



It gives me great pleasure to introduce this first *The State of the Arab Cities* report, the latest addition to a rapidly expanding series of regional publications on the state of cities which already include the African, the Asia-Pacific, the East European and the Latin America-Caribbean regions.

The Arab States constitute perhaps the most diverse region so far covered by the state of the cities report series. National populations for 2010 varied from as little as 691,000 in the Comoros to well over 84 million in Egypt. IMF data for the same year showed that GDP per capita ranged from USD 862 in the Comoros to USD 74,901 in Qatar. The region's highest literacy rate of 94.5 per cent is found in Kuwait, while Mauritania scores only 55.8 per cent. Likewise, the national urbanization rate in Kuwait is 98.4 per cent versus 31.8 in Yemen.

Clearly, the region also has a significant number of shared characteristics beyond being Arab States. The overriding common feature is the shared Islamic religion and culture, but there are other common traits, including large demographic youth bulges, significant youth under- and unemployment rates. There are also highly centralized governance systems that are being questioned by the populations at large, acute stresses on fresh water supplies, and increasingly felt impacts of climate change, to mention a few.

The year 2011 has been a historic one for the Arab States region. I am referring to what became known as 'the Arab Spring'. As early as 2008, the first State of the African Cities report - which covered the Arab States on the Africa continent - issued succinct but accurate advice to the governments of northern Africa that only major political, social and economic reform could avert significant urban unrest.

The report warned that the combination of large numbers of unemployed urban youth, a lack of affordable housing, and the resultant stress on the ability of societies to cater for urban new household formation rates constituted an explosive mixture. The events of 2011 showed the validity of this forecast.

The Arab States region is currently at a historic cross road in its political, social and economic evolution. And so I would like to repeat here the message carried in our 2008 Africa report, because of its significance for the Arab States region as a whole:

The challenge is to reshape social and urban policies towards sustainable economic growth and adequate living conditions for rapidly expanding numbers of young and poor urbanites. But the confrontation with urbanity and modernity can only be resolved by the region itself, while the outcomes of policies to better integrate [the Arab States] in the global economy ... and among themselves ... will determine its future.

UN-Habitat is promoting the economic role of cities both in the Arab world and beyond. We also want to ensure that urban planning is well equipped to deal with current urban challenges.

Finally, I would like to commend the excellent inter-agency cooperation in the true spirit of One-UN in the preparation of this publication. I thank all partners for their vision, contributions and cooperation.

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