

COMMENTARY

Steps towards reform

Building a knowledge-based society in today's Arab world depends on overcoming primarily political obstacles to progress. **Nader Fergany** analyses the reforms required for an Arab renaissance.

Building a knowledge-based society in the Arab countries would mean reclaiming one of the epic achievements of Arab history. At the zenith of Arab-Muslim civilization, from the eighth to the thirteenth century, the Arab world succeeded in building a knowledge culture in which Arabic was the language of science, and knowledge production flourished.

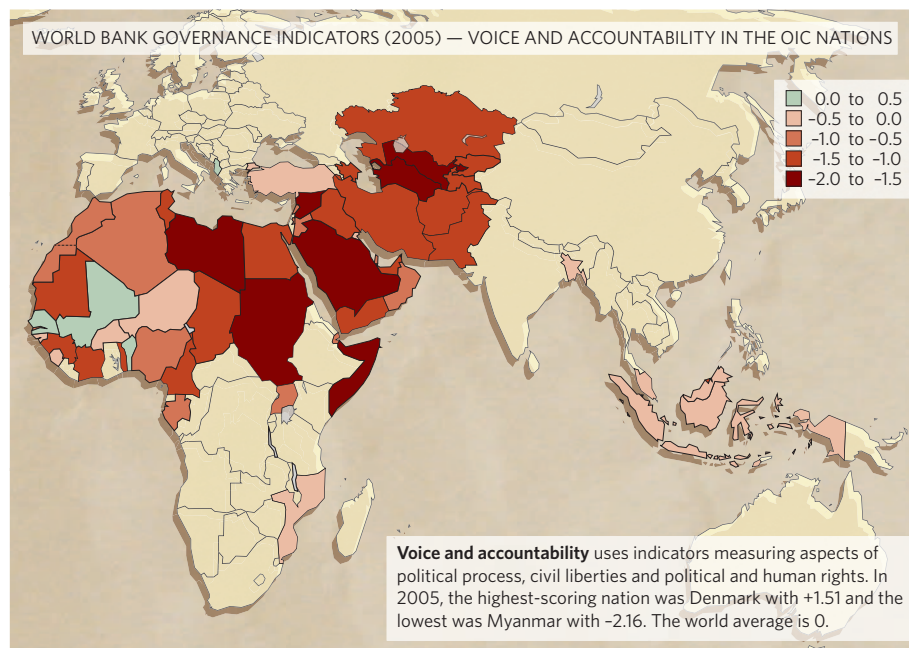
But building a knowledge society in today's Arab world is a significant challenge. Arab countries spend vastly less on science than most other nations. Investment in education is also lagging, with students spending far fewer years at school than their counterparts in the east Asian tigers, for example. The Arab region also has far fewer researchers and engineers, and produces fewer scientific publications, than any other world region, apart from sub-Saharan Africa.

Deficiencies in science and education investment are secondary obstacles to progress — the primary impediments are political. That is the conclusion of a series of Arab Human Development Reports (AHDR) published between 2002 and 2005 (<http://cfapp2.undp.org/rbas/ahdr.cfm#>). The fourth and final report in the series, devoted to the 'Rise of women in the Arab world', is scheduled for launch in December. The reports, of which I am the lead author, are written by Arabs for Arabs, by a team of more than 100 scholars and experts, sponsored by (but independent of) the United Nations Development Programme.

Knowledge society

The series formulates a strategic vision aimed at restructuring the region from within to achieve an Arab renaissance built around a knowledge-based society. In this vision, knowledge itself is crucial to the functioning of an open society, and is intimately linked with human development. Establishing institutions of good governance is critical to the expansion of human freedoms, justice and dignity.

The first AHDR report, published in 2002, identified three major barriers impeding human development in the Arab region: deficits in the acquisition and production of knowledge, in the empowerment of women, and in freedom. These deficits exist on three interlinked levels, from the rights of the individual to those of subgroups, and, equally important, national liberation and self-deter-



mination. Moreover, the report concluded that all three barriers are inextricably linked — greater freedoms are a prerequisite for creating an environment conducive not only to the creation of knowledge, but also the starting conditions for a profound reform of governance ensuring justice and human dignity.

Subsequent AHDR reports have endeavoured to investigate these three topics in depth. 'Building a Knowledge Society', published in 2003, defines societal knowledge as including not just the natural and exact sciences, but also the humanities and social sciences, and artistic and literary creativity. This broad definition of knowledge is important, as it underpins a vision of a society in which the production and dissemination of knowledge become central to its every aspect.

A strategic vision for creating a knowledge society in Arab countries may, at first, seem fairly free of political implications, dealing as it does with the relatively neutral issues of education and science. But it is in fact a deeply political issue. It is no coincidence, for example, that a central pillar of the reports' vision is the "total respect for the key freedoms of opinion, expression and association, and guaranteeing these through good governance," (see 'Pillars of knowledge', overleaf).

As World Bank governance data for 2005 reveal, most of the nations belonging to the Organization of the Islamic Conference perform badly on indicators for voice and accountability (measuring political, civil and human rights, above) and for effective governance (measuring the quality of public-service delivery and bureaucracy competence, overleaf).

Good governance

Political reform is required therefore at national, regional and global levels. At the national level, Arab regimes are rarely representative of, nor accountable to, the people. Power, in the form of political authority and wealth, is concentrated in the hands of a few. Most of the public are marginalized and live in poverty — the antithesis of freedom.

At the regional level, current efforts at cooperation between Arab countries have failed to capitalize on the immense potential offered by closer Arab integration, despite these countries having the advantages of a common culture, history and language. This failure is all the more disheartening given that Arab countries face serious regional and global challenges that could be better addressed united. The potential for greater Arab cooperation has, for example, largely gone untapped in key areas

of opportunity such as education, mass media and in research and development in fields of particular relevance to the Arab region.

Globally, knowledge has been transformed from the 'public' good it was for much of history to a 'private' good governed by the profit motives of multinational corporations. Historically, the fruits of Arab-Muslim science were freely given to the West, enabling the European Renaissance. In this light, any attempt to restrict less-developed countries' access to knowledge, for example through international intellectual-property rights agreements, should be seen as a historical reversal of one of humanity's noblest traditions: the free sharing of knowledge.

Human development and freedom in Arab countries are also being restricted by the failure of global governance to help resolve fairly the intensifying conflicts that beset the region, foremost among which is the foreign occupation of Palestine and Iraq.

The Arab world has substantial potential human capital. Its scientists innovate as best they can, despite an environment that is hostile to investment and has weak institutional support for research — both of which favour an ongoing brain drain. A first step would be to draw on the potential of the Arab scientific diaspora to contribute to the creation of a knowledge society. There need to be policies that offer incentives for Arab scientists working abroad to return to their home countries.

Cultural renaissance

But the Arab development crisis is so acute, complex and multifaceted that a knowledge renaissance cannot be constructed in isolation, and will be impossible in the absence of broader reforms touching almost all aspects of Arab society — in cultural constructs, social and economic systems, and above all in the political structures at the national, regional and global scales.

In other words, partial reform is no longer enough. The developed world is rapidly forging ahead in creating knowledge-intensive societies. If the Arab world does not quickly reform, the asymmetry of world knowledge production will continue, and the Arab countries will be forever marginalized.

At the same time, a knowledge renaissance demands that Arabs open up more to the world and other cultures. Arabs have contributed greatly to human culture, and must now regain the honour of effectively participating in it. Isolationism can only lead to stagnation and impotence.

World order is also indisputably in need of reform to reduce inequalities, injustice and oppression. By reinforcing Arab cooperation, and actively engaging other cultures, Arabs can help accelerate a global enlightenment.

A radical reform of the power structure in Arab countries is needed. Several scenarios can be contemplated. The first is the 'impending disaster' scenario. Here the status quo in Arab countries is maintained by corrupt governance in regimes clinging on to power. The most likely outcome will be violent social conflict. This may result in a change in power structure but probably at an unacceptably high price.

Similarly, reforms imposed from outside the Arab world cannot achieve acceptable social change, as ultimately they will serve the interests of those imposing them, and not the interests of the Arab people. This inevitably results in legitimate resistance.

Peaceful reform?

The only alternative is reform from within Arab countries themselves. This would require the emergence of a vigorous civil society capable of leading a peaceful process of political struggle. But Arab society remains stuck because of restrictions on freedom and the prevailing climate of corruption.

Pillars of knowledge

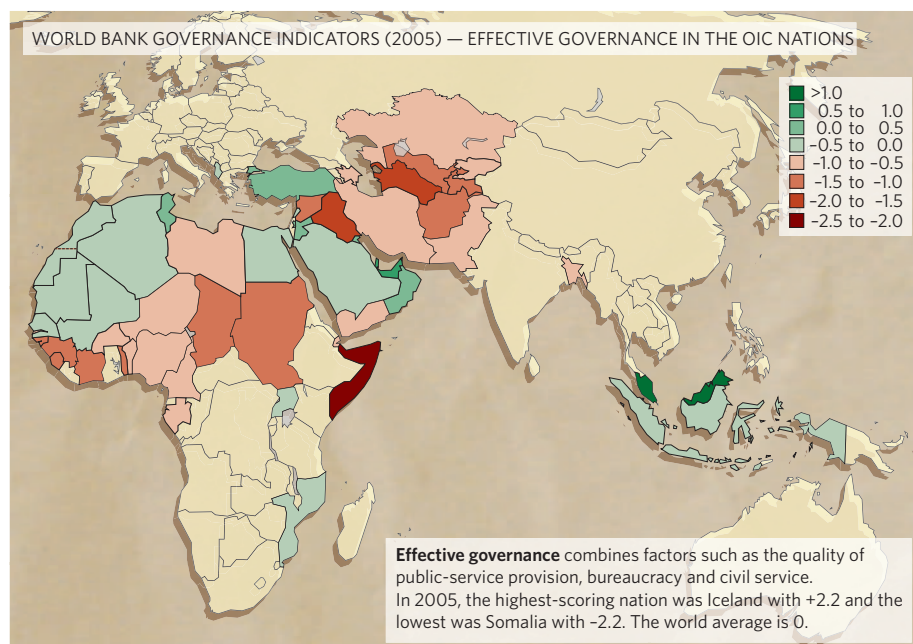
The strategic vision laid out in the Arab Human Development Report for creating a knowledge-based society in Arab countries is organized around five main pillars:

- Total respect for the key freedoms of opinion, expression and association, and guaranteeing these through good governance.
- Ensuring high-quality education for all, with special attention given to early childhood education and higher education, and to life-long continuing education.
- Introduction of research and technological development in all societal activities, and an accelerated transition to the information age.
- Rapid transition to a society in which knowledge becomes the source of value and the organizing principle of human activity.
- Establishing a general Arab knowledge model that is authentic, open, enlightened and based on five factors: a return to true religion; promotion of the Arabic language; furthering of historic Arab knowledge; celebration of cultural diversity within nations; and opening up to other societies and cultures.

Will existing regimes ever allow greater freedom of assembly and organization in civil and political society? Small Muslim countries, such as Albania and Senegal, have shown over the past decade that it is possible to convert a negative indicator for freedom of expression into a positive one. Is peaceful reform possible in the larger populous Muslim or Arab nations? The result would be a historic renegotiation of the existing structure and exercise of power.

Among the 22 Arab League nations only three — Algeria, Bahrain and Iraq — have made any positive improvement in voice and accountability over the past decade, and this from historic lows. Many more Arab nations have seen negative trends and a worsening of freedom of expression that makes the 'impending disaster' scenario much more likely.

Hope is pinned on a reform process that begins with total respect for the key freedoms of expression and association. This would allow the emergence of a vigorous civil society capable of leading the required transformation. I believe that the seeds are there; in mushrooming civil movements protesting against despotism and corruption, and clamouring for deep-rooted reform. In Egypt, for example, the past few years have witnessed the emergence of several increasingly effective protest movements — such as the broad 'kefaya' movement — that have inspired similar movements in other Arab countries, such as Yemen and Libya. If we fail to cultivate them it will be an irrevocable loss of a historic opportunity. ■ Nader Fergany is director of the Almishkat Centre for Research, Giza, Egypt.



See Editorial, page 1; News Features, pages 19–29.