



## Conclusions. An Overview of Population Dynamics in the Mediterranean

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## Chapter 10

# Conclusions. An Overview of Population Dynamics in the Mediterranean



**Abstract** This book has made it possible to review the main demographic developments of the last 70 years. Above all, it has made it possible to highlight the rapid global homogenisation of several demographic behaviours in the Mediterranean, to point out certain exceptions and to identify the global challenges that await Mediterranean populations.

**Keywords** Mediterranean • Population studies • International comparison • Demographic convergence

### 10.1 Major Demographic Developments Since 1950

This book has made it possible to review the main demographic developments of the last 70 years. Above all, it has made it possible to highlight the rapid global homogenisation of several demographic behaviours in the Mediterranean, to point out certain exceptions and to identify the global challenges that await Mediterranean populations.

From a geographical point of view, the Mediterranean appears to have extremely heterogeneous populations, since it includes some of the most densely populated regions in the world as well as desert regions. Nevertheless, most of the Mediterranean countries are experiencing a strong coastalisation of its population. In addition, there are several coastal cities. The role of water, the sea and also the rivers in shaping human settlement in the Mediterranean is a characteristic that is present in the entire area studied (the Nile being the most archetypal example). The Mediterranean is undergoing rapid urbanisation, from a predominantly rural population in 1950 to an urban population of 70% by 2020. The urban agglomerations on the Southern and Eastern shores account for most of the Mediterranean's urban population growth between 2000 and 2020. This phenomenon has led to a higher concentration of the population in the area, especially on the coastlines. This human pressure on the natural environment is not without consequences in terms of maritime pollution, the

degradation of the environment and biodiversity, fires, pressures on water resources, etc.

From a demographic point of view, however, the rate of growth has been steadily decreasing for all Mediterranean countries since the late 1970s. However, due to the inertia of the demographic phenomena, the populations of the Mediterranean countries have more than doubled, reaching around 570 million inhabitants in 2020. This increase in Mediterranean populations is mainly driven by the Southern and Eastern shores. Indeed, while the Mediterranean as a whole has gained 110 million inhabitants between 2000 and 2020, the countries on the Northern Shore have only contributed 11 million. This trend explains why today 2 out of 3 Mediterranean people live in a country on the Southern and Eastern shores (compared to 1 out of 3 in 1950), and also why Egypt and Turkey are the most populated Mediterranean countries in 2020, and no longer Italy and France as in 1950.

The slowdown in the rate of population growth in the Mediterranean, which is currently lower than in the past, can be explained by the demographic transition generalising to the whole region. All Mediterranean countries have seen their birth and death rates fall, thus limiting population growth. Nevertheless, we have managed to identify that there are significant disparities behind these overall trends. There is no single demographic transition model in the Mediterranean. On the contrary, there are several types, differing in their pace, course, and post-transitional demographic regime. The transition has been much faster in some countries than in others. Some post-transitional regimes are characterised by declining growth (Bulgaria, Croatia, Italy, etc.), others by low or moderate growth (France, Cyprus, Tunisia, Kosovo, Turkey, etc.), and a few are still experiencing relatively high growth (Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, Algeria, Israel). Thus, the slowdown in the rate of growth is leading some countries to lose population, while others continue to gain population.

If the Mediterranean is increasing its number of inhabitants, it is above all, experiencing a rapid transformation in the composition of its population. In fact, the most striking development noted is that of demographic ageing, with an increase in the number of elderly people in the population and a decrease in that of the young. Currently, the elderly (65 years of age or older) represent 12% of the Mediterranean population, and the young (under 15 years of age) about 24%. In general, the populations of the countries on the Northern shore are older than those on the Southern and Eastern shores: in 2020, people aged 65 or over represented 21% on average for the former, and 6% for the latter. However, the gap between countries is slightly smaller today than it was in 1950. This phenomenon will continue at an even faster pace in the coming decades, with demographic ageing definitively establishing itself as a concern shared by all Mediterranean countries. Indeed, the UN projections (median scenario) will expect that people aged 65 or over represent about 22% of the entire Mediterranean population in 2060, with about 34% for the Northern shore and 17% for the Southern and Eastern shore.

With the demographic transition process, fertility levels have been reduced in all Mediterranean countries. Despite this convergence towards lower levels than those of the pre-transitional regimes, fertility differences still persist in the Mediterranean. Our analyses reveal first of all that some countries have reached a fertility level well

below the population replacement level (2.1 children per woman). With the exception of Cyprus, all of these very low fertility countries are not on the Southern and Eastern shores. Other groups of countries have a fertility level around the replacement level, such as France, Tunisia, Turkey or Lebanon; and finally, other fertility situations are noted as remaining fixed well above this threshold (more than 3 children per woman), such as Jordan, Egypt, Israel and Palestine. In light of the predicted convergence of the demographic transition, our analyses suggest that Mediterranean countries could stabilise at different fertility levels, potentially generating different demographic regimes in the future. For example, two groups can be distinguished in terms of fertility timing: countries where the childbearing age is lower and those for which it is higher. However, this is not a shore-based divide, as there are countries from all shores in both groups. The determinants of these birth timing seem to be very heterogeneous from one country to another, thus fuelling the possibility that fertility in the Mediterranean will not fully converge in the end.

However, family formation and dissolution behaviours have converged in some ways over the last 70 years. In the Mediterranean, there has not only been a decrease in the frequency of marriages and a reduction in the disparities in divorcibility, but also an increase in the age at marriage and in permanent celibacy. These contemporary family changes have been interpreted as a profound challenge to the institution of marriage in Western Europe, and as a marriage revolution in Arab-Muslim countries. However, lifelong commitment is still expressed in various forms in Europe and marriage continues to endure and structure family models on the Southern and Eastern shores. Permanent celibacy and postponement of the age of marriage may then be less about questioning the institution of marriage itself than of worsening socio-economic conditions, such as high youth unemployment, greater precariousness and uncertainty about the future, or the cost of housing or marriage being too high. Similarly, not being married does not imply the same social reality. In Arab-Muslim societies, this means waiting longer for social independence and economic autonomy, or being unable to start a family. Thus, similar trends in demographic indicators may conceal very different social situations.

The Mediterranean has also seen a broad convergence of mortality, with a historic increase in life expectancy at birth for all countries. The disparities of the 1950s have narrowed considerably, with countries with the lowest life expectancy at birth catching up rapidly. However, convergence has not been observed for about 30 years. The control of infectious diseases, and later of cardiovascular diseases, has led to a reduction in infant and adult mortality. On the other hand, the unequal capacity of Mediterranean countries to fight against societal diseases, neurodegenerative diseases and cancers, has led to a divergence in life expectancy at age 65. Massive ageing will therefore inevitably lead to a significant increase in the number of deaths in these countries, as survival probabilities at older ages are unlikely to increase rapidly.

Finally, with regard to international migration, the book showed that the Mediterranean constitutes a real migration system, and above all one of the largest migration areas in the world. Migration from the Southern and Eastern shore countries to European countries was intense in the 1960s. However, the various economic crises from the 1970s onwards led to increasingly restrictive entry policies in Europe. Southern

European countries have been gradually becoming host countries. Since the 2000s, there has been a recomposition of the poles of attraction in the Mediterranean, with the emergence of Turkey for example. Finally, the number of refugees and asylum seekers has increased considerably since the “Arab Spring” and the various ensuing conflicts, to the point of talk of a “refugee crisis”. The issue of international migration is, along with that of the urbanisation/littoralisation of the common sea and the ageing of populations, a challenge shared by the entire Mediterranean area.

## **10.2 An Assessment of the Book’s Overall Approach**

The introduction to this publication set out a number of approaches, including the implementation of a comparative approach. Now that the project is drawing to a close, what heuristic lessons can we draw from it? First of all, regarding our choice to study Mediterranean populations over a long demographic period (i.e., over the last 70 years), we can commend ourselves, which has proven particularly fruitful. It is indeed by putting recent trends into perspective within long-term developments that has allowed us, for example, to identify the broad movements of convergence that have taken place in various fields. Situating the present in a historical perspective allows for an account of underlying trends rather than short-term fluctuations. Thanks to this approach, it is also possible to affirm that the disparities have been reduced over time, and that the Mediterranean populations are closer and more similar today than in the past. The Mediterranean is therefore well and truly in the process of demographic homogenisation on the whole, despite persistent heterogeneities in certain areas.

This choice of studying it over the long term has also made it possible to show that the demographic history of the Mediterranean countries is not always monotonous, but on the contrary is sometimes punctuated by changes in pace, breaks in trends or even reversals. This historical perspective sometimes makes it possible to put certain recent economic developments into perspective and to interpret them more accurately and also makes it possible to avoid considering demographic developments as being one-way or predetermined. Indeed, recent reversals in trends have again reminded us of this, such as the decline in life expectancy at birth with the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of these may be surprising at first glance, but are less so when hewed from an historical perspective. Increases in fertility in Egypt and Algeria, for example, may appear as notable exceptions to the theory of demographic transition. However, fertility increases have already taken place in the past in the Mediterranean, with baby booms observed in many European countries in the 1950s and 1960s, and in Egypt in the 1980s, putting the current increases or surges in fertility into perspective. The question is to what extent these trend reversals reflect backtracking, a temporary change or even a new behavioural trend.

Our second approach was to implement an overall international comparison, with countries as the level of analysis, rejecting any predefined geographical framework. The analyses in this publication have therefore not sought to reiterate the classic

contrasts,<sup>1</sup> such as the Northern shore vs. the Southern and Eastern shores, or the Balkans, Southern Europe, North Africa vs. the Near East. On the contrary, we opted for a bottom-up approach, allowing groups from all Mediterranean countries to emerge, regardless of their geographical location.

This choice showed the extent to which the Mediterranean is a complex region that cannot be reduced to a simple demographic opposition between two blocks (Northern Shore/Southern and Eastern shore). Beyond the traditional contrasts, this method made it possible to highlight the internal diversity of each of the blocks in many areas. Surprisingly, some countries are closer to countries on other shores than to their neighbours. For example, Tunisia has a demographic regime closer to France than Algeria or Morocco. Similarly, the demographic regime of France is more similar to that of Tunisia than to those of Italy or Spain. This is also the case for certain Balkan countries (Serbia, Montenegro, etc.) whose life expectancy at birth is similar to that of countries on the Southern and Eastern shores (Turkey, Lebanon).

This option, which consists of taking all the countries without first grouping them together, has made it possible to show once again that the overall contrast between the shores of the Mediterranean is still coherent for a certain number of demographic phenomena. However, even when contrasts between shores are noted, the situations are less often caricatured and there are exceptions for each shore. Indeed, in several chapters, our analyses highlight countries or particular groups of countries that would not have been identified by any other method. This concerns, for example, the particular position of specific Balkan countries (Kosovo, Albania, Macedonia, etc.), which are quite systematically closer to the countries of the Southern and Eastern shores than to the other Balkan countries in terms of several demographic phenomena. This characteristic had already been highlighted for Albania by Attané and Courbage (2004). The same applies to Israel, Cyprus, and sometimes Lebanon, for the Southern and Eastern shores, which stand out as atypical in the region.

In addition, certain demographic phenomena reveal contrasts between countries from different shores. This is the case, for example, for adult mortality, age at child-bearing or age at marriage. It is by refusing to perpetuate existing regional categories that it has been possible to obtain a renewed understanding of the Mediterranean, we have identified trans-Mediterranean formations (grouping together countries from different shores), and regionalisations beyond the Northern shore and the Southern and Eastern shores divide.

This publication is therefore not a juxtaposition of regional monographs, or a bibliographic synthesis of national studies. It is an integrated, bottom-up demographic and geographical approach based on data. This approach has been fruitful in proposing an original synthesis of the major demographic phenomena over the last 70 years, and thereby offering up-to-date insights of demography in the Mediterranean.

The aim of this publication was to provide an overview of the demographic trends over the last 70 years for all populations of the Mediterranean. To this end, we chose to analyse the classic demographic phenomena. On the other hand, some aspects have

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the publication, only the graphical representations have used broad regional groupings, for reasons related to practicality and consistency.

not been developed or have only been partially developed. These are all avenues to be developed further with an approach similar to that of this publication. We mention three of them here, but there are obviously many others.

Firstly, we did not focus enough on educational progress and the status of women. Both have considerable influence on demographic behaviour, in particular on the decline in fertility and the nuptiality rate. The Mediterranean area is varied from the point of view of women's place in society, whether one compares the countries or the different social and geographical sub-areas specific of each country studied. The status occupied by women varies between and within societies, just as the place of residence (urban or rural) or the community to which they belong influences a couple's plans to have children.

Secondly, it is imperative to obtain an improved understanding of representations and values in the Mediterranean countries, particularly those associated with the couple, the family, motherhood and children. We are thinking of, for example, the ideal number of children,<sup>2</sup> the importance of family life, the acceptability of giving birth to a child out-of-wedlock, the importance of work for a woman, the values transmitted from parents to children, etc. It is rather difficult, despite opinions being collected via relevant international comparative surveys, to construct a complete picture of the Mediterranean situation. However, there are some elements that can provide food for thought. A number of opinion questions are asked to male and female respondents from different countries. As such, it is possible to pinpoint and measure the transformation of norms and the conception of marriage and the family in the Mediterranean and to imagine their future.

Finally, this publication mainly uses countries as the level of analysis, as it was already rich enough to offer a synthesis of demographic phenomena in the Mediterranean. However, we are aware that the lessons learned at the national level mask regional inequalities. The analyses carried out at the sub-national level in this publication, for population density or age structure for example, have shown the extent to which very contrasting situations can co-exist within the same country, and that homogeneous geographical groupings can include regions of several countries. There is now a desire to encourage international comparative studies at a sub-national level, as has been done for demographic ageing in the Mediterranean (Doignon, 2016, 2020). However, this approach remains painstaking for several reasons. This is because international databases only cover countries. It would therefore be necessary to obtain data from national statistical offices, international institutions (e.g. Eurostat) or major international surveys. This raises the question of data access, as well as data availability and comparability. All these aspects are unequal from one Mediterranean country to another and vary according to the topic. While it would therefore be time-consuming to study all the Mediterranean countries at the sub-national level, it seems to us that the analytical potential of such an approach is very high. We would thus be highly supportive of any initiative aiming to undertake a systematic sub-national demographic comparison.

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<sup>2</sup> See Ambrosetti et al. (2021) for the case of Egypt.

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