



BEIRUT INSTITUTE

**Thinking 2020s -
What to Expect? How to Prepare?**

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in
Abu Dhabi

Policy Recommendations

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Introduction

The Arab region stands at a crossroads, facing increasingly complex challenges, but also a set of historic opportunities. Arab states must not only respond to the contingencies they face on a daily basis, but must also commit the requisite time and resources to addressing generational challenges such as terrorism and the endemic crisis of unemployment, alongside global issues such as climate change and technological and economic disruption.

Meanwhile, the relative disengagement of certain key foreign powers from the region, coupled with more active and muscular interventions by other external states, is reshaping the Middle East's geopolitical landscape. So too is popular unrest, which continues to reverberate across the Arab region.

As we move into the 2020s, we are all preoccupied by the central questions that animated the third edition of the Beirut Institute Summit, which fostered rigorous and vociferous debate.

What can we expect?

How do we prepare?

The daunting complexity of the policy challenges confronting this region requires exceptional creativity and expertise, and an unusual breadth of vision. The quality of the recommendations and perspectives raised at the summit reflect the inventiveness of our participants. Delegates and panelists conducted rich, stimulating discussions that focused on a wide variety of issues, from regional security and political stability, to the importance of education and cultural exchange, and the critical role of women and youth in leading the response to these questions.

The comprehensive discussions on the challenges and opportunities facing the Arab region through the next decade concerned five strategic areas: security, governance, economic development, socio-cultural change to empower women and young people, and environmental protection. This paper explores in depth the policy recommendations arising from each debate.

Executive Summary

How should the Arab region tackle its most critical challenges and grasp its most promising opportunities in the decade ahead? That was the focus of the third Beirut Institute Summit, which is the culmination of the Institute's work to build a shared vision of peace, prosperity and progress for our region by drawing on the expertise of thought-leaders from across the globe.

The summit, held in Abu Dhabi in October 2019, brought together academics, policymakers, business leaders, journalists and prominent figures from the public, private and civil sectors. It built on the ideas generated at the two previous summits, held in 2015 and 2018, as participants brought fresh perspectives to recurring issues, while also giving their thoughts on the most recent developments playing out across the region.

The focus of the discussions was to achieve consensus around a set of robust, actionable recommendations that will command broad support across the Arab region. These were conceptualized along five strategic axes:

1. Take Ownership of Multilateral Peace-Building

Peace-building requires effective multilateral action, led by Arab states, and the leveraging of relationships with key external countries through diplomacy

2. Build Modern States

Improve governance based firmly on the rule of law and make public institutions more responsive to social demands and more accountable to the public

3. Build Prosperity

Build enduring prosperity through pan-regional co-operation, deepen integration with the West, develop stronger ties with Asia, and promote greater involvement of the private sector in knowledge and tech-based economies

4. Empower Women and Young People

Addressing the two major socio-cultural issues that beset the region will contribute to stability, growth, and prosperity. All people need to be recognized for their potential to contribute, rather than treated as a burden to be cared for

5. Protect the Environment

Countries must act to secure a livable environment with sufficient and sustainable natural resources for current and future generations

The recommendations in each of the five areas are drawn from the broad and deep discussions on each topic at the summit. They are the result of the insight, expertise and experience the participants contributed to the collaborative and open-minded debates. At the start of the 2020s, these recommendations offer a framework for peace, good governance, prosperity and cultural evolution that will allow the people of the Arab region to thrive in the decades to come.

Overview of the Recommendations

1. Take Ownership of Multilateral Peace-Building

Peace-building requires effective multilateral action, led by Arab states, and the leveraging of relationships with key external countries through diplomacy

- 1.1 Re-engage with international diplomacy and include a wider range of key countries and global institutions
- 1.2 Take ownership of the region's problems to achieve lasting stability through Arab-led multilateral initiatives
- 1.3 Use soft economic power to advance diplomatic and political solutions to conflicts

2. Build Modern States

Improve governance based firmly on the rule of law and make public institutions more responsive to social demands and more accountable to the public

- 2.1 Build efficient, transparent institutions to ensure accountability and improved public-sector performance
- 2.2 Use data-based technologies as enablers of engagement and empowerment
- 2.3 Systematically combat public-sector corruption with robust legislation backed up by impartial and firm enforcement
- 2.3 Promote cities to showcase innovative development initiatives and policies for the region as a whole

3. Build Prosperity

Build enduring prosperity through pan-regional co-operation, deepen integration with the West, develop stronger ties with Asia, and promote greater involvement of the private sector in knowledge and tech-based economies

- 3.1 Advance regional economic integration within an Arab common market
- 3.2 Deepen Arab integration with Western societies and economies
- 3.3 Widen and deepen co-operation with fast-growing Asian economies
- 3.4 Accelerate digital transformation and the transition to a knowledge economy
- 3.5 Create programs and incubators to promote traditional trades and next-generation craftsmanship

4. Empower Women and Young People

Addressing the two major socio-cultural issues that beset the region will contribute to stability, growth, and prosperity

- 4.1 Increase the participation of women in business and politics through quotas and address legal discrimination
- 4.2 Enable young people to shape their own futures through education and embed shared cultural experiences into policymaking to draw the region's youth together

5. Protect the Environment

Countries must act to secure a livable environment with sufficient and sustainable natural resources for current and future generations

- 5.1 Develop clear policies and provide strong monitoring to ensure effective waste management and the promotion of a circular economy
- 5.2 Increase wide-ranging mitigation programs to cope with the consequences of climate change and substantially improve incentives to prevent further acceleration of global warming

1. Take Ownership of Multilateral Peace-Building

As we enter the 2020s, the prospect of region-wide peace and stability still appears distant. The prolonged civil war in Syria continues, following the pullback of US forces from the northeast of the country and the military offensive by Turkey. Meanwhile, the conflict in Yemen continues and the Palestinian question appears further from resolution than at any time in decades.

Against this volatile backdrop, governments across the region are under pressure from citizens who are more demanding of their own leaderships and are challenging sectarian, ethnic and religious divides. Protests have flared in Sudan, Algeria, Iraq and, after the 2019 Beirut Institute Summit, Lebanon and Iran.

In the wake of the dashed hopes of the 2011 Arab Spring, citizens in many Arab countries are again rejecting a status quo marked by ineffective or failing state institutions. Their grievances encompass poor public services, widespread unemployment and lack of opportunities, extensive corruption and the absence of transparency and accountability from authorities at all levels. The recent civil unrest in Iran also has an international dimension, due to fears of a regional war between Tehran and its Gulf Arab neighbors.

Addressing these profound interlocking challenges will require a concerted and collective effort by all players in the region and the co-operation of global powers. To build lasting peace and stability, Arab countries urgently need to align their national strategic goals with the collective aspirations of the Arab people. Peace-building will also require effective multilateral action, led by Arab states but leveraging relationships with key external powers.

Action items:

- Re-engage with international diplomacy and include a wider range of key countries and global institutions
- Take ownership of the region's problems to achieve lasting stability through Arab-led multilateral initiatives
- Use soft economic power to advance diplomatic and political solutions to conflicts

1.1 Re-engage with international diplomacy and include a wider range of key countries and global institutions

For the past century, the politics of the Arab region has been characterized by volatility and uncertainty, punctuated by sporadic and contingent interventions by various foreign powers. Shifting alliances and webs of vested interests have complicated the political and security landscapes. Throughout the Middle East, the spread of terrorism and extremism by armed, non-state militia groups has often fractured national unity and undermined many states.

Against this backdrop, none of the region's ongoing conflicts has appeared any closer to resolution over the past year, with the arguable exception of Yemen, where a partial ceasefire was agreed in March 2019. In Syria, the civil war drags on. Meanwhile, there are growing fears of another Gulf confrontation involving Iran after attacks on oil tankers in the Gulf and on Saudi Aramco oil fields, as well as deep pessimism about the prospects for substantive negotiations to end the Palestinian crisis.

These diplomatic challenges must spur Arab countries to develop broader forms of conflict management and resolution across the region, especially given the Middle East's changing geopolitical landscape. The redeployment of US forces in northeast Syria and Turkey's subsequent intervention is the most recent example of how this landscape is being ruptured by unanticipated developments.

The risk for Arab countries is that the region will descend into a permanent crisis of unresolvable conflicts, compounded by disruptive interventions by external actors. Successful conflict management and the construction of a lasting peace throughout the region depend on Arab countries working together to seize the diplomatic initiative.

China and Russia: potential partners for peace-building

An opportunity exists to take advantage of a transition in the balance of global power and, in particular, the rise of Asia, as trade and investment flows between Arab countries and fast-growing Asian economies continue to increase. In this promising economic context, there is potential to involve China and Russia more closely in diplomatic efforts to build lasting stability in the Middle East.

Since the launch of China's "Belt and Road" initiative in 2011, Beijing has become increasingly diplomatically engaged in the Arab region. At the same time, Russia and China both aspire to create a "greater Eurasia" commercial area that would include the Middle East. Both Moscow and Beijing therefore have an increasing stake in the security and stability of the Arab region.

It is vital to note, however, that summit participants do not believe either Russia or China is ready to step into the role as guarantor of regional stability. China has no desire for any involvement in Syria, and Russia's intervention in the country has placed it in the middle of a conflict where the Syrian regime continues to inflict hardship on its own citizens.

It is therefore essential that Arab states should not reduce their engagement with the US and its Western allies, even as they seek deeper strategic ties with China and Russia. A carefully calibrated diplomatic rebalancing is required, rather than a total departure from traditional political positioning. For the foreseeable future, the Arab region's close relationships with the West will remain critical to regional security, notwithstanding the inconsistent diplomacy of the Trump administration.

1.2 Take ownership of the region's problems to achieve lasting stability through Arab-led multilateral initiatives

At the same time as building broader diplomatic relationships, Arab countries must develop their own robust security frameworks to ensure stability and preserve the territorial integrity and political sovereignty of individual states and the region as a whole.

Arab states should take control of mediation and dispute resolution, building on existing regional institutions such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and drawing on the expertise of Arab-based policy research institutes.

These agreements should include:

- **Areas of common interest that form the basis for mutually beneficial international co-operation:** these should initially cover precise, discrete items such as environmental sustainability, food security or counter-terrorism, where a consensus

is relatively easy to achieve. For instance, there is already a groundswell of calls for urgent, coordinated action on counter-terrorism following successive waves of attacks inspired by the ideology of DAESH. Over time, engagement by Arab countries on multiple non-contentious issues could build trust to tackle co-operation on larger, more complex and more divisive questions.

- **An empowered mechanism for Arab-led arbitration and regional dispute resolution:** this mechanism, governed by regional consensus, would help prevent disputes from developing into full-blown conflicts and would serve as the basis for broader multilateral co-operation. Such initiatives could encompass the League of Arab States, as well as the GCC. Alternatively, member states could explore a formal security collaboration that draws on the full range of diplomatic initiatives and relationships across the Arab region.
- **Deployment of interlocutors from Arab countries with no direct stake in conflicts and disputes in order to broker agreements:** where international diplomacy has stalled, neutral Arab countries should act as intermediaries to build confidence and promote understanding between opposing groups. This approach might offer a better prospect for meaningful dialogue with Iran, Israel and Turkey than waiting for intervention by the US and other external powers.

By taking control of regional diplomacy, Arab countries would in turn reduce their collective vulnerability mainly to destabilizing interventions by external powers. Lebanon's fragile society currently provides a conspicuous example of this process, due to Iran's involvement in Lebanese domestic politics. Iran's allies inside Lebanon have continued to resist popular demands for the formation of a non-sectarian, technocratic government. Lebanon is thus a key test case of whether Arab states can develop a coordinated diplomatic strategy with sufficient incentives to encourage Tehran to moderate its strategic ambitions.

In contrast to Lebanon, the enduring Palestinian crisis illustrates how collective Arab-led mediation could enable more constructive engagement with foreign states and the global community to resolve a seemingly intractable dispute. Palestine's status in the Arab region needs urgent repair through inter-Arab dialogue, with Palestine reinstated in the political discourse of the region.

Currently, the outlook appears bleak, with recent attempts at a rapprochement between Israel and the Arab region over the Palestinian question coming to nothing. Israel has continued to build settlements in the West Bank, while a long-promised US peace plan, crafted by senior advisor to the President, Jared Kushner, has never been released in full. A proposed two-state solution that recognizes Palestinian sovereignty has never seemed more remote, yet the outlines of such a settlement are clear.

To begin with, the unity of the Palestinian leadership should be re-established through free, fair and inclusive elections that are internationally monitored. Arab countries should also work with external powers to encourage the resumption of Israeli-Palestinian talks aimed at achieving a two-state solution.

1.3 Use soft economic power to advance diplomatic and political solutions to conflicts

The history of conflict in the Arab region in recent years is also the history of economic sanctions, which have repeatedly failed to keep the peace and restore stability. In contrast, the

deployment of soft economic power by Arab countries would break this pattern by offering material incentives for building and maintaining peace.

The war in Yemen is an example of where coordinated use of soft economic power by Arab countries could lay the basis for an enduring peace settlement. After five years of conflict, more than half the Yemeni population is starving or at risk of famine, and there is a chronic lack of access to basic medical care. The path forward requires an immediate ceasefire and the comprehensive reconstruction of Yemen's shattered economy and society to resolve this daunting humanitarian crisis.

A collective, pragmatic Arab proposal has already de-escalated the conflict, providing grounds for encouragement. Co-operation between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates led to negotiations backed by economic incentives that produced a limited ceasefire in 2019. Although fighting continues in parts of Yemen, this twin-track diplomatic and economic approach offers a template for a lasting political solution.

Pending a ceasefire, a regional redevelopment fund could be established with the "Friends of Yemen" group, with a view to raising further capital. In total, the World Bank predicts that about 32\$ billion will be needed during the first five years of peace to rebuild Yemen¹. It is imperative that GCC member countries make a major collective contribution to this reconstruction effort. In the longer term, GCC members could consider reintegrating Yemen into the GCC's economic framework, thereby accelerating reconstruction and ensuring the country's return to a stable, co-operative relationship with its neighbors.

Yemen also suggests a potential template for how soft economic power could secure peace in Syria following nine years of civil war. Recent changes in US policy towards Syria have left regional powers to fill the space created by the scaling down of direct US involvement on the ground.

Russia, Turkey and Iran have acted swiftly to exploit the resulting power vacuum, as has Syria's President Bashar al-Assad, who has consolidated his authority and gradually reclaimed territory lost to DAESH, as well as to Kurdish and rebel forces.

The collective challenge for Syria's Arab neighbors is to use trade and investment as incentives to broker a political solution that will end the violence, contain the resurgence of extremism, and lay the groundwork for post-war reconstruction.

Finally, a coordinated diplomatic effort is required, led by key Arab states, which acknowledges the reality of Iran's strategic position as a major regional power while incentivizing Tehran to reorient its foreign policy towards peaceful ends. Potential economic rewards could be a critical bargaining tool, given the impact of international sanctions on the wellbeing of the Iranian people. The possibility of alleviating economic distress and thereby reducing civil unrest would likely be welcomed by Iran's government. However, Iran must demonstrate verifiable good intentions by stopping its support for the Houthis in Yemen and ending propaganda directed against Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.

¹ <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/757121557938303017/pdf/Yemen-Country-Engagement-Note-for-the-Period-FY20-FY21.pdf>

See page 11.

2. Build Modern States

Throughout the Middle East, a number of Arab countries are exposed to dangerous and destabilizing geopolitical forces. However, their greatest vulnerabilities remain domestic problems of governance and institutional capacity, manifested in a lack of accountability and a failure to implement the rule of law in a fair and transparent fashion.

Over the past year, several countries in the region have experienced political upheavals amid simmering popular discontent. In Sudan, a popular revolution ended President Omar al-Bashir's 30-year autocratic rule and saw a joint military-civilian transitional government installed to lead the country towards a promised democratic future.

Similar dynamics emerged in Algeria, where popular pressure forced President Abdelaziz Bouteflika to resign and protests continued in December after the election of Abdelmadjid Tebboune². In Lebanon, the government resigned following weeks of civil unrest, while in Tunisia, a retired academic, Kais Saied, won the country's presidential election on a wave of support from young voters³.

Protests have also erupted sporadically in Egypt and in Iraq, where demonstrators are seeking a non-sectarian government that will eliminate endemic corruption and halt Iranian interference in Iraqi affairs. Since the Beirut Institute Summit took place in October, Iranians have also taken to the streets to protest over higher fuel prices and other grievances.

These events serve to highlight the urgent need to make public institutions more responsive to social demands, and to improve governance and base it firmly on the rule of law. Such a transformation requires a bottom-up approach, through which citizens become active participants in the modernization of their societies.

Four key areas of action could help address the challenges that all Arab countries share:

2.1 Build efficient, transparent institutions to ensure accountability and improved public-sector performance

Efficient, transparent institutions ensure accountability and improved public-sector performance. This creates a virtuous circle, where citizens trust their governments and are motivated to engage with state agencies, thereby reinforcing a sense of nationhood. In some countries, however, the reverse is too often the case, with citizens increasingly dissatisfied with superficial institutional reforms that fail to deliver on promises. Loyalty to the nation, as represented by the state, is consequently weakened.

To strengthen and reform institutions, some countries should do more to leverage their shared language and culture, and be more open to exchanging examples of best practice. Specific actions could include:

² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-50782676>

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-50032460>

- Establishing a pan-Arab school for civil service training to improve the capabilities and productivity of public servants and the quality and efficiency of public services. The performance of customer-facing civil servants in particular directly affects the public's perception of government. A regional training program for civil servants could improve this perception and also encourage the exchange of best-practice examples and experiences between participating countries.
- States should engage with civil society groups and independent think tanks to inform policymaking, as well as drive national discourse on issues of public importance. This would take the form of thought leadership, including studies, conferences and publications on a wide range of public policy issues. In turn, policymakers would be spurred to design and/or adopt innovative, cross-disciplinary approaches to decision-making to help solve complex, intractable problems that have defied traditional top-down approaches.
- Launching public works programs to restore basic services, repair damaged infrastructure, and rebuild schools, health facilities and markets are effective ways to combat radicalization and extremism. Such measures would act as effective "soft power" alternatives to conventional security-led interventions, which risk further alienation of radicalized individuals and communities. Restoring confidence in public authorities and fostering a range of private opportunities are essential to improving quality of life for all citizens.
- Advance the gradual evolution of national political and economic structures to pre-empt civil unrest by addressing key grievances before they trigger popular revolts.

2.2 Use data-based technologies as enablers of engagement and empowerment

It is essential that new and emerging data-based technologies are used as enablers of engagement and empowerment.

So far, governments have been focused on the threat of cyberattacks to state agencies and the weaponization of social media by terrorist and extremist groups. As a result, Arab states have been more inclined to use data-based technology to deal with these security challenges. Yet these same technologies are also excellent vehicles for engagement with citizens, allowing governments to understand their needs and desires, measure public sentiment regarding policy, and deliver digitized services.

2.3 Systematically combat public-sector corruption with robust legislation backed up by impartial and firm enforcement

Promoting public-sector transparency across the region depends on robust legislation backed up by rigorous enforcement. Once anti-corruption laws have been instituted, independent commissions should be established with three key remits:

- Investigate and prosecute allegations of corruption
- Devise and enforce a framework for consistent transparency throughout the public sector
- Ensure central and local government accountability and compliance with the stated standards

2.4 Promote cities to showcase innovative development initiatives and policies for the region as a whole

Robust, sustainable cities are critical to the controlled, incremental evolution of political and economic structures within Arab countries. In recent decades, Arab cities have repeatedly been the fulcrum for civil unrest and mass revolts, which have destabilized and sometimes toppled unpopular regimes. Advancing a state-led transition to better governance depends on addressing the grievances that spur these protests, many of which concern street-level issues such as poor housing and municipal corruption.

Across the region, Arab cities face severe challenges. At one extreme, governments and local residents must literally rebuild homes, offices and infrastructure destroyed by war. At the opposite end, some of the region's most affluent cities are afflicted by familiar quality-of-life issues associated with breakneck development – notably, overstretched public services and pollution.

Despite this wide spectrum, two common flaws in urban planning stand out. Firstly, many Arab cities lack the capacity to finance municipal projects. Secondly, funding for such projects from central governments, international aid agencies and other sources of capital can be extremely inefficient and insensitive to local needs.

To address these shortcomings, governments should localize national-level United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This would enable policymakers, investors and donors to match resources to individual municipal requirements and measure outcomes more accurately. At a regional level, Arab countries should create an infrastructure fund for Arab cities with a four-point mandate to:

- Assist cities that lack the capacity to finance their own projects
- Work with multilateral banks to bridge the gap between funding and bankable municipal projects
- Produce clearly defined governance standards for these projects, linked to regional and national governance standards and objectives
- Provide a platform for the benefit of municipalities that lack the know-how to create, award and monitor large-scale projects

Successful models of cities could then be scaled up to national or regional level. This effort would involve identifying a single city that can act as a test case for innovative development initiatives and policies, overseen by an empowered multilateral regional commission.

3. Build Prosperity

To build enduring prosperity, Arab countries must put into action a wide-ranging vision based on pan-regional co-operation, stronger ties with Asia, greater involvement of the private sector, and digital transformation. Achieving these goals will increase economic opportunities for the growing population and foster stability.

The recommendations apply both to the wealthier, resource-rich countries now seeking to diversify their economies away from fossil fuels and create more private-sector jobs, and to the countries suffering from higher poverty rates and acute unemployment, especially among young people.

3.1 Advance regional economic integration with an Arab common market

A regional economic agreement is urgently required to facilitate greater economic co-operation between Arab countries. Initially, membership of this treaty organization should be restricted to a nucleus of relatively developed countries, but it should also have a clear mandate and mission to expand. Such an agreement would spur economic growth by freeing up trade between countries. It would cut bureaucracy around imports and exports, harmonize regulation and make it easier for local entrepreneurs and multinational companies to do business across the region.

As a first step, national governments should reactivate the agreements of the Arab League's 2009 Arab Economic and Social Development Summit to establish an Arab common market. Four parallel pathways should be pursued to achieve this goal:

- 1. Expand existing co-operative institutions such as the Gulf Cooperation Council** to encompass other Arab countries in the region and, in time, non-Arab Gulf countries. Associate membership should be offered to countries that do not yet meet the economic criteria to qualify for full membership. As associate members, they would be able to benefit from specific economic agreements while working towards full membership.
- 2. Loosen restrictive trade regulations** to facilitate cross-border movement of goods, labor, and capital, including intellectual capital. This liberalization will allow companies access to a wider regional market and talent pool, rather than restricting them to a limited set of national markets with different regulatory regimes that may be difficult for foreign investors to access and navigate.
- 3. Create a pan-Arab standardization office**, modeled on the European Committee for Standardization. This would reduce the inefficiencies related to testing products against multiple overlapping standards to gain access to the various Arab markets.
- 4. Create an anti-dumping mechanism** that would prevent countries taking part in the common market from illegally subsidizing their products, and ensure all member states benefited from a fair level of competition.

3.2 Deepen Arab integration with Western societies and economies

Since the Second World War, Arab countries have become increasingly integrated with Western societies and economies. Initially, this integration was propelled by the West's need for oil and underpinned by a network of post-colonial ties stretching from Baghdad to Rabat. In recent decades, these relationships have been reinforced by a host of "hard" and "soft" political, economic and social forces, ranging from military co-operation and investments by US and European companies across the region, to the rise of an educated middle-class with access to the global internet.

The strong consensus at the third Beirut Institute Summit was that Arab integration with the West needed to be deepened further. In particular, it was noted that values and institutions prized in the US and Europe, including open markets, the rule of law and financial transparency, were also critical to the future development of Middle Eastern countries.

3.3 Widen and deepen co-operation with fast-growing Asian economies

In recent decades, the rise of China, India and other export-driven Asian economies has precipitated a major shift in global trading relationships. Arab countries, positioned between East and West, are well placed to exploit this shift, particularly given the increasing dependence of rising Asian powers on crude oil from the Arabian Gulf.

China

Since the 2013 launch of its vaunted "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI), China has dramatically expanded its economic presence across the Arab region. China is eager to invest in Arab infrastructure, including developing ports and establishing logistics networks, as part of an economic corridor that will eventually connect Central Asia, East Africa, the Indian Subcontinent and the Mediterranean.

Enhanced economic co-operation between Arab nations and China, under the aegis of the BRI, will bring with it the transfer of technology and expertise to the Middle East, as well as financing for much-needed infrastructure improvements and capital projects. In addition, a closer relationship with the world's second-largest economy will allow Arab countries to move away from over-reliance on Western powers and diversify their strategic options.

In the coming years, Arab countries should coordinate their efforts in two areas to maximize the opportunities presented by the BRI:

- 1. Development of a joint China-Arab energy strategy:** China is one of the largest importers of crude oil and natural gas produced by Arab countries. On the Arab side, there is an urgent need to invest in renewable energy sources to pre-empt the depletion of mineral reserves and falling global demand for fossil fuels due to climate-change concerns. A joint energy strategy would aim to build collaborative public and private-sector relationships to meet both China and the Arab region's contrasting energy demands.
- 2. Greater coordination between China-Arab institutions:** the increasing diversity and complexity of China's economic relationship with Arab countries have created a demand for more joined-up thinking by the following bodies, which should work more closely together to coordinate their efforts and avoid duplication:
Finance: China-Arab Inter-Bank Association

Science and technology: China-Arab Science and Technology Partnership Program
Research and development: China-Arab Research Center on Reform and Development
Cultural exchange: China-Arab States Press Center and Arab-Chinese Digital Library

“Rising Asia”

In addition to China, it is imperative that Arab states accelerate their drive to develop closer ties with other fast-growing Asian economies – notably India and the countries that belong to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a market of 650 million people. To this end, Arab countries need to collaborate more effectively on two fronts:

1. **Creation of a GCC-ASEAN Free Trade Area:** the GCC, as the most important economic bloc in the Arab region, originally conceived the idea of a mutual free trade area agreement with ASEAN in 2009. A decade later, such an agreement urgently needs to be concluded. A joint GCC-ASEAN FTA would act as a platform for Arab countries to capitalize on the growing importance of Asia in the 21st century, organized around at least five major economic organizations. These are: the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA); the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP); the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP); the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Group (APEC); and a proposed Indo-Pacific economic region stretching from China and Japan via Southeast Asia to India.
2. **Coordination of “Rising Asia” and Chinese economic partnerships:** the ASEAN-related web of partnerships allows Asian countries to counter-balance China’s expanding economic and strategic power, which has global ramifications. Through these partnerships, ASEAN has built an extensive network of trading and security partners to bolster regional peace, stability and prosperity. In this context, Arab countries should regard ASEAN as a crucial alternative to overdependence on trade and investment with China. A twin-track approach promises the best way forward for the much-anticipated creation of a “New Silk Road”, which would restore ancient trade routes and relationships between the Arab region and the Far East.

3.4 Accelerate digital transformation and the transition to a knowledge economy

The rapid advance of digital technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI), blockchain, augmented reality, robotics and the Internet of Things (IoT), is fundamentally changing Arab societies, economies and, more specifically, the future of work. In this context, the following policies are an urgent priority to equip citizens for the digitized knowledge economies of the future:

1. National digital upskilling programs: unemployment, particularly among young people and women, is rife throughout the Arab region. A coordinated effort by the public and private sectors, working with schools and universities, is required to ensure all citizens, but especially youth, have the necessary digital skills to find employment in the data-driven economies of the future.

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) should be promoted across the Arab region by governments and companies. MOOCs notably offer:

- Affordable, flexible ways to learn basic or new digital skills
- Courses run by some of the world’s leading tech companies and universities, including Microsoft, Harvard and MIT

2. Increased investment in emerging technologies and cybersecurity infrastructure:

governments throughout the Arab region must boost R&D investment in emerging technologies such as AI and blockchain to accelerate the creation of knowledge economies. To this end, it is critical that Arab universities build fully digitized learning cultures, with STEM curricula including courses in computer programming, data analytics and AI.

By investing in “home grown” technology and digitally-skilled graduates, Arab countries potentially stand to retain a greater share of the benefits from the transition to knowledge economies. For example, AI is expected to contribute approximately USD 320\$ billion to the Middle East economy by 2030⁴. In addition, a new generation of university-educated Arabs with advanced digital skills will be essential for the construction of robust regional and national cybersecurity infrastructures, which for political reasons cannot be readily transferred from foreign countries.

3.5 Create programs and incubators to promote traditional trades and next-generation craftsmanship

While the economy becomes more digitized, countries should not lose sight of the vital importance of traditional trades. They remain the core of the economy, and the Arab region needs to invest in its labor force to improve craftsmanship and instill a culture of excellence. Advances in technology have also drastically improved the efficiency of tools used in trades.

Investment in a strong **vocational and technical training** pathway will help to empower young people and promote high-quality employment for skilled tradespeople, working alongside the knowledge economy.

⁴ <https://www.pwc.com/m1/en/media-centre/2018/ai-to-contribute-320-billion-middle-east-gdp.html>

4. Empower Women and Young People

Two major socio-cultural issues beset the region and need immediate attention: empowering women and helping young people to shape their future. Addressing these challenges will help contribute to stability, growth, and prosperity.

Children and young adults (0-24 years old) account for nearly half the population of the Middle East and North Africa⁵, while about half the total population of the region is female⁶.

Empowering women must include education initiatives; helping young people to shape their future will include giving young women and girls more agency than historic cultural and social attitudes have allowed.

Education reform is also an increasingly urgent issue in the face of high youth employment rates across the region⁷, where population growth continues to outpace most of the rest of the world⁸. Together with a shift in cultural attitudes, better education opportunities for young people will provide the empowered, informed citizens needed for 21st-century Arab economies that will inevitably be less dependent on natural resources.

Ensuring that all people are recognized for their potential to contribute as human capital, rather than as a burden to be cared for, is crucial for growth and prosperity in the region.

4.1 Increase the participation of women in business and politics through quotas and address legal discrimination

In recent years, numerous academic studies have shown that social and economic outcomes improve when women are involved in policymaking and decision-making. These findings are especially relevant to Arab countries, given the vast untapped potential of women across all fields in both the public and private sectors.

To increase the participation and involvement of women in politics and business, countries in the region should:

- **Establish clear target quotas for women in both private and public-sector jobs**

These targets should be carefully considered and specific to criteria including sector, grade, stage of development, strategic importance and availability of skills. Governments should drive responsibility and accountability for these target quotas. Bringing women into publicly visible, leading roles will both improve their perception by the general population and change intra-family dynamics by breaking down male prejudices. It would also alter international perceptions regarding the position of women in Arab societies.

5 Unicef, "MENA Generation 2030," April 2019: <https://data.unicef.org/resources/middle-east-north-africa-generation-2030/>

6 World Bank 2019: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL.FE.ZS?locations=ZQ>

7 International Monetary Fund: <https://www.imf.org/external/np/vc/061312/2012.htm?id=186569>

8 World Economic Forum website: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/05/2018/why-the-world-s-fastest-growing-populations-are-in-the-middle-east-and-africa/>

- **Measure pay and promotion**

Public and private organizations should conduct regular internal reports on metrics according to gender, including the number of new hires, the proportion of promotions, and pay gaps between men and women. Particular effort should be made to increase the participation and involvement of women in leadership roles. Some Arab countries have made significant progress on this front. For example, at time of publication, there were nine female cabinet members in the United Arab Emirates' government⁹ and four in Sudan's newly-formed government under Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok¹⁰. Sudan has also just appointed the first female chief justice in the Arab region, Neemat Abdullah Mohamed Khair. The economic empowerment of women is also a driver for alleviating financial pressure on families, which can begin to rely on multiple income streams.

- **Address legal discrimination**

Governments should tackle legal discrimination against women, especially regarding property ownership and citizenship laws in the region. To raise awareness and encourage early adoption of these recommendations, governments should:

- Introduce incentives for companies and public entities to meet these requirements
- Ensure transparency of reporting of these metrics by private and public entities
- Run media campaigns to enhance and support the overall message
- Put punitive measures in place for those entities failing to meet quota targets

9 <https://www.government.ae/en/about-the-uae/the-uae-government/the-uae-cabinet>

10 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sudan-politics/sudans-pm-selects-members-of-first-cabinet-since-bashirs-ouster-idUSKCN1VO1KY>

4.2 Enable young people to shape their own futures through education and embed shared cultural experiences into policymaking to draw the region's youth together

Rapid growth of the young population during a period of conflict and economic deterioration has pushed youth unemployment levels in the MENA region to around 30 percent¹¹, about twice the global average¹². At the same time, more than 14.3 million children in the MENA region were “out of school” at the end of 2017, according to Unicef¹³.

The region rapidly needs to tackle education failures and youth unemployment to meet its ambitions for change and the transition already underway to less resource-dependent economies. Including young people in policymaking and decision-making is a vital step in repairing the fabric of the region's societies, while better opportunities in education and work will reduce the allure of violent extremist groups.

Recommendations for enabling young people in the region to reach their full potential focus on two key areas – firstly **education**:

- **Curricula across all levels should be reimagined to shift from rote memorization** to place the emphasis on holistic discussion and the promotion of critical and analytical thinking. This could be achieved by developing both soft and hard skills, weaving together the natural sciences and the humanities. Technology should also be used to facilitate education delivery.
- **Governments should establish a culture of continuous education** by emphasizing an integrated lifetime learning journey. This would involve dismantling the walls that separate disciplines and academic units; for example, integrating medicine with engineering. Working with the private sector, governments should also take steps to ensure that learning does not stop in the classroom, but extends to the workplace. This will create adaptable professionals who update their skills constantly in order to remain employable and valuable in a rapidly changing market.
- **Educational establishments that emphasize practical skills** relevant to the needs of a 21st-century labor market are also required. A system such as Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), as mentioned in section 3.5, would introduce young people into the workplace at an early stage and give them the practical skills for trades that will be needed to diversify economies reliant on resource revenues.
- **Establishing partnerships with various countries to develop local talent through experience abroad** will help train and equip promising young people with marketable skills and qualifications. Incentives for them to return to their home countries could include loans or grants that would assist them in resettling, or funding to help them set up their own businesses or entrepreneurial ventures.

11 <https://www.brookings.edu/research/youth-employment-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa-revisiting-and-reframing-the-challenge/>

12 PwC Middle East website June 2019, “Identifying opportunities to fill the youth unemployment gap,” citing the World Data Bank: <https://www.pwc.com/m1/en/blog/youth-unemployment-in-the-middle-east.html>

13 Unicef website: <https://www.unicef.org/mena/out-school-children>

Governments should also facilitate a shift in cultural mindsets to break down barriers that have divided people along tribal, religious, or national borders, while reinforcing fundamental values that underpin and strengthen social cohesion. The following **cultural recommendations** will provide an anchor for citizens as they navigate a fast-changing future:

- **Embed shared cultural experiences and history in policymaking** so that nations will understand the impact of the decisions they take on neighboring countries. A broader view of the region's history and culture will help unite it under the same umbrella.
- **Encourage awareness of fundamental values** such as tolerance, inclusion and respect for diversity through online and offline media campaigns. Social media would be a critical element, but as a tool for engagement, rather than one for monitoring and oppression.
- **Set up a regional cultural fund** with potentially 100\$ million to invest in media and the creative industries to produce digital content, films and written material intended to influence social attitudes and perceptions. The aim would be to promote a more tolerant and open society, and engage young people through "soft diplomacy."
- **Encourage the participation of young people in politics and decision-making** by setting mandated quotas for youth representation in politics, starting at the community or municipal level. This would ensure young people could make their voices heard and have their needs taken into account during the policymaking process. Freedom of the press – both mainstream and social media – is also essential, since this is currently the main vehicle for youth engagement in the political process.
- **Encourage mobility within the region** to help break down cultural barriers and cultivate common values. To that end, governments should simplify travel requirements such as visas and ensure there are minimal legal or administrative barriers to freedom of movement, while still ensuring cross-border security.

5. Protect the Environment

The climate crisis is already affecting the region in many ways and its impact is likely to worsen, according to the World Bank¹⁴. Further increases in temperature, reduced rainfall and longer, deeper droughts are forecast. While the issue of sustainability in the region has fostered lively and passionate debate among experts and politicians, it has seemingly not taken root in the cultural consciousness as an issue of existential importance. Yet the threats posed by climate change and resource scarcity loom closer than ever as sea levels rise and populations grow.

Acknowledging the need to deal with the impact of climate change is now no longer simply a political imperative, but also a moral responsibility. Countries in the region must act to secure a livable environment with sufficient and sustainable natural resources for current and future generations.

Those Arab countries that are net oil exporters have a particular duty to redouble their environmental and sustainability efforts, by investing in renewable energy and renewable resources, especially clean and usable water. These efforts should hasten the transition to a circular economy, and deploy technical and political solutions to address fundamental issues of food security and environmental degradation.

5.1 Develop clear policies and provide strong monitoring to ensure effective waste management and the promotion of a circular economy

- Tackling food waste by establishing more efficient waste-management systems and running awareness campaigns

An example would be Egypt's "smart card" system, which limits the daily amount of subsidized bread available to individuals. This has resulted in a marked decrease in the amount wasted.

Overall, the region has very high levels of food waste. On a per capita basis, Saudi Arabia wastes the most food annually of any country, at 427kg per person. Meanwhile the UAE ranks 22nd out of 25 countries surveyed, with wastage of 196.6kg per person, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit and the Barilla Center for Food and Nutrition.¹⁵

- Make industrial companies responsible for the full lifecycle of material goods that they produce, from manufacturing through to disposal

Governments should ensure corporate accountability for this initiative. Assigning responsibility for the full lifecycle can help reduce toxicity from pollution and limit the dumping of industrial waste.

- Take steps to reduce consumer waste, especially single-use plastic (bags, straws, bottles, etc.) as well as wasted food and water

Companies should be made responsible for the lifecycle of their products.

¹⁴ The World Bank website 2017: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/mena-climate-change5#>

¹⁵ 2016 Food Sustainability Index: <http://foodsustainability.eiu.com/gulf-region/>

5.2 Increase wide-ranging mitigation programs to cope with the consequences of climate change and substantially improve incentives to prevent further acceleration of global warming

- Encourage discussion across the region of issues such as climate change, natural resources and the environment. Increase co-operation and improve national and regional planning to manage the growing strain on resources, especially water
- Increase public awareness of the impact of climate change
- Set up public-private task forces to propose and examine potential mitigation strategies
- Introduce urban planning guidelines to protect urban infrastructure from water damage caused by rising sea levels and warn private and public investors about the risks of future flooding
- Prepare guidelines that will steer public infrastructure investment away from areas of growing flood risk towards areas that could be used for relocating coastal communities under potential threat from rising sea levels
- Prepare for possible impacts of climate change on agriculture, including flooding, wildfires and reduced groundwater reserves
- Invest in desalination plants and technology, building on the advances made in the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia

Conclusion

Arab countries and societies must take the initiative to work proactively and in co-operation, where possible, to meet the daunting challenges and seize the enormous opportunities being created by the region's rapidly changing economic and geopolitical landscape. The third Beirut Institute Summit was designed to outline a set of practicable, pragmatic and proactive policy initiatives that can break the pattern of state and governance failures in the Arab region.

Many of the greatest threats to the Arab future are plainly evident: protracted civil wars, internal revolutions, unwelcome foreign interventions, economic and social malaise, and the consequent rise of extremist ideologies that offer false hope to desperate societies. Yet technological advances, rapidly accelerating economic and cultural global integration, and the largely untapped but enormous potential resource of Arab human capital, especially among young people, offer unprecedented opportunities for positive social, economic and political transformations.

Summit participants brought to bear their highly diverse backgrounds and perspectives to help craft an outline for how Arab states, societies and the region can rise to the challenge and truly begin to meet their potential. The recommendations as outlined in this report were not intended to provide an instant, easy or one-size-fits-all fix. On the contrary, many will require determination, vision and statesmanship from policymakers and other leaders, plus concerted and sustained government action and, often, co-operation.

Key to almost all of the recommendations will be developing a broad social consensus for change based on the empowerment and engagement of the wider Arab public – and particularly women and youth – which can only be obtained through significant political and social reforms.

Failure to act decisively is not an option for states whose own legitimacy and future are currently or potentially under threat from increasingly restive populations. This new decade in our young century must mark a decisive break with the past for the Arab region, as governments across the region finally deliver on the promise of a secure, prosperous and equitable future for all their citizens. The proposals outlined in this report present a purposeful and practicable roadmap for this urgently required transformation.

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Institutional Profile

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Beirut Institute is an independent non-partisan think tank and a catalyst for intergenerational, innovative, solution-oriented critical thinking for current and future policy opportunities affecting the Arab region and its place in the world. A convener of leading minds in policy, Beirut Institute has held three editions of a global summit in Abu Dhabi culminating in a set of recommendations delivered to policy makers all over the world. Beirut Institute Summit provides a forum to challenge and influence impacting decisions through dissecting strategic priorities and shaping future policies. As a policy incubator, Beirut Institute's scope of activities ties together research-based evidence with public engagement within the Arab region and globally.



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