions alone do not explain civil conflicts, ethno-religious tension and poverty. Poor political and economic institutions also play a role (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). Others exclude the youth bulge as a determining factor in the eruption of ethnic conflict, whose origins should be looked for in ethnic differences rather than in age brackets (Yar & Miodownik, 2016). However, a certain predisposition towards unstable and conflictual geopolitical situations cannot be excluded in and between States with large youth populations, as argued by Goldstone (2002). Furthermore, youth are often attracted by new ideas and heterodox relations that lead them to challenge older forms of authority. In the Muslim world large populations of idle youth are attracted by Islam as an alternative force for social mobility, proof of which can be found in the ease with which ISIS has been able to recruit young people in these geographical areas (Gouda & Marktanner, 2018; Sommers, 2019).

Contributing factors to the development of a youth bulge include rapid urbanization, heightened expectations among job seekers and environmental stress. The migration model that leads to rapid growth in urbanization plays an important role since cities in the developing world lack the infrastructure, resources and jobs to accommodate a large influx of rural workers. This creates the conditions for black market activities, often led by gangs and paramilitary groups. In terms of employment, an abundance of both low and highly-skilled workers without job opportunities can foment social unrest. The environmental issue, on the other hand, is less immediately evident: rapid population growth often leads

to the degradation of forests and water supplies. This can generate anti-governmental sympathies and create conflicts due to scarcity of resources (Finaz, 2016; Le Billon, 2001, 2005).

It is evident that over and beyond turbulent situations of various intensity and more or less violent conflicts, a youth bulge almost always leads to youth mobility: within country in the case of rapid urbanization, between neighbouring States or, more and more frequently, migration towards countries with better living standards and more developed welfare systems (Kararach, 2014).

Lastly, the question of whether the youth bulge phenomenon is always a negative issue should be addressed. The answer is, not necessarily. In time, with the progression of demographic transition and, above all, given the right investments, large youth populations will potentially become economically productive adults who can ensure the wellbeing of their society. This phenomenon is known as the ‘demographic dividend’ and arises out of the ‘demographic window of opportunity’: the period of time in which the age structure of a country sees a large share of the population enter the potential working age, in comparison to the number of children and old people who are not economically productive. For example, the East Asian economies in rapid growth underwent a youth bulge that only later led to the good economic performance of those countries (Fong, 2016). Earlier still, the economies of Western countries underwent the same transition.

2 THE YOUTH BULGE IN HISTORY: SOME EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO MENA REGION

As Heinsohn explained the Holocaust (2000) and the practice of human sacrifice in ancient Mesopotamia (1992) through demographic change, other authors, as we will see later, have tried to demonstrate the connection between the youth bulge and terrorism (Schomaker, 2013), revealing how the Arab Spring has been triggered by a youth surplus, particularly in males, who, not coincidentally, were won over by the radical Salafi ideologies which supplanted the liberal democratic reformism that had once existed in the area. However, the youth bulge phenomenon and its dangerous effects are evidently not exclusive to the North African and Middle Eastern shores of the Mediterranean.

When a youth bulge reaches significant levels, it becomes the cause of major instability that, in its most extreme forms, can mine democratic equilibriums. Bouthoul (1970) argued that in practice, from a sociological-demographic perspective, all major conflicts have contributed to the elimination of male surplus. The author underlines how every time the demographic pyramid leans notably in favour of the male section of the population—as is the case in many pre-war periods of history—the level of violence increases. According to the originator of this theory, many events in the history of humanity can be attributed to the youth bulge model, among which: the sixteenth century European colonialist expansion that began after nearly a century of progressive demographic growth following the decimation of the European population caused by the Black Death; the rise of Nazism that exploited the 1900–1914 German youth bulge during the crisis of the Weimar Republic; the Marxist revolutions in South America in the 1960s–1980s; and not least, the acts of terrorism that occurred in Europe in the 1970s. In the latter case, the endurance of the democratic institutions on the one hand and the economic recovery that the entire continent was experiencing on the other, prevented the phenomenon from degenerating.

With regards to the youth bulge in North Africa and the Middle East, over the last 100 years the population in these areas has increased tenfold, reaching approximately 1.5 billion people today. This can be explained in the light of demographic data: in 1950 women from these geographical areas on average conceived between 6–8 children, of whom 3–4 were males (Giordano, 2011a). In 1970 those born in 1950 would have been exactly 20-years old, not by chance therefore the first episodes of unrest and resulting violence were recorded in the 20 years between 1970 and 1990.

Lebanon provides us with a classic example of the youth bulge. Between 1975 and 1990 the civil war caused around 150,000 deaths in a population of approximately three million inhabitants. There is little doubt that a consistent share of this social unrest was provoked by the presence of various religious groups who fuelled the disquietude of young males. Despite this, the violence perpetrated in Lebanese territories came to a halt in 1990. The reasons behind this sudden change can be identified also in a drastic demographic drop in the number of male sons: on average, Lebanese women went from having 6 children to only 2; the ‘raw material’ that had given rise to belligerent conflict was no longer readily available (Harb, 2016). However, a sizeable youth population is

still present in Lebanon and provided the basis for the ongoing protests in the country nationwide. Demonstrations, however intergenerational, that began on 17 October 2019 in response to the government's inability to find solutions to an economic crisis that has loomed over the past year (Wimmen, 2019). The protests would have been triggered by the new taxes expected on petrol, tobacco and online calls through operators such as WhatsApp.

Another example is provided by the Iranian youth cohort that has been politically active since the ousting of Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953. The death of three students during the protests against the visit of Vice President Nixon, who was in Iran in the same year to support the Shah after a CIA operation against the chosen government, is still commemorated nationally today. Youth were key players in the 1979 revolution. In the 1980s, they made up the majority of fighters in the eight-year Iran-Iraq war. In the 1990s, they recompensed the post-war debt by entering into politics and influencing the economic and social life of the country. In 1997, their numbers contributed to choosing the reformist president Mohammad Khatami. Their contribution to the 2009 elections saw the so-called 'green revolution' or 'twitter revolution', seriously alter the political debate in Iran. Today, their strength is in their numbers. A 'baby boom' after the revolution that lasted until the 1980s nearly doubled the country's population, which increased from 34 to 63 million in a single decade. Iran is now one of the youngest societies in the world and its demographic progression is surely one of the greatest threats to the status quo (Giordano, 2011b).

Just as interesting in terms of the actual extent of the phenomenon is the Palestinian youth bulge, whose relevance is due to the civil conflict currently in course with Israel (Laborce et al., 2018). It must be said that during conventional wars a drastic drop in the birth rate is the norm—this is due to both the very negative expectations of bringing a child into the world during these periods and the separation of parents, whose male members are at the front—while in conflicts involving civilians the population of the weaker side in the conflict often has higher fertility rates.

This is also the case for example between Turks and Kurds, whose fertility rates vary significantly. Today's fertility rates see Turkish-speaking women give birth to an average of 1.8 children per head, while Kurdish-speaking women give birth to an average of four children per head, double the number of Turkish children. This is one of the most extreme

discrepancies in the overall decline in the Islamic population. On the other hand, Ocalan, former leader of the PKK (*Partiya Karkerén Kurdistan*, separatist Kurdish party), was clearly aware of the strategic importance of the demographic factor when he is said to have suggested that ‘every Kurd must either grab his gun every morning...or grab his wife every night’ (Sizemore, 2010). Indeed, it is the presence of the Kurdish ethnicity in the South East of Turkey that has helped increase women’s fertility rates in comparison to all other areas. Naturally, the difference in fertility rates is also due to differing socio-economic conditions, reflected in lower salaries and lower levels of education in the same Kurdish population (Giordano, 2014).¹

3 A DEMOGRAPHIC EXPLANATION OF YOUTH TURMOIL ON THE SOUTH-EASTERN SHORES OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

While it can be said that environmental geography and economic relations in the Mediterranean world-system—particularly in ancient times—tended to uniform the Mediterranean landscape, the same cannot be said of historical and political events in the various countries that look onto the Mediterranean basin. Events of this kind have, on the contrary, delineated very different trajectories of development on the two shores of the Mediterranean. Despite sharing the same sea and many other common factors, the geographical Euro-Mediterranean² area presents four distinct fractures of different kinds (Bonaverio et al., 2006):

- Demographic: The demographic process on the two shores of the Mediterranean shows two quite different trends, revealing a decisive decline on the northern shores and a higher growth rate in the south-east. According to the most reliable estimations,³ however, the trend in the south-east shows a long-term evolution that converges with that of the northern shore of the Basin.
- Geo-economical: The countries in the north belong to one of the wealthiest areas of the planet and are securely integrated within the international economic system; conversely, the countries in the south-east have low economic and employment growth rates, and many of them remain in the margins of the world economic scenario.

- Cultural: While in the past the cultural differences between the two shores of the Mediterranean were perceived as bringing wellbeing and positive reciprocal influence, today they are mostly perceived as conflictual, particularly in terms of religious identification.
- Political: In the North, the European Union prevails, a group of countries that are more or less integrated as a coalition of stable, democratic states; while on the south-eastern side countries continue to be in conflict with each other (the Israeli-Palestinian issue is a perfect example here) and fail to support rights that are reconcilable with the fundamental rights of Europe.

For the purposes of this contribution, the fracture that most interests us is the demographic one. The spatial distribution of the population in the Mediterranean area is of fundamental importance if we consider that the relations between the two shores have changed radically in terms of numbers and structure over the last 50 years. The northern shores of the Mediterranean have an ageing, static population, while the southern shores have a young population that will continue to grow over coming years, despite the diminishing fertility rate in the south-eastern Mediterranean that will be examined later on.

First, let's take a step backwards and place the Euro-Mediterranean question within the global system. We know that ageing is one of the factors at the basis of the geo-demographic revolution (Giordano, 2017) that has taken place throughout the world over recent years, alongside an increase in population and a reduction in birth rates. The world population is gradually ageing: the transition from 2015 to 2050 show that the percentage of over 65-year olds will continue to grow. For example, in most European countries over 65-year olds will increase from 20–25% of the population, to over 30%. Overall, the world population has developed very unevenly, yet the ageing trend has been confirmed despite a difference in times, speed and intensity.

In fact, while some countries are currently ageing, others are in full growth and others will be the protagonists of the next demographic boom, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. The times and speed of geo-demographic processes are of crucial importance as they change the strategic, political and economic equilibriums in various geographical areas. Wallerstein's world-system, conceived above all as a Marxist critique of capitalism, will continue to be reconfigured by the long-term driving forces that determine the evolution of the world population as

it takes place within and between the various territories on the planet. As demographic transition (the process at the basis of the evolution of the population) develops in a spatially and temporally diversified manner, further imbalance will be added to a planet that is already politically and economically unequal. The order and spatial organization of human activity will be more and more disrupted.

It is true that the world is ageing, but it has also never been as diversified as it is in this specific historical period. In the 1980s, the world was more uniform. Today, some parts of the world have populations that are structurally old, others are ageing, while others are still very young (United Nations Population Fund, 2014). The fact is that the world has never been so full of young people as it is today. The increase in the population over recent decades and the actual percentage of young people today, provides us with this scenario. Currently, the average age in the world is 30-years-old. In some countries, under 30-year-olds represent more than 30% of the total population. Looking at Fig. 1, it may occur to us to match these very young countries to territories of considerable turbulence.

So, is such a young population a problem? Indeed, if we consult the Global Conflict Risk Index (Smidt et al., 2016) created by a European Commission study group, we can see that ‘demographics’ and the ‘youth bulge’ are both listed as political, social and economic risk factors in the ‘Geography and environment’ section.

Figure 2 represents the youth bulge (and children bulge) in percentages for the various countries and geographical areas of the world. The darker colours show the countries in which more than 70% of the population is under 30-years-old. This is the case in many of the countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, where, however, there is also a children-bulge currently in course, with an average age of just 15. This explains why many of the wars in this part of the world are also fought by children and why—considering the other difficulties—this area of the world has yet to experience economic development: there are too many young people. In regional terms, the Middle East and Africa have the highest percentage of young people under 30. However, North Africa and the Middle East also have the highest percentage of real young adults: those between the ages of 20 and 30.

If we now observe Fig. 3,⁴ we can see that the average age in almost all the countries in the MENA region is below the world average of 29. Only three countries have a higher average age, and yet it is still just a

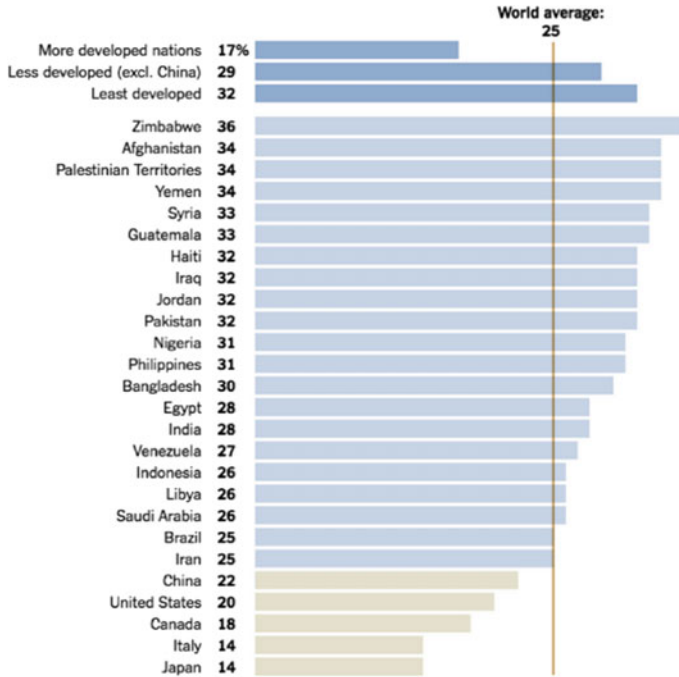


Fig. 1 Under 30 percentages in the world (*Source* Population Reference Bureau by *New York Times* [Sengupta, 2016])

little over 30. Yemen, Palestine and Iraq take up positions at the bottom of the chart with average ages at Sub-Saharan levels, 17/18-years-old. At the same time, we can see that young people correspond to a considerable percentage of the population in the working age. Yemen 42%, Palestine 39 and Jordan 37. Not only do these countries have a lot of young people, potentially these young people could be available as a significant part of the workforce.

As said, these conditions alone do not necessarily produce the negative effects of the youth bulge. Another fundamental factor is represented by limited or no access to the job market. MENA region has shown the highest unemployment rates: between 2008 and 2010, the unemployment rate in the Middle East was at 25.5%, while in North Africa it was at 23. The MENA region does not just have the highest unemployment

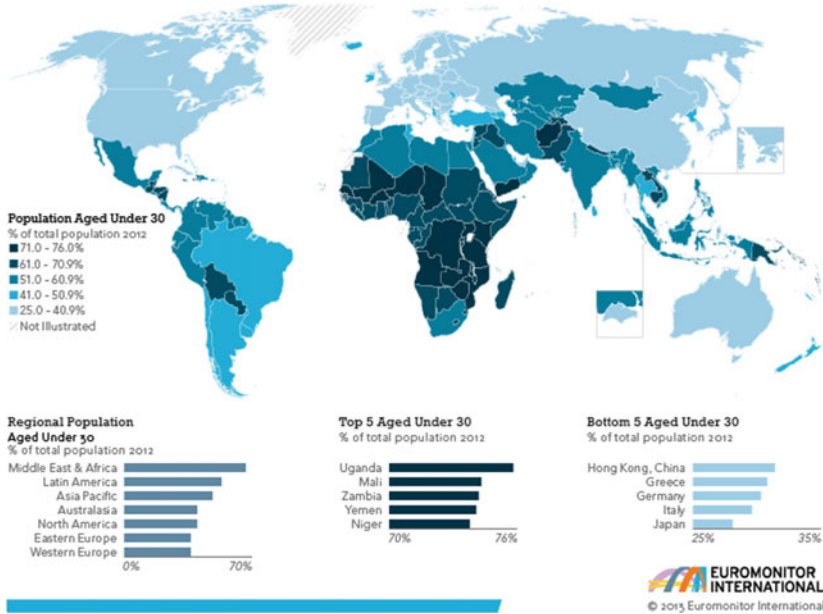


Fig. 2 The youth bulge and children bulge in the world (Source Euromonitor International, 2013)

rates, but also the lowest participation of young people in the job market. There are many young people in other parts of the world, but evidently the MENA region offers less job opportunities to young people.

It should not surprise us then that the 2008 crisis contributed to aggravating youth unemployment, thus providing further motivation for the explosion of the Arab Spring (Fig. 4). Therefore, 5% of the world population has produced 45% of the terrorist attacks in the world, 57.5% of refugees in the world, 68.5% of deaths as a result of conflict in the world and 47% of internally displaced people (Ortiz & Cummins, 2012).

In Jordan the youth bulge is reaching its height, although Algeria's youth bulge is expected to last even longer because its fertility rate began to diminish later. Youth unemployment is still a huge problem in the country as there are very few possibilities for young people, including those with higher qualifications. In Egypt, the youth population is reaching its peak (LaGraffe, 2012), which adds to the difficulties

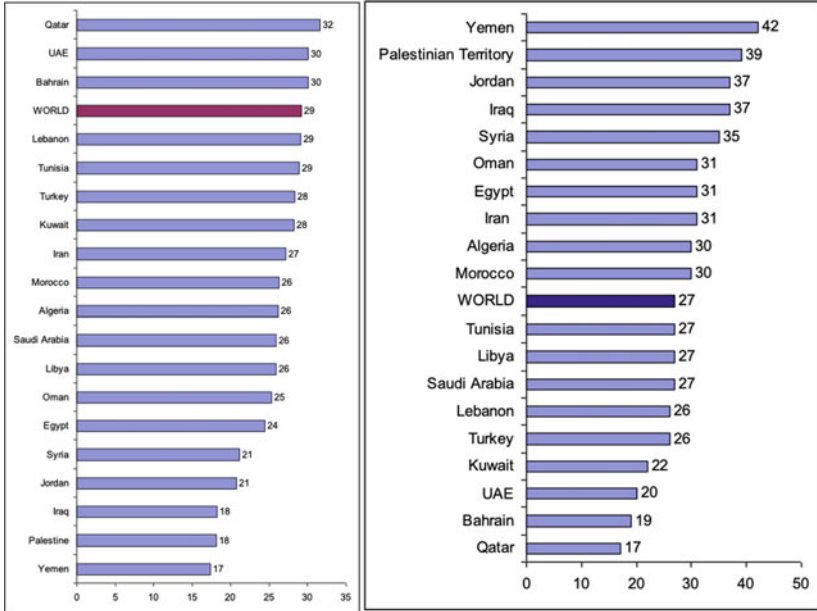


Fig. 3 Median age in the MENA countries (left); Youth percentage of the total working-age population (right) (Source Roudi, F. (2011). *Youth population & employment in the Middle East & North Africa: Opportunity or challenge*. Population Reference Bureau)

of high unemployment rates (Ghafar, 2016). A democratic Egypt could use this population to its advantage, as long as it managed to insert more young people into the job market.

It is also interesting to consider the two countries Algeria and Tunisia, both of which are going through a phase of advanced demographic transition in the area (Haghighat, 2018). The youth population in Algeria is reaching its peak and fertility rates are diminishing. Youth unemployment is still high, although oil revenue has contributed to creating more stable job opportunities in the field (Cincotta, 2015c).

The youth bulge in Tunisia is less dramatic because fertility rates began to diminish earlier than in the rest of the region. A democratic Tunisia could represent a favourable moment for development, if the majority of people of working age are able to find work. The terrorist attacks, for

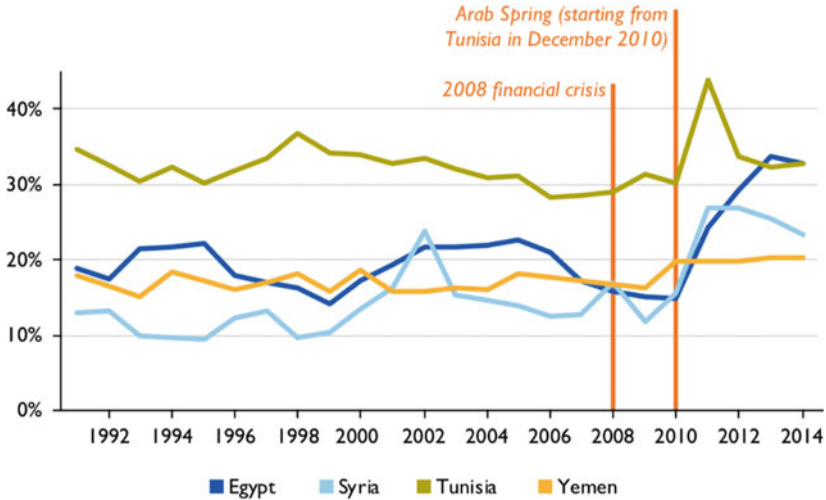


Fig. 4 Youth unemployment in some MENA countries (Source Paasonen, K., & Urdal, H. (2016). *Youth bulges, exclusion and instability: The role of youth in the Arab Spring*. Peace Research Institute Oslo)

which the Islamic State (al-Dawla al-Islāmiyya) claimed responsibility, on the beaches and at the National Bard Museum, were aimed not so much at Western tourists as at creating insecurity in the Tunisian population and above all, weakening the tourist industry in order to provoke potentially unemployed youths into enlisting in the terrorist organization, also thanks to religious callings.

What can we foresee for the future? The projections of the United Nations tell us that the population of the south-eastern Mediterranean has grown more than that of the European Union and that it will continue to do so for several years. The trend in the female Arab population—especially those who are urbanized and educated—is to have less children. If in the 1950s a woman’s average fertility rate was around 6–7 children, today it is only slightly above 2, with a strong tendency to converge with the European reproductive model (Kronfol, 2011).

Life expectancy on the south-eastern coast of the Mediterranean is more and more similar to European life expectancy, and has improved dramatically since the 1950s, when expectancy was at just 45-years-old, to reach over 70-years-old today (Matthijs et al., 2015; Cincotta, 2015b).

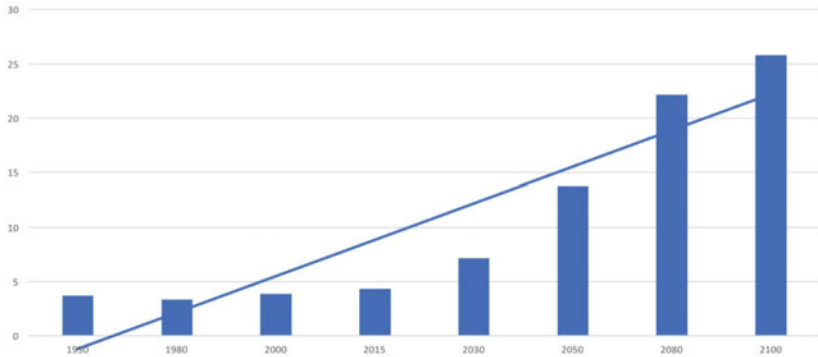


Fig. 5 Percentage of over-65 in MENA region, 1950–2100 (Source United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2017). *World population prospects: The 2017 revision*. UNDESA)

This helps us understand two aspects: the percentage of over 65-year-olds in the MENA region will increase (Fig. 5), with differences between countries but with the same impact as in Europe; the youth bulge will gradually diminish (Fig. 6) due to both the ageing of the population and the new generations who, as we have seen, no longer have the same high fertility rates as before.

The two trends characterize ageing as an irreversible phenomenon—an aspect that we find harder to accept—because the total growth and the percentage of elderly people in many contemporary societies is a direct consequence of the fact that people, on average, live longer and have less children than in previous eras. This means an induced reduction in the number of fertile people and therefore the obvious incapacity of the system to reproduce itself. Change in reproductive behaviour, even if radical, would not lead to changes in the structure of the population, except on a very long-term basis.

What is happening in the MENA region—following the route taken by developed countries and that currently being taken by developing countries—is a period of demographic transition from an ‘ancient’ regime characterized by high birth and death rates to a ‘modern’ regime with low birth and death rates. The same cannot be said of Sub-Saharan Africa, which is still in the early phases of demographic transition and provides us with different challenges for the future.

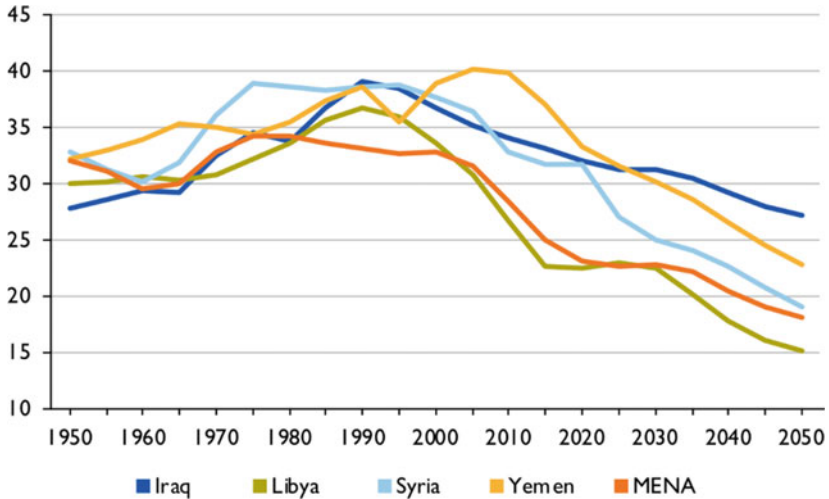


Fig. 6 Youth bulge in some countries of the MENA region, 1950–2050 (Source Paasonen [2016])

4 CONCLUSION: THE GEO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHALLENGES OF THE FUTURE

If the beginning of the century presented us with a demographic curve of prevailing instability in the MENA region, we should soon be worried about the situation represented in Sub-Saharan Africa. What has happened over recent years in the Mediterranean in terms of migration, conflict and disorder, could happen in even more virulent terms in Sub-Saharan Africa. These potential threats should be dealt with well in advance, because the geographic obstacles represented by the Sahara and the Mediterranean might well not be enough.

Demography, however, provides us with favourable conditions as well as potentially dangerous ones, such as the demographic window of opportunity. Demographic transition is decisive: it is the moment in which the number of children begins to diminish but the population still hasn't begun to age. For this reason, the active population extends to more than 65% of the total. This is a happy period that lasts roughly 30 years. It offers undoubted advantages, for example: a larger work force, a smaller number of children thus freeing women from the role of the carer,

allowing them to be available for work; this means more savings for investment and improved human capital due to investments in training and education.

In fact, the period known as the ‘glorious thirties’—between 1945 and 1975—was Europe’s demographic window of opportunity and economic development (the ‘economic miracle’ in Italy in the 1950s and 1960s is a good example), just as China is experiencing its window of opportunity today. The window of opportunity in Sub-Saharan Africa will not occur until around 2050, when all today’s children will be the adults of tomorrow.

However, in this case it is important not to be determinist. Demography offers moments of crisis and opportunity. It provides a necessary context, but it is not enough on its own. It is important not to forget other factors such as the growing education of the population, the widespread use of new technologies, the unemployment issue, endemic corruption and the continuing violation of human rights. As in the case of the youth bulge, specific contextual conditions are necessary for these demographic events to manifest themselves positively or negatively through the window of opportunity. Good policies in health, education, economics and governance are all needed to be able to take advantage of the demographic dividend.

The future wellbeing of the world population will depend on this. Not to foresee and provide for this would expose the world to the dangers inherent in the new demographic tsunami that is redrawing the planet. Our planet will have to contemplate the equilibrium between those countries in demographic growth and those in demographic depression, as well as the relationship between young countries and old countries or ageing countries, thus redefining centres and suburbs on a geo-demographic basis. Much will depend on the way in which and the speed with which we react. The reaction will require multi-scale governance with an internationally coordinated response and policies suitable to specific territories that take into consideration past histories, as well as demonstrating far-sightedness for the future.

NOTES

1. Turning to Europe, the same considerations can be made for the civil conflict between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. It is well known that Northern Ireland is divided into two culturally diverse communities, the Unionists (pro United Kingdom) and the Republicans (pro Republic of Ireland). Both are often described on the basis of religious identification: The Unionists are mainly Christian-Protestant (predominantly Presbyterian), while the Republicans are mainly Christian-Roman Catholic. Contrary to popular belief, however, not all Catholics are Republican and not all Protestants are Unionist. Indeed, the high fertility rates in the area during the period of conflict—and therefore the high levels of young people—were not so much due to religious beliefs, but to a sense of belonging and the will to prevail. These contending motivations evidently flattened out with the 1998 Peace Agreement and since then Northern Irish fertility rates, although still some of the highest in Europe, have begun to ‘normalize’ (Goldstone et al., 2012).
2. The evident semantic fracture provides an initial indication of the gap between the European and the North African, Middle Eastern shores.
3. UN Population Division: <https://population.un.org/wpp/>; US Census Bureau International Database: <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/international-programs/about/idb.html>; OECD Population Data: <https://data.oecd.org/pop/population.htm>
4. A methodological note: some of the figures here take into consideration the period from 2008 to 2011. This is intentional in order to understand what the demographic and economic conditions were before the outbreak of the Arab Spring and other geopolitical or conflicting events.

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