



Egypt's Population Bomb

December 4, 2017 **Ilan I. Berman** *Al-Hurra Digital*

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It's the most important Middle Eastern news story that no one is talking about.

Earlier this Fall, Egypt's state statistics agency, the Central Agency for Popular Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS), formally released the findings of its 2016 national census. The results shed important new light on the challenges now confronting the government of president Abdel Fatah al-Sisi in Cairo.

The central conclusion of the CAPMAS survey is that Egypt's population is ballooning. Over the past three decades, the country's population has essentially doubled, rising from 48 million in 1986 to nearly 95 million at the end of last year. Moreover, the pace of this growth appears to be quickening. In the decade between 1986 and 1996, the census notes, Egypt's population grew by just over 11 million souls. In the subsequent decade (1996-2006), it grew by an analogous amount: nearly 13.5 million. But in the ten years since, it has accelerated, growing by some 22 million, and this surge shows no signs of slowing.

This growing cohort, moreover, is among the youngest in the Middle East. More than 1/3rd of all Egyptians (some 36 million souls) are below the age of 15, and one in five is between 15 and 24 years old. Those statistics make Egypt a charter member of the so-called "youth bulge" that dominates society and politics throughout the greater Middle East.

The implications, both for Egypt and for the region, are profound.

The most immediate is economic. Back in 2013, a principal justification for the ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood-dominated government of Mohammed Morsi was its chronic failure to stabilize the country's ailing economy. The unspoken promise was that a new regime, headed by an "old guard" of seasoned warrior-statesmen with General Sisi at the helm, could and would do much better.

But nearly four years on, the Sisi government is struggling to keep the country's economic ship of state afloat. Efforts to pare down extensive existing subsidies on everything from foodstuffs to fuel (a core condition of the massive \$12 billion bailout provided by the International Monetary Fund last Fall) have lagged over worries of sustained social unrest. The national rate of inflation, however, has nonetheless soared, peaking at more than 35 percent this summer - its highest point in decades. Most significantly, from a demographic perspective, the country's job market remains deeply inadequate. At just under 12 percent, the national unemployment rate in Egypt today is only marginally better than the 12.7 percent joblessness that prevailed while Morsi was in office. This statistic, in turn, is weighted heavily toward the country's most vulnerable national constituency. A 2016 study by the Brookings Institution found overall youth unemployment in Egypt to rank at a staggering 30 percent - with the country's most educated youngsters being the most disadvantaged.

This failure is not simply an economic problem. It also represents a distinct security threat, because the growing cohort of idle young Egyptians is optimal fodder for extremist groups.

That's a dynamic that the Sisi government can ill-afford. Since assuming power in 2013, the new regime in Cairo has faced what is essentially a three-front counterterrorism fight. The first involves Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, the powerful Islamic State regional franchise that has ensconced itself in the Sinai (and which continues to pose a real danger to Egyptian security, as recent events have tragically demonstrated). The second is situated to Egypt's west, where the Islamic State has established a major (and expanding) foothold amid Libya's ongoing political disorder. The third and final front is domestic, posed by parts of the Muslim Brotherhood that have adopted a more radical, confrontational stance toward the Egyptian state since their ouster from political power in 2013.

Each of these problems could become significantly worse in the near future, if augmented by the growing cadre of young Egyptians without a tangible economic stake in the country's future.

For its part, the Egyptian government is well aware of the destabilizing potential of the country's population boom. President Sisi himself has described the country's surging population as a potential threat to the state on a par with terrorism. And in recent weeks, authorities in Cairo have issued new recommendations and launched legislative initiatives relating to population control in an effort to mitigate the problem in the years ahead.

What isn't in evidence yet, however, is a national strategy designed to cope with the current challenge - one that meaningfully engages and occupies the country's growing, youthful citizenry. And without one, Egypt's population boom could become a population bomb in the not-so-distant future, with dire consequences for the state and for the larger region.

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