

Wave of various forms of self-expression and protests spread through a number of Arab states in the first quarter of 2011. All of them involved more or less numerous political rallies. Everywhere protesters demanded political changes blaming the authorities for their poverty. Sentiments for reforms of òNasser eraö and deep economic changes of that very time clearly came back. However, blaming ruling teams of Arab states for stagnation and impoverishment seems to be exaggerated and unfair. Reasons for lack of visible improvement in economic status of Arabic population, which was the major cause of the protests, have the structural character and are the outcome of huge population growth rate in Arabic countries in the recent time.

Demographic boom

At the end of the 20th century population of Arab inhabitants of broadly defined Middle East numbered more than 280 mln¹ people. According to current estimates their number reaches ca. 350 mln² people. These data are publicly available and nothing unusual seems to be hidden in it.

Country	Arab population	Total population	Percent of the Arab population
Egypt	72,676,000	79,785,392	91.09%
Algeria	26,872,704	35,423,000	75.86%
Morocco	22,864,006	32,381,000	70.61%
Saudi Arabia	22,666,005	26,246,000	86.36%
Iraq	21,543,202	31,467,000	68.46%
Yemen	22,619,204	24,256,000	93.25%
Syria	19,840,102	22,505,000	88.16%
Sudan	26,757,247	41,981,000	63.74%
Tunisia	10,070,004	10,374,000	87.07%
Libya	5,853,001	6,546,000	89.41%
Jordan	6,297,002	6,472,000	97.30%
Palestinian National Authority	4,004,902	4,409,000	90.83%
Lebanon	4,018,303	4,255,000	94.44%

¹ The Arab Population: 2000. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau official website: [www.census.gov; http://www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/c2kbr-23.pdf](http://www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/c2kbr-23.pdf) [accessed on:]

² Data from the Egiptian Central Agency for Population Mobilisation and Statistics website: www.msrintranet.capmas.gov.eg/; <http://www.msrintranet.capmas.gov.eg/pls/fdl/tst12e?action=&lname=> [accessed on:]

	04	3,030,000	73.89%
	04	4,707,000	47.41%
Oman	1,672,702	2,905,000	57.58%
Mauretania	2,881,900	3,343,000	86.21%
Qatar	958,004	1,508,000	63.53%
Bahrain	525,801	803,000	65.48%
óTotal	285,333,507	356,376,000	80%

However, in the context of events taking place for several weeks in the region lately these data gain completely new meaning. They seem to be vital to explain the substratum of protests which have occurred in the Middle East in early 2011. Events happening in recent weeks in Egypt, being the most populous state in this part of the world, may serve as a good exemplification in this case. To demonstrate this we refer to slightly older statistics of this country.

Mere 10 mln people inhabited the land of the Pharaohs less than a hundred years ago³. By comparison, Poland, having regained its independence in 1918, was two times more populous⁴. This ratio was maintained throughout the whole interwar period.

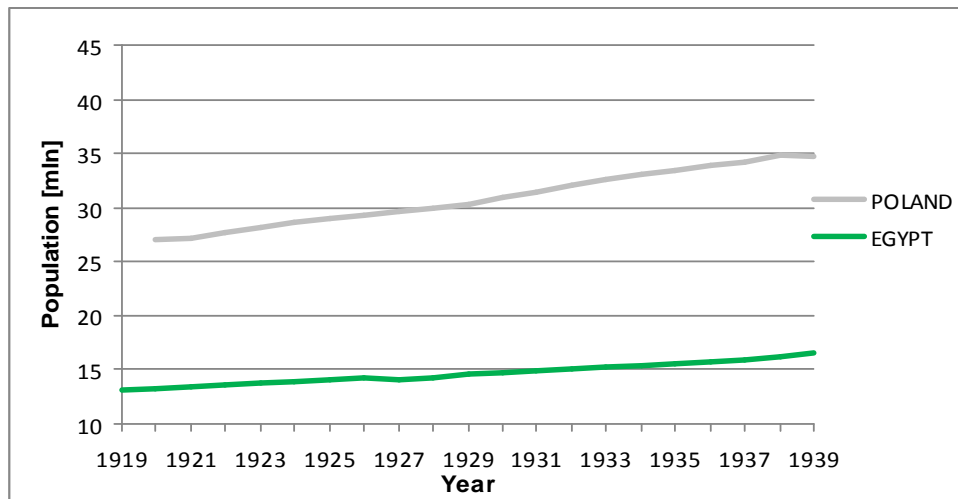


Fig. 1. The demographic changes in Egypt and Poland in 1919-1939

One year before the outbreak of the World War II the Second Polish Republic population numbered 34.8 mln, compared to 16.5 mln in Egypt. One can even observe a slightly faster population growth in the former than in the latter. It was only forty years ago, in the late 60s and early 70s, that these figures equaled for the two countries.

³ <http://www.populstat.info/Africa/egyptc.htm>, [accessed on:]

⁴ Historia Polski w liczbach. Państwo i społeczeństwo. T.1, Warsaw, 2003, p. 357.

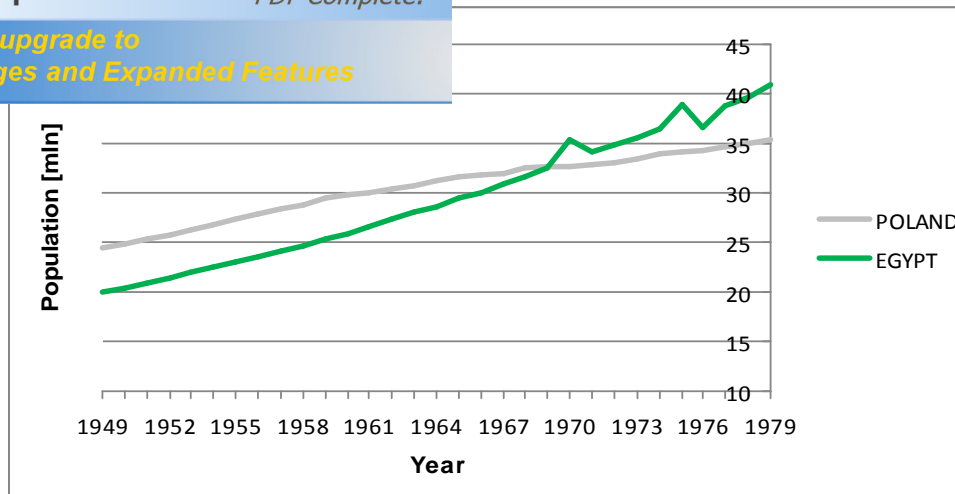


Fig. 2. The demographic changes in Egypt and Poland in 1949-1979

Time of changes

It was in that very same period that millions of Egyptians with the tears in their eyes bade farewell to Gamal Abdel Nasser. For them he was not only the father of real independence, but also a true leader, a statesman whom the whole Arab world admired. In 1956, his contribution to the humiliation of Western powers gave the dignity to the Arab world and led to a gradual overcoming of its colonial mentality. Nasser formulated the concept of pan-Arabism and started to put it into practice⁵. Both the intellectual elite and common people admired him. Recognition which he enjoyed was sincere and well-deserved for Nasser was able to listen to the voice of the people and meet their expectations better than any other politician in this part of the world. Naturally, he first addressed the issues that were of utmost importance for his countrymen. Thanks to him hundreds of thousands of Egyptians cultivate their own small plots and home gardens. By carrying out the agrarian reform, implementing huge infrastructure projects and industrializing the country Nasser secured the livelihoods of several millions of families⁶, livelihoods that, in the context of the Middle East, were modest but certain and stable. Together with almost revolutionary changes in the Egyptian culture and customs pushed through by Nasser, these initiatives seem to have countered the demographic processes that slowed down the population growth in Egypt⁷.

Followers of Nasser

However, slower population growth in this most populous state in the region can hardly be seen as a consequence of its transformation in the Nasser era. Moreover, it is even impossible to confirm indisputably the existence of cause and effect relationship between the implemented pro-social measures and the population growth rate in Egypt. Although the country exceeded most of the Arab world in this respect, in fact it did not stand out so much against other countries in the region. Each of them has found its own Nasser, who tried to limit the scale of poverty in the spirit of Arab socialist thought. Syria has benefited from

⁵ H.A. Jamsheer, *Jedno arabska. Geneza idei w tradycji wczesnego islamu*, Warsaw, 1995. For more by the same author on Nasser and his view on the concept of unification of the Arab world, see: H.A. Jamsheer, *Konflikt sueski w stosunkach międzynarodowych 1956-1957*, / ód , 1987, pp. 769.

⁶ J. Zdanowski, *Historia Bliskiego Wschodu w XX wieku*, Wrocław, 2010, p. 194.

⁷ . . . , Moscow, 2006.

...on with Egypt⁸ within the United Arab Republic, while the leader of local Free Officers Movement Abd al-Karim al-Nasr, Gaddafi, etc¹⁰. In each of these countries population growth rate stood at a similar level. Compared to the levels of the year 1955, Egypt's population doubled in 1979¹¹, with Syria¹² and Iraq¹³ achieving their doubling effectó in 1978, while in Libya, which was the last one to follow the path of Arab socialism changes, the population doubled already in 1973¹⁴.

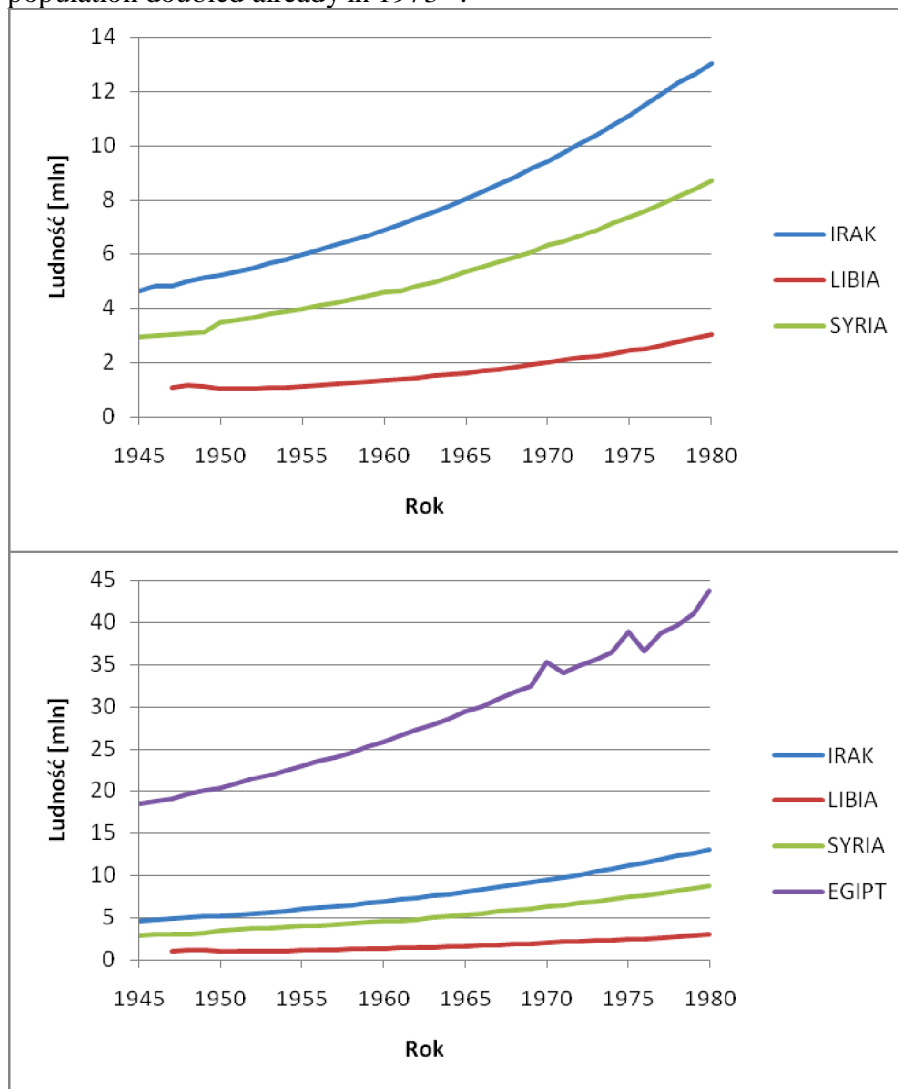


Fig. 3. The demographic changes in Egypt, Iraq, Libya and Syria in 1945-1980

⁸ Akt Konstytucyjny Dotyczący Tworzenia Zjednoczonej Republiki Arabskiej, Cairo February 1, 1958 in: Bliski i Rodkowy Wschód. Afryka Północna. Materiały i dokumenty 1945-1960, Wydział Nauk Społecznych przy KC PZPR [School of Social Sciences at PUWP CC], duplicated typescript, Warsaw (no release date).

⁹ U. Dann, Iraq under Qassem. A Political History 1958-1963, Tel Aviv, 1969.

¹⁰ . . . , Moscow 1989, p. 11.

¹¹ Data from the website populstat.info: <http://www.populstat.info/Africa/egyptc.htm> [accessed on: 2011.08.03]

¹² Data from the website populstat.info: <http://www.populstat.info/Asia/syriac.htm> [accessed on: 2011.08.03]

¹³ Data from the website populstat.info: <http://www.populstat.info/Asia/iraqc.htm> [accessed on: 2011.08.03]

¹⁴ Data from the website populstat.info: <http://www.populstat.info/Africa/libyac.htm> [accessed on: 2011.08.03]

and reforms kindled in the Nasser era faded away with the specific mentality of the local society it seemed to be a foregone conclusion. While the 70s saw the region run under the sign of a number of investments mostly planned in the previous decade, the 80s were a pure waste of time in this respect. War with Iran pushed Iraq on a downward spiral. Before its outbreak Iraq, being a country with a strong currency and several billion dollars worth of gold reserves, a country that could become the Croesus of the Arab world, in fact has torn bankrupt¹⁵. Strongly secular and relatively well educated society with a middle class that, in the context of the region, could be considered large and wealthy¹⁶ was plunged into unimaginable poverty. Due to the devastation of the war, people lost their jobs and the regime did not dare to carry out the demobilization necessary to save the state finances for fear of mass unrest and riots. In effect, Iraq became a huge military camp with a very large army and could not afford its maintenance or reduction¹⁷. Although the situation was much better in other countries of the region, there was no sign of any progress as related to the end of the 70s in their case either. Libya, by supporting national liberation and revolutionary movements, found itself in opposition to the West even before the Lockerbie bombing. Therefore, a group of potential partners ready to help Gaddafi in the modernization of industry and infrastructure narrowed to the Eastern Bloc which struggled with its own powerlessness¹⁸. Syria and Lebanon bogged down in the conflict with Israel, while the wealthy monarchies of the Persian Gulf invested mainly in their own security fearing the consequences of the export of Shiite revolution: they co-financed Iraqi military campaigns on the one hand and funded the protection of oil installations and transfer routes on the other. Exceptions to this dichotomy were limited to buying the most expensive, state-of-the-art military equipment which was totally unnecessary for these countries. E.g., Saudis contracted to purchase planes compatible with the U.S. defense AWAC system, even before this type of equipment came into possession of the army of any of the U.S. European allies.

Step backwards

To be fair, we should also mention that it is hard to overlook the positive changes that have taken place in the 80s in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. Discrediting the efforts undertaken by the local monarchs for the modernization of their countries would be even unserious. Gently speaking, the problem lies in the nature of reforms and unequal proportion of efforts focused on different sectors of economy. Due to that fact, it was impossible neither to abandon the oil monoculture, nor to gain more profit from it. Building modern multi-lane roads instead of the refineries, which would allow for the export of finished product and not only the raw material, was a typical example of this trend. Such excess of form over the content seemed to be something more than just a local specificity. In fact, it determined the paths of development of these countries without meeting their main needs related to their dynamic population growth. In the 90s there were no changes in this respect. Kuwait licked the wounds after the occupation, while Iraq, devastated by wars caused by Baath regime, was slowly dying, what, surprisingly, remained unnoticed even during the Operation Desert Fox when the American missiles illuminated the sky over Baghdad. Neither were the record low prices of oil conducive to the implementation of more ambitious reforms.

¹⁵ J. Bulloch, H. Morris, *Wojna Saddama*, Poznań, 1991, p. 83.

¹⁶ H. Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, Princeton, 1978.

¹⁷ J. Bulloch, H. Morris, *Wojna Saddama...*, p. 84.

¹⁸ Ch. M. Blanchard, *Libya: Unrest and U.S. Policy*, The Federation of American Scientists, access from the website: <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33142.pdf>, [accessed on:].

wind of changes to the region. Upturn in the global market saw its impact on the stock prices of energy resources. Due to their gradual but successive and sustainable growth, countries which possess such resources slowly began to implement a number of projects aimed at neutralization of threats to the stability of local political systems caused by dynamic population growth. Interestingly enough, countries leading in this respect were Qatar and the UAE, although due to their relatively small population they were the least exposed to the dangers associated with the abovementioned demographic changes. The situation was far worse in the countries with no revenues from oil sales. E.g., in Yemen and Syria there have been no structural actions aimed on bringing about changes since virtually the end of the 70s. The governments of Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt have shown more creativity and made a number of efforts to ensure foreign investments. Obtained capital was allocated to the expansion of infrastructure necessary for tourism development. Along with the services sector, tourism strengthened its share in GDP of these countries and became a key branch of economy as well as the leading sector in creating new jobs¹⁹. However, its ability to absorb the unemployed was and still is too limited in relation to the needs resulting from a significant annual growth of working age population. Organisation of convoys escorting foreign visitors in Egypt and establishment of various security services such as the Tourist Police is aimed at reducing not only the potential threat of terrorist attacks but also the number of young people without the means to live.

Steps taken by the king of Saudi Arabia, Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud, are a specific confirmation of the existing *status quo*. In February 2011, as a result of events in Tunisia and Egypt, he commanded the implementation of a broad investment program including a 40 billion USD worth financial package aimed at the elimination of the painful effects of the rising food prices on the poorer part of society and involving monthly benefits for the unemployed, construction of 500,000 new dwellings, allowances for public sector employees and subsidies for health care. Creation of 60,000 new jobs in the security services that are subject to the Ministry of Internal Affairs is an integral part of the reform²⁰.

Saudi Arabia, possessing significant foreign exchange reserves worth over 400 billion USD finds itself in much more favorable conditions than its neighbors in terms of alleviating social tension related to, inter alia, youth unemployment. However, previous tardiness can cost the monarchy much more than one can expect.

The Arab Spring, the name that the media gave the events taking place in the Arab world in early 2011, seems to be appropriate. Analogies do not consist only of the actions for freedom and liberalization of the political systems. Similarities are also evident in the reasons for the uprising. Just like over one and a half century ago masses of people protested due to a sudden increase in food prices caused by, inter alia, crop failure in 1846-1847 combined with unprecedented population growth, today the rice, olive and tomatoes, being much more expensive than a year before, became the *spiritus movens* of the Arab social unrest. Forecasts and predictions suggesting the possibility of improving the fate of the population of countries mentioned above only through changes in the leadership are very optimistic. For example, while speaking of Egypt one should not neglect the fact that Hosni Mubarak and his government actually seemed to be quite effective in their fight against poverty. They

¹⁹ In the financial year 2008/2009 share of tourism in GDP was 11% and this sector gave work to 13% of working age population in Egypt. See: *Informacja o sytuacji gospodarczej Egiptu* ó Wydział Promocji, Handlu i Inwestycji Ambasady RP w Kairze. Published on the website http://cairo.trade.gov.pl/pl/egypt/article/detail/479.Gospodarka_Egiptu.html, [accessed on:].

²⁰ *Spokój za pieni dze* in *Źrzczechpospolita* March 18, 2011. Published on the website www.rp.pl; <http://www.rp.pl/arttykul/628708.html>, [accessed on:].

employment for years, regardless of the fact that the end of their rule. Moreover, in the last seven years they spent 2 USD in 2003 to 2,926 USD in 2009²¹. In this context, concerns about the effects of disappointment which may overtake the societies of Middle Eastern countries so actively involved in protest actions against their native regimes in the early months of 2011, seem to be reasonable. In these circumstances, the dissatisfaction caused by the lack of improvement of the economic situation is a factor clearly favoring inclusion of populist parties and religious extremists into the mainstream of political life. Such a scenario seems to be more than likely because there are no indications of any decline in prices of basic food products, such as rice or olive, in the near future.

Text Piotr Kwiatkiewicz
Fig. Ryszard Tomczak

References:

- Akt Konstytucyjny Dotyczący Utworzenia Zjednoczonej Republiki Arabskiej*, §Cairo February 1, 1958 in *Bliski i Środkowy Wschód. Afryka Północna. Materiały i dokumenty 1945-1960*, Wydawnictwo Szkoła Nauk Społecznych przy KC PZPR [School of Social Sciences at PUWP CC], duplicated typescript, Warsaw (no release date).
- Batatu H., *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, Princeton 1978.
- Blanchard Ch. M., *Libya: Unrest and U.S. Policy*, The Federation of American Scientists <http://www.fas.org/>
- Bulloch J., Morris H., *Wojna Saddama*, Poznań 1991.
- <http://cairo.trade.gov.pl>
- Central Agency for Population Mobilisation and Statistics www.msrintranet.capmas.gov.eg/
- Dann U., *Iraq under Qassem. A Political History 1958-1963*, Tel Aviv 1969.
- Historia Polski w liczbach. Państwo i społeczeństwo. T.1, Warsaw 2003.
- <http://www.populstat.info>
- Jamsheer H.A., *Jedno państwo arabskie. Geneza idei w tradycji wczesnego islamu*, Warsaw 1995.
- Jamsheer H.A., *Konflikt sueski w stosunkach międzynarodowych 1956-1957*, / ód 1987.
- Spokój za pieniądze* in *Rzeczpospolita* March 18, 2011.
- The Arab Population: U.S. Census Bureau
- Zdanowski J., *Historia Bliskiego Wschodu w XX wieku*, Wrocław 2010.
- ó Moscow 1989.
-, Moscow 2006.

²¹ Informacja o sytuacji gospodarczej Egiptu, op.cit.