



# **Alexandria Statement March 2004**

**Final Statement of  
“Arab Reform Issues: Vision and Implementation”  
12-14 March 2004  
Bibliotheca Alexandrina**

In Collaboration with:

Arab Academy for Science and Technology  
Arab Business Council  
Arab Women’s Organization  
Economic Research Forum  
Arab Organization for Human Rights

The Alexandria Statement  
12 - 14 March 2004  
“Issues of Reform in the Arab World”

**Introduction**

1. Participants in the “Issues of Reform in the Arab World: Vision and Implementation” conference, organized by the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in collaboration with civil society institutions in the Arab world, met from 12 to 14 March 2004 to discuss the reforms needed to develop Arab societies. The participants stated that they are fully convinced that reform is a necessary and urgent matter, that it stems from within Arab societies and that it should address the aspirations of the people to develop a comprehensive reform project, covering political, economic, social and cultural aspects. This project should allow addressing the individual situation of each country while fitting within a general framework that highlights features shared by Arab Societies. This should allow each society to push forward its own reforms, while avoiding isolationism. It should also lay a strong foundation for regional cooperation that would forge a more positive and functional Arab entity on the international scene.
2. However, internal reform should not divert our attention from dealing with pressing regional issues on our agenda. At the forefront of these issues is a just solution for the Palestinian problem based on international resolutions that provide for the establishment of two independent and genuinely sovereign states, the liberation of occupied Arab territories and the recognition of the independence and territorial integrity of Iraq. In addition, the Middle East should be declared an area free from weapons of mass destruction. All territorial problems should be resolved peacefully without external interference so that these problems do not provide an excuse for foreign intervention in the affairs of the Arab region, which would put it once again under foreign tutelage.
3. The people of the region, by virtue of their history of civilized behavior and in keeping with their vision of a promising future, emphatically condemn terrorism in all its forms, reject all modes of religious fanaticism, and seek to embody values of tolerance and creative interaction between cultures and civilizations.

4. Arab societies have the maturity and historical experience that enable them to contribute to our common human civilization, and are, indeed, capable of taking charge of their affairs and reforming their internal conditions; while interacting fully with the outside world and its many experiences of reform, in accordance with a list of specific priorities that runs as follows:

### **First - Political Reform:**

5. Political reform refers to all direct and indirect measures for which governments, civil society and the private sector are responsible - measures that could help Arab societies and countries advance, without hesitation, towards building concrete and genuine democratic systems.
6. As representatives of Arab civil society, when we talk of democratic systems, we mean, without ambiguity, genuine democracy. This may differ in form and shape from one country to another due to cultural and historical variations; but the essence of democracy remains the same. Democracy refers to a system where freedom is paramount value that ensures actual sovereignty of the people and government by the people through political pluralism, leading to transfer of power. Democracy is based on respect of all rights for all the people, including freedom of thought and expression, and the right to organize under the umbrella of effective political institutions, \*\* with an elected legislature, an independent judiciary, a government that is subject to both constitutional and public accountability, and political parties of different intellectual and ideological orientations.
7. This genuine democracy requires guaranteed freedom of expression in all its forms, topmost among which is freedom of the press, and audio-visual and electronic media. It calls for adopting free, regular, centralized and decentralized elections to guarantee transfer of power and the rule of the people. It also requires the highest possible level of decentralization that would allow greater self-expression by local communities, unleashing their creative potentials for culturally contributions to human development in all fields. This is closely linked to achieving the highest level of transparency in public life, to stamping out corruption within the

framework of establishing good governance and support for human rights provided according to international agreements. The rights of women, children and minorities, the protection of the fundamental rights of those charged with criminal offences and the humane treatment of citizens are on top of the list. All this is in keeping with accepted practices in those societies that have preceded us on the road to democratic development.

8. We hereby present a number of specific visions for political reform, and deem it important that these visions should be translated into tangible steps to be taken within the framework of a partnership between governments and civil society. These visions include the following:

### **Constitutional & Legislative Reform**

9. Since the constitution is the basic law of the state, its articles should not be inconsistent with the model political system sought by society. It should also be consistent with the international covenants on human rights. This means that articles of the constitution should reflect the changes and developments that have actually taken place. Furthermore, any constitutional article that contradicts the demands of genuine democracy in the Arab countries should be amended, and modern constitutions should be drafted for those countries that have not yet reached that stage of democracy, aligning the provisions of the constitutions with the objective of society in its quest for democratic evolution. This would include:
  - a) Clear-cut separation of the legislative and executive powers.
  - b) Rejuvenation of the forms of governance to guarantee regular and peaceful transfers of power in accordance with the prevailing circumstances in each country. A modern state is based on institutions and regulations, not on goodwill.
  - c) Organizing free and periodic elections that will safeguard democratic practices and ensure the non-monopolization of power by placing time limits on holding the power of government.
  - d) Abolishing arrest or detention as a result of free expression in all Arab countries and releasing all prisoners who are not put on trial or against whom no indictments were issued.

### **Institutional and Structural Reform**

10. A democratic system is closely linked to the presence of strong institutions incorporating the three recognized branches of government: the executive, the legislative and the judiciary, in addition to the press, the media and civil society associations. These institutions should be reviewed to guarantee their sound democratic practices. Consequently, this requires full transparency, the selection of effective leadership, a defined term of office, and the effective enforcement of the principle of 'rule of the law' with no exception, irrespective of any justification.
11. Hence, the representatives of civil society, civil and non-governmental organizations represented in this conference affirm the need for the abolition of extra-judicial and emergency laws and extraordinary courts in any form and under any name, currently in effect in many Arab countries, since these undermine the democratic nature of political systems. Regular laws can adequately address all offences, with no need for extraordinary laws. This is a fundamental requirement for democratic legislative reform. Similarly, the elaboration of an effective legislation to deal with terrorism without compromising civil liberties and political rights is an integral part of legislative reform.

### **Unleashing Freedoms**

12. The freedom to establish political parties within the framework of the law and the constitution, providing a forum for all intellectual trends and civil political forces to present their programs in a free, equal opportunity competition for governing, within the liberties provided for in international covenants.
13. Arab countries which have not ratified the following set of international and Arab agreements should do so now:
  - a) The Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
  - b) The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.
  - c) The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
  - d) The Modernization of the Arab Charter for Human Rights Project, as drafted by a team of Arab experts (December, 2003).
  - e) All international conventions on the rights of women providing for the abolition of all forms of discrimination against them.
  - f) The International Convention on the Rights of the Child providing for a better life for Arab children.

14. Freeing the press and media from all forms of governmental influences or hegemony. Free press is the pillar of the democratic system and a clear representation of the freedom of expression and transparency. This can be achieved by developing the media, the laws regulating the publication of newspapers and the establishment of broadcasting stations and television channels based on independent ownership and management and transparency of finance. Thus, strengthening the ability of media groups to organize and conduct their affairs, without external interference by government authorities.
15. Allowing the establishment of civil society institutions by amending the restricting laws on founding societies, syndicates and volunteer unions, regardless of the nature of their activities whether political, social, cultural or economic, to guarantee its freedom in funding and mobility. Control of foreign funding should be done by following the methods applied in advanced societies. Undoubtedly, amending the legal framework that controls civil society should be given priority in the consideration of issues relevant to the democratic development of society. Such amendments are also related to activating the means of participation in political life as well as getting rid of the sense of alienation and marginalization, from which Arab citizens suffer for lack of any active and effective participation in the making of their future. Lastly, these amendments will guarantee effective contributions by the civil society in issues that require teamwork and voluntary initiatives.
16. Encouraging public opinion polls and freeing them of any obstacles as one of the basic democratic methods. Founding institutions and research centers to work on Arab public opinion polls and to encourage the conducting of such polls regularly on all political, social and economic issues, would provide accurate data that could help decision-makers and social planners. In addition, these will draw an accurate graph of public opinion trends that have to be taken into consideration when making any decision.

### **Secondly: Economic Reform:**

17. Economic reform includes all legislation, policies, and measures that would free the national economy and turn it efficiently in accordance with market mechanisms. This would be done in a manner that would

ensure economic prosperity and facilitate integration with regional and global economies.

18. Needless to say, this economic concept implies the resolution of many debates and controversies over the orientation of the economic system, including many details such as the role of the state, the relationship between the role of the state and the market, and the social dimension of development.
19. All participants agreed that the current performance of Arab economies does not meet the challenges that need to be confronted, nor does it reflect the latent potential of our financial and human resources. This deficient performance of Arab economies and the requirements of the future call for a radical economic reform to change the current situation. Slowing down the implementation of the economic reform has an enormous cost that will only increase with time. The Arab economic situation is captured by the following indicators:
  - a) Decline of economic growth rates of the gross national income and the *per capita* income compared to international indicators;
  - b) Decline of the Arab countries' share in international trade, with exports limited to primary products, and with a marginal share in the high-value-added products;
  - c) Reduction of the Arab region's share in foreign capital flows, including direct and indirect foreign investments;
  - d) Failure to generate job opportunities for new job seekers with a sharp increase in unemployment rates, which are higher than the average in developing countries, mainly among youth groups and women;
  - e) Increase of poverty rates in Arab countries among the unemployed as well as the employed
20. The gamut of policies proposed and implemented in the region have focused mainly on creating overall stability, and reducing rates of inflation through the triad of stabilization, privatization and liberation. Such programs did not address other important issues such as unemployment and the provision of basic social services.

21. In the predominantly young Arab world, youth employment, the quality of education and of social services, and micro enterprise programs should be essential elements in reform programs. There should be clearly established priorities, with a special focus on the institutional framework required to achieve overall social and economic reform.

### **Structural Reform**

22. Therefore, we propose the following to achieve structural reform:

- a) Arab countries should declare clear plans with specific time frames for institutional and structural reform, with a precise definition of the role of the state in encouraging economic activity and providing an enabling environment for the private sector, and for the public sector in those areas where it has a comparative advantage, and suitable competencies. This should be done with clearly defined plans to effect a radical change in governmental administrative systems, to minimize the bureaucracy, and to raise the efficiency of governmental authorities dealing with investors, importers, and exporters, in such matters as taxes, customs, and license issuing authorities.
- b) Encouraging privatization programs, including in the banking sector, with appropriate regulation to safeguard the public interest, while reducing government investment, except in strategic areas and for public goods, and abolishing economically unjustified government monopoly rights in order to encourage the private sector, attract more investment, and maximize the participation of the private sector in generating job opportunities.
- c) Setting criteria and regulations to enhance the quality of national products and to establish national councils supporting competitiveness, along with carrying out and making public continuous evaluation results.
- d) Inculcating good governance rules for economic activity, with special focus on transparency, accountability and the rule of law.
- e) Information and data are extremely important to make decisions and for a realistic and sound analysis. There is a need to pass laws that would obligate authorities producing economic data to make this data available and easily accessible, whenever needed according to clear and agreed rules. Comprehensive databases of Arab economies should be prepared.
- f) Ensuring environmental conservation in all economic activities.
- g) Participants also call for providing mechanisms suitable for training those employed in agencies that either supervise or participate in



economic activity, directly or indirectly, such as businessmen's associations, banking unions, as well as prosecutors and the judges who are responsible for dealing with cases and disputes related to new economic and financial transactions and tools, such training to be provided the training institutes for judges.

23. One the regional scale, we would like to emphasize:

- a) Developing Arab financial sectors in general, and banks in particular, and encouraging the establishment of big banking institutions, as well as the modernization of networks of Arab stock markets.
- b) Developing and networking the infrastructure for information technology in the Arab world.
- c) Activating Arab agreements by setting achievable objectives and identifying some priority sectors housing good chances of success in promoting greater inter-Arab economic cooperation, such as transportation, electricity, energy, and information and communication technology. A follow up body affiliated to the Arab Economic Unity Council should be established to regularly report results to the Arab Summit and to make these results and reports public.
- d) Agreement on a binding framework to liberalize trade in services between Arab countries.
- e) Organizing an Arab labor market through drafting and ratifying a multilateral agreement to coordinate the movement of Arab labor within a fixed-term time-frame, and to define work conditions for the duration of stay in host countries and determine the responsibility of the labor exporting countries in evaluating the skills and capacities of the labor force. They should also prepare training programs for Arab labor to enable them to enter foreign markets, according to protocols and evaluation standards agreed upon with foreign countries.
- f) Establishing an Arab institution, funded and managed by the private sector, to train leaders in management in order to enable new generations to develop and carry out reform programs.

24. To increase the Arab World's effectiveness within the international economy, we suggest:

- a) Calling on developed countries to open their markets to Arab exports, especially agricultural products.
- b) A highly efficient specialized administration should be formed and affiliated to the League of Arab States in order to positively

participate in world economy by increasing the exports of goods and services, increasing the relative share of foreign investments in Arab countries, and benefiting from education, training, and work opportunities in different markets. Such an administration should follow up on world trade issues, empowering Arab countries to actively participate in the World Trade Organization, coordinating Arab positions, defending their interests, training and rehabilitating Arab cadres to negotiate issues of trade liberalization and agriculture, and ensuring access to market for industrial products.

25. To promote investment, we would like to emphasize:

- a) Resolving forcefully problems that obstruct Arab and foreign investment.
- b) Establishing an effective mechanism to settle economic disputes among investors.
- c) Dealing with Arab investments in all Arab countries in a manner equal to national investments.
- d) Encouraging innovation, attracting investment necessary for research and development, launching projects in high value added goods and services, and protecting intellectual property rights.

26. Addressing poverty in its multiple dimensions, including social and political marginalization, lack of participation and constrained opportunities for upward mobility. This precludes reliance on economic growth alone as sufficient instrument for poverty reduction. It calls for the adoption of a closer implementation timeframe to fight poverty in conformity with the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals.

27. Given the importance of the employment issue, especially with regard to Arab youths and women, we suggest:

- a) Developing micro and small enterprise funding programs to help solve the unemployment problem, while paying special attention to women.
- b) Empowering women to participate in the national work force and to make use of their experience and qualifications.
- c) Reviewing current economic policies from a fully-employment perspective, to address five million new Arab job seekers annually, with special emphasis on promoting youth employment. This will only be achieved by implementing policies that could raise actual economic growth rates to no less than 6 % -7% annually, on average,

over the coming decade. This requires integrated policies to increase investments, promote capacity building, and better direct and mobilize local and foreign savings.

28. Participants emphasized that Arab civil society and private sector institutions can contribute to economic reform. This contribution would be achieved by participating in priority setting, and by working hand in hand with governments in implementation. Civil society institutions have an important role to play in following up with governments on measures and solutions regarding reform.

29. In order to implement these proposals, the participants call upon the Bibliotheca Alexandrina to organize, in collaboration with the League of Arab States, a series of conferences and specialized seminars to discuss these issues in a manner commensurate with their significance and technical specificity. It is important that these discussions take place within a workable framework that responds to the challenges the Arab economies are facing on the local and regional levels, with a view to come up with specific proposals to be submitted to Arab governments. The most important of these topics are:

- a) Arab financial sectors and investment constraints.
- b) Unified customs system and inter-Arab trade.
- c) Arab competitiveness and evaluation standards, establishing national councils for Arab competitiveness and the unification of evaluation standards.
- d) Incubators for high technology products.
- e) Public resources management in the Arab world.
- f) Good governance of economic activity.
- g) Raising the level of economic media.

### **Third: Social Reform:**

30. Recognizing that the Arab community as a whole possesses great social and cultural resources, it is time to make maximum use of these resources to establish a viable, cohesive Arab society that is capable of solving its problems and, subsequently, moving forward to effectively achieve

progress and participate in forging its own future and the future of the world. This involves working towards achieving the following goals:

- a) Developing a pattern of family relationships that would help create an independent, distinct and free individual capable of taking responsibility for his/her choices. This requires a review of some of the values that continue to negatively affect the Arab life such as submissiveness and obedience, and substituting them with values of independence, dialogue and positive interaction.
- b) The media plays a fundamental role in building the general culture of individuals. Therefore, this requires affirming the role of the media in re-building the values that support development and modernization such as equality, tolerance, accepting the other and even the value of difference. In addition, these values have to go hand in hand with concepts like precision, commitment to perfection and other positive values that would help transform Arab society into a new and functional society.
- c) Directing Arab societies towards acquiring, disseminating and producing knowledge. This requires focusing on five integrated and interrelated issues that work towards achieving a society of knowledge. These are:
  - Confirming the need for human development and setting education as a priority.
  - Achieving technological development and providing the basis for its infrastructure.
  - Developing strategies for scientific research.
  - Supporting free enterprise and encouraging creative innovation.
  - Providing a supportive environment for a society of political, economic and cultural knowledge.

31. To insure this, the participants recommend the following:

- a) Setting Arab criteria for education output at all levels in keeping with international criteria that provide a baseline for gauging and evaluation. However, adopting these criteria should be only the starting point that each country can build on and add to.

- b) Establishing organizations to evaluate the quality of education in each Arab country. These organizations must be independent of Ministries of Education and should be connected regionally, allowing for exchange of graduates and the free movement of citizens in the job market.
- c) Keeping the state's financial support of and responsibility for educational institutions while maintaining the academic independence of these public and private establishments. Furthermore, private financing of higher education should be allowed provided that it is for non-profit purposes.
- d) Promoting scientific research and increasing its financial and human resources, linking it with the institutions responsible for production and development, and erasing all red tape policies that hamper the freedom of research and the production of knowledge.
- e) Aiming at de-centralization and flexibility in running these institutions.
- f) Coordinating the output of the educational system with the changing needs of the job market, economic growth, and the building of competitive capacities.
- g) Inviting the civil society to share in financing education and contributing in running and monitoring it in Arab societies.
- h) Granting students the privilege to practice their political rights including peaceful demonstration, free expression of their opinions, and democratic elections in student unions. Students must be permitted to participate in running their own educational process and allowed difference of opinion.
- i) Eradicating illiteracy, especially among women, in no more than ten years.
- j) Focusing attention on the Arabic language, developing its curricula and agreeing upon a set of criteria to conduct comparative studies in that area.

32. Working towards achieving social stability in Arab societies. This requires the reformulation of effective policies that secure justice in the distribution of wealth. Thus, there is also a need to end the social marginalization of certain social groups through establishing policies that emphasize respect and implement international declarations of human rights. There is also a need to focus on the empowerment of women, promoting their participation in the development of society and

eliminating all forms of discrimination against them. This is closely related to the issue of integrating youth, enhancing their participation in society and providing immediate solutions for the issue of youth employment. Last, but not least, there is a need to develop the conditions of Arab childhood and formulate the effective social policies to deal with people with special needs and the elderly in the Arab world. Furthermore, the problem of the increase in the rate of poverty requires an effective strategy to address this in the light of the solutions suggested by the United Nations and other international organizations.

33. It is our belief that we should address the negative political, social and economic practices in the Arab countries. Therefore, the participants find it necessary to formulate a new social contract between the state and the citizen in Arab society. This contract should define clearly the rights of the state and its duties towards the citizen and, likewise, outline the rights of the Arab citizen and how to safeguard them.

#### **Fourth: Cultural Reform:**

34. Participants in the conference took into consideration all local and regional cultural problems and challenges, addressing them from a perspective that asserts a set of indispensable cultural priorities:

- a) Inculcating rational and scientific thinking through encouraging and funding scientific research institutions and allowing civil societies the freedom to develop such institutions. Simultaneously, any form of religious extremism that may exist in educational curricula, sermons in mosques and the official or private media must be completely eradicated.
- b) Encouraging the continuous revision and renewal of religious discourse to reveal the civilized, enlightened aspects of religion such as promoting intellectual freedom, allowing interpretation of religious matters to benefit the individual and society and facing all forms of rigidity, extremism and literalism in comprehending religious texts. The reform of religious discourse should be consistent with the spirit of science, rationality and the requisites of contemporary life. This will eliminate pernicious contradictions between the freedom of thought and creativity on the one hand, and the tutelage, imposed in

- the name of religion, on the other. Religion calls for persuasion through debate and does not impose intellectual terrorism on those who may disagree.
- c) Freeing and developing female culture to achieve equality between the sexes in education and employment in order to ensure full social participation.
  - d) Providing a cultural atmosphere to promote democratic development and peaceful transfer of power. This can only be achieved by confronting atrophied customs, and the rudiments of decadent political systems that can prevent any effective political participation or reform. Consequently, this will change the political and social view of women and augment their cultural and scientific participation. Because cultural development is the foundation for any development, the first step that must be taken towards any radical reform cannot succeed without spreading the culture of democracy through educational curricula and the media.
  - e) Renewing cultural discourse and freeing it from the elements that prevent dialogue with the others, and accepting differences and, renewing all related discourses such as political, social groups and media discourses.
  - f) Reforming and activating Arab cultural institutions through financial and moral support to widen the range of their plans and coordinate between them and other cultural organizations.
  - g) Canceling any form of censorship over intellectual and cultural activities to support freedom of thought, augment creativity and free it from any religious, traditional, private or political authority under the pretext of public interest. The advance of nations depends on guaranteeing freedom to all intellectual and creative thinkers.
  - h) Promoting cultural efforts on the national level and strengthening the concept of interdependence in cultural economics.
  - i) Preserving the Arabic language and developing it for digital information technology.
  - j) Encouraging cultural interaction with the entire world to ensure the diversity of the creative human culture and promote effective contribution to international organizations without going against our cultural identity or cultural heritage.
  - k) Confirming that science is a main component of culture and a major path for future vision, which establishes a general cultural consciousness in the knowledge-based society, and is the best way to advance in every field.

- 1) Documenting Arab culture annually to monitor the mechanisms of production and the forms of follow up and coordinating the efforts to organize the activities of professional Arab cultural syndicates and publishing the results.
35. Encouraging national cultural exchange through the following measures:
- a) Exempting Arab cultural production from any kind of censorship or customs regulations in all Arab countries, while, simultaneously, raising the level of competitive programs against programs that represent foreign cultures.
  - b) Developing mutual digital publication projects for newspapers, magazines and books, so that we can overcome distribution problems and the obstacles hindering the flow of Arabic publications.
  - c) Activating governmental and civil translation institutions and coordinating their selections along two parallel-synchronized lines: Translating from Arabic into all languages and translating from all living languages into Arabic.
  - d) Encouraging creativity and intellectual creative achievements on both the national and regional levels. This will provide more motivation for cultural production, and could be achieved through offering valuable prizes and various forms of national and regional celebrations.



## **Fifth: Civil Society Follow Up Mechanisms:**

36. Highlighting the reform aspects that the conference has discussed requires establishing a cohesive set of implementation mechanisms, which would provide for following up on the agreed suggestions and recommendations. We, therefore, have to focus on the role of Arab civil society in reform, especially in the different sustainable development fields. This requires taking the following measures:

- a) Establish an Arab Reform Forum at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina to act as an open forum for initiatives, intellectual dialogue and Arab projects. This will include all initiatives whether those relevant to Arab reform or other initiatives that are related to all forms of dialogue and cooperation with the international civil society. This will be done through arranging joint seminars and dialogues, both on the Arab and international levels. Such seminars will discuss general development issues, while particularly highlighting the roles of youth and women in development, in addition to carrying out joint projects in various fields of development. Linked to this activity is the creation of an Arab Societal Observatory, to follow the activities of Arab civil society and evaluate, political, economic, social and cultural reform programs through a comprehensive list of qualitative and quantitative indicators. .
- b) Civil society institutions in every Arab country will select a number of the non-governmental organizations that have achieved success in the fields of development and human rights, to present their activities and assess their social contributions. This will be done through a general Arab conference to be held annually in Alexandria or any of the Arab countries to highlight the role of the civil society in development.
- c) Organize national Arab conferences in each country to discuss the reform ideas and to present successful experiences on both the Arab and international levels. The Bibliotheca Alexandrina will host the next conference on “Reform in Egypt”.
- d) Organize regional Arab seminars to discuss different issues of reform.
- e) Establish a follow up committee, which will convene, at least once every six months, to review the achievements and provide support for the dialogue forum once it is established.

## **Conclusion:**

37. The participants confirm that the implementation of the reform visions they have drafted will not be the sole responsibility of governments. Both the civil society and governments should shoulder such responsibility. The promising future of our Arab nation will only be achieved by investing and dedicating creative capacities, genuine initiatives and continuous work in both vision and implementation.

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