The making of the Lancet Series on health in the Arab world

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11 authors, including:

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48 PUBLICATIONS  960 CITATIONS

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107 PUBLICATIONS  3,673 CITATIONS

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73 PUBLICATIONS  1,214 CITATIONS

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111 PUBLICATIONS  2,399 CITATIONS

Available from: Abdullatif Husseini
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During a visit to Lebanon in July, 2011, *Lancet* Editor-in-Chief Richard Horton invited us to prepare the *Lancet* Series on Health in the Arab World: a View from Within. The invitation fell on receptive ears, and came at the right time. Earlier that year, four of us had finished collaborating on an edited volume entitled *Public Health in the Arab World*,1 with more than 80 contributing scholars, mostly from the region, and some international scholars.

Conducting research to provide evidence that can contribute to improving health in a region engulfed in war and ongoing turmoil is not an easy matter. Researchers in our region must struggle with and overcome several constraints, including heavy teaching loads and institution-building priorities, leaving little time dedicated to research; absence of institutional incentives and support for conducting quality research; dearth of publicly available datasets; and absence of funding and government commitment to encourage research. But above all, we must sometimes confront enormous challenges brought about by wars and conflicts, injustice, fragmentation, insecurities, and uncertainties, which can at times suddenly dwarf our research agendas and make them irrelevant.

In response to this predicament and to remain engaged, productive, and relevant we learned the importance of working in teams and building networks to support each other. And so, over the past decade, a group of us came together on the basis of a common understanding of the importance of the social and political contexts of health; an interest in developing frameworks of analysis that are relevant to the realities and reflective of the needs of our region; and with the aim of giving voice to a regional perspective on issues of health and wellbeing, now hardly existing in the international literature.

The onset of uprisings in several countries in the region during the period of preparing the Series created an immediate need for fresh perspectives and new scholarship. Initially we wanted to give the Arab uprisings a special place in the Series. Eventually, we decided against a theme on “health and the Arab spring”, attractive as this had seemed at the time, in recognition of the larger picture of health, politics, and society in the region. In retrospect, this approach served us well.

With space available for only a few contributions, the selection of priority topics for Series papers, Viewpoints, and Comments was the first challenge facing members of the Coordinating Committee (H Zurayk, R Giacaman, and S Jabbour) and the Steering Group (all authors listed on this Comment). We wanted to address issues of high relevance, while focusing on dimensions of particular significance to the region such as the political context and conflicts and wars. Some issues such as women’s health had been covered well in the *Public Health in the Arab World* volume.1 Additionally, we were interested in presenting a multidisciplinary approach in all papers.

The Series paper themes were thus extensively discussed by the Coordinating Committee and the Steering Group. In the process, we also had to consider the essential issue of identifying possible lead authors and coauthors. We wanted a quality scientific product, and searched for quality contributors. In selecting authors, we also sought diverse professional and country backgrounds and focused on multidisciplinarity. Our local, regional, and international networks were very useful in bringing together scholars from the Arab world in the main, sometimes in collaboration with international scholars with previous experience in undertaking research in the region. A list of themes for papers and lead authors was eventually drawn up, agreed on, and solicited with selective changes made early in the process. We were amazed at the enthusiastic response of authors joining the Series.

The Steering Group and lead authors developed an active network of discussions and consultations, meeting
face-to-face three times between March, 2012, and March, 2013. These meetings were indispensable for the crystallisation of the Series, and brought ideas and people closer together. In fact, it would have been difficult to envisage the Series without these meetings. The implication of this experience for international research-funding agencies is that there is a need to invest in facilitating exchange to build meaningful collaborations. Fortunately, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada, had the good sense and vision to support this process.

Lead authors and coauthors of papers also formed collaborative networks working together on papers for more than a year. They met as situations allowed and continued to be in touch by electronic means, integrating and enriching the writing process. Authors of Viewpoints and Comments worked individually, while involving members of the Coordinating Committee and sometimes the Steering Group in reviewing their work. Authors were supported by Richard Horton and the editorial team led by Farhat Yaqub, to whom all contributors feel much appreciation.

From July, 2011, to October, 2013, when authors were actively working on the Series, the region continued to go through the so-called springs and falls of political change that we are still witnessing to this day. Some periods were very intense, boding great dangers, a reality which has become part of our daily lives in the region. Yet we somehow coped and continue to cope to ensure uninterrupted productivity. This gives the Series a distinctive meaning for all who contributed to its production with resolve and resilience. It became a project to complete as a must, showing our commitment to health and wellbeing based on dignity and justice in the Arab world.

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