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ORGANIZATION AND STATUS OF CIVIL REGISTRATION AND VITAL STATISTICS IN THE ARAB COUNTRIES

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
Foreword	1
Organization of Civil Registration Systems	1
Organization of Vital Statistics Systems	2
Status of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics	3
Annex 1. National Agencies Responsible for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics	5
Annex 2. Estimated Completeness of Birth and Death Registration	6

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FOREWORD

This report brings together information on the organization of the civil registration and vital statistics systems in the Arab countries. These are the countries with a common language, religion, and culture located in the subregions of Asia and Africa. Rather than approach these countries on a regional basis, it seems more convenient and logical to view the problems of civil registration and vital registration of the Arab countries as a group. It is hoped that the information in this report will provide useful background data for planning strategy for the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics in the Arab countries.

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ORGANIZATION AND STATUS OF CIVIL REGISTRATION
AND VITAL STATISTICS IN THE ARAB COUNTRIES

The date of establishment of the civil registry in the Arab countries is available¹ for only 6 out of the 19 countries, namely, Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Mauritania, Syria and Tunisia. However, it is apparent that there is a system for the registration of births and deaths in various stages of development in virtually every Arab country. On the other hand, the registration of births and deaths is deficient in most of them. In 4 countries, Egypt, Jordan, Libya and Kuwait, birth statistics are said to be based on complete registration coverage. In only three countries, Egypt, Jordan and Kuwait, death registration is considered complete.

The Arab countries are defined as those countries whose official language is Arabic, and the following fall within this definition: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, the Peoples' Democratic Republic of Yemen and the Republic of Yemen.

Much needs to be done to improve the registration systems of the Arab countries. It is the purpose of this report to provide what background information is available on the organization of the civil registration and vital statistics systems in the Arab countries for use in formulating a program of improvement of registration and vital statistics.

Considerable information is available on the national and subnational offices responsible for civil registration and the national administration responsible for vital statistics. These data were obtained by the United Nations Statistical Office in 1979 and by the International Institute for Vital Registration and Statistics which conducted a questionnaire survey in 1984. However, relatively little is known specifically about the status of civil registration and vital statistics in the Arab countries. More information will be needed to enable the various countries to plan a program of improvement of civil registration and vital statistics.

Organization of Civil Registration Systems

A civil registration system is essentially a national network of local registration offices. It may be a centralized system in which case the central agency in the national government exercises authority over the local registration offices. In countries with a federated form of government, the civil registration system is usually decentralized, that is, the local registration offices are supervised or administered by some authority at a subnational level such as a district, region, state or province. In these instances, there is no national office to oversee the local registration operations. As far as can be determined, the civil registration function in all the Arab countries is centralized:

Annex 1 lists the national agencies legally responsible for civil registration, the registration authorities at the subnational level, and the agencies responsible for the compilation of national vital statistics. The information is summarized in Table 1 together with comparative data for two regions in which the Arab countries are located.

Table 1. Ministries Legally Responsible for Civil Registration

	Health	Home or Interior	Justice	Other	No data
All regions	20(14)	50(35)	38(27)	34(24)	37
Arab countries	7(44)	6(38)	1(6)	2(12)	3
Africa*	2(7)	17(57)	9(30)	2(7)	11
Asia*	4(17)	12(52)	4(17)	3(13)	5

*Excluding Arab countries. Note: Percent in parens.

¹United Nations Handbook of Vital Statistics Systems and Methods. Vol. II. Review of National Practices Studies in Methods Series F No. 35. United Nations, 1985

The worldwide pattern of civil registration and vital statistics varies considerably. In a little more than one third of the countries of the world, civil registration is part of the system of local governments which is usually one of the functions of the Ministry of Home or Interior. The second most frequent locus for civil registration is the Ministry of Justice, presumably because of the legal nature of the vital records. In about 14 percent of the countries, the legal responsibility for national civil registration is lodged in the Health Ministry.

Although the proportion of countries where civil registration is the function of the Ministry of Home or Interior in the Arab countries is about the same as that for all countries of the world, the regional pattern of organization is quite different from that in other parts of the world. The Ministry of Justice in the Arab countries does not play much of a role in civil registration as in other countries whereas the Ministry of Health has the legal responsibility for the registration of births and deaths in 44 percent of the countries for which information is available. This is in marked contrast with the proportion (10 percent) of countries in the rest of the world where the Ministry of Health is responsible for civil registration.

There is much to be said for allocating the responsibility for the registration of births and deaths to the national health administration because of its control over large hospitals and local health centers where vital events frequently occur. Also, because the Ministry of Health is, actually or potentially, one of the major consumers of vital statistics, there should be a vested interest and motivation to organize and operate an efficient system of registration of births, deaths and fetal deaths. However, the same cannot be said about the problem of registering marriages and divorces which are vital events not of particular interest to the health administration. This fact seems to have been recognized by at least one country in the area, Kuwait. In Kuwait, the registration of marriages and divorces has been allocated to the Ministry of Justice. Actually, the situation in Kuwait is not as simple as it seems. Although the National agency for the registration of births and deaths is located in the Ministry of Health, the registration of these events takes place in the local courts under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice. Inasmuch as the Ministry of Health does not have the responsibility for compiling national statistics on births and deaths, it seems anomalous for the Health Ministry to be responsible for the national registration of births and deaths which are actually registered in the local courts and not in the local health facilities. In this organizational arrangement, the Ministry of Health appears to serve only as a go-between between the local courts and the Ministry of Planning in the transmittal of birth and death records for statistical purposes. In this situation, it would seem simpler and perhaps more logical for the Ministry of Justice to oversee the registration of all vital events by the local courts.

Relationship between national CR administration to subnational office

In a centralized civil registration system, a national registration office heads up the national network of local registration offices. In those countries where the local registration offices are in the same administration as the national registration office, the national registration office can exercise administrative as well as a technical control over the local registration offices. In those countries where the local registration offices are under the administrative control of another ministry, the national registration office can give technical directions but would not have administrative authority over the personnel in the local registration offices. For example, in Egypt, births and deaths are registered by the personnel of the health centers under the administrative control of the Ministry of Health. However, the national registration office is located in the Civil Registration Department of the Ministry of Interior. Thus, the national registration office may give technical direction to the personnel of the local registration offices but does not have administrative authority over them. Because the personnel of the health centers are not administratively responsible to the national civil registration authority, questions of priority arise, especially if registration is not a full-time activity, as is frequently the case.

In at least half of the Arab countries, the local registration offices are in the same ministry or department as the national registration office. Two are in different administration, and in 7 countries information is missing.

Organization of Vital Statistics Systems

As is the case in most countries of the world, the legal responsibility for the compilation of national vital statistics is vested in the central bureau of statistics in the majority of the Arab countries. In 2 countries, the vital statistics function is carried out by the Ministry of Health and in another two by the national civil registration office. No information is available on the location of the vital statistics function in 5 countries.

In 4 countries, Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Syria, the civil registration and vital statistics functions are carried out in the same ministry or department. In 9 countries, Algeria, Bahrain, Kuwait, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Sudan and Tunisia, they are in different administrations. Data are missing for the remainder of the countries.

The advantage of having vital statistics and civil registration in the same administration is that it makes communication between the two agencies less difficult. This is most important from the standpoint of vital statistics where uniformity or comparability of data is a prime requisite. It is essential that all the areas in the country use the same basic definitions and registration procedures, identical forms in the collection of data, and the same classifications so that there will be comparability in the statistics produced from records of vital events registered in different parts of the country. Without a close working relationship between the vital statistics and registration authorities, it will not be possible to produce comparable vital statistics from place to place within the country and from year to year.

Status of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics

The evaluation of status or the present state of development of the civil registration and vital statistics systems involves the assessment of various aspects of the registration and statistical process such as adequacy of the registration laws and regulations, promptness and completeness of registration, efficiency of services in providing certification of vital events, quality of data, adequacy and usefulness of data produced, timeliness in the issuance of data, etc. At this point, not too much is known about any of these factors except the issuance of vital statistics and some measure of completeness with which births and deaths are registered.

With respect to the availability of vital statistics, reference was made to the most recent issue of the Demographic Yearbook of the United Nations. According to the Demographic Yearbook, data on the total number of births are available for every country except Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Yemen and the Peoples' Republic of Yemen. Data on the total number of deaths are missing for Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Democratic Republic of Yemen, and the Peoples' Republic of Yemen. For data on causes of death, the World Health Organization Statistical Yearbook² lists only Egypt (1980) and Kuwait (1985).

Perhaps the most useful single index of status is a measure of completeness with which births and deaths are registered. Periodically, the countries are asked by the United Nations to make an assessment of the registration completeness of vital events. These evaluations, (C) for registration completeness of 90 percent or more and (U) for completeness of less than 90 percent, are published in the United Nations Demographic Yearbook. In some cases, the evaluations are based on the results of sample surveys. Most of them are educated guesses. However, in terms of the United Nations standard of completeness, these "guesstimates" probably represent a reasonably good assessment of the situation. In a few instances, the authorities may be over optimistic about the effectiveness of the compulsory provisions of the registration law.

In the IIVRS survey, the questionnaire called for the actual percentage of the completeness of birth and death registration. This precision made a proper response a little more difficult, so that in a number of returns, the item was left blank. In Annex 2 are shown the completeness of registration of births and deaths. The data are from the IIVRS survey, the United Nations Statistical Office and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, and includes all but 5 of the Arab countries. For these 5 countries, Oman, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Peoples' Republic of Yemen and the Republic of Yemen, it would seem reasonable to assume that registration completeness is less than 90 percent.

Of the 19 Arab countries, the registration of births and deaths has been reported to be complete in only 3 countries, Egypt, Jordan and Qatar. In addition, the registration of births has been considered as satisfactory in Libya and Tunisia; and birth registration in Bahrain and Syria appears to be close to complete coverage. On the other hand, death registration seems to be a problem in all the countries, except for the 3 aforementioned countries.

The criterion of 90 percent or more as a measure of adequacy of the registration system may be too rigorous in some instances. If a segment of the national population lives outside the usual

²World Health Statistics Annual, 1986; World Health Organization, 1986

national social and economic culture, the immediate need for registration may not exist; and if, for example, the first use of a child's birth certificate is to establish age for school entrance little harm is done if registration is delayed beyond the first year. The legal record has value for proving identity, age, citizenship, filiation, marital status and so forth, primarily in the settled, largely urban populations, while nomadic and tribal populations may have little need for such proof. To bring them into the mainstream would be contingent on social change that may not be imminent in many countries. Still, in such countries, the registration system may be more or less adequately serving one of the purposes for which it exists at the present level of demand for individual documentation. On the other hand, if a country has instituted a population register or a personal identity system, the integrity of such a system cannot be maintained without an adequate civil registration system for a continuous update.

The present criterion of completeness was essentially developed for the use of vital records for statistical purposes. For this, it would be ideal to have a nationwide count of 100 percent of the vital events occurring in the country, and complete coverage for all the important variables. However, to achieve complete country-wide population coverage is not immediately possible in most developing countries. Because of this, many countries are resorting to sample demographic surveys and various other methods for the estimation of birth and death rates. Unfortunately, these estimates are, by and large, of limited value because of the errors involved. In the case of demographic surveys, consideration needs to be given to sampling as well as nonsampling errors. The former can be determined from the sample size of the survey but the latter cannot. However, it is well known that surveys, especially single round surveys are not efficient methods for counting vital events occurring in an area. Even dual records surveys, theoretically the most efficient of the lot, present great difficulties under field conditions in developing countries. In addition to the errors, national surveys are usually limited to the country as a whole and subnational data cannot be obtained.

The various indirect methods of estimating birth and death rates are based on a statistical model into which data obtained from censuses and sample surveys are entered. The accuracy of the estimates depends upon validity of the assumptions underlying the statistical model used and the precision of the data from censuses and sample surveys. The applicability of the model to the actual situation in a country cannot be determined. Nor is it usually possible to ascertain the errors in the input data and their effects on the estimate. These uncertainties raise questions about the usefulness of these estimates in measuring changes in vital rates. As a matter of fact, some of these models are not designed to measure change in rates over time.

Clearly, the various methods of estimating birth and death rates are not substitutes for the registration method. However, as mentioned before, it takes time and effort to develop a registration system. Unfortunately, there is need now for vital records and vital statistics, particularly the latter, for national social and economic developmental planning. In recognition of this, the International Institute for Vital Registration and Statistics³ has recommended various steps to be followed by the national civil registration office and by the national vital statistics office to accelerate the improvement of the registration and vital statistics systems, respectively.

³IIVRS Actions for the Improvement of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics, Technical Paper No. 27 December 1983.

Annex 1. National Agencies Responsible for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics

COUNTRY	CIVIL REGISTRATION ADMINISTRATION		NATIONAL VITAL STATISTICS OFFICE
	Subnational	National	
Algeria	...	Bureau des Statistiques d'Etat Civil, Ministère de la Planification l'Amenagement du Territoire	...
Bahrain	Births & Deaths Registration Office	Births & Deaths Registration Office, Ministry of Health	Central Statistical Organization, Council of Ministers
Egypt	Health Centers	Civil Registration Dept., Ministry of Interior	Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics
Iraq ¹	Chief Medical Office (Governorato)	Directorate of Vital and Health Statistics Ministry of Health	Directorate of Vital & Health Statistics Ministry of Health
Jordan	Civil Registration Office	Civil Status Department Ministry of Interior	Civil Status Department Ministry of Interior
Kuwait ¹	Civil Registration Units Department of Courts	Department of Central Civil Registration, Ministry of Health	Central Planning Office Ministry of Planning
Lebanon	...	...	Central Statistical Office Ministry of Planning
Libya	Civil Registration Office	Civil Registration Section Secretariat of utilities	Census and Statistics Dept., Secretariat of Planning
Mauritania	...	...	...
Morocco	Bureau locaux d'etat civil	Division d'etat civil, Ministère de l'Interieur	Direction de la Statistiques, Ministère du Plan
Oman	...	Ministry of Health (Not operational)	Directorate General of National Statistics
Qatar	Health Centers	Preventive Health Dept., Ministry of Public Health	Central Statistical Organization, Presidency of the Council of Ministers
Saudi Arabia	Directorate of Health Affairs	Department of Preventive Medicine, Ministry of Health	Department of Statistics, Ministry of Health
Sudan	Hospitals, Dispensaries, dressing stations	Ministry of Health	Department of Statistics, Ministry of Finance & Economic Planning
Syria	Department of Civil Registration	General Directorate for Civil Registration, Ministry of Interior	General Directorate for Civil Registration, Ministry of Interior
Tunisia ¹	Centres d'etat civil (Commone)	Ministere de l'Interieur	Direction des Statistiques, Demographiques et Sociales, Institut National de la Statistiques Ministère du Plan
United Arab Emirates	...	...	...
Yemen, Arab Rep.	...	Department of Civil Registration & Population Registration Ministry of Interior	...
Yemen, Dem.	Local registration offices	Civil Registration Dept., Ministry of Justice	...

¹United Nations Handbook of Vital Statistics Systems and Methods, Volume II Review of National Practices. Series F, No. 35, P. 51, 1985



Annex 2. Estimated Completeness of Birth and Death Registration

Country	% Registration Completeness		Country	% Registration Completeness	
	Birth	Death		Birth	Death
Algeria ¹	U	U	Oman	...	...
Bahrain	87	...	Qatar	95	95
Egypt	100	100	Saudi Arabia	...	...
Iraq ²	U	- U	Sudan	25	5
Jordan	100	100	Syria	88	54
Kuwait ²	U	U	Tunisia ¹	C	U
Lebanon ²	U	...	United Arab Emirates	...	...
Libya	90	62	Yemen, Peoples' Dem. Rep.	...	...
Mauritania ²	U	U	Yemen, Rep.	...	...
Morocco	40	40			

¹ Makannah, T.J., Methods and Problems of Civil Registration Practices and Vital Statistics Collection in Africa. IIVRS Technical Papers No. 16, p. 17 and 18, July 1981.

² United Nations Handbook of Vital Statistics Systems and Methods, Vol. II. Review of National Practices, Series F, No. 35, p. 73, 1985.