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in the MENA Region: Understanding the
new security environment

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*Cover picture: Millions of people had to flee their homes as a result of escalation of conflict and violence.
Photo: Syrian Arab Red Crescent Society*

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Demographic and migration challenges in the MENA Region: Understanding the new security environment

"A Mediterranean fragmented into a series of inter-connected geopolitical as well as domestic crises which involve international and regional powers and local, national as well as subnational actors through new proxy wars"

During the last decades the Mediterranean has turned into one of the main geopolitical hotspots where new economic, military and ideological struggles are underway. The fragile regional security architecture seems governed by a “Hobbesian” state of relations. Many drivers of instability and turmoil have arisen, pushing the region into a situation of permanent tension. A Mediterranean fragmented into a series of inter-connected geopolitical as well as domestic crises which involve international and regional powers and local, national as well as subnational actors through new proxy wars. The roots of this instability are very complex and dependent on the history and social fabric of this region.

The MENA region has experienced a number of significant developments in the last decade. From the Arab Spring uprisings in 2010-2011 to the decline in oil prices in 2014-2016, from the exposure to geopolitical instability, conflict, increased displacement and migration, and the resurgence of protests in some societies, to the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis: young people have grown up in a context of high uncertainty and instability (Muasher and Yahya, 2020). The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated existing challenges for young people across the region and global and regional trends such as climate change, digitalisation and migratory pressures raise new questions about the opportunities available for young people and future generations.

The security environment in the Middle East and Africa is a living laboratory for highlighting and analyzing changes in the concept and nature of security. Old (territorial conflicts, civil wars) and new (pandemics, climate change, extremism) threats meet in these two subsystems, with the result that instability and insecurity are the main characteristics of these regions. Africa's security environment is perhaps the most complex in the world, as it is the result of the interdependence of global pressures (population boom, extreme urbanisation, energy insecurity, environmental degradation) and local operations (lack of structures and organisation, religious radicalism, state-citizen conflict) (Hutchful, 1998). States, which are structured differently from their European counterparts, are pressured and in many cases fail resulting in entire countries turning into black holes and power passing to non-state groups and entities (tribes, warlords, criminal and terrorist organizations) (Gaub, 2021).

"The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated existing challenges for young people across the region and global and regional trends such as climate change, digitalisation and migratory pressures raise new questions about the opportunities available for young people and future generations. "

Current patterns of politics, religion, and ideology are shaped by large racial, ethnic, and regional differences within a given state. (Cordesman-Toukan, 2016). An examination of the broader demographic, economic, and security trends in the MENA region shows how critical these factors are in shaping social anger and discontent. They also indicate the key role of the quality of governance, internal security systems, justice, and social progress and change in shaping and addressing the problems of each state.

The causes of this turmoil are deep, complex, and include structural problems in governance, demographics and the economy. Most states in the region have no real political parties or pluralistic structures, while only monarchies have a history of political legitimation. There is no clear basis for representative governance, no experience of political compromise and functional elections, and no pattern of effective governance coupled with economic progress and social evolution for further development. Ethnic and religious issues are often divisive and have been suppressed for decades. Justice systems are weak and/or corrupt, religious extremism fuels radicalization and social unrest, and security forces are more often part of the problem (Cordesman, 2017).



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Demographics and Migration Situation

The demographic situation and the migration trends in the MENA region are two very important factors that are affecting the general situation with specific links to European security. The Arab Development Report warned almost a decade ago that demographic pressures, failures in economic growth and the combination of challenges related to income distribution, deep problems of corruption, nepotism and discrimination were exacerbating pre-existing instability regarding the lack of freedom and threaten regional stability creating significant challenges in some countries (UNDP, 2011).

Furthermore, it is important to highlight some structural factors that are heavily affecting migration issues:

1. Natural disasters, with floods and droughts being the two main forms of disasters.
2. Overpopulation, with the population having more than doubled from 1974 levels and growing continuously and rapidly.
3. Conflicts, with the region having a long history of violent armed conflicts, intra-state, inter-state and regional.
4. Forced Displacement, with prolonged instability driving millions of people into internal and external displacement with refugee camps in Africa at times the size of cities.
5. Poverty, with millions of residents surviving on less than a dollar a day.

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Climate change is an important catalyst for population and migration issues. Africa and the Middle East are the most burdened and are considered to be the most vulnerable regions to climate change, while they are also emerging as the most likely foci of environmental conflicts in the future (IPCC, 2014). One of the most important effects of climate change is food security, due to the high dependence of the countries of the region on agricultural production (35% of the population is employed in agriculture, which contributes 13% to the GDP of the countries of the region). The Nile Delta may be at risk from both sea-level rise and salinization in agricultural areas, with 12% to 15% of arable land highly likely to be lost to sea-level rise over the course of this century with corresponding consequences on the lives of five million people by 2050. Accordingly, in the Middle East, crop yields are projected to decline significantly in an area that is already largely barren or semi-barren (Karami, 2019: 118-140), (Durrell, 2018), (Nin-Pratt et al, 2018), (OECD-FAO, 2018), (SelvaRaju, 2013: 27-51), (WaHa, K. et al. 2017), (Borghesi – Ticci, 2019).

But the most important problem for the region is related to water resources, with the report of the World Bank emphasizing that 60% of the population of the region lives under a regime of limited or very limited reserves of water resources (World Bank, 2018). Water systems are already under intense pressure. About two-thirds of the Arab world depends on sources outside their borders for their water supply. The Jordan and Yarmouk rivers are expected to experience a significant reduction in their flow with implications for Israel, the Palestinian territories and Jordan. Existing tensions over water access are bound to worsen in the region, resulting in further political instability with dangerous implications for energy security. In the Horn of Africa, declining rainfall and rising temperatures will have a major negative impact on an area particularly vulnerable to conflict. Sedimentation and desertification are two of the main impacts that will significantly affect the regional water regime, with several forecasts claiming that between 20% and 38% of the total Mediterranean population will be under situations of "natural water stresses" (Sieghart- Betre, 2018), (Lange, 2019), (FAO, 2018), (World Bank, 2017). It is worth noting that for the decade 2005-2015 the annual availability of clean water per inhabitant decreased by 25% from 990 to 800 m³ (Saab, 2017).

The MENA countries are currently in a state of demographic transition. Shrinking fertility rates compared to previous decades have resulted in a youth bulge, so the determinable demographic trend is proceeding towards a gradually aging society. Nevertheless, there is still an increase in the region's absolute population figures that is expected to reach a population of about one billion people by 2090, surpassing even China and nearly doubling Europe's population numbers by the end of the century (UNDESA, 2017).



One of the most important effects of climate change is food security, due to the high dependence of the countries of the region on agricultural production

In 2000, the MENA region comprised 338 million inhabitants, accounting for 5.5 per cent of the world's population. The region experienced an average population growth of 2.0 per cent per year, well above the world's annual average of 1.3 per cent. MENA's population is currently growing at a rate of around 1.7 per cent per year. This growth is projected to slow down to 1.3 per cent per year around 2030, reaching 0.8 per cent per year by mid-century. Despite slowing growth rates, the region's population is expected to more than double in size during the first half of the twenty first century, from 338 million in 2000 to 724 million in 2050 (UNICEF, 2019). Between 2000 and 2015 close to 121 million people were added and according to the projections the same number of people will be added from 2015 until 2030. It is important to highlight that rapid population growth across the region is driven mostly by natural increase (births outnumbering deaths). Young people (aged under 30) constitute more than half (55%) of the population across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), compared with 36% of the population across OECD countries. By 2050, the population under 29 years old is projected to range from 28% in Qatar to 59% in Mauritania. (OECD, 2022).

All MENA countries – with the exception of Lebanon - will see increases in their total population during the first half of the century. Over the fifteen years between 2015 and 2030 the populations of Iraq, Bahrain and the State of Palestine have been projected to grow by almost 50 per cent. Other countries, such as Sudan, Syria and Oman are expected to see an increase of their population by approximately 40 per cent – although the current crisis situation in the region may change this picture in an unpredictable way (UNICEF, 2019). The largest population increase in absolute terms will be seen in Egypt, with 26 million people between 2015 and 2030 (60 million increase by 2050), followed by Iraq with 17 million (45 million by 2050) and Sudan with 16 million (42 million by 2050) (UNICEF, 2019).

Millions of people had to flee their homes as a result of escalation of conflict and violence.

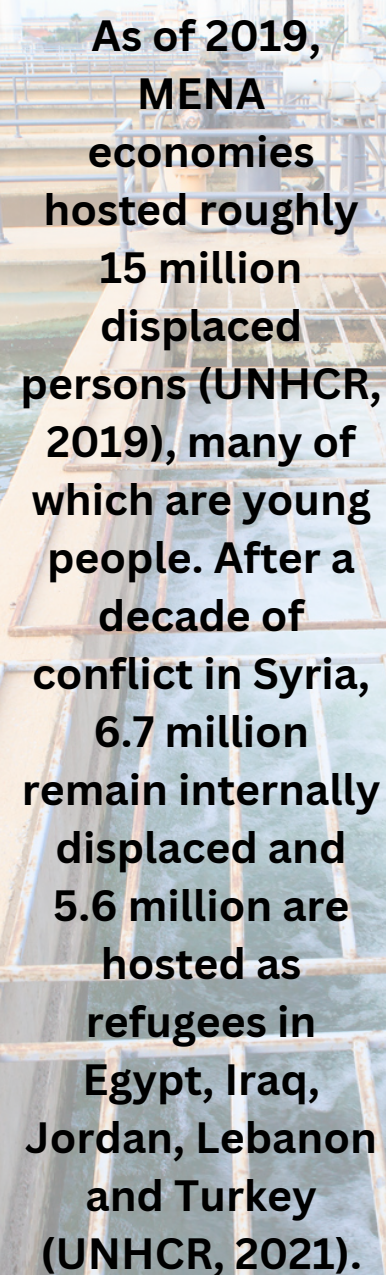
Photo: Syrian Arab Red Crescent Society



"despite slowing growth rates, the region's population is expected to more than double in size during the first half of the twenty first century, from 338 million in 2000 to 724 million in 2050"

In parts of the MENA region, the presence of war and conflicts and natural disasters has led to mass population displacement. Conflicts and more general instability in the Middle East according to Faath and Mattes, have fueled migration flows from the region over the past thirty years (Faath-Mattes, 2014). The latest dynamic of instability to highlight the connection of conflict to forced migration in the region is the Arab Spring. The civil wars in Libya and Syria since 2011 have caused massive internal displacements, but also waves of refugees in neighboring countries (Yazgan-Eroglou-Sirkeci, 2015, Toaldo, 2015).

As of 2019, MENA economies hosted roughly 15 million displaced persons (UNHCR, 2019), many of which are young people. After a decade of conflict in Syria, 6.7 million remain internally displaced and 5.6 million are hosted as refugees in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey (UNHCR, 2021). But this trend is not recent. According to the 2020 Revision of the United Nations Trends in International Migrant Stock dataset, the number of international migrants in MENA increased from approximately 20 million in 2000 to 50 million in 2020. Within this framework internal displacement is one of the major problems and challenges for the MENA region.



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As of the end of 2013, sub-Saharan Africa had the largest number of displaced people (12.5 million), followed by the Middle East and North Africa (9.1 million). 63% of the global number of displaced people came from just five countries experiencing armed conflicts (Syria, Colombia, Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan). But the year that changed radically and for the worse in terms of internal displacement was 2014. By the end of 2014, 38 million people around the world had been forced to flee their homes due to armed conflict and generalized violence, and they lived in conditions of displacement within their country's borders. Eleven million people were displaced during the year, the equivalent of 30,000 people per day. Never in the past 10 years of IDMC's global report has such a high estimate of the number of people newly displaced in a year been reported (IDMC, 2016: 1). The main causes of the displacement crisis were a) the protracted crises in Iraq, South Sudan, Syria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Nigeria, b) the bloody activity of ISIS and Boko Haram, c) the escalation of the armed conflict in Syria and South Sudan.

Instability is escalating, creating extreme inequalities in wealth, education and other areas of human development. This has led to the acute marginalization of certain geographical areas, usually those far from political and economic capitals, and the radicalization of oppressed parts of the society seeking greater independence, power and control. According to recent IDMC reports, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Syria, Somalia, the Central African Republic, and Afghanistan are again among the ten countries with the largest number of displaced people due to conflict. New waves of conflict and violence have sparked displacement in Nigeria and Cameroon, with these countries among the ten worst affected globally. In Ethiopia, 2.9 million new displacements were observed, the largest increase worldwide.

In particular, in Sub-Saharan Africa there were 7.4 new displacements due to conflict and violence and 2.6 million due to disasters, a number greater than any other geographical region, which accounts for 36% of displacements worldwide. In total, 16.5 million people are internally displaced in sub-Saharan Africa as a result of conflict. The trend is similar in the Middle East and North Africa, with the 2.1 million newly displaced representing a significant decrease compared to 2017, but with the eleven million people on the move in the region making up 25% of displaced worldwide. The decrease in displacements is mainly due to the significant limitation of ISIS activity in Iraq and Syria, due to the military defeat of the organization. In addition, there were 200,000 new displacements due to disasters (IDMC, 2019).

Conclusions

Youth bulge is the most critical issue in MENA region at the moment. Breakdown in education quality and relevance. Extremely young populations with major lag in jobs, marriage, and housing. Low expectations for the future. Closing windows of security and state sector employment. Major problems in saving and in funding business. Furthermore, we can observe also the following: Disguised unemployment and hollow jobs with no productivity gain or real career prospects and motivation. Dissatisfaction with failed governance and secular alternative, and cause of religious extremism.

The COVID-19 crisis has further exacerbated pre-existing inequalities across the region and among young people of different backgrounds. Although physical health risks have been lower for young people than the elderly, youth have been significantly impacted by the socio-economic effects of the pandemic (OECD, 2020). In response to Russia's large-scale aggression against Ukraine in 2022, new concerns about the food security for the MENA population emerged as the MENA region is especially dependent on Russia and Ukraine for their wheat needs: for instance, more than 80% of Egypt's wheat imports in 2020 came from Russia and Ukraine and more than 70% for Lebanon (OECD, 2022).



UNHCR working in Syria to support displaced people, refugees, and the most vulnerable by distributing kits containing alcohol, soap, tissues, gloves and masks to protect families from the spread of COVID-19
Source: UNHCR Syria

According to Arab Barometer survey results, in 2021, 44% of people aged 0-29 years in MENA report that they have considered emigrating, compared to 36% of 30-49 years old and 20.5% of respondents aged 50 or above (Arab Barometer, 2021).

As the region's significant youth cohort grows older, the demographic transition presents both an opportunity and the need for renewed efforts and investments into their transition to an autonomous life and participation in economic, social and public life. However, the demographic reality in the region is often not portrayed as an opportunity but as a cause of concern given the challenges young people are facing.

The youth bulge currently poses the most critical issue in the MENA region. One major problem is the breakdown in the quality and relevance of education, leading to extremely young populations with significant delays in finding jobs, getting married, and securing housing. Additionally, there are low expectations for the future and diminishing opportunities in the security and state sectors, while the region also faces major difficulties in securing funding for businesses. Moreover, there are signs of disguised unemployment and hollow jobs lacking productivity gains or real career prospects, which in turn contributes to societal dissatisfaction with the current governance model, and leads to prospects for religious extremism as an alternative to secular options.

The COVID-19 crisis has worsened existing inequalities in the region and has disproportionately affected young people from different backgrounds. While young individuals have faced lower physical health risks compared to the elderly, they have been significantly impacted by the pandemic's socio-economic consequences (OECD, 2020). The environment was further worsened after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and has raised concerns about food security in the MENA region, given the reliance on Russia and Ukraine for wheat imports. Indicatively, in 2020, more than 80% of Egypt's and 70% of Lebanon's wheat was imported from Russia and Ukraine (OECD, 2022).

According to the Arab Barometer survey conducted in 2021, a significant percentage of the region's youth is considering emigration as an option. Specifically, 44% of individuals aged 0-29 consider emigrating, compared to 36% of those aged 30-49, and 20.5% of those aged 50 or above (Arab Barometer, 2021).

As the significant youth cohort in the region grows older, the demographic transition presents both an opportunity and a pressing need for renewed efforts and investments to support both their transition into independent lives, as well as their active participation in the economic, social, and public spheres. However, the ongoing challenges for young people means that the region's demographic reality is often viewed with concern rather than as an opportunity.

As the significant youth cohort in the region grows older, the demographic transition presents both an opportunity and a pressing need for renewed efforts and investments to support both their transition into independent lives, as well as their active participation in the economic, social, and public spheres.

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