

For Immediate Release



## Leading scientific journal *The Lancet* publishes important AUB-led series on health in the Arab world

Beirut, Lebanon- 23/01/2014 -*The Lancet*, the world's leading general medicine journal, has just published a series of papers entitled "Health in the Arab World: a view from within," which were produced by an interdisciplinary team of researchers from the region, under the leadership of the American University of Beirut, the Bir Zeit University and *The Lancet*.

The *Lancet* series (more details below) focuses on priority health issues in the Arab world, based on evidence interpreted mainly by scholars from the region, while adopting a multidisciplinary approach that includes medical, public health, social, and political perspectives.

The series was launched in London on January 20, 2014 --the date of publication -- and at AUB on January 23, 2014, in the presence of *Lancet* editor Richard Horton. It includes six peer-reviewed articles on health and governance in the Arab world, in addition to several essays, commentaries and viewpoints on topics as diverse as the impact of colonialism on the current state of public health in the Arab world to the role of activism and research to achieve social justice.

During the opening ceremony of the Beirut launch speakers lauded the importance of regional scientific collaboration with the aim of improving the health of people in the region.

"The *Lancet* Series on Health in the Arab world is another landmark achievement for AUB and the region whose voice is underrepresented in global health forums," said Professor Iman Nuwayhid, dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences at AUB (FHS). "At FHS, we are committed, in collaboration with sister academic institutions in Lebanon and the region, to making sure our work will shape the global public health discourse."

AUB Provost Ahmad Dallal added: "FHS is playing an important leadership role in the region, developing strategies to improve the health of people in the region... This collaborative, interdisciplinary work is a demonstration of the international quality of research that is demanded and supported by AUB."

Huda Zurayk, professor of epidemiology and population health at AUB, and the leader of the coordinating committee for the *Lancet* series project acknowledged that due to the painful political transition that the Arab region is going through, many countries "have slid backwards in terms of health and economic parameters, but the region still represents great promise for the future and requires all our hard work, perseverance, and patience."

Zurayk noted that while the region is underreported in international literature, the *Lancet* series will offer scholars an opportunity to look at priority issues in the region. Moreover, the peer-reviewed series of scientific papers will show that there is very serious research going on in the region.

On the sidelines of the launch meeting, Zurayk also underscored the importance of addressing governance issues while studying the state of public health in the region. "These papers represent a view from within the region, by scholars who understand the context," she said.

“Moreover, the researchers delved into issues related to governance, infrastructure and the absence of political commitment, which is often a key deterring factor to the advancement of public health in the region.”

“Based on the Lancet series, we are looking to hold a special meeting, specifically for policy-makers,” added Zurayk, “for great science has to be translated into great policies.” Niveen Abu Rmeileh, director of the Institute of Community and Public Health at Birzeit University, said that some people have often argued that the Arab world does not have the capacity to produce stellar research on health and medicine, but the *Lancet* series has proven otherwise. At the same time, the process of producing the collaborative, interdisciplinary research has consolidated teamwork at the regional level.

Lancet editor Richard Horton said that while the series highlights a series of challenges in the region, some of them alarming and even tragic, it also represents an opportunity for learning. Moreover, Horton considered the collaboration among authors and editors across and beyond the region as a “lesson of utmost global importance if we were to achieve peace.”

## **Six peer-reviewed articles published in the Lancet on the state of health in the Arab world**

*The Lancet* has published six peer-reviewed articles on health in the Arab world. The launch of the series was held in Beirut on January 23, 2014 and in London on January 20, 2014, in the presence of *Lancet* editor Richard Horton.

The research project, led by the American University of Beirut, Bir Zeit University, and *The Lancet* unveiled some interesting facts about health in the Arab world, including the rise in depression and anxiety and chronic diseases, as well as death due to traffic accidents. Moreover, issues of governance and lack of political commitment remain deterrents to improving public health in the region. One alarming revelation is that health care has become a tactic used in warfare, and that the increasing rates of ecological degradation are seriously affecting the health of people in the region.

Below are more detailed summaries of the six papers as well as the commentaries.

- [The State of Health in the Arab World](#)
- [Governance and Health in the Arab World](#)
- [Non-Communicable Diseases in the Arab World](#)
- [The Path towards Universal Health Coverage](#)
- [Changing therapeutic geographies of the Iraq and Syrian Wars](#)
- [Health and Ecological Sustainability in the Arab World](#)
- [Series Comments, Viewpoint, and Essay \[links only\]](#)

[The State of Health in the Arab World](#) by Ali Mokdad *et al*

- The Arab World has made dramatic progress in reducing mortality and prolonging life. Over the past 20 years, the Arab World succeeded in decreasing premature death and disability for most communicable, newborn, nutritional, and maternal causes of death, with the exception of HIV/AIDS.

- Despite improvements, substantial burdens of communicable, newborn, nutritional, and maternal causes of disease persist in the low-income countries of the Arab World.
- Depression and anxiety were major causes of disease burden, and affected women more than men.
- The Arab World is experiencing a major epidemiological transition. Between 1990 and 2010, disease burden from many non-communicable causes has increased, especially ischaemic heart disease, mental disorders (such as depression and anxiety), musculoskeletal disorders (including low back pain and neck pain), diabetes, and chronic kidney disease.
- The impact of demographic change in age and sex structure and population growth was large on the burden of disease, as measured by DALYs. About 11% of the change in NCDs was due to population ageing and 54.6% was due to population growth.
- The changes to the pattern and burden of disease in the Arab World will challenge already stretched human and financial resources since many Arab countries are now dealing with a double burden of non-communicable and infectious diseases. A road map for health in the Arab World is urgently needed.
- Ischaemic heart disease (IHD) is the number one cause of death in the Arab World in 2005 and 2010 (13.32% and 14.30% of deaths, respectively).
- Deaths from road traffic injuries increased significantly between 1990 and 2010.
- Deaths due to suboptimal breastfeeding and childhood underweight declined from ranks 6 and 5 in 1990 to 10 and 11, respectively, in 2010.

#### [Governance and Health in the Arab World](#) by Rajai Batniji *et al*

- The Arab world is characterised by weak political institutions, shaped by legacies of colonialism and patronage. These institutions exclude large segments of the population from political representation and government services.
- Despite weak political institutions, the Arab World has seen sharp reductions in mortality and increases in life expectancy over the past 30 years.
- There does not appear to be any association between democracy and improved health indicators in the Arab World. However, there is a suggested association between more effective governments and reductions in mortality from 1980-2010.
- Efforts to reduce corruption and improve government effectiveness may be more plausibly linked to population health improvements than efforts to democratise.
- Lost in the aggregate statistics on population health are sharp inequalities, leaving minorities, refugees, political opponents of entrenched regimes, immigrants, women, and the poor often excluded from healthcare and social protection. Their exclusion is likely to be amplified in countries undergoing political transformation.

#### [Non-Communicable Diseases in the Arab World](#) by Hanan Abdul Rahim *et al*

- Noncommunicable diseases (cardiovascular disease, cancer, chronic lung diseases, and diabetes) pose an enormous human and financial burden in the countries of the Arab World. In addition to population ageing, risk factors—including tobacco use, physical inactivity, and unhealthy diets—fuel the epidemic.
- Across the Arab world, there are variations in resources, health system capacity, and policy responses to the non-communicable disease crisis. In general, however, the efforts have not been proportionate to the magnitude of the problem, and there is substantial room for improvement.
- Cost-effective and feasible interventions have already been identified for prevention and treatment, including stricter tobacco control measures and immediate action on salt reduction. Implementation of these and other important measures requires strengthened health systems, multisectoral action, and continuous monitoring and assessment of progress.
- Most importantly, political commitment at the highest level is essential for success, and Arab governments should be held accountable for their national and international commitments. Engaging in the global framework for NCDs should promote accountability for effective action.
- Addressing the epidemic is a development imperative. Inaction is not an option.

#### [The Path towards Universal Health Coverage](#) by Shadi Saleh *et al*

- The constitutions of many countries in the Arab World clearly highlight the role of governments in guaranteeing the provision of health as a right for all citizens. Yet citizens of these countries still suffer from inequitable health-care systems.
- One component of such inequity relates to the limited financial access to health care services.
- The recent uprisings in the Arab World, commonly referred to as the “Arab Spring”, created a sociopolitical momentum that should be used to pave a path towards realising universal health coverage (UHC).
- The authors present a brief overview of the evolution of health-care systems in the Arab World, with a focus on Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. The authors offer a roadmap for action to address the challenges and opportunities for progressing towards UHC.
- The path towards UHC will require compromises at each stage to move the process forward. One issue should not be part of any compromise; that is each individual’s right to the highest attainable standard of health.

#### [Changing therapeutic geographies of the Iraq and Syrian Wars](#) by Omar Al-Dewachi *et al*

- There is a need to explore the long-term and transnational structural health care challenges that accompany the chronicity of conflicts in the Arab World.
- The global war on terror has blurred the boundaries between warfare and healthcare.
- Two main phenomena have accompanied large-scale conflicts in Iraq and Syria: the militarisation and regionalisation of health care. Healthcare has become a tactic of

war and the massive displacement of national populations is changing health priorities in the region.

- It is central to pay attention to the dismantlement of state-health care systems and the emerging survival strategies of national populations.
- Framing therapeutic geographies of healthcare is crucial to understanding the global health challenges of ongoing conflicts, since they speak to the mobility, politics, value, and dynamics of healthcare access and transformation.

#### [Health and Ecological Sustainability in the Arab World](#) by Abbas El-Zein *et al*

- Problems associated with water scarcity, food insecurity, and informal urban settlements in parts of the Arab World are critical and worsening, exacerbated by climate change and a quasi-permanent state of violent conflict.
- Mutually-reinforcing dynamics around ecological degradation, past and present development policies, and demographic change have combined to create an ecological crisis that calls into question the survival of communities and institutions.
- The ecological crisis is occurring in a context characterised by autocratic systems of government, lack of accountability and poor governance, retrenchment of the welfare state, large social and geographic inequalities, heavy militarisation, and squandering of revenues from fossil fuels.
- "Survival" can be used as a criterion for identifying critical thresholds and differential threats to communities and individuals, towards better understanding of the crisis, as well as short- and long-term responses and emergency preparedness.
- Regional collaboration is key to tackling the ecological crisis. The authors call on health professionals to play a central part in informing, networking, lobbying, and developing evidence-based responses, within and beyond the health sphere.

#### Further Series content:

Comment - [Health equity in the Arab world: the future we want](#) by Hoda Rashad

Comment - [Research and activism for tobacco control in the Arab world](#) by Rima Nakkash *et al*

Comment - [The making of the Lancet Series on health in the Arab world](#) by Huda Zurayk *et al*

Comment - [Responding to priority health challenges in the Arab world](#) by Ala Alwan

Comment - [Health in the Arab world: a renewed opportunity](#) by Richard Horton

Viewpoint - [Health and contemporary change in the Arab world](#) by Samer Jabbour

Essay - [State formation and underdevelopment in the Arab world](#) by Tariq Tell

Essay - [Importance of research networks: the Reproductive Health Working Group, Arab world and Turkey](#) by Rita Giacaman *et al*

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#### Note to Editors

#### About AUB

Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy,

standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 700 full-time faculty members and a student body of about 8,500 students. AUB currently offers more than 100 programs leading to the bachelor's, master's, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full service 420-bed hospital.

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