

# The Arab World and the Millennium Summit: Avoiding the Globalization Challenge

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## Brief Analysis

Unlike the nearly two hundred other world leaders who spoke at last week's Millennium Summit, virtually every Arab head of state delivered a speech that avoided the conclave's main theme--meeting the economic and political challenge of globalization. Instead, they spoke about preserving Arab rights in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. The importance of the peace process notwithstanding, the Arab leaders' performance in New York highlights how profoundly out of step the Arab world is with the rest of the globe on the defining issues of the new century. Indeed, a review of three influential global surveys underscores the sober reality behind the signatures of Arab leaders to the lofty pro-democracy, pro-reform objectives of the Summit's concluding "Millennium Declaration."

UNDP's "Human Development Report 2000": This comprehensive annual survey by the United Nations Development Program ranks every country in numerous economic, social, and political categories. This year's survey draws an explicit link between economic development and political freedom, arguing that one is not possible without the other. The statistics on "Arab States" (including Mauritania but not the Palestinian Authority) paint a picture of a region that lacks the economic and social development and good governance generally recognized as prerequisites for a transition to democracy.

Key findings from the UNDP report are as follows:

- Except for four small-oil producing shaykhdoms, all Arab states rank either in the "low" or in the lower half of the "middle" category of the Human Development Index, which combines 1998 statistics for life expectancy at birth, adult literacy, school enrollment, GDP per capita, and other tests. More importantly, progress over the last decade has been glacially slow--Egypt's, Lebanon's, and Tunisia's rankings increased slightly while the rest of the countries showed no significant improvement.
- While income levels rose across the region over the past decade, the disparities are huge, with non-oil states mired in poverty. Excluding the Gulf states and Libya, and even with the great oil-to-aid/remittances transfers of the 1970s and 1980s, average GDP per capita in the rest of the Arab world stands at just \$1,398 (less than \$4 per day). Turkey's GDP per capita, by comparison, stands at \$3,167 and Israel's at \$15,978.
- Literacy rates in Arab states have stagnated. Countries that enjoyed high rates ten years ago (the Gulf states, Lebanon, and Jordan) have maintained their status but not improved much; they all rank below most of Latin

America and Eastern Europe. In Egypt, Morocco, Iraq, and Yemen, little improvement is evident. In those countries, about half the adult population is able to read and write, mirroring rates of a decade ago.

- Internet access--a key component of globalization--is still extremely limited. There are more than twice as many Internet hosts per capita in sub-Saharan Africa as there are in the Arab world. And levels of access to computers are highly skewed throughout the region: about one out of ten people in Kuwait and Qatar has a personal computer, compared to about one in a hundred in Jordan and Egypt.

- Declining population growth rates across the Arab world are a bright spot but only a relative one. While the growth rate for the region is projected to drop to 2.1 percent in 2015, down from 2.8 percent in 1975, it will only be slightly lower than sub-Saharan Africa's projected rate of 2.3 percent--the world's highest.

Freedom House's "Freedom in the World 1999-2000": This annual survey measures political rights and civil liberties against a "universal" set of criteria, and assigns rankings of "free," "not free," and "partly free." Fourteen of 17 ranked Arab countries are deemed "not free." No other region of the world is home to as many "not free" states. Only Jordan, Kuwait, and Morocco are rated "partly free." Not one of the seventeen countries is rated as having a free media. While the report notes a trend in many countries toward more regular elections and less repressive internal security forces, it is harshly critical of Arab governments' restrictive press laws, manipulation of electoral processes, and arbitrary constraints on NGOs. Only Morocco received an "upward trend" arrow in the survey, indicating significant positive developments in the past year.

Transparency International's 1999 "Corruption Perception Index" (CPI): This survey employs a complex statistical method to rank corporate perceptions of corruption in 99 countries. As corruption becomes a key factor in the high-speed chase of developing countries to attract global capital, the CPI has become a survey that few leaders can afford to ignore. The good news is that Arab countries are generally only "moderately" corrupt, as compared to the "highly corrupt" regions of Africa and most parts of the former Soviet Union. The bad news is that countries most needing to attract foreign investment did not score well. On a scale of one (highly corrupt) to ten (corruption-free), Morocco and Jordan scored a four and Egypt a 3.3. Notably, the rankings show no significant improvements from past years, despite the well-publicized anti-corruption campaigns undertaken by several regimes.

Implications: Taken together, these surveys have important ramifications. They suggest that, beyond grand speeches of regional leaders, the Arab world has witnessed little fundamental change in either economic or political arenas. The case may be especially worrisome for local U.S. allies.

Specifically, the surveys underscore the hypocrisy of Arab leaders who present themselves as democrats and the hollowness of a U.S. policy that accepts--at least rhetorically--such dubious claims. Virtually all global surveys--including the State Department's annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices--sharply criticize the absence of democracy in the Arab world, and the official Arab response is usually a rejection of these findings as "external meddling" or "applying inappropriate Western standards." At the same time, however, Arab leaders are increasingly keen to showcase their "achievements" at international democracy celebrations, and Washington does not blanch from allowing their participation. In the most eyebrow-raising episode, the June 2000 U.S.-led Warsaw conference on "A Community of Democracies," aimed at "creating a new family of democracies," was attended by eight Arab nations: Egypt, Kuwait, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Qatar, Jordan, and Yemen. (Iran, with an arguably freer electoral process than any Arab country, was not invited.) With great fanfare, Arab participants all signed the event's final communique pledging to uphold democracy and respect international democratic norms. Just days later, one of the signatories--Egypt--arrested a leading pro-democracy activist, Professor Saadeddin Ibrahim, held him for six weeks without charge and closed down his respected think tank. That episode shined an embarrassing spotlight on the implications of setting the admission price into the "democracy club" so low that nearly any country--even one whose president was reelected with a 96 percent majority--can buy a ticket.

It is also important to note that surveys alone do not tell the complete story about the region. Substantial anecdotal evidence--and even some polling data--points to the fact that the region, as a whole, is relatively more open and less subject to repression than a quarter-century ago. There are notable exceptions, such as Iraq and Sudan, but this new reality is certainly the case in places like Egypt, Morocco, and Jordan. Little of this positive change shows up in global surveys because much of it has developed on the margins of the traditional "top-down" political structure across the Middle East; it emerges not from governments but from NGOs, from some media outlets and fledgling Internet networks, and among grass-roots civil society activists. While the importance of "top-down" liberalizing moves by Arab governments should not be underestimated, a genuine democratization process in the Arab world is more likely to develop--gradually and fitfully--outside the official power structures.

For the United States, the rise of the World Trade Organization and the emergence of free trade as a global organizing principle have given Washington the opportunity to make the promotion of free-market economic policies a mainstay of American foreign policy. Events like the Warsaw Conference and the Millennium Summit may fuel a similar impetus regarding the promotion of democracy abroad. While recognizing the preeminent strategic value of alliances with non-democracies in the Middle East, U.S. policymakers need to re-think the tendency to accept the suspect democratic credentials even of friendly regimes, and begin to focus special efforts on the "pockets" of hopeful change at the margins of traditional Arab politics. This is where the greatest potential for democratic reform may be found.

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