



The State of  
Arab Cities 2012

Challenges of  
Urban Transition

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## Message from the Secretary-General



In recent months, Arab cities have been the central meeting ground for courageous calls for better governance, more effective economic management, greater transparency and more freedom. Those legitimate aspirations for human rights and dignity have echoed around the world.

Through the centuries, Arab cities have generated many of humankind's most enduring achievements and legacies. Today, we must ensure that these cities are sustainable and inclusive – able to maintain their cultural and spiritual heritage while advancing well-being for generations to come.

*The State of Arab Cities 2012* offers a timely account of the progress and the problems in these rapidly urbanizing centres of human civilization. It tells us, for example, that urban slums are decreasing in large parts of the region, and that urban innovations are being introduced with dazzling speed. But it also shows how many Arab societies continue to suffer under conflict, extreme poverty and under-development.

Far too often, highly centralized governance structures undermine local authorities' efficiency, perpetuate corruption, obstruct political participation and erode the relationships between the citizenry and the level of government closest to them. The Arab Awakening has delivered welcome change, but there is still much work ahead even in those places where democratic transitions are taking root.

This report also highlights the importance of young people. In most Arab countries, youth make up the majority of the population, and youth unemployment is very high. These trends often converge in the region's cities, where a lack of opportunities and dim prospects for personal and professional advancement can have destabilizing impacts.

Arab nations and cities are at a pivotal moment. As we look to the challenges of the future, *The State of Arab Cities 2012* offers insight and analysis to inform and enlighten. I commend it to a wide global audience.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Ki Moon Ban". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending from the end.

**Ban Ki-moon**  
**Secretary-General**  
**United Nations**



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.

**Dr. Joan Clos**  
Under-Secretary General of the United Nations  
Executive Director UN-Habitat



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