



Population Growth in Egypt: Threats, Responses and Opportunities

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Egypt is the most populous Arab country in the Middle East. In 2020 its population passed the 100 million milestone and may reach 200 million by the year 2100. The dizzying rise in the Egyptian population embodies opportunities for the land of the Nile, but also complex problems. As the Egyptian President Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi has clarified more than once, reducing the birthrate tops national priorities and is perceived as a basic condition for securing a future of sustainable development, economic welfare and political stability in the country. This paper examines the weighty demographic challenges facing Egypt, surveys the strategies adopted by the Egyptian regime to deal with them, and analyzes their significance. At this point in time, it looks as if Egypt is managing to bring about gradual restraint in population growth, but it is still far from the ambitious targets it set itself. In every future scenario the demographic factor is expected to remain a central variable shaping Egypt's interests and its domestic and foreign policies. As for Israel, the high rate of natural growth in its southern neighbor could increase risks such as infiltration by refugees, but also reinforce the interests of both parties in the maintenance of peace and the expansion of bilateral and multilateral collaborations.

Keywords: Egypt, Demography, Population growth, Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, Family Planning, Women, Israel

Introduction: Reducing the Egyptian Birthrate as an Ongoing Challenge

Egypt deserves the title “Mother of the World” (Umm al-Dunya) not only because of its rich cultural heritage but also thanks to its multitude of descendants: there are 5,599 births every day, 233 per hour, four every minute, and a birth every 15 seconds (Salih & Salah al-Din 2024).

A high rate of natural population increase is not exceptional in the Middle East, particularly among traditional and rural groups with poor education and socioeconomic status, but in

Egypt it has become the fundamental issue shaping the present and future. Demography affects every country differently, according to its unique circumstances, and can lead to diverse and even contradictory outcomes: On the one hand it grants a “demographic dividend,” that is, it leads to a rise in the proportion of the working population and a decline in the proportion of non-working dependent groups—the elderly and children. On the other hand, in the absence of suitable development and growth, it can create crises such as pressure on infrastructure

and resources, unemployment and poverty. Countries with high population growth must constantly expand public services such as education, health and welfare; create new jobs; provide food and welfare payments, and in some cases this naturally leads to efforts to reduce the birthrate (Rivlin 2009, 7-11, 36-37).

The first census in Egypt took place in 1882. At that time there were almost seven million residents in the Land of the Nile. Since the start of the twentieth century there have been sharp and rapid demographic changes. In 1900 there were about 10 million inhabitants, by 1950 about 20 million, in 1981 about 44 million, and in 2020 about 100 million. In the 1950s and 1960s the Egyptian birthrate stood at about seven children per woman on average, and since then it has shrunk gradually to 2.85.

However, the pace of population growth has not slowed because the trend to a lower birthrate was not constant or uniform in all parts of the country, and also due to the “demographic momentum” phenomenon, where the drop in birthrate coincided with improved levels of medical care, leading to a decline in infant mortality and a rise in life expectancy. In these circumstances the current balance between births and mortality—which could potentially reduce population growth in Egypt—is expected to continue for decades. Another factor delaying the decline in population growth is the increase in the number of women of child-bearing age, recorded simultaneously with the drop in births (Gal 2015, 15-28; UN News 2022; Winkler 2008, 84-88; Sofer & Gross-Lan 2008, 52-64).

The rapid population growth, which began in the second half of the twentieth century forced Egypt to face a number of challenges, including the provision of health services for women and small children, educational frameworks for children and youths, the creation of new jobs for a constantly growing young workforce and the supply of essential goods (Gal 2015, 15-28; Khalifa et al. 2001). The rapid population increase in rural areas coincided with a reduction in the average per capita allocation of agricultural

Diagram. Population Growth in Egypt in the Last 200 years



Source: Akhbar al-Yawm

land, meaning less demand for agricultural workers, and therefore more unemployment and poverty. These circumstances accelerated the process of urbanization (migration to towns), leading to overcrowding and greater stress on urban infrastructures such as transport, water, sewage and energy. The population explosion in Egypt created profound national dependence on food imports to meet the growing needs of its citizens. A further difficulty is the “brain drain” as educated Egyptians move to countries where they can expect a better standard of living (Winkler 2008, 115-123; Sofer & Gross-Lan 2008, 52-64). During the years 1980-2010 educated Egyptians accounted for 40%-60% of emigrants who left the country (‘Imara 2013, 22-23).

According to the academic literature, in recent decades developing countries have tried to tackle population growth by encouraging family planning (Bergstrom et al. 2013, 153; Bongaarts & Hodgson 2022, 141-142). Past governments in Egypt also adopted similar actions to lower the birthrate, including the

provision of family planning services, explaining the importance of contraception, making contraception accessible to the public, and encouraging women to enter the job market. At the same time, policies to reduce the birthrate were not always pursued with determination: they began during the rule of Gamal Abdel Nasser (1954-1970), lapsed during the rule of Anwar al-Sadat (1970-1981) and re-emerged during the rule of Hosni Mubarak (1981-2011). The latter recorded partial success in the matter, while struggling against religious perceptions that encouraged fertility, by explaining the negative socioeconomic significance of large families. But even he did not provide a satisfactory solution to the problem, which as described below still burdens Egypt and threatens its future (Rivlin 2003, 16; 2009, 95-100).

In this paper we examine the demographic challenges that Egypt faces at present and the steps that the authorities in Cairo are taking to address them. We propose an interim assessment of their effectiveness and their significance as well as their limitations, while taking account of the fact that these are historical processes that are still in progress. The paper is based on the study of a rich and varied corpus of sources in Arabic, English and Hebrew, including professional publications by thinktanks, press articles and official Egyptian government documents.

“A Ticking Bomb”: The Demographic Situation Under al-Sisi

The social and political upheavals in Egypt at the start of the 2010s were an unexpected obstacle to the struggle to reduce the birthrate. The revolution of January 25, 2011, distracted public and government attention from the issue of population growth for some time, led to a temporary shortage of contraceptives in pharmacies in the shadow of the political anarchy and, in the years 2012-2013, brought to power the Muslim Brotherhood, which promoted a religious-conservative agenda. The result was a rise in the average number of children per

family from three in 2008, towards the end of the Mubarak era, to 3.5 in 2014, the start of the al-Sisi era (Sabry 2023). The retreat from efforts to reduce the birthrate exacted a heavy price from Egypt, as shown by the rise of public expenditure on services such as education, health and housing (El-Saharty et al. 2022).

As stated, in 2020 Egypt officially crossed the threshold of 100 million inhabitants, and by the end of 2023 there were almost 106 million (51.6% of them male). In 2023 the population was growing by about 1.4 million people every year (calculated as 2.044 million births minus the number of deaths). The average number of children per woman stood at 2.85. The latest figures, although high, reflect a drop of 8% in the natural increase compared to 2022 (in which there were about 150,000 more births). This is the largest drop recorded since 2002 (Salih & Salah al-Din 2024). Not only that, but the rate of natural increase also fell from 1.6% in 2022 to 1.4% in 2023, the lowest rate of population growth recorded in Egypt for half a century (al-Qi'i 2024). The Egyptian population is very young, over a third are children under the age of 15, and almost half are under the age of 24. The forecast is that by 2050 the country will have 141-160 million inhabitants, based on various scenarios of reductions in the birth rate (Baraniya 2022; Zayn 2023).

The political and economic crises that struck Egypt over the past decade made it hard for the country to exploit its “demographic dividend,” with over 60% of the population of working age. Economic growth in Egypt, which was around 4.2% on average throughout the decade, was not high enough to keep up with the rapid population growth, to create enough proper jobs for the new entrants to the job market, and to provide a suitable response to the rising needs of the economy (Zayn 2022). About a third of Egyptians live below the poverty line, population density in the capital Cairo is about 52,000 per square kilometer, there are an average of 1.56 beds in Egyptian hospitals for every 1,000 people (compared to a global

average of 1.9), and the average number of pupils in a class is 47.5, although in some schools the number rises to 90 (USAID 2023; Winter 2023, 15). Although unemployment has been somewhat curbed and fell below the 10% threshold, many of the available jobs are low paid, offer poor conditions, and are unsuitable for the educated younger generation (Zayn 2023).

In the first half of the last decade, the economic challenges led to an increase in emigration from Egypt, rising from about 300,000 in 2010 to about half a million in 2015 (Macrotrends n.d.-a). However, reinforcement of the Egyptian struggle against illegal migration reduced the scale of the phenomenon. In 2021–2023 the number of Egyptian migrants to Europe varied from 9,000 to 22,000, most of whom went through Turkey, Libya and Sudan. In 2022 a survey by The Arab Barometer found that 13% of Egyptians were considering emigration—the lowest rate among countries of the Middle East and North Africa (Abufalgha 2022; DTM n.d.; Macrotrends n.d.-b). According to a report published in 2019 by The Central Agency for Public Mobilization & Statistics in Egypt, the highest proportion of emigrants are aged 25–29, while the lowest rate is in the 65+ age group, mostly men. The report also showed that migration was more common from rural areas than urban areas, and that most migrants had a high school and higher education (Mohamed Farid Mahmoud 2020, 383–384). At the same time Egypt continues to suffer from a brain drain, and according to the Egyptian Medical Syndicate, in the years 2019–2022 over 11,500 doctors left the country (Farouk Mahfouz 2023), including to Britain (al-Sadat 2022).

The demographic challenges facing Egypt are exacerbated by the global ecological crisis: rising temperatures, climate changes, extreme weather events (such as heatwaves and dust storms), desertification and urbanization, and rising sea levels, which could flood coastal towns and damage agricultural land. To these must be added the serious shortage of water

resources, centering mainly on the River Nile, which is threatened by the Renaissance Dam in Ethiopia. Egypt's water distress in turn affects the agricultural sector and food security. Moreover, Egypt is dependent for half its grains on imports, whose availability could be severely impacted by the effects of climate change on global wheat crops, and due to economic and geopolitical factors such as the war in Ukraine, leading to steep price increases. The effects of climate change are made more severe by the unique geographical profile of Egypt, a desert country where more than 90% of the population are crowded into the Nile valley and along the Mediterranean coast, creating pressures on rapidly dwindling basic natural resources, such as water and fertile agricultural land. In this situation there is a growing gap between the state's resources and its ability to supply the basic needs of its inhabitants, and this could lead to public protests and even threaten the regime's stability (Berkovsky and Sofer 2012, 40; Terdiman et al., 2022).

Al-Sisi has frequently defined the high birthrate as the greatest threat to Egyptian national security, as a danger to political stability, and as a source of other problems: the provision of employment and housing, developing decent education and health services, and making progress to a better future

It is therefore no wonder that the Egyptian leadership—from the President to his ministers—give highest priority to the issue of population growth, and see it as the key to easing Egypt's deep-rooted problems now and in the future. al-Sisi has frequently defined the high birthrate as the greatest threat to Egyptian national security, as a danger to political stability, and as a source of other problems: the provision of employment and housing, developing decent education and health services, and making progress to a better future (Tabikha 2023). The President even rebuked families who choose to have more than two children (O'Grady &

Farouk Mahfouz 2022). The Minister of Health & Population, Khaled Abdel Ghaffar, also cited natural population increase as the biggest obstacle to economic growth, and a source of poverty and hunger, due to the difficulty in providing the necessary resources, and as a factor that adversely affects the quality of public services in the fields of education and health, and the overall standard of living (Tabikha 2023). Muhammed al-Baz, chairman of the editorial board of the government-supporting *al-Dustur* newspaper, warned that a continuation of the current situation could lead Egypt to “collective suicide” (Jamal 2023).

On the other hand, Egyptian opposition figures have sometimes proposed a different point of view. For example, there were some who recalled that the experience of some other countries shows that natural increase can actually lead to economic growth; therefore the economic difficulties under al-Sisi should not be blamed on population growth but also—and perhaps mainly—on the government’s failure to deal with challenges such as poverty, education, employment and health (al-Misri 2019).

In fact, while the average birthrate per woman was 2.85 in 2023 (an improvement compared to 3.4 in 2017), Egypt’s actual target is to gradually reduce it to 1.6 by 2052 (al-Watan 2021). Another ambitious target defined by President al-Sisi is to reduce the annual number of births to 400,000 for two decades—a step that he estimates will restrain natural growth and lead to the necessary balance between the state’s financial capabilities and population size (Arabic CNN 2023a). It should be noted that in 2023 there were 1.4 million births—very far from the President’s target, but 6.8% less than in 2022. In any event, if Egypt meets its targets it will benefit from the overall age structure of a young population of working age, that could open a promising window of opportunity (El-Saharty et al. 2022).

Over the years a number of factors have contributed to the high birthrate in Egypt

and placed difficult obstacles in the way of government attempts—past and present—to slow down the country’s population growth:

- a. Traditional social beliefs that high fertility is a religious precept. These are more widespread among rural communities and are supported by some clerics (or at least are not firmly refuted).
- b. Low use of contraception by married Egyptian women (59% in 2014, rising to 66% in 2021), whether due to religious reasons (see the previous paragraph), lack of awareness, economic distress or lack of availability in pharmacies and clinics.
- c. The common link between a woman’s economic and social status and the number of her children, who are seen as “insurance” in case she is widowed or divorced. This combines with common beliefs among Egyptian women that having numerous children will stop a man from abandoning his wife or taking another wife. It should be noted that although polygamy is permitted in Islam, the actual incidence in Egypt is tiny, with less than one percent of men living with more than one wife.
- d. Children are assigned an essential role in the economic support of the family. As of 2021 about 5% of children aged 5-17 were working, while this rate was double among poor and rural families whose children are usually employed in agriculture. At the same time there is a negative attitude to the birth of daughters, due to traditional attitudes that reject the idea of women going out into the public space to find work, and sometimes families continue having children until a son is born, who can help to support the family.
- e. Early marriage of girls under the age of 18 (partly for reasons of poverty and the desire to obtain the bridal price) means many years of childbearing, numerous children and lack of education (Baraniya 2024a; Winkler 2008, 81-82; Zayn 2023; Sofer & Gross-Lan 2008, 52-64; UNICEF 2024; Kramer 2020).

Cartoon. The “Population Time Bomb” Threatens Egyptian “Development”



Source: Youm7

Strategies Adopted by the al-Sisi government in the face of Population Growth

The importance that Egypt attaches to the demographic challenge has already found expression in the constitution approved in 2014. Section 41 deals with the country's commitment to strive towards achieving the necessary balance between population growth and the resources available, to maximize the investment in human capital and improve skills in order to achieve sustainable development (Constitution of Egypt 2014; Ministry of Health & Population and National Population Council 2023, 12; Tawfiq 2022, 4). The constitutional declarations have been translated by the al-Sisi government into practical policy that is being implemented along two main dimensions. First are the actions taken to improve the standard of living in view of rapid natural population growth and the resulting pressures on state services and resources. The second dimension is the policy intended to bring about a significant reduction in the birth rate over the coming decades.

With respect to the first dimension, over the past decade Egypt has promoted economic, social and infrastructure programs that are designed to help the state and its citizens deal with the consequences of population growth (Ministry of Health & Population and National Population Council 2023, 9-11). In 2021 President

al-Sisi announced the construction of a “New Republic”—the code name for a broad vision to raise the standard of living in Egypt in the areas of housing, health, education, employment and infrastructure. On the subject of housing, for example, Egypt embarked on a range of projects based on the understanding that it had to build 600,000 housing units each year to keep pace with the growing population. One of the most prominent projects is the new administrative center still under construction, which on completion should accommodate 6.5 million residents (Flat & Villa n.d.). Dozens of other towns have been built, most of which are in desert areas, with the aim of encouraging a more balanced geographical dispersion of the population, relieving the overcrowding in the towns between the Nile valley and the Delta, protecting agricultural land from urban sprawl, creating incentives to attract capital and investment in the desert regions, and deriving benefit from their natural resources. These towns are expected to provide homes for over 30 million people (Ministry of Health & Population and National Population Council 2023, 15-16; Salih 2023; Tabikha 2023).

Some of the housing projects are the subject of public controversy in Egypt, particularly the new administrative capital. Critics of this project—whose cost is estimated at some 45 billion dollars—argue that it is wasting state funds that should have been invested in more pressing matters, such as education and health (Tabikha 2023). In addition, there is criticism of the high cost of housing in the new capital, which is beyond the reach of the average family. In this sense the project is not realizing one of its declared objectives: the provision of affordable housing for all Egyptians (Arabi 21 2023). If that were not enough, the project is progressing more slowly than planned, and the target of a million residents living there by 2026 seems far from realistic at present (Abu Bakr 2024; Yunis 2022).

Another flagship project in the field of economic development and the struggle

against poverty is “Decent Life” (hayah karima), which was announced in 2019 and is intended to improve the lives of millions of Egyptians living in 4,700 villages that suffer from high rates of poverty, overcrowding and poor levels of housing, sewage, sanitation, education, medicine and employment. At the end of 2023 the project had been implemented in about 1,500 villages and some 18 million residents had benefited (Amin 2021; Hasan 2023; Tulan 2021). Another project is dedicated to the elimination of unplanned slums (al-ashwa’iyyat) and moving their residents to towns that can provide them with better housing and services. During the years 2014-2023 some 1.2 million people from 300 slum neighborhoods and 25 districts benefited from the construction of some 250,000 housing units (Hani 2023; Ministry of Health & Population and National Population Council 2023, 14-15; Nabil 2023).

In recent years Egypt has worked on the provision of free family planning assistance, which is given in public and mobile clinics operated by the Egyptian Ministry of Health & Population in all regions of the country.

In the field of education, Egypt has adopted reforms designed to prepare the younger generation for future integration in the local and global job market and to contribute to the development of the country. The reforms include modernization of schools, improvement of infrastructures and construction of new classrooms and schools, to ease the overcrowding in educational institutions (Winter 2023, 15). In the fields of food and water security, Egypt adopted a long term action plan including extending agricultural land from 9.7 million padans¹ in 2023 to 15 million padans in 2030, focusing on crops that require little water, reducing dependence on food imports, developing water resources and setting up dozens of water desalination and recycling plants. In the energy sector, Egypt is working

strenuously to meet the soaring electricity needs of the economy, by developing domestic and external gas resources and sources of renewable energy (Terdiman et al. 2022; El-Din 2023).

With regard to the brain drain, the Ministry of Migration and the General Union of Egyptians Abroad are making efforts to bring Egyptian exiles back to their homeland and recruit them to the efforts to develop the New Republic, particularly in the case of highly educated emigrants in the fields of science (Ibrahim 2022).

As for the second dimension of reducing natural population growth, Egypt under al-Sisi has formulated a national population strategy for the period 2023-2030, whose purpose is to bring about a drastic drop in birthrates. The current target is a decline from 2.85 to 2.4 children per woman by 2030 (Baraniya 2024a). Even before that, in 2021 Egypt launched the National Project for the Development of the Egyptian Family, whose purpose was to improve the quality of life in the country by moderating population growth (Ministry of Health & Population and National Population Council 2023, 9, 13). In order to reduce the birthrate, a variety of strategies were employed: provision of family planning services, economic incentives, legislative intervention, educational activities, obtaining religious approval for the moves, and female empowerment.

Help in Family Planning

In recent years Egypt has worked on the provision of free family planning assistance, which is given in public and mobile clinics operated by the Egyptian Ministry of Health & Population in all regions of the country. Training was given to thousands of medical teams in health departments, as well as thousands of obstetricians, gynecologists and nurses, to provide medical services in maternity and gynecological departments. Since 2020, on the initiative of the Ministry for Social Solidarity, Egypt has also been offering a telephone hotline service called “We are with you” (ihna ma’aki), to respond to queries from women on matters

of family planning and fertility ('Abd al-Salam 2022).

In addition, the Ministry of Health & Population supplies a range of effective contraceptives at subsidized prices, available at family planning clinics, community centers and hospitals all over Egypt. The purpose is to find the safest type of contraception for each woman based on her unique circumstances, such as contraceptive injections or pills of various kinds, including those suitable for nursing mothers. According to Ministry data for 2023, these steps have led to a rise of 66% in the use of family planning measures ('Abd al-Salam 2023).

Incentives to Reduce the Birthrate

In the framework of the National Project for Development of the Egyptian Family, women are offered a financial incentive to limit births. In 2023 the Ministry of Planning and the Ministry of Economic & Financial Development announced that the Egyptian government would place at the disposal of married women aged 21-45, with no more than two children, an annual savings grant of 1,000 Egyptian pounds. The cumulative amount would be calculated according to the woman's age when joining the project, and it would be redeemable when she reaches the age of 45, as long as she complies with the terms (Sabry 2023). Apart from limiting the number of children to two, the terms for receiving the money include periodic visits to family development clinics, intervals between births, provision of regular vaccinations for children, participation in frameworks for women's education, and regular checkups for breast cancer and non-infectious diseases (Arabic CNN 2023b).

The move attracted wide criticism in Egypt. The central argument was that the amount was too low to encourage reduction in births (Sabry 2023). For example, women in their twenties and thirties stated that they would not decide how many children to have in return for an incentive they would only receive many years later. It was

also argued that the value of the money could be lower at redemption because of Egypt's high inflation rate, the constant devaluation of the Egyptian pound and taxation on the final sum (Mustafa 2023). Another argument was that the profit from children's work for some families was larger than the grant, so they would continue to see numerous children as the preferred way of dealing with poverty (Hafiz 2023).

Legislative Activity

In recent years the Egyptian government has taken a series of legislative steps, which are still in various stages of legislation, with the aim of reinforcing state control of population growth and directly or indirectly reducing the birthrate. It is sometimes difficult to trace the exact timetable of the progress, approval and implementation of these legislative steps, but it is possible to draw conclusions regarding the general direction of government moves.

Firstly, since 2018 the Ministry of Justice, with the support of President al-Sisi, has been promoting a law to prevent the marriage of minors under the age of 18, with the possibility of prosecuting anyone involved in such a marriage: the father, guardian, husband, witnesses and lawyers. In 2023 a draft bill on this matter was published by the legislative committee of the Egyptian parliament, but as of early 2024 the law had not yet been approved and had still not formally come into force (Baraniya 2024b; Ministry of Health & Population and National Population Council 2023, 62-63; Radwan 2023).

Secondly, since the start of the decade, the Egyptian government has been promoting amendments to the Personal Status Law, with the aim of regulating inter alia the laws on marriage, and perhaps, although not openly stated, also to reduce the rate of marriage. According to the draft bill published in 2022, couples who wish to marry must meet various preconditions, including: the absence of legal obstacles (such as a criminal record); medical checks to discover non-infectious diseases (such as diabetes, hypertension and obesity) and

infectious diseases (such as HIV), plus genetic tests in cases of consanguineous marriage; bringing two witnesses; confirmation that the couple are of sound mind; and permission for a legal representative to validate the marriage. The law has not yet been finally approved, and in February 2024 President al-Sisi ordered the committee responsible for drafting it to complete the work without delay (‘Ali 2024; State Information Service 2023a).

The assumption behind the bill is that educated and working women will marry later and have fewer children than uneducated and non-working women, and that there is a direct link between investment in education for girls and young women, and the desire for smaller families, which will slow down population growth

It should be noted that the bill aroused public protest from those who maintained that it amounted to excessive and improper state interference in personal matters, made the marriage process too complicated, and placed a further financial burden on couples. In response, al-Sisi stated that the purpose of the law was not to make marriage too difficult for couples, but to assure their parents that the marriage was suitable, and the state would be failing in its duty otherwise. Although the president avoided stating explicitly that the purpose of the law was to delay marriages or reduce the birthrate, he recommended that newlywed couples should wait one to three years in order to examine the state of their marriage before bringing children into the world (al-Khalij al-Jadid 2023; al-Hurra 2022). Not only that, but the bill also stipulates conditions for polygamy, including the husband’s obligation to submit a request to the Family Matters Court and to obtain the approval of his first wife to marry another wife (Egypt Independent 2022). These demands, which are designed to restrict polygamy and therefore also fertility, are in addition to the objection to polygamy from

Sheikh al-Azhar Ahmed al-Tayeb, who noted that this custom was harmful to women and children and only permitted by the religion in very limited circumstances (Egypt Today 2022).

Thirdly, in late 2023 the Egyptian People’s Council debated an amendment to the Children’s Law, including more serious penalties ranging from fines to actual imprisonment for failing to report births or delay in reporting births (Abu Talib 2023; ‘Ali 2023). The amendment bill was intended to reduce the phenomenon of births occurring under the government radar, when information does not reach the Ministry of Health and the Population Registry Office. One of the reasons for failing to register births is the case of children born to couples who married in a traditional marriage with no official contract (zawaj urfi) (Awda 2022). According to figures from the Central Agency for Public Mobilization & Statistics, in 2015 the number of traditional marriages reached 88,000, representing some 9% of marriages in Egypt, while in 2018 the number jumped to over 100,000 and in 2020 it reached 113,000 (Abu al-Rus 2020; al-Saqar 2015; Daya’ al-Din 2021).

Finally, Egypt has tried to promote a law imposing penalties and fines for dropping out of education, partly to encourage education of women, but the bill in its original format was not approved. The assumption behind the bill is that educated and working women will marry later and have fewer children than uneducated and non-working women, and that there is a direct link between investment in education for girls and young women, and the desire for smaller families, which will slow down population growth (Yusuf et al. 2014, 5; Ministry of Health & Population and National Population Council 2023, 62-63). As a rule, the rate of higher education in Egypt is lower for women than for men: In 2022 the rate of education for girls was 68.95%, compared to 79.99% for boys (referring to young people aged 15 and over who can read and write) (O’Neill 2024). In addition, the dropout rate from junior high school is slightly higher for girls than for boys,

but in the years 2018–2021 it was only between 1% and 2% (Draya Forum 2022). In an attempt to improve the state of education, in 2022 the government submitted a bill to impose a fine on the guardian of a boy or girl who was regularly absent from school without justification, but it was ultimately rejected with the argument that it would impose a heavy economic burden on families who could not manage the costs of education, such as uniforms, writing materials and books (Salama 2022). In early 2024 it was reported that the government had decided to change direction and offer financial grants to help needy families to meet the costs of sending dropouts back to school or keeping their children in school. However there is a concern that many of the families prioritize the children's immediate income potential over the benefits of education (Hafiz, 2024b).

Information Campaigns

The struggle to reduce the birthrate in Egypt is supported by a broad information campaign to encourage citizens to cooperate with government policy. The campaign makes use of the media, social networks, field work and activities in schools and institutions of higher education to spread its message. For example, the government's radio and tv channels broadcast public service messages encouraging the public to take advantage of family planning services. Social network influencers—including football players, movie stars and musicians—are recruited to act as government “ambassadors” to raise awareness of the overpopulation issue among the younger generation (‘Abd al-Jalil 2020).

In order to reach other audiences and raise their awareness of family planning services, the government conducts seminars in all regions of the country, including in villages and distant provinces (‘Abd al-Salam 2022). Hospitals have also held seminars for women, dealing with subjects such as the benefits of family planning, maintaining child health, and the risks of pregnancy at a young age (al-

Shawki 2023). There was also a “Service to Your Door” campaign with home visits to selected target populations to raise awareness of family planning issues (‘Abd al-Salam 2023).

Special efforts to provide information about limiting family size are aimed at the younger generation. For example, there are meetings with university students with discussions on the causes of population growth in Egypt, the challenges it poses and the actions required to tackle them (al-Qahira 2023 24; Sa’d 2023). Similar meetings are aimed at school pupils, including seminars on the importance of the population issue and its impact on the quality of life for individuals and society in general (Nafi’ 2023).

The grade 10 textbook, “Geography of Egypt,” teaches pupils about the negative consequences of overpopulation, including unemployment, overcrowding, drug problems, poverty and illiteracy.

Messages in this spirit also find expression in the school curriculum, subject to a decision by the Ministry of Health to introduce content relating to population and fertility issues (‘Abd al-Latif 2022). For example, the grade 10 textbook, “Geography of Egypt,” teaches pupils about the negative consequences of overpopulation, including unemployment, overcrowding, drug problems, poverty and illiteracy. It also describes various factors that can help to reduce the rate of increase, including economic depression, war and political instability. The book teaches pupils that a small family can ensure a better life, and that the conditions for reducing the birthrate include raising the level of education, bringing women into the workforce, planning family size in advance and using contraception. These solutions for reducing the birthrate are presented not only as a social need but also as permitted by religious laws. For example, “Dialogue Literature in Islam,” a 12th grade textbook, quotes Islamic rulings that

permit—in certain circumstances—the use of contraceptives (Winter 2023, 75-76).

The Religious Stamp of Approval for Fertility Reduction

National religious institutions and religious leaders in Egypt have also joined the government campaign to provide information on reducing the birthrate. The government is keen to obtain religious approval for dealing with the problem, understanding the strong influence of religious considerations—which are as strong as cultural and social considerations—on the degree of public cooperation with the official policy on matters such as family planning and the use of contraceptives (Hafiz 2024a). Therefore, following al-Sisi's declaration regarding the dangers of overpopulation, in 2021 religious institutions began a campaign of information on social media, designed to persuade Egyptians that limiting childbirth is legitimate. On its Twitter account the Egyptian Religious Court launched the hashtag “Family planning is permitted” (*tanzim al-nasl ja'iz*) to clarify the religious view on the subject and to reply to questions from followers, stressing that the state is permitted to adopt the necessary measures. At the same time, the Egyptian Ministry of Awqaf launched an awareness campaign on the subject, which was promoted through joint seminars with the National Media Authority and the National Press Authority. A number of prominent religious scholars have also given their backing to government efforts to limit the birthrate in declarations that were broadcast on Egyptian tv (‘Abd al-Latif 2021).

Senior scholars from al-Azhar, Egypt's most important religious institution, have also expressed support for the state's efforts to control population growth because of its negative effects on the economy, health and education services (Wahba 2021). They stress that there is no valid basis in religious practice for condemning family planning efforts, and the religion actually permits limiting births if this improves the standard of living and serves

needs such as providing proper education to the younger generation (Midhat 2021). Sheikh al-Azhar Ahmed al-Tayeb called on Egyptian society to unite in the struggle against misguided perceptions that oppose family planning, and noted that overpopulation puts a strain on Egypt's resources and hinders its economic development (Karim 2021).

Moreover, in early 2022 the Egypt's Dar al-Ifta' published a book on family planning laws in Islam, which was distributed by the Ministry of Social Solidarity at special conferences on fertility reduction held all over the country (Shahin 2022). A religious ruling by Dar al-Ifta' states that Islam permits spacing pregnancies to protect the mother's health and to improve the education she gives her children, as long as her fertility is not irreversibly damaged (‘Abd al-Rahman 2022). Finally, in January 2024 the Ministry of Awqaf and the Ministry of Health agreed that Friday sermons would be devoted to raising awareness of the dangers of excessive population growth and its negative consequences, and they would set up joint working teams of religious leaders and doctors to give lectures on the subject to citizens in hospitals, schools and universities and other places of assembly (Hafiz 2024a).

Empowering Women

The Egyptian government has adopted a variety of ways to empower women of child-bearing age (18-45), by encouraging them to study and find work, and to increase their financial independence. These actions, although not formally and directly aimed at reducing the birthrate, indirectly help the government efforts to achieve this goal.

The Egyptian National Council for Women makes a variety of efforts to encourage women to enter the job market, to bring productive women who own small businesses to the market and help them to grow as entrepreneurs. For example, the Council's Center for the Development of Women's Skills holds training courses for women interested in setting up small

businesses, to introduce them to the basics of management and marketing. Some of the courses include practical training. The Center also offers supplementary courses for new graduates of academic institutions to help them find employment. The courses cover essential skills such as basic and advanced computer skills, writing a resume and preparing for job interviews. The Center also provides courses for working women to further their achievements (50 Million African Women Speak n.d.).

The Council has also set up a program, “Female Entrepreneurs Move Forward,” designed to encourage business development for women who wish to set up small businesses. The program is intended to help them to make a business plan and establish their business. It is designed for older and younger women who already have a business as well as those who would like to start one, and it helps them to improve their management skills and learn about market needs in order to succeed in business. The courses cover numerous subjects, including financial awareness, marketing the venture, pricing products and managing the business. There are about 100 training courses, and from 2016 to 2022 more than 2,000 women and girls were trained (Sa’id 2022; ‘Abd al-Ghani 2023).

Another project in the years 2020-2022 was “She Trades Egypt,” to support women who sell their handicrafts. The aim was to promote their businesses, help female entrepreneurs in this field, and enable them to expand into local and international markets. The project gave training workshops to dozens of small and medium sized businesses engaged in the art of designing and developing handmade products, including book-keeping and financial management, logistics, types of packaging and shipping, marketing and pricing, and compliance with quality standards (State Information Service 2023b; International Trade Centre n.d.; State Information Service 2022).

The National Council for Women also launched an internet platform, “My Strength is

my Craft” (quwwati fi hirfati) to support women, particularly those engaged in handicrafts. The platform is a Facebook group whose purpose is to connect women with diverse skills who can provide a product or a service, with female entrepreneurs, in order to increase their exposure and chances of obtaining work (al-Habal 2020). The group was launched in 2020 and as of early 2024 had about 1200 members (My Strength is my Craft n.d.).

Another move in collaboration with the National Council for Women is the “Winner” program (rabiha), designed to expand employment opportunities for women. The program began in 2023 and has held a series of training courses on employment skills, for 1,000 women from various regions of Egypt. At the courses and at personal training sessions with experts on career development, the women learn about aspects such as teamwork, time management, dealing with stress, writing emails, conducting negotiations, composing a resume and preparing for job interviews. The training and assistance enable women to realize their potential in the job market and contribute to Egypt’s socioeconomic development (UN Egypt 2023).

The messages of female empowerment are also found in school textbooks at all levels, which encourage gender equality and oppose discrimination and the oppression of women. For example, the book “Values and Respect for the Other” for grade 1 shows girls and boys playing football together.

As well as government initiatives there are also private initiatives to encourage women to join the labor market and increase their economic independence. One example is Mumm—an Egyptian platform that supplies home-cooked food. This online market enables users to purchase home-cooked meals at attractive prices based on geographical region. The founder of the platform, Walid Abd al-

Rahman, launched Mumm.com in 2015, and its benefit is that it enables women to work from their homes (Waya 'Arabi 2020; Tartrian, 2017).

Finally, the messages of female empowerment are also found in school textbooks at all levels, which encourage gender equality and oppose discrimination and the oppression of women. For example, the book "Values and Respect for the Other" for grade 1 shows girls and boys playing football together. A similar book for grade 5 has pictures of a female doctor, a girl playing tennis, and a man cleaning his house, illustrating a fair division of household tasks between all family members. The book "Arabic Language" for grade 3 describes a situation in which the husband and children do housework to enable the wife to relax after a hard day's work. Some of the books show important and influential women in Egypt and in the Arab world in general, including female leaders, scientists and intellectuals who can serve as role models for pupils, particularly girls. For example, the book "Civics & Human Rights" for grade 11 introduces Doria Shafik, a female Egyptian intellectual and important activist in the Egyptian feminist movement. "Arabic Language" for grade 9 asks pupils to compare the Polish French physicist Marie Curie and the Egyptian physicist Samira Moussa, and explain their contributions to human progress (Winter 2023, 85-89).

Moreover, many textbooks state that women are entitled to get an education, including higher education, just like men, to achieve economic independence and to play prominent roles in various fields in the job market. For example, a social sciences book for grade 8 teaches pupils to respect women's rights and recognize their important role in society, particularly in the education system and the job market, since they make up half of society. The grade 11 textbook "Civics & Human Rights" stresses that women can work in many fields, including medicine, engineering, teaching, services, and as ambassadors and state presidents, and that they play a fundamental role in the political,

economic and social life of the country. The book also teaches that the progress of every society depends on the active participation of women. Although this is not stated explicitly, it can be assumed that the active encouragement of women's participation in the labor market derives from the understanding that women who work, study and have a career are likely to have fewer children (Winter 2023, 75-76, 90-91).

Summary and Significance

In the decade under President al-Sisi, the Egyptian government has invested a variety of efforts in the struggle against overpopulation and the reduction of birthrates. The moves are not yet complete and so far their success has been only partial. It appears that the problems and challenges of natural increase are building up faster than they can be resolved. Egypt's fight against population growth is expected to continue over the coming decades, and its outcome will have consequences for the country's political and economic future, as well as for its relations with its neighbors, including Israel.

On the domestic front, the continuation of the present birthrate could deepen the economic distress of Egyptians, increasing unemployment and poverty, and intensifying the pressure on services and resources. These circumstances will strengthen social and political volatility, encourage public unrest, and in certain scenarios could even undermine the political order. This is not just a theoretical threat: the events of the Arab Spring in the Middle East were partly due to economic and environmental factors. Vulnerability to climate change and its effects on the water supply, agriculture, tourism and energy could aggravate the internal threats Egypt faces. At the same time, if Egypt can balance its population growth with its limited resources, carry out essential economic and social reforms, and recruit external support for these moves, it will increase its chances of surviving the demographic challenge and even emerge stronger from it.

Demographic processes in Egypt also have regional and global impact, embodying both threats and opportunities. On the one hand, increasing economic distress will strengthen the motivation to migrate from Egypt to richer countries, mainly in Europe and the Gulf. On the other hand, it is often said that the Egyptian population makes it “too big to fail,” and this helps it to enlist other countries to provide assistance. The generous aid provided to Egypt through grants, loans and investments from international financial institutions, from the European Union and from some Gulf states, is intended to prevent further deterioration of its economic situation, and help the government to promote the essential reforms required to tackle unchecked population growth and ensure the commitment of the Cairo regime to the struggle against illegal migration from Egypt.

The impact of Egypt’s demographic processes does not bypass Israel. Further intensification of the economic and climate crises in Egypt could result in waves of refugees trying to cross its borders. Such circumstances could challenge the existing order in the Sinai Peninsula that is defined by the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, and arouse political and security tensions between the countries. At the same time, Egypt’s domestic challenges, derived partly from rapid population growth, and the extensive development efforts led by the al-Sisi government to tackle them, work against any retreat from the peace treaty which is a political, security and economic asset to both countries. On the contrary, in recent years there has been fruitful and growing cooperation between Israel and Egypt in the field of energy, and Egypt is dependent on Israeli gas for its growing domestic needs and also for export purposes. In addition, American aid to Egypt of 1.3 billion dollars annually and the QIZ agreements between Israel, Egypt and the US also encourage compliance with the peace treaty.

If Egypt can successfully tackle population growth and its associated problems, this will

contribute to regional stability in general. To achieve this Egypt needs help and support from its friends worldwide. Israel, like other countries, has an interest in strengthening Egyptian stability, and both countries share an interest in extending their bilateral and multilateral collaborations in both existing and new fields, such as agriculture, water, tourism, renewable energy and the environment. We can only hope that the rising population in Egypt will promote a parallel process of growing cooperation between the two countries.

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Note

- 1 A padan is a unit of land of about three dunams.