



FONDATION HUGOT
DU
COLLÈGE DE FRANCE
— 1979 —



LA CHAIRE HISTOIRE CONTEMPORAINE DU MONDE ARABE DU COLLEGE DE FRANCE

Avec le soutien de la

FONDATION MOULAY HICHAM et de la FONDATION HUGOT DU
COLLEGE DE FRANCE

GENERATIONS ARABES

YOUSSEF COURBAGE

'Demographic transition, democratic transition in the Arab World'

Fondation Hugot, Paris

28 et 29 juin 2012

1. INTRODUCTION

For these Arab countries, I will show first how the demographic transition, in its broadest sense a universal phenomenon, encompasses now the Arab (and Muslim world). Yet, my intention is to go beyond descriptive demography to include politics, particularly with an eye on the present Arab upheavals. This sort of connection between literacy, demography and politics is not a recent discovery. Hence, this trend towards increasing education has been, is still and will remain an element of social disruption. Especially, when the youth are its demographic dominant component, which is the case from Morocco to Iraq But disruption will not last for ever. It is possible to anticipate on basis of demographic indicators, a more serene future.

All these countries have now entered in a process of convergence with the developed world. Thus, it inaugurates an era where the youth bulge is declining while aged persons are not yet booming. The advantages of this new demography in the Arab world and the region are immense, namely, from the economic viewpoint. Yet the main outcome might be extra-economic, and for sure, political. We will cover these forecasts in the last part.

2. FROM THE DEMOGRAPHIC TO THE DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTION

Since December 2010, the speed, suddenness and scope of events in North Africa and the Middle East have taken everyone by surprise. A tsunami, according to Ehud Barak, the Israeli Minister of Defense, naturally one of the least sympathetic to these movements, rapidly qualified as *intifadas*.

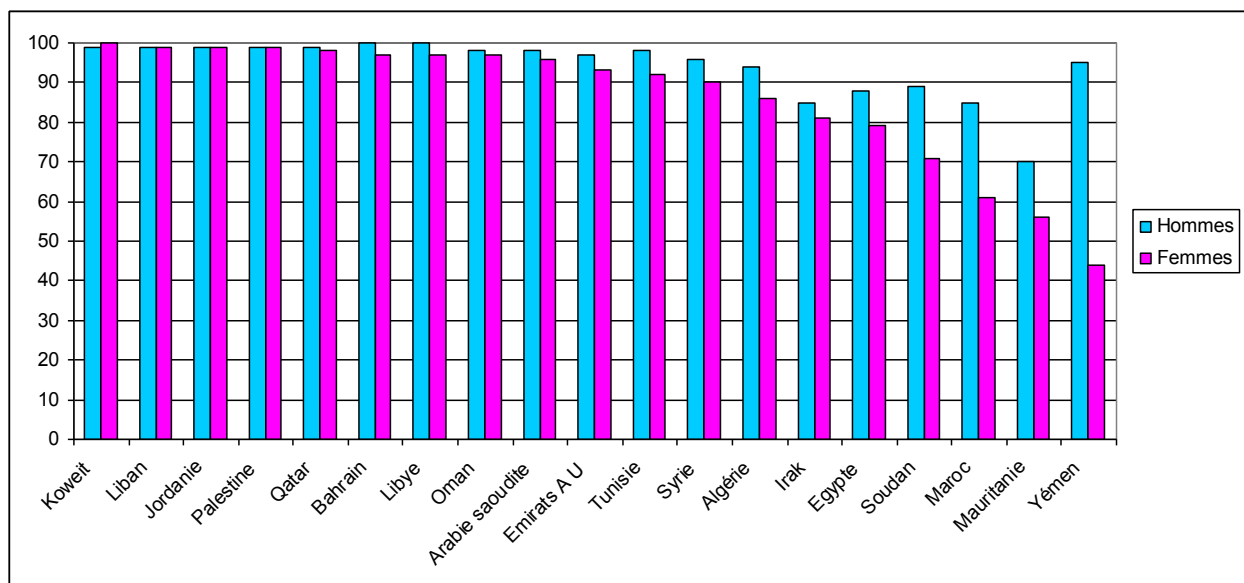
They nevertheless had to happen. Recognizing the universality of the human beings -basically there are no differences in essence but in level of development - the processes that we have seen taking off in England then burgeoning in France before spreading throughout Europe and the world, would have inevitably reached the Arab countries.

For the past four decades depending on their level of advancement, the Arab countries have been experiencing cultural, demographic, anthropological and family transformation resembling those that Europe had been through since the English (1640 - 1660) and French Revolutions (1789-1793). Contrary to many essentialist or culturalist views the Arab world does not stand as an exception. To think the opposite would qualify it as intrinsically averse to human progress, which is obviously contradicted by its current history, as we will show.

2.1. Education at the root of the transformations

The process of multiple transitions in the Arab countries was triggered by access to **education** for boys then for girls. Most of the youth –almost completely illiterates few decades ago-are now able to read and write by 20-24 years, the starting ages of the process of union and reproduction. Several of its effects are well-know and well-studied (such as the link between education and fertility decrease). But a holistic vision is still to come, linking the multiple stages going from education to revolution.

Chart 1 : Proportion of Arab youngsters by sex (15-19 years) able to read and write, by country, 2010



At the root of the modernization process and of demographic transition, it is essential to recall that the acquisition of the ability to read and especially to write is an essential step for the individuation of the human being and the acquisition of autonomy.

2.2. Demographic metamorphosis: Mortality, fertility...

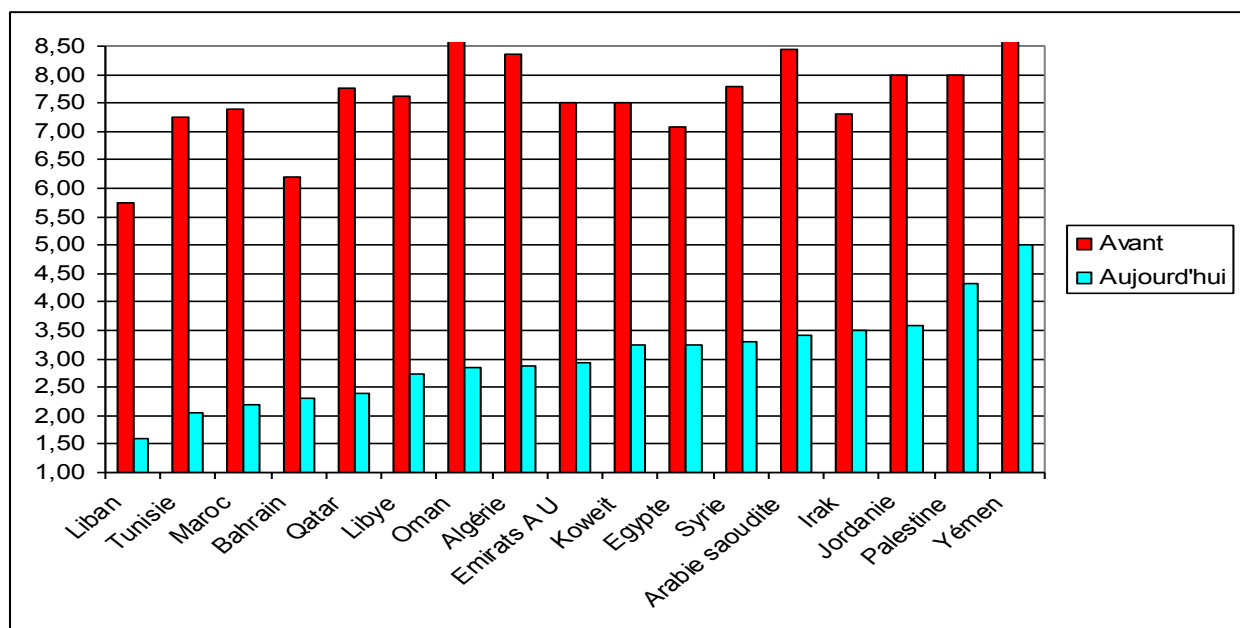
Fertility has been the most significant and paramount factor which was affected by education. But education triggered also mortality decrease. The demographic shift can be dated to the 17th century when advances in medicine contributed also to lowering **mortality** rate in Europe, also a precondition for fertility decrease.

Similarly with some delays, Arab fertility by itself wouldn't have fallen if mortality did not take the lead, pushing life expectancy from 40 years in the 1950's to over 75 years now. Mortality reduction was spectacular by its demographic effects. But not only by demographic standards. Arab populations are very often-hastily- characterized as fatalist, even by themselves. Maybe because they were used to death, which is such a banal phenomenon in every corner. Therefore, mortality fall is akin to a mental revolution with the

reshaping of the psyche of populations moving away from fatalism.

Alike the ancient populations of Europe but more recently these population adhered to fertility control, indispensable to cope with a growing population. Fertility has fallen from 7.5 children per woman on average in pre-transitional years to less than 3 now, with several countries around or below replacement level (2.1). Hence, today's Iran's fertility (1.8) is lower than in Scandinavia, in Lebanon, which is 60% Moslem (1.6) it is lower than in Belgium (1.8). Tunisia (2.05), Morocco (2.19) Turkey (2.10), are at few decimal points from the French *beau modèle*¹. We will return later on to one other condition of fertility transition: secularization. (Chart 2).

Chart 2: Total Fertility Rate in the Arab countries before transition and in 2010



The progress in education and especially female education has engendered the delaying in age at marriage and then the spread of contraception -against which there are no theological obstacles for the Muslims and for large parts of the Arab Christians- and thus to this speedy decrease in fertility down to low European average of 2 children, in the most advanced parts of the region like North Africa, Lebanon (not only among the Christians but also the Muslims, Sunnis and Shiites, alike²), Turkey and Iran.

¹ For a detailed study of demographic transition in Arab and Moslem countries, its ups and downs, we refer to our book, Youssef Courbage and Emmanuel Todd, *A convergence of civilizations – The transformations of Muslim societies around the world*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2011, p. 134.

² For the demography of Christians and Muslims communities in the Middle East and Turkey, Youssef Courbage and Philippe Fargues, *Christians and Jews in Islam*, London, Tauris, 1997, p. 245.

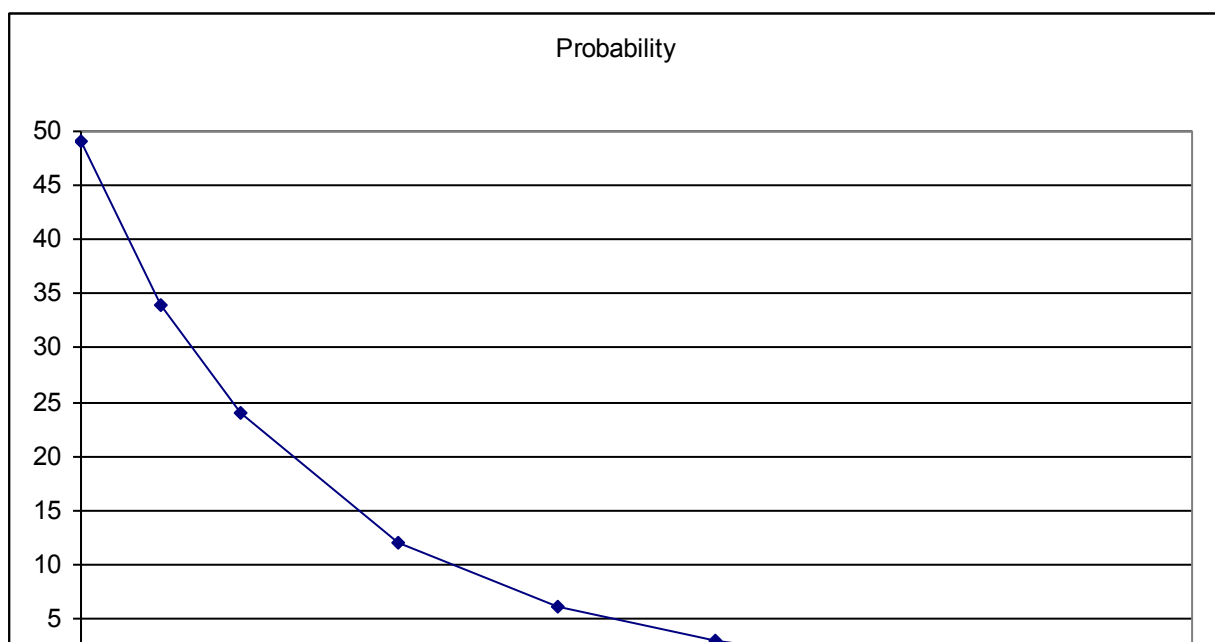
2.3 ...Marriage, endogamy/exogamy, patriarchy, gender roles

Marriage is no more the sacred religious and social obligation it used to be. Just to quote one example. In Morocco in 2010, 42% of males and 33% of women aged 30-34 years are still bachelors and spinsters, some by personal choice. In Algeria, Tunisia, Lebanon, singulate mean age at marriage approaches or exceeds now 30 years, almost twice what is used to be in the 60's.

Not only marriage rate has decreased, its nature has changed. **Endogamy**, or this so called "Arab marriage" which implied a sealing of the extended family and a closure in social groups ending up in stiffened institutions, was cut by half. Going beyond mere demographic calculations, we should underscore that when society shifts to exogamic marriage, like in Morocco where marriage with relatives has fallen from 30% to 15% between 1995 and 2010, its potential to openness increases. Going a step further, we can claim that openness might be conducive to revolt. Especially, when the population is governed by autocrats, the case almost everywhere in the Arab region. Hence a subtle combination of demographic changes, all inter-connected: mass education, mortality collapse, marriage and fertility free choice... might well act behind the scene to explain those rebellions against abject living conditions and absence of freedom.

- Patriarchal social structures and mentalities no more resist to demographic changes. In Morocco, Tunisia, Lebanon, Iran and Turkey, in some areas of Syria (Alawite, Druze, Ismailis populated provinces), fertility is now close or below 2 children. As shown in the next chart, the odds of not having a son increase rapidly with the fall of fertility. Negligible or low when TFR was above 4 children, it becomes significantly high when TFR approaches 2. This means that today 25% of the couples in the Maghreb, Lebanon, Turkey or Iran and in coastal and mountainous Syria, accept enthusiastically to have only 2 daughters without a male heir, apparently in contradiction with the teachings of Islam or more profoundly of deeply rooted patriarchal ideology from times immemorial (Chart 3).

Chart 3: Probability (%) to remain sonless by average number of children

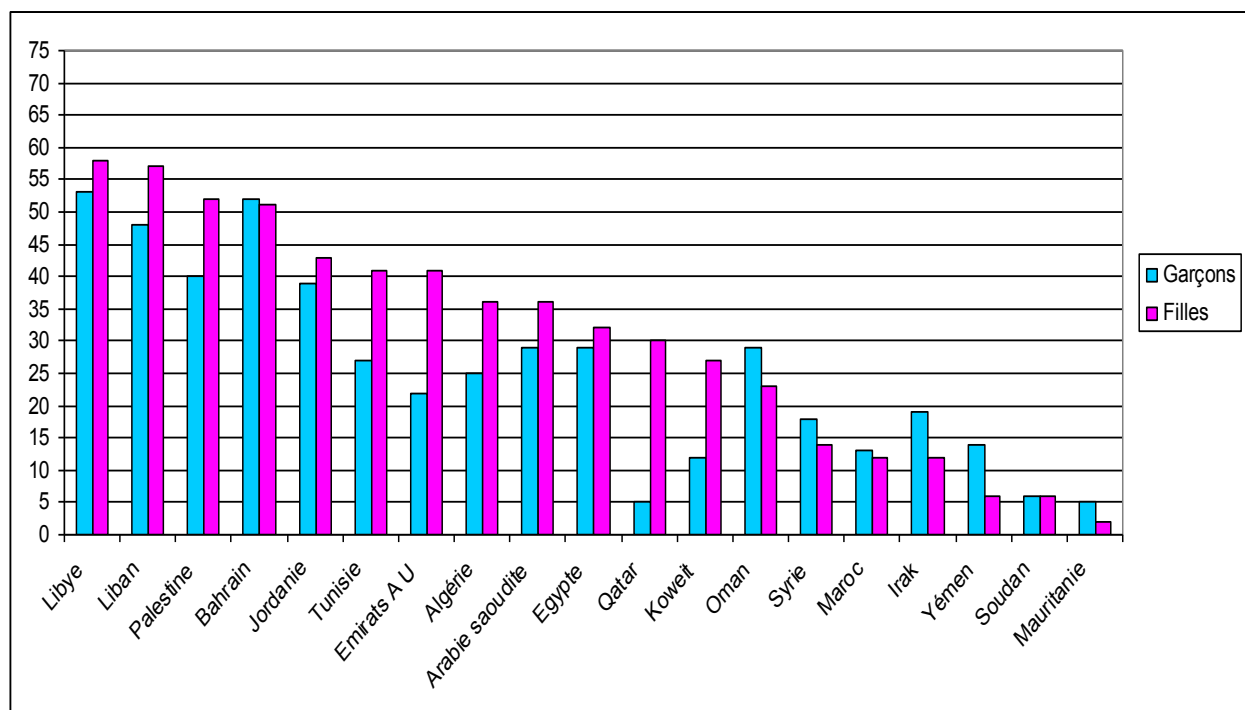


Gender roles: Supposedly confined to their reproductive and domestic role, Arab women (Iranians also), have burst onto the scene during last events from Casablanca to Dera'a and even in remote Sana'a.

This sort of *purdah* has to come to an end, as a result of successful education and demographic transitions which are reshuffling Arab societies preparing the emergence of the role of women. Nothing as explicit as their access to the upper degrees of education: secondary and university (chart 4) can prove it. In secondary education net enrolment ratios are now higher for girls than for boys in a majority of Arab countries from Algeria (68/65) to Palestine (87/82), including the Arabian Peninsula and its emirates: Kuwait (92/88).

Even more impressive is their penetration of universities, with this astounding result that everywhere -except in Yemen- girls are now better educated than boys. There is no need to be a great scholar to forecast how these figures might soon translate in the employment, political and other spheres (media).

Chart 4: Enrolment ratio at university level (18-24 years) by sex and country (around 2010)



2.4. Ambivalent effects of education and contraception

But there is also a hidden face to education. Education in and of itself and contraception, which follows in its aftermath, are ambivalent factors, which consequences might be at the same time, positive and negative.

Acquisition of education for males and females leads to fertility decline which is indispensable for economic progress. From the philosophers of the *Lumières* (Enlightenments) until Emile Durkheim, only this positive sequence was considered.

But, as of the end of the 19th century, the dark side of modernization was also emphasized: increase of suicide rate as a by product. By the same token, learning to read and write made individuals and masses more conscious. Cultural progress might well at its starts lead to a mental destabilization. Concretely, what we observe in an Arab society, where literacy is digging its way is that:

- -the son can read and write and not his father, who is still on hold of an -absolute- power in patriarchal societies,
- -the sisters become educated as much as their brothers or even more,
-spouses will become as educated (and sometimes more) than her husband.

-the spread of birth control which follows literacy undermines traditional domination of man on woman.

Thus, universal education might imply directly a destabilization of relations of authority in the family, and indirectly through contraception. These disruptions might contribute to a mental disorientation in the society.

On the one hand, contraception is a welcome development, since limiting the number of children allows parents to focus more on each child, who is then better fed better educated, better medically treated and receives more affection. Parenting in a smaller family, particularly with regard to father-mother interactions, becomes more democratic, freer, and this can have an overall positive impact on the society and governance. On the opposite side, a household in which an illiterate father wields authority over educated children with access to knowledge beyond the parents' reach – especially in a patriarchal society – could generate an explosive combination.

Yet, education of women could be, at first, a destabilizing factor. They then become motivated by contraception, as do some two-thirds of North African women. Who will then guarantee that their men will not be cheated on? This sort of psychological tension cannot be underestimated, especially in such societies, where remnants of patriarchy have not completely disappeared.

2.5 Secularization: a pre-condition to demographic transition?

A return to history shows that **secularization** of individuals followed the penetration of education across the strata of the European society, although at varying tempos.

France was the more precocious in this connection and fertility started to decrease by the second half of the 18th century. By means of *coitus interruptus* and a sort of primitive condoms made out of animals' intestines, French women went against the explicit teachings of the Church to actively curtail their reproduction. *On trompe la nature jusque dans les campagnes*, lamented a Catholic priest of Ile-de-France. The rest of Europe has undergone later, with a century delay, the same processes of secularization. Fertility transition was hence retarded although most of these countries had higher literacy rates than France.

- Against all odds, Arab societies which have registered an exceptionally fast fertility transition are certainly living this same process of secularization. But how to measure it? Surveys on attitudes about secularization are very rare, still a sort of taboo. Morocco is an exception, where such surveys could be taken. Officially one of the most conservative Arab countries in religious matters, the King being at the same time « A Commander of the Faithful » Moroccan surveys show, contrary to stereotypes and given ideas that religious practice is receding amongst the younger generations: 47%, 36% among young males and 59% among young females, claiming that they are religiously minded.

This has a clear impact on the act of voluntarily limiting the number of children. Contraception either for European Christians or Arab Muslims, implies that they start to feel the sole responsible of their reproduction. “Divine intervention” is no more considered the genesis of procreation. Individuals understand its new meaning: to give life is their stole attribute, without being dictated by the family, the tribe or by any political or religious power.

Empirical data, although limited help to illustrate this major shift in attitudes. Some forty years ago, the first surveys on the attitudes toward procreation in the Arab world were taken. One of the questions was: “what is your ideal number of children?” An important number of women used to give non-numerical responses. Instead of answering two, three or ... ten children, they would respond something like: “It is God’s will”, “I don’t believe in spacing births, it is God who decide...” etc. etc. Today, such non-numerical responses have almost completely disappeared from surveys.

Secularization weights heavily on the relations between cultural areas. Contrary to many alarmists who decry a “clash of civilizations,” the Arab and Muslim worlds in general and more peculiarly North Africa are now undergoing a phenomenon of secularization. Secularization, however, should not be equated with either atheism or even agnosticism. Rather, it means that an individual can be totally secular in one’s daily behavior – notably for the most important issue: the ability to give life - while at same time going to church, to mosque, or to the synagogue. There is no radical contradiction. Arab societies are witnessing a phenomenon of “disenchantment of the world”, in the sense used by Max Weber, which occurred in the West two centuries ago.

Hence contrary to the line of reasoning of the essentialists, the Arab world is currently experiencing a demographic transformation, which is also an effect of increased secularization. It might look ironic, even provocative, to raise this issue of secularization at a time (May 2012), when the Islamist parties are accumulating electoral victories one after the other, from *Ennahda* in Tunisia to the Parti Justice et Démocratie (PJD) in Morocco, passing by the Moslem Brotherhood and the *Salafists* in Egypt and their emergence elsewhere (Libya, Syria and Yemen).

Yet, these victories of the Islamists have more to do with the pusillanimity and irresponsibility of the liberal and leftist parties split into a multitude of tiny groups, than with the seduction of Islam as such. Add to this, that more Arabs have only known the worst face from secular powers, autocrats and despots: the Syrian and Iraqi Baath parties, or in a milder form the Ben Ali of Tunisia, the Qaddahfi of Libya or the Mubarak of Egypt, the Yemen of Ali Abdallah Saleh.

2.6 Democracy or Islamist chaos?

There is no need for explaining the violence secreted in the Arab countries to speculate on a particular species of Islam. Enough is to recall the suddenness of their demographic transition, epitomized in this fertility rate slashed from 7.5 to less than 3 or 2 in a matter of four decades, as compared to the centuries it required in Europe.

Hence, were they and might still live in a state of disorientation because they are subjected to a sudden change of mentalities, associated with rising literacy, and going through the same routes than Europe: males literacy, females literacy, contraception and fertility decrease. Many non-Muslim countries alike which are crossing the key stages of literacy and birth control, massive political disruption have also followed: Rwanda, Kenya, Côte d'Ivoire, Sri Lanka, Haiti...to name but just a few.

Researchers both from the North or the South and most media are mistaken while presenting these crises as a regressive phenomenon, whereas they are only crises of transition during which the modernization process disorients people and destabilize political regimes.

It is therefore curious instead of looking at its positive and encouraging trends to view only the negative aspects of Arab demography. In this regard, some recent analyses have pinpointed demography in the Arab or Muslim world as a potential cause for increased radicalization and destabilization. Hence NATO's retired generals and high ranking officers strategic report: "Towards a Grand Strategy for an Uncertain World," just to name one³. The assessment points to the Arab and Moslem countries as the world's most volatile area, namely because of their "**youth bulge**" which increases uncertainty that favors political fanaticism and radical Islam which might spread with ease, fuelled by demographic "explosion".

We are now at the end of the youth bulge. We are in the middle of a universal process of modernization, a long cycle in which literacy, secularization, then declining fertility accentuate at first the differences between areas, then lead to a convergence. The Arab and Muslim world are currently at the heart of the transition to modernity. Some have already joined Europe by low fertility standards: Lebanon, Tunisia, Morocco, Iran... Others are still on the road: Yemen, Palestine, but their fertility is sharply declining. All will have converged with developed regions within a very short time span.

Hence there are grounds for optimism. On the population-economic register, but as we will see on the political one. Reduced wealth disparities, a fairer distribution of knowledge, give fresh impetus to the middle classes and favor pluralism. Therefore, it is not much exaggerated to equate **demographic transition to democratic transition**.

3. THE ROOT TO DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION

- The exact timing of the Arab revolutions was largely unknown. It is like forecasting an earthquake in Kobe or in Port-au-Prince. Seismologists know for sure that a fatal event must happen, still are completely unable to predict when it will occur. Same for social scientists or demographers who can forecast on basis of their indices: literacy,

³ General (ret.) Dr. Klaus Naumann, et. Al, *Towards a grand strategy for an uncertain world-Renewing transatlantic partnership*, Noaber Foundation, 2007, p.157.

urbanization, fertility, marriage, exogamy, youth bulge, unemployment... etc. that something (revolution? rebellion? upheavals?) has to occur in these countries but not when and how.

-
- Namely why Tunisia has opened the way with the first Arab revolution, followed by Egypt, where, by all means, the overall situation was much worst. Why later on Libya and Yemen? How the situation in Syria (and Bahrain) might evolve, in view of their peculiar demographic heterogeneity?
- As underscored, comparative history enables one to understand that we are in the midst of a universal process, where demographic transition is a key component and leads societies from literacy to secularization, to contraception and ultimately to political revolution. A process which started in Europe and had no reasons to stop at the gates of the Arab world. Besides, its concentration in just four decades, is yet another example of the acceleration of history.
- Forty six years ago, Muslim world was viewed by social scientists as a very peculiar planet. Hence Dudley Kirk the renowned American demographer elaborated special set of “laws” for the Muslim demography⁴: It is universally high, shows no significant trend to decline and would remain higher than for adepts of other religions. The collapse of fertility in this region is a vivid proof of the vacuity of such line of reasoning. Only essentialists/culturalists thinkers could have thought that the Arab or Muslim world is by nature adverse to progress or modernity.
- Going one step further we infer that if Arabs have adhered to demographic transition in all its phases, including education⁵, contraception and secularization, they are ready for the long way to political revolution and democratization.
- In-depth transformations at the individual level cannot go without a complete reshuffling of long-established hierarchies such as the absolute paternal authority of the father on his children, less and less acceptable with the uneasy cohabitation of educated children living under the yoke of an illiterate father. Becoming as educated and sometimes more than their husbands, women are less and less supportive of a passive submission to the will of their men. Same can be said about the authority that traditionally the brother hold over his sisters.
- Hence, a cascading silent questioning of the once immutable family structure. But what is occurring at the individual and family level inevitably will spill over at the societal level. Since after all, society is but the projection from the small family level to the large macro-level.
- The questioning of authority never stops at the micro level. The simple person who challenges the authority of his father, will soon contest the legitimacy of a President -especially a President for life-, as is the case in Arab countries.

⁴ Dudley Kirk, “Factors affecting Muslim natality », in Bernard Berelson, *Family Planning and Population programs*, Chicago, 1966

⁵ The acquisition of basic education has been an element of the Arab revolutions much more than the so –called “new technologies, including internet, facebook and twitter, which were only instrument which spread the knowledge and the necessity of the political changes but were not at its roots. Anyway, internet cannot be conceivable without a certain ability to read and write.

- However, one of the risks of demographic transition, derives from the ultimate resistance opposed by the patriarchal and « machist » components of these societies. It requires more than few decades for changing the nature of the relations among sexes from male domination to peaceful and quieter interactions.
- The threat hanging over male's supremacy explain why, for large segments of the society, the nostalgic *Salafist* way of thinking, a return to the mythic perfect society of the beginnings of Islam, seduces some segments of the society, now so visible and audible in the landscape: the Islamic veil, the Islamic beard, the thundering minarets. All in all, beyond the veil, the beard and the minaret, one has to observe the ineluctable progresses of education and contraception.
- For the largest parts of the population (the non-*Salafists*), contraception and delayed age at marriage are now the norms. The small-size family, the pattern to which the Arab societies have adhered, relations among spouses or between parents and children are becoming more egalitarian, less tense, because of the decrease of pressure on family resources. The *pater familias* has no more to reign with an iron fist to impose discipline in an overcrowded household, cluttered with a dozen of children.
- All of which cannot but produce a beneficial input on the societal and political spheres. Although this line of reasoning is not frequent- usually because of the segmentation of social sciences, demography studies population matters, political scientists studies politics-, it is less than frequent to look how individual and family transformations do affect politics. Although, to detach the changes at the individual and family level from those of the global sphere is the utmost futility.
- Pursuing in this issue, it won't be exaggerated to claim that, although on a world scale or on the Arab one there are exceptions, a correlation exists between the stage of demographic transition and the stage of democracy. In other words, in societies where family size is still of the ancient regime, the odds for autocrats or despots to rule are very high. Therefore the transition of the demographic regime to a small family size appears a necessary –although not sufficient- condition to get out from authoritarianism, on the route to democracy.
- Anyway, without surprise there are unavoidable gaps between the tempos of demographic and political transitions. Tunisia, in every respect, the most advanced Arab country: literacy, fertility and marriage, urbanization, gender gap etc. on top of a religious and ethnic homogeneity had to wait until January 2011 to deliver the jasmine revolution. On basis of its good indicators, namely the TFR which was not far from 2 since ten years we could have expected the overthrow of the authoritarian regime earlier.
- At the opposite, Yemen, the most backward on the list, with the worst demographic (a TFR still as high as 5) and socio-economic indicators, far from those of Tunisia, could get rid of its three decades autocrat just few months after Tunisia. Between those two extremes, Egypt, Libya and Syria at the same stage of their demographic transitions, but with so much diverging political itineraries.
- A paradox of history is that most often, it is the political power which is at the genesis of the modernization process, a process that will prove fatal to its survival. Arab rulers, whose sole objectives was and still is to stay in power have unconsciously sowed the seeds which have prepared their fall.
- In Tunisia and almost everywhere, from Bourguiba, the first president for life who would have kept the power for eternity before being quicked out by another autocrat, modernization: access to education, to contraception and secularization, has

worked in accelerating their fall and the emergence of democracy. Other autocrats were more careful. In Syria, quality of education was voluntarily sacrificed, hence its modernizing role.

- With few exception, limited to some periods of their history, no Arab country was able to block for good this social demand which has fuelled the demographic transition which will prove to be the death sentence of these regimes.

4. Conclusion

-
- To sum up in all the Arab or MENA countries:
- The access to a majority of boys being able to read and write,
- followed by a majority of girls being also able to read and write,
- Have increased the level of consciousness of the individuals, or their individuation,
- And led to a mental secularization,
- Followed by contraception, fertility decrease and diminishing family size.
- All are pre-conditions that favour democratic transition
- The common denominator for all these countries? The speed and suddenness of their demographic transition. Even for the more retarded such as Yemen, where fertility although still very high (5 children) was almost the double in 1990.
- Even in the rich and conservative countries of the Arabian Peninsula, demographic transition has been particularly speedy. One can wonder if these countries (except Bahrain) will remain, thanks to their rental economies, protected forever from the currents of Arab upheavals.
- Peoples can not take such a control of their demographic destiny and let others to decide of their future in politics.