A Call to “Reclaim Arab Knowledge”

UNDP publishes the second Arab Human Development Report:
Arab Human Development Report 2003: Building a Knowledge Society

Amman, Jordan, 20 October 2003—Arab countries need to close a “growing knowledge gap” by investing heavily in education and promoting open intellectual inquiry, say the authors of the second Arab Human Development Report, published by the United Nations Development Programme today.

The Arab states should also encourage greater interaction with other nations, cultures, and regions of the world, the authors argue. “Openness, interaction, assimilation, absorption, revision, criticism and examination cannot but prompt creative knowledge production in Arab societies,” the Report states.

The Report, written by a group of distinguished Arab scholars and opinion leaders, is at once descriptive and prescriptive, with bold recommendations for change and detailed analyses of the current state of education, scientific research, the media, the publishing industry, culture encompassing religion, intellectual heritage and the Arabic language, and other building blocks of a “knowledge society” in the Arab world. Drafted during a period of intensifying conflict and political tension in the region, the Report also notes the direct and indirect impact on Arab human development, of recent international and regional events including the occupation of Iraq, Israel’s reoccupation of most Palestinian cities and towns, and restrictions on civil liberties imposed under the rubric of counter-terrorism in the West and the Arab world alike.

The Arab Human Development Report 2003 (AHDR 2003) is the second of a planned four-part series which will also cover the issues of freedoms and political institutions, and gender imbalance and the empowerment of women in the 22 Arab states. The first Report (AHDR 2002), issued a year ago, outlined the most important development challenges facing the Arab world at the beginning of the third millennium. The Egyptian journalist Mohammad Hassainain Haikal said AHDR 2002 signaled the region’s “last chance to join the trip to the future;” Time Magazine hailed it as “the most important publication of 2002.” More than a million visitors to UNDP’s Web site downloaded the entire 168 page text of AHDR 2002, written by a distinguished team of scholars from throughout the Arab world, under the leadership of Dr. Nader Fergany, Director of the Al-Mishkât Centre for Research and Training in Cairo, and Dr. Rima Khalaf Hunaidi, United Nations Assistant Secretary-General and Regional Director of UNDP’s Regional Bureau for Arab States, who is a former deputy prime minister of Jordan.
A large-scale international study (World Values Survey) presents an opportunity to compare Arab attitudes towards knowledge, good governance and gender equality with those expressed in other regions.

The following results are based on field surveys in a large number of countries throughout the world, including four Arab countries (Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco) that comprise about half the Arab people.

In addition to the Arab region, the surveys provide enough data to compare the Arab region to eight other country groupings: other (non-Arab) Islamic countries, sub-Saharan Africa, Eastern Europe, South Asia, USA/Canada, Australia and New Zealand, Latin America, East Asia, and Western Europe.

According to this survey, Arabs value knowledge and good governance strongly but take an ambivalent stand on gender equality.

Among the nine regions, Arabs expressed the highest preference for the role of science in the service of humanity. Arabs also topped the list of those supporting the statement that "democracy is better than any other form of government" and expressed the highest level of rejection of authoritarian rule (a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections).

On the empowerment of women, the Arabs came third in rejecting that "a university education is more important for a boy than for a girl" while expressing the highest approval that "when jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women". In other words, Arabs stood for gender equality in education but not in employment. In human development terms, Arabs expressed support for building the human capabilities of women but not for their utilisation.

Evidently, Arab public opinion strongly supports the focus of AHDR1 on the two deficits of freedom/good governance, and knowledge. But AHDR1 might have been ahead of Arab public opinion in stressing women’s full empowerment in both education and employment according to the paradigm of building human capabilities and utilising them effectively.

Source of WVS data: Inglehart, R., Background Paper for AHDR2.
AHDR 2003 delves deeper into one of the key issues raised by last year’s Report: the construction of a viable “knowledge society” in the Arab world. The Report was prepared via a participatory process involving nearly 40 authors and 30 advisers and peer reviewers. Contributors to the Report included prominent Arab development thinkers and practitioners—men and women from academia, intelligentsia, civil society, the media and the private and public sectors. “The Report examines the status of Arab knowledge today in terms of demand, production and dissemination, and concludes that all three are ineffectual, notwithstanding the abundance of Arab human capital,” Dr. Khalaf writes in her foreword. “It contrasts this state with the origins and outcomes of the region’s rich, enquiring and pluralistic cultural and intellectual heritage, confirming that the latter provide robust foundations on which to build a knowledge society.”

Activating a dialogue among Arabs

As Dr. Khalaf stresses, the AHDR 2003 is intended to provoke debate and catalyse change inside the Arab world. “Its goal is to activate a dialogue among Arabs on ways to change the course of Arab history and afford the Arab people the decent lives to which they aspire and to which they are entitled,” she says. “Written into every line is the unwavering conviction that reform efforts, which genuinely serve the region’s interests, must be initiated and launched from within.”

Yet the construction of a viable “knowledge society” requires effective economic, social, and political institutions, Dr. Khalaf emphasises: “The missing links are … smothered by ideologies, societal structures and values that inhibit critical thinking, cut Arabs off from their knowledge-rich heritage, and block the free flow of ideas and learning.”

The “five pillars” of an Arab knowledge society

The Report proposes a strategic vision that could support a creative renaissance buttressed by the “five pillars” of an Arab knowledge society:

♦ **Guaranteeing the key freedoms of opinion, speech and assembly through good governance bounded by the law.** “A climate of freedom is an essential prerequisite of the knowledge society,” affirms the Report and argues that, “It is also imperative to end the era of administrative control and the grip of security agencies over the production and dissemination of knowledge and the various forms of creative activity that are the foundations for the knowledge society in Arab countries.”

♦ **The full dissemination of high quality education.** Arab countries need to radically improve the quality of all levels of education. Basic education should become universal and extended to 10 years. Special attention should be paid to early childhood learning and to creating a system for life-long learning. In higher
education, improving quality requires subjecting all programmes to independent and periodical evaluation. To achieve this, the Report calls for the establishment of an independent Arab organization for the accreditation of all higher education programmes.

♦ **Indigenizing science, universalizing R&D and joining the Information Revolution.** A starting point for this is to overcome the illusion that importing technology as embodied in products, machinery, and services, is equivalent to acquiring knowledge. Basic research should be encouraged and supported by appropriate funding and institutions. Arab governments should also establish networks linking public, private and international sectors, and focus technological research on regional demand.

♦ **Shifting rapidly towards knowledge-based and value-added production.** This calls for a decisive move towards developing renewable resources through knowledge and technological capabilities and towards diversifying economic structures and markets.

♦ **Developing an authentic, broadminded and enlightened Arab knowledge model.** This would include delivering pure religion from political exploitation and respecting independent scholarship; advancing the Arabic language by undertaking serious research and linguistic reform; reclaiming the intellectual strengths of Arab cultural heritage; promoting cultural diversity in the region; and opening up to other cultures abroad.

The need for cultural openness
The Report confirms that “The Arab-Islamic culture at its zenith was a role model for borrowing and assimilation, followed by generous giving when it established its distinguished knowledge edifice.” But it notes rising anxieties and fears of cultural dissolution in an emerging global culture, as well as some trends towards isolation and rejection of values and ideas from outside. Hence the Report is outspoken about the need for deeper engagement with other peoples, cultures and regions. “The truth is that Arab culture has no choice but to engage again in a new global experiment,” it states. “It cannot enclose itself, contented with living on history, the past and inherited culture alone in a world whose victorious powers reach into all corners of the earth, dominating all forms of knowledge, behaviour, life, manufactured goods and innovation.”

Political pressures: Terrorism, counter-terrorism and occupation
The AHDR series aims to crystallize a strategic vision of Arab intellectuals who hope for a restructuring of the region from within, rather than change imposed by others. Internal reform, based on rigorous self-criticism, is far more effective and sustainable, they insist. International surveys of Arab public opinion reproduced in the 2003 Report show strong majority support for democracy and rejection of authoritarian rule.

But recent advances and bright spots—more women elected to parliaments, the continuing expansion of cable news broadcasting by satellite—“were partly eclipsed by new setbacks in the areas of freedom of opinion, expression and association,” the authors say. These setbacks were in part a response and reaction to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

“Following the bloody events of September 11, a number of countries adopted extreme security measures and policies as part of the war on terrorism. These measures and policies, however, exceeded their original goals, and led to the erosion of civil and political liberties in many countries in the world, notably the United States, often diminishing the welfare of Arabs and Muslims living, studying or travelling abroad, interrupting cultural exchanges between the Arab world and the West and cutting off knowledge acquisition opportunities for young Arabs.”
Among the first effects of these measures was the significant drop in the number of Arab students studying in the United States—a trend, which diminishes and discourages Arab ties to the West. Figures from several Arab governments indicate that Arab student enrolment in the United States fell by about 30 percent between 1999 and 2002.

The global campaign against terrorism has been a pretext for restrictions on civil liberties in Arab nations as well, creating further barriers to the free exchange of opinions and information, the authors say. “One of the worst consequences of freedom-constraining measures in developed countries is that they gave authorities in some Arab countries another excuse to enact new laws limiting civil and political freedoms. The Arab countries as a group adopted an expanded definition of terrorism, which assumed institutional expression at the regional level in The Arab Charter against Terrorism.”

“This charter was criticized in Arab and international human rights circles, because its expanded definition opens the door to abuse. It allows censorship, restricts access to the Internet, and restricts printing and publication. Moreover, the Charter neither explicitly prohibits detention nor torture.”

The breadth and intensity of Arab opposition to the US-led invasion of Iraq and to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza have heightened political tensions within Arab states and have become in themselves obstacles to open interchange with the United States and its allies, the authors note. This has been aggravated by what many see as a campaign of defamation and misrepresentation of Arabs, Muslims and Islam; “a reflection in many instances of ignorance and in some cases an expression of unjustified abuse.”

Yet political disputes should not become a barrier to continuing Arab interaction with the United States, they argue. “From the standpoint of cross-fertilization and knowledge, American society represents a more enduring source of ideas, cultural resources and values than any single political administration, which is bound to change through democratic processes,” the authors write. “Differences at the political level, no matter how intense, should not be allowed to eclipse this all-important fact and shut the door on cultural dialogue.”

### Depoliticizing religion

The Report’s authors note that “pure religion (Islam) provides great incentives for knowledge acquisition”, “the Arab scientific renaissance in the past is clear testimony to that.” But the authors also analyse the use and misuse of religion, which they see as a key component of a knowledge society. “Suppressing political action in many Arab countries has driven some “Islamic” movements underground and pushed others to work under an Islamic cover. In the absence of peaceful and effective political channels for dealing with injustices in the Arab world, at the country, regional and global levels, some political movements identifying themselves as Islamic have adopted extreme interpretations of Islam and violence as means of political activism. They have advocated belligerence towards both other political forces in Arab countries and ‘the Other,’ particularly the West as relations have grown more tense, accusing both of being the enemies of Islam itself,” the authors state.

“The collusion between some oppressive regimes and certain types of conservative religious scholars has resulted in certain interpretations of Islam that serve the interests of those regimes. Such interpretations represent serious impediments to human development, particularly when it comes to freedom of thought, accountability of the ruling authorities and women’s participation in public life.” They conclude that delivering religion from political exploitation is necessary for building knowledge societies in Arab countries.
The need to invest in education and research
The authors paint a disturbing portrait of the state of education at all levels in the region today and strongly urge major new investment in learning from the pre-school phase to advanced post-graduate research endeavours.

“Many children still do not have access to basic education,” the Report notes. “Higher education is characterized by decreasing enrolment, and public spending on education has actually declined since 1985. In all cases, nevertheless, the most important challenge facing Arab education is its declining quality.”

“Scientific research in Arab countries is held back by weak basic research and the almost total absence of advanced research in fields such as information technology and molecular biology. It also suffers from miserly R&D expenditure (currently state spending on R&D does not exceed 0.2 percent of GNP, most of which pays only for salaries); poor institutional support and a political and social context inimical to the development and promotion of science.”

There are an estimated 371 research scientists and engineers per million citizens in Arab countries, compared to a global rate of 979 per million, the authors note.

Building an information infrastructure
Communication infrastructure in the Arab world is also woefully inadequate. “The number of telephone lines in Arab countries is barely one-fifth of that in developed countries. Access to digital media is also among the lowest in the world. There are just 18 computers per 1,000 people in the region, compared to the global average of 78.3 computers per 1,000 persons and only 1.6 percent of the Arab population has Internet access,” as compared with 68 percent in the UK and 79 percent in the US.

At the national level, the Report says, action to popularize Information and Communications Technology (ICT) as a tool for knowledge acquisition should focus on:

♦ boosting literacy, especially among women;
♦ lowering monopolistic barriers for Internet providers and telecommunications developers;
♦ lowering other Internet access costs;
♦ overcoming restrictions on ICT access by gender, economic capability, geographic location or social conditions; and
♦ using ICT as a tool for life-long education.

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Amman, Jordan, 20 October 2003—In Arab countries, with a combined population of 284 million, a “best seller” may have a print run of just 5,000 copies, due to censorship and other constraints on independent publishers. Translations of foreign works into Arabic lag far behind figures in the rest of the world: five times more books are translated yearly into Greek, a language spoken by just 11 million people, than into Arabic. Just 53 newspapers per 1,000 citizens are published daily in the region, compared to 285 papers per 1,000 people in the developed nations, and there are only 18 computers per 1,000 people in the Arab world, as compared to the global average of 78 per 1,000.

These revealing statistics are among many presented in UNDP’s Arab Human Development Report 2003 (AHDR), which says state censorship has stifled the development of independent Arab news media and a broad-based regional publishing industry.

Limitations imposed by the state
“In most Arab countries,” the Report states, “the media operate in an environment that sharply restricts freedom of the press and freedom of expression and opinion. Journalists face illegal harassment, intimidation and even physical threats; censorship is rife and newspapers and television channels are sometimes arbitrarily closed down. Most media institutions are state-owned, particularly radio and television.”

Nevertheless, notes the Report, change is under way. “The last two years … have seen some improvements in the Arab information environment, brought about by dawning competition. More independent-minded newspapers have appeared, challenging the iron grip of the older, state-supported press on political opinion, news and information. With bases abroad, these papers can escape state censorship. Some Arab-language private satellite channels have started to contest the monopoly of state channels over the broadcast media.”

Notwithstanding such bright spots in the Arab media, most media institutions in Arab countries remain state-owned. Despite the growth of satellite broadcasting, of the 120 satellite channels in the Arab world, more than 70 percent are officially under Arab government supervision. Arab news coverage is largely inadequate, the Report says, with the main focus still on official developments and senior political officials. “News of interest to the majority of the population, and which relates to their daily concerns or which could enrich their scientific and cultural knowledge, is scarce. News about certain aspects of Arab politics, society and religion is often simply not disclosed.”
In short, the AHDR 2003 maintains, most Arab countries “place the media under the dominant political authorities and institutions, and employ media channels for political propaganda and entertainment, at the expense of other functions and services.”

**Obstructing “the diffusion of knowledge”**

Indeed, the Report points out that the spread of knowledge and ideas in the Arab world is curtailed in other areas as well, including publishing. “Oppression, the arbitrary application of laws, selective censorship and other politically motivated restrictions are widespread,” says the Report. “They often take the form of legal constraints on publications, associations, general assemblies and electronic media, which prevent these from carrying out their communication and cultural roles. Such restrictions also obstruct the diffusion of knowledge and the education of public opinion.

“Yet the more dangerous restrictions are those imposed by security authorities when they confiscate publications or ban people from entering a country or prevent the sale of certain books during fairs while promoting other kinds of books. In committing these acts, these authorities reach above the constitutional institutions and the law, using the pretext of ‘national security,’ a criterion seldom clarified by them. Other forms of restriction come from classes of citizens themselves, who… appoint themselves the custodians of public morality, and press for the censorship of books, articles and media events”. The Report concludes: “Freedoms that are hostage to matters of security, to censorship and to self-appointed watchdogs of public morality are freedoms denied. The first victims of this denial are creativity, innovation and knowledge.”

Among the paradoxes of Arab censorship is that the novels of the author who won the first prize at the largest Arab book fair in 2000 were banned. In another case, the Report notes, the novel that won the 2000 prize for excellence, in the capital of Arab culture for that year, was prevented by the censor from being distributed in that same capital.

**Books are scarce, so is knowledge**

Arabs constitute five percent of the world population, yet they produce only one percent of the world’s books. Meagre as this output is, a much higher percentage than the world average of this production is dedicated to religious books. Religious books account for 17 percent of all books published in Arab countries, compared to a world average of about five percent. Books on social sciences, literature and the arts command a much smaller percentage. In 1996, Arab countries produced no more than 1945 literary and artistic books despite a readership of 280 million in the 22 Arab countries. This is less than what a country such as Turkey produces, with a population about one-quarter that of the Arab countries. In general, the usual print run for novels or collections of short stories ranges from 1,000 to 3,000 copies.

“Authors and publishers are hard put to accommodate the whims and instructions of 22 Arab censors. As a result, books do not move easily through their natural markets,” writes Fathi Khalil al-Biss, a Vice-President of the Arab Publishers Union and a contributor to the Report.

Far too often, the Arab book is treated as a banned commodity, subject to censorship and bureaucratic procedures that greatly increase costs to publishers. These laws inevitably hinder book publishing and circulation.
In addition to the obstacles imposed by censorship, *AHDR 2003* identifies “high illiteracy rates in some Arab countries, and the declining purchasing power of today’s Arab readers,” as the “real factors influencing the size of this readership.” But the authors question whether Arabs would choose to read a book on literature in their leisure time, even if they could afford books. There are no accurate statistics on the types of books preferred by Arab readers, but according to many publishers and observers, the bestsellers at the Cairo International Book Fair are religious works, followed by those categorized as educational.

Translated books—critical for the acquisition and transfer of knowledge—are much rarer in the Arab-speaking world than in regions with comparable levels of literacy and economic development. No more than 10,000 books were translated into Arabic over the entire past millennium, equivalent to the number translated into Spanish each year.

**The digital wadi**

Finally, the divide between Internet users and the rest of the Arab population remains a deep and daunting canyon, despite recent advances. Though the number of Internet users in the Arab world climbed by an estimated 60 percent from 2000 to 2001, residents of Arab states with access to the World Wide Web still only represented 1.6 percent of the overall population, one of the lowest ratios in the world. “This is hardly an appropriate base for using information to spread knowledge and increase demand for it, or for accessing the vast array of scientific research networks, universities and other knowledge sources that throng the Internet,” the Report’s authors state.

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The Best Investments: Education, Research and Development

Amman, Jordan, 20 October 2003—Arab countries should emulate the success of the Asian Tiger nations by adopting a policy of “early and intensive investment in education, accompanied by sustained and rapid improvement of its level,” say the authors of the latest Arab Human Development Report 2003 (AHDR 2003). The Report also notes the damaging impact on the region’s knowledge base caused by excessive oil dependence and the accelerating emigration of educated professionals.

In the last three decades, the Asian Tigers (Hong Kong, Singapore, and the Republic of Korea) dramatically raised incomes and living standards—largely, the Report’s authors argue, because of sustained investment in education and research.

By contrast, the income gap between Arab states and industrial countries has dramatically widened during the same period.

Despite the popular perception that Arab countries are rich, overall GDP at the end of the 20th century (US$604 billion) was little more than that of Spain ($559 billion), with less than 15 percent of the Arab population. After the oil boom of the 1970s, most of the economies of the Middle East and North Africa either stagnated or declined.
The education gap
Efforts to measure the quality of Arab education are limited—in itself an indication of a crisis in education in the region, the Report’s authors say. But contrasting quantitative measurements show key deficiencies relevant to economic development and knowledge production: for example, fewer than one in 20 Arab university students are pursuing scientific disciplines, while in Republic of Korea the figure is one in five. The relative lack of well-funded and well-attended science education has a direct impact on technological achievement: one indication is the limited number of industrial patents registered by Arab companies and individuals.

Still, the authors note that it is “evidently possible for societies to make substantial advances in knowledge, even when their standard indicators of knowledge capital are modest—as in the case of large countries such as China and India. This suggests that valuable knowledge achievements might depend crucially on matters that involve political will and leadership; the capacity to raise and mobilize material, technical and human resources; and the drive to focus national efforts on attaining an indigenous societal renaissance, both people-centred and patriotic.”

The AHDR 2003 says it may be possible for Arabs to emulate some of the “striking knowledge outcomes of other developing countries whose conventional knowledge indicators do not surpass those found in the Arab world.” Looking at the Arab world today, the Report points to Jordan and Kuwait as countries that have relatively better educational systems and higher societal motivation for education, indicating the potential for progress elsewhere in the region.

The brain drain
The AHDR notes that the emigration—the “haemorrhage”—of large numbers of qualified Arab professionals to the West greatly undermines economic development in the region. The reason is a lack of attractive work opportunities at home and a stifling political environment. The result is that Arab economies and societies remain stagnant, causing more emigration. Between 1998 and 2000, for example, more than 15,000 Arab doctors migrated abroad.

“Arguably, emigration of highly qualified Arabs to the West has been one of the most serious factors undermining knowledge acquisition in Arab countries,” the authors say.
The Arab brain drain constitutes a form of reverse development aid, they note, since receiving countries clearly benefit from Arab investments in training and educating their citizens. More significant, however, is the lost potential contribution of the emigrants to their countries of origin. The authors call for concerted action to reverse this trend, and provide Arab expatriates with incentives to return.

**Petroleum dependency**

The Report points out that the overwhelming dependence on oil extraction stifles innovation and production in the region. One of the main features “of the production pattern prevailing in Arab countries, which influences knowledge acquisition, is the overwhelming dependence on the extraction of raw materials chiefly oil.” the authors note. This *rentier* system encourages spending and acquisition, providing little incentive to stimulate local investment and production. By contrast, creating indigenous knowledge requires time, effort and financial resources.

“Almost all Arab countries have relinquished key knowledge-intensive aspects of oil production to foreign firms,” say the authors. “The consequences of this abdication are severe.”

Most production in Arab countries is based on traditional, primary commodities that do not require advanced skills or technology, while consumer goods are mainly produced under foreign franchise, a practice that “stimulates knowledge development abroad and stifles it at home.”

Excessive dependency on oil and other export commodities discourages broader international trade relationships and limits competition in the internal market, the authors add. “Resistance to opening up to the outside world by Arab economies and their lack of exposure to foreign competition, coupled with at times excessive protection for local products through import substitution policies, have also slowed the advancement of productivity and the employment of knowledge to that end.”

Oil dependence has also led to the excessive concentration—and exportation—of wealth: “Demand for knowledge has been weakened not only by faltering economic growth and productivity in Arab countries during the last quarter-century but also by the over-concentration of wealth in a few hands,” the authors argue. “The vast amount of Arab capital invested in industrialized countries and, therefore, denied to the Arab world, is strong evidence that, in human development terms, it is not the possession of money and wealth that matters but how productively such wealth is invested.”
Some Questions and Answers about AHDR 2003

Q: A UNDP Arab Human Development Report (AHDR) was published in 2002. How is this latest one (AHDR 2003) different from the first one?

A: The 2002 Report looked at the broad spectrum of Arab human development and identified three deficits: freedom; women’s empowerment; and the acquisition and effective use of knowledge. AHDR 2003 focuses on this last deficit: knowledge.

Q: What is the importance of knowledge in human development?

A: It is the foundation stone of human development because it represents an essential capability that increases people’s choices. It is also a means of human fulfillment. And today, knowledge more than capital drives economic progress. The establishment of a knowledge-based society is crucial if Arab states are to flourish and achieve genuine human development. The latest Report presents a vision of self-determined change, based on internal social reform and scrupulous self-criticism.

Q: But can a knowledge society be built in isolation from other factors?

A: No. A knowledge society cannot thrive in an atmosphere of oppression. Unfortunately, after the horrific events of September 11, 2001, conditions in some Arab countries have become even more oppressive than before. Governments have found spurious justification for curbing freedom through an expanded definition of terror. If leading democracies are having to back-pedal on human rights, they argue, then other states further behind on the road to reform might need to as well.

Q: How far have Arab countries progressed towards building a knowledge-based society?

A: They still have a long way to go. A knowledge society implies instituting knowledge as the organizing principle of human life. Arab countries are far removed from such a society. And the divide between them and knowledge societies is getting wider. There is a serious shortfall in the acquisition, absorption, use and production of knowledge in Arab countries.

Q: What are some of the factors blocking progress?

A: There are a number of obstacles the most important of which is the lack of freedoms that suffocates creative production, and the lack of institutional support and funding that are essential for scientific research. The
organization of national knowledge systems is weak. Before an Arab knowledge society can be established, there must be a strong link between R&D centres, intermediary institutions and producers, between education and society—particularly in technical fields, and between states, industries, universities and civil society. The state needs to play a major role in the knowledge acquisition system, especially in promoting basic research.

Q: But surely 270 million Arabs have the capacity between them to establish a knowledge society?

A: It is true that Arab countries possess significant human capital with the potential to sustain a knowledge renaissance. But in terms of scientific and artistic production, for example, realizing this potential will be difficult without an appropriate support structure. Take the case of science production. Patents provide a useful yardstick for measuring the presence of innovation in national and foreign markets. On that criterion, there are virtually no Arab innovations in the market. Arab scientific research has not yet reached the innovation stage.

Q: Is there no research and development (R&D) being carried out in the Arab world?

A: There is, but ultimately it is of limited benefit. There are around 126 specialized scientific research centres attached to Arab universities, along with 278 state-funded centres. But research projects often lack clear objectives, a sharp focus on results, or a sense of urgency—leading to an inability to transform research results into investment projects.

Q: You mentioned artistic production. How do Arab countries fare in this?

A: Much better. The Arab world has produced a wealth of distinguished literary and artistic work. Unlike science and technology, the production of good literature is not dependent on economic investment. Nevertheless, the publishing business is eroding because readers are declining and publishers have to accommodate the whims and instructions of 22 Arab censors. Playing it safe nudges them towards religious or educational books. Even a best-selling Arab novel will record sales of only around 5,000.

Q: What about Arab-Islamic culture? Isn’t the whole ethos of that culture against the kind of enquiry, openness and rationality associated with real learning?

On the contrary. The Arab-Islamic civilization hosted some of the great intellectual currents of all time. It demonstrated that reason and faith are perfectly harmonious. While Islam flourished, this culture founded forms of mathematical rationality and introduced experimentation as a pattern of scientific proof. Through translation, it preserved and transmitted classical Greek scholarship, which would otherwise have been lost to Europe in its dark age. Its open character was reflected in its absorption and synthesis of knowledge from many cultures, including the Byzantine, Chinese, Egyptian, Greek, Indian, Iranian, North African, Sicilian and Spanish. There were elements in this heritage that were unscientific and averse to reason, especially schools of mysticism. But at its height, the Arab-Islamic culture was—and has the potential to be again—a great cauldron of learning.

Q: But what about today’s Islamic clerics and fundamentalists who reject all outside influence and seek to close off the Arab world? Do they stand for a knowledge society?

Undoubtedly, political developments in the region and the absence of peaceful and effective political channels for dealing with injustices in the Arab world have pushed some Islamic clerics to give precedence to political aims over the cultural or social objectives of Islam. Moreover, the collusion between some repressive regimes and certain conservative religious scholars has resulted in some interpretations of Islam that are inimical to free enquiry and the pursuit of rational knowledge. The Report makes it clear that such groups are however not representative of the authentic Arab culture or the moral, civilized and humane vision that has underpinned the principles of Islam from its earliest days. It issues a firm call for religion, education and scholarship to be freed from political influence and that of radical movements.
Q: When one measures knowledge capital, how do Arab countries compare with other developing states?

A: One of the big problems in measuring the state of knowledge in Arab countries is the lack of data—an indicator in itself that knowledge is in crisis. In terms of comparisons, it is worth looking at the performance of the Asian Tiger nations. In the middle of the 20th century Arab countries occupied a stronger position than the Asian Tigers on the standard indicator of economic development. Now the positions are reversed. A key lesson of the Asian experience is the importance of early and intensive investment in education, accompanied by sustained and rapid improvement of the level of education.

Q: When you look round Arab countries you see lots of modern industries—doesn’t that mean these countries have acquired technological knowledge?

A: In most cases, no. The industries you see are based on imported machinery that is neither adapted nor developed by Arab countries to effectively realize the purposes of their societies. As producers of such machinery continue to improve on them, Arab countries see their “modern industries” quickly turn obsolete and their benefits start to vanish in the absence of national research capabilities. Arab governments gambled on the idea that encouraging trade with developed countries and seeking investment from them would create an environment conducive to the transfer of technology. But multinational corporations failed to share knowledge-intensive parts of the production process. Another problem is that while Arab countries are establishing free market economies, they are not reaping the benefits of them because they lack the critical mass of creative entrepreneurs who are prepared to assume risks in technology development and the production of goods and services.

Q: Shouldn’t Arab countries put more effort into learning the languages of the developed world to help in knowledge acquisition?

A: Yes, the quality of language teaching certainly needs to be radically improved. But there also needs to be much greater emphasis on the use of Arabic in higher education—particularly in the sciences. The Arabic language is the distinctive feature of Arab identity. Yet the Arabic language faces a crisis in terms of theorization, teaching, grammar, and documentation, and from the duality of standard and colloquial Arabic. To counter this, university education in Arab countries should be “Arabized,” and teaching of the language has to be reformed to encourage young minds to think critically in their own language. Simultaneously, the teaching of foreign languages has to be strengthened.

Q: But isn’t economic development more important than the quality of education?

A: The two things are closely linked. When social and economic conditions are conducive to knowledge acquisition, a “virtuous cycle” develops. High output allows resources to be invested in knowledge, which leads to the production of new knowledge. This, in turn, accelerates economic growth. Despite the popular perception that Arab countries are wealthy, the volume of their economic production is small. Revitalizing economic growth in the region is, therefore, essential for any knowledge renaissance. There is another issue related to the economy. Almost all Arab countries have relinquished key knowledge-intensive aspects of oil production to foreign firms. And consumer goods are mainly produced under foreign franchise, a practice that stimulates knowledge development abroad and stifles it at home.

Q: But the Arab middle class is educated and able, isn’t it?

A: A large educated middle class is important in influencing the building of a knowledge system. The problem is that the middle class in Arab countries is in decline, under pressure from rising poverty and the uneven distribution of wealth. This is exacerbated by a trend towards “educated unemployment”—the result of a mismatch between
university output and labour market requirements—quite apart from the disastrous effects of the emigration of qualified Arabs to the West.

Q: Is there anything that governments can do in this respect?

A: In many cases there is a problem in the relationship between Arab governments and intellectuals. The latter tend to be either allied or in opposition to the dominant political ideology. Governments often allocate scarce resources in exchange for pursuing state-directed work—projects that lead to the corruption of research and eventually to the destruction of knowledge itself. Many politically neutral academics have emigrated. What is needed is an independent knowledge sphere that produces knowledge without political coercion.

Q: So what is the AHDR 2003’s strategic vision for a knowledge society?

A: Knowledge is under siege in Arab countries today from political powers, societal forces and certain regressive factions. Its liberation rests on the democratization of societies and on indigenising knowledge, technology and learning across the board. The stress must be on development from inside Arab society—the future map of the Arab world should be drawn from within the region. More precisely, there are five pillars of the knowledge society that Arab countries should start constructing: freedom of speech and assembly through good governance—an essential prerequisite; the full dissemination of high quality education; indigenising science and universalizing R&D; shifting rapidly towards knowledge-based production in Arab socioeconomic structures; and developing an authentic, broadminded and enlightened Arab knowledge model, with the Arabic language stage-centre. This package amounts to a new social contract for Arab intellectuals, elites and ordinary women and men.

Q: Still with the stress on Arabic?

A: Absolutely. Historically, the Arabic language has proved itself capable of expressing and addressing the deepest, finest, most complex and most nuanced aspects of knowledge. The Arabic language could become a powerful element in an Arab information bloc in the information age, competing effectively with the rest of the world. What is needed is a revival of the traditions of Arab knowledge to stimulate an appreciation and re-assimilation of the cultural values that can nurture a present-day renaissance.

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