



Regional Launching Conference for the project
"Governance & Financing for the Mediterranean Water Sector"

Palau de Pedrables, Barcelona, Spain
28-29 May 2013

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Minister of Water and Irrigation
Minister of Agriculture
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"Arab Spring and Water Governance"

**Speech of H.E. the Minister of Water and Irrigation and the Minister of
Agriculture**

of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan

Dr. Hazim El-Naser

“Arab Spring and Water Governance”

It is an honor for me to participate and to speak at this Conference on Water Governance in the Middle East and North Africa. I very much welcome the opportunity to come together with representatives of our neighboring nations, our brother states, and to discuss how we can promote water governance in our countries so as to secure safe and fair water supply for our people.

For me the concept of water governance is not only a key word. I believe that our ability to realize good water governance locally and in the region will be decisive for sustaining freedom and peace in our countries. That is: I believe that in general, there exist an intrinsic connection between social freedom and a nation's prosperity on the one hand and its resource governance on the other. This is particularly true for the current political reality in the Arab countries and their present water governance systems.

In the following I will try to give you a picture of why I think that there is a unique and intrinsic connection between social unrest and water governance. I will also try to provide some core principles for configuring future water governance systems in terms of their implementation from a local and a regional perspective.

Now, what is meant when we use the terms “Arab Spring” and “Water Governance”? As for water governance I would like to refer to one of the most widely used definitions. It describes water governance as “the range or set of political, social, economic, and administrative systems that are [or must be] in place to develop and manage water resources and the delivery of water services at different levels of society”. However, to ensure *good* water governance, governments depend on the quality of their leadership and the strength of their institutions so that resources are managed in an efficient, effective, sustainable, and transparent manner by sector officials as well as by stakeholders.

The term “Arab Spring” is understood as “a series of anti-government uprisings in various countries in the Arab Region, beginning in Tunisia in December 2010” caused by lack of political and human rights (human dignity) as well as by poverty, unemployment, and major price increases of basic commodities. On the local level these are considered to be the most important reasons. On the regional level additional factors such as lack of justice, the continued tragedy of the Palestinian people, the war in Iraq, and the resulting regional political and power imbalances are considered to have stimulated the Arab uprising.

Water shortages in the Arab Countries are at the root of the region’s instability both locally and regionally. Thirteen of the 22 member countries of the Arab League rank among the world’s most water scarce nations. While the Middle East and North Africa represent 10 percent of the planet’s land, they contain less than 1 percent of the world’s freshwater resources. Despite this reality, Arab countries with the lowest renewable fresh water resources continue to have per capita water consumption rates, which are among the highest in the world. The main challenge for the region is to balance declining resources with increasing consumption resulting primarily from rapid population growth. Hence, in the coming years, Arabs are very likely to witness further manifestation of unrest all over the region due to adverse impact of water-stress on food supply as well as on water supply and sanitation services.

To link the above-mentioned factors to our theme here, we shall consider the price increase of basic commodities, particularly food production through irrigated agriculture, as the key factor in the correlation of the Arab Spring and water governance. Although human dignity has been widely acknowledged as the main fuel of the Arab Spring, there is broad consensus that the right to access basic commodities, particularly foodstuffs and water are producing more organized and more systematic opposition to present systems of status quo governance.

[Ineffective governance institutions, corruption, and lack of transparency have prevented governments from providing adequate protection from increased water stress in most Arab countries] This has resulted in importing most of their food commodities at high cost. Wheat is a good example in the case of Egypt. Arab countries are the largest importers of cereal in the world. This means, that when commodity prices surged in the autumn of 2010, largely due to water scarcity linked to Russia’s disastrous drought and the prevailing drought conditions among the Mashreq countries (2003-2011), basic foodstuffs were in short supply. Consequently, local prices increased in most cases beyond affordability of the poor or even the middle classes. This can be demonstrated in

the case of Egypt where prices in 2011 rose around 12% despite government subsidies on food and energy accounting for 7% of GDP.

Jordan, for example, which is considered to be one of the most water scarce countries in the world, witnessed riots and social unrest in the cities of Jarash (Sakib) and Mafrq (Manshiat Bani Hassan) as early as 2007 due to water scarcity and shutdowns of water supply. In 2012, H. M. King Abdullah II rushed back from a visit outside the country directly to Taibeh village in the Karak Governorate, after repeated reports on the severe suffering of its residents as a result of frequent cuts in water supply over several months. H.M. listened to the complaints of numerous residents about water stress and called on concerned authorities particularly the Ministry of Water and Irrigation, to identify as soon as possible settlements that were suffering from water shutdowns in the governorate and to take immediate measures to resolve the matter swiftly. The objective is to find permanent solutions to the problem and to guarantee fair distribution of water among all citizens, particularly during the summer.

Jordan is severely impacted by the Syrian conflict. Now, just to give a quick impression of the impact of Syrian refugee influx on Jordan. The estimated short-term direct cost and indirect long-term cost in the Jordanian Water Sector assuming 1.2 million Syrian refugees is estimated to be 509.7 million JD. However, Jordan received until now less than 2% of the said figure.

Furthermore, assessments in camps and host communities have shown that access to water is a key challenge for the refugees and is a source of tension with the host communities. And the Syrian uprising was also initiated by a water-stress incident, namely in the rural area of Daraa City.

Yemen is also considered to be one of the world's most water-stressed countries. The price of water there has increased five to ten folds since 2011. With fuel supplies used to pump water from underground aquifers becoming scarce, Sanaa could be the world's first capital to discontinue water supply. The problematic situation accompanied by chronic long-term water cuts in Sanaa as well as in other major cities, contributed heavily to the societal affliction, which led to the national uprising against the political regime. It is very clear: When people cannot find water for the basic needs of their children, they will ultimately join whoever promises to change their current dismal situation.

Water is also the major factor of the present unfolding tension between Iraq, Turkey, and Syria. Iraqi Prime Minister has publicly expressed his growing concerns with the "quality of water from the Euphrates and the Tigris rivers as a result of Turkey upstream unilateral measures and plans". In May 2011, Iraqi Prime Minister warned his neighbors, with Turkey and Syria in mind, that the

region faces conflict unless the issue of dwindling water resources is addressed. Iraq's water shortage has been increasing for a decade or more due to poor infrastructure for water services and sanitation due to the boycott prior to 2003 and poor governance, primarily lack of transparency and accountability. The Prime Minister biggest fear is that the increasing water shortage will trigger violence within Iraq. The recent uprising in the Western part of Iraq among the Sunnis was linked to complaints about poor infrastructure for water and energy.

It is still unclear and indeed, difficult to predict, whether the political changes and consequence of the Arab Spring will enhance the prevailing water governance among these countries or not. The objective must be to create the opportunity and incentive to pursue sector reforms on the national level, and agreements on the regional level. The latter must aim at creating sustainable management practices to the already stressed water resources as well as at restoring regional water rights among Arab countries.

A good example for the need of regional water resource agreements is the groundwater aquifers shared among the North African countries. If not tackled in a proper way, this could be a catalyst for increasing tension and hostility among the states of the Arab Spring. Algeria, Libya, and Tunisia have an agreement. However, Egypt, Libya, and South Sudan do not. Soon their new governments and leaders will certainly have to renegotiate the distribution of the shared surface and ground water resources. There will likely be a renewed focus on resource security and its connection to food supply and price increases, which affect many. Not absent in all their deliberations might be the fact that resource security was one of the most important factors that triggered the Arab uprising. When considering the vast increase in political and economic awareness among Arab states, and the need for the new Arab Spring governments and their neighbors to prove that they are truly forward-looking, adopting an Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) approach has become mandatory. This includes international agreements that sustainably manage the precious surface and ground water resources, so that today's development can be balanced with the needs of the future generations. Until the time when comprehensive agreements are completed, these resources will continue to be vulnerable to exploitation, pollution, and political tension among these countries. This situation begs two simple but potentially dangerous questions: Who actually holds power now, considering the new political and democratic environment among the Arab Spring countries, and what are we going to do about water? And: Will the new governments exploit these resources for short-term economic stimulus that can be leveraged for political gains to promote popularity among citizens?

In conclusion, the question of water governance is at its core a political one. Water governance is about policy choices that balance competing interests by focusing on who is entitled to which services and by determining how services are provided and who will be charged how much for what. And water governance is intrinsically obligated to make decisions on how water resources are protected.

Looking ahead, and even after the dust of the Arab Spring has settled, (which might take another five to ten years), water scarcity, shortages in food supplies and high commodity prices, will continue to present challenges to leaders and governments. They are the same challenges that ignited the Arab awakening. In fact, these challenges might be much more difficult.

The depletion of precious groundwater aquifers and the reduction of food supply will certainly aggravate in the future. Failure on the part of governments to introduce proper governance to plan population growth, as well as to provide water and foodstuffs for basic needs, will facilitate a difficult political and social situation that could easily lead to more social unrest and political instability. So what policies does the region need to meet increasing water demand, i.e. to meet the scarcity challenge? First, nations and civil societies need to work on enhancing prevailing water governance with all its elements: foremost transparency, accountability, coherence and participation, particularly the rule of law within the three dimensions, society, economy and protection of the natural environment. Second, a regional and national strategy needs to be put in place to identify a sustainable plan for equitable provision of water in a region equally hard hit by scarcity. This requires a coordinated regulatory framework. Without proper regional coordination, measures that may disadvantage neighboring countries will lead to water conflicts. Third, proper management of municipal and industrial water supplies requires the introduction of water pricing schemes. Water pricing is likely to be unpopular in the short term, but it will moderate consumption and will lead to a more efficient use of water. It will thus help to protect water supplies from overuse and pollution. Fourth, increasing and providing sources of funding is crucial. The region's formidable accumulation of sovereign wealth funds should pool some resources and launch a regional water investment fund to invest in the huge outlays required for the necessary infrastructure. The Arab Spring has taken place because of many complex and interconnected factors. Given the challenges the region faces, a regional water strategy, as part of a green economy, is no longer just an option. With unprecedented levels of water stress, it is indeed a necessity, if the Arab World is to avoid further social and economic crisis in the coming years.

As I mentioned, the recent political unrest in our region has put the spotlight on the governance deficit, and amplified the need for socio-political reforms. There

is a clear demand for more efficient water service provision, wider participation of stakeholders and the private sector, more decentralized planning and implementation and more transparent and accountable decision-making. The UfM-labelled project aims to effectively address these issues and identify and promote solutions that are realistic and implementable.

With that in mind and before closing, let me restate Jordan's support to this UfM project and our commitment to work together with GWP-Med and OECD for its success.

Thank you all