



منتدى غرب آسيا - شمال إفريقيا
West Asia - North Africa Forum

WANA Forum 2011:

A Region in Transition

The West Asia - North Africa (WANA) has, in recent months, entered a period of fundamental change. While few could have predicted the nature and extent of transformation, the underlying driving forces behind the various protests have been present for some time. Indeed, the Cedar Revolution in Lebanon and the Green Revolution in Iran could be considered as the forerunners of a new call for change in governance that has united people across WANA in the pursuit of human dignity and freedom. As hundreds of thousands have taken to the streets in protest of political and economic oppression, in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, Jordan, Syria and elsewhere, the implications and consequences of change remain unclear.

In response to regional events, the annual meeting of the WANA Forum will convene actors from across the region, to include academics, intellectuals, civil society leaders, political and private sector representatives, to examine the nature of the ongoing transition across the region. As a regional process, directed by and for its participants, the WANA Forum is committed to providing a non-threatening, neutral platform for dialogue and developing new regional thinking based upon shared values. It has long been the belief of Forum members that through cooperation and the participation of what HRH Prince El Hassan bin Talal calls the 'Third Domain' of partnership can all sectors of society – civil, public and private – develop responsible stewardship for a more sustainable, prosperous and equitable future. The annual meeting will consider the message the WANA Forum community wants to convey to the broader region and to the international community and how economic interests of nation-states can align with holistic regional aspirations that ensure human dignity and foster social cohesion.

Contextualising Regional Events

WANA's recent political history is marked by the fragmented experimentation of imported ideologies – from nationalism to socialism, neo-conservatism to communism. This has often led to continual ideological clashes and confused political economy despite repeated efforts to frame these ideologies within pre-existing historical, cultural and religious legacies. Indeed, the failure to develop our own political systems, based on embracing common principles of transparency, accountability and citizens' empowerment has brought considerable disparity – political, economic and social – between and within nation-states in the region. WANA hosts some of the world's highest per capita GDPs and some of its lowest. The region is home to almost 27 million uprooted and displaced persons. Conflict has, according to some estimates cost the region as much as \$12 trillion in lost opportunities since Madrid and Oslo. Overall, the systems that have been put in place, which offer subsidies and belie true market value of goods and energy, leave the region's economy distorted and highly vulnerable to global price spikes in the costs of food and fuel. The reduction of subsidies, while economically necessary according to some, may ultimately lead to decreases in living conditions and outpourings of discontentment.

Disenfranchised and disempowered, people across WANA are beginning to hold their governments accountable in countries that can no longer mask political oppression with state subsidies. Reliance on mass exploitation of natural resources, with a weak industrial base to provide the required jobs, and lacking market diversity meant that the region's economy has suffered from rentierism and clientelism forcing its young people to find work outside their home countries, while causing excessive environmental damage and social fault lines.

The economic pressures faced by nations across the region are inextricably linked to demographic changes. With almost 60 per cent of the population of WANA under the age of 25, approximately 23 per cent of youth are currently unemployed and a further 27 per cent are economically inactive.¹ Perhaps the youth have come of age in breaking their long-held silence, demanding empowerment, opportunity and the recognition of their human dignity in the face of political, economic and social oppression. The youth can be - and indeed, should be - energised to innovate, create and fuel strong economic growth.

Under rising demographic and economic strain, combined with an inability of governments to accommodate growing demands of access to education, social services, employment and political participation, people across WANA have mobilised in demanding change. The movement that materialised in Tunisia offers an opportunity to build new systems of governance, economy and regional connectedness, accompanied by new political structures that enable and empower citizens of all ages to become stakeholders of their own future.

The wave of change and transformation has been strengthened by the technological empowerment of citizens. It is increasingly difficult for authoritarian governments to control access to information, and as the cost of technology decreases, so does the required entry-level for communicative tools. Individuals and organisations alike are now able to play a role in informing, organising and exercising their right to freedom of expression. The spread of information means that power will be more widely distributed and informal networks will undercut the monopoly of traditional bureaucracy.²

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Building on the Forum's objectives in advancing social cohesion; improving the region's ability to recover and reconstruct in the aftermath of conflict; advocating sustainable environmental and green economy solutions; as well as its desire to mitigate against a history of imported political and economic ideologies, the Forum will explore potential outcomes for the region once the 'sands of revolution' have settled.

For instance, what constitutes sustainable political and economic structures that can foster long-term stability and ensure human dignity across the region? What lessons can be learned from the experience of other regions that have undergone similar transformations? In discussing transition, the key question becomes transition to what? What would be considered a positive outcome for the region?

¹ International Labour Office, *Global Employment Trends for Youth*, August 2010.

² Joseph Nye, *The Reality of Virtual Power*, p. 2011