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Challenges Jordan is Facing Today

**Chair: Professor T. Stephen Hardy**

Alsalam Alikum and Good Evening to all of you joining us from up North and elsewhere.

Allow me to express my appreciation to The University of Hull, Professors Cohen and Hardy and all those who made tonight possible. Thank you for inviting me.

It is indeed both my pleasure and privilege to be with you - albeit virtually. But this is what the current requirement of these unnerving and trying times we find ourselves in!

I hope all of you and your loved ones are keeping well and are keeping safe away from the covid pandemic that has taken the world by storm, and that is yet to shape differently, how we approach life, health, economics, learning and communication.

The novel coronavirus, which is effecting the entire globe, my own country included, hopefully sooner as opposed to later will recede, and we would have all learned our lesson that world is more connected than ever before.

Therefore, His Majesty King Abdullah the 2nd suggests that we all benefit from “re-globalization” that is aiming for a renewed integration of our world / that centres on the well-being of its people / and concentrate on getting it right.

A re-globalization that strengthens and builds capacities within our countries and ushers in / true cooperation rather than competition. One that recognizes that a single country, acting alone, cannot succeed. For One country’s failure is every country’s failure.

Threats do not come in silos, and the solutions cannot be in silos.

Ladies and Gentelmen,

Jordan, pre-covid already had its share of socio-economic challenges; like high unemployment rates, consistent budget deficits and rising public debt levels. Yet this year, the Hashemite Kingdom is entering its 2nd Centennial.

The country’s One Hundred Year Journey began in 1921, when its founder, the late king Abdullah the first, organised his first government in Amman, establishing the Emirate of Transjordan. He secured its independence in 1946 to become the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

A proud country that sits in the heart of a Middle East that unfortunately is riddled with problems, fuelled with sectarianism and burdened by havoc.

Historically, Jordan, under its most able Hashemite leadership offered sound and credible advice - and still does - to our trusted friends and allies in consistence with the banners which the country caries / of peace, security and prosperity.

Jordan also carries a huge burden on behalf of the international community. To say the least, by carrying the burden of over 1.3 million Syrians living in Jordan, representing an increase of 21% of the country’s population.

An increase that happened not in 80 - 100 years, rather over a period of a few years. Something that has placed an incredible strain on the country’s social services and infrastructure.

We are having to accommodate over 140 thousand Syrian refugee children in Jordanian schools. Yet still 40% of Syrian school-age children remain out of school! And we have issued over 270 thousand work permits to Syrians, which is 5 times as much jobs the country can create per year, whilst we have 24% unemployment rate.

By all means, Jordan thus far claims the world title with the greatest number of refugees in absolute and relative terms. 15.6% of the world’s refugee population reside in Jordan. And the overall refugee population has aggravated the socio-economic fragility of Jordan, security burdens and environmental challenges.

The Syrian crisis alone - notwithstanding Covid - negatively impacted the development gains made by Jordan over the past years, increased public debt, and caused a deviation in the path of sustainable development for the coming decade.

But Jordan’s leadership and its people are focused on the greater good / and remain committed to being the beacon of hope in the region, and to moving forward with the much needed help of friends and partners.

A couple of years ago, February 2019, in London, the world came together in an unprecedented manner, to initiate Jordan’s plan for economic growth, to pledge support, respect and solidarity, to a country that has given so much to the international community, human security and dignity.

In London we witnessed the commitment and determination of the Jordanian Government, and that of the Friends of Jordan, to forge a way forward and to overcome the economic obstacles the country is faced with, providing a better standard of living, and living up to the aspirations of the youthful population of Jordan and the region. Something that is at the heart of His Majesty King Abdullah the Second’s vision, which is captured in three words; Progress, Faith & Peace.

Following the legacy of his father, the late King Hussein of Jordan, His Majesty King Abdullah the 2nd has made the welfare of Jordan’s people the cornerstone of his policies for national development, regional peace and global coexistence. The King’s special concern for the future of Jordan’s young people has put youth engagement, education and opportunity at the top of his agenda.

Progress

His Majesty’s development agenda is based on core beliefs about what Jordan must be:

A thriving and successful economy at the heart of a peaceful, prosperous and democratic region.

Jordan's success will be incomplete as long as the people of the Middle East live with regional conflict, which is an obstacle to cooperation and exchange, and a threat to the confidence, security and rule of law on which healthy economies are built.

Faith

And as a descendant of the Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him), King Abdullah has made the Islamic principles of / justice, peace, social harmony and tolerance / central to his agenda for the nation.

Jordanians come from different faiths but they share a piety that is powerful and central to their daily lives.

This devotion also illuminates the King's vision for the region and the world.

By bringing the world’s nations, faiths and cultures together in dialogue, His Majesty seeks to advance understanding of humanity’s common concerns and bonds.

He shares with Muslims around the world a sense of alarm about the challenges to the Islamic nation posed by extremism: violence in the region and beyond, the use of religion for political purposes, the strife among Muslims and the vilification of Muslims that extremist acts have inspired. And His Majesty is addressing these challenges head on.

In 2004, King Abdullah, alongside the Royal Aal Al Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought / and some of the world’s leading Islamic scholars, released the [Amman Message](http://ammanmessage.com/index.php?lang=en%2522%2520%255Ct%2520%2522_blank),

which is a straightforward explanation of the values of compassion, respect for others, tolerance and freedom of religion that are the guiding principles of Islam.

In July 2006, King Abdullah opened the doors of the first International Islamic Conference in Amman. There, 180 leading Muslim scholars from 45 countries, representing all the madhahib of Sunni, Shii and Ibadi Islam, and all Islam's currents, including Sufism,

joined in affirming the Amman Message. Together, these authorities issued a clear and categorical rejection of extremism and violence which have no place in religion.

As for Peace, Decades of robust regional and international engagement have made Jordan one of the most stable, secure and prosperous countries in the region.

It is from this position of strength that Jordan has advanced its own development to become a highly globalised country.

Today, the pursuit of peace in the region and beyond – a hallmark of Hashemite leadership – is the cornerstone of His Majesty King Abdullah II’s foreign policy.

King Abdullah is the region's most outspoken statesman on Middle East peace, which he asserts as both a basic right and a practical need for all people of the region.

Using Jordan's strong relationship with members of the international community, / His Majesty has advocated for active global engagement in bringing the Israelis and Palestinians together for a resolution.

The King has also been the region’s most vocal advocate of the Arab Peace Initiative (API)

as the platform for the realization of comprehensive peace between the Arab states and Israel.

The API, a unanimous pledge of coexistence with the state of Israel made by all Arab states during the 2002 Arab Summit in Beirut,

Calls for comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace and security guarantees for all the countries of the region.

Its foundation is Israel's withdrawal from all occupied Arab territories and the establishment of a viable, independent Palestinian state on Palestinian territory.

To achieve a comprehensive and lasting peace we have to address the legitimate rights of both sides.

We all need to agree as to where we want to be some years down the line and work our way backwards. We would need to articulate the objectives and assess IF what we are doing will get us there.

We need to be forceful in that "peace is a right for all” and that

“inclusion is a must”.

The Palestinians need sovereignty, a state and a flag, Israel needs to feel secure.

Failure to deliver that, No acceptance will be secured. And whatever short-term benefits of perceived stabilisation will only be temporary.

In Jordan, and I believe you may as well, we are all about solutions not problems. And we believe that remaining engaged is important to prevent a vacuum that can be exploited by haters and radicals.

We need to get the process back on track. The right process on the right track that spells; Inclusion and moving forward.

Jordan has a stake in the peace process and firmly supports a 2 State solution to age old conflict on the basis of the June 4th, 1967 lines, with East Jerusalem as the Capital of Palestine; backed by the Arab Peace Initiative, with all final status issues to be discussed and agreed.

The Political Will on both sides of the divide, coupled with the necessary support of the US and international partners to reach a resolution remains key to solving THE core problem of the region.

Jerusalem, of course, is detrimental to achieving sustainable peace. The lack thereof remains an essential recruitment tool for terrorist groups and unrest in the region and beyond.

In the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, we remain committed to uphold our role as the Custodian of Islamic and Christian holy sites in the City.

We believe that weakening the presence of other religions and communities in Holy City goes against what it represents and what it symbolises. And it plays directly into the hands extremist cards. Something we all don’t appreciate nor want!

Again, the US leadership remains essential, and we are working with our allies and partners to help encourage advancing an equitable peace deal based on the two-state solution, with the hope that in due course, the deal will contribute to reaching that goal.

In other areas, King Abdullah has maintained Jordan’s openness to its neighbours and friends, and spearheaded a forceful holistic response to extremism and terrorism.

Ladies & Gentlemen,

Although today, Jordan is going through a rough patch, the Kingdom remains committed for a brighter future.

The country enjoys a stable political environment, a unique strategic location, a free market-oriented economy with access to major international markets, attractive investment climate and a well educated population and fantastic tourism sites.

The government has a plan, which factors in the realities of the Jordanian economy including an expected economic contraction of at least 3% in 2020.

The government has put forward an Indicative Executive Program for 2021-2024 that calls for for the first time for full synergy between economic, fiscal and monetary policies in order to stimulate growth, improve livelihoods and create the needed jobs for Jordanians

 whilst also maintaining focus on fiscal and monetary stability.

It has put forward an overall outlook for the economy with realistic targets including an increase in GDP growth from -3% in 2020 to +3.3% in 2024,

maintaining budget deficit levels at below 6.5% of GDP, and reducing public debt from 89% of GDP

(net of SSC holdings) in 2020 to 84.2% of GDP (net of SSC holdings) in 2024.

It also strives to maintain foreign reserves to cover at least 8 months of imports,

reduce the current account deficit from 11% of GDP in 2020 to 4.9% of GDP in 2024,

achieve at least a 6.5% growth in exports and increase FDI from JD0.5 billion in 2020 to JD1.5 billion in 2024.

The country is focused on Transforming into a Digital and Green Economy As a key economic driver to accelerating growth and facilitating job creation. It has adopted a comprehensive ICT development and digitization strategy to improve service delivery and provide the necessary infrastructure to transform Jordan into a digital economy.

Efforts will also be placed to maximize the impact of digitization and the establishment of an inclusive information and communication technologies (ICT) ecosystem that encourages greater uptake and usage of digital services, as well as the provision of trained and skilled labor.

Under higher education, it seeks to better match higher education outputs with labor market demands through the implementation of projects that integrate technology into teaching, as well as supporting research and development in science and technology.

This investment in inclusive growth is also coupled with a commitment to a National Strategy for Green Growth (2021-2025) that also focuses on consolidating national efforts towards transforming into a greener economy and leveraging the green economy agenda to promote deeper economic development, energy efficiency and employment.

The strategy covers plans across the water, waste, energy, agricultural, energy, tourism, and transport sectors.

Specifically on ICT, I am proud to say that the Sector grew from 300 million to 2.2 Billion US Dollars over the past 20 years.

 It contributes directly and indirectly to 12 percent of GDP.

And today, with Five Thousand Jordanian IT graduates each year, Jordan offers raw talent that can be harnessed and good to go regionally and globally after receiving the right short term training programs and platforms.

The ICT sector in Jordan took yet another leap forward with the 1 million Jordanian Coders Initiative launched by His Royal Highness Crown Prince Al Hussein back in May 2019. And with the launching Youth, Technology, and Jobs (YTJ) initiative which will empower citizens in preparation for the future of work and accelerated digitalisation.

With that and a lot already happening in Jordan, in terms of Back Office Operations, Advanced Technical Support and Jordanian companies and start-ups with their own Intellectual Capital, we remain optimistic and committed to working with our friends and partners here in the UK, the international community and international financial institutions even closer to ensure to ensure that Jordan is on a path to sustainable growth.

Indeed International reports indicate that Jordan’s overall investment environment is improving.

Jordan was selected as one of the top three most improved business climates in the World Bank’s “Doing Business Report 2020,”

jumping 29 places from 104 to 75.

To End I would like to reaffirm that the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is committed to continuing its efforts to mediate wherever possible, offer assistance whenever it is needed, and continue to push hope forward at every opportunity.

For the lack of progress and lack of hope is hazardous and dangerous.

Jordan will keep on going to the next level regardless of the challenges, which do exist, but we believe, and our history testifies, that in collaboration with our friends and partners, we will turn challenge into opportunity that is mutually beneficial.

I thank you for your patience and look forward to your contributions.