

“Engaging Youth” UNRWA Stakeholder Conference

Brussels, 19-20 Mar 2012

Keynote speech by Mr. Nasser Judeh, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan

Excellencies, distinguished attendees, ladies and gentlemen,

At the outset, allow me on behalf of the Government of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, to express my appreciation to UNRWA, and its Commissioner General Mr. Filippo Grandi for organizing this conference and their tireless commitment to continue reinvigorating UNRWA’s work through targeting critical areas of focus. I would also like to thank the Government of Belgium and the EU for hosting this vital exchange where engaging the youth among Palestine refugees is a theme of meticulous importance in the new dynamic of a changing Middle East; as young people comprise the great majority of Palestinian refugees in our area.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It has been a year of historic change in the Middle East. Circumstances have been diverse in different countries, but steadfast and clear calls for human rights, justice, better governance, a more equitable share of resources, and improved living conditions, have similarly resonated throughout the Arab world.

Regrettably, this dynamic has been in bleak contrast with the stagnant political context in which Palestinians, and even more so Palestine refugees, continue to find themselves. Their experience is still one of denied rights, unfulfilled justice and increased vulnerability. For young Palestinians exposed to the new social media with people their own age in other burgeoning places, their exchanges would reveal a sense of further disparity.

The youths mounting aspirations through the Arab Awakening serve to highlight the need to fulfill those of young Palestinians, as we come together right now with the aim of responding to the concerns of youth, and stress the urgency of creating opportunities for the younger generation of Palestinian refugees.

However, and from my government’s perspective, the responding approach should be a multipronged one that seeks to resume credible political efforts between the parties to the conflict while simultaneously and effectively collaborating to address the urgent needs of Palestinian refugee youth.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Many erred in succumbing to the illusion that the “Arab Spring” has no connection to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict which is at the heart of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Those argue that the slogans and chants of demonstrators across the Arab World are only confined to basic values of democracy, justice, the rule of law and good governance- and not the Israeli occupation. Although, the slogans were as such, and demonstrators were demanding the profusion of those

basic values but from the very beginning, we were of the full conviction that masses demonstrating in different parts in the Arab World to seek more justice at home, will demand at least the same for the Palestinians who continue to linger under the only remaining occupation in the world.

I advise that no one makes any mistakes by wrongfully assuming that there will be a regional environment in the Middle East that is receptive to Israel due to the fact that democracy and more freedom are finding their way to Arab States. On the contrary, Arab public opinion will judge Israel and determine any dealings with Israel on the basis of its willingness or lack of willingness to satisfy the legitimate grievances of the Palestinian people.

It is noteworthy to highlight that slogans in Arab countries that have either moved into a new political era through revolutions or the ones that are in transition are prominently ones that all the more so, call for justice for the Palestinians.

There is little doubt that the new Arab order strengthened by its youth is one that will still view the continuation of Palestinian-Israeli conflict as the most pertinent, clear and present challenge to the very same values of justice that they profuse.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The two-state solution is the *only universally accepted solution* to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict which would fulfill the aspirations of the Palestinian people and their dispossessed refugees as echoed by the Quartette, the UN and the International Community as a whole. Such a solution is at the heart of the Arab-Israeli conflict and there are *no alternatives* to this solution.

And as His Majesty King Abdullah II cautions, with changing demography and geography; with dynamics resulting from settlements and other unilateral measures which are illegal, illegitimate and corrosive to peacemaking efforts and the viability of the two-state solution itself, the assured result would be devastating to the whole region.

Any vacuum in peace efforts is bound to allow radical forces in the region to adversely shape the course of the shifting political winds in our region from the promise of peace towards the perils of extremism and hostility- and on an unprecedented scale. As such, the Government of Jordan seriously concerned with the impasse and unilateral measures; launched the Amman Talks between the parties earlier this year in the hope of resuming direct negotiations as soon as possible as stagnation is simply not acceptable and carries precarious repercussions for the security of the region. This is the backdrop of the exchanges and direct talks that took place in Amman between the Palestinian and Israeli sides. Those talks were serious and we hope that they will generate the needed momentum to carry us to the next phase but under all circumstances that would allow a sustained and productive engagement that meets the deadline identified by the Quartet in its 23 September 2011 statement to conclude an agreement on all issues by the end of 2012 and crystallize the two state solution.

Under the leadership of His Majesty King Abdullah II, Jordan will continue to exert all efforts to build a path for peace for the Israeli and Palestinian peoples; peace that ensures the right of all citizens to live in freedom, security, and dignity.

The International community managed to generate a lot of good will in the context of its partnership with many in our region who are still supporting, the demands and aspirations of the people of Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Yemen and many other places in the Arab world of more Justice and freedom.

This very same constituency in the Arab World will expect the international community not to deviate from the benchmark which it has set for itself when we deal with the issue of resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and fulfilling justice to the Palestinians. If the international community assumes a leading role -as it should- in effectively addressing the Palestinian-Israeli conflict on the basis of the two-state solution; then we will certainly witness the emergence of regional orders that are predicated on satisfying the aspirations of the people of the Middle East and preserving their human rights, dignity and security. In this context, the government of Jordan reaffirms that any future settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to be sustainable; must take into account effectively addressing the Palestine refugee issue, on the basis of international justice, particularly United Nations resolution 194- as to be agreed upon among all parties to the conflict in accordance with the Arab Peace Initiative.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Youth are the future, and unfolding events in the Middle East have clearly shown their potential, as we have witnessed a year of decisive change in the region. Youth are taking action and utilizing means and tools made available by the rapid advances in the field of telecommunication and social media in particular as a conduit for mobilization.

Transformation is in effect sweeping the youth of the Middle East and Palestinian refugee youth are not immune to such change. This is manifesting itself in either forceful change; that is change through “revolution”, or is taking place in the context of voluntary “evolution” and systematic transformation to more representative and democratic political systems and more sound economic systems.

In Jordan we are proud of the fact that we represent a clear example of the latter form of change. Long before demonstrations were even conceivable in this part of the world, Jordan’s leadership was one that embarked on a course of action leading to more representative governments, and political/economic rights to all its citizens.

Jordan has embarked on implementing comprehensive reforms that included special focus on political reform as well as economic reforms. The Arab Awakening gave us the opportunity to reinvigorate political reforms in Jordan. To this effect constitutional changes were introduced with the view of reforming the political system and landscape to ensure a better system of checks and balances, transparency, accountability, rule of law and integrity. Similarly consensus-based legislation concerning political parties, elections and monitoring are in the making based on recommendations made by the National Dialogue Committee.

Palestinian refugees in Jordan enjoy rights in the Kingdom well and beyond the minimum international standard, stipulated in the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Optional Protocol. The Jordanian government is proud that its rights based approach afforded to Palestinian refugees coupled with direct and indirect services provided by the government which has resulted in a more sustainable and enhanced living standard for refugees in Jordan than other UNRWA fields of operation in the region.

Palestinian refugees have access to public services, jobs in the private and public sectors, and have the right to own property. On the economic level, youth have the right to engage in the civil and economic domains and participate in the national development and investment. They also have the rights to health insurance and health care. As for their educational and cultural rights, all youth in Jordan enjoy these rights at all levels as they have access to educational services in addition to building and participating in civil society foundations.

It is important to stress that the Palestinian refugees camp services committees' which oversee and identify the needs of the camps in Jordan in coordination with the Jordanian government and UNRWA have youth comprising of about 50% of their membership. Committee members, particularly the youth, focus on a number of issues important to refugee youth; such as job creation and addressing environment and health problems. Palestine refugee youth are also well represented in civil society organizations, as well as social and sport clubs in Jordan.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Jordanian government is further committed to develop Palestine refugee youth leadership skills and abilities, as part of its commitment to empower Jordanian youth. Empowering Palestine refugee youth does not contradict with their legitimate rights in a future settlement of the refugee issue in the framework of the two state solution; which guaranteed under international law and related resolutions.

In February 2012, a conference on “Youth @ Work: Partnerships for Skills Development” was held in Jordan and convened by the International Youth Foundation (IYF).

During this conference, a series of initiatives to employ young Jordanians and provide them with skills to help them enter the labor market had been launched; one of these initiatives aims to employ 2,000 Jordanians aged between 18 and 30 in the tourism and hospitality sectors. Palestine refugee youth in Jordan, as part of Jordanian youth, will benefit from this initiative, which is intended to substitute foreign labor with local, in vital sectors of economy such as tourism and hospitality.

Stressing the importance of creating jobs for youth and ensuring sustainability in this regard, a new initiative was launched by the Government of Jordan that entails establishing a network of 25 career counseling centers which focuses on the private sector across Jordan.

Through the Internet and Social Media Youth IT Centre initiative, 5,000 young Jordanians will be trained within 2 years in 20 centers across the country.

However, with 25 percent of youth in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region currently unemployed, solutions to the challenge of employability of Palestine refugee youth need the cooperation, engagement and support of regional and international stakeholders to promote youth investment programs. Jordan can play a role together with other stakeholders to create the best environment for youth entrepreneurs.

This forum also presents an opportunity for key stakeholders to focus on the main reasons behind Palestine refugee youth unemployment. One of the main reasons is the Israeli occupation and the restrictions imposed on Palestinian youth to access much of their land and its natural resources.

The International community would do well to focus on working with Israel towards rigorously implementing the recommendations presented by Quartet representative and the World Bank among others to empower Palestinians including refugees and expand their control in areas A, B and C to help preempt and compensate for the economic shortfall anticipated for the PA in 2012.

Furthermore, in host countries like Jordan, most programs are adversely affected by lack of funding, which limits the sustained and consistent outreach efforts to Palestine refugee youth carried out by the government of Jordan. As such, with the persistence of Jordan's acute economic crisis the government cannot shoulder additional burdens resulting from decreasing UNRWA's services which are considered a lifeline to Palestinian refugees.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Jordan recognizes the vital role of UNRWA in affording educational and health services to Palestinian refugees and the kingdom will continue providing all forms of support to UNRWA due to its important role in Jordan and the region. However, the Government of Jordan is deeply concerned over the agency's financial situation, especially the gap between available funds and demands, as we continue to work hard with the international donor community to increase the financial support for (UNRWA) in order to alleviate the burden on burdened host countries in light of the agency's worsening financial situation.

The youths' aspirations in the Arab Awakening highlight the need to equally preempt and anticipate the aspirations of young Palestinians, and we hope that our gathering here today will rise to the challenge of responding to the permanent and immediate concerns of Palestine refugee youth, and the urgency of creating opportunities for the younger generation, for we will not only make one important contribution to the stability of the region which fragile peace efforts require to advance, but we will also invest in the precious human capital represented by the refugees, and hence in the future of peace

I thank you.