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Speech of:
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Your Excellency, the Honorable Minister of Foreign Affairs,
Your Excellency the Honorable Minister of Planning,
Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me first, Your Excellency, to express my gratitude to you and my deep appreciation for your kind welcome. We are greatly honoured by your presence on the occasion of the official launch of the Second Arab Human Development Report. It is a source of immense pleasure for us that Jordan, in the reign of His Majesty King Abdullah the Second, is hosting this landmark ceremony. This generous act has given the Report team a platform from which to address the entire Arab people and a forum open to different points of view. Amman for us today is a centre for freedom of expression in service to the cause of development across the Arab world. To our distinguished guests attending from other countries of region, I offer a warm welcome to Jordan. Thank you for taking the trouble to be with us and for sharing our faith in the capabilities of this region and our concern for its future.

It has been more than a year since the launch of the first Arab Human Development Report, which explored the situation of human development in the Arab world, highlighting substantial achievements while identifying significant shortcomings and suggesting ways of overcoming them. Human development, as defined in that Report, is synonymous with an Arab renaissance in that it seeks to build human well being on the loftiest plane of existence: a plane where people's choices and capabilities are protected by essential human freedoms and enriched by innovation and creativity; where the boundaries of knowledge are constantly pushed further back and where people are able to lead decent lives consistent with human dignity. The reaction of Arab intellectuals to the first Report, whether they endorsed it or criticized it, was proof enough of the vitality of the Arab world and of its people's ardent concern to achieve their deepest aspirations.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In the time available to me, please allow me to accompany you on a quick tour of the second Report. This is an opportunity to familiarize ourselves with the state of knowledge in the Arab world, in particular its dissemination and production; to take note of the cultural, political, economic and social context for knowledge acquisition; and to review aspects of the authors' strategic vision for enhancing the acquisition, indigenisation and creation of knowledge.

Before turning to the topic of knowledge, it is important to remember that, according to the Report team, the two years between starting the first Report and initiating the second have been two years unlike any others in recent Arab history. This has been a time of events that have shaken the world and traumatized the Arab region. In 2002,

the Israeli army reoccupied almost the entire Palestinian Territories committing, notably in Jenin and Nablus, a series of human atrocities, including wanton destruction, intimidation and killing that led reputable international non-governmental organizations to describe those acts as “war crimes”. The invasion also caused widespread material destruction that spared neither schools, nor mosques nor churches nor even olive trees. The occupation continues to undermine the capabilities of Palestinian society and its hopes of self-determination and statehood.

In 2003 Iraq fell under an occupation that most Arabs saw as embodying plans to reshape the region from the outside to suit the interests of foreign powers. Over the last two years, measures taken in the name of the war on terrorism have stifled freedoms in many parts of the world, notably in the United States. Civil and political freedoms, particularly of Arabs and Muslims, were violated as a consequence. Arabs and Muslims have faced arrest and arbitrary detention without trial or charge. Contrary to established legal principles they have become guilty until proven innocent. Islam has been the target of an unjust wave of provocation, defamation and criticism that betrays remarkable ignorance most of the time and blatant prejudice at other times. The clearest expression of what Arabs and Muslims have come to suffer as a result of ethnic profiling came from His Majesty King Abdullah The Second when he observed in his Islamic Summit speech that the pre-judgement of Muslims has come to represent the worst form of terrorism.

Certain profound events only reveal their full consequences after an interval. Yet in this case the results were felt immediately. The impact of these momentous events would cripple the process of development in Arab societies imposing a pattern contrary to that desired by most Arabs. Undoubtedly, under these new circumstances, the challenge of human development has become even more important, more urgent and harder to attain. In contrast to these externally driven events, the series of Arab Human Development Reports represents an effort to crystallize a strategic vision of change, developed by Arabs, for the sake of human development from within the region and to deepen an Arab-owned and Arab-led dialogue on ways to safeguard the dignity and well-being of the Arab people. There can be no doubt that self-reform stemming from open, scrupulous and balanced self-criticism is the right, if not the only alternative to plans that have apparently been drawn up outside the Arab world for restructuring the region and for reshaping its identity.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In today’s world, knowledge has become the key to progress and growth. Knowledge increasingly defines the line between wealth and poverty, between capability and powerlessness and between human fulfillment and frustration. A country able to mobilize and spread knowledge can rapidly raise its level of development, help all its citizens to grow and flourish and take its proper place on the contemporary global stage. Where do we Arabs stand in the world of knowledge as far as dissemination and production are concerned?

Education is considered the most important component in the knowledge dissemination system. The Report reveals great achievements in many Arab countries in the area of expanding and disseminating education. Yet despite the impressive quantitative expansion of Arab education, and despite the generally good

qualifications of professors and teachers, our systems face challenges in terms of quality. We are still faced with overcrowded classrooms, insufficient facilities and low performance in basic subjects such as mathematics and sciences. We still emphasize rote learning instead teaching our children how to think and how to solve problems. When the Report attempted to take the quality of education into account in measuring Arab human capital, it found that only a handful of Arab countries have undertaken quality assessments. Neglecting this dimension of evaluation leads to the deterioration of educational quality and can decouple education from the needs of society and job markets. Among countries that are exceptions to this general trend is Jordan, which early on recognized the importance of quality assurance in developing its human capital and building its knowledge capabilities.

The mass media are generally regarded as the most important channels of knowledge dissemination. However, the Report notes that, in Arab countries, most of the media do not live up to the requirements of building a knowledge society and that there are common features of the Arab media discourse in general, and of the official discourse in particular, that stifle innovation, prevent interaction and repress initiatives. Authority and officialdom often loom large in media discourse, dominating its content and values and imposing a uni-dimensional point of view.

Recently however some bright spots in the Arab information environment, represented by a number of Arabic satellite channels and newspapers, have started to appear. Despite the iron grip of official media on political opinion, news and information, the Arab media has entered a new phase marked by dawning competition. Some of these new wave media have been able to compete with the world's most respected news sources in covering breaking news. They have injected a new spirit of open debate, objective analysis and free enquiry into Arab media coverage.

When it comes to knowledge production, the Report discloses great variations in performance, ranging from scarcity in some fields to vigorous creative output in others. Arab scientific research is characterized by low production, weak basic research and an absence of advanced research in such fields as information technology and molecular biology. Arab R&D generally suffers from low levels of funding, an absence of institutional support and declining numbers of qualified staff.

In most Arab countries, production in the humanities and social sciences is subject to many restrictions. Censorship and political red lines, whether explicit or tacit, frequently interfere with free expression and enquiry in these fields.

By contrast with this weak output in the natural and social sciences, Arab societies can boast creative production in literature and art equal to the best in the world. The originality visible in many Arab creative works is often impressive. Such works are the fruit of a robust creative effort that however does not call for large financial investments, unlike the case of scientific research and development.

Yet Arab literary production also faces certain challenges, of which the most important are a low readership and the declining purchasing power of today's Arab readers. This is clearly reflected in the number of books produced in the Arab world. Although we Arabs represent five per cent of the world's people we account for just

one per cent of the books it produces. Moreover, the relatively few books we do produce do not move freely through Arab markets, due to the restrictions imposed by twenty-two Arab censors. As a result, our people are frequently denied access to fresh ideas and creative works.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This is the state of knowledge in Arab countries today. But how did it become like this? Knowledge needs many supports in order to flourish. Which ones are most lacking? Knowledge needs a system to organize and manage the way it is acquired. It requires an enabling cultural environment in which to ripen, a favourable economic and social structure and a political atmosphere that recognizes and rewards creativity.

When the Report examines the rich storehouse of ideas, knowledge and creative expression in our living Arab culture it finds bright treasures waiting to be reclaimed. Indeed, the Report affirms that, just as it did in the first millennium and at the beginning of the second, so again in the third millennium Arab culture can nourish a knowledge society. Moreover, this strength and wealth can enhance the ability of Arab societies to manage and benefit from the new currents of globalization.

Islam, which is the most important component of Arab culture, actively encourages intellectual enquiry, the acquisition of science and the creation of knowledge-based societies. The period in Arab history when science and scholarship blossomed, which was marked by a strong link between the Islamic religion and science, offers the best evidence of this. Moreover, the Arabic language, with its rich structure and capabilities, may well represent a unique instrument for facilitating an Arab renaissance in the age of informatics and knowledge.

Yet, while the Report sees rich incentives and inspiration for knowledge in our Arab culture it finds these stimulants missing in our economic and political structures. It notes, for example, that the main production pattern in our societies, which centres on depleting raw materials, brings with it a pattern of investment that encourages luxury expenditure and discourages the development of productive capabilities based on knowledge.

The Report points out that Arab markets lack two characteristics important for knowledge production; healthy competition and adequate size. Moreover, lack of transparency and accountability leads to a situation where the interests of political elites and businessmen become intertwined or even identical. This context decreases the competitive advantage of utilizing knowledge since economic profits result from favoritism in the power structure rather than from creativity and innovation. In addition, Arab markets are typically small when taken individually. Furthermore, these markets remain well below their potential owing to a lack of Arab cooperation, which has failed to keep up with levels of regional cooperation in other parts of the world or to implement important cooperation agreements and economic decisions adopted in Arab regional forums.

The pattern of incentives in a society also affects how knowledge is acquired and transmitted. This pattern is the predominant group of values that a society embraces and that is reflected in its various moral and material facets. In our region, the oil

boom drastically affected the social standing of scientists, educated people and scholars by measuring social value exclusively in terms of money, regardless of how that money was made. But the Report does not say that the region needs a new system of societal incentives. Rather, it says we need to recover the essential values that have been smothered under the rush of oil and easy riches.

The political context influences knowledge through the dimensions of freedom and the rule of law. If the margin of freedom narrows, the scope of individual creativity vanishes. The absence of freedoms allows political powers to dominate the knowledge system at the level of institutions and individuals. When that happens, standards of competence and efficiency, which should be foremost in appointing the heads and staff of these institutions, usually suffer. Instead, political loyalties and considerations take precedence and, throughout the whole system, the pursuit of excellence and knowledge is compromised.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Report's thorough analysis of the status of Arab knowledge culminates in a strategic vision for reforming the social context of knowledge acquisition, and strengthening the knowledge system in Arab countries. This vision is based on five principles:

The first principle is based on providing and guaranteeing the key freedoms of opinion, expression and association through good governance. When these freedoms flourish, they beget more freedoms, which work together to enhance the spirit of scientific research and technological development. Those freedoms will not flourish unless laws that are strong enough to lift restrictions on expression, remove barriers to organization and counter practices that hamper freedom of thought are in place and enforced. Laws will not function if are not applied by a disinterested, independent and effective judiciary that prevents political and social authorities from encroaching on, or violating these freedoms. The prerequisite for all these elements is good governance.

The second principle is the broadening of high quality education to all Arab citizens, paying special attention to both ends of the educational continuum and emphasizing life-long learning. Of particular importance is the recognition that returns on investment in childhood education and training are immeasurably valuable. The first and most important step towards educational reform is for Arab countries to commit themselves to independent and periodical assessments of the quality of education at all stages.

The third principle emphasizes applying research and development to all social activities and joining the information revolution decisively. This suggests that a two-pronged strategy is required. The first should focus on strengthening national institutions, while the second should concentrate on deepening cooperation between those Arab countries, interested in coordinating their efforts to reform their scientific and technological policies.

The fourth principle stresses the importance of shifting Arab economies rapidly towards knowledge-based production. The prevailing production pattern is

commodity based and dependent on depleting natural resources. It also entails patterns of income distribution, consumer spending and social behavior that are not conducive to building knowledge-based economies.

The fifth principle is based on establishing an authentic, enlightened Arab knowledge model. The first requirement in establishing an enlightened knowledge model is the promotion of scholarship (*ijtihad*) in society and the protection of the individual's right to differ. In that environment, the mind is set free by adopting logic, evidence and rational argument. Robust differences of opinion among Arabs should be seen as a sign of vitality and a matter of pride, not marks of weakness or causes for concern. One of the important features of the new knowledge model is to be free of inflexible thinking, and to be open to cultural interaction, intellectual intermingling with other nations and exposure to others' innovations.

Ladies and gentlemen:

I have merely scratched the surface of a rich and complex report in this attempt to highlight its main analyses and findings. The Report is the work of committed Arab intellectuals who are passionately concerned about the status and future of the Arab world and who are devoted to unleashing the tremendous potential of their beloved region.

I wish to thank you, the members of the Report Team, for your remarkable efforts and perseverance. I express my special gratitude to Dr. Nader Fergany, Leader of the Core Team, for his resourcefulness and contributions at every stage and his hard work and professional dedication to the cause of Arab human development.

Last but hardly least, I express my deep appreciation to the members of the Report's advisory board, without whose guidance and counsel this report would not have been what it is now.

Let me close now on a note of personal optimism. I believe that our living Arab heritage, our endlessly creative Arabic language and our eternal religion, Islam, are infinitely durable forces. These foundations of our civilization once supported a knowledge society that was the envy of the world. They will do so again if we clear away the defective social, economic and political structures we have piled on them. We can free our minds to reason without fear; free our people's souls to breathe; and free our knowledge systems to grow into sources of new economic, social and technological strength. The Arab people deserve nothing less in this new millennium of knowledge.

Thank you.