

Dossier: Social Policies and the Challenges to Improve Well-being in the Mediterranean Area

# Make Way for Numbers: The Age Race in the Mediterranean

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## Six out of Ten Inhabitants in North Africa and the Middle East

The population of the twenty-six Mediterranean countries amounted to approximately 560 million inhabitants in 2020.<sup>1</sup> The majority of the Mediterranean population (6 out of 10 inhabitants) is now located in North Africa and the Middle East (MENA),<sup>2</sup> since the rapid and intense demographic transition this southern and eastern Mediterranean region has experienced over the past 70 years.

While the population of the Mediterranean as a whole increased on average by 2.4 between 1950 and 2020, the population of the North African and Middle Eastern countries increased almost fivefold. It has gone from 72 million inhabitants to 334 million today. The MENA region, which had only two countries with over 10 million inhabitants in 1950 (Turkey and Egypt), had five by 1990 (Egypt, Turkey, Algeria, Morocco and the Syrian Arab Republic) and has seven today (Egypt, Turkey, Algeria, Morocco, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia and Jordan). This development contrasts sharply with the situation of the countries of southern Europe and the Balkans on the North Shore, a geographical area that has grown from 158 million

to only 226 million inhabitants (i.e. a 1.4-fold increase) in the same period. The average annual growth rate of the North Shore countries has been nil or very slightly negative since 2017, while that of the North African and Middle Eastern countries has been +1.5% per year in recent years (this growth rate is out of all proportion to those of the North Shore countries, most of which have experienced a less intense demographic transition because it has been spread over a longer period). Egypt and Turkey, with growth rates of more than 2% per year for over 30 years, have seen their populations increase spectacularly (Chart 14), thereby helping to considerably transform the demographic order that prevailed in the 1950s, when 70% of the inhabitants were still located on the northern and eastern shores.<sup>3</sup> While the demographic transition has led to a very sustained increase in the populations of the MENA countries over the past 70 years, it has also transformed the relative weights of the various constituent age groups.

## Share and Number: The Weight of Age Groups

Among the demographic challenges pointed out by demographers specializing in the Mediterranean (Ambrosetti, 2020), the transformation of the population's age structure during the process of demographic transition appears crucial. Indeed, these transformations may be considered assets for a time because they bring potential growth (the demographic dividend), but at the same time they may be-

<sup>1</sup> Albania, Algeria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Malta, Montenegro, Morocco, Portugal, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, State of Palestine, Syrian Arab Republic, TFYR Macedonia, Tunisia, Turkey.

<sup>2</sup> To illustrate the evolution of the weight of the different age groups since the 1950s, we have analysed the growth of the following 11 countries: Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, State of Palestine, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia and Turkey. We shall use the acronym MENA – Middle East and North Africa – to designate this group.

<sup>3</sup> The order of the shores was reversed in the early 1990s.

come a source of concern when the population that is unemployed or too old to work rises rapidly and becomes a burden for the middle generations. In order to describe the evolution of the age composition of the MENA countries' population since the 1950s in its uniqueness compared to other Mediterranean countries, we have made the unusual choice of classifying the total population into three main groups: the under-30s (youth), the 30-69s (middle) and the 70s and over (seniors or elderly). This division into groups of roughly equal magnitude provides an image of youth and old age that is more independent of the usual economic classifications (60 or 65 years) by focusing more on an age beyond which situations of dependency are more likely to arise. The age of 30 was chosen because it corresponds to a stage in the life cycle when people are fully established in adulthood, when they have a family and have been able to stabilize themselves in gainful occupation. These choices also make it easier to compare different countries for which the 0-14 and 60+ age groups do not correspond to the same realities. The age at which one is considered a senior citizen is different from one end of the Mediterranean to the other, but

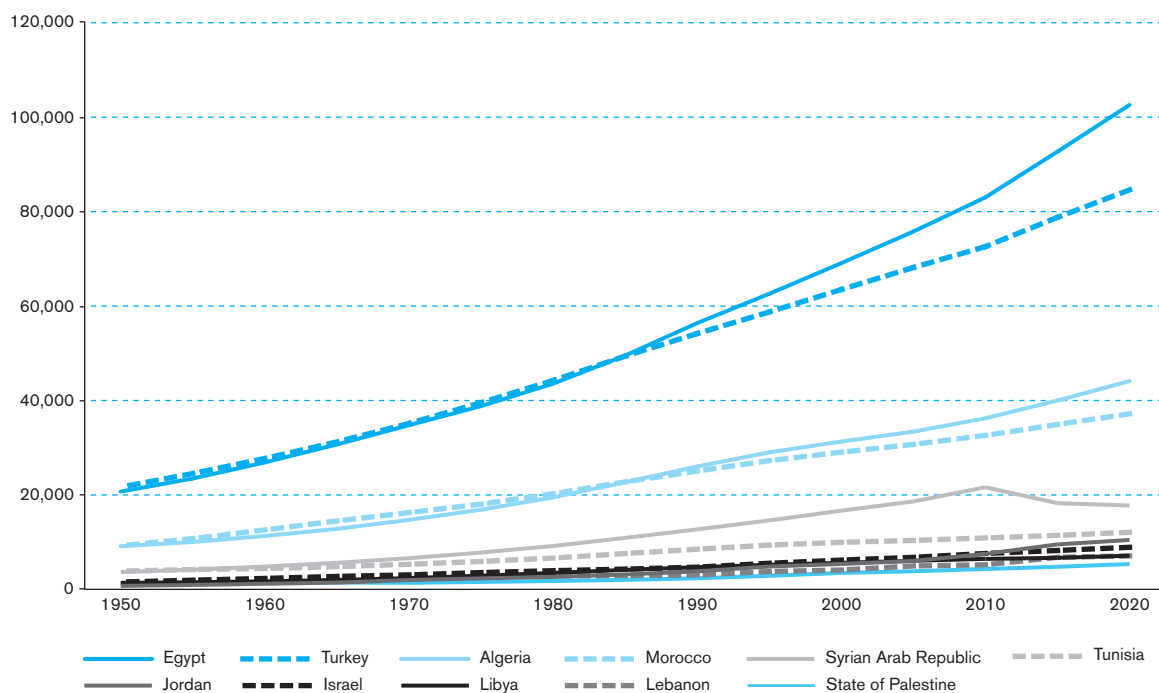
medical progress has led to a real convergence of life expectancy towards a common age of over 70.

*Young People: 7 Out of 10 in North Africa or the Middle East*

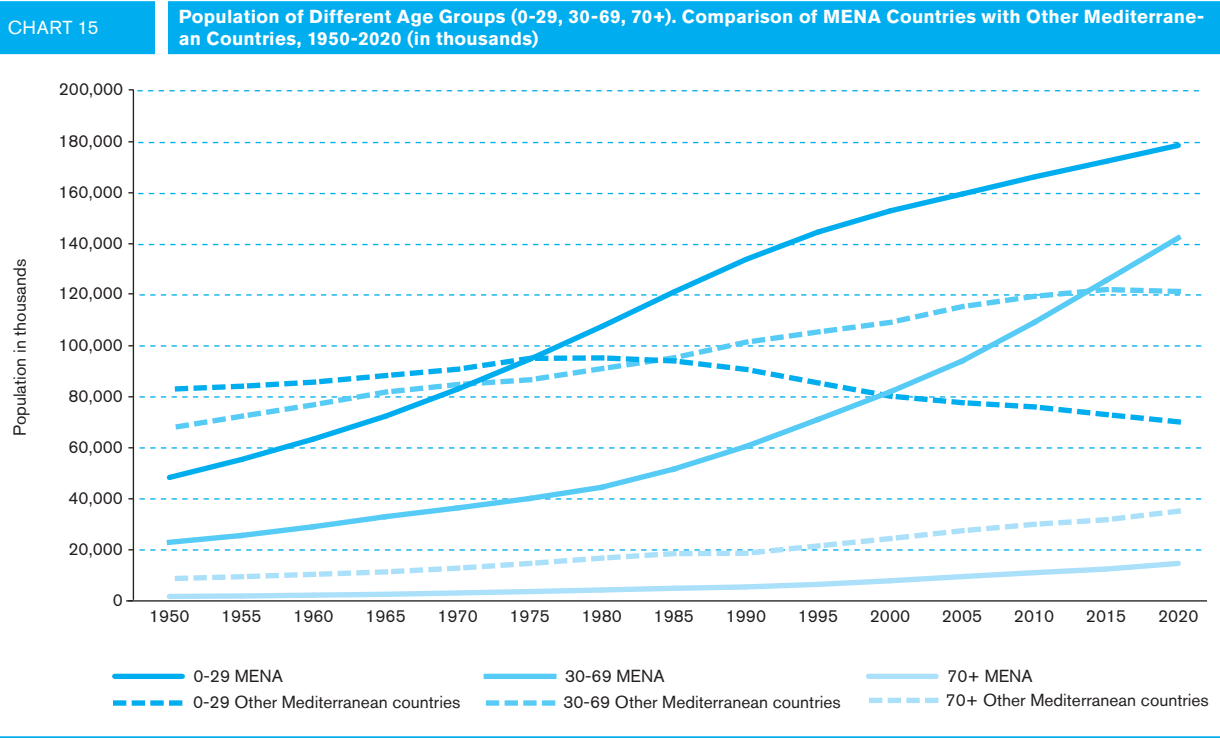
In the Mediterranean, the total population under the age of 30 amounted to 248 million people in 2020 (compared to 130 million in 1950). 178 million of them live in North Africa and the Middle East (Chart 15), i.e. 72% of the total. This situation was the opposite in 1950, when only 3 to 4 in 10 young people lived in MENA countries.

The proportion of youth in MENA countries is now 53% (Chart 16). It has always been above 50% since the 1950s, reaching a peak in 1975 and 1980 (69%). The annual growth rate of young people in MENA countries was particularly high from the 1950s to the 1990s (average annual growth of more than 2% per year) due to the decline in mortality, and then slowed down to an average annual growth rate of approximately 1% over the last thirty years, because the decline in fertility has led to fewer children in the younger age groups.

**CHART 14** Comparative Population Trends for North Africa and the Middle East, 1950-2020 (total population, both sexes combined, as of 1 July, in thousands)



Source: prepared by the author using UN data, 2019 (United Nations et al., 2019).



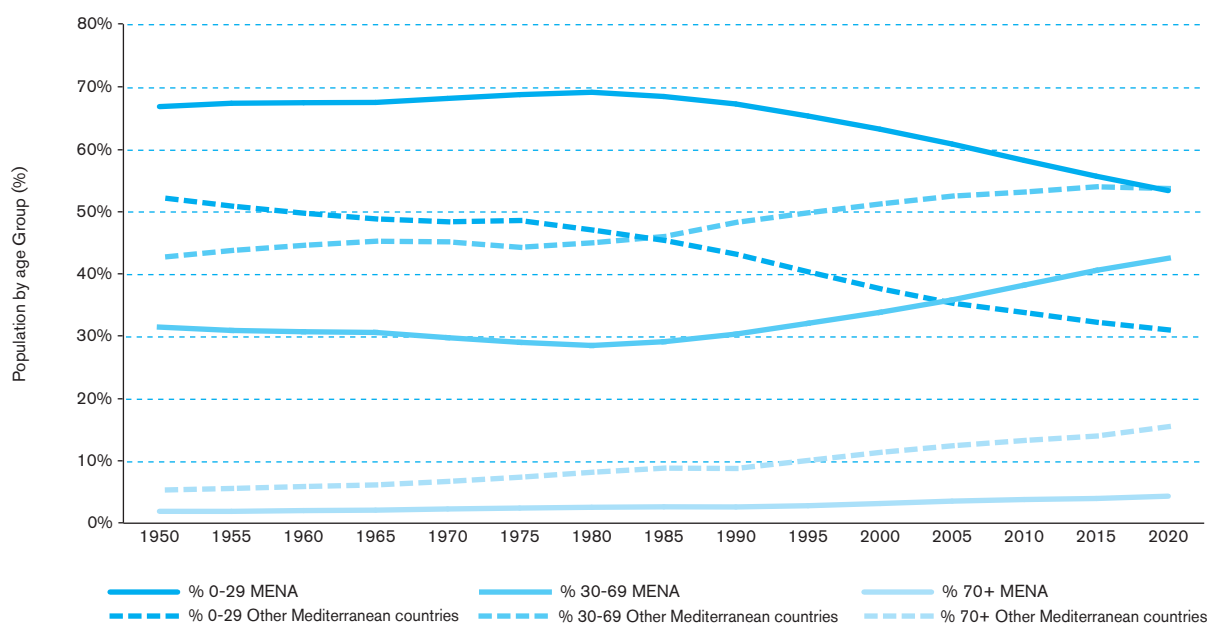
*The North Shore Has Lost 1 in 4 Young People over 40 Years*

Conversely, the countries of southern Europe and the Balkans on the North Shore, which had as many as 95 million young people in the early 1980s, had only 69 million in 2020, a drop of 26% in 40 years (Charts 15 and 16). By way of comparison, the number of under-30s on the South Shore almost doubled in the same period. The growth rate of young people on the North Shore became negative in the mid-1980s and has been around  $-0.8\%$  per year for over 10 years. This negative growth means that each year that passes, these countries lose 1 in 100 young people under 30. If we look simultaneously at the weight of young people not in terms of proportion, but in terms of numbers (Chart 15, solid and dotted red curves), this decrease in the number of young people on the North Shore contrasts sharply with the increase in the number of young people in MENA, the curves intersecting in the mid-1970s. Chart 16, which depicts the percentage of the different age groups in the total population, reveals, however, that in the MENA countries the weight of the youth age group is decreasing compared to the increasing weight of the other age groups, especially the middle age group (30 to 69-year-olds), but also

more discreetly that of the 70+ age group. It is therefore this latter group – the seniors – that, due to demographic inertia, is experiencing the most rapid progress, catching up with the under-30s in terms of numbers and proportion. In the MENA countries, the growth of the middle (30-69) age group is currently around 2.5% per year. For the first time, on the other hand, the average annual growth rate of the same population on the North Shore has become negative.

*The Highest Rate of Increase: The 70+ Age Group, on Both the South and North Shores*

In 2020, the Mediterranean had 49 million people aged 70 and over (9% of the total population). 14 million belong to the 11 MENA countries we are studying, while 35 million are on the North Shore (Chart 15). The number of elderly people has thus multiplied by 10 since the 1950s in the MENA countries and by four for North Shore countries. While these numbers may appear low when compared to other age categories, they are however the ones that are and will be growing fastest. The average annual growth rate of the 70+ age group in MENA countries is currently about 3.4% per year (2% per year on the North Shore). The prospects are also for a growth



Sources: prepared by the author using UN data (2019).

rate of the oldest people in this category, in particular centenarians on the North Shore and 80-84 and 85-89-year-olds on the South Shore. These increases have to do with the age pyramid, which is and will be feeding a significant flow of ageing people into the upper category from the middle one. This phenomenon is combined with gains in life expectancy that are increasingly concentrated at older ages (ageing from above). This situation, which is already poorly controlled on the North Shore, promises to be an immense challenge for the MENA countries, which cannot always prepare for it, as they are concentrated on coping with the very rapid growth in the number of under-30s and 30-69-year-olds. However, the situation will become critical much more quickly than for the countries of the North Shore, because of the speed and intensity of the demographic transition they have experienced or are just completing. While until now in these countries the economically inactive elderly were cared for by their children, private solidarity is crumbling and traditional models are being called into question by the younger generations, who are already facing economic insecurity. The time has already come for these countries to develop public solidarity policies for the elderly and to build specialized institutions for them, capable, if possible, of managing the rise in dependency (Sajoux and Amar, 2018).

### What Is the Outlook for 2060?

In 40 years, United Nations projections (medium variant) predict that the populations of MENA countries will have reached nearly 500 million, against 200 million on the North Shore, i.e. a total of nearly 700 million inhabitants by 2060 (Table 11). The youngest population (under 30) will reach 253 million, the 30-69 age group 321 million, and the Mediterranean will also have more than 116 million people aged 70 and over, of which more than half (53%) will be in the MENA countries (Table 11).

#### *One out of Three People Will Be over 70 in 40 Years on the North Shore*

The share of elderly people by 2060 will be 27% on average on the North Shore. The highest proportions of elderly are expected in Italy, Spain, Greece and Portugal (Table 11). These countries will gradually lose part of their population due to an excess of deaths over births, and migration policies will not be able to stem this phenomenon of ageing at the top of the pyramid in a context of very low fertility. This situation is increasingly reported by the media and the press. It worries employers in the countries concerned, who are already faced with a shortage of la-

bour. Chart 15 illustrates this already perceptible phenomenon of the decline in the numbers of young and middle-aged people. This situation also jeopardizes the welfare state and pension systems. For the MENA countries, the share of the over-70s is estimated to reach 13% on average by 2060, with strong contrasts between countries. The highest shares of elderly people are expected in Turkey and Lebanon (nearly 20%), followed closely by Tunisia and Morocco (Table 11). The challenges brought about by the rapid ageing of the Moroccan population, for example, have already been the subject of publications focussing on the matter of the resources and sacrifices needed to cope with it for the middle generations, i.e. the question of family solidarity in a context of shrinking family size and crises of all kinds that these societies have to face (Sajoux and Amar, 2018, p. 160): "Given the ongoing rapid ageing, it is important to ascertain which means and measures are likely to allow these solidarities to

be consolidated and relayed in some way as soon as possible."

The proportion of older people also varies greatly across a country. If the phenomenon is studied at finer administrative levels, it is common to observe much higher proportions of elderly people, particularly in rural areas. This situation of ageing and feminization of rural areas, accentuated by the departure of younger people to cities and the return of urban dwellers to their region of birth on retirement, creates tensions around the agricultural workforce as well as situations of distress and isolation for the elderly (Hovardaoglu and Calisir-Hovardaoglu, 2022).

#### *By 2060: 85 Million under 30 in Egypt Alone*

The highest numbers of people under 30 are expected in Egypt, which will have 1.5 times as many young people (85 million) as the entire North Shore combined (55 million). Israel and the State of Palestine

TABLE 11	2060: Population (in thousands) and Relative Share of Different Age Groups in the Total Population (%): Comparison of MENA Countries with Other Mediterranean Countries						
	0-29	30-69	70+	Total	% 0-29	% 30-69	% 70+
Egypt	84,680	79,148	13,710	<b>177,538</b>	48	45	8
Turkey	31,747	47,993	18,200	<b>97,941</b>	32	49	19
Algeria	25,530	30,199	9,250	<b>64,979</b>	39	46	14
Morocco	16,987	23,189	7,265	<b>47,440</b>	36	49	15
Syrian Arab Republic	13,655	17,031	4,549	<b>35,235</b>	39	48	13
Israel	5,950	6,174	1,911	<b>14,034</b>	42	44	14
Tunisia	4,751	6,775	2,438	<b>13,964</b>	34	49	17
Jordan	5,369	6,853	1,393	<b>13,615</b>	39	50	10
State of Palestine	4,670	4,585	659	<b>9,913</b>	47	46	7
Libya	3,104	4,332	1,201	<b>8,637</b>	36	50	14
Lebanon	2,101	3,250	1,212	<b>6,563</b>	32	50	18
<b>Total MENA by 2060</b>	<b>198,543</b>	<b>229,529</b>	<b>61,788</b>	<b>489,860</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>13</b>
France	20,925	30,741	15,417	<b>67,083</b>	31	46	23
Italy	12,416	23,000	15,142	<b>50,557</b>	25	45	30
Spain	10,460	17,919	12,667	<b>41,046</b>	25	44	31
Portugal	2,204	3,875	2,435	<b>8,514</b>	26	46	29
Greece	2,044	3,789	2,568	<b>8,400</b>	24	45	31
Serbia	1,760	3,234	1,488	<b>6,482</b>	27	50	23
Bulgaria	1,450	2,302	1,172	<b>4,923</b>	29	47	24
Croatia	813	1,476	806	<b>3,095</b>	26	48	26
Bosnia and Herzegovina	598	1,213	628	<b>2,439</b>	25	50	26
Albania	536	1,144	511	<b>2,191</b>	24	52	23
Slovenia	537	827	495	<b>1,859</b>	29	44	27
North Macedonia	480	871	382	<b>1,734</b>	28	50	22
Cyprus	364	686	312	<b>1,362</b>	27	50	23
Montenegro	175	279	112	<b>566</b>	31	49	20
Malta	112	191	112	<b>415</b>	27	46	27
<b>TOTAL others by 2060</b>	<b>54,874</b>	<b>91,547</b>	<b>54,246</b>	<b>200,667</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>TOTAL Mediterranean</b>	<b>253,417</b>	<b>321,076</b>	<b>116,034</b>	<b>690,528</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>17</b>

Sources: prepared by the author using UN data (2019).

also have expected under-30s proportions of approximately 50% by 2060, but these countries are not among the most populous in the Mediterranean.

*The 30-69 Age Group by 2060: MENA – 230 Million / North Shore – 92 Million*

The proportion is also largely concentrated in the countries of North Africa and the Middle East as regards the middle age group. The 30-69 age group will be two and a half times more numerous in the MENA countries than on the North Shore. The demographic heavyweights in this age group on the South Shore are, in descending order: Egypt (79 million), Turkey (48), Algeria (30), Morocco (23) and the Syrian Arab Republic (17). On the North Shore, France (31 million), Italy (23 million) and Spain (18 million) will be the only countries with more than 10 million 30-59-year-olds (Table 11).

## Conclusion

These situations of demographic ageing and the reversal of the proportions between age groups from one shore to the other lead us to stress once again, by way of conclusion, that large-scale migratory movements are to be expected: “The region’s migration scenario in the future could be characterized by strong migratory pressures, particularly from the migration of young adults from the southeastern Mediterranean to Europe” (Ambrosetti 2020, 303). Whether desired or feared, these movements of young people and adults from one shore to the other are now more than certain, making the question of their management, i.e. the policies to be implemented, ever more salient. Beyond the strong growth shown by the demographic transitions in MENA countries, it should nevertheless be kept in mind that these will come to an end, since fertility is converging towards low levels everywhere. The fertility gap between the most and least fertile countries has thus fallen from 5 children per woman in 1950 to only 2.4 children in 2020. The highest fertility rates observed in the 1950s were over 7 children per woman, while the lowest were around 2.3 children per woman. Today, the highest fertility rates in the Mediterranean are around 3 children per woman, while the lowest have fallen to historically low levels of around 1.3 children per woman. Thus, “the

world’s populations, of different civilizations and religions, are on trajectories of convergence” (Courbage and Todd, 2014, 159; Blöss-Widmer et al., 2017). While waiting for the different Mediterranean countries to achieve more moderate growth across all age groups, it is nevertheless urgently necessary for them to try to cushion the most negative collective consequences of the demographic transition, foremost among which is the massive ageing of many generations expected on the North Shore and very soon on the South Shore as well.

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