

Challenges of Demographic Pressures and Resource Scarcity on the Political Economy in the Levant & MENA Region

Özlem TÜR

Prof. Dr., Department of International Relations, Middle East Technical University

To cite this article: Tür, Özlem, “Challenges of Demographic Pressures and Resource Scarcity on the Political Economy in the Levant & MENA Region”, *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 15, No. 60, 2018, pp. 75-87, DOI: [10.33458/uidergisi.525099](https://doi.org/10.33458/uidergisi.525099)

To link to this article: <https://dx.doi.org/10.33458/uidergisi.525099>

Submitted: 15 November 2017
Printed Version: 01 December 2018

Uluslararası İlişkiler Konseyi Derneği | International Relations Council of Turkey
Uluslararası İlişkiler – Journal of International Relations
E-mail : bilgi@uidergisi.com.tr

All rights of this paper are reserved by the *International Relations Council of Turkey*. With the exception of academic quotations, no part of this publication may be reproduced, redistributed, sold or transmitted in any form and by any means for public usage without a prior permission from the copyright holder. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the author(s)'s and do not reflect those of *the Council*, editors of the journal, and other authors.

Challenges of Demographic Pressures and Resource Scarcity on the Political Economy in the Levant & MENA Region

Özlem TÜR

*Professor, Department of International Relations, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey.
E-mail: tur@metu.edu.tr*

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to analyze the challenges of population growth and resource scarcity in the Arab countries of the Levant. As the region has suffered from ongoing conflicts, civil wars, and political crises, the challenges of population growth and resource scarcity, coupled with environmental challenges has often been overlooked. This paper focuses on the problems associated with a growing population, such as an increased likelihood of unemployment and the emergence of a middle class poor in the region. Coupled with crony capitalism and patronage networks, it argues that the problems of youth are immediate and the necessity of inclusive policies is pressing. The paper follows by with a section that addresses environmental challenges and climate change. The linkage between environmental degradation and security is analyzed. The paper problematizes the Arab state, its regime survival strategies and its resistance to change as the main impediments for sustainability, growth and inclusiveness in the Levant.

Keywords: Youth, Demographic Change, Climate Change, Crony Capitalism, Arab State.

Levant ve MENA Bölgesi Politik Ekonomisinde Demografik Baskılar ve Kaynak Kıtlığı Sorunları

ÖZET

Bu makale, Levant'taki Arap ülkelerinde yaşanan nüfus artışı ve kaynak kıtlığı sorunlarını analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Süregelen çatışmalar, iç savaşlar ve siyasi krizlerden mustarip olan bölgede, nüfus artışı, kaynak kıtlığı ve çevresel sorunlar genellikle görmezden gelinmektedir. Bu çalışma, bölgede nüfus artışıyla bağlantılı bir biçimde artan işsizlik ihtimali ve fakir bir orta sınıfin ortaya çıkması gibi sorunlara odaklanmaktadır. Kayırmacı kapitalizmin patronaj ağlarla birleştiği bir ortamda gençliğin sorunlarının acil biçimde çözülmesi gerektiği ve kapsayıcı politikalara duyulan ihtiyacın hayati olduğu savunulmaktadır. Çalışma çevresel sorunlar ve iklim değişikliğine de değinmektedir. Çevresel bozulma ve güvenlik arasındaki ilişki analiz edilmektedir. Makale, Arap devleti, rejim bekası stratejileri ve değişime dair direncin Levant'ta sürdürülebilirlik, büyüme ve kapsayıcılığın önündeki en önemli engeller olduğunu sorunsallaştırmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Gençlik, Demografik Değişim, İklim Değişikliği, Kayırmacı Kapitalizm, Arap Devleti.

Introduction

Back in 1995, Alan Richards warned us about an overemphasis on conflict and wars in the Middle East. While the region has undoubtedly witnessed many conflicts, interventions and civil strife, as Richards argues, “there is a quieter, deeper source of instability - mounting economic problems”. The Middle East has been falling behind other regions with its “inability to curb population growth”, which has produced a youth bulge, engendering “a rising tide of young people seeking jobs”. As the population increases, there is “a quietly increasing challenge to acquire adequate food”, thus the region “cannot feed itself; food dependency will grow in the near future, as the water constraint binds more tightly”. Richards further argues that, “there is a way out” and is rather straightforward as “technocrats know what to do”. Yet, the problem lies with the leaders/states as they “lack the will and the skill to pull it off. Weak political systems may well deliver ‘too little, too late.’”¹

This paper aims to address these challenges — that of population growth and resource scarcity in the Levant and also adds the environmental challenges as a multiplying factor, and argues that despite many studies that call for immediate attention and action, the region suffers from a lack of political will in tackling these problems.² Trying to grapple with hard security issues, bread and butter issues are often of secondary concern. Yet, as the human security concerns are neglected, the stability in the region is at higher risk.

When the Arab uprisings began in Tunisia and spread to Egypt and beyond by the end of 2010, many analysts rushed to talk about population growth, unemployment, increasing food prices and the ensuing inequality in the region. One of the core discussions since then has been how the radical republics of the region, shaking up with demands for change are unable to respond to the growing challenges. The Arab Human Development Report (AHDR) of 2009 highlighted how the human security or lack of it in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region constituted an important watershed in these discussions.³ The report argued that “the trend in the region has been to focus more on the security of the state than on the security of the people” and called for a new approach that focused on the “human as the main agent”. In a way, as mentioned in the beginning of this paper, parallel to what Richards was arguing more than a decade ago, the report criticized the emphasis on the traditional conception of security and underlined that such an emphasis “led to missed opportunities to ensure the security of the human person”. Thus, what is faced in the region resulted in “an all-too-common sense of limited opportunities and personal insecurity, witnessed in the world’s highest levels of unemployment, deep and contentious patterns of exclusion”.⁴ As is underlined in the report, for decades the Arab citizen, suffered from seven dimensions of threat: 1) People and their insecure environment; 2) The State and its insecure people; 3) The vulnerability of those lost from sight; 4) Volatile growth, high unemployment and persisting poverty; 5) Hunger, malnutrition and food insecurity; 6) Health security challenges; and 7) Occupation and military interventions.⁵

1 Alan Richards, “Economic Roots of Instability in the Middle East”, *Middle East Policy*, Vol.4, No.1-2, 1995, p.175.

2 The paper mainly deals with the Arab countries of the Levant - Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and the Occupied Territories, and excludes a detailed analysis of Israel and Turkey.

3 *Arab Human Development Report 2009 – Challenges for Human Security in the Arab Region*, New York, UNDP, 2009.

4 *Ibid.*, p.V.

5 *Ibid.*, p.2-15.

The inability to respond to these concerns thus lies at the heart of the uprisings. Yet, as will be argued below, why the uprisings happened at the moment they did, by the end of 2010, and not before has a great deal to do with the Arab state and its regime survival priorities. The demonstration of frustration among the young “middle class poor”, whose hopes for a better future were dashed due to the inability and unwillingness of the states to respond to these challenges for decades, is important to discuss in this context. As a demonstration of the importance of this fact, as will be discussed below, the AHDR of 2016 focuses on the youth population. Yet, to what extent the points underlined in the Report will be taken into account and will help the Arab states to overcome their survival priorities and act on the youth problems is altogether another question.

Demographic Pressure

The region hosts one of the fastest growing populations of the world. High fertility rates in the Arab world in general (six children per women in the 1980s) have produced a youth bulge between the ages of 15 and 24. One of the most striking characteristics of the MENA, no doubt, has been its rapid population growth. In four decades population numbers have more than quadrupled, rising from 124 million in 1970 and reaching 350 million. By 2050 the population of MENA is expected to reach around 600 million, 685 million in 2070 and 845 million in 2100 according to United Nations medium-fertility scenario. What is also important to note is that the share of the youth in the population in 2010 was 27.9 percent.⁶ The number of youth is expected to rise to 100 million by 2035.⁷ In the high-fertility scenario, MENA’s population is expected to double by 2080, which together with projected climate impacts, puts the resources of the region, especially water and land, under enormous pressure as it will be coupled with the high existing pressure to create new employment opportunities.

R population growth is challenging enough for countries, but when the shares of certain population groups within states grow more rapidly than others, a so-called “differential fertility”, the issue becomes even more challenging. Most countries of the Levant are composed of critical minorities as well as limitations on certain groups’ access to political power. Changing population dynamics, one group growing more than the others, complicates the political and social dynamics. The Alawite minority in Syria, the Shi’a and the Kurds in Iraq, the secular/orthodox divide in Israel, rapid population growth in the Occupied Palestinian Territories as well as the population ratios of East Bankers in Jordan are critical. According to the recently released figures by the Israel Bureau of Statistics, there is “a massive rise in birth rates in the Jewish state.”⁸ Accordingly, 181,405 babies were born in Israel in 2016, showing “a 92 percent increase over the number of babies born in 1980. Of those babies, 73.9 percent were born to Jewish women, and 23.3 percent to Arab women.”⁹ Considering

6 *Arab Human Development Report 2016 – Youth and the Prospects for Human Development in a Changing Reality*, New York, UNDP, 2016, p.15

7 Ragui Assaad and Farzaneh Roudi-Fahimi, “Youth in the Middle East and North Africa: Demographic Opportunity or Challenge”, Washington, Population Reference Bureau, April 2007, p.3. <https://assets.prb.org/pdf07/YouthinMENA.pdf>, (Accessed on 8 March 2018).

8 “Israeli Birth Rates on the Rise”, *Israel Today*, 14 March 2018, <http://www.israeltoday.co.il/NewsItem/tabid/178/nid/33572/Default.aspx>, (Accessed on 20 March 2018).

9 *Ibid.*

that the birth rate is higher especially among the ultra-Orthodox Jews, who have low participation in the work force, this stands as a divisive issue for the future of the society, as well as a constraint on economic growth.¹⁰ However challenging these population changes may be, none of these cases pose as important of a threat to stability as does the case of Lebanon. The confessional system established in Lebanon is based on the 1932 census, which determined the Maronite community as the majority.¹¹ Since then, although the population ratios are considered to have radically changed, no other census has been conducted. The Shi'a population has grown considerably and is thought to constitute a majority in the country, yet a parallel change in the system is not permitted.¹² The emergence of the Amal movement in 1970s, as the Movement of the Dispossessed, was an attempt to change this, while the popularity of Hezbollah from 1980s is also related to this fact. In addition to general challenges that a growing population poses for the states, differential changes, when combined with lack of political opportunities and change, creates a suitable environment for more radical movements to grow, deepening the fragility of the state. When thinking about population growth, this aspect is also especially pressing for the Levant countries.

Growing Youth Bulge and Unemployment

As is often underlined, one of the most important characteristics of the region is its young population — that is the youth bulge — that constitutes the fastest growing segment of the Arab population.¹³ Around 60 percent of the population is considered to be less than 25 years of age, making the region one of the most youthful regions in the world, with a median age of 22 years, compared to a global average of 28.5. As the UN Report of 2011 argued, although such a large number of youth “could become the backbone of strong economies and a vibrant future if they had the right education, skills, and job opportunities”, they are challenged with a lack of opportunities and high unemployment.¹⁴ In line with what Richards and Waterbury argue, population growth has “retarded the development process and stressed the polity” in the region.¹⁵ One of the most important challenges, presented by the increasing population, is unemployment. According to International Labor Organization, youth unemployment is higher in the MENA region than in any other region of the world.¹⁶ While the world average for unemployment is six percent and the youth unemployment is 12.6 percent, the numbers reach 10.2 percent for total

10 Tova Cohen, “Israel has the highest birth rate in the developed world, and that’s becoming a problem”, *Reuters*, 25 September 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/israel-has-the-highest-birth-rate-in-the-developed-world-and-thats-becoming-a-problem-2015-9>, (Accessed on 7 February 2018).

11 For a discussion on the 1932 census and its significance see Rania Maktabi, “The Lebanese Census of 1932 Revisited. Who are the Lebanese?”, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.26, No.2, 1999, p.219-241.

12 For a discussion on the changing ratios of different sects, see William Harris, *The New Face of Lebanon – History’s Revenge*, Princeton, NJ, Markus Wiener Publishers, 2006, p.67-76.

13 For details see the United Nations Report by Farzaneh Roudi, *Youth Population and Employment in the Middle East and North Africa: Opportunity or Challenge*, United Nations Expert Group Meeting on Adolescents, Youth and Development, July 2011, http://www.un.org/esa/population/meetings/egm-adolescents/p06_roudi.pdf, (Accessed on 30 January 2108).

14 Ibid.

15 Alan Richards and John Waterbury (Eds.), *A Political Economy of the Middle East*, 3rd ed., Boulder, Colorado, Westview Press, 2013, p.72.

16 International Labour Organization, “Global Employment Trends for Youth 2015 - MENA region retains highest youth unemployment rate in the world”, 8 October 2015, http://www.ilo.org/beirut/media-centre/news/WCMS_412797/lang--en/index.htm, (Accessed on 30 January 2018).

unemployment and 27 percent for youth unemployment in the MENA and is highest among some of the Levant countries — Jordan, Lebanon and the Occupied Territories. As is presented in the table below, youth unemployment reaches 28 percent in Jordan and over 40 percent in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.¹⁷ Rapid population growth requires states to “spend [more] money to create jobs”, and creating entry-level jobs becomes especially challenging.

Table 1. Unemployment Rates in the MENA Region and the Levant Countries

Country	Year	Total Unemployment	Youth Unemployment
World	2011	6	12.6
MENA	2011	10.2	27
Syria	2010	8.4	18.3
Lebanon	2007	9	22.1
Jordan	2010	12.5	28.1
Occupied Territories	2008	23.7	40.2

Source: Mirkin, “*Arab Spring: Demographics in a Region in transition*”, p. 23.

A look at the basic facts surrounding unemployment in the Levant — although there are differences between the countries — reveals four general and important aspects that are worth noting: First, unemployment is often greater in the cities than in the countryside; second, it mainly affects the youth; third, educated workers are more highly unemployed than uneducated ones; fourth, unemployment rates for women exceed that of men.¹⁸ The young population requires long-term investment in education and services before they can be economically productive, as well as a clean environment and sufficient resources to sustain them. As they complete their education (at different levels), the youth need jobs to sustain themselves and build families. Yet, this is not an easy task.

Asaf Bayat describes a “middle-class poor”¹⁹ to refer to the region’s educated youth and what Farhad Khosrokhavar calls a “would-be middle class”²⁰ reflects this phenomenon. The region hosts an important youth population that is well educated, connected with the outside world, and uses social media very effectively, but have little chance of being the future elite. As the Arab Human Development Report of 2016 underlines, during the 2000s, the region witnessed the highest level of skilled emigration in the world; as young people cannot find jobs, they look for suitable conditions elsewhere.²¹ Those that stayed behind “being cut from the political and economic elite” faced a “constant feeling of anxiety” and frustration due to the lack of available qualified jobs. Despite being well educated, this group is mostly excluded from the labor market, political mechanisms and the countries’ ruling coalition mostly because of the ‘crony capitalism’ prevalent in most of

17 Barry Mirkin, “Arab Spring Demographics in a Region in Transition”, *Arab Human Development Report – Research Paper Series*, New York, UNDP, 2013, p.22-23.

18 Ibid.

19 Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2013.

20 Farhad Khosrokhavar, *The New Arab Revolutions That Shook the World*, Boulder, London, Paradigm Publishers, 2012.

21 *Arab Human Development Report 2016*, p.27

these countries. The developmentalist state model based on import substitution industrialization, adopted by the radical republics during the 1950s and 1960s created an overgrown state sector in the 'socialist' Arab Republics. Crumbling under the need for economic reform in the 1980s, these countries, rather than pursuing a full-scale reform, chose to adopt "selective liberalizations" that would enlarge the ruling coalition rather than bring about any future change.²² Thus, the new elite who benefitted from the reforms were regime-friendly, loyal entrepreneurs that would serve the continuation of the regime and in return themselves. In this system, private investors who could link up with the state were presumably in a better position, making use of governmental licensing and often obtaining cheaper public sector inputs while supplying state-owned enterprises with 'favorably priced' inputs.²³

There has been a strategic alliance between the state and this new elite as the "businessmen and bureaucrats have learned to manipulate economic policy to maximize personal benefit at the expense of national development"²⁴ and the governments were "hostage to the politically primordial need to generate and disseminate patronage."²⁵ For example, in the case of Syria, Sadowski puts it bluntly:

Corporate bonds are supposed to pursue profits, not popularity and politicians are supposed to increase the public welfare, not their bank accounts. Patronage tends to violate this separation: It is the most 'economic' of political relationships...It is the inequality not the inefficiency of patronage that offends Syrians. If everyone had equal access to patronage few would complain.²⁶

How Bashar Asad's regime has modernized its authoritarian outlook by relying more on crony capitalists and how this has led to a more durable regime with long-term costs is a point underlined by Hinnebusch.²⁷ As he emphasizes, at the heart of the regime coalition in Syria were "the 'crony capitalists', the rent-seeking alliances of political brokers (led by Asad's mother's family) and the regime supportive bourgeoisie". By creating and nurturing its "own" capitalists, the Syrian regime aimed to "survive the incremental transition to a partial market economy and since no significant business venture was possible without regime insiders taking a percentage, regime crony capitalists developed intimate partnerships with wider elements of the bourgeoisie."²⁸ It is interesting to see that it was this bourgeoisie, and not the Ba'ath Party, that funded Asad's 2007 re-election campaign. Although being more productive, the businessmen of Aleppo were less connected to the regime and therefore received less state benefit. How they managed to survive and triumph in this restrictive

22 For this argument see Raymond Hinnebusch, "Syria: The Politics of Economic Liberalization", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol.18, No.2, 1997, p.249-265; Steven Heydemann, "The Political Logic of Economic Rationality: selective stabilization in Syria", H. J. Barkey (Ed.), *The Politics of Economic Reform in the Middle East*, New York, St Martin's Press, 1992, p.11-37.

23 Nazih Ayubi, *Over-Stating the Arab State*, New York, I. B Tauris, 1995, p.345.

24 Yahya Sadowski, *Political Vegetables? Businessmen and Bureaucrats in the: Development of Egyptian Agriculture*, Washington, D.C., Brookings Institution, 1991.

25 Robert Springborg, "The Political Economy of the Arab Spring", *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol.16, No.3, 2011, p.432.

26 Yahya Sadowski, "Baathists ethics and the Spirit of Satté Capitalism: Patronage and the Party in Contemporary Syria", P. Chelkowski and R. J. Pranger (Eds.), *Ideology and Power in the Middle East*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1988, p.168-69.

27 Raymond Hinnebusch, "Syria: from 'authoritarian upgrading' to revolution?", *International Affairs*, Vol.88 No.1, 2012, p.101-102.

28 Ibid.

environment was thanks to the opening to Turkey. Other productive “medium-and small-scale capital was, however, marginalized and alienated.”²⁹

Without links to the state, the chances for businesses to survive are very small in the MENA region. The countries of the Levant are no exception. In this context, when new jobs are created, they are often earmarked for the families of loyal businessmen, not for ordinary citizens. It was this cronyism, according to Cammett and Diwan, which lied at the core of the feelings of inequality and frustration that triggered the Arab uprisings.³⁰

Youth Bulge, Social Instability and Conflict

In addition to economic challenges and unemployment problems, the youth bulge in the Arab countries, the Levant region being no exception, is seen as one of the main drivers of social instability and conflict.³¹ But is there a direct linkage between population increase and security challenges? Do youth bulges create political violence and social conflict? Although this question has been discussed in the literature for long time, it has come back to the forefront since the Arab uprisings.

Moller, back in 1968, argued that the presence of a large number of adolescents and young adults is likely to influence the political affairs so as to generate violent conflicts.³² There is a cause and effect relationship between such an increase and political instability. Mesquida and Weiner argue that it is particularly young men who engage in collective risk taking. The relative number of young males in a given population is likely to influence political affairs and to lead to collective violence. A population profile that is disproportionately young makes the occurrence of political violence extremely probable. Their conclusion is that the presence of a relatively large number of men makes coalitional aggression more probable, particularly when the resources needed to attract a mate are insufficiently available or poorly distributed.³³

Stuck in between the lack of jobs and crony capitalists, the MENA youth have little hope for their future. It was this combination of a youth bulge, high employment and the feeling of frustration that moved young people to the streets in 2010/11. Their high education and social media networks made them highly equipped for the job market; yet their hopes for the future were limited. Although unemployment was high, economic growth was slow, and food prices were high, these were not new dynamics and had been present in the region for the past few decades. What explains the uprisings in this particular moment cannot be understood without the accumulated frustration based on a combination of economic factors as well as the closed regime coalitions.

29 Ibid.

30 Melani Cammett and Ishac Diwan, “Conclusion: The Political Economy of the Arab Uprisings”, Richards and Waterbury, *A Political Economy of the Middle East*, p.414.

31 For a general analysis that looks at the relationship between population growth and security see, Jack A. Goldstone, “Population and Security: How Demographic Change Can Lead to Violent Conflict”, *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol.56, No.1, Fall 2002, p.3-22.

32 Herbert Moller, “Youth as a Force in the Modern World”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol.10, No.3, 1968, p.237-260.

33 Christian G. Mesquida and Neil I. Wiener, “Human Collective Aggression: A behavioral ecology perspective”, *Ethology and Sociobiology*, Vol.17, No.4, July 1996, p.247-262.

Is There a Way Out for the Youth?

The Arab Human Development Report of 2016, titled *Youth and the Prospects for Human Development in a Changing Reality*, propose a way out of the demographic pressure the region is experiencing. The report makes three important recommendations: “To enhance the basic capabilities of young people to allow them to realize their full potential”; “to widen the opportunities available to young people for self-fulfillment by providing suitable job opportunities, [...] enabling them to participate actively in government and public institutions”; and “to achieve peace and security and strengthen the role of youth.”³⁴ The last objective seems the most improbable, as the region is in a constant state of conflict and the imminent danger of war is very high. The other two objectives do not seem adoptable in the short-term either, though the urgency is very clear considering the rapid population growth.

Although these recommendations call for states to make the necessary changes, in the Arab world in general “the state” with its regime survival reflexes seems to create more problems than solutions for the youth. Despite the existing challenges for the youth in the region, the adaptation of national youth policies or strategies is limited. Slow progress on the matter is due to problems in implementation, both because there are coordination problems between the institutions that are involved in youth policies and because there is an unwillingness to work with the youth in policy-making processes. More clearly, the authoritarian nature of the state prevents any transparent, inclusive mechanisms of policy formulation; thus while maintaining the stability and security of the regime in the short-run, in the medium to long run will create greater risks and problems.

Growing Population and Resource Scarcity

As the population of the region rapidly increases, a scarcity of resources also becomes an important problem. One of the most urgent scarcities in the region is water, which also affects food security. The MENA region in general is an arid region with low precipitation rates. The 1990s often referred to the possibility of ‘water wars’ in the region, signaling the importance of the issue.³⁵ Considering the environmental problems caused by climate change, the amount of water in the Levant has been declining in recent years. Droughts, which dramatically affected Northern Syria and Iraq at the end of the 2000s, and which will be discussed below, are important to note. Considering the severity of the water scarcity, Richards and Waterbury call for a change of direction in economic activity for the region. They suggest rather a difficult road ahead: non-agricultural development.³⁶ Transforming the pre-dominantly agrarian Arab economies – especially those of the Levant – to non-agricultural development is not an easy task. The not-so-successful efforts of state-led industrialization/developmentalism of the 1950s and 1960s are telling in this case.

Another possibility to cope with water scarcity can be finding ways of cooperation with neighbors. In a highly securitized environment, such mechanisms might be expected to help alleviate if not end the political tension in the region. But, looking at the question of how much cooperation

34 *Arab Human Development Report, 2016*, p.40-41.

35 See for example Joyce R. Starr, “Water Wars”, *Foreign Policy*, No.82, Spring 1991, p.17-36.

36 Richards and Waterbury, *A Political Economy of the Middle East*, p.176-177.

can be achieved in sharing the permanent rivers, which are the main source of surface water, little success has been achieved so far. As Stang suggests, as with other issues, the Levant has little success in term of cooperation in environmental issues. Although it has more geographic opportunities to “pursue environmental cooperation than other sub-regions of the MENA with the shared waters of Jordan, Tigris and Euphrates basins crossing the borders”, there is little possibility of cooperation, as the regional conflict overrides attempts for collaboration in the Levant.³⁷

Although ending up in failure, there had been a couple of initiatives. For example, the 1994 Israel-Jordan Peace Agreement led to the establishment of a Joint Water Committee that would help parties to share water, build infrastructure and provide for joint project development. The cooperation continued for over twenty years, but it has been highly politicized and the “decisions are often dictated by Israel”.³⁸ The Euphrates-Tigris Basin has also witnessed competition rather than cooperation. The water issue has been highly politicized, especially between Turkey and Syria in the 1990s and has been linked to bilateral security problems.³⁹ In the 2000s, although the two countries have managed to see the water issue more as a technical one, and managed to cooperate on water sharing, this period did not produce any agreements. As the Turkish-Syrian relations strained after the beginning of the uprisings in Syria, water cooperation also vanished. This is a good example for demonstrating how water issues are subject to political agenda and thus high politics.

Growing Population and Food Security

The Middle East region in general, being one of the top food importers in the world, is extremely vulnerable to food supplies and prices. The region in general is suffering from deficits in bio-capacity and agricultural production.⁴⁰ As the global crop production declined in 2010, commodity prices jumped in the region. There is already some analysis that underlines how food security and the high food prices are one of the major factors that sparked the Arab uprisings.⁴¹ With other socio-economic challenges, this is surely one of the factors that added to the frustration of the masses with their current regimes. However, although the issue is central for a population’s livelihood, policies oriented towards food security do not seem to be prioritized by the governments. In the words of the former Director of Policy Planning at the US Department of State, Ann Marie Slaughter, the discussion on food security lacks two qualities necessary to be taken seriously: “it is not immediate and it is not sexy.”⁴² Yet, food security is actually immediate. Considering the volatility of food imports, most Middle East countries are trying to achieve food sufficiency. But without available resources some are now directing their energies to acquire land abroad. For example, Jordan and

37 Gerald Stang, “Climate Challenges in the Middle East – Rethinking Environmental Cooperation”, *Middle East Institute Policy Paper*, Washington D.C, 2016-2, p.9.

38 Ibid., p.11.

39 Mustafa Aydın and Fulya Ereker, “Water Scarcity and Political Wrangling: Security in the Euphrates and Tigris Basin”, Hans Günter Brauch *et.al.* (Eds.), *Facing Global Environmental Change: Environmental, Human, Energy, Food, Health and Water Security Concepts*, Berlin & New York, Springer, 2009, p.603-613.

40 John Waterbury, “The Political Economy of Climate Change in the Arab World”, Arab Human Development Report Research Paper Series, New York, UNDP, 2013, p.35.

41 For example see, Ines Perez “Climate Change and Rising Food Prices Heightened Arab Spring”, *ClimateWire*, 4 March 2013, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/climate-change-and-rising-food-prices-heightened-arab-spring/> (Accessed on 30 January 2018).

42 Ibid.

Turkey joined in a group of Gulf countries to buy land in Sudan.⁴³ Although Turkey ranks 49th and Jordan 55th in the food security index among the 113 countries in the list,⁴⁴ their rush to buy/lease land abroad can be seen as an attempt to meet the challenge ahead. The others are not lucky or prepared as much. Thus, coupled with environmental constraints, food security will be a serious challenge ahead for the countries of the Levant.

Environmental Challenges – Resource scarcity and Security Concerns

As is discussed above, the region is highly stressed by the challenges posed by a growing population. As the competition to share resources increases, environmental degradation and climate change is putting additional stress on these resources. As has been often argued, in the Middle East in general, there is a “long-term mismanagement of natural resources.”⁴⁵ The aggregation of this neglect, coupled with the recent challenges of environmental degradation and climate change, could “make the parts of the MENA region”, including parts of the Levant, “uninhabitable.”⁴⁶ As is often reported, most Arab countries have contributed very little to the greenhouse effect. For example, the MENA’s share of carbon dioxide emissions is no more than 4.7 per cent, lower than any other region except Sub-Saharan Africa.⁴⁷ Despite this, the region will be directly affected from climate change in terms of water scarcity and thus faces a decrease in agricultural production, higher levels of emigration, lower levels of economic production, deepened food insecurity, increased poverty and a higher risk of social instability.⁴⁸ Yet, as in other issues, Waterbury argues that when dealing with environmental challenges “going through the motions or doing nothing is a viable political strategy and may be attractive unless there are sufficient incentives, mainly economic and financial, to induce real commitments to adaptation.”⁴⁹

There have been a couple of initiatives that problematized the environmental issues in the Levant. The Middle East Environmental Security Initiative, which brought Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Authority together, has been important in providing for a forum for regional cooperation.⁵⁰ Beginning its activities in 1997, it brought key issues, such as renewable energy and a need for regional

43 Waterbury, “The Political Economy of Climate Change in the Arab World”, p.36; “Türkiye Sudan’da tarım arazisi kiraladı” (Turkey Leased Agricultural Land in Sudan), *TRT Haber*, 13 May 2014, <http://www.trthaber.com/haber/ekonomi/turkiye-sudanda-tarim-arazisi-kiraladi-127324.html>, (Accessed on 30 January 2018).

44 Global Food Security Index, <http://foodsecurityindex.eiu.com>, (Accessed on 1 February 2018).

45 Francesca De Chatel, “The Role of Drought and Climate Change in the Syrian Uprising – Untangling the Triggers of the Revolution”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.50, No.4, 2014, p.521-535.

46 Loulla-Mae Eleftheriou-Smith, “Climate change could make parts of the Middle East and North Africa ‘uninhabitable’”, *Independent*, 3 May 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/climate-change-could-make-parts-of-the-middle-east-and-north-africa-uninhabitable-a7010811.html>, (Accessed on 30 January 2018).

47 Human Development Report 2007/2008 – Fighting Climate Change: Human Solidarity in a Divided World, New York, UNDP, 2007.

48 For details see Oli Brown and Alec Crawford, *Rising Temperatures, Rising Tensions-Climate Change and the Risk of Violent Conflict in the Middle East*, Manitoba, Canada, International Institute for Sustainable Development, 2009.

49 Waterbury, “The Political Economy of Climate Change in the Arab World”, p.24.

50 Hans Günter Brauch, “Environment and Security in the Middle East: Conceptualizing Environmental, Human, Food, Health and Gender Security”, C. Lipchin *et al.* (Eds.), *Integrated Water Resources Management and Security in the Middle East*, Proceedings of the NATO Advanced Study Institute on Integrated Water Resources Management and Security in the Middle East, Kibbutz Ketura, Israel, Springer, 2007, p.126-127.

dialogue to the agenda.⁵¹ Also, there are various non-state initiatives run by the NGOs, two of which especially stand out: The Israeli-Palestine Center for Research and Information (ICPRI), established in 1988 and renamed Israel-Palestine: Creative Regional Initiatives in 2003,⁵² and EcoPeace/Friends of the Earth in the Middle East, which works on the environmental impact of conflicts/wars in the region. The IPCRI declares that a large part of its “peace-building work focuses on the environment”. It looks at the impact of “environmental degradation on Israel and Palestine, developing environmentally conscious infrastructure in West Bank and Gaza and promoting the economic benefits of cooperation between Israel and Palestine”.⁵³ EcoPeace, on the other hand, established in 1994, has offices in Amman, Bethlehem and Tel Aviv, and works on the “promotion of cooperative efforts to protect” the “shared environmental heritage” of the region.⁵⁴ Considering that the region is prone to conflict and has experienced a high frequency of wars, demonstrating the environmental impact of conflict is significant. Yet, again such concerns often yield to high politics and strategic priorities and do not produce tangible results on the ground.

Global warming in general severely affects the region. But, like in other aspects, climate change is “too nebulous and long term and even seemingly hypothetical to be a priority for most people... Doing nothing has proven the easy option”.⁵⁵ Warming of about 0.2 degrees per decade has been observed in the MENA region from 1961 to 1990, and at an even faster rate since then.⁵⁶ Studies show that by the end of the century, “unusual heat extremes will occur in about 30 percent of summer months almost everywhere in the MENA region”.⁵⁷ Living in certain places in the region will be impossible, and will create huge migration waves within and from the region. Many studies underline a direct linkage between climate change and migration.⁵⁸ Internal migration will continue to be important, as many people will be forced to move, while others — the poor — will have to stay back. In such a context, it is not only enough to talk about the migration as a consequence of climate change, but it is also necessary to talk about how to gauge climate change in relation to other economic and political conditions that might foster or limit migration. Another important question centers on how MENA governments plan to address the coming climate-motivated migration waves.

Is there a direct linkage between climate change and security? By creating competition for scarce resources, intensifying food insecurity and hindering economic growth, climate change is considered to be a cause for many security concerns.⁵⁹ The linkage between migration as a consequence of climate change and conflicts is often underlined. When the Arab uprisings reached Syria, many studies rushed to note that a main cause of the uprising might be related to the severe drought the country

51 Ibid.

52 See <http://www.ipcri.org/index.php/about>, (Accessed on 30 March 2018).

53 Ibid.

54 For objectives and history of the Organization <http://ecopeace.org/>, (Accessed on 30 March 2018).

55 Stang, *Climate Challenges in the Middle East*, p.4.

56 Katharina Waha *et.al.*, “Climate change impacts in the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) region and their implications for vulnerable population groups”, *Regional Environmental Change*, Vol.17, No.6, August 2017, p.1623-1638.

57 Ibid.

58 For example see, Clionadh Raleigh, Lisa Jordan and Idean Salehyan, “Assessing the Impact of Climate Change on Migration and Conflict”, World Bank Group for the Social Dimensions of Climate Change, http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTSOCIALDEVELOPMENT/Resources/SDCCWorkingPaper_MigrationandConflict.pdf (Accessed on 30 January 2018).

59 Brown and Crawford, *Rising Temperatures, Rising Tensions*, p.2-3.

experienced between 2006-2010, which led to a huge migration wave.⁶⁰ In 2009, more than 800,000 Syrians were reported to have lost their livelihoods due to the drought in northern Syria.⁶¹ Migrants to Der'a from northern Syria were considered by some analysts to have been a driver of the uprising. But research done by Fröhlich shows that this was not the case. Migrants from northern Syria were too weak and not established in Der'a and thus incapable of organizing the community towards collective action.⁶² Rather than establishing a direct causality, it is possible to argue that 'climate migration' can act "as a threat multiplier" in the region "by placing additional pressure on already scarce resources and by reinforcing preexisting threats such as political instability, poverty and unemployment".⁶³ Chatel emphasizes the role of the Syrian state during the drought period and argues that it was not the drought, "but rather the government's failure to respond to the ensuing humanitarian crisis that formed one of the triggers of the uprising, feeding a discontent that had long been simmering in rural areas."⁶⁴ While Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine were also affected by drought in 2007-2008, Chatel explains that the humanitarian crisis emerged in Syria and not in any other Levantine countries due to the government's long-term neglect of the rural areas and need for reform and decades of accumulated mismanagement. How the state created the crisis situation and later handled (or did not handle it) is what is critical. The policies of the Syrian government have depleted the North of its resources and the drought only added further devastation to an already critical situation. Blaming the uprising solely on climate change would mean taking responsibility off the state. The state is the most important actor and is required to act but chooses not to, complicating the problem and creating grave consequences.

Conclusion

This paper argued that the Levant is facing enormous challenges due to a youth bulge and resource scarcity. The rising population, environmental challenges and climate change are all putting a strain on the region's already scarce resources. Considering that the region is witnessing a rapidly growing youth population, the ensuing unemployment, cronyism, labor-seeking emigration and increasing likelihood of drought will continue to be challenges in future decades. As it is underlined above, societies with growing young populations face both opportunities and challenges. There is a potential of dynamism and growth. Yet on the other hand there exists a high risk for instability if the demands for the youth cannot be met. Despite different levels of development, the countries of the Levant share similar challenges when faced with the need to meet the demands of their growing populations.

60 For example see, Henry Fountain, "Researchers Link Syrian Conflict to a Drought Made Worse by Climate Change", *New York Times*, 2 March 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/03/science/earth/study-links-syria-conflict-to-drought-caused-by-climate-change.html> (Accessed on 30 January 2018).

61 Francesco Femia and Caitlin Werrell, "Syria: Climate Change, Drought and Social Unrest" in The Center for Climate & Security, *Exploring the Security Risks of Climate Change*, Washington DC, 29 February 2012, <https://climateandsecurity.org/2012/02/29/syria-climate-change-drought-and-social-unrest> (Accessed on 30 January 2018).

62 Christiane J. Fröhlich, "Climate migrants as protestors? Dispelling misconceptions about global environmental change in pre-revolutionary Syria", *Contemporary Levant*, Vol.1, 2016, p.38-50.

63 Ibid.

64 De Chatel, "The Role of Drought and Climate Change in the Syrian Uprising".

As shown, the need to address the requirements is pressing but, despite the severity of the picture and demand for new policies, the states are mostly occupied with hard security issues and are struggling with civil wars, violent non-state actors, and sectarian politics. In almost every country of the Levant there is either an ongoing conflict or a danger of its eruption. While the Palestinian issue still lies at the heart of regional politics, the devastating civil war in Syria brought in different regional and international actors, making all its neighbors — Iraq, Turkey, Jordan and Israel — a part of the crisis to different degrees. In the context of ongoing crises, population issues and resource scarcity are easily neglected. The states also use high politics as a way to justify inaction and thus continue to prioritize regime security and cronyism.

Also the presence of imminent danger of war inhibits cooperation between parties. Considering that the effects of environmental problems and resource scarcity can best be mitigated through cooperation, the Levant seems to be far from witnessing any change in this aspect. Yet, it is the issues of population, environment and resources that will determine the future of the regimes of the Levant. Considering how these issues are linked to security, without providing basic level of human security, the risk of future instability is very high. How to persuade the unwilling leaders to take action seems to be the hardest task.