The First Palestinian Symposium on Water Rights and Access to the Jordan River and Development Needs in the Jordan Valley

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InterContinental Hotel, Jericho, West bank

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Palestinian Jordan River Conference Summary

The First Palestinian Symposium on Water Rights and Access to the Jordan River and Development Needs in the Jordan Valley national conference brought together Palestinian experts, academics, local and national government representatives and other stakeholders from Palestine to highlight the need for securing Palestinian water rights and development needs in the Jordan Valley.

During the course of the conference presenters addressed issues of water scarcity, water needs and water availability in the Jordan Valley, in sectors such as agriculture, tourism and industry. Issues regarding the rehabilitation of the Jordan River were raised, including needed water amounts and water quality, building on the work of FoEME’s Jordan River Rehabilitation project and the findings of the report Towards a Living Jordan River: An Environmental Flows Report on the Rehabilitation of the Lower Jordan River.

The importance of the Jordan Valley for the economic growth of a future Palestinian state was addressed, highlighting the agricultural sector’s contribution to the economy. As part of a future Palestinian economy, the sustainable development of the Jordan Valley requires a ‘Master Plan’, taking into consideration all sectors and the corresponding water needs for each, and how this could be achieved with limited access to water resources. In this sense, an integrated management plan for the Jordan River, including all riparian countries is essential.

The critical state of the Dead Sea is a direct result of the depletion of waters from the Jordan River. It is estimated that no more than 20-30 mcm of water reaches the Dead Sea from the Jordan River (2% of its natural flow), with an extremely poor quality level. Dr. Shaddad Atilli stressed that cooperation with Israel over rehabilitation of the Dead Sea and the Jordan River is severely restrained by restricted access of Palestinians to these two water sources.

Restricted access to the waters of the Jordan River and Dead Sea was also a central argument by those presenting the case for tourism development in the Jordan Valley. Without secure Palestinian water rights, uncertainty over water access acts as a major hindrance to tourism investments. Coupled with restricted access to historical and environmental sites of importance, the Palestinian tourism sector has little room for growth.

Agriculture in the Jordan Valley plays an important role in the economy of Palestine. According to the presentation by the Ministry of Agriculture, there are only 27,000 dunums of irrigated land in the Jordan Valley, representing 11% of agricultural land in Palestine. The contribution of the agricultural sector to GDP is 7.1% and employs 13.4% of the Palestinian labor force. Incorporated into a Jericho agro-industrial zone, agriculture could further be developed and targeted towards an international market, most notably in the Middle East and Europe.

The end of the symposium was celebrated with a dinner for all participants at the InterContinental Hotel Jericho.
The second day of the conference included a regional field trip for symposium participants, who were taken to a variety of sites of environmental and historical importance. Stops included Ein Fashkha on the Dead Sea, the Baptism site on the West Bank of the Jordan River (though due to restricted access, participants were not able to visit the actual site), the Wadi Auja and the Auja Environment Center.