

## YOUTH IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA: DEMOGRAPHIC OPPORTUNITY OR CHALLENGE?

by Ragui Assaad and Farzaneh Roudi-Fahimi

Nearly one in five people living in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is between the ages of 15 and 24—the age group defined as “youth.”<sup>1</sup> The current number of youth in the region is unprecedented: nearly 95 million in 2005. The extent to which this large group of young people will become healthy and productive members of their societies depends on how well governments and civil societies invest in social, economic, and political institutions that meet the current needs of young people.

Ages 15 to 24 represent a period in life when one makes the transition from the dependence of childhood to the independence of adulthood—a period filled with enthusiasm, dreams, and ambitions. It is also a period during which a number of social, economic, biological, and demographic events occur that set the stage for adult life, such as education, marriage, and entrance into the job market. As

the average years of education increases and marriage is delayed, the transition to adulthood extends over a longer period of time, making adolescence an increasingly important stage for policy attention.

Despite a wealth of oil resources and major improvements in health and education over the past few decades, this region’s political, social, and economic systems have not evolved in a way that effectively meets the changing needs of its rapidly growing young population. This policy brief gives an overview of demographic trends among youth and the implications of these trends for human and economic development in the MENA region.

### The Youth Bulge

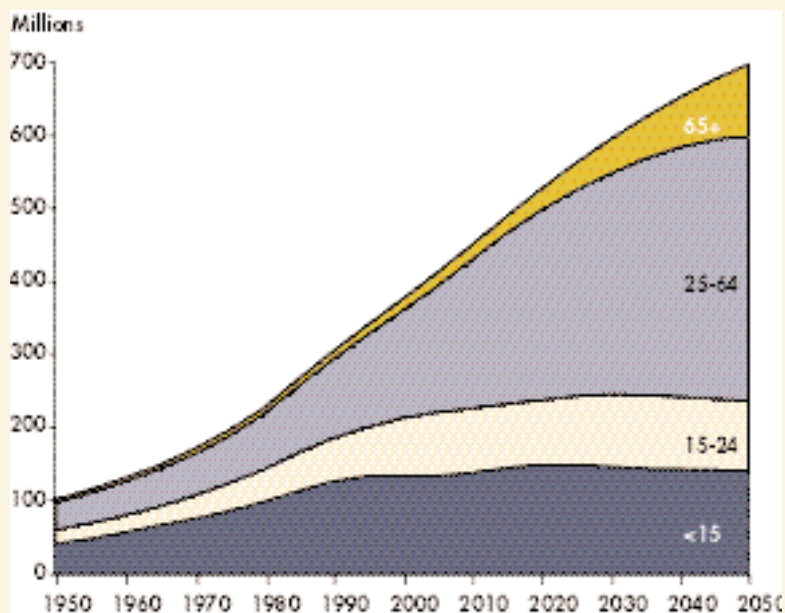
Although mortality in the MENA region began to decline in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the decline in fertility (births per woman) did not occur until the mid-1960s and early to mid-1970s. As a result, the second half of the 20th century witnessed explosive population growth throughout the region as births far outnumbered deaths (see Figure 1). The region’s growth rate reached a peak of 3 percent a year around 1980. Currently, the population of MENA is growing at about 2 percent a year, still higher than the world average. The world as a whole reached its peak of population growth of 2 percent a year in the mid-1960s and is currently growing at 1.2 percent a year.<sup>2</sup>

The combination of a significant decline in child mortality and the relatively slow onset of fertility decline led first to an increase in the proportion of children under 15, and then to an increase in the proportion of young people ages 15 to 24, as the proportion of children fell after fertility began to decline (see Figure 2, page 2). The increase in the proportion of 15-to-24-year-olds in the total population, referred to as the “youth bulge,” combined with the rapid growth in the overall population, has resulted in the most rapid growth in the number of young people in the region’s history.

MENA countries, however, differ in the pace of their fertility declines, and where they are now

Figure 1

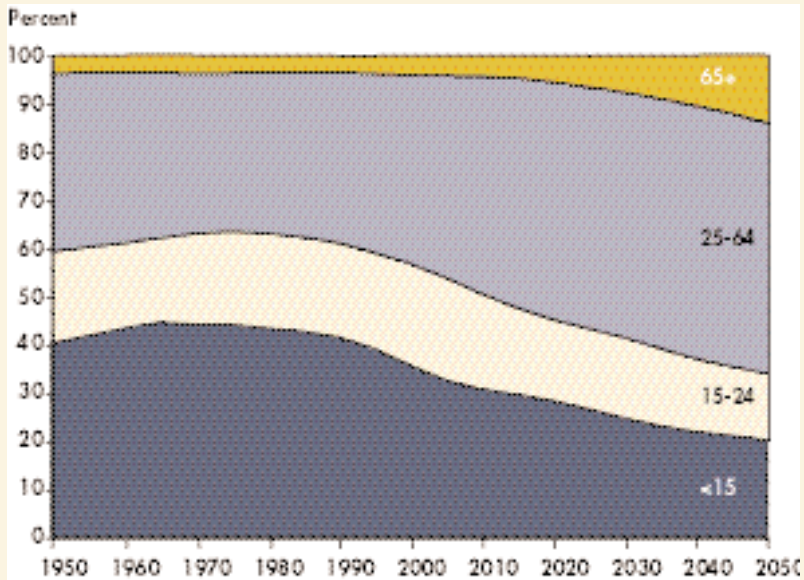
### Population Growth in MENA by Age Group, 1950-2050



SOURCE: United Nations, *World Population Prospects: The 2004 Revision* (New York: UN, 2005).

Figure 2

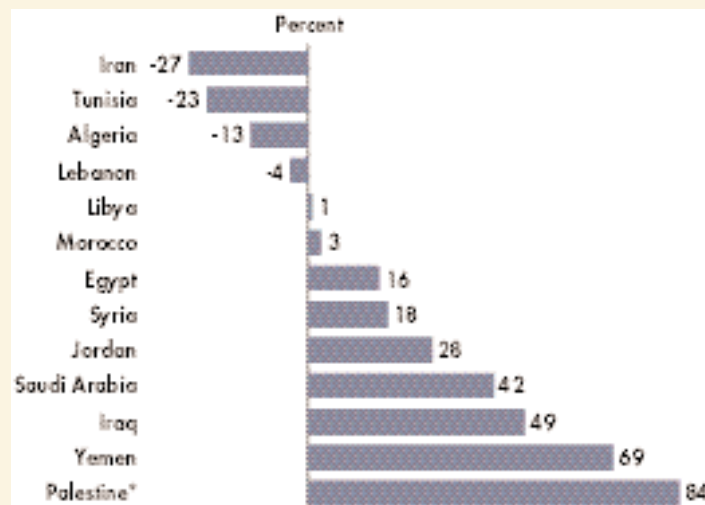
### Population Distribution in MENA by Age Group, 1950-2050



SOURCE: United Nations, *World Population Prospects: The 2004 Revision* (New York: UN, 2005).

Figure 3

### Percent Change in Size of Youth Population in Selected Countries in MENA, 2005-2025



\*Palestine includes the Arab population of the West Bank and Gaza.

SOURCE: United Nations, *World Population Prospects: The 2004 Revision* (New York: UN, 2005).

in the transition from high to low fertility. The youth bulge is more pronounced in countries where the onset of fertility decline occurred later and the decline was sharper (see table). It is most noticeable in Iran, where fertility declined sharply during the 1990s. As a result, 25 percent of Iran's population was between the ages of 15 and 24 in 2005. In 2005, the share of the youth population in MENA countries ranged from 25 percent in Iran to around 15 percent in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar. Fertility is generally the main factor determining the age composition of MENA's populations and their population growth. But in the labor-receiving Gulf states, such as Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar, international migration also plays an important role, as large numbers of people migrate to these states for work.

Over the next two decades, the youth populations in Iraq, Yemen, and the Palestinian Territories—where current levels of fertility are the highest in the region—will experience the fastest growth. In these countries, well over 40 percent of their populations are currently under 15 years of age. On average, an Iraqi woman gives birth to 4.8 children in her lifetime, while Palestinian and Yemeni women give birth to more than five children. As a result, 15-to-24-year-olds will still constitute around 20 percent of the population in these countries in 2025. The number of youth in Iraq is projected to increase by nearly 3 million—from 5.8 million in 2005 to 8.6 million in 2025. And the number of Palestinian youth will increase from 0.7 million to 1.3 million—more than an 80 percent increase. The number of youth in Yemen will also increase by more than 3 million during this same period, a 69 percent increase (see Figure 3).

On the other hand, women in Lebanon, Iran, Morocco, Tunisia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates give birth to no more than 2.5 children on average today. By 2025, the share of youth in Iran, Lebanon, and Tunisia is expected to drop to 15 percent or less. The rate of growth in the youth population in the region as a whole will slow in the next two decades as these and other countries experience fertility decline. The overall share of youth in MENA's population is expected to decline to 17 percent by 2025—although the number of 15-to-24-year-olds is still expected to increase by more than 7 million for the region as a whole.

The number of youth in the MENA region is projected to peak at 100 million by 2035 and to decline slowly thereafter. Figure 4 (page 4) shows 15-to-24-year-olds as percent of the working-age population in Egypt, Iran, Turkey, and Yemen.

The youth bulge poses opportunities as well as challenges for development. Its demographic opportunity can be reaped when today's youth reach their prime working ages. When the ratio of nonworking age groups (under age 15 and 65 and older) relative to the working age groups (ages 15 to 64)—referred to as the “age-dependency ratio”—shrinks, greater productivity and higher incomes are possible. This is the so-called “demographic bonus” that follows

15 to 25 years after the onset of fertility decline. Eventually, the population ages and dependency ratios rise again as a greater proportion of the population reaches retirement age. Thus, some experts refer to the 30- to 40-year period with higher shares of working-age populations as the “demographic window of opportunity” for economic growth. However, this demographic bonus is not automatic; it depends on each country's social and economic policy responses.

In order to reap the benefits of this window of opportunity, MENA countries need to adapt their economic, social, and political institutions to the changes brought by the unprecedented numbers of

### Selected Demographic and Socioeconomic Indicators for Youth Ages 15-24 in MENA

|                                     | Youth Population (1000s) |               |               | Youth as % of Total Population |           |           | Youth as % of Working Age Population | Unemployment Rate Among Youth (%) |           |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------|---------------|--------------------------------|-----------|-----------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------|
|                                     | 1985                     | 2005          | 2025          | 1985                           | 2005      | 2025      | 2005                                 | Male                              | Female    |
| <b>Middle East and North Africa</b> | <b>52,401</b>            | <b>87,584</b> | <b>94,647</b> | <b>20</b>                      | <b>21</b> | <b>17</b> | <b>34</b>                            | <b>23</b>                         | <b>33</b> |
| Algeria                             | 4,469                    | 7,424         | 6,468         | 20                             | 23        | 15        | 34                                   | 43                                | 46        |
| Bahrain                             | 67                       | 110           | 132           | 16                             | 15        | 14        | 22                                   | 17                                | 27        |
| Egypt                               | 9,292                    | 15,442        | 17,862        | 19                             | 21        | 18        | 34                                   | 21                                | 40        |
| Iran                                | 9,249                    | 17,629        | 12,864        | 19                             | 25        | 14        | 38                                   | 20                                | 32        |
| Iraq                                | 3,335                    | 5,809         | 8,627         | 20                             | 20        | 19        | 36                                   | —                                 | —         |
| Jordan                              | 558                      | 1,139         | 1,462         | 21                             | 20        | 18        | 33                                   | 28                                | 50        |
| Kuwait                              | 296                      | 415           | 559           | 17                             | 15        | 14        | 21                                   | 16                                | 8         |
| Lebanon                             | 564                      | 657           | 634           | 20                             | 18        | 15        | 29                                   | 24                                | 14        |
| Libya                               | 682                      | 1,318         | 1,326         | 18                             | 23        | 17        | 34                                   | —                                 | —         |
| Morocco                             | 4,447                    | 6,479         | 6,673         | 20                             | 18        | 17        | 32                                   | 17                                | 16        |
| Oman                                | 262                      | 538           | 627           | 17                             | 21        | 17        | 33                                   | —                                 | —         |
| Palestine*                          | 358                      | 721           | 1,327         | 20                             | 19        | 21        | 38                                   | 39                                | 45        |
| Qatar                               | 55                       | 112           | 148           | 15                             | 14        | 13        | 18                                   | 8                                 | 30        |
| Saudi Arabia                        | 2,492                    | 4,548         | 6,475         | 19                             | 19        | 17        | 31                                   | 25                                | 39        |
| Syria                               | 2,123                    | 4,369         | 5,176         | 20                             | 23        | 18        | 38                                   | 16                                | 36        |
| Tunisia                             | 1,530                    | 2,098         | 1,614         | 21                             | 21        | 13        | 31                                   | 31                                | 29        |
| Turkey                              | 10,450                   | 13,496        | 14,172        | 20                             | 18        | 16        | 28                                   | 19                                | 19        |
| United Arab Emirates                | 206                      | 783           | 907           | 15                             | 17        | 14        | 23                                   | 6                                 | 6         |
| Yemen                               | 1,966                    | 4,497         | 7,594         | 20                             | 21        | 20        | 42                                   | 21                                | 14        |

\*Palestine includes the Arab population of the West Bank and Gaza.

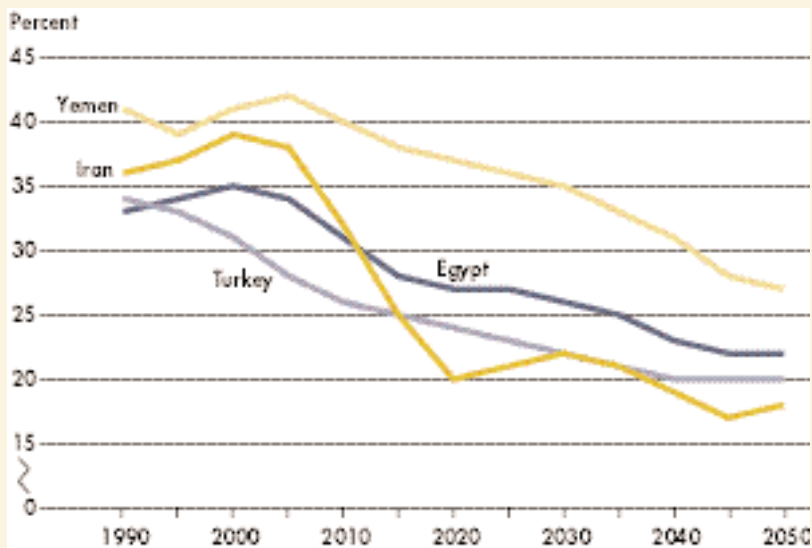
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**NOTE:** Years for data on youth unemployment: Algeria (2004), Bahrain (2001), Egypt (2002), Iran (2005), Jordan (2005), Kuwait (1995), Lebanon (1997), Morocco (2003), Palestine (2004), Qatar (2004), Saudi Arabia (2002), Syria (2003), Tunisia (2005), Turkey (2005), United Arab Emirates (1995), Yemen (2003).

**SOURCES:** United Nations, *World Population Prospects: The 2004 Revision*; ESCWA, *Survey of Economic and Social Developments in the ESCWA Region 2003-2004*; International Labour Organization (ILO), *Global Employment Trends 2004*; ILO, LABORSTA (2006); ILO, *Key Indicators of the Labor Market 2006*; Jordan DOS website (2006); Republic of Yemen, *Statistical Year Book 2003* (June 2004); and CAPMAS, *Annual Bulletin of Labour Force Sample Survey in A.R.E 2004* (August 2005).

Figure 4

### Trends in Share of Youth (Ages 15-24) in Working-Age Population (Ages 15-64), Selected Countries



SOURCE: United Nations, *World Population Prospects: The 2004 Revision* (New York: UN, 2005).

young people as they move into adulthood. Educational systems need to accommodate the rapidly growing student population; labor markets need to expand to provide additional jobs; housing markets must meet the growing housing demand of couples attempting to marry; and health systems must adapt to the needs of young people—a constituency they have served relatively little. (Another policy brief in this series addresses young people's sexual and reproductive health. See page 8.)

### The Changing Needs of Youth

The changing needs of youth in MENA are affected by what happens inside and outside the region. The global economy—with its power to reach across national boundaries and into the smallest communities—has brought a new dimension that profoundly affects the life of young people in the region. Today, satellite dishes on rooftops bringing worldwide broadcasts into people's homes are a common feature of MENA's urban landscapes and are rapidly expanding to rural areas. Internet use is also growing fast and quickly changing the lives of youth—further widening the generation gap between young peo-

ple and their parents and decisionmakers. These trends in the global media, as well as the rise of religious fundamentalism, make it increasingly crucial to get young people to attend school and pay greater attention to what they learn while they are in school.

### Education

Over the last few decades, school enrollments have risen markedly throughout the region. Primary education is nearly universal in most countries and the gap between boys and girls' enrollments in secondary school has disappeared in many countries. Higher education has grown as well. Overall, the educational attainments in MENA today resemble those of East Asia in the early 1980s, with a broad base of primary and secondary graduates. MENA countries can successfully follow East Asia's progress in education by investing now in secondary education, reducing dropout rates, and investing appropriately in higher education.

Due to continued fertility decline and the slower rate of growth of the school-age population, governments face less pressure to increase the number of seats in primary schools, and, with some time lag, secondary schools, and therefore have an opportunity to focus on improving the quality of schooling and expanding higher education. Such a strategy is more feasible in countries where primary school enrollment is already universal, such as in Algeria, Syria, and Tunisia.

Unfortunately, illiteracy and school dropout rates remain unacceptably high in pockets of populations in some countries in the region. The largest numbers of illiterate young people are found in Egypt, Iraq, and Yemen, who together constitute about three-quarters of the nearly 10 million illiterate youth in the region—with girls representing over two-thirds of that group. Girls who are illiterate or have little schooling generally come from poor communities and tend to marry and begin childbearing at a young age. Early marriage cuts short girls' formal education and often traps them in a vicious cycle of low education, high fertility, and poverty.

Programs that keep disadvantaged girls in school, or promote their return to school, and teach them literacy and life skills are important for reducing girls' social isolation and promoting broader



social and economic development. Community-based strategies are needed to engage local authorities, religious leaders, and families who can help remove barriers to girls' education and participation in community activities. A small number of such pilot projects with successful results have been developed in MENA countries with large rural populations. (The box describes such a project in rural parts of Upper Egypt.)

### School-to-Work Transition

Greater numbers of students in MENA are acquiring more education, but the numbers do not always translate into higher rates of employment and wages. Even though this region has had one of the fastest increases in the average years of schooling in the developing world, the material that is taught in schools has not necessarily helped young people find jobs and move into the workforce. This is largely due to educational systems that are geared toward preparing students to serve in the public sector, which used to be the primary employer of educated new entrants in most MENA economies but is no longer playing that role.

Thus, schools must evolve to meet the requirements of employment in the market economy that is increasingly taking root in MENA.<sup>3</sup> With growing market economies in the region, the introduction of new technologies, and greater integration into the world economy, the demand for certain skills is increasing, making much of the material taught in most existing public education systems obsolete. Changes in the economies have created significant mismatches between the human skills demanded by new enterprises and those available in the work force, leading to an extended and difficult transition period when graduates are trying to find work. A recent study in Syria looking at school-to-work transition found that young people face fundamental challenges in finding career employment, due to their lack of appropriate education and a dearth of jobs.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, entrepreneurs in the region regularly cite the lack of both general job readiness skills and specific occupational skills as important constraints to hiring. The mismatch between the quality of the labor supply and the requirements of the labor market can largely be tackled by improving the underlying quality of education. A fundamental

### The Ishraq Program in Rural Upper Egypt

Meaning "enlightenment" in Arabic, *Ishraq* is a program in rural Upper Egypt that targets adolescent girls who are out of school. The program aims to create safe public spaces for girls in their community, improve girls' functional literacy, positively influence social norms, and improve local and national decisionmakers' support for girl-friendly measures and policies. Since its start in 2001, the *Ishraq* program has brought together nearly 800 girls ages 11 to 15 from 12 villages to meet four times a week for three-hour sessions in youth centers or schools in groups of about 25 members each. The 20-month program (down from 30 months during the pilot) offers girls sufficient literacy and life skills to enable them to pass their literacy exam and enter or return to school.

Rural Upper Egypt is one of those pockets of population in the region where the vicious cycles of low education, high fertility, and poverty still persist. Girls who are not in school miss the opportunity of having access to a place outside their home where they are safe and can be part of community life, interacting with their peers and being exposed to positive adult role models outside the realm of family.

*Ishraq* was established by a group of nongovernmental organizations with the support of two key government agencies, the Ministry of Youth (recently renamed the Supreme Council for Youth) and the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood. The program worked with local authorities to ensure that girls were offered identification cards in the form of a birth certificate or health card—a critical first step in developing an active citizenry as well as offering some protection from underage marriage, which often is justified on the basis that a girl's age is not known.

The program recruited young female secondary-school graduates from the community and trained them as program leaders to serve as teachers, role models, and advocates. They became the critical link between girls, their families, and the *Ishraq* program. Recognizing that interventions aimed solely at girls would have only a minimal effect on changing gender norms in the community, *Ishraq* also worked with adolescent boys, parents, and community leaders such as priests and *imams*, physicians, mayors, and governorate health and education officials.

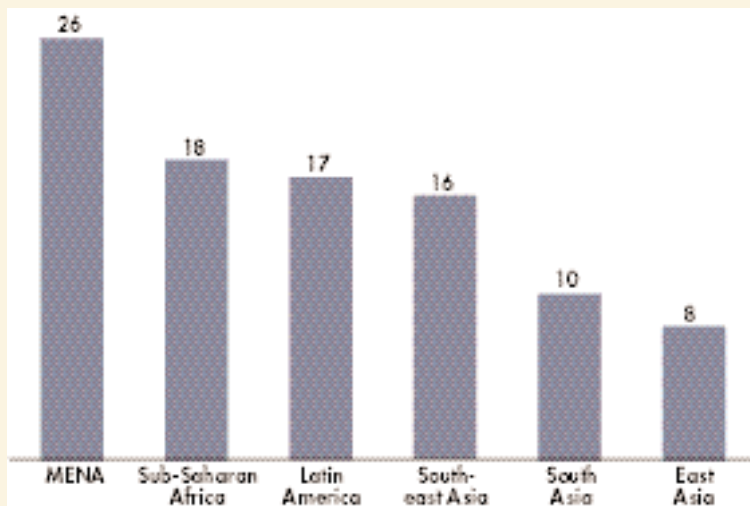
*Ishraq* has proved to be successful: 92 percent of the participants who later took the government literacy exam passed and 67 percent of girls who completed the training continued their education in public school. Efforts are now underway to determine how best to institutionalize and scale up the program.

**SOURCE:** Martha Brady, Abeer Salem, and Nadia Zibani, "Bringing New Opportunities to Adolescent Girls in Socially Conservative Settings: The *Ishraq* Program in Rural Upper Egypt," *Promoting Healthy, Safe, and Productive Transitions to Adulthood*, Brief No. 12 (New York: Population Council, 2005).

shift from curricula that rely on rote and nonparticipatory learning to those that promote problemsolving and application of knowledge is required to help ease the path to gainful employment for youth.

Figure 5

### Unemployment Rate Among Youth by Selected World Regions, 2005



SOURCE: International Labour Organization (ILO), *Global Employment Trends for Youth* (Geneva: ILO, 2006): Annex 1.

### Unemployment

The combination of skill mismatches in the labor market and the rapidly growing number of new entrants to the labor market has created a situation in which too many young people have a hard time finding jobs. MENA's unemployment rate is the highest among world's regions, primarily because of very high youth unemployment rates. MENA's youth unemployment rate is more than twice that of South Asia (see Figure 5).<sup>5</sup>

The enormous labor-supply pressures in MENA are due to a combination of population growth, the youth bulge, and increasing participation of women in the labor force. (The labor force is technically defined as those who are actively holding a job and those who are looking for a job.) According to a World Bank report, MENA's labor force is expected to increase by 40 percent between 2000 and 2010, and by nearly 80 percent between 2000 and 2020.<sup>6</sup> Another study estimates that 43 million are expected to enter MENA's labor force during this same decade, compared with 47 million people who entered the labor force during the four-decade period of 1950 to 1990.<sup>7</sup>

The unemployment rate—the proportion of the labor force who do not hold a job and are looking for one—among youth in MENA ranges from more than 40 percent in Algeria and among the Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza to 6 percent in the United Arab Emirates. According to one study, the share of youth among the unemployed in the region ranges from about one-third in the Palestinian Territories to three-quarters in Syria. The relatively lower share of youth among unemployed Palestinians is due to a higher rate of unemployment among the entire Palestinian labor force.<sup>8</sup>

In most countries in the region, according to an analysis by the World Bank, workers with little or no education and those with postsecondary education constitute a smaller share of the unemployed. Most of the unemployed workers are either semiskilled or have intermediate or secondary educations, a sign of the undervaluation of their training in the economy. Even for the most educated workers, the analysis suggests that the private sector rewards their education less than the public sector.<sup>9</sup> However, a recent analysis in Egypt has shown that the highest rates of unemployment have now shifted to university graduates. There are two reasons for this shift: University students were the fastest-growing group among new entrants and the group most dependent on government employment, which is not growing as fast or might even be shrinking.<sup>10</sup>

The rapid rise in the number of female entrants in the job market, combined with the reduced role of the government in hiring and persistent barriers for young women to enter the private sector, is leading to very high female unemployment rates. According to the World Bank, female labor force participation in MENA rose from 22 percent in 1960 to almost 25 percent in 1980, and to 32 percent in 2000.<sup>11</sup> Thus, despite the fact that MENA continues to have the lowest rate of female labor-force participation among the world's major regions, women's participation is rising rapidly, driven primarily by increasing educational attainment and delayed age at marriage.

Among the major world regions, the largest gender gaps in unemployment rates among youth are found in MENA. There are several reasons for the failure of private firms in MENA to substitute for governments in employing young women,

including: highly segregated labor markets along gender lines; employers unwilling to assume the added cost of maternity leave and child care; women's limited geographic mobility; and the limited growth of labor-intensive, export-oriented industries that might otherwise employ women.<sup>12</sup>

The oil-rich and labor-receiving Gulf countries are faced with the additional challenge of addressing the employment balance between their nationals and non-nationals. A rapidly growing number of young nationals are entering the labor force at a time when their governments are no longer able to guarantee lifetime employment in the public sector, on which citizens have customarily relied. Nearly all of the Gulf states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates) are now instituting policies that push the private sector to hire more nationals. Such policies range from setting mandatory quotas and targets for private businesses to hire nationals, to charging businesses taxes on their foreign workers.

### Unlocking the Employment Potential

Political, economic, and social reforms that could encourage greater participation of MENA's youth in society are long overdue. Many projects across the region are now trying to create job opportunities for new entrants into the labor force. But such efforts cannot address MENA's employment issues without broad-based and fundamental changes that could strengthen economic growth and create viable job prospects for the *tens of millions* of young men and women entering the work force over the next two decades.

In its report, *Unlocking the Employment Potential in the Middle East and North Africa: Toward a New Social Contract*, the World Bank argues that MENA countries must adopt new development policies that realign their economies in three important ways:

- **Reinventing the private sector.** Despite more than two decades of effort (with varying intensity and success among countries), the share of the private sector in total investment has not increased enough to compensate for the decline in public investment. Entrepreneurs continue to face problems that stem from weaknesses in infrastructure and legal and financial systems.

- **Integrating with the world economy.**

MENA remains one of the least integrated regions in the world, having failed to take advantage of the expansion of world trade and foreign direct investment.

- **Managing oil resources better.** Diversifying productive activities is a growing priority, as governments need to develop new sources to enable more effective and sustainable public spending.

In addition, the report emphasizes that MENA countries must redefine their “social contracts”—implicit agreements between governments and citizens about the rights and duties of each side. Rooted in socialist policies and strengthened by the oil boom of the 1970s, MENA governments have offered their citizens generous social benefits and services, including guaranteed government jobs for those who seek them and protective labor laws that extend to the private sector as well.

As the population is growing rapidly and economies are changing, the existing safety nets are increasingly becoming outdated and stretched beyond their capacity. Reforms are needed to balance the need for labor market flexibility and new job creation with social protection and income security for workers. MENA's labor market prospects largely depend on how successfully its governments can develop new social contracts for the 21st century.

### Conclusion

MENA countries have diverse economies and their populations are at different stages of the transition from high to low fertility. Thus, their governments may choose different approaches to improve educational and job opportunities for youth. However, none can succeed in strengthening human capacity among youth without fundamental reforms and greater engagement of civil society. Experiences from around the world have produced extensive knowledge about what works in development strategies and policy reforms, as well as what does not work. While learning and benefiting from other countries' experiences, every MENA government needs to map its pathway to reform in ways that are tailored to its country-specific conditions and desired outcomes.



## References

<sup>1</sup> Countries and territories included in the Middle East and North Africa, as defined in this policy brief, are listed in Table 1. The United Nations defines “young people” as ages 10 to 24, so “youth ages 15 to 24” are the older segment of young people.

<sup>2</sup> Farzaneh Roudi, *Population Trends and Challenges in the Middle East and North Africa* (Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau, 2001); and United Nations, *World Population Prospects: The 2004 Revision* (New York: United Nations, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> World Bank, *Unlocking the Employment Potential in the Middle East and North Africa: Toward a New Social Contract* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2004): 196-200.

<sup>4</sup> Sufyan Alissa, “The School-to-Work Transition of Young People in Syria,” prepared for the International Labour Organization (ILO), June 2006.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations, *Millennium Development Goals Report 2006* (New York: United Nations, 2006): 24.

<sup>6</sup> World Bank, *Unlocking the Employment Potential in the Middle East and North Africa*.

<sup>7</sup> Nader Kabbani and Ekta Kathari, “A Situation Analysis of Youth Employment in the MENA Region,” presented at the conference on Urban Children and Youth in the MENA Region: Addressing Priorities in Education, held in Dubai, May 16-18, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Kabbani and Kathari, “A Situation Analysis of Youth Employment in the MENA Region.”

<sup>9</sup> World Bank, *Unlocking the Employment Potential in the Middle East and North Africa*: 200.

<sup>10</sup> Ragui Assaad, “Unemployment and Youth Insertion in the Labor Market in Egypt,” *Egyptian Center for Economic Studies (ECES) Working Paper* 118 (2007).

<sup>11</sup> World Bank, *Unlocking the Employment Potential in the Middle East and North Africa*: 65.

<sup>12</sup> World Bank, *MENA Development Report: Gender and Development in the Middle East and North Africa* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2004).

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