

The Arab Predicament, Circa 2002:

How Can Arabs Fix the Problems of the Arab World? (Part II)

Oct 4, 2002



In-Depth Reports

I recently read the United Nations (UN) Arab Human Development Report from one end to the other. It was the most miserable thing I have read in a long time. The report reveals the presence of a number of deficits in the Arab world. One of them is a freedom deficit. Another is a knowledge deficit. A third is what the report calls a "human productivity" deficit.

The report makes clear that these deficits have nothing to do with the gross domestic product of Arab countries or with per capita income; in fact, some of the countries with the highest gross domestic product have the greatest social deficits. What the report does not say in so many words is that the human productivity deficit is in the intellectual, creative, and innovative contribution of Arabs to the realm of science and new knowledge. That is the worst part of the report.

The question is whether the Arabs can pull themselves out of their predicament. Arabs have an education system. But this education system does not produce productive, innovative individuals and societies. Whereas the level of literacy is currently high, the level of understanding and enlightenment is low. It is almost as if the level of enlightenment goes down with the rise in literacy. Mr. Heggy has just said that, until the 1940s, secular Islam was a much greater force in the Arab world. He calls it secular Islam; I call it enlightenment. In the revolutionary era that began in the 1950s, there was a great emphasis on literacy, but less emphasis on real education.

I would also like to address myself to Nabeel Khoury. Earlier in these proceedings, he said that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has hampered democratization in the Arab world. I disagree. Arab governments have used this as an excuse to slow down progress and democratization. (Applause.) Perhaps many of my fellow Arabs will not agree, but we have been fed, decade after decade, with the line, "We are in a national struggle for survival, and therefore we cannot allow freedom or democratization. The time is inauspicious -- we cannot have a free press because we are in an existential struggle." I don't buy it. Arab governments say these things only because they want to stay in power, not because they really have a fight to win. Their fight is for their own survival, not for the survival of their people. (Applause.)

The UN report is admirable, but it is also deficient in some ways. It is a critique of the institutional structures of Arab society rather than of Arab society itself. It does not go into the mind-set and attitudinal issues that plague us as Arabs. For example, the report does not talk about the lack of self-criticism in the Arab world. The few who can and want to engage in self-criticism face great difficulty in broadcasting their thinking, in being accepted as worth listening to. Arabs who engage in self-reflection are usually branded as traitors to the Arab cause, as having sold out to the enemies of the Arabs. Yet, this self-critique is where Arabs must begin if they wish to rise from their predicament.

The problem is that a vicious cycle is in motion. We have dictatorial, authoritarian governments that restrict knowledge and innovative thinking, creating an environment in which innovative thinkers don't dare speak out. In

order for the liberals and thinkers to actually make their voices heard, their governments must allow them to publish. So, this "freedom deficit" constrains innovative thinking and creates the conditions for a deficit in innovation.

The UN report places the Arab world either on par with sub-Saharan Africa or just above it in some cases, and yet, the Arab world is so much richer than sub-Saharan Africa. We have no right to be at such a low level. The governments are not solely to blame. Arab society itself is resistant to innovative thinking. One of the problems is that we are trapped in a glorious past. I sometimes wonder whether Arabs would not be much better off today if they did not have such a glorious past.

I say we are trapped in our past because, in a sense, we have glorified ourselves too much. We think we have achieved everything -- that the world therefore owes us and we do not need to look inward. Yes, we have achieved great things, but that was a long time ago; we have been in a period of decline for at least the last 600 years. We have not come to terms with that reality. When we look at ourselves, we see ourselves back in the ninth century. Until and unless we can begin to look at ourselves as we are now, equivalent to sub-Saharan Africa, we will not escape our predicament.

How do we get out? We need help, and the United States can act as a catalyst. How? You have to come to us. You have to touch us. I do not know what the right balance is between helping the innovators -- the liberals -- without harming them. But without outside help, we, on our own, will find it difficult to break this vicious cycle and turn it into a virtuous one. (Applause.)

Read remarks by the other participants on this panel: [Tarek Heggy. \(templateC07.php?CID=122\)](#) [Ibrahim Karawan. \(templateC07.php?CID=124\)](#) and [Ali Salem \(templateC07.php?CID=125\)](#) ❖

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