H.E Mr. Omer Bar Lev - Member of the Knesset

[Transcription] Thank you. His Excellency Saad Abu Hammour, Secretary General of the JVA, the three Palestinians, Deputy Ministers, Ayoub Kara, Israel’s Deputy Minister of Regional Cooperation, Helena Gröndahl Rietz, Swedish Ambassador to Jordan, Joanna Veronika, Ambassador, head of the European Union delegation to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan Danny Nevo, Israel’s Ambassador to Jordan, and of course the three EcoPeace Middle East directors, and distinguished guests. It’s my second year here and thank you very much for inviting me, it is a great honour for me. In these days of deadlock in the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, the tri-lateral project we are discussing here, to rehabilitate the Southern Jordan River, that brings together Jordan, Palestinians, and Israel is very, very impressive. Not only is this an ecological and environmental mission of the highest order, it is also proof that our relations are not a sum game. That cooperation can lead us all to fruitful initiatives to benefit us all.

Water is a clear example of resources that we all rely on. Jordanians, Palestinians, and Israelis. No-one has yet found a substitute for water, and we are all lost without it. History has taught us that controlling water resources, especially in arid areas like ours, can on the one hand be a cause of conflicts and wars, but on the other hand, be a well of unity, sharing, and inclusion. Nowadays, the water resources that we all share are drying up quickly. Precipitation levels are decreasing, and the global warming is only making matters worse. In recent years, we have acquired extensive knowledge about water and how to use it creatively. Israel has become a regional water power developing advanced technologies for water desalination, recycling. Whereas the average precipitation in mountain Israel is 1.2 billion cubic meters per year, our consumption is 2.2 billion cubic meters. The additional billion comes from the technologies of agriculture, effluence, and desalination of seawater. We Israelis have much to share with our Jordanians and Palestinian colleagues. We all can seize this opportunity to turn water from a source of controversy into a joint mission.

Another good example for trilateral joint project is the Dead Sea Red Sea project. The desalination project to be built in Aqaba, that will supply water to the Southern part of Israel and Jordan. In exchange, Israel will supply in the North water to the West Bank and Jordan, is another good example. The significance of trilateral cooperation of such kind goes far beyond its direct and obvious importance. It strengthens the general common interest. It weakens the opponents of cooperation in Israel, in the Palestinian Authority, and in Jordan, and it opens new and unexpected horizons and opportunities. Hence the rehabilitation of the Jordan River is not only an environmental necessity. It has political, economical, and security implications as well. The Southern Jordan Valley, from the sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea, on both banks, should be able to provide its inhabitants, first and foremost, with a source of subsistence. It should offer them an opportunity for economic development, and serve as an example for cooperation between citizens of different countries.

But while we are dealing with a tri-lateral project, it is wrong, and impossible to ignore the elephant in the room. The ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, which can prevent such cooperation. When I look back on the conflict between Jordan and Israel, I understand how fortunate our countries were, two decades ago, to have two great leaders, his excellency, the late King Hussain, and the Prime Minister of Israel, the late Yitzhak Rabin,
who made the dream of historic peace come true. These two great leaders were able to set aside their differences, make strategic compromises, and unite their peoples behind a vision of hope.

I am not interested in the ongoing blame game between the prime minister of Israel and the chairman of the Palestinian Authority. I am not interested in determining which one of them is responsible for the failures to achieve an agreement so far. But I do think, and many of you here in this audience might agree, that if Israel and the Palestinians will wait until both sides, simultaneously, will have courageous leaders who can make hard decisions and convince their people that this is the right path, then we might be waiting for a very long time for the peace we, and our children, deserve. Therefore, Israel and the Palestinians now have two options. Either we wait until both sides will have daring and visionary leaders, such as his excellency, the late King Hussain, and the late Prime Minister Rabin, who will be brave enough to make hard decisions and compromises, or we choose to work together in specific fields.

As I said earlier, collaborations like the one we witness here in Southern Jordan build trust, it proves that it pays ... for all of us. The unfortunate developments that we have seen recently in our neighbourhood only strengthens the broader common interest of Jordan, the Palestinians and Israel. The collapse of Syria and Iraq, the bloodshed in those war torn countries, illustrate the need to build an economic political security wall to strengthen the moderate nations in the Middle East. Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinians have the common interest in achieving a stable Middle East. We must join forces against the fundamentalists, especially against the extremism of the Islamic State. Let us not forget the Gaza Strip, and the 1.8 million Palestinians who live there in Gaza. We also have a common goal, all three of us, the Israelis, Jordanians, and Palestinian Authority. And our common goal is to weaken Hamas and enable the Palestinian Authority to gain a strong foothold in Gaza.

We all have interests in transferring the reconstruction budget, and then the development budget to the Gaza Strip. But only through the PA. The formula must be demilitarization in exchange for development. Israel has to launch a new political initiative but for that it needs the support of its neighbors; Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and of course the Palestinian Authority, as well as the support of the international community; the United States, the European Union, and the United Nations. If we can overcome the environmental challenges, we can surely overcome the political and economic ones too. Our region has great potential. This River is sacred to many people, and it can easily become the hub of tourism, an engine of growth and prosperity. But it does not have to stop with the Jordan River. The Gaza strip too can flourish. Imagine a strip with an international airport. With trade and tourism. Imagine a Gaza strip that can capitalize on its beautiful beaches, growth and economy that will lift thousands of Palestinians out of poverty. I call on the representatives from Israel, from Jordan, from the PA and our international friends here: Let us decide that we can realize this vision. Let us make this region an example for cooperation and prosperity. I urge the representatives from the international community to continue in support of our region. Only if we all believe that it is possible, will we be able to overcome the deficit of water and expanding of terror, and replace them with love. Thank you very much.