

Keynote Address of Munqeth Mehyar,
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Participatory Workshop on Environment and Security Issues in
the Southern Mediterranean Region

Your Excellency's, dear guests thank you for this honor granted to me and my organization to address this distinguished audience bringing together professionals from academia, government, civil society and think tanks on this most important occasion.

The background paper prepared by the Institute for Environmental Security well sets the scene for the relationship between environmental issues and the broader issues of national security. In my presentation this afternoon I aim to touch on the concrete examples of environment degradation and security concerns that I have witnessed in my own life time and through the privileged perspective that I have come to gain through the regional organization FoEME, that I co-lead with my Palestinian and Israeli partners.

As a kid growing up in Jordan, one of my great passions was the sea and hence I would regularly head down to Aqaba our only coast line, to snorkel and later scuba dive, thrilled by life forms and marine diversity of our unique coral reefs. After graduating from the US and coming back to Jordan in the early 1980s, I took my first vacation in Aqaba. I was devastated to see the amount of degradation that had happened to the coral reefs and the marine life in the short years that I was away. Aqaba had grown from a small fishing village to a major port for export and import of goods to Jordan. There were now four different large commercial ports in place. Of particular concern was a phosphate loading station that was leading to a thin cover of phosphate dust over the sea, increasing nutrient levels in the water and reducing water clarity, negatively impacting the coral reefs. The economic benefits to the country were clear – the need for jobs, new livelihoods but why at the expense of the environment. By the early 1990s the regional peace process was the topic of the day and Jordan was preparing itself to benefit. Tourism was on the top of the agenda and thousands of new hotel rooms were being proposed for Aqaba to welcome the tourist dollar. After the signing of the Peace Treaty with Israel, being one of the first Jordanians to visit Eilat and witnessing the poor state of the coral reefs on the Israeli side, I was fearful that the marine ecosystems in Aqaba were destined for the same fate of those of Eilat – almost completely destroyed.

Today almost twenty years later much due to scientific Aqaba – Eilat exchange, civil society crossborder campaigning and brave political leadership of the Aqaba Environment Commissioner many good management practices were introduced to better handle the new environmental pressures facing Aqaba. The thousands of hotel rooms were indeed built, but new technology to greatly reduce phosphate dust was installed and management practices such as requiring local instructors to lead all tourist dives to the reef have served to reduce the human impacts on the fragile reef, despite

increased pressures. While far from perfect, Aqaba's reefs are still far healthier than those of Eilat – lessons were not only learnt – they were implemented.

From the security perspective Egyptian, Jordanian and Israeli training took place and investment in equipment made, to respond to potential oil spills and ship accidents that could even involve oil tankers. All sides came to understand that they shared a common interest in both seeking to prevent an oil spill and if it was to occur to respond professionally in a manner that would minimize impact. The economic benefit experienced from rapid rise in tourism also highlighted the vulnerability of all three sides to oil spills from any one side, that in turn to lead to meaningful cooperation.

So why couldn't the early success of environment and security cooperation experienced at the head of the Gulf of Aqaba be sustained and expanded to many other areas of shared environmental concern? The Water Authorities of Jordan and Israel might point to the Water Committee that continues to meet until today, implementing the water arrangements of the Jordan Israel Peace Treaty as another example of ongoing cooperation with an environmental and security angle. Israeli water authorities here present would further point to the Joint Water Committee Israeli Palestinian as another successful model.

I would argue these examples are very much the exception however. Trilateral cooperation with Egypt over the Red Sea fizzled out by 1998 as soon as the Peace Process started to sour. The Palestinian Water Authority publicly describes the Joint Water Committee as a vehicle of continued Israeli domination of their water. Apart from cooperation of water application between Israel and Jordan very little is left of the warm peace envisioned – with water allocation having little to do with environmental sustainability.

The lower Jordan River, turned in to a sewage canal under the mindset of conflict, has little improved since the peace process of the early 1990s. New dams and increased diversion of fresh water reduced flows to just 2% of historical levels. Only in these last few years have we seen investments made in removing sewage from the river, much due to NGO pressure, but commitment to return some fresh water flows to the river still meet the objection of water authorities. Palestinians continue to have no access to the river due to Israeli military control and could hardly benefit from the poor state of the river even if they did have access.

The Dead Sea is still rapidly shrinking – this year averaging a drop of close to one and a half meters in depth, up from an average of just over a meter in years past. New evaporation ponds were built with government approval on the Jordanian side of the Dead Sea and the Dead Sea Works on the Israeli side is seeking to similarly further increase pond size negatively impacting the Dead Sea. Very expensive and environmentally questionable technological solutions such as the proposed Red Dead Conduit have been studied but the public release of reports are constantly delayed, highlighting the vulnerability of big ticket item solutions.

While talk and plans for more sustainable use of scarce water resources abound, recent reports commissioned by FoEME and produced by local economists speak to Israel being better able to manage and conserve over 500 mcm annually, Jordan 300 mcm annually and even Palestine 90 mcm, all at prices less than the marginal cost of water, if more realistic water pricing was advanced, protectionist policies removed, leakage drastically reduced, grey water reuse encouraged, etc etc, etc. Imagine close to 900 mcm available in the region to alleviate water scarcity particularly in Palestine and Jordan and for the common needs of nature. Sadly, Middle East politics mixed with internal political interests prevent these policies moving forward.

On the more positive side improved membrane technology has considerably reduced the cost of seawater desalination allowing for the more wealthy countries like Israel or through donor support in Gaza, to invest in this new source of fresh water. While vulnerability to prolonged draught, due to climate change, is somewhat diminished, the environmental impacts of desalination, increased air pollution, CO2 emissions, coastal and marine impacts of the release of brine are largely ignored. For poor countries and in particular the most poor and vulnerable populations with in these countries the cost of desalinated water is still beyond reach and the further disparity created could just as likely lead to more animosity between the countries as it could to increased water supply.

The failure of the Israeli Palestinian peace process to move beyond the interim stage is certainly partly the cause for the failure of the government led environment / security cooperation witnessed at the head of the Gulf of Aqaba in the early years to be duplicated and even sustained; it is however not the whole story. The public on all sides have certainly lost faith in any goodwill of the other side and government leadership has not risen sufficiently to meet the challenge. In this context, at street level, cooperation has come to be seen as collaboration – benefiting only the 'other' side. On government level Arab – Israeli cooperation takes place in secret, away from public lime light, sadly only strengthening the leadership of the more vocal minority of the street who seek to end any cooperative efforts contrary to the broader interest of the public.

Unsustainable practices and policies, be they in water, land use or energy are widespread throughout the region and indeed all over the Mediterranean without reference or relevance to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands and the Golan Heights. While the continued occupation is a prime cause for Palestinian suffering and non-cooperation between Arab states and Israel, the issue has little relevance to the Arab Spring or to climate change induced drought perhaps contributing to civil unrest in regions of Syria, resulting in major security concerns for the region, including refugees and displaced persons pouring into Jordan and Turkey, leading to an even more acute water stress and land degradation in the case of Jordan.

It is the experience of FoEME that a deeper understanding of the common threats and lost opportunities of unsustainable practices both caused by conflict and occupation but also due to unsustainable management of natural resources across the board is at the heart of advancing both peace and the environment. These days here together in

Jordan present a rare opportunity to debate, discuss and perhaps start identifying what steps must urgently be taken to reduce immanent environmental threats and how the interdependent nature of our shared environmental resources and especially water could be the catalyst for peace building and not a vehicle of domination. Civil society and FoEME in particular has developed through programming for increased education and advocacy, both top down with political leadership and bottom up community action that we seek to share in later sessions of this conference. I am absolutely certain that it will take courage and leadership on all sides to meet the challenges we face – cooperation between government, NGOs, academia and others. After close to nearly two decades of work on this issue I remain more certain than ever that we have no other alternative but to do so.

Shukran - Thank you