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The Youth Bulge in Egypt: An Intersection of Demographics, Security, and the Arab Spring

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Abstract

During the Arab Spring, Egyptians revolted against decades of poor governance and failed institutions. A wide range of grievances contributed to the eventual fall of the Mubarak regime, and most of these grievances were influenced by the demographic composition of the Egyptian population. This paper argues that the youth bulge in Egypt played a major role in the political transition and as such serves as the prime example of the intersection of demographics, security, and the Arab Spring.

Introduction

From continent to continent and across race and religion, the "demographic" of insurgency, ethnic conflict, terrorism, and state-sponsored violence holds constant. The vast majority of recruits are young men, most of them out of school and out of work. It is a formula that hardly varies, whether in the scattered hideouts of Al Qaeda, on the backstreets of Baghdad or Port-au-Prince, or in the rugged mountains of Macedonia, Chechnya, Afghanistan, or eastern Colombia.

—Richard Cincotta²

Weeks of high-profile protests in downtown Cairo resulted in the ousting of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. Academics and policymakers put forth theories on the causes of this phenomenon that quickly swept across the Middle East. Did the blame lie with authoritarian

regimes under which oppressed people had simply had enough? Was it sparked by the increasing price of wheat?³ While the ultimate cause of the unrest that led to Mubarak's demise is likely a combination of many factors, one thing is certain—the demographics of Egypt and throughout the region have played an important role in the widespread instability. With this in mind, communities, countries, regional organizations, and the international community must enact, monitor, and assess policies that provide youth with "decent work" and social engagement in order to avert future crises.

This article aims to provide a better understanding of the intersection of demographics and security in the contemporary context by identifying and clarifying the existing arguments in the literature. It then examines a case study of Egypt, one of the countries at the center of the "Arab Spring," and the most relevant among these countries to Middle East security and strategic stability in the overall region. This paper argues that the youth bulge in Egypt played a major role in the political transition and as such serves as the prime example of the intersection of demographics, security, and the Arab Spring.

Parameters

This article examines the relationship between demographic factors and security in the context of the Arab Spring. In essence, it analyzes how demographic factors interact with causes of insecurity and what can be done to mitigate their negative effects. It does so by first discussing the extent to which demographic factors can affect security. The article considers a number of conditions, such as unemployment and poverty, as intervening variables between demography and security. Demographics can exacerbate conditions such as unemployment or poverty, resulting in a range of different security issues.

The majority of the relevant literature defines "youth" as being between ages fifteen and twenty-four and this article uses the same definition. Furthermore, this article contends that traditional perceptions of unemployment—defined as people lacking any sort of employment—as a cause of insecurity can be misleading in much of the developing world. Unemployment alone does not paint a complete picture of the social and demographic situation in a country. Thus, the definition of an unemployed person used throughout the article will include people in a number of other situations, such as those who are underemployed, the working poor,

people no longer looking for work, and the disenfranchised—all critical segments of the population when examining the relationship between demographics and security.

Literature Review

A number of root causes of conflict and instability are identified in international security literature. These include, but are not limited to, unemployment, poverty, social unrest, urbanization, and declining economic conditions. Demographics interact with these often preexisting conditions and aggravate them, acting as a "force multiplier" for the drivers of conflict. In this way, demographics serve as an intervening variable. Unemployment and poverty exist in society regardless of a country's demographic structure; however, the negative effects of the aforementioned variables on security are more dramatic in cases where a demographic challenge is present.

Unemployment

The youth bulge is a demographic phenomenon strongly connected to security challenges. As stated above, youth bulges are defined as large cohorts between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four, expressed as a percentage of the total population.⁴ In many countries a youth bulge can result in a shortage of jobs. As population growth exceeds economic growth, the problem becomes more acute. At present, "[h]alf of the world's population is under the age of 24 years, with currently 1.2 billion young people (15–24 years) participating as the largest cohort ever entering the transition to adult status, which usually includes the desire for meaningful employment opportunities."⁵ Sadly, these opportunities are grossly lacking; as a percentage of total global unemployment, youth account for 40 percent, yet their share of the working-age population is only 25 percent.

Compared to adults, youth are approximately three times as likely to be unemployed.⁶ This trend is likely to continue, if not worsen, given the demographic challenges facing the planet. Developing countries are also home to nine out of ten children who are under the age of fifteen, and maintain the world's highest birthrates.⁷ Furthermore, it is estimated that:

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"Over 70 percent of the world's population growth between now and 2050 will occur in 24 countries, all of which are classified by the World Bank as low income or lower-middle income, with an average per capita income of under \$3,855 in 2008."⁸

The intersection of these phenomena may aggravate the various causes of poverty, increasing the likelihood of civil conflict. Experts across the field suggest that it may be necessary to monitor the variables that contribute to high birth rates, such as the level of female education, to curtail this trend in the future.⁹

Poverty

Youth bulges, and the ensuing unemployment, result in an increased percentage of people living in poverty. Young people make up almost 60 percent of the poor in the world.¹⁰ One of the seminal works on this topic finds that an increase of 1 percent in youth population within a country results in a 4 percent increase in the likelihood of conflict.¹¹ Furthermore,

"When youth make up more than 35 percent of the adult population, which is evident in many developing countries, the risk of armed conflict is 150 percent higher than in countries with an age structure similar to most developed countries."¹²

Poverty contributes to nearly all the security shortcomings discussed in this paper.^{13, 14} In fact, experts argue that it may play an even more prominent role relative to other contributors of instability. Development economist Paul Collier presents evidence that weak economic growth and low income contribute to instability far more than any ethnic disputes. Indeed, Collier finds ethnic diversity is inversely related to insecurity.¹⁵

Social Unrest

Youth unemployment in extremis causes feelings of alienation from society and political processes, giving rise to social unrest.¹⁶ Dr. Henrik Urdal of the Peace Research Institute of Oslo asserts that "generally it has been observed that young males are the main protagonists of criminal as well as political violence."¹⁷ Worldwide, young men are responsible for three quarters of violent crimes.¹⁸ Criminal activity is an area in which both greed and grievance explanations are valid. Collier and Urdal agree that a large youth population lowers the recruitment cost for potential rebel and criminal gang leaders as such ventures become more enticing to the unemployed. Similarly, a large population of college-educated young men who have high expectations are more likely to become radicalized. Fareed

Zakaria points out that in most Arab countries more than half of the population is less than twenty-five years of age. Using historical precedent, he argues, "France went through a youth bulge just before the French revolution, as did Iran before its 1979 revolution. In the Arab world, this revolution has taken the form of an Islamic resurgence."¹⁹ Simply put, large, unemployed, poor youth populations have a negative effect on security and are more likely to be involved in criminal activity, aggravating social unrest. Further, there is less of an opportunity cost for these youthful populations to be involved in prolonged protest activities.

Not only does the mere presence of a youth bulge matter to security, but a number of other demographic metrics are relevant as well. The size of the specific youth bulge cohort plays a role. According to Easterlin's relative cohort size theory, "other things constant, the economic and social fortunes of a cohort (those born in a given year) tend to vary inversely with its relative size."²⁰ Essentially, Easterlin argues, larger cohorts within a youth bulge will suffer more difficult conditions as increased competition and "crowding mechanisms" affect different aspects of social life, such as school or the labor market. Large youth cohorts that are unable to find decent work will often move into the illegal and illicit economy.

Declining Economic Conditions

Additionally, there are a number of economic arguments relating to demographics and security. Dr. Jack Goldstone of George Mason University argues that "twenty-first century international security will depend less on how many people inhabit the world than on how the global population is composed and distributed."²¹ The most striking example of this trend is found in smaller developing countries, located throughout the Middle East and Africa, that average between 2.5 and 4.7 percent growth. With the United States, Europe and other Western countries growing at a much slower pace, and even shrinking in some cases, the relative demographic weight of the West is in decline. It is projected that "the relative demographic weight of the world's developed countries will drop by nearly 25 percent" in the next forty years.²²

Although this may have classic balance-of-power implications for the realist, most experts in this school of thought are concerned with economic power. As populations decline, either absolutely or relatively, their economic clout in the form of percentage of global gross domestic product (GDP) declines as well. As Dr. Goldstone reiterates, "The proportion of global GDP produced by Europe, the United States, and Canada fell from 68 percent in 1950 to 47 percent in 2003 and will decline even more steeply in the future."²³

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Defense and national security policy is, on some level, a function of the economic strength of a state. This being the case Dr. Goldstone, in a report from the Environmental Change and Security Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, asserts:

"The military capacities of large developing countries will increase, while the ability of rich nations to put 'boots on the ground' in conflict zones will diminish. Managing conflicts involving developing countries will become more difficult, and will put more of a strain on developed countries' economies, than before."²⁴

The particular stage along the demographic transition in which that country is situated is another important demographic metric. A country in one of the earlier stages of development will consistently have very high birth and death rates. High birth rates over time will cause large cohorts of youth to follow one after the other, thereby creating, or increasing the size of, a youth bulge in the population. This, in turn, increases the dependency ratio, or the ratio of non-workers to workers within a population. A higher dependency ratio is representative of the portion of the population not earning income, participating in the tax base, or creating economic growth. There is further concern that within this non-working population, more require social services, are unable to contribute to the family unit, and thereby drag down household income levels.

Further exacerbating the economic problem is the "graying" of populations in the West. Not only will the growth of Western populations be outpaced by the growth of developing nations, but Western countries will grow older. The working population in Western countries will shrink, decreasing overall productivity, and the elderly, retired populations will increase. This increases the dependency ratio as discussed above, albeit on the other end of the age spectrum.

Urbanization

In academic and policy circles alike, the threat of failed states is at the top of the agenda. Just as important for security, however, is the threat of failed cities.²⁵ With the general shift from agricultural jobs toward those in the manufacturing and service industries, youth, as well as populations in general, are moving from rural to urban areas at an alarming rate. A National Intelligence Council study, *Global Trends 2015: A Dialogue About the Future with Nongovernment Experts*, supplemented with data gathered by research centers including the United Nations Population Division, estimates that the world population will total 7.2 billion by 2015.

This represents approximately an 18 percent increase over the past fifteen years. Furthermore, the study concludes that "ninety-five percent of the growth will take place in 'emerging' countries, and nearly all projected population growth will occur in rapidly expanding urban areas."²⁶

Overcrowding in urban centers not only causes but exacerbates problems and inequalities within society as municipalities outgrow their governing capacities. Naval War College professors P.H. Liotta and James F. Miskel claim, "many of the burgeoning cities of the future may well become Petri dishes of instability, disease, and terrorism."²⁷ Furthermore, in a globalized world it is easier for individuals or groups to export this instability with regional and international security implications. Richard Cincotta of Population Action International also argues that these two demographic factors, urbanization and youth bulges, are interrelated. He believes that "urban areas—particularly those in Asia—are increasingly the principal locus of ethnic and religious conflict."²⁸

Youth Bulges and Interstate Conflict

Although intrastate conflict is usually the prominent concern arising from youth bulges, they may also inadvertently place countries at a higher risk of interstate conflict. The case study in this article exemplifies intrastate conflict. It is necessary, however, to understand all aspects of the youth bulge's role in conflict and how the youth bulge may play a role, in general, in shaping the post-revolution Middle East.

First, many developing countries are tempted to enlist large numbers of youth to keep unemployment at an acceptable level and to imbue the youth with a sense of nationalist pride. This, however, has the unintended effect of altering the regional military balance, possibly leading to regional instability.²⁹ Historians further argue that youth bulges enabled countries in early modern and modern Europe to "wrest territory from their continental neighbors and build overseas empires."³⁰ Additionally, increasing competition for resources within the region can be a further point of contention between states.

Case Study: Egypt

The recent upheavals in the Middle East, most notably the Egyptian Revolution, bring demographic factors to the fore. The primary drivers that led to instability and eventually the Egyptian revolt may be debated, but demographics undeniably played a prominent role.

Any discussion of these events must first put the demography of Egypt into context. The population of Middle Eastern countries has more than quadrupled over the past sixty years. According to the United Nations Population Division, in 1950 the combined population of all Middle Eastern countries was 60.2 million, compared with the more than 271 million in 2005. Its percentage of the total world population has doubled from 2.5 to 5 percent over that same time period.³¹ Even more stunning are the figures for Egypt itself: it has grown over 378 percent from 1950 to the present, beginning at 21.5 million inhabitants and standing currently at over 81 million.³²

Put another way, the population of Egypt today has 20 million more people than the entire Middle East did in 1950. On a municipal level, Cairo is the most populous metropolitan area on the African continent, and one of the most densely populated cities in the world. The reason Tahrir Square functioned as the heartbeat of the revolution was, in part, because many of the demographic stress factors were exacerbated in the overcrowded Cairo metropolitan area. Furthermore, the population is projected to grow by approximately 50 percent over the next half century.

As discussed above, it is not only the total size of the population, but its make-up, that can cause societal demographic stress. The Middle East is endowed with one of the youngest populations in the world; the population under the age of fifteen is over 33 percent. Most individual nations in the region have youth cohorts under the age of twenty-four that account for over half of their population. Egypt is no different, with over 54 percent of its population making up the under-twenty-four demographic. Adding to the demographic warning signs are the 24 million Egyptians who are between the ages of fifteen and twenty-nine, also referred to in the demographic security field as "fighting age."³³

The Middle East claims one of the highest unemployment rates in the world. Additionally, the level of social capacity required to fulfill the needs of new generations is sorely lacking. Youth populations experiencing a combination of economic hardship, too few political venues for voicing grievances, and an inundation of a revolutionary ideology are more likely to cause political instability.³⁴ As of 2010 the Egyptian unemployment rate was reportedly 9.7 percent, although this does not include the underemployed.³⁵

The result of the aforementioned demographic dynamics is now history. Hosni Mubarak resigned under great pressure brought on by the protests and demonstrations of millions in Tahrir Square that brought Egypt's economy to a halt. These demonstrations, which lasted for weeks, were

due to a ripe population; one that was young, unemployed or underemployed, and disaffected, which made them much easier to mobilize. While overall unemployment rates were not particularly alarming, there was a concentration of unemployment among college-educated youth. Egypt has a median age of twenty-four and a government that provides free higher education. About 25 percent of Egypt's population is college educated. Close to 87 percent of the unemployed in Egypt are between the ages of fifteen and twenty-nine, with unemployment among Egyptian college graduates being ten times higher than those who did not go to college.³⁶ The International Organization for Migration recently completed a study confirming these conditions. It found that the most significant push factor for young Egyptians who wish to migrate is a lack of employment opportunities. Furthermore, employment troubles were exacerbated by events during the Egyptian revolution.³⁷

Some argue that the recent increase in the cost of wheat in Egypt was a contributing factor. While this is true, it is important to understand that it was an increase in the costs for food and fuel, in conjunction with demographic challenges, that ignited the situation. As discussed earlier, Egypt's demographic situation acted as a force multiplier for some already destabilizing conditions. A brief released by the United States Institute of Peace aptly describes the situation:

"Egyptians saw their real incomes severely eroded in the face of uncontrollable price hikes of basic necessities. The recent global recession made things much worse for many Egyptians, and the population living in poverty rose precipitously. These factors combined to help push Egypt's restless population over the tipping point—many felt that they had little more to lose...[i]n the end, Egypt's youth were buffeted by the 'perfect storm.' Unfair parliamentary elections and the wave of political unrest in Tunisia may have lit the fuse but underlying socioeconomic inequities fuelled continued unrest."³⁸

Interestingly, the same segment of the population that is considered to be the youth bulge has a mastery of technology unparalleled by any generation that has come before it. The use of social media to organize the youth was paramount in bringing about regime change in Egypt, and in protests across the Middle East writ large. Without the widespread use of social media, for example, knowledge and outrage over the self-immolation of the twenty-six-year-old man in Tunisia who was unable to support his family may have been less widespread. Without the use of social media in Egypt in particular, the scale of protests might have been curbed by the blackout of state-controlled media. These factors, along with the others

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mentioned throughout this article, demonstrate how demographics in general, and the youth bulge in particular, affected regime change in Egypt.

Implications—Turning the "New Population Bomb" into the "Demographic Dividend"

The literature review and case study presented in this article highlight a number of policy implications and recommendations for governments in the Middle East. Demographic trends in general and youth bulges in particular can have enormous impact on state security and ultimately regime stability, as witnessed in the Middle East during the Arab Spring.

Many responses to demographic challenges, whether from governments or international organizations, focus on the training and education of the young unemployed. This trend is due to the risks created by leaving these groups idle. Solutions must be tailored to the specific problems of the youth demographic. For instance, the new Egyptian government could adopt the idea of economists Raymond Gilpin, Amal Kandeel, and Paul Sullivan of the United States Institute of Peace, who state that Egypt should "introduce initiatives that would help align Egypt's education and training institutions with the realities and requirements of a vibrant economy. This would make the workforce more prepared for the job market and encourage much-needed investment."³⁹ By doing this, the education system could ensure that the jobs it is preparing its graduates for coincide with the market demand for labor. In turn, better cooperation between government and private industry is in order. The private sector must do a better job of informing the government about available jobs, as well as what skill sets are in high demand.

Knowing where to focus youth programs is paramount. It is also important for policymakers and practitioners formulating and developing policy in or for the Middle East to be mindful of the unemployment "multiplier effects" on instability that are associated with youth bulges. Policymakers must not neglect to consider the underemployed and the working poor; these groups are just as vulnerable as the fully unemployed. This article highlights a youth bulge as a critical national security indicator, and one where the proper international resources can have an impact far beyond their monetary value. As the United States reconsiders its military aid and assistance package to the Egyptian people, for example, youth unemployment should be at the top of policymakers' lists.

Finally, some demographic trends, such as the youth bulge, can be beneficial once a country reaches a certain point in demographic transition where birth and death rates begin to decline. Once this demographic progression begins, Dr. Urdal suggests that "countries may experience a window of opportunity for economic development, often called a 'demographic dividend,' largely flowing from increased savings as the relative number of dependents decreases."⁴⁰ In order to reach this stage in demographic transition, it will be necessary to keep the youth as employed and socially engaged as possible in order to reap the benefits and keep Egypt from falling into conflict.

Egypt is demographically on track to reap the benefits of a demographic dividend, as described above, and is approaching the zenith of its youth bulge. Recently, the trajectory of the population aged fifteen to twenty-nine has begun to level off. However, note Ragui Assaad and Jayshree Bajoria of the Council on Foreign Relations, "that group of young people is making its way into the labor market right now and putting a lot of pressure in the form of unemployment and informalization of the labor market as they get poor jobs."⁴¹

The stage of a country's youth bulge along the demographic transition continuum is an important factor in determining when that country will experience demographic dividends, those being the societal benefits arising from the favorable change in the structure of the population. As stated above, a youth bulge can pay "demographic dividends" once the birth and death rates even out, resulting in a larger percentage of the population being economically productive in comparison to the amount that is dependent. Birth rates are also directly correlated to the level of education attained by women in society. For instance, the longer a girl stays in school, and the higher education level she attains, the fewer children she will have. Therefore, focusing on improvements in education for girls may shift Egypt and similarly situated countries in a positive direction in terms of getting to the next stage of the demographic transition. Moreover, increased access to health services, family planning, and sex education can contribute to demographic stability.⁴² While promising, these are especially challenging reforms in some of the more conservative Muslim societies due to the adherence by governments to outdated cultural norms. Health services also mitigate, and help prevent, the negative effects of HIV in developing countries, as HIV generally causes deaths in the middle-aged working population, contributing to a large youth bulge by changing, among other things, the proportional makeup of society.

Conclusion

Security concerns resulting from, or exacerbated by, youth bulges and related demographic factors will not disappear any time soon. Approximately one-third of countries remain in the early stages of the demographic transition, increasing their likelihood of civil conflict well into the future.⁴³ This phenomenon poses a challenge not only for the countries in which they occur, but throughout the international system. Many critics and experts are curious as to why the U.S. government and the U.S. intelligence community failed to predict the recent events in the Arab world. Perhaps one reason is an underestimation of the power of demographics. Realizing the impact of these trends on other factors of stability, such as unemployment and poverty, is paramount for creating effective policies. Governments everywhere must address issues of age, or else deal with the consequences of ignoring them.

About the Author

Daniel LaGraffe is a Presidential Management Fellow in the Office of the Secretary of Defense and is on assignment to the Defense Plans Division of the Office of the Defense Advisor at the United States Mission to NATO. He holds an MA in Security Policy Studies from the Elliott School of International Affairs at The George Washington University and a BA in Political Science from Arizona State University. Previously, Daniel LaGraffe worked as an intelligence analyst at Sotera Defense Solutions and served in the United States Marine Corps.

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