

The Women's Foreign Policy Group Presents

Amat Al Alim Ali Alsoswa
Assistant Administrator and Director of the Regional Bureau for
Arab States, UN Development Program

Democracy and Development in the Arab World

May 3, 2006
Inside the United Nations
UN Headquarters
New York City

Amat Al Alim Ali Alsoswa: I am grateful for this opportunity to share my views on the topic of “Democracy and Development in the Arab World,” a subject that has significant relevance for the United Nations Development Programme and United Nations more broadly.

Host to five United Nations peacekeeping operations¹; two political missions²; 18 UNDP Offices; and numerous specialized agencies, the United Nations has a serious stake in the promotion of democracy and development in the Arab World.

My subject has perhaps even greater relevance for countless millions of women in the Arab World struggling to exercise their most fundamental human rights and freedoms. Having spent the better part of my professional career championing women's equality, if there is one thing that I have taken away it is that without full and open participation of women in all aspects of society, strong and lasting democratic development will not be achieved.

Therefore, I think you will agree that any discussion about democracy and development in the Arab world must be viewed in the context of women's empowerment.

But, before I go any further, let me first clarify the geopolitical landscape I will be referring to during my address. I believe clarification is necessary because the Arab World enjoys a surplus of labels but suffers a deficit of recognized identity.

We are sometimes called the “Near East”, at other times “the Middle East and North Africa”. Some see the region as the “southern Mediterranean”, while others identify it as part of the “Islamic world”. For the purposes of this presentation, I will adopt the definition and identity that the peoples of the region have chosen for themselves. I will speak about the 22 countries straddling two continents from the Arabian Sea to the Atlantic Ocean that belong to the League of Arab States and constitute the Arab world.

It is a world that is old in tradition, proud in culture and young in population. In fact, the Arab world is the youngest of world regions with youth between the ages of 15 and 24 years of age exceeding 20 per cent of populations in at least 13 countries.³

¹ UNDOF, UNIFIL, UNTSO, UNMIS, MINURSO

² UNSCO, UNAMI

³ Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen.

It is also a world that is remarkably diverse, ranging from Low Income and Crisis Countries (such as Somalia, Sudan and Iraq), to wealthy Net Contributor Countries (such as Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia).

Yet despite diversities and differences, unbreakable ties join the 295 million inhabitants of the Arab world. These include a common language and a vibrant heritage that still lives potently in a common cultural context that unites these peoples even when, at times, they go their separate ways.

But despite pre-conceived notions of widespread wealth in the Arab world, most of the region's inhabitants entered the 21st Century shouldering a burden of unmet social needs and aspirations that oil income failed to satisfy:

- One in five people live in poverty, on less than \$2 per day;
- Nearly 50% or more of the populations in at least seven of the poorest Arab countries live below the national poverty line⁴;
- Twelve percent of this number suffers from food insecurity;
- Ten percent of all people live under foreign occupation; and
- 65 million adults are illiterate, two thirds of them women.

These sharp regional and intra-country disparities mean that while some Arab countries, particularly those in the Gulf, are set to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, the majority of middle-income countries – those in the Mashreq and Maghreb – vary in their potential to reach the MDGs. And it is very likely that low income Countries in the region (Djibouti, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen) will make only partial progress, or in crisis countries – no progress at all.

And yet, we have determined – that despite economic diversity – the root causes of national development challenges center on the deficits identified in the Arab Human Development Reports – the shared deficits of freedom, knowledge and women's empowerment.

The Deficit in Freedom and Good Governance

The deficit of freedom and good governance is among the greatest and most pervasive factors impeding the pursuit of democratic progress in the region. The essential attributes of open societies, such as full scrutiny of state spending, an unfettered press, truly independent courts, free and fair elections, and accountable security services – remain elusive.

We acknowledge that our democratic experience is relatively young and that we have much to learn. Old habits die hard as the saying goes. That is why we must find our own way --- to develop our own methodology that caters to our traditional values; and to move towards a democratic society at our own pace.

Therefore, if democracy is to flourish across the Arab world, it may not be "democracy" as Westerners know it. It may take different forms. This in a sense is why we often refer to "freedom" to describe what we hope for. Freedom may come in different forms in different countries. And though the culture of freedom may dictate different approaches, there are some basic tenets: freedom of the press, free elections, an independent judiciary, and the emancipation and empowerment of women.

⁴ Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania, Palestine, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen.

We are also mindful of the fact that some of our social customs need to change in order for this commitment to materialize in our daily lives.

The other challenge to overcome is the financial burden of the democratic process. The current economic situation in much of the Arab world makes it difficult to achieve since the majority of our people live under punishing poverty and lack the very minimum conditions for active participation in their democratic spaces.

Addressing this freedom deficit will require unprecedented political will to demolish obstacles and build new structures -- political, social and economic -- in order to set free our potential.

Efforts must focus squarely on internally driven reform processes that strengthen governance, encourage equal wealth, advance knowledge, improve services and accountability, and last but not least, promote the empowerment of half of the Arab World's population – women.

The Deficit in Women's Empowerment

Ladies and Gentlemen: if the dearth of democracy and freedom is an obstacle to men's development, it is a wall for women.

What does it mean to be a woman in the Arab World?

For starters, it means that there's a good chance that you are among the 43.3 million women who are illiterate, despite significant improvements in girl's access to education over the past 30-years.

It means that you experience the least amount of political participation compared to any other region in the world. A region where only 8% of seats in national parliaments are occupied by women.

It means that there's a good chance that you are unemployed; since you suffer from the highest rates of unemployment in the world as well as the lowest rates of participation in labour markets; or, you work without payment within the family economy (especially in rural areas where women traditionally work in agricultural sectors).

Being a woman in the Arab world further means that you are a victim of legal discrimination, including nationality and citizenship laws;

For those women in conflict areas, there is additional suffering while you are striving to feed and keep your family together. In Iraq, for example, more than 90 women become widows each day due to continuing violence across the country.⁵ According to local government statistics, 13,750 families (some 70,000 people) have been displaced by violence.

We also know, however, that despite systematic discrimination women are the change agents in our society.

⁵ Women's Rights Association

Having championed the rights of women in Yemen for the better part of three decades, it is my candid view that the single most important factor in the drive for democracy and development in the Arab world is the courage and activism of women.

Consider the thousands of women who protested and won their right for legislative elections with women voters and candidates during the past few years in Yemen, Oman, Bahrain, and finally Kuwait. Women ministers have been appointed for the first time in several Arab countries – in Oman⁶; in the United Arab Emirates⁷, in Yemen, in Bahrain, where two women have been appointed as Government Ministers⁸ and Kuwait,⁹ a month following the granting of full political rights to Kuwaiti women in May 2005. All of these hard one gains in women's rights were the results of decades of lobbying by generations of women's rights campaigners across the region.

And while these advances bode well for women's empowerment and democratization more broadly, we must seek to preserve the gains that pro-women legislation has secured and move beyond principle to practice. But again, there are challenges to overcome.

The first is the blinding poverty that shackles progress in women's health, education and work. In other words, women's basic capacity for enjoyment of any these rights is threatened.

A more difficult challenge is presented by social norms, customs and continued dogmatic refusal by people in our own cultures to grant women the rights to participate in public life. These are difficult challenges but with persistence we will prevail.

No one ever said that the quest for freedom was an easy one. But it's increasingly clear women must be part of political reform processes, or the entire transformation will fail. A society that bars half of its productive workforce cannot succeed in the 21st Century.

A 2004 World Bank study¹⁰ on Gender and Development in the MENA region shows that a woman working raises family incomes by 25 percent on average, lifting millions out of poverty. The lesson: when women prosper, everyone prospers.

Women are further catalyst for much-needed regional integration, working across borders to foster economic and social development. Women are also beginning to play a role in globalized economy, mastering business and information technology and speaking out to the world.

Educational attainment is the key to women's empowerment in the Arab world, bringing me to the third interrelated deficit of knowledge.

The Knowledge Deficit

In the Arab world, we possess significant human capital, but the potential of that capital is either being depleted by the so-called 'brain drain,' or, is being buried under political ideologies and

⁶ Sheikha Aisha bint Khalfan bin Jameel al-Sayabiyah, Minister for Industrial Craftsmanship appointed in 2003.

⁷ Sheikha Lubna al-Qasimi, appointed Minister of Economics and Planning 2004.

⁸ Dr Nada Haffadh, appointed Bahrain's Minister of Health in 2004; and Dr Fatima Al Balooshi, appointed Minister of Social Affairs in 2005.

⁹ Massouma al-Mubarak, appointed Kuwait's Minister of Planning in 2005.

¹⁰ *Gender and Development in the Middle East and North Africa*, World Bank 2004, p.57.

defective economic and political structures. As a result, knowledge dissemination in the region is weak and knowledge production is poor.

Consider that Arabs make up 5% of the world's population, but only produce 1% of the world's books. The figures for translated books are also discouraging. The Arab world translates about 330 books annually, one fifth of the number that Greece translates. The cumulative total of translated books since the Caliph Maa'moun's (sic) time is about 100,000, almost the average that Spain translates in one year.

The primary vehicles for knowledge dissemination – education systems – have failed to address the problem of illiteracy, which is serious enough. But, perhaps an even greater handicap involves another type of illiteracy -- that manifested in the passivity, conformity, and lack of incentives for intellectual enquiry that pervades our curricula and teaching methods.

For knowledge to flourish, we need to guarantee the key freedoms of opinion, expression and association in order to unleash the creative energies of people. Next, we need to broaden the quality of education in order to build the capabilities of our young; embed science in Arab society; and shift our economic structures rapidly towards knowledge-based and higher value-added production.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

I hope that I have demonstrated that the three deficits impeding democracy and development in the Arab world are intrinsically linked. The challenge for Arab countries is to find a way to undertake serious economic, social and political reforms, or risk further marginalization and its consequences, be it pervasive poverty, persistent civil unrest, or protracted armed conflict.

There is little doubt that the ultimate success of political reforms and democratization will depend on Arabs themselves. But, the external environment is not a neutral factor. It will, as it has in the past, affect the chances of success for any reform effort.

If the International Community is to play a productive role encouraging democracy and development, it must first observe the principle of "do no harm." Foreign development assistance must be based on partnership and never patronage. And people must be permitted, and encouraged, to conceptualize and frame their own vision of the future.

Moreover, there is dire need to connect with every day people. We must find a way for the benefits of democracy and development to be tangible and felt by citizens, especially the young. Equally important, we must amplify those voices that lie beyond the Mediterranean coastline, and embrace the Arabs living on the edge of the Sahara or the shores of the Arabian Sea.

I should also like to make the point that UNDP – and the United Nations more broadly – is a vital forum and stage on which to advance democracy and development in the Arab world.

One of our more successful advocacy tools to date is the pioneering Arab Human Development Report series, which has firmly placed the United Nations as a whole and UNDP in particular, as a key actor in the internally-driven debates on development in the region.

Our next Report is dedicated exclusively to the deficit in women's empowerment, and while still a work in progress, we anticipate releasing the report this summer.

As with previous Reports, we anticipate additional programming to consolidate our work in women's empowerment.

As a new comer to the organization, I was particularly pleased to learn of the extent of UNDP's efforts to generate dialogues between women's groups and Governments and embark on bold new programmes.

One such example is our Gender & Citizenship Initiative, which seeks to raise awareness about gender inequalities in legislation; and build partnerships between women's NGOs and parliamentarians. Another example is our work to enhance women's rights through Information Communications Technology, including the establishment of ICT centres across the region. UNDP is further engaged in supporting national gender action plans, and promoting women and girls education.

Ladies and Gentlemen: Allow me to conclude by reciting my principle points. They are:

One: that democracy and development in the Arab World is contingent on the full and active participation of women in the transformation progress.

Two: that despite widespread economic diversity in the region, the development challenge is similar, focused on the three-shared deficits that I have laid out.

Three: the International Community can help to promote homegrown democracy and pluralism in the Arab world by engaging Arab Governments and nudging them towards reform, and by working in broader partnership with Arab reformers regardless of their political affiliations.

I thank you for giving me the opportunity to address you today and I now look forward to your thoughts and comments.

Thank you.