

The UN Development Program Report:

A Closer Look

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Brief Analysis

Earlier this month, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) published the Arab Human Development Report 2002, a critical look at development in the Arab world. Written by Arab scholars, it attempts to explain why Arab societies lag behind much of the rest of the world in key areas of economic, political, and social progress. The report has been hailed for the honesty of its conclusions, which assert that the Arab world has deficits in three areas: freedom, knowledge, and the participation of women in economic, professional, and political activities. Moreover, the details and methodology of the study itself offer further, perhaps unintended insights.

The Arab League: An Artificial Context

The report examined the twenty-two members of the Arab League, the diplomatic grouping that includes major players like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, peripheral countries like Djibouti and the Comoros Islands, and the non-state of Palestine. Yet, the rationale for grouping these countries for cultural, anthropological, and economic study is unclear. Arab League members have a wide variety of political interests that animate local politics but rarely find their way onto the League agenda, which is devoted almost exclusively to Iraq and the Palestinians. Similarly, the economic situations within these countries differ widely, so much so that it is impractical to examine them collectively. Although the Arab world includes the four most oil-rich states in the world -- Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates, which account for 65 percent of global oil reserves -- it is also home to some of the world's poorest nations (e.g., Mauritania and Somalia). The language factor alone is not a worthwhile reason to group assessments of the economic problems facing Kuwait and Somalia in the same study.

Despite the comprehensive aim of the report, several Arab states fail to appear in the final quantitative analysis, notably Libya and the Gulf states of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman. The authors' stated reasoning behind these omissions is "lack of data," suggesting lack of cooperation by countries fearing the report's conclusions.

The Alternative Human Development Index

The methodology of the report was based on the human development index (HDI), a tool devised by the UNDP to gauge a country's performance through statistics on life expectancy, school enrollment, adult literacy, and per capita

income. The authors of the report also created a new tool, the alternative human development index (AHDI). The AHDI emphasizes a variety of political and environmental factors not included in the HDI: political freedom, gender empowerment, internet servers per thousand people, and per capita carbon dioxide emissions. At the same time, the AHDI excludes what has traditionally been thought of as the single most important indicator of development: per capita income.

The report is noteworthy in part because the authors' methodology resulted in a grimmer assessment of development in Arab countries than had been seen in past reports. When examined using the AHDI, the countries in question were ranked even lower in the world order than they had been in past studies using the HDI or per capita income by itself. For example, under the HDI, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates would have been ranked twenty-ninth and thirty-fourth in the world, respectively, alongside countries such as Argentina and Costa Rica. Under the AHDI, however, they are ranked seventieth and seventy-fourth, near Jordan (sixty-eighth) and Lebanon (seventy-third). The top twenty places in both indices are dominated by Western democracies, with the United States ranked fourth under the HDI and eleventh under the AHDI (the lower ADHI ranking is due to poor scores for gender empowerment and carbon dioxide emissions).

As part of an effort to measure the concerns of younger generations, a standardized opinion poll of Arab youths was conducted as part of the report, under the sponsorship of several UNDP country offices. The key issues that emerged were education and job opportunities, with females particularly concerned about the latter. An astonishing 51 percent of those polled expressed a desire to emigrate to another country. Of these, the majority of older respondents (15-to-20-year-olds) favored European countries (with 21 percent specifying Britain), while another 36 percent selected either the United States or Canada. Hopefully, future studies will address why Western countries are so attractive to these young people, particularly in light of the West's advantages in freedom, knowledge, and womanpower.

Arab World versus Muslim World

Following September 11, numerous superficial analyses suggested that something intrinsic to Muslim societies made them inhospitable to the values of education, equality, and freedom so often associated with the West. Yet, the UNDP study indicates that this problem characterizes Arab societies, not Muslim societies. A review of HDI and AHDI results shows that Arab states generally rank lower than non-Arab states with Muslim-majority populations. The highest-rated non-Arab Muslim country is Malaysia, with an HDI ranking of forty-two and an AHDI ranking of fifty-nine. Turkey, with an HDI ranking of fifty-six, falls to sixty-seven under the AHDI, but still ranks higher than any Arab country. Indonesia ranks sixty-nine under both measures. Even Bangladesh, viewed for many years as an economic basket case, scores a relatively high ranking of eighty-three under the AHDI, higher than nine Arab states, including Egypt, Tunisia, and Syria.

Regrettably, Israel was left out of the report's rankings, so its AHDI score is unknown; however, its HDI ranking in 2001 was twenty-two, higher than that of any Arab state. It would be useful to undertake further research on the Arab minority in Israel and on non-Arab Muslim minorities in Arab countries (e.g., the Kurds in Iraq); such research could provide important insights into why non-Arab states with Muslim-majority populations seem to fare better than Arab states. The answer may well lie in the UNDP report's conclusion: "[T]he predominant characteristic of the current Arab reality seems to be the existence of deeply rooted shortcomings in the Arab institutional structure. . . . [T]he keys to institutional reform lie in improving political representation, civil service capacity and the rule of law." These shortcomings seem to characterize the Arab world in particular, not simply those countries in which Islam has a strong influence on public life.

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