

## The Role of Demographics

BETWEEN THE END of the First World War and the present time marked increases in population occurred in Syria. Although the relevant statistical evidence may be somewhat defective, in particular with regard to the first four decades of this century, the persistence of demographic growth is unmistakable. Syria's population rose from about 1.5 million<sup>1</sup> in 1922 to about 13.8 million in 1994 (consult Table 1±1), that is, more than ninefold. Its average annual growth rate was 3.3 percent in the period 1970±1991.<sup>2</sup>

This growth of population had its beginnings in the nineteenth century and was worldwide in its incidence. As Fernand Braudel has pointed out, its rhythm—registering, despite slowdowns, a continuous rise—differs from that of former times, which was characterized by alternate demographic ebbs and flows.<sup>3</sup>

In Syria the phenomenon was initially related to the revival of agriculture and its gradual or partial integration into the world trade network. But the rise in population was as much an effect as a cause of the agricultural revival, in the sense that the two phenomena nurtured and reinforced each other. Other factors contributed sooner or later to the advance of agriculture, including the increase in rural security, the growing penetration into the countryside of money and the idea of profit, the stabilization of property rights, the settlement of the bedouins, the introduction of machinery and artificial fertilizers, and the building of roads, railways, harbors, and irrigation works.

If, initially, the rise in population was related to the reanimation of agriculture, its continued growth has been increasingly a reflection of the decline in mortality rates, particularly after World War II. The process is traceable to the restriction of the ravages of endemic diseases, greater access to purified water better sanitation, increasing public health facilities, improved diets and child health care, and wider utilization of antibiotics. As is clear from Table 1±2, the crude death rate for Syria fell by two-thirds between 1960 and 1991, and in the latter year was, interestingly enough, lower than that for Japan or the United States, assuming the accuracy of the demographic indicators. As is reflected in the same table, Syria appears also to have made much progress between 1960 and 1991 in lengthening life expectancy and reducing infant mortality. This could perhaps be attributed, at least in part, to the marked interest of its regime in the welfare of country people, which is, in turn, explicable by the regime's rural roots and rural constituency. As regards the infant mortality rate, however, it is doubtful that the rural-urban differential has as yet been wiped out; but rural people aged fifty and above appear to live longer than their urban counterparts.<sup>4</sup>

TABLE 1±1  
 Syria's Total and Rural Population and Its Population Active in Agriculture,  
 Animal Husbandry, and Forestry (in thousands)

Year	Total Population	Rural Population	% of Rural Population	Population Active in Agriculture, Animal Husbandry, and Forestry	% of Total Economically Active Population
1922 <sup>a</sup>	1,547	n.a. <sup>b</sup>		n.a. <sup>b</sup>	n.a. <sup>b</sup>
1937 <sup>a</sup>	2,367	n.a. <sup>b</sup>		n.a. <sup>b</sup>	n.a. <sup>b</sup>
1946 <sup>a</sup>	2,950	2,006	68.0	683	n.a. <sup>b</sup>
1960(census)	4,353 <sup>cd</sup>	2,668 <sup>cd</sup>	61.3	514 <sup>cd</sup>	52.1 <sup>cd</sup>
1970(census)	6,305 <sup>e</sup>	3,564 <sup>e</sup>	56.5	747 <sup>e</sup>	49.4 <sup>e</sup>
1981(census)	9,046	4,790	52.9	495	24.2
1991 <sup>a</sup>	12,529	6,194	49.4	924	28.0
1994(census)	13,782	6,732 <sup>a</sup>	48.6 <sup>a</sup>	n.a. <sup>b</sup>	n.a. <sup>b</sup>

Sources: League of Nations, *The Mandates System* (Geneva, 1945), pp. 86±87; Great Britain, Foreign Office, FO 371/75558, XL/A/11723, E4976, Annex B to Letter of 22 October 1948 from H. R. Stewart; Office Arabe de Presse et de Documentation, Damascus, *Recueil des statistiques syriennes comparées (1928±1968)*, p. 10; Syria, Ministry of Planning, Directorate of Statistics, *Census of Population, 1960 . . .*, pp. 30±31, 34±35, and 162±63; Syria, Office of Prime Minister Central Bureau of Statistics, *Population Census in Syrian Arab Republic, 1970*, vol. 1, pp. 1, 39, and 306; *Results of the Population Census . . . , 1981* (in Arabic), pp. 44 and 225; and *Statistical Abstracts, 1991*, p. 60; 1992, pp. 90±91; 1994, pp. 62 and 80±81; and 1996, p. 58.

<sup>a</sup>Estimates.

<sup>b</sup>Not available.

<sup>c</sup>The 1960 and 1970 census takers did not count a great number of women working on family farms.

<sup>d</sup>This figure does not take into account the bedouin elements, who numbered 211,670 in 1960.

Although under ideal circumstances Syria can absorb a larger workforce in its economy, rapid demographic growth has been, at one point or another in the last four decades, an important unsettling factor in Syrian life. In conjunction with other elements, such as recurring droughts and soil degradation, it has increased the pressure on land, stimulated an unprecedented rural exodus, made Damascus and other main cities top-heavy with people and problems, pushed up the cost of food, exacerbated economic inequalities, and indirectly contributed to the rise of the Ba'thists and, eventually, to the partial erosion of the salutary effects of agrarian reform. Conjointly with inadequate productivity, the improvement from the 1950s onward of living standards and the consequent rise in per capita consumption, demographic growth was also responsible for transforming Syria in the 1970s from a net exporter into a net importer of food, thus significantly increasing the country's financial burden.

Between 1976 and 1989, however, there appears to have been a simultaneous decrease in Syria's agricultural population (see Table 1±3). True, the official figures should be viewed with some skepticism. The sharp fluctuations in the size of the farming force that they reflect stem in part from the vagaries of the weather, but may also be due to flaws or changes in sampling methods. The figure for 1976 is probably to some extent a statistical aberration. The pro-

TABLE 1±2  
Life Expectancy and Demographic Indicators, Syria Compared with Selected Middle Eastern and Advanced Countries

Country	Crude Birth Rate per Thousand Population			Crude Death Rate per Thousand Population			Life Expectancy at Birth (Years)			Infant Mortality Rate per Thousand (Aged 0±1)		
	1960	1984	1991	1960	1984	1991	1960	1986	1991	1960	1984	1991
Syria	47	45	44	18	8	6	50	64	67	132	55	37
Saudi Arabia	49	43	37	23	9	5	43	63	69	185	61	32
Egypt	44	36	32	19	10	9	46	61	61	128	94	59
Iraq	49	45		20	10		46	63		139	74	
Iran	46	41	44	20	9	9	50	59	65	163	112	68
Jordan	47	46	37	20	8	5	47	65	69	136	50	29
Israel	27	23	21	6	7	6	69	75	76	32	14	9
Turkey	43	30	28	16	9	7	51	65	67	190	86	58
Japan	18	13	10	8	7	7	68	78	79	31	6	5
U.S.A.	24	16	16	9	9	9	70	75	76	26	11	9

Sources: The World Bank, *World Development Reports* (Washington, D.C.) 1982, pp. 144±45 and 150±51; 1986, pp. 230±33; 1988, pp. 222±23; and 1993, pp. 238±39 and 290±93.

TABLE 1±3  
Proportion of Population Employed in Agriculture  
in 1970±1984, 1989, and 1991

Year	Population Active in Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Forestry in Thousands <sup>a</sup>	% of Total Economically Active Population
1970 (census)	747 <sup>b</sup>	49.4
1971	892	54.2
1972	908	55.6
1973	858	50.8
1974	864	53.0
1975	918	49.9
1976	578 <sup>c</sup>	33.7
1977	756	39.9
1978	671	34.7
1979	687	32.8
1980	687	32.3
1981(census)	495 <sup>c</sup>	24.2
1982	705	32.0
1983	715	31.8
1984	571 <sup>d</sup>	31.7
1989	675	22.9
1991	924	28.0

Sources: Syria, Office of Prime Minister Central Bureau of Statistics, *Population Census . . .*, 1970, vol. I, p. 306; *Results of the Population Census, 1981*, p. 225; *Yearly Compilation of Agricultural Statistics* (in Arabic) and *Statistical Abstracts* for various years; and the Peasants' General Union, *al-Mu' tamar-ul-`Am ar-Rabi'*, p. 28; *al-Mu' tamar-ul-`Am al-Khams*, p. 71; and *al-Mu' tamar-ul-`Am as-Sadis*, p. 53. The latter congress gave the figure 696,200 for the 1981 population active in agriculture but I relied on the figure in the 1981 census, which was published in 1988.

Note: The Syrian government did not publish figures for 1985±1988 and 1990.

<sup>c</sup>The short-run (year-to-year) variation in the agricultural labor force is largely explicable by the vagaries of the weather, but transfer to other occupations and internal and external migration were also involved.

<sup>b</sup>An undercount of female family workers is certain.

<sup>d</sup>It is not clear why the agricultural population dropped so sharply in 1976 and 1981. The indices of total agricultural production for these two years inclined upward (see Table 4±3). It is possible that the 1976 figure is a statistical aberration or that the statistical projections for the earlier or succeeding years are defective. The latter explanation might be true also of the figures for the years preceding or following 1981.

<sup>e</sup>Because of a drought Syrian agriculture was depressed in 1984.

jections for the years preceding or succeeding the 1981 census, which was published in 1988, may be defective. Nevertheless, the decline of the cultivating population in that period was in all likelihood fairly large. Moreover, there are indications that at least some of the owners of small or nonviable farms are now only part-time husbandmen, having been driven by economic need to take second jobs in nearby towns.

The decrease in the farming population in the years in question had its roots in the income differentials between rural and urban laborers, the attractions of city life, the irregularity of rainfall, the depletion from over-use of the subterranean water in some areas, the greater reliance on agricultural machines and on a capital-intensive mode of production, and the sharp swing in the world grain prices. In the second half of the 1970s many peasants in such rainfed regions as the Hawran and Jabal Druze were also tempted to seek their fortunes in the Gulf, but the prospects for these migrant laborers have dwindled with the downward movement of international oil prices after 1981 and in particular after the 1985 precipitous oil price plunge. This factor, added to the relative improvement in the conditions of life in the countryside and the decreasing chances for peasant employment in the cities, may account for what the Peasants' General Union described as "a reverse migration" from urban areas to the villages in the early 1990s,<sup>5</sup> which is reflected in the increase of the agricultural force from about 675,107 in 1989<sup>6</sup> to about 924,274 in 1991.<sup>7</sup> But 1991 was also a year of exceptional rainfall.<sup>8</sup>

One other significant demographic feature is the population's low rate of participation in the labor force, which stood in 1970 at 24.9, in 1981 at 22.7 and in 1991 at 27.8 percent.<sup>9</sup> It is possible that a segment of the unpaid women working on family farms were not officially enumerated. But the low labor participation rate is in large measure explicable by the youthful slant of the population's age structure: in 1994—the latest year for which relevant data are available—44.8 percent of the Syrians were younger than fifteen.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, a high proportion of urban women do not take part in the work force. Both these factors add greatly to the economic burden of the laboring component of the population.