

## Arab development

# Self-doomed to failure

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## **An unsparing new report by Arab scholars explains why their region lags behind so much of the world**

WHAT went wrong with the Arab world? Why is it so stuck behind the times? It is not an obviously unlucky region. Fatly endowed with oil, and with its people sharing a rich cultural, religious and linguistic heritage, it is faced neither with endemic poverty nor with ethnic conflict. It shook off its colonial or neo-colonial legacies long ago, and the countries that had revolutions should have had time to recover from them. But, with barely an exception, its autocratic rulers, whether presidents or kings, give up their authority only when they die; its elections are a sick joke; half its people are treated as lesser legal and economic beings, and more than half its young, burdened by joblessness and stifled by conservative religious tradition, are said to want to get out of the place as soon as they can.

Across dinner tables from Morocco to the Gulf, but above all in Egypt, the Arab world's natural leader, Arab intellectuals endlessly ask one another how and why things came to turn out in this unnecessarily bad way. A team of such scholars (it is indicative of the barriers to freely expressed thought that there are almost no worthwhile think-tanks in the Arab world) have now spent a year putting their experience to diagnostic use in the "Arab Human Development Report 2002", published this week by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

With Nader Fergany, an Egyptian sociologist, as the chief author, the report carefully dissects and analyses the Arab world's strengths and failings. The strengths, alas, consume little space; the failings are what interest the writers. Inbuilt caution holds them back from naming too many names, but they explain honestly and convincingly how and why they think their world has gone wrong.

For the past ten years, the UNDP's human-development reports and index (HDI) have been gauging a country's performance by its record in life expectancy, school enrolment and adult literacy as well as by its income per head. This is the programme's first comprehensive look at a separate region. The Arab survey is intended as an annual affair, with the first broad-brush approach to be followed by narrower reports, pin-pointing specific themes, such as the Arabs' failure to keep pace with the tumult of information and communication technology.

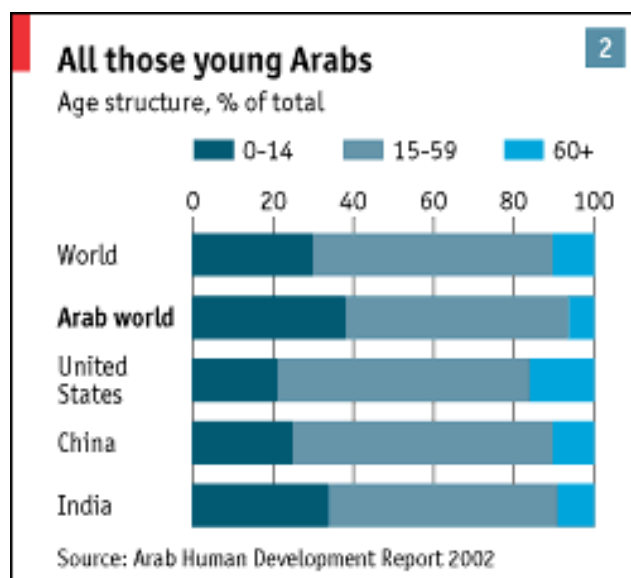
The Arab team has also produced a new index for the UNDP, the Alternative Human Development Index (AHDI). This excludes income per head but adds measurements to the HDI that take account of a country's record on freedom, use of the Internet, and carbon-dioxide emissions. Predictably, the Arabs do even worse when they are measured this way.

The Arab world is taken to mean the 22 members of the Arab League, accounting at present for 280m people, or roughly the same as the United States, ranging from 68m in Egypt to 565,000 in Qatar. The region has the largest proportion of young people in the world—38% of Arabs are under 14—and it is calculated that the population will top 400m in 20 years' time.

There are good things to report: life expectancy has increased by 15 years over the past three decades, and infant mortality has dropped by two-thirds. Nor is it any surprise to be told that Arab income per head is higher than that in most other developing regions (though it is rather a surprise that its total GDP, at \$531 billion, is less than Spain's). The Arabs have less abject poverty (defined as an income of less than \$1 a day) than any other developing region, which is in part a tribute to Arab and Islamic traditions of charitable giving to the destitute. But, growls the report, "the region is richer than it is developed."

### Three things lacking

One in five Arabs still live on less than \$2 a day. And, over the past 20 years, growth in income per head, at an annual rate of 0.5%, was lower than anywhere else in the world except sub-Saharan Africa. At this rate, says the report, it will take the average Arab 140 years to double his income, a target that some regions are set to reach in less than ten

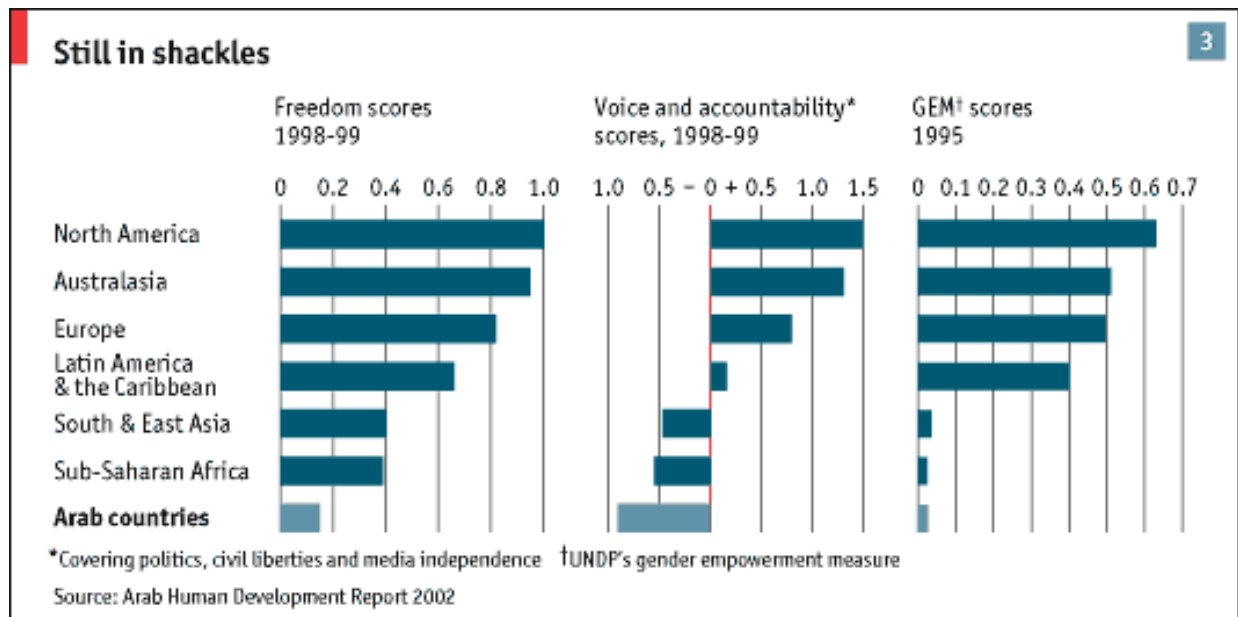


years. Stagnant growth, together with a fast-rising population, means vanishing jobs. Around 12m people, or 15% of the labour force, are already unemployed, and on present trends the number could rise to 25m by 2010.

The barrier to better Arab performance is not a lack of resources, concludes the report, but the lamentable shortage of three essentials: freedom, knowledge and womanpower. Not having enough of these amounts to what the authors call the region's three "deficits". It is these deficits, they argue, that hold the frustrated Arabs back from reaching their potential—and allow the rest of the world both to despise and to fear a deadly combination of wealth and backwardness.

**Freedom.** This deficit, in the UNDP's interpretation, explains many of the fundamental things that are wrong with the Arab world: the survival of absolute autocracies; the holding of bogus elections; confusion between the executive and the judiciary (the report points out the close linguistic link between the two in Arabic); constraints on the media and on civil society; and a patriarchal, intolerant, sometimes suffocating social environment.

The area is rich in all the outward trappings of democracy. Elections are held and human-rights conventions are signed. But the great wave of democratisation that has opened up so much of the world over the past 15 years seems to have left the Arabs untouched. Democracy is occasionally offered, but as a concession, not as a right.



"The transfer of power through the ballot box is not a common phenomenon in the Arab world," the report says politely. Moreover, senior public servants, from ministers down, are seldom appointed solely on the basis of merit. People are given jobs not because of what they know, but because of whom they know. The result, all too often, is an unmoving, unresponsive central authority and an incompetent public administration.

Freedom of expression and freedom of association are both sharply limited. The report quotes Freedom House, an American-based monitor of political and civil rights, in recording that no Arab country has genuinely free media, and only three have "partly free". The rest are not free.

Civil society, in the Arab world, has a terribly long way to go. NGOs are hobbled by legal and administrative obstacles laid in their path by authorities deeply suspicious of what they might be up to. But they also suffer from internal weaknesses, often getting their money either from foreign sources, which adds to the suspicions, or from the government, which defeats the object of their creation.

**Knowledge.** "If God were to humiliate a human being," wrote Imam Ali bin abi Taleb in the sixth century, "He would deny him knowledge." Although the Arabs spend a higher percentage of GDP on education than any other developing region, it is not, it seems, well spent. The quality of education has deteriorated pitifully, and there is a severe mismatch between the labour market and the education system. Adult illiteracy rates have declined but are still very high: 65m adults are illiterate, almost two-thirds of them women. Some 10m children still have no schooling at all.

One of the gravest results of their poor education is that the Arabs, who once led the world in science, are dropping ever further behind in scientific research and in information technology. Investment in research and development is less than one-seventh of the world average. Only 0.6% of the population uses the Internet, and 1.2% have personal computers.

Another, no less grave, result is the dearth of creativity. The report comments sadly on the severe shortage of new writing, and, for instance, the decline in the film industry. Nor are foreign books much translated: in the 1,000 years since the reign of the Caliph Mamoun, say the authors, the Arabs have translated as many books as Spain translates in one year.

**Women's status.** The one thing that every outsider knows about the Arab world is that it does not treat its women as full citizens. The report sees this as an awful waste: how can a society prosper when it stifles half its productive potential? After all, even though women's literacy rates have trebled in the past 30 years, one in every two Arab women still can neither read nor write. Their participation in their countries' political and economic life is the lowest in the world.

Governments and societies (and sometimes, as in Kuwait, societies and parliamentarians are more backward than their governments) vary in the degrees of bad treatment they mete out to women. But in nearly all Arab countries, women suffer from unequal citizenship and legal entitlements. The UNDP has a "gender-empowerment measure" which shows the Arabs near the bottom (according to this measure, sub-Saharan Africa ranks even worse). But the UN was able to measure only 14 of the 22 Arab states, since the necessary data were not available in the others. This, as the report says, speaks for itself, reflecting the general lack of concern in the region for women's desire to be allowed to get on.



Photo caption: women in the shadows.

### **Why it all went wrong**

A country can have one or two of these deficits, says Clovis Maksoud, a respected Lebanese involved in the report's preparation, and still surge ahead. Singapore, for instance, manages to prosper without offering much political freedom. It is when a country or a region suffers from all three deficits that it is in such a bad way.

There are no clear historical reasons why it has turned out like this. The priority, in the years after the second world war, was to get rid of the western powers that were still ruling much of the region either directly or through proxies. The emphasis was on national liberation, not on individual liberty. Nationalism was drummed into people, leaving little room for thoughts of personal freedom.

But when the imperialists were gone, the new independent governments often aped their old colonial administrations (not the European governments behind these administrations) by adopting their characteristics of extreme centralisation, very little separation of power between different branches of government, and a generally paternalistic attitude. The late Anwar Sadat even used to address the Egyptian people as "my children".

The Arab authors of the survey avoid making the Arab-Israeli conflict either a cause of, or an excuse for, their region's failings. The report contains references to the particular circumstances of the Palestinians living under occupation or as refugees, and its overview has a section that refers to the pall cast by the conflict over the political and economic life of

the entire region. And, indeed, the business with Israel, in particular Israel's occupation of Palestine, is a severe distraction. It absorbs much-needed energy, and its effect is to turn people's thoughts, yet again, from individual liberty to national liberation.

Blaming outside intervention for the region's sorrows is not as fashionable as it was during the cold war. But it still has some validity. Since September 11th, for instance, outside events have provided authoritarian rulers with an excuse to get away with doing some pretty nasty things, particularly if done to Islamist dissidents. Syria, for instance, is usually prominent on America's list of outcast states. But right now its security services are engaged in questioning an alleged al-Qaeda leader under torture, with America's tacit approval and encouragement.

Restrained about Israel, the report has other, no doubt less voluntary, constraints. The Arab countries are a remarkably heterogeneous lot. Little, for instance, links secular Tunisia and Islamic Saudi Arabia except for their common refusal to give a dissident voice a hearing. But the report—and this is both its strength and its weakness—takes the region as a whole, seldom differentiating between countries.

The tables at the end give the game away by showing how individual Arab states are ranked on several delicate issues. But the text studiously avoids specificity, except to point out where some country or other is doing rather better. It is remarked upon, for instance, that Kuwait and Qatar have allowed reasonably free elections to national assemblies, and that Jordan and Egypt have made advances towards equality of the sexes.

## **Do not search or question**

The most delicate issue of all, again carefully skirted by the authors of the report, is the part that Islam plays in delaying and impeding the Arab world's advance towards the ever-receding renaissance that its intellectuals crave. One of the report's signed articles explains Islam's support for justice, peace, tolerance, equilibrium and all good things besides. But most secularists believe that the pervasive Islamisation of society, which in several Arab countries has largely replaced the frightening militancy of the 1980s and early 1990s, has played a significant part in stifling constructive Arab thought.

From their schooldays onwards, Arabs are instructed that they should not defy tradition, that they should respect authority, that truth should be sought in the text and not in experience. Fear of *fawda* (chaos) and *fitna* (schism) are deeply engrained in much Arab-Islamic teaching. "The role of thought", wrote a Syrian intellectual "is to explain and transmit...and not to search and question."

Such tenets never held back the great Arab astronomers and mathematicians of the Middle Ages. But now, it seems, they hold sway, discouraging critical thought and innovation and helping to produce a great army of young Arabs, jobless, unskilled and embittered, cut off from changing their own societies by democratic means. Islam at least offers them a little self-respect. With so many paths closed to them, some are now turning their dangerous anger on the western world.