

THE YOUTH AND THE POPULATION ISSUE IN SYRIA

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Introduction containing the research problem and its main queries:

When we talk about the thorny issue of population it seems rather difficult to find the factor which can keep us away from going too far. In light of the noticeable slowdown of the economic and social growth, the decrease in material and natural resources, and the slow growth of living standards, and for the purpose of accelerating economic growth, we may be tempted to attribute all social problems to the high increase of population. That is why the talk about the inappropriate demographical situation tends to be transformed into forming a problem about the rapid increase of the population and the need to stop this increase in order to boost economic and social development. Furthermore, this development becomes dependant on controlling birth or stopping it completely, according to the widely-held belief. The general fear of the population increase and the unscientific heated debates about the problems resulting from this increase have influenced the thinking of scientists especially the non-specialists such as physicists, biologists and mathematicians who in turn have had an effect on this matter when they were led to wrongly confuse the population increase with the number of births. The American scientist Houeil, for example, has categorically declared that humans in modern times cannot curb the speed of births. He came up with the theory that humanity will face huge disasters and frustration in social life for twenty times due to population increase, and that the remaining people will be able to learn after five thousand years (and after going through the stages of fear and revival) how to direct births. And although those who were behind the theory of demographic transition have acknowledged the need to reduce the number of births and the multi-children families in the developing countries, they stopped short of conducting an in-depth research or academic study into the family crisis and the facts of low births.

Analyzing the factors which can lead to a reduction in the number of births, especially in countries where family planning is at its lowest or does not even exist, shows that modernization (urbanization) is the critical factor in all country groups, and that family planning can only reduce the total number of births by 2-9%. (Antonof, 1986, 45). This also proves the failure of the theory which claims that it is easy to direct or, more precisely, reduce the number of births depending on contraceptives and family planning measures. And in order to be able to detect the misconceptions about how easy it is to control births when compared with the difficulty of rebuilding the economy under the pressure of population increase and the slowdown in the process of reducing the number of births in light of the historical and unlimited phenomenon of multi-children families, the meaning of "how to influence births" should be made clear. Does it mean to control the behaviour that produces the family or control the life conditions which can encourage or inhibit the reduction of the number of births?

Which is easier? To change the family need to have children, or to change life conditions? or more precisely the conditions which promote the need to having children. The first option is easier since it will be easier to influence the conditions which promote the need that exists with the family than to change the need itself, which changes with the new generation and remains almost unchanged within the same generation of couples and families. In developing countries such as Syria we

find the campaign to reduce the number of births through promoting the means of family planning to be in fact a campaign to promote the instructions of reducing the number of children between those who have satisfied their needs for having children and those who do not want to have more children than what they need. That is why if this road was to be followed; the main obstacle to reducing the number of births then would be the same need to have children.

The campaign to promote awareness about how to use the new methods of family planning effectively and to provide these methods to the public does not affect in any way the need to have children. Thinking about having children remains the prior thought. Moreover, this family planning campaign works only on the determinist side only of the birth reduction process by reducing the number of children in the family and encouraging the example of the family with few children. Family planning in this way is something completely different, and it contradicts the family policy which aims at supporting the family with children and promoting family lifestyle. (Antonof, 1986, 98).

The idea of family planning, based on its human considerations, aims at improving public health through preserving the health that produces family members by reducing mortality rate among children and breast-feeding mothers, in addition to improving women health by preventing abortion and regulating pregnancies...etc.

The programs of family planning should have functions other than the demographic objectives of governments. The most important function of such programs should be to preserve this social establishment on which society is built by working to ensure its survival and continuity taking into consideration the relation between the number of children in a family and the functions and roles which it performs as an only establishment in society. And if we agree on the need to reduce the number of births in the family to achieve a balance between the increasing population and the slow economic growth, then how far should we go, and what is the optimal number of children in a family that can insure its survival and continuity?

We can say, based on this, that success in dealing with the population problem and achieving development challenges depends on analyzing the relation between life conditions of the family and its decision to have children. And I do not believe that a media campaign here would be able to affect such decision in light of the low level of education, the high level of illiteracy, the limited participation of women in the workforce, inadequate training and rehabilitating, unemployment...etc. And here come the role of the youth because it is them who represent the workforce, and based on them we can identify the rate of family support, fertility rate, GDP, GNP and the general demographic features of society. They represent the biggest section of the population - 42.7% of the population are in the age group of 13-35 years (Union of the Revolution Youth, 2006, 9). In addition, the youth are the most susceptible to problems related to sexual health such as early marriages, marriages between family relatives, dangerous behaviour and sexually-transmitted diseases.

Integrating the youth into the development process and enabling them to participate in making the decisions which affect them, providing them with the suitable circumstances to work for their well-being and based on their personal beliefs, in addition to educating and training them are the basis to slow down the rapid population increase, to achieve the development challenges of the twenty first century, and to reap the economic fruits of the low level of fertility resulting from reducing the need to having children and having instead a thoughtful insight into their future. To what extent then should the youth be integrated into the development process? And what is the reality of the youth and their unfulfilled needs? What is their

position on their main issues and population-related issues? Do they lack awareness of the population question and the nature of its problems? Do they lack awareness of the importance of family planning methods and how to use them? Do not they have an insight into their future and the future of children later on? Do not they have awareness of the risks of having many children? What kinds of sexual health services do they have access to? What are the obstacles which hinder these youths from performing their intended role? What is the decisive factor behind their decision to have children?

The nature of the issue in Syria:

Population issues in Syria started to attract attention after the results of the 1970 census were issued. Problems and crises related to the unfulfilled needs of the population such as education, work, housing, health, water...etc started to surface. That is why population-related issues started to form an integral part of social and economic development plans, starting from the fifth five-year plan 1981-1985 which showed the mutual relation between the population factor and economic development, till the tenth five-year plan 2001-2005 which tried to strike a balance between the increasing demands of the population and the capacity of social and economic development.

Although the main objective of all the five-year plans since 1980 and until 2005 was to meet the increasing demands of the population such as the welfare and to develop the economic, social, health, educational and cultural level of the family, reality shows that what has been achieved was way below the ambitions and the intended objectives. Poverty has increased, especially poverty of the capabilities. 5.3 millions of the population remained under poverty line, that is 30.13% of the population. 20% of this percentage were considered poor, and 11.14% were extremely poor and could not fully fulfill their needs other than food. (Commission of family affairs, 2006, 4). Moreover, per capita income declined to 21% of the world average per capita income, and to 55% of the average per capita income in semi-developed countries.

As for education, the percentage of those who have not attended school remains high especially among females and children in the countryside. It shows that more than quarter of the children in Syria are deprived from elementary education, and that a great part of those who had dropped out early in their lives have become merely literate or have gone back to illiteracy which was as high as 19% in 2004. Furthermore, the percentage of those who have not attended school in the age group of 12 years and above is more than 46% in the whole country and it is more than 51% in the countryside.

In secondary education data shows that the number of those who have joined state and private education in addition to different kinds of technical education was 410238 in 2003 with a percentage of 32.15% of the members of the age group of this stage; 33% of whom are males and 31.22% are females. As for university education, the number of individuals in the age group 18-23 years (the stage of higher education) was 2023345 in 2003, only 17.4% of whom were attending a university; while the same percentage was 20% on a world level, and it was 40% in developing countries, and 25% in the Middle East. Added to this is the lack of the infrastructure which is essential to the development of human capital. State budget for the year 2000 allocated less than 7% to education. And the average share of for each student in the pre-university stages has declined in 2004 to be less than their share in 2003. The share of a technical education student has declined from 46402 Syrian pounds in 2003 to 32539 in 2004. The share of a secondary education student has declined from 15192

to 12042. In addition, more than 66% of the workforce in 2002 had elementary education or below. (Human development report, 2005, 72).

As for work and employment, unemployment rate in 2002 among the youth in the age group 25-35 years was 17.17%. And the percentage of the youths among the unemployed workforce was 78%. The majority of the employed were employed in jobs that did not match their academic qualifications. This was confirmed by the results of the workforce survey conducted by the central bureau for census in 2002, which found that 35% of employed university graduates were employed in fields that did not match their academic qualifications. It also found that 25% of those with secondary education were employed in jobs that did not match their qualifications. All of this shows the decline in the external efficiency of education, and how that will affect the development process negatively in the form of an increase in unemployment among graduates and a decline in the average productivity level of work.

These numbers which represent only a small part of the wider picture call for asking the question again: is the population increase really responsible for this situation in spite of the efforts which has been exerted since three decades up till now? Here we reaffirm that although we do not deny that population increase has negative effects in many areas, we cannot attribute all problems and crises related to economy, employment, income, education, health...etc solely to this increase in population. The problem of unemployment, for example, is not related to (according to the widely-accepted view) the population increase or the increase in the number of the newcomers into the employment market, which is about 200 000 per annum. But rather it is related to bad economic planning, and thus to the weak modernizing process and the continuity of the recession which has been affecting the economy since years. In the last two decades, the growth rates for some industries have declined below the growth rate of the population, the levels of the workforce employment in these industries have also declined. The standard number for production in industry and mining declined from 109 in 1997 to 97 in 2002. The standard number for agricultural production also declined from 108 in 1998 to 100 in 2000. The same applies to the construction sector. As a result, the growth rate for the gross domestic product declined to almost zero in 2000 and 2001, and to a little above that in 2002 and 2003. The standard number for capital formation with the prices of 2000 also declined from 108 in 1995 to 100 in 2000. (human development report, 2005). All of this has led to a slump in modernizing the employment market and to a decline in the ability of that market to take in the newcomers, in addition to an increase in the level of unemployment whether the apparent one or the masked. It has also led to recruit extra employees into the public sector as the government thought that could serve social objectives such as liberating those from unemployment and poverty. But the result was in fact the accumulation of big numbers of employees in the government establishments and companies without the need to all of them. This in turn has led to a decline in the average productivity of the employee with a direct effect on reducing the total product, reducing incomes, a decline in the quality of public services offered to the citizens, the spread of laziness and irresponsibility among employees and the spread of different kinds of management corruption.

What makes things even worse is this bureaucratic order which is driving investments away (in spite of the existence of the legislation encouraging it), starting from the backward non-computerized administrative business technology to corruption cases, intermediary networks, brokerage, and the weak accountability mechanisms which are incongruent with investment attraction and detrimental to its interests in addition the negative role the private sector plays in the development

process because it rarely invests in the substantial production sectors. Rather, it is quite often directed to real estate speculations and marginal industrial sectors (shampoo, candy, chewing gum...etc.). This is normal as it turns to the easier, more profitable and less risky sectors to the extent that the one who wants to establish genuine national industry is regarded as 'idiot' according to a researcher. (Thakaria, 1998, 813)

As for education, the problems afflicting it, such as joining, capacity, truancy, graduates' percentages and qualifications, budgetary problems, and quality issues...etc., are not (as the prevailing opinion) due to the increase of the number of members as much as they are due to the nature and aspects of social fabric, which by their overlaps constitute real frustration and impediments which obstruct achieving the desired image. So, how can the values of serious education and productive work prevail in an atmosphere which does not basically need the science and production values, but it needs the values and manners of smartness and working out? How can efficiency improvement, performance level promotion and spontaneous concern increase prevail in the light of the existence of the criteria of belonging and intervention in picking out business applicants and not the criteria of efficiency and qualifications or equality of opportunities for all the educated and graduates in the labor market ? How can the values of specialization mastery prevail while it is unlikely to have a job opportunity in the same specialization?

What is applicable to education and unemployment can also be applied to all the issues related to population in general and the issues of the youth in particular. Therefore discussing the population issue, with all its implications of high growth rates, population increase, high birthrates and what they require of measures and procedures concerning the youth in the first place, relates to the ability to influence these conditions and situation aforementioned. That is, the solution will be dependent on the ability to change the framed conditions and factors to giving birth to numerous children and not on persistently believing that the absence of awareness of the negative outcomes of numerous births on family and society, nor the absence of the discerning outlook on the children's future, decrease in the awareness of family planning means, or lack of such means are the reasons of the continuance of this problem. To clarify that, these questions concerning the problem of the research have been brought up and answered in the field research.

However, if we approach the question from the demographic point of view, we find that most demographic indicators show that, today, Syria is on the threshold of the positive equilibrium phase in population growth (the second phase of growth after the negative equilibrium and the population explosion). This phase is characterized by gradual decrease in fertility and birthrates, annual growth rate, rise in the average marriage age, and changes in the age structure of the population...etc; the average of the annual population increase had dropped from 3.38 % by the eighties to 2.37% in 2005. The total fertility had also dropped at the rate of 1.5 child every ten years between 1978 – 2007, and for the one woman form more than 8.3 living child birth in 1978 to 3.66 in 1999, a decrease rate which equals -3.8% annually, less than 3.5 living child birth in 2000, and to less than 2.5 child birth as for the woman who is a high school certificate holder. Marital fertility has also dropped annually at a rate of -2.4% since 1978. The average age of the first marriage for males increased to 28.5 year in 2001 and for females to 26.6 year for the same year. (National Population Strategy, 2006, 11-17.)

As for population age structure, the rate of individuals under 15 years dropped from 49.3% in 1970 to 40.5% in 2000, and to less than that in the following years, whereas

the individuals' percentage increased within the human force from 46.6% in 1970 to 56.4 in 2000, while the percentage of the old people remained the same as for this period. (The figures were calculated from the Syrian statistic groups for different years.)

All that confirms that the phase of the population explosion is a transitory phase which all the developed countries have come through, and now, the majority of the developing countries are now coming through including Syria where there are indications that it is on the threshold of the positive equilibrium phase as before.

The phase of population explosion, which started in the developing countries, including Syria, from the outset of the second half of the last century, was marked as being precedent to the economic and social development in these countries contrary to the European countries. Therefore, due to the inadequate economic changes needed to improve the production force, income increase, and bringing about enough job opportunities, there was a prevailing opinion that the problem is limited to the population increase without giving importance to the depletion and waste processes of the resources of these countries and their economic surplus, and the optimal usage and investment of these resources.

Field Part

Following the analysis methodology on which the theoretical part was based on, a questionnaire was designed to explore the views of a number of young people about fundamental issues related to the population issue on which many questions centered. Besides, as we realize that talking about the youth people or studying any of their problems will be deceitful if the many changes, which make them a category of diverse traits and characteristics, are not taken into consideration. However, to research in all these variables is beyond our ability. Therefore, we have focused in this research on some variables which are related to the population question. We have also drawn upon a specimen of one hundred collage students who were randomly chosen from the Faculty of Arts and Humanities in Damascus University. Having collected, studied, categorized, and analyzed the data, we had the following findings:

- 1- Concerning the question related to the reasons behind the crises and problems which the people suffer from, we have got the data which are listed in the following table:

Table no. (1)

The opinion of the specimen members concerning the problems the people suffer from

Reason	percentage
Population increase	12
Economic surplus waste and depletion	45
Bad economic planning	23
Resources and capabilities insufficiency	10
Others	10

Out of this data, we find that the main reason, according to the young people, is, in the first place, the economic surplus waste and depletion in addition to the bad economic planning; wherein the percentage of those who said that was the highest, 68%. Whereas the percentage of those who ascribed the reason to population increase and the insufficiency of resources was more than 20%. This confirms the theoretical

analysis method in this research which states that the population increase does not constitute the conclusive factor in the problems which the society is suffering from.

2- Concerning the question about how much the young man believes that there are negative outcomes for the population increase, 87% have answered that they perceive that this is true, but they believe that it is not the factor which the reasons of the problems are restricted to. And, concerning the question about the role of the individuals and families in the reduction of the intensity of problems, 84% answered that reducing the birth number in families contributes to that but does not totally give a solution.

2-Concerning the young people’s opinion about the big number of children in the family, we have got the following data:

Table no. (3)

The specimen members’ opinion about the big number of the family children

Variable	Percentage
Guarantee for parents as they grow old	15
Social respect for the family	-
Helping the father with the expenditure	-
Burden for the parents	85

From the above data, we find that the overwhelming majority stated that numerous births constitute a burden to the parents and that there is no benefit of the numerous births in the family. This reflects the young people’s awareness of the disadvantages of the numerous births and its usefulness nowadays.

3- When asked about the ideal number of the family children, 74% of the specimen members answered that two children is the ideal number, while 23% said that this number should be 3 – 4. Only 3% referred to the importance of giving birth to more than four children. As those members , who have chosen two children, were asked about the reason for their preference, the data was as follows:

Table no. (3)

The reason for preferring only two children in the family

The reason	Repetition	%
The ability of securing their needs	55	74.32
An indication of civilization	12	16.21
It is better for the mother’s heath	4	5.42
Much easier for the parents	4.05	3
Total	74	100

We notice here that the most influential factor in the young people’s preference for two children in the family is their discerning outlook on these children’s future, the possibility of securing a decent living standard, and meeting their needs and requests. Wherefore, 74% answered that this is the reason for having only two children.

4- As for the question concerning the young man’s opinion about the ideal marriage age for both males and females, no one approved of marriage before the age of 20 for both of males and females; 80% of them said that the ideal marriage age is after twenty five for young males, while 42% said that the

appropriate marriage age for girls is also after twenty five as demonstrated in the following table:

Table no. (4)

The young people's opinion about the appropriate marriage age

Appropriate age for marriage	young male	Young female	Total
Less than 20 years	-	-	-
20-25 years	19%	58%	38.5%
25 or more than 25	81%	42%	61.5%
Total	100	100	100

When asked about the reason for choosing the age of after twenty five, 64% of those who had chosen this age answered that it was because of the inability to secure marriage requirements before this age.

5- As an answer to the question concerning the extent of the young male's knowledge of family planning means, the data was listed in the following table:

Table no. (5)

The extent of the young male's knowledge of family planning means

Means	I know little	I know well	I don't know
Pills	-	100	-
coil	-	100	-
Injection	12	88	-
coitus interruptus	15	85	-
Condom	-	100	-
Sterilization	-	100	-
Lactation period prolongation	-	100	-
Safety period	10	90	-
Norplant	15	10	75

From the data above, we notice that the young have good knowledge about family planning means especially those most circulated and used (pills, loop, condom, and lactation period prolongation). This shows that the question is not about the young's knowledge of the family planning means and their use since more than 95% approved of their importance, necessity, and possibility of using them, a thing which does not contradict with the religious teachings, except for abortion and sterilization.

6- When asked to rank the importance of some of the questions which this research took into consideration, 55% of the specimen members gave priority to the job issue, and then came the housing question and the fear of future. This was confirmed when they were asked about the possibility of finding a job opportunity after graduation, since the overwhelming majority (76%) answered that this possibility is very weak especially if the job opportunity restricted to the specialization.

7- Concerning the choices available for the young people to secure future job opportunities, 49% of the specimen members said that they were not satisfied

with the current situation and future opportunities. In fact, they expressed inclination and desire to travel abroad to secure future opportunities.

To conclude, the question does not lie in the young's lack of awareness or understanding of the nature of the population situation in Syria, since all the preceding data demonstrated good level of understanding. Rather, the question is often represented in other factors which were discussed in the theoretical part of this research.

Finally, what is left is to mention that in spite of our realization that the specimen chosen for this research does not represent all the young people class with all its variables, yet conducting a research of this kind on a specimen of educated people clarifies and confirms that the population issue is in the core of the educated people's awareness. Hence, the solution to the question will be related to the possibility of facing the education challenges in the first place.

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