

**NDI Conference
Istanbul, Turkey
April 13, 2004**

Your Royal Highness Princess Basma,
Secretary Albright,
President Kabbah
Minister Aydin
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to be among you today. No timing is more appropriate than now for the holding of such a gathering, and no heading is more fitting than this: A Congress of Democrats from the Islamic World. I am humbled to be among such distinguished company of true reformers working for a better future of this region. A special tribute should go to the United Nations Development Fund, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, and the Turkish Democracy Foundation for sponsoring this historic gathering. Had it not been for their sincere and devoted efforts, we would not be meeting today at a critical time when we, together as Muslims, have to come out with a collective blueprint for reform and democratic transformation acquiescent to our religious and cultural values. Please join me in thanking them for a job well done. I would like also to thank the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation for hosting our luncheon today.

The issue of reform is rapidly occupying central stage in the Arab World. The region has been bombarded in recent weeks with a multitude of reform initiatives that have been conceived and shaped outside the Arab World. The most prominent of these, is a leaked reported U.S. document detailing U.S. ideas about a “Greater Middle East Initiative” for a region extending from Morocco to Afghanistan. This unofficial paper has generated a fierce and heated debate across the Arab World, a debate that is still very much alive.

As a representative of a country which is already undergoing a serious political, economic and social reform process, I bring several messages to your meeting today. The first is that it is not sufficient to agree on the content of reform. Indeed, there is little disagreement in the Arab World today over key areas where reform is needed: public and civil freedoms, women’s rights, educational reform, judicial reform, economic liberalization, and fighting terrorism. These are all areas that will hopefully appear in a statement of principles that will be adopted at the upcoming Arab summit. But if content is important, ownership of the process is even more so. Initiatives seen as imposed from the outside will only hurt the efforts of genuine reformers in our region. Opponents of political and social reform will conveniently label reform efforts as a mere implementation of a Western agenda against the interests of the Arab World—and will probably get away with it.

Having said that, I should make it very clear that opposition to outside efforts should not be turned into opposition to reform itself. If such outside efforts are to be resisted, then it is imperative for the region to come out with an initiative of its own—one that will credibly and seriously commit Arab countries to the principles outlined above and more. We hope the upcoming Arab summit will do exactly that. History teaches us that if we are not ready to act, someone else will attempt to act on our behalf.

The second message I bring is that a statement of principles on reform and a plan of action to implement these reforms are not quite the same. While one can expect a common commitment to principles, a one-blueprint-for-all action plan is unrealistic. Arab states are at different stages of political, economic, social and cultural development that demand a different, if serious, pace for each. Jordan has already such a plan, one that I will outline later in my speech.

My third message is that this reform process cannot be looked at in isolation of the central question looming heavy over our area—the continuation of the Arab-Israeli conflict. While the Arab-Israeli conflict cannot credibly be used as an excuse for the lack of movement on several social reform issues—women’s rights for example, it is equally true that movement on political reform without a parallel serious attention to the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict, might lead to the wrong results. We need to move on these two tracks together if we are not to allow frustration and anger resulting from the continuation of the occupation to result in a societal shift away from moderation and towards extremism. Further, if we are to have a sustained public buy-in for many of potentially controversial reform efforts, we need to also address the core issue that all Arabs have on their minds. The Arab public needs to be convinced that the international community is truly serious about helping resolve this problem even while it asks the region to help it address the terrorism issue.

Once we have committed to a path of reform, we will certainly need to engage in a dialogue with the international community to assist us in our efforts. We already have an ongoing and healthy dialogue with the European Union over these issues. This dialogue has indeed started with the Barcelona process almost ten years ago, and we hope it will result in a joint agreement on an action plan that would emphasize cooperation and outside assistance rather than outside imposition. It is here where my fourth message lies. If such a dialogue is to be successful, any initiative by the outside world should not be perceived as a movement against Islam. If there is a concern about terrorism, then we share it, and we share the commitment to fight it. But I must caution against such notions as a Greater Middle East, in which countries are lumped together for sometimes no other reason other than their common religion is Islam. A geographically “Greater Middle East” will only dilute the issues of the region and will be counterproductive when it comes to any public buy-in. This should not turn into a clash of civilizations, but into a coalition of civilizations against ignorance and terrorism.

But enough talking about the outside world. We must define our own objectives and chart our own path. In Jordan, we have done so. Our vision is to develop Jordan as

a modern, tolerant open society, and to establish ourselves as a successful, homegrown and prosperous Arab and Islamic model. We aim at a gradual process that will lead to a system which respects diversity at all times and regards it as a strength rather than a weakness, where majority rule is coupled with minority rights, where the right to politically organize is always guaranteed, and where personal and public freedoms are upheld. It is necessarily an evolutionary process that aims at entrenching a democratic culture in the national psyche, so that democratic principles become the norm, and so that democracy is not used by any who might opt to subject to it once and then deny it to others.

To achieve this, key strategic objectives have been identified for the next five years by a new government formed in October of last year, and entrusted by the King to implement a far-reaching program of political reform as its first priority. These objectives include public and personal freedoms, including freedom of the press and assembly; empowering women and removing any legal discrimination against them; developing a more effective political party life; developing an independent and more efficient judiciary; implementing an educational reform plan to encourage independent and critical thinking and bridge the knowledge gap with the rest of the world; and promoting a participative civil society while giving special attention to human rights.

Political reform in Jordan has already entered a new and important stage of implementation. The ministry of information was abolished as of last October, and several laws have been enacted, modified or abolished to restructure the state media organizations (TV, Radio, Press agency) and disengage them from direct government control through the establishment of independent boards to run them. Laws have been passed to allow private TV and radio stations to operate in the kingdom, with two such licenses already granted.

Although political parties are legal and operating in Jordan, most of them have no real platforms or popular support. A national dialogue involving parliament and civil society has been initiated to agree on ways to encourage the development of an active political party culture in the country, including drafting a new political parties and election laws.

A Human Rights Center has already been established last year to act as an ombudsman for human rights violations in the country.

We are taking major steps to have Jordanian laws conform with our constitution which states that all Jordanians are equal before the law, thus attempting to remove legal discrimination against women. Examples of such laws under review include family protection, civil status, citizenship, penal code, civil and military pension and Civil Service laws. In addition, concrete steps are being taken to encourage more women's participation in public life. The present cabinet includes three women out of 21 cabinet members, a first in Jordan's history. A quota of six seats in parliament has been established for women in the current election law, in addition to any other seats women can win on their own. In addition to the present six women in parliament, His Majesty

also appointed seven women to the Senate out of a total of 55 members, another first for the country.

A three-year judicial reform plan and a 5-year educational reform plan are already being implemented. The judicial reform plan aims at improving the overall performance of the judicial system in Jordan, enhance its role as an enabler for civic society and national competitiveness while maintaining its independence from other branches of government. The educational reform plan includes four initiatives focusing on life long learning, responsiveness to the economy, access to information and communications technology, and quality learning.

It is important to note that the codes of tolerance and dialogue have been embedded in Arab and Islamic culture since the earliest of times, with the coexistence of Muslims, Christians and Jews being the norm throughout the different eras of Arab Islamic culture in Africa, Europe and Asia. Documented cultural, scientific and literary works from the three groups and the survival of three monolithic religions' oldest houses of worship throughout the Middle East bear a live testimony to this colorful coexistence. At the same time, while codes of tolerance and human rights, already embodied in the region's culture and norms are of utmost importance, their real significance are seen when those codes of equality are translated into the values and daily life of citizens.

We must therefore recognize here current initiatives by other Arab states that have been launched, and the important role civil society is playing in these initiatives. The Sana'a declaration in Yemen at the beginning of this year upheld key principles of human rights and democracy in the Arab World. The Alexandria conference, sponsored by the Alexandria library in cooperation with Arab NGO's and held in March of this year, came out with a far-reaching document on political, economic and social reforms in our region. The new law on women's rights, passed in Morocco few months ago, is a major step forward that will set a new standard on this issue in the Arab World. One should never forget also that one of the first reports to seriously identify key challenges facing human development in the Arab World was issued in 2002 by the United Nations Development Program, and written exclusively by Arabs. We are particularly proud that a Jordanian woman spearheaded that effort and continues to do so.

I do not mean to paint a rosy picture of all these efforts though. The fact remains that reform is always a difficult process, and our region is no exception. There are powerful social and political forces that are content with the status quo, and they will not sit still while reform efforts attempt to move forward. Regardless, these homegrown efforts are setting a new yardstick by which reforms in our region can be measured. After the Arab summit, reform will hopefully have a face and some flesh as opposed to the lip service attention it has often received. Countries will have to choose then how to translate reform principles into specific programs. Their seriousness in tackling these issues will no doubt help determine how their future will look. I am confident that the wheels of reform have been set in motion, and for those who are looking for a bright future for their societies, there is no turning back.

Thank you