

The Arab Human Development Report – Envisioning an Arab Renaissance

NADER FERGANY

Editor's Introduction: The Arab Human Development Report (AHDR) has had a noteworthy career. Within the Arab world, it has stimulated debate and controversy. In Europe and the United States, since its publication almost every discussion about development, democratization, and reform in Arab countries has made reference to the AHDR's findings. Furthermore, outside reform initiatives, such as those envisioned in the USA's Greater Middle East Initiative, have been linked to the report. The report is thus a prime example of the power of ideas and the difficult interrelationship between knowledge and politics, which is particularly relevant to the sensitive relations between the USA and the Arab world since September 11. The following contribution by the lead author of the AHDR explains the original idea behind the report, comments on the political reactions, and envisions a reform path which translates analytical insights into societal reform from within.

Contents and Objectives of the Arab Human Development Reports

The first AHDR (2002) presented a comprehensive but preliminary treatment of the current situation of the Arab nation from a human development perspective. The Report ended its diagnosis by concluding that three fundamental deficits impede human development in Arab countries: (i) in the acquisition of knowledge, (ii) in freedom and good governance, and (iii) in the empowerment of women.¹

Given that the first AHDR, by virtue of its comprehensive nature, was unable to investigate deeply the individual deficits, a need arose for more profound treatment. The Regional Bureau for Arab States of the United Nations Development Program therefore decided to produce at least three more annual issues of the AHDR: the AHDR has thus become a *series* of reports.

The second Report was dedicated to providing in-depth treatment of the deficit in knowledge acquisition in Arab countries and concluded with a strategic vision for the establishment of a knowledge-based society. The third Report is currently in preparation and focuses on »freedom and good governance«. Publication is scheduled for the end of 2004. This may be the most critical and sensitive of the trinity of deficits outlined by the first AHDR. The hope is that this Report will stimulate a broad-based discussion throughout Arab societies concerning ways of expanding the range of freedom and building good governance among the Arab nation. Preparation of the fourth Report, focusing on »The Advancement of Women«, has also begun and publication is planned for 2005.

In addressing the dangers implicit in re-shaping the Arab region from the outside, the AHDR series seeks to act as a spur to the formulation of a strategic vision, to be crystallized by Arab elites through a process of societal innovation. This innovation would be aimed at re-shaping the region from within for the sake of its human development. There can be no dispute that reform from the inside, founded on rigorous self-criticism, is the right approach for confronting such dangers and ensuring success and sustainability.

Mindful of the maxim that »the people of Mecca best know the city's paths«, the AHDR are, nevertheless, reluctant to offer a »ready-made recipe« claiming to be appropriate for the promotion of human development in any or all Arab societies.²

Building human development requires a level of societal innovation that the members of Arab societies can accomplish only for themselves and by themselves. Indeed, this is what human development is all about.

-
1. The AHDR is prepared by a team of more than 100 researchers and experts, male and female, from across the spectrum of Arab countries, generations, and intellectual tendencies, based both inside and outside the Arab world. Preparation of the Report is subject to a multi-step process of synthesis and rigorous review by a consultative council. Thereafter the Report is reviewed by two teams of readers independent of the Report preparation process. One reviews the original, Arabic version, while the other, which includes non-Arabs, reviews the English translation. The team is almost entirely composed of Arabs, with the exception of some non-Arab members of the second independent readers' team, whose presence is justified by the fact that the Report seeks to address non-Arabs as well as its original Arab audience.
 2. We deliberately use the term »Arab society« in this context in preference to »Arab country« or »Arab state« in order to stress that the »society« in question may be part of a state or of a collection of states or of the Arab world as a whole.

The Report thus confines itself to indicating the main features of a proposed *strategic vision*³ to illuminate the path towards human development. The vital forces in any Arab society are invited, first, to engage with it through *serious discussion*. Disagreement, where objectively justified, is as valuable as agreement, and diagnosis and recommendations have to be contextualized. Only then can societal forces determine their own path towards the goals of the strategic vision. Out of this process of social innovation, a *societal movement* may arise that depends on the release of human creative energies within the society in question and their efficient utilization in building human development. The last chapter of each Report therefore focuses on *broad outlines* to guide the future quest for human development, in the hope of stimulating debate.

Knowledge and Human Development: The Important Messages of the Second AHDR

A review of global, regional, and local developments since work on the first AHDR was completed led the Report team to conclude that the challenge to human development represented by the three deficits in knowledge, freedom, and the empowerment of women, remains very serious. Indeed, the challenge may have heightened, particularly in the area of freedom, largely because of adverse regional and global changes. These include the deterioration of civil and political liberties in the United States and the West after the events of 9-11, especially where Arabs and Muslims are concerned, and the subsequent tightening of restrictions on freedom in Arab countries. In addition, Israel has repeated its incursions into the Palestinian territories, leaving appalling scenes of destruction and devastation in its wake; and the coalition led by the United States and the United Kingdom invaded and occupied Iraq in breach of international legitimacy.

Concerning the *state of knowledge acquisition* at the start of the twenty-first century, the second AHDR (2003) points to a weakness in the dissemination and production of knowledge in Arab countries despite the presence of significant Arab human capital. This human capital could, under different circumstances, constitute a strong infrastructure for a knowledge renaissance.

3. Which, by definition, does not seek to emulate the level of rigor of a »strategy«.

The Report concludes with a strategic vision for the establishment of a knowledge-based society in Arab countries, organized around five main pillars:

1. Full respect for the *key* freedoms of opinion, expression, and association, and their guarantee through good governance.
2. Ensuring high-quality education for all, with special attention given to the two ends of the educational spectrum, early childhood education and higher education, and to lifelong learning.
3. The institution of research and technological development in all societal activities and accession to the information age.
4. Rapid transition to a knowledge-based mode of production in Arab socio-economic structures.
5. Establishing a general Arab knowledge model that is authentic, open, and enlightened, based on: a return to true religion, salvaged from exploitation for tendentious purposes, and the encouragement and appreciation of independent religious scholarship; promotion of the Arabic language; appeal to and use of the best of the Arab knowledge heritage; enrichment of, support for, and celebration of cultural diversity within the nation; and opening up to other cultures.

In conclusion, the Report points to the fact that knowledge acquisition is a sacred duty that goes unobserved in the Arab nation today. Religion, culture, history, and the future demand that Arabs seek knowledge. The only impediments to knowledge are man-made structures, in society, the economy, and, above all, politics. It is now incumbent on the Arabs to set these structures to rights so that their nation may assume the place in the world it rightfully deserves in the Knowledge Millennium.

Responses and Criticisms

The publication of the first and second Reports provoked a storm of reaction both for and against, and from inside and outside Arab borders.⁴ In the Report team's view, this is an indication both of the vital importance of the issues dealt with and of the need to bring them to the fore

4. In my estimation, the topography of the reaction to the second AHDR does not differ in essence from that of the first, despite the fact that the second Report turned out to be more mature in its attempt to avoid many of the justifiable criticisms directed against the first.

during this critical era in the history of the Arab nation. The Report team welcomes serious and objective discussion of the issues raised and indeed considers this an essential component of the start-up process for societal innovation leading to the formulation of an authentic »Arab renaissance« project.

In order to understand reactions to the AHDR it is important to understand a key aspect of the »Arab mentality« in relation to the anguish of self-criticism. In my estimation, the Arab intellectual identity is in essence an uneasy mixture of feelings of humiliation – which are understandable and have their origin in the continual thwarting of aspirations in the Arab nation – and of »transcendentalism« in the »Kantian« sense, in that it regards itself as being above self-criticism⁵ as part of a desperate effort to protect the self, which is simultaneously both oppressed and violated.

Reactions to the Report varied from one Arab country to another, as expected, according to the margin of freedom available.

It is perhaps natural that a report critical of the current situation should meet with a measure of reserve on the part of the societal forces responsible for, or implicated in, the present crisis in the Arab world. Thus the reaction of governments, Arab official organizations, and certain intellectuals was lukewarm and in some cases even hostile.

At the same time, reactions to the Report varied from one Arab country to another, as expected, according to the margin of freedom available, the vitality of debate on public issues, and the degree of enlightenment of the government. Thus, while public discussions of the Report benefited from official sponsorship in Jordan, Morocco, and Lebanon, for instance, the authorities in one Arab country banned a public seminar planned to discuss the AHDR findings.

It is also natural that such a report should meet with sympathetic reactions from forces of change critical of the status quo and hoping for a better alternative. This was the main reaction among civil society organizations and independent academic circles, though some of these provided objective – and welcome – criticisms of the report's methodology or contents.

5. Mahdi Bunduq, *Deconstructing Arab Culture* (in Arabic), Policy Package 97–98 (Cairo: Higher Council for Culture, 2003).

What is not natural, however, is that some of those who might have been expected to stand shoulder to shoulder with a Report of this type should have made defamatory accusations: for example, that the Report was »treason« or an attempt to curry favor with the West at the expense of other Arabs.

Other critics of the Report condemned it as going too far in highlighting the shortcomings of Arab countries. Personally, however, I find no exaggeration or embellishment of the negatives in the AHDR: on the one hand, the Report team attempted to be as objective as possible; on the other, in view of the fact that the Report was issued through UNDP, whose members are governments, the Report team was careful not to single out any Arab state for harsh criticism. The same logic applies with even greater force when it comes to the region as a whole, a region of which the team is extremely solicitous and for which it desires nothing but progress. In my opinion the Report may if anything have treated the negative aspects of the current Arab situation a little too leniently.

The most foolish of the criticisms directed against the Report, however, were those which claimed that it was an attempt to curry favor with the West by focusing on the faults of Arab countries and exploiting the post 9-11 atmosphere, particularly in the United States. This led some to view it as a preparatory step for outside intervention by the West, particularly the United States in the context of its so-called War on Terror. One such critic even went so far as to demand that publication of the Report be prevented, reasoning that since »publication of the first report had led to the occupation of Iraq, the appearance of another might be construed as an invitation to the occupation of Syria!«.

Appeal to reason and the information available reveals the incoherence of such criticisms. Work on the first Report began early in 2001 – even though it appeared after 9-11 – and the penultimate draft of the Report was completed before that date. Likewise, we know that Iraq had been suffering from an unjust embargo by the United States for almost a decade before work commenced on the first Report and that plans for the invasion of Iraq had been put in place years before its appearance.

The first AHDR, despite being issued through UNDP, unequivocally condemned Israeli incursions in the Palestinian territories and the blockade of Iraq, incurring the rancor of both the United States and Israel; both went so far as to protest officially at the contents of the Report, although this did not prevent them from exploiting it later on, instrumentalizing the analysis given in the Report to justify their own policies.

It is also indisputable that the factors that shape the policy of the United States and the West in the Arab region did not come into being with the AHDR. Similarly, there can be no doubt that among the most important reasons underlying the success of the hostile plans directed against the Arab region from the outside are the Arab weakness and disintegration that the AHDR seeks to overcome through the initiation of a historic process of Arab renaissance.

The AHDR and US Interests

The Report suffered abuse at the hands of forces outside the Arab nation, especially the current US administration which used it to further its own interests, both in the Arab region and globally, and in an attempt to acquire the credibility that, with its history of disregarding legitimate Arab aspirations and rights, particularly in Palestine and Iraq, it so obviously lacks.

The US administration's misuse of the Report was most blatant in its proposed »Greater Middle East Initiative«. Simultaneously, the current US administration sought to hinder the preparation of the third AHDR – whose topic is fundamental to a true renaissance in Arab countries – by penalizing one of the organizations sponsoring the Report for having published criticisms of Israel and the current US administration in the first and second AHDR. These actions are expressive of a fundamental contradiction, not to say a deep-rooted hypocrisy, in the current US administration's position which makes a show of sympathizing with reform while at the same time attempting to obstruct one of the most significant contributions to the reform process to emerge from within the Arab nation.

It is a source of further sorrow that the administration's definition of »terrorism« was broadened to include any act of patriotic resistance to occupation or to foreign intervention in Arab countries, even though such acts are a legitimate right recognized in international human rights law, which considers them an exercise of the right to self-determination and the right to resist occupation.

It would be surprising if this expanded definition of terrorism, and the measures based on it, had not nourished Arab negative feelings towards the current US administration, feelings that have become the greatest obstacle to achieving normal Arab–American relations, and one that mere propaganda campaigns can do nothing to overcome. People's feelings are

a natural reaction to the course of events on the ground, and no amount of »popular diplomacy« aimed at »changing minds and winning peace«, will succeed in removing the agony Arabs feel at the sufferings of Palestine and Iraq and at the threat of intervention, by force if need be, in other Arab countries.

From Analysis to Reform: Alternative Arab Futures

The crisis of human development in the Arab nation has become so huge, complex, and multi-dimensional that no true reform of any particular aspect of Arab society is possible without reform of every other aspect if a human renaissance is to take place in the region. As is abundantly clear from the proposed strategic vision for the establishment of a knowledge-based society in Arab countries – a topic that might seem to be innocent of any political perspective – the required societal reform extends to the dominant culture as well as to current social and economic structures, and, before all else, to the political context at the national, regional, and global levels. In other words, partial reform is no longer enough, however many fields it may cover. Indeed, such reform may no longer be possible in any case, given its need for an enabling societal environment. It follows that delay or prevarication over comprehensive societal reform in Arab countries out of regard for existing interests – of whatever kind – can no longer be tolerated, the alternative bringing with it consequences that would be catastrophic.

There is no civilized alternative for the Arab renaissance but to open up to the world and human culture at large.

It has also become clear that the political shackles on human development in Arab countries constitute the most virulent and long-lasting factor in terms of delaying opportunities for a renaissance in the Arab nation. This calls for a radical reform of the power structure in Arab countries. While it is possible that if left to follow their own course events in Arab countries might lead to a violent social conflict, ending in a modification of the power structure, the cost to society would be too enormous for any patriot solicitous of the well-being of the nation as a whole to tolerate or accept.

The majority of Arabs suffer, as a result of an imbalance in the distribution of power in terms of both authority and wealth, from manifold injustices in the form of growing poverty (a term that we use here to denote the antithesis of human development and which thus includes whatever undermines freedom, whether as a result of internal repression or intervention by force – in its cruelest form, occupation – from outside).

The sole alternative capable of saving us from the unimaginable disasters that will inevitably come about if current trends continue is the initiation of an historic process of negotiation among the vital forces of Arab societies aimed at achieving a radical modification of the power structure and the exercise of power. Such a modification should lead to good governance, protect freedom, and enable human development.

To this end, there is no alternative to reform from within founded on balanced self-criticism and an effective and authentic effort at innovation on the part of society at large in which all the vital forces in Arab countries participate. This should create a societal transition that is both universally acceptable and sustainable. In contrast, reform imposed from outside cannot possibly serve the interests of any but those who impose it; it cannot serve the interests of the Arabs, and would unavoidably result in a legitimate, and indeed sacred, resistance.

This said, there is no civilized alternative for the Arab renaissance but to open up to the world and human culture at large. The Arabs have made a substantial contribution to the latter and must now regain the honor of effective participation in it. Obscurantism and isolationism can bequeath only stagnation and impotence. At the same time, the global system is itself indisputably in need of reform, and such reform, when carried out, will be reflected positively in improved opportunities for renaissance in the Arab region, which has suffered too much from the injustice of the current oppressive state of affairs.

In the final analysis, the Arabs have a real opportunity to build a human renaissance and, as far as possible, to reform the global context. However, this opportunity is dependent on the strengthening of Arab cooperation, the weakness of which, specifically in respect of knowledge acquisition and generally in respect of human development, represents the irrevocable loss of a historic opportunity.

In my judgment, the essence of an Arab renaissance in this critical era in the history of the Arab nation would be a shift towards a society of freedom and good governance.

Freedom is taken here in the comprehensive sense of *eradication of all forms of infringement of human dignity*. This comprehensive sense not only incorporates civil and political freedoms (in other words, liberation from oppression) but also adds to them the imperative that the individual be liberated from all means by which human dignity may be diminished, such as hunger, disease, ignorance, poverty, and fear. In human rights terms, this understanding of freedom extends to all realms of human rights, that is, to civil and political rights, as well as economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights. In this sense, freedom is *synonymous* with human development, and is perhaps the quintessential public good required in less developed countries.

By »good governance« we mean governance based on the following seven principles:

1. Freedom in the comprehensive sense and especially the *key freedoms* of opinion, expression, and association (civil and political) in harmony with international human rights law.
2. Full representation of the people in governance institutions.
3. Governance strictly based on institutions and, above all, the separation of powers.
4. Institutions that work efficiently and with total transparency according to the principles of rational public administration.
5. Institutions subject to effective inter-accountability based on the separation of powers and direct accountability to the people via periodical, open, free, and honest elections.
6. Application of the law to all without exception in a form that is fair and protective of human rights.
7. A competent, honest, and totally independent judiciary to oversee the application of the law and implement its rulings efficiently vis-à-vis the executive authority.

The society of freedom and good governance also requires a *sturdy* institutional structure in which three sectors function efficiently and in synergy: the state, comprising the government, elected representatives, and the judiciary; civil society; and the private sector, enhanced by the principles of rational public administration.

It appears to me that this model of good governance should be considered the most general and useful form of democracy. The pursuit of such a system of good governance by way of society-wide innovation in Arab countries would guarantee that it would be implanted in the fabric of Arab society, thus ensuring its stability and sustainability.

What May the Future Bring?

The Probable Way Forward: The »Mixed Alternative«

The harbingers of a future scenario are gathering, at both regional and global level. We refer to the possible outcomes of the G8's »Broader Middle East Initiative« and its concomitants, an initiative that may push for a wave of internal reform in Arab countries but that is driven by outside forces and fundamentally serves their interests. Given their current make-up and susceptibility to outside influences, it is likely that the Arab states will strive to respond positively to these dictated reformist pressures while at the same time attempting to prevent them from achieving all-out societal reform, especially in the political sphere and specifically with regard to the distribution of power and its exercise – issues which, in my view, are essential to an authentic Arab renaissance.

This »mixed alternative« will probably fall short of an »authentic Arab renaissance« in two respects fundamental to national liberation. First, it will probably disregard basic issues of Arab freedom, since it may involve subservience to foreign powers whose interests do not necessarily intersect with those of freedom and good governance in the sense adopted here, especially where national liberation and independence are concerned. Specifically, the »mixed alternative« may lead to a special position being carved out for Israel and continuing foreign influence in Iraq and throughout the region, under the cloak of the »Wider Middle East Initiative«. Second, and more broadly, the vitality of internal reform in the Arab countries may become muted, leading to continuing passive reception of the main features of the Arab destiny from the outside.

Let us also note that the historic project for Arab reform started two centuries ago, gained momentum through the battles for national liberation, and continues today without regard to the forces that exercise internal and external hegemony over the Arabs' trajectory and which have often served to slow it down. Being faithful to the Arab renaissance project requires, however, that we also acknowledge that the trajectory of Arab reform has remained distant from the Arab people's aspirations to freedom, honor, and dignity.

From another perspective, an opportunity exists to minimize the shortcomings of the externally driven reform project and to bring it closer to the ideal alternative or at least to divert its course towards a process of cumulative reform that approaches the »*épanouissement humain*« alternative, even if it does not go all the way. Whatever the case, it remains the

task of the forces of the Arab renaissance to realize that alternative to the utmost possible degree.

Modifications to the »Greater Middle East Initiative« presented by the current US administration – for example, the German and British initiatives – have emerged. These show some interest in heeding legitimate Arab demands for liberation in Palestine and Iraq and stress the necessity of broad and active participation across society in the Arab countries in shaping the reform project. A European contribution, different from the »Greater Middle East Initiative« as originally presented by the current US administration, seems to have been incorporated in the G8 initiative. Such an initiative might form a strong foundation for Arab–European cooperation, based on mutual understanding and respect, that would support a genuine Arab initiative for renaissance.

It may be that the most important way in which we may benefit from this alternative is through its provision of the necessary and fundamental condition for starting the historical process of transition towards freedom and good governance in Arab countries, to be outlined below.

Arab Renaissance from Within – The »Épanouissement Humain« Scenario

While this »realistic« alternative would not necessarily bring about the ultimate goal of a renaissance in the Arab nation, it may, in the best-case scenario, help open up a path to an historic process aimed at assuring the first peaceful transfer of power in Arab countries.

The course that we think will avoid the miserable fate implied by perpetuation of current trends in Arab society is an historic process adopted by the Arab peoples and led by civil society institutions in Arab countries to bring about the *first non-violent transfer of power*.⁶ The desired result of such a change would be the redistribution of power in Arab societies in such a way as to put it in the hands of its rightful owners, the mass of the people, as a transitional step to a system of good governance of the sort described above and one that would form a sound basis for a human renaissance in the Arab nation.

What is required then is a historic shift, based on non-violent negotiation among all the vital forces of the various Arab societies, that aims to

6. Any transfer of power that does not reach the heart of the power structure, redistribution in favor of the masses, and institutional good governance does not qualify.

redistribute power and organize its exercise along the lines described in the above definition of the good governance system.

This shift requires an opening act that would widen to the maximum extent the scope of public space in Arab countries. It also requires an extended and interlinked society-wide struggle, in which the success of each stage would form the objective basis for the emergence of the next. Thus the best outcome for the path of reform as it is actually taking place and which is described above would perhaps be for it to lead to the realization of the *initial* legal and organizational reform needed for the historic path of transition towards freedom and good governance. Such reform would consist of a guarantee of full respect for the key freedoms of opinion, expression, and association.

What is required is a historic shift, based on non-violent negotiation among all the vital forces of the various Arab societies, that aims to redistribute power.

Such reform might guarantee the crystallization of a society-wide vanguard organized around the institutions of civil society that could lead the necessary society-wide struggle for the historic negotiation of a redistribution and reorganization of power in Arab countries. Once this initial desideratum is met, it will be necessary to clear the way completely for the vital forces in Arab societies to create their own path towards a society of freedom and good governance. The internal reform dynamic must be allowed to take its course freely so that a special Arab path to freedom and good governance can be determined.

The bulk of the burden of bringing about this transition will fall on the shoulders of an elite of intellectuals and political and civil activists. They must carve out for themselves and for the nation a path that avoids both the prevailing submissiveness to the dominance of those with power and wealth, and the despair and violence to which many angry young people, to whom all avenues for positive action have been blocked, are drawn. This in turn will require a large measure of wisdom and solidarity across existing artificial borders, as well as many sacrifices.

The role of the elite in the creation of the renaissance in the Arab nation is then critical, but what kind of elite do we have in mind? The elite in question is one that can transform itself into a societal vanguard that can give voice, transparently and with responsibility, to its society; that is

committed to its renaissance, struggles for that renaissance, and is ready to take on the difficulties that that responsibility and commitment entail. These are the characteristics par excellence of a renaissance-oriented elite, characteristics which we fear the current Arab elites, and especially the intellectuals, have yet to rise to.

The historic wager is that the atmosphere of freedom that guarantees absolute respect for the key freedoms of opinion, expression, and association will offer a fertile societal environment for the emergence of this elite.

The AHDR's Contribution: Invigorating Debate, Empowering the Elite

The fundamental mission of the AHDR can be summed up as providing »intellectual ammunition« for an Arab renaissance through instigating debate on the salient issues of the crisis in human development and approaches to overcome them.

In this respect the AHDR has probably succeeded. The issues brought to the fore by the successive editions of the report have got onto the agenda of all vital forces concerned with reform in the Arab world, regardless of the reaction to specific analyses or recommendations. In particular, certain reform actions that have been taken by Arab governments since the publication of the first volume, especially in the areas of empowerment of women and expansion of popular participation, are at least consistent with the recommendations of the Report. Many of the maxims – for example, »building the knowledge society« – have become a staple of official and civil society jargon in Arab countries. In addition, a multitude of reform initiatives have been proposed by civil society groups and the League of Arab States in the last three years.

To be sure, a great deal more needs to be done, both by governments and civil society throughout the Arab world, to fully capture the reform vision of the AHDR and hopefully carry it forward toward a resplendent Arab renaissance. However, the AHDR is an unfolding process. The extent of its ultimate contribution to reform in the Arab world can be judged only by its comprehensive vision for renaissance, expected to coalesce in the publication of the third and fourth volumes of the series. The vitality of the debate it ends up generating and the extent of empowerment of civil society as a societal vanguard for deep reform in the Arab world should be the ultimate criteria for success.