Ministers, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Friends of water and sustainable development;

I am truly honored to address you during this opening session of the conference on Sustainable Development in the Jordan Valley organized by EcoPeace, the Stockholm International Water Institute and the Global Nature Fund.

These are indeed challenging times for the Middle East. We are all deeply concerned about developments in Iraq and Syria but also about the situation in Jerusalem only a few miles up the hills. We need to isolate extremists on all sides and support moderate and non-violent forces who work to promote democracy, human rights and gender equality.

Two weeks ago, the Swedish government took the official decision to recognize the State of Palestine. This is an important step that confirms the right to self-determination of the Palestinian people. The decision is meant to bring hope, to young Israelis as well as to young Palestinians, at a time when tensions are increasing and peace talks seem remote.

Through this decision, Sweden’s close ties with the State of Israel are complemented by an equivalent relationship with Palestine in pursuing the two-state solution that Israelis, Palestinians and a united international community see as the path to sustainable peace in the Middle East.

The Swedish Government also decided to increase its support to Palestinian state-building. (Bilateral aid to Palestine will increase by SEK 500 million to SEK 1.5 billion over the next five-year period, in addition to Sweden’s substantial humanitarian assistance). One goal with our development cooperation with Palestine is to strengthen its resilience to environmental and climate change. In this context, let me just mention that Sweden’s new government includes the Green Party for the first time in our political history.

To prepare for the future, one also has to look back to history. We are currently celebrating 25 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the peaceful transformation of Europe. Immediately following the events, Sweden invested heavily in building
strong cooperation with all the Baltic Sea States around our shared water resources and the protection of its sensitive environment. This cooperation included a strong civil society component. The Baltic Sea Cooperation strengthened our belief that cooperation on shared natural resources or shared environmental problems can be a strong driver for peaceful integration - above and beyond the technical and economic benefits that may be achieved. In this context, let me also mention the Stockholm International Water Institute (SIWI) which has been working tirelessly since 1991 to promote improved knowledge and cooperation on water issues on the local, regional and global levels.

- In Sweden and in much of Europe we do not face challenges related to water scarcity like you do here in the Middle East. But challenges related to water quality are in many respects similar. The Water Framework Directive adopted by EU in 2000 provides the means by which to achieve [the label] ‘good status’ of for all ground and surface water in the EU. The Directive also provides tools for good river basin management within and between. The Directive has provided for increased cooperation across national borders over shared waters. As a member of the EU and a supporter of cooperation in this region, I am encouraged by the EU’s support for the development of the NGO Regional Master Plan for the Lower Jordan River.

- Many of the key challenges this region faces today, including water and climate change, know no borders and are also best tackled through a regional approach. Sweden firmly believes that one important driver for peace in this region must and will be co-operation on shared water resources. Sweden has, for many years now, been a supporter of reinforced cooperation as well as the rehabilitation of the Jordan River. I believe increased cooperation over the Jordan River can and will bring benefits to all stakeholders who depend on it.

- One of our key partners for the cooperation in this region is EcoPeace and Sweden is a proud supporter of the “Good Water Neighbors Project” which links the peoples sharing the lower Jordan River together at a range of levels. I have had the pleasure of visiting different parts of the River Basin with EcoPeace and the organization has proved that it is possible to achieve results over the borders in spite of political challenges. We are aware this is not an easy task. I am full of admiration for the energy, commitment and dedication that the organization and its staff from the three countries are showing. In this context, I am pleased to announce that Sweden has recently decided on another 3-year financial support to the Good Water Neighbors project.
• The ecosystem is one and know no borders. At the same time, some key decisions on water resources in this region are closely linked to security issues. Unfortunately, from what I have seen myself on the ground, this can lead to a loose-loose-situation for the populations dependent on the water. BUT this need not be the case as the conveners of this conference are determined to show us. Cooperation between all stakeholders provides us with a win-win opportunity not to be lost.

• Interdependencies and regional integration are sometimes difficult to build but also, because they require courage and trust, harder to break. A few weeks ago, we saw the 20th anniversary of the Israeli-Jordanian Peace Treaty. One of the key components of this agreement is the mechanism by which Jordan stores water from the Yarmouk in Lake Tiberias during winter time. During summer when Jordan needs it, Israel releases it again. The lake essentially serves as Jordan’s water bank. This arrangement has now worked for 20 years and is a manifestation of national leadership that can lead the way for the future.

• Let me conclude by again thanking the organizers of this conference, SIWI, EcoPeace and GNF – with the support of the European Union – and welcome the Regional Master Plan for the Lower Jordan River. All efforts in support of sustainable development, dialogue and cooperation in this region should be encouraged. I urge all of you to engage with open minds and a vision that transcends the immediate challenges we now face in the region.

• I wish you all a successful conference.

• Thank you for your attention!