

## Commentary: Is it light at the end of the tunnel, or another train coming? Concluding comments

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I genuinely thank the commentators on my piece (Maziak 2009) for enriching the debate (Nuwayhid 2009; El-Zein 2009; Mandil 2009). I feel I need to begin my response by stating clearly that nowhere in my commentary did I claim the Arab world should be united, or that health problems/indicators are similar or generalizable for all Arab countries, nor did I advocate the adoption of “western democracy” as a solution for health problems in the Arab world (Maziak 2009). As a side point however, I do not mind an European type of union for Arab countries based on common interest, and would advocate the unleashing of civil society potential and democratic institutions (e.g., free press) as important conditions for health and development in this region. While most of the commentaries reflected on the heterogeneous picture of health and development among Arab states, I make it clear in my commentary that this is not my focus. Rather, I tried to illuminate some shared and interconnected underlying dynamics of the health landscape; namely the role of governance, traditional and legal institutions, humanitarian crisis and wars, and women’s status. These lie beyond the reach of the classical socio-economic determinants of health that public health research in the region has been engaged in for a long time, and are at the heart of health and equality in the Arab world. While interactions between these are complex, in the most simplified example, governance determines the way health systems are run and the checks and balances on its performance, while traditional forces shape the legal systems, the status of segments of the society (e.g.,

women, HIV infected), and determine what is allowed or taboo for public health to tackle. On the other hand, regional conflicts and foreign intervention tend to deepen the humanitarian crisis, solidify totalitarian regimes and traditional social forces, which will in turn reflect on the rights and wellbeing of citizens, especially the voiceless. I also argue, contrary to the commentaries’ view, that these factors are primary to the work of health professionals and researchers, community initiatives, as well as political commitment to public health. In fact, it seems that the more we repeat these recipes the more we tend to believe in them, and the less we tend to ask the logical question; “why are significant improvements not occurring when we have long ago diagnosed the problem, and have legions of committed and able people working to solve it”. This is the main theme of my paper that remains unaddressed by the commentaries.

It is easy to be optimistic about some positive changes occurring undoubtedly in all Arab societies, but the domains I discuss in my commentary represent more powerful and fundamental forces that are currently drawing the Arab world in the opposite direction towards more division, friction, and suffering. Most of the progress mentioned by the commentators does not scratch deeper than the surface, because it does not address the roots of social inequality and injustice in Arab societies. As I make it clear in my piece, the official health indicators in Arab countries can be unreliable, and they do leave out important sectors of these societies (e.g., foreign workers/servants in the Gulf States). I see no pretext for optimism, and in fact considering the global progress in human rights in the last two decades, the Arab world, again to a variable degree, is going in the opposite direction in terms of civil freedoms and political representation, women’s and minorities/refugees rights, the humanitarian crisis

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stemming from conflicts, and the influence of traditional forces on the social and legal fabric of societies. My mother had more rights and respect as an educated and economically productive woman growing up in a traditional Arab society in the 50s–60s of the twentieth century, than my daughter would have growing up in most Arab countries today.

The everlasting peace (i.e., not isolated peace treaties) I advocate cannot be the ultimate solution to all problems in the Arab world today, but in my opinion has the best potential to create an environment, whereby the current regressive dynamics can be challenged. The Arab–Israeli conflict is not only delaying progress in involved Arab states, but is the main factor behind regional division, foreign intervention, arms race, social development favoring extremism, and sidetracking of development.

I am not trying to preach doom and gloom, but to blow the whistle on a region that harbors a mass scale of suffering and nurtures powerful seeds of injustice and instability. In the end, this is a case where I would like to be wrong.

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