

The Causes and Effects of Global Graying

By Phillip Longman
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WASHINGTON - Turn on your TV these days and you're bound to see images of Iraqi youths dancing atop burned out Humvees or of Mexican youths slipping across border fences. We see Liberian child soldiers brandishing rifles and Palestinian kids throwing stones. No wonder so many Americans form the impression that Third World population growth is a major threat to global stability.

Yet these images only capture the surface of life and miss a deeper demographic reality. Nearly everyone knows that the United States and other industrialized countries are all aging societies. Europe already has more elders than youths, and by mid-century all of the United States will be older than Florida is today. Yet the most rapidly aging areas of the world, according to the United Nations, the U.S. Census and virtually all other demographic forecasters, are the very places we today associate with destabilizing youth bulges - with the Middle East being among the most rapidly aging of all.

Iran, for example, is aging four times faster than the United States. It took 50 years for the United States to go from a median age of 30 to today's 35. It would take another 50 years for the median age here to reach 40. But while the median age in the United States will be increasing by just five years, the median age in Iran will be increasing by 20 years, reaching 40.2 by mid-century, according to U.N. projections. Similarly, Egypt is aging at three times the rate of the United States, and Iraq nearly 2 1/2 times faster. Virtually anywhere one looks in the developing world, the pattern is the same.

Between 2000 and 2050, Mexico's median age will increase 20 years, leaving half the population over age 42 and making the country older than its northern neighbor. On current trends, 30 percent of China's population will be over 60 by mid-century. Even Africa is aging at nearly double the rate of the United States. Countries such as France and Japan at least got a chance to grow rich before they grew old. Now, most developing countries are growing old before they get rich.

Why is this happening?

Primarily it's because of the dramatic decline in fertility rates that is now spreading to every corner of the globe. As more of the world's population moves to urban areas in which children offer little or no economic reward to their parents, and as women gain in economic opportunity and reproductive control, people are producing fewer children.

No industrialized country still produces enough children to sustain its population. And even in countries where fertility rates are still above replacement levels, a dramatic fall in the number of children born to each woman is leading to a steep slowdown in

population growth, as well as to unprecedented rates of population aging.

The global fall in fertility certainly brings lots of benefits. For example, as the relative number of children declines, so does the burden of their dependency, which partly explains the current economic success of countries such as India and China.

Looking to the next decade, the "middle aging" of the Middle East will ease the region's overall dependency ratio, thereby freeing more resources for infrastructure and industrial development. The appeal of radicalism may also diminish as Middle Eastern societies become increasingly dominated by middle-aged people concerned with such practical issues as health care and retirement savings.

Just as population aging in the West during the 1980s was accompanied by the disappearance of youthful indigenous terrorist groups such as the Red Brigades or the Weather Underground, falling birth rates in the Middle East could well produce societies far less prone to violence.

Yet even if declining fertility rates initially bring a "demographic dividend," that dividend eventually has to be repaid if the trend continues. At first there are fewer children to feed, clothe and educate, leaving more for adults to enjoy. But soon enough, there are fewer productive workers as well, while there are also more and more dependent elderly, who each consume far more resources than do children. China, whose pension system is already deeply in debt, will become what demographer Xiaochun Qiao calls a "4-2-1" society, in which one child must support two parents and four grandparents.

In the longer run, of course, falling fertility leads not only to population aging, but to population decline. World population could well be shrinking before today's children reach retirement age, and there is an 85 percent chance it will be doing so by the end of the century, according to projections by International Institute for Applied Systems.

If global fertility rates converge with those seen today in Europe or among native-born Americans, by 2200 world population could shrink to half of what it is today even without any major wars or pandemics, according to U.N. projections. The only precedent we have for such a decline in population is the period of late antiquity, when falling birthrates helped bring about the collapse of the Roman Empire.

Global aging is better than its alternative, but to borrow a phrase from my late grandmother, it's not for sissies.

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