

“Women of the Arab World: Setting their Agenda”

St Anthony’s College, Oxford

16-17 February 2007

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a privilege to take part in this conference on “Women in the Arab World”, and I thank St Anthony’s College, and in particular Prof Eugene Rogan for taking the initiative to hold this conference and for his kind invitation and illuminating remarks.

The fourth Arab Human Development report entitled “The Rise of Arab Women”, was completed in 2006 and launched in Sana’a last December. The Report was the final installment in a series of studies that started almost six years ago. It completes a venture that has encountered steep hurdles, keen disagreements and gratifying support. Today’s event is thus an opportunity to reflect on the entire undertaking. My remarks will therefore consider the four AHDRs (Arab Human Development Reports) as interrelated chapters of a single narrative, and I will try to illustrate the contribution of each to the whole. I will also go over the major findings of the fourth report, hoping to contribute to setting the agenda in the last session of this conference.

Let me take you to the beginnings, to the year 2000. The Regional Bureau for Arab states had set up a new advisory board comprising a prominent group of Arab development specialists and practitioners. It was hoped that the new board will help the Arab Bureau identify the real needs of

the region based on which UNDP would design its initiatives in Arab countries. The board, in its first meeting, agreed that the starting point for such an exercise should be an objective and independent assessment of the state of development in the region. Our point of departure was a sense of urgency about the grave situation of the Arab world in the new Millennium. The region was lagging behind others in human development. Palestinian and Arab territories were still occupied by Israel which continued to cause suffering and arrest development in the occupied territories and beyond. Across our region, the dynamics of failed policies, repression and public alienation strengthened extremist voices whose intolerant ideologies started to capture the political arena, freezing debate and silencing moderate opposition. Terror spread cancerously, impacting citizens, reformers and governments alike.

That situation demanded close analysis by representative Arab thinkers with a firm stake in the issues in question. Outside studies of the region struck us as selective, remote and insensitive to the Arab people's needs and potential. We wanted our analysis to be all encompassing, independent, objective and relevant. We were prepared to be as critical as the facts warranted, in a way that perhaps only citizens of a region speaking to their fellows can be. Our ultimate goal was to help build a broad consensus on Arab development challenges and choices so that countries might design effective development strategies suited to their circumstances.

With that conviction, the first AHDR was shaped. It surveyed the direction of Arab human development in recent decades and asked: what combination of external and internal forces is driving that course? What progress has the region made? What dynamics will create positive change?

The report revealed that, despite some impressive gains in the last 30 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the region remained ‘richer than it was developed’. Arab countries had made initial and impressive progress in reducing infant mortality, raising life expectancy, educating the young, especially girls, and keeping income inequality low. But these achievements began to look precarious once the authors probed beyond conventional measures of development. Behind the relatively prosperous image of many Arab countries projected by the standard Human Development Index (HDI) lay another story. The region was entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century mired in a different form of poverty – *human* poverty – reflected in an acute crisis of capabilities and opportunities compared to other parts of the world.

Illiteracy still handicapped sixty five million adults, two thirds of them women. Ten million 6 to 15 year-olds were out of school, the region’s unemployment rate of 15 percent was the highest in the world and women’s labour force participation ranked the lowest. A digital disconnect separated most Arabs from the information age, and Internet access rates were below those of sub-Saharan Africa. Despite the fabled oil bonanza, Arab economies were faltering. Growth averaged around just 0.5 per cent a year in the last two decades of the twentieth century and labour productivity was in decline.

The report demonstrated that the region’s malaise stemmed from three cardinal deficits: a deficit in freedom, which stifles the region’s voice and creativity; in women’s empowerment, which cripples half of its human capital; and in knowledge, which shackles its potential for productivity and innovation.

The findings of that first report may have caused Arab establishments to wince, but they prompted citizens to pause and think because they seemed to

reflect the actual state of affairs in the region. Certainly, the wide development debate that ensued took a vigorous turn. Some reviewers cited the report's analysis as a breakthrough and others labeled it as heresy. Abroad, governments, development agencies and think tanks hailed the report as a fresh approach to the central dilemmas of the Arab world. Whether readers were for it or against it, AHDR 1 had arrived. More than a million people downloaded that first Report, and today, the entire series continues to inspire fierce debate in the region and abroad. Five factors account for this broad interest.

First, Arabs – not faceless international bureaucrats or distant Western think tanks - draft these reports. They are anchored in our realities and speak to our own lofty hopes, values and standards.

Second, the hallmark of the report process is wide participation. The special team selected for the theme of each report included almost one hundred people from about every Arab country, representing different fields, perspectives and ideologies. Such diversity made consensus a difficult goal but also a genuine achievement.

Third, as *human* development reports, these studies put people first within a comprehensive analytical framework. They address the highest common factors of human well being, not the lowest common denominators of economic existence. The AHDRs are concerned with the enlargement of human freedom in the broadest sense. In their perspective, freedom is not an abstraction. It is attained concretely by expanding people's choices and capabilities through education and innovation and secured by protecting individual and collective human rights.

Fourth, the AHDRs are independent of governments. They spring from a constructive impatience with the self-serving nature of official accounts, which often gloss over the realities of Arab daily life. These reports instead get to the point.

Finally, the reports are candid: they don't shy away from sensitive issues, including state repression, religious intolerance or discrimination against women and minorities. They face facts, however unpalatable.

These qualities enhanced the credibility and popular appeal of the series, but also made it controversial. Applauded by the media and by civil society, our authors were often accused by officialdom of being disloyal to their societies and exposing the region's failings to the advantage of those with designs on it. The team *did* expose weaknesses, but not to slam states or comfort their detractors. Their objective was to subject policy flaws long concealed by official bluster to the light of analysis and hence the chance of repair. The authors were certain that dispelling the mirages blinding states to their perilous course was more patriotic than abetting further illusions. They believed that nations that know themselves face the future with confidence: those that do not remain vulnerable to shocks from within and without.

The second report took up the region's knowledge deficit, establishing the practice of thematic analysis followed by the rest of the series. It observed that knowledge increasingly defines the line between wealth and poverty, between capability and powerlessness and between human fulfillment and frustration. It assessed the present state of Arab knowledge dissemination and production, concluding that both were relatively ineffectual by modern standards and compared to the rich Arab heritage of scholarship and ideas. It pointed to the worrisome state of Arab learning. Enrolment in higher

education is one-fifth the average in industrial countries. In most Arab countries public spending on education has dropped, teachers and professors are underpaid, and overcrowding in schools and colleges is the norm. Syllabus reform is overdue, and educational methodologies need to be brought in line with modern pedagogical practice. When it comes to quality, our educational systems are sorely challenged.

Not only have these systems failed to eradicate conventional illiteracy; they have become accomplices in encouraging students to be passive and conformist and suffocating their curiosity. A similar blanket stifles the mass media, which in other regions act effectively as agents of knowledge dissemination. In our societies, the free circulation of information is often blocked by the iron grip of authority on political opinion and news, and by the more insidious practice of self-censorship among reporters and editors. Fortunately, matters are now changing. Thanks to satellite broadcasting and a few independent newspapers, a free media that airs multiple viewpoints and thrives on dialogue has pushed itself forward.

If Arab knowledge diffusion is uniformly weak, knowledge production varies in performance, marked by scarcity in the sciences and vigorous output in the creative arts. AHDR 2 pointed out that, in the sciences, not only is production anemic, but what is produced is often irrelevant. Links between R&D, the production system and end-users are missing and feedback non-existent. In our region, almost no advanced research takes place in fields such as information technology or molecular biology. Indeed, in general, there are only 371 scientists and engineers working on R&D for every million citizens in Arab countries. Globally, the figure is 979 per million. Do Arab countries not produce scientists? Yes, they do. They produce them in several fields, and some are highly distinguished – but each year, we drive many of them away to

the West where material and professional rewards match their skills and contributions.

The large Arab brain drain is not surprising in light of the miserly support that governments give to scientific institutions, which leaves them out on a limb. The private sector, meanwhile, has little incentive to contribute to knowledge production. Lack of accountability and transparency has reduced the competitive pressure to use knowledge to improve economic activity since business profits usually come from access to power rather than through economic efficiency and performance. As a result, Arab industry accounts for just three percent of R&D investment, while in developed countries that figure is never less than 50 percent.

In sharp contrast, Arab creative production in the arts and literature compares with the best in the world, perhaps because state neglect is not the severe handicap it is in the sciences.

AHDR 2 showed that the most serious impediments to knowledge are political. This is particularly apparent in universities and research centers that are denied autonomy, appointments on merit and the freedom to pursue independent scholarship. The careers of Arab scholars in state universities hang on their support for the status quo. Their originality, freedom of thought and intellectual honesty are thus hostage to the restrictive will of prevailing powers. Sadly, regressive authorities and social forces have not only let the Arab knowledge enterprise fall away: through countless penalties, they have ensured that its stewards are intimidated, isolated and deterred.

AHDR 2 concluded with a strong plea for better governance, pointing out that freedom, knowledge and open societies are closely related. It called

for the separation of politics and knowledge into their respective domains and a return to the humane vision originally underlying Islamic scholarship. It demanded the complete overhaul of the region's antiquated and under-resourced education systems and new investment in R&D. And it proposed an enlightened Arab knowledge model based on revitalized social values and cultural openness that would help Arab societies to mobilize their knowledge assets at home and in the global economy.

Our third report risked both censure and censorship in order to investigate the state of Arab freedoms. It found these deficient in some cases and grossly deficient in others. Describing free societies in their normative dimensions as contrasts with many present-day Arab countries, it demonstrated that good governance in the Arab world falls critically short. If the ultimate goal of development is to enable people to participate freely in political, social and economic life, to be fully represented in governing structures and to share in decisions that affect their lives, Arab countries have much ground to cover. Ours is a region where citizens are still subjects and where public authority is the prerogative of a few. It is a region where the social contract between the ruler and the ruled was dictated and not negotiated, and where the peaceful transfer of power is still the exception rather than the rule. Deep flaws in the legal and political architecture of the Arab State contribute to this situation. These are consolidated by alliances between certain authorities and foreign powers whose interests are not served by Arab democracy.

Let me add three more links connected with the international environment, which have been damaging to Arab freedoms in several ways:

- First, until recently, Western powers remained apprehensive about true democratization in the region, fearing that popular governments would oppose their oil and other geopolitical interests. Such policy, in fact, has sometimes

actively held back Arab democracy, while fueling Israeli expansionism and Arab dictatorships and turning a blind eye to human rights violations. That, in turn, has distorted Arab political and economic agendas by diverting budgets and priorities towards large, repressive military and security establishments.

- Second, the international paradigm shift accompanying the war on terror, and marked by new Western policies especially towards immigrants, has produced draconian national legislation that has sometimes been used to curtail the civil rights of Arabs living, studying or traveling abroad.
- Finally, yet just as significant, is the weighting of decisions and influence in the global governance system towards powerful nations. This imbalance has frequently blocked peaceful channels for addressing Arab grievances over Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory, its encroaching settlements and separation Wall and its continuous violations of the Palestinians' most basic rights, including the right to life itself. For Palestinians and Arabs, as indeed for all peoples, peaceful efforts remain the first and best choice, but the repeated frustration of such efforts and the absence of alternatives, has ultimately goaded some groups pursuing liberation to seek redress through violent resistance, and others to cross the line into acts of terror.

All of this has not only impeded the reform agenda, but has accentuated the divides between Arabs and outsiders and polarized the region.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In general, our people enjoy greater personal and economic liberties than political freedoms. Most Arab countries curb the key freedoms of expression and association, despite their inclusion in Arab constitutions. Quite noticeably, what national constitutions grant in principle, national laws curtail in the guise of regulation. And what laws render legal, actual practice often violates. Thus, seven Arab countries still forbid the formation of political

parties. Where parties can legally operate, bureaucratic hurdles either slow them down or hasten their collapse.

Across the region, human rights abuses are all-too-common. Freedom of speech is widely muzzled, and life for journalists and human rights activists is perilous in a part of the world known as the most dangerous for members of their profession. Authorities and extremist groups alike violate the very right to life. Proper guarantees of fair trial are set aside as citizens are referred to the jurisdiction of military or exceptional courts. Leaders sometimes invoke external threats and counter-terrorism as pretexts for declaring states of emergency that are now permanent fixtures in certain Arab countries. These expedients suspend rights and freedoms, quell dissent and instill public apathy while absolving the executive power of constitutional and legal restraints, however inadequate they may be.

While the lack of freedom extends to all people, women and minorities are doubly afflicted. Persecution and prejudice deal them a double share of oppression. Violations are harshest when such groups are treated, whether under the law or by common practice, as second-class citizens with inferior rights and opportunities. Pressured by patriarchal structures and restricted by the legal system, many women find that the rules of society leave them invisible, powerless and subordinated.

That brings me full circle to the theme of our fourth report, the region's deficit in women's empowerment. The report underscores that the rebirth of the Arab world for which the previous reports called will remain a dream without the advancement of women in the Arab countries. No capability - human, national or regional - deemed essential by the first report; no knowledge society advocated by the second; and no society of freedom and

good governance envisioned by the third can be built or considered complete so long as women in the region are neglected or suppressed. The rise of women is inseparably and causally linked to the fate of the Arab world and its achievement of human development.

At its core essence, the report considers that, as human beings, women and men have an innate and equal right to achieve a life of material and moral dignity. The rise of women thus entails:

- ❖ Complete equality of opportunity between women and men in the acquisition and employment of human capabilities;
- ❖ Guaranteed rights of citizenship for all women on an equal footing with men; and
- ❖ Acknowledging of, and respect for differences between the sexes.

Under no conditions is it acceptable to use gender differences to support theories of inequality, or any form of discrimination.

The Report surveys the state of women in Arab countries and determines that they are neither the shapeless figures shrouded in black and deprived of all rights as some western outlets portray them; nor the full citizens equal in rights and opportunities as some Arab officials like to maintain. Arab women have actually made significant progress towards empowerment. Many have realized outstanding achievements in the spheres of social sciences and literature, exact sciences, business entrepreneurship, arts and media, and athletics. In the political realm, women now participate in parliaments, cabinets and local councils across the region. In Iraq, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia, women have doubled, or even tripled, their representation in parliaments; however, the Report acknowledges that much more must be achieved to extend empowerment to the broad base of women.

Furthermore, notable progress has been achieved towards gender equality under the law. Labour laws are showing signs of progress with many states granting women the right for equal pay for equal work, while guaranteeing the right to maternity leave and in some cases, the right to child-care. A number of countries have taken steps to modernize family laws, and adopt proactive measures to balance spouses' rights to end marriage through divorce. But legal discrimination still exists, most profoundly in the region's personal status laws, which the Report contends are permeated by "legally sanctioned gender bias," but cites more progressive legislation in the Maghreb, which has sought to alleviate "the injustices against women in personal status matters without infringing upon the principles of *shari'a*."

The Report further celebrates progress in women's learning. Data shows that equality between the sexes in higher education has been achieved in twelve Arab countries, and that girl's enrolment in primary school is at least 90 percent that of boys in all Arab states except three. These examples signal a change in the Arab world, and yet, the Report attests that the deficit in education is a major factor in preventing women in the region from participating effectively and fruitfully in public life.

The Report cites pervasive obstacles, or core challenges, that impede women's progress towards reaching the heights of their capacity. In public life, cultural, legal, social, economic and political factors obstruct women's equal access to education, health services, job opportunities, and citizen's rights and representation. In private life, traditional patterns of upbringing and discriminatory family and personal-status laws perpetuate inequality and subordination.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Report is not limited to analysis of the status quo. It also presents a strategic vision for a future where the rise of women, in both intellectual and practical terms, remains an essential axis of the Arab project for a human renaissance. It sees the advancement of women as both a struggle against internal despotism and external appropriation, and part of the construction of a renaissance that will bring about freedom, pride and vigor for all Arabs, men and women on an equal footing.

In line with the calls in previous Reports for comprehensive, right-based societal reforms, the rise of Arab women calls for immediate measures, including:

- ❖ Total respect for the rights of citizenship of all Arab women;
- ❖ The protection and guarantee of women's rights in the area of personal affairs and family relations.

The Report also calls for the temporary adoption of the principle of affirmative action in expanding women's participation in all fields of human endeavor, and for dismantling centuries –old structures that reinforce discrimination. The Report envisages these societal reforms as one wing of a bird that symbolizes the rise of women in the Arab world, while the second wing comprises the emergence of a widespread and effective movement of advocacy and change in Arab society.

The first wing which entails initiation of **societal reform** for the rise of women addresses attitudinal shifts and the reform of cultural frameworks. Such a reform package would entail:

- ❖ Using the enlightened findings of *Shar`ia* law, as elucidated by independent interpretative scholarship, to align national legislation with

the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW);

- ❖ Eliminating any cultural discrimination against women in Arab countries;
- ❖ Enacting and implementing legislative reform to guarantee women's full rights of citizenship;
- ❖ Combating poverty and deprivation; and
- ❖ Reforming patterns of child raising, and especially education and the media, in order to instill an awareness of the need for equal treatment between the sexes.

The second wing **is based on the rise of a widespread and effective movement of change in the Arab civil society**, will enrich active civil society organizations both at the national and regional levels. This movement will begin by focusing on two sets of priorities:

- ❖ First, eliminating women's legacy of deprivation in health and knowledge through education initiatives that provide girls and women with full opportunities to acquire essential capabilities in health and knowledge on an equal footing with boys and men; and
- ❖ Second, eliminating stubborn obstacles to women's utilization of their capabilities as they see fit, which consequently give women the prospects to participate in all types of human activity outside the family on an equal footing with men.

Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have tried to convey to you in essence the salient findings and directions of the Report, but in truth, the content is much richer than my account. But from what I have said today, perhaps its most important message is clear: that the

rise of women is in fact a prerequisite for an Arab renaissance, inseparable from the fate of the Arab world and its achievement of human development.

I devoutly believe that we, the Arab people, have the capacities, the resources, and the political will to attain the goals of this rich Report through mustering political will, engaging in true partnerships and embarking on deeply pragmatic development action.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen:

The Arab Human Development Reports make it clear that reform in the region is necessary, desirable and indeed overdue. This reform cannot, as in the past, be limited to tinkering or cosmetic changes. It has to be thoroughgoing and comprehensive. It must encompass political reforms that implement systems of good governance and unshackle the creative energies of our people; social reforms that build their capabilities; and economic reforms that open up wider opportunities for people to utilize their enhanced capabilities. The objective of these reforms would be to rebuild Arab societies on the full respect of freedoms and human rights, on the complete empowerment of women, and on the consolidation of knowledge in all economic and societal structures.

Several claims might be made for what AHDRs as a series have achieved. I will close by citing only three.

*Analytically*, the reports provide a scrupulous, objective and self-critical appraisal of the situation of the region. Their findings offer individual states at different stages of development an overarching yet flexible vision of pan-Arab

development in specific thematic areas that can be adapted to national conditions. The reports aspire to unity in diversity.

*Politically*, these reports risk an independent line to make a case for citizens. Speaking in plain terms, they have linked the state of Arab human development to that of human rights and to international conventions, creating a comprehensive and monitorable framework for a negotiated social contract in the region. The reports hold states accountable.

*Diplomatically*, by advocating that change in the region can only come from within through Arab-owned initiatives, the reports have proposed the ground rules for a constructive engagement between external parties and the region. That engagement must be based on partnership and dialogue, rather than on intervention, conditionality and patronage.

These reports have been conceived, guided and written in the hope that Arabs everywhere will find in them the common inspiration to join in building the better future that our children and their children richly deserve. If our modest efforts with this series can help to rally the Arab peoples and their partners to take the path we have envisioned towards a future free from crisis, fear and want, we shall consider our labours amply rewarded.

Thank you for your kind attention.