

ALARMING FACTS ON POPULATION GROWTH IN ARAB COUNTRIES ⁽¹⁾

"The Population of the Arab World is growing at an alarming three percent a year and, at the present rate, will double in about 20 years."

There are at present more than 150 million Arabs spread out over 21 independent Arab countries. This number is expected to reach about 300 million in the year 2000.

This rapid growth is not primarily provoked by a surge in the number of births. The chief cause is the dramatic fall in the death rate from 37 per 1000 in 1850 to 15 per 1000 in 1970. The dramatic fall is due to various reasons: fewer famine crises, less tribal warfare, improved agriculture systems and storage techniques. Other reasons are better sanitation and water supplies and the gradual introduction of modern medicine.

Most important among the causes of rapid population growth is the fall in infant mortality which shows a potential for further decline in most countries.

The population growth is one of the most acute problems to be handled by Arab states. It is in fact the chief problem of the developing regions of the world where the population is expected to rise from three billion in 1975 to five billions in the year 2000, while in developed regions only a slight increase will occur: from 1.1 billion in 1975 to 1.3 billion in 2000²

"With the present population growth rates, all resources have to be doubled every 20 to 30 years just to maintain the present standard of living."³ In the 1990s the world may have to face a shortage of food similar to the oil shortage in the 1970s.

In handling the situation, Arab states have adopted diverse policies. Three of them, Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco, which comprise about 40 percent of the total population of the Arab world, have decided that their population growth rates must be curbed. Population policy has been more successful in Egypt and Tunisia than in Morocco.

In other countries like Jordan, Algeria and Syria, active support of contraceptive services has been provided by governments, while in Sudan, North Yemen, South Yemen, Lebanon and Bahrain, governments have been less active along this line.

On the other hand, a few Arab countries feel the necessity of adopting a policy of accelerating population growth, either because they are thinly populated, as is the case of Iraq and Libya, or because the large proportion of non-nationals and oil wealth induce them to encourage higher birth rates. Such is the case of the Gulf countries, excluding Bahrain.

"The United Nations recognizes access to knowledge about family planning as a basic human right. National family planning associations, members of the International Planned Parenthood Federation, were generally the first to provide organized family planning services, but till the early 1970s, the only governments to provide such services were Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia. The situation has improved over the last five years. Ten of the 21 Arab countries have IPPF member associations and 12 governments now provide some family-planning services" (*The Middle East*, p. 60). Family planning all over the Arab world is gaining ground and importance.⁽⁴⁾

(1) Chiefly condensed from "Running to Stand Still", (Population Revolution), published in the *The Middle East*, July 1979, no. 57, pp. 57-60.

(2) *WIN NEWS*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1979, p. 19.

(3) *The Middle East*, *Ibid.* p. 59.

(4) See *Al-Raida* no. 2. p. 10 and no. 3, p. 7.