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Implications of Syrian Demographic Trends

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**SUMMARY:** A number of articles published by various Syrian publications in recent months indicate that the Syrian Government has been giving serious attention to demographic trends within the country. Nearly 50% of Syria's population is under age 15, an important statistic affecting educational planning as well as projecting future population growth. Internal and external migration is changing the face of Syria and causing labor shortages that constrict economic growth. SARG planners are trying to develop a coordinated strategy to mesh economic/social planning with demographic projections. **END SUMMARY.**

INTRODUCTION

Numerous articles published in Syria within the past few months have shed some light on the relationship between Syrian demography and the dimensions of the SARG's planning for national development. They indicate that some key planners have begun to focus on the long-term implications of demographic trends in an effort to mesh statistical projections with comprehensive planning for Syria's urban-rural development schemes. They also provide sound statistical justification for President Asad's attempt to induce many of Syria's more talented emigres to return and for his efforts to stabilize Syrian development planning.

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to underpopulation, emigration outside the country, and domestic population shifts from rural to urban areas.

#### EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL MIGRATION

One study noted that "Syria in recent years has suffered from a continuous human exodus from the country. Some sources estimate the number of Syrian emigrants at 1.5 million." The scientific expertise of these emigrants constitutes a major "brain drain" and an enormous potential manpower pool which could significantly increase Syria's ability to utilize its natural resources. "This is the reason behind the issuance of legislation to encourage the return of Syrian emigrants," and, it should be added, regulations restricting Syrian travel abroad.

Internal migration produces a number of problems affecting both urban and rural sectors. In the cities, it causes: (1) a housing crisis, (2) a decrease in the rate of childbirth and marriage and an increase in the age of marriage, (3) an increase in pollution, (4) an increase in crime, (5) an increase in consumption of electricity, water and food, and (6) a transportation crisis accompanied by traffic problems and an increasing auto accident rate.

Rural areas are affected by: (1) an increase in hidden unemployment, (2) a decrease in arable lands resulting in a freeze in agricultural productivity, and (3) a lack of balance in the labor structure and a scarcity of workers to harvest crops.

#### CORRELATION OF BIRTHRATE WITH STATUS OF SYRIAN WOMEN

Statistics reveal that the average birthrate of illiterate Syrian women is 6 children, while university graduates on an average give birth to 2 children. Damascene working women average 3 pregnancies while non-workers average 5. Women involved in agricultural work are more fecund than those employed by the non-agricultural sectors.

#### EFFECT OF DEMOGRAPHY UPON WAR-MAKING POTENTIAL

One of the studies asserted that, "The fighting power of any society is connected to that society's capabilities. Our present demographic situation impedes our capabilities and subsequently our fighting power. The most obvious reason for this impediment is the great density of

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Damascus population. Damascus is a target susceptible to enemy aircraft and missile attack, which would result in large losses. The scarcity of border villages, their small size and unorganized distribution also affects the military situation, because it facilitates enemy infiltration as happened during the 1973 October War on the Golan front. Our demographic situation is so bad that it impedes all social improvements, all attempts to overcome occupation, underdevelopment and division."

#### TOWARD A SYRIAN DEMOGRAPHIC POLICY

All of the studies addressed themselves to the need for creating a Syrian demographic policy that would mesh with the country's development planning. One author outlined the following six points as elements of a potential demographic strategy: (1) review of the civil code to align it with social development, (2) assignment of more importance to family planning, (3) increase in availability of education for men and women equally, (4) assurance of equality of labor conditions between men and women, (5) creation of a comprehensive medical and social security system, (6) linkage between economic and social projects and demographic studies.

Another report accentuated political elements which should be considered in any demographic strategy: (1) "suppression of artificial boundaries imposed by colonialism" will help solve demographic problems at both the national and pan-Arab levels, (2) Syrian inducement of its scientifically talented emigrants to return will help ease the skilled manpower shortage, (3) on-going development projects--the Euphrates basin irrigation scheme, mineral extraction in relatively underpopulated areas and extension of the Syrian urban communication network to rural areas--will help stabilize the rural population and stem internal migration to the country's urban centers by setting up other population centers where jobs are available and living standards attractive.

A third article recommended raising the minimum age at which girls could marry and redistributing elements of the Syrian population to the thinly-settled northern and eastern regions of the country.

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