



## *Demography and Democracy*

The Middle East and North Africa have recently experienced one of the highest population growth rates in the world, which has profoundly affected the wider region and its institutions. In addition, the current period of unprecedented political turbulence has further complicated the picture, resulting in uprisings and resistance movements that have coincided with intense shifts in sociocultural norms, as well as economic and political change. Through highlighting the links between population dynamics and the social and political transitions, this book provides a new view of these contemporary regional changes. The complexity of the changes is further explained in the context of *demographic* transitions (mortality, fertility, migration) that work hand in hand with *development* (economic and social modernization) and, ultimately, *democratization* (political modernization). These three *Ds* (demographic, development and democratic transitions) are central to Elhum Haghighat's analysis of the Middle East and North Africa at this crucial time.

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Transitions in the Middle East and North  
Africa

ELHUM HAGHIGHAT  
*The City University of New York*



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*To Batool Morakkabi Kharajpour Haghighat, who has never  
been forgotten and never will*

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## *Author's Note*

The links between demographic forces and political outcomes are complex and are mitigated by many other variables such as geopolitical forces, available resources (e.g., oil wealth), historical experiences and the quality of institutions, governance and policies. I know I am trying to describe a very intricate picture of major changes in the MENA region, and I am also striving to provide a new lens through which to view those changes. The fact is, the MENA region is multifaceted. Demographic transitions (mortality, fertility, migration – the three pillars of population change) work hand in hand with development (economic and social change) and, ultimately, democratization (political change). The three *D*'s are essential to my thesis: MENA societies are moving toward democratization but at different speeds and along different paths when compared with conventional wisdom/theories that project a process that parallels what occurred in the West.

The process of modernization in the MENA is unlike the process of Western development (explained in Chapter 1). The Western model, among other things, predicts that as societies modernize, they become secular; religion should not have a place in the state and should only be influential in people's private lives. This reductionist perspective is rejected. Religion is an important part of these societies and their states and, in fact, traditional religious institutions provide citizens with venues to work for reform, to advance democracy and to develop a unique sense of *social and political identity*. This is not unique to the MENA; many other developing countries have experienced a similar effect (e.g., Indonesia and some of the Latin American countries).

The "Clash of Civilizations" thesis offers a divisive perspective where "civilizations" and their differences (not similarities) cause regions such as the MENA to fall behind in development, and religion (particularly Islam) is not compatible with socioeconomic development and the modernization process. Sen (1999, 2007) calls the core paradigm of the "Clash of Civilizations" reductionist; its focus is on us versus them, where democracy and rationalism are familiar Western

ideals but foreign to the non-Western world. The “Clash of Civilizations” polarizes cultures and focuses on the politics of otherness (Said, 1993). MENA societies and their social and political institutions *are* closely intertwined with Islam in different degrees, forms and shapes, but it is important to keep in mind *how and why* it has evolved to this point. Its historical, social and political existence must be acknowledged, understood and contextualized. That mechanism is the focus of this book. Courbage and Todd’s (2007) demographic study of Muslim countries focuses on the causes and consequences of declining fertility, and tackles and dismisses the “Clash of Civilizations” thesis within the demographic frame of transition in Muslim countries. Literacy improvements, higher education (especially among females) and declining fertility rates are argued to be fundamental causes of change and transformation in Muslim countries, which in turn changes family dynamics and gender relations. Further, it challenges authorities and authoritarian regimes.

In the Western model, industrial capitalism spurs modernization. But that took centuries in the West. In the MENA region, demographic transitions and economic development have proceeded much more quickly. That is a significant difference. Civil society and liberalism are expected to expand in modernizing societies, with both citizens and the state focusing on equal rights and privileges. But political modernization is a slow process. Among most of the MENA countries, socio-economic developments are impressive while political development lags, but that does not necessarily mean modernization will never happen and that political activism is absent.

Within the MENA societies experiencing development, the burning question is this: When and under what conditions does socioeconomic development lead to democratization and political development? The cause-and-effect relationship between democracy and development is complex. Lipset (1960, 1994) argues that modernization manifests itself through *social conditions* that in turn foster democratic culture; modernization becomes visible through changes in *social conditions* that *promote democratic culture, a large, educated middle class* and more *political awareness*. These social conditions also work as *mediating variables*. For example, demographic transitions (e.g., lowering of mortality and fertility), education, health, urbanization and improvement in socioeconomic status all work in favor of the democratization process. Lerner (1958) identifies micro-level (and individual) factors of

urbanization, education and communication (e.g., media) as the *contributing factors to the process of modernization and democratization* (also see Boix, 2003; Acemoglu and Robinson, 2005; and Inglehart and Welzel, 2005 for an expanded version of this discourse). While Lipset (1960) and others have focused on the importance of economic development and its various intervening factors (e.g., higher standard of living due to urbanization and spread of education), Dyson (2010, 2012) does not challenge any of the social phenomena that contribute to the role of democratization; he does observe, however, that “demographic processes have huge consequences for development [and] the fact that the demographic transition has played a fundamental role in the creation of the modern world has been neglected to a remarkable degree.”

States obviously play a crucial role in implementing democratic values and institutions (a top-down approach). But often, the lingering values of past regimes, totalitarianism and dictatorships do not leave room for political liberalization and development. Civil societies are important for modernizing societies and their contributions to the democratization of nation-states are significant (a ground-up approach). Civil society organizations play a significant role in the MENA region. Piety movements across the MENA region often operate through civil society organizations and are reformist in nature. They are scrutinizing social and political institutions and perceive a need for adjustment and reform. The reform, however, is legitimized through core religious values: honoring the dignity of people and bringing justice to social and political structures. MENA societies are creating unique identities contextualized within their modernization and development experiences. Being *modern* is acceptable but being *Western* is not. The focus of the reform is to create a modern identity distinct from the Western paradigm. For example, across the MENA, female piety movements operate within mosques challenging the conventions of the traditionally male domain. They are assuming responsibility to alter the oppressive structures to make changes in their lives (Krause, 2012; Mahmood, 2005). Western feminism is rejected, but female piety movements are on a quest for inclusion and equality within the context of a male-centric culture. They are also expanding definitions of civil society organizations – beyond those funded by the United Nations and the World Bank, for example. They include charity organizations run by mosques, informal gatherings in citizens’ homes

(e.g., *Diwaniyyas*, tea and coffee houses, intellectual salons, virtual blogging and sites). These are mechanisms of political education and empowerment that are present in the MENA region. These venues have often been critical in political mobilization (e.g., voting, strategizing, empowering). Political development and mobilization is a *process*. And *change* and *continuity* are its key (Rivetti, 2015).

Generally speaking, all demographic indicators have improved in the MENA region from the wealthiest (Qatar) to the poorest (Yemen) within the past few decades. This is an indication of the modernization and development of their economies, infrastructure, health and education. Each country, however, is experiencing modernization and demographic transition at different stages and levels.

Other than the comparative demographic data used throughout this book, I use four case studies of MENA countries (Yemen, Qatar, Tunisia and Iran), with different but connected histories, to portray the varying degrees of progress and achievement among the variables of change. These four case studies illustrate the unique experiences, the complexities, dynamics and dimensions of development and the modernization experience. They also contextualize the process of demographic and democratic transitions in the MENA and put it in a historical, socioeconomic and political framework. Broadly speaking, Tunisia and Iran are in the later stages of their demographic transitions, Qatar is in the mid/later stage and Yemen is in the earlier stage because of its high mortality and fertility rates and its high rate of poverty. Each country's experience is unique but connected to the regional, historical, global, political, economic and social change within the context of demographic transitions and development. This brings us to the issues of the historical experiences of these countries: History matters. It reveals how past experiences shape the current political, social and economic experiences and realities. It highlights the role of the international community, the role of colonialism and the role of US and other foreign forces in the region. It explains how oil and other resources have shaped and are still shaping their development strategies.

## *Acknowledgments*

This book is another intellectual exploration of my academic and personal experiences. Growing up in Iran and traveling extensively with my family while I was a child and a young teenager, I saw firsthand the geographic, ethnic, linguistic, religious and socioeconomic diversity of Iran and the region. As an idealistic teenager, I observed the Iranian revolution and street demonstrations. Like most Iranians of my generation, I was in search of equality, justice and political and social change. Once the Iranian revolution of 1978–1979 was in its roaring stages, I was privileged enough to leave Iran (in November 1978) for my new destination and new home: the United States.

Because of my father's position as the executive director of the health department in the province of Sistan-va-Baluchestan, we lived in the most impoverished region of Iran for several years. I saw poverty and what it means to be destitute and desperate. In Shiraz and Tehran (where we also lived before and after our residence in Sistan-va-Baluchestan), I saw how the privileged middle and upper classes lived in luxury compared to the disadvantaged people in the province of Sistan-va-Baluchestan. My father as a medical doctor oversaw reducing infant, child and adult mortality rates by introducing simple measures such as vaccinations, better nutrition, personal hygiene, family planning programs and other health initiatives that opened a new window of hope and improvement in the challenging lives of the people of Sistan-va-Baluchestan. Today, forty years later, Sistan-va-Baluchestan, the largest province in Iran, is still the least advantaged in terms of resources and health measures, but it has come a long way from what I remember. The city of Zahedan is now a large city with a university. Health and education resources are much more widely available, and what were small towns and villages are now large cities and towns in the province. The university is the second largest university in the country with two campuses and an international campus in Chabehar. It has a cadre of professors and

researchers (some female – both as professors and a sizable percentage as students). This was out of reach for the people in the late 1960s and 1970s and in a few decades, the region has been transformed. Poverty is still widespread, but resources are much more available than decades ago. The population of Iran in 1978 (the year I left) was recorded to be 36 million. Today it has surpassed 80 million. In 1978, life expectancy at birth was fifty-five years of age. In 2014, it was reported to be seventy-one years. In 1978, Iranian women on average were expected to bear more than six children during their lifetime (total fertility rate) while today's Iranian women are expected to have 1.85 (below replacement level). This rate is as low as it is for American women and even lower than it is for today's French women. These dramatic demographic transformations within the context of development and democratization (in Iran and across the MENA region) are the focus of this book.

Those early realizations and experiences in Iran and later in the United States as a first-generation immigrant followed me throughout my intellectual journey and scholarship as a professor and planted the seeds for most of my work (including this book) as a social scientist.

Life's journey continues, but people who influenced me personally and intellectually are never forgotten. I am grateful to so many people for their influence in helping me develop a strong sense of intellectual leadership. There are many, but I cannot help but mention a few that were instrumental with their sharp minds and unconditional support during the completion of this work. Reading the works of Tim Dyson at the London School of Economics and Political Science along with John R. Weeks at San Diego State University had a profound influence on my understanding of demographic trends of the modern world and the MENA region.

I extend my gratitude to my colleagues and friends who have been there for me in my many moments of frustration and long hours of writing and researching. I am grateful to Professors Ira Bloom, Luisa Borrell, Dene Hurley and Mary Rogan for their friendship and support. Former Provost Mary Papazian and her support of my scholarship on the social and political issues in the Middle East were instrumental to the birth of this book. She believed in a thriving academic community, challenging academic authority and bringing truth to the discipline. At the later stages of the book, Provost Harriet Fayne and Dean Gautam Sen's support proved to be instrumental in completing the manuscript during my duties as Chair of my department and while wearing different



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I extend my gratitude to the brilliant Syrian political artist, Wissam Al-Jazairy for allowing me to use one of his masterpieces, “Dictator and Dancers,” for the cover of this book. His painting brought a new dimension to the book and connected the world of an artist to my world of academia.

I am grateful to, Paul, for his unconditional support and respecting my personal space and time so I could disappear for days (sometimes weeks) in my home office and exclusively focus on this work. As always, the support of, Justin Arash and Brandon Ashkan, was essential and invigorating during many long days, weeks and months of writing and researching. Last but not least, the hundreds of thousands of people who have faced opposition, persecution, oppression and suppression but stood strong to make a difference in search of justice in the Middle East and North Africa are my *true heroes*. They deserve to be acknowledged and remembered for their *heroic acts and collective voices*. I read about their stories and experiences and those heroes continue to inspire me in both my life and my intellectual journey.

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