



# Holding a Harsh Mirror to the Arab World

**I**T IS NO SECRET, LEAST OF ALL TO THE ARAB PUBLIC, that all is not well in the Arab world. As a whole, Arab states have badly lagged behind much of the rest of the world in economic and social development, even prior to the latest post-Cold War wave of globalization. However, speaking frankly about these matters, even taking the first step towards amelioration has never been a simple task.

Ruling Arab elites have long viewed non-official intellectual endeavor with suspicion and have acted to coopt, corrupt or repress independent voices that might delegitimize their authority and thus threaten their monopoly on power.

This is at least one of the reasons, then, that Arab political and intellectual life over the last half-century has been severely stunted, characterized by a dearth of self-criticism, with the preponderance of blame for Arab societies' shortcomings usually being ascribed to pernicious foreign forces.

However, this is no longer entirely the case, thanks in part to the series of Arab Human Development Reports crafted by a cross-section of Arab academicians from the region and beyond. The fifth and latest one, issued in late July, is entitled "Challenges to Human Security in the Arab Countries." ([www.arab-hdr.org](http://www.arab-hdr.org))

In more than 200 pages of data, vignettes and analysis, the report paints a sobering portrait of contemporary Arab social and political realities. As such, it promises to serve as a base-line reference point for all upcoming policy discussions addressing the ills of the Arab world.

The conceptual emphasis of the report is on "human security," namely, "the liberation of human beings from those intense, extensive, prolonged and comprehensive threats to which their lives and freedom are vulnerable." The threats to human security are analyzed according to seven categories: 1) pressures on environmental resources; 2) the performance of the state in guaranteeing or undermining human security; 3) the personal insecurity of vulnerable groups; 4) economic vulnerability, poverty and unemployment; 5) food security and nutrition; 6) health and welfare; and 7) the systemic insecurity of occupation and foreign military intervention.

Each section is extremely sobering. For example, with regard to the environment, the total population of Arab countries will have increased from 150 million in 1980 to 395 million in 2015, while renewable water reserves are being depleted faster than they can be replenished, water pollution is expanding, desertification is expanding and access to clean water is declining, thus exposing children, in particular, to a range of diseases.

With regard to the State, the report suggests that it is a major part of the problem, pointing to its authoritarian ways, the absence of democ-

cratic governance, representative institutions and the rule of law, and a failure to respect cultural, ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity. Women are deemed among the most vulnerable of groups, and the report pulls no punches in detailing the myriad ways in which women

are continuously exposed to family and institutionalized violence, not only physical but also as victims of cultural and social practices, such as female genital mutilation and child marriage, as well as human trafficking.

The Arab countries' "fabled oil wealth" masks, and in fact causes, serious structural weaknesses of many Arab economies. Hunger and malnutrition rates are rising, according to the report; the only other region where this is the case is sub-Saharan Africa. In the health sphere, despite improvements, health care systems available to most Arabs are inadequate, with wide disparities in quality both within and between countries. Moreover, HIV/AIDS "represents a stubborn, proximate and misunderstood danger."

As for the role of occupation and military intervention, the report details the damage to all spheres of human security, particularly in Iraq, the West Bank and Gaza, and Somalia. Interestingly, it does not fail to note how both

extremist groups and Arab governments exploit these situations to their own ends and thus perpetuate cycles of destruction and oppressive rule.

Not surprisingly, the report's findings were not uniformly greeted with applause. Strangely enough, its lead author, Cairo University Prof. Mustafa Kamel El-Sayed, disassociated himself from it, declaring that his final draft had been substantially altered by its United Nations publishers so as to emphasize domestic factors at the expense of external causes, in order to appease the U.S. and Israel. Samir Radwan, a former International Labor Organization official, chimed in, calling the report's emphasis on issues like female genital mutilation and climate change a "flavor of the month" approach, at the expense of the Iraq and Palestine issues.

In response, the former Director of the Al-Ahram Center for Strategic and Political Studies, Abdel Moneim Said Aly, declared that it was up to Arab political elites – rulers, the civilian bureaucracy, the military establishment, and the culture and media agencies – to recognize how bad things are and to take responsibility for changing them, as other elites in other countries and regions have done in similar circumstances. "At some point," he stated, "our elites, who are brave and smart, have to put two and two together and get four."

Poignant advice indeed, and applicable elsewhere as well. ●

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