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Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

REPORT

**OF THE FIFTEENTH MEETING OF THE REGIONAL COORDINATION
MECHANISM OF THE ARAB STATES
BEIRUT, 1 JUNE 2011**

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Introduction

1. As the secretariat to the Regional Coordination Mechanism (RCM) for the Arab States, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) convened the fifteenth meeting of the RCM at United Nations House, Beirut, on 1 June 2011 under the chairmanship of Ms. Rima Khalaf, Under-Secretary-General and Executive Secretary of ESCWA.

2. The purpose of the meeting, which was attended by representatives of regional United Nations agencies; other regional organizations, including the League of Arab States; and regional experts on the issues to be discussed, was to identify key features of the new economic, political and social profile of the Arab region in the wake of recent social movements, highlighting in particular the main challenges facing member countries and the role of the United Nations and other regional actors in responding to the changing needs. The thematic focus of the meeting was the transition to democracy in the Arab region. This report is a summary of the key discussions and outcomes of the meeting.

I. KEY OUTCOMES

3. The main outcome of the meeting was the establishment of a working group on Regional Integration. The meeting also endorsed the work of the Statistical Coordination Taskforce, which was convened as a result of a recommendation from the fourteenth meeting of the RCM in November 2010.

4. Participants supported the articulation of a workplan for the Statistics Group and RCM members requested the production of terms of reference for the Regional Integration Working Group for the consideration of the full membership.

II. PRESENTATIONS, DISCUSSIONS AND OUTCOMES

A. SESSION 1 – THE ARAB REGION AT A CROSS ROADS: CHANGING THE POLITICS OF DEVELOPMENT

5. The purpose of this session was to identify key features of the new economic, political and social profile of the region in the wake of the recent social movements in a number of Arab countries, and to explore new areas in which the United Nations and other regional actors could effectively respond and adjust their support to member countries.

1. Presentation

The Arab region at a cross roads: towards a new development paradigm

6. In his presentation, the keynote speaker of the meeting, Dr. Taher Kanaan, (Jordan) identified the deep-rooted cultural identity, economic complementarity and common interests shared by countries in the Arab region as the primary source of potential solutions to counter the politics of fragmentation in the region. He based his presentation on lessons learned from history, focusing on the ways in which foreign interference in the region had undermined peoples' aspirations, increased the economic and political dependence of Arab States on external industrial powers, and weakened intra-Arab relations. He also emphasized the mutually enforcing relationship between democracy and development, and underlined the challenges facing the region in terms of sustaining democratic momentum, delivering basic services, and combating poverty and unemployment.

2. Discussion

7. The central role of youth and civil society organizations in the recent social movements was emphasized throughout the discussion. General discussion by participants focused on the need to deal with

young people as an integrated part of society, rather than as a separate, vulnerable group. There was consensus that the unfolding social, political and economic movements in the region should help shape a clear vision about future relations with young people. In this regard, Dr. Kanaan considered youth as the principal leaders of the recent social movements in the Arab region and noted the importance of articulating national strategies which address sustainable development and other vital issues from a youth perspective. National and international institutions concerned with development should therefore revisit their development philosophies with a view to engaging young people in national dialogue, incorporating their proposals and aspirations into national policies, and guaranteeing their political, economic and social inclusion.

8. Participants noted that the recent social movements have been inclusive and have shown no gender or other discrimination. They also stressed the failure of gender-based development policies which consider women to be weak members of society, and emphasized the need for a new development paradigm, based on empowering women and achieving inclusive and integrated development in the Arab countries. It was noted that women played an important role in the social movements and that empowering women in all aspects and stages of development is critical. In that regard, a recommendation was made to re-examine strategic development policies with the specific needs and roles of women in mind.

9. The nexus between economic growth and democratic change was deliberated, and participants suggested that the United Nations should reconsider its strategies for engaging stakeholders to facilitate that transition, with a particular focus on women. In considering this nexus, the RCM noted that while economic growth is key to achieving sustainable democracy, democratic governance is not considered as important for economic growth. To rectify this imbalance, democracy should be promoted more fully in development policies. Further, the role of the United Nations in the region needs to be redefined, with United Nations actors promoting both economic and regional integration in the Arab States.

10. Given that practice has demonstrated that economic growth does not always yield political and social benefits, the importance of redefining economic growth as key to sustainable democracy was highlighted. In this regard, the role of States as regulators should be revisited and a comprehensive growth paradigm generated.

11. The importance of equity and dignity as primary drivers of the “Arab spring” was highlighted, and it was proposed that these should be universally established as the principal dimension of the design and financing of development-related investments.

12. In general discussion, participants stressed the importance of joint Arab action to address the non-integrated economic policies of Arab countries, calling for joint Arab programmes to resolve issues related to economic integration and employment. Participants also noted the need to seek practical solutions to development problems within an institutional framework and to develop “out-of-the-box” strategies, emphasizing that regional integration should be achieved by Governments in cooperation with civil society. In this regard, the importance of engaging both public and private sectors in an inclusive debate about social democracy and liberalism, especially social protection, across the Arab region was noted.

13. A number of participants suggested that United Nations organizations, in cooperation with non-governmental organizations and large institutions, should continue to support the recent social movements. Inspired by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations should use its best endeavours to support the Arab region against external intervention if it and its partners are not to be considered part of the problem.

14. Mr. Abdel Rahman Gad Hassan, a guest speaker and youth activist from Egypt, contended that the role of the United Nations in the Arab region was ripe for redefinition, as the work of certain United Nations agencies appeared to be guided by local policies, rather than by overarching principles. He argued that one

of the main outcomes of the meeting should be to revisit and restructure the work of the United Nations in the Middle East.

15. Ensuing discussion emphasized that the situation has not yet settled in a number of Arab countries, notably Egypt and Tunisia, and that United Nations agencies and the broader international community therefore still need to assist countries in overcoming their problems. It was further observed that while internal reform has succeeded in part, further efforts are needed to achieve a better balance between economic and social affairs.

16. The role of Arab media in recent social movements was highlighted as having provided a good reflection of the feeling on the ground. It was noted that the media in the Arab world had criticized United Nations agencies for failing to take practical steps to improve the situation of Arab people and for replicating foreign models which are inappropriate in the Arab context. In this regard, the significant role played by information and communications technology in social movements and the need for the United Nations and other regional actors to have greater awareness of the importance of media in facilitating such movements was noted.

17. Participants observed that social movements and uprisings have occurred despite high growth rates and existing policies and programmes. They conjectured that reasons for this may be rooted in poorly-implemented programmes, inefficient development methods, and weak political and civil action. They stressed the absence of transparency and accountability in governmental bodies, as well as corruption, noting that societies suffer not only from political exclusion, but also from civil and societal exclusion.

18. It was suggested that any new development paradigm should redistribute wealth equally between the public and private sectors. Furthermore, the need to defend property rights and fully integrate Arab markets was identified as critical, since experience had shown that integrated markets had been less negatively affected by the recent financial crisis.

19. Food security continues to pose a risk to development in the region. It was suggested that the United Nations and other regional players, such as the League of Arab States, review their strategies to ensure that they respond optimally to the needs of Arab people by reducing delays between the passing of resolutions and the implementation of related actions.

20. The important interlinkage between internal, subregional and regional reform were identified. In this regard, it was highlighted that a study to establish an economic model to foster both inter-State and intraregional justice is required.

21. In response, Dr. Kanaan considered that the major threat in an incomplete Arab spring is fragility and that the principal impediment to democracy is foreign intervention. He discussed the jobless economic growth that has been seen in Arab countries and drew a comparison between neo-liberalism, which hinders internal progress and impedes social movements, and liberalism, which creates market liberalization. Arguing that the inequalities which all too often prevail in the Arab region are related to market imperfections and productivity patterns, he reiterated that the political decay in Arab countries which is currently hindering the progress of social movements and uprisings is a direct result of the resistance to change by long-standing public institutions.

22. Participants concluded that the role of the United Nations should be revisited with a view to safeguarding the fragile social movements in the region. They posited that regional organizations and agencies of the United Nations need to create a new development paradigm, based on experience and lessons learned, with particular emphasis on social justice and wealth distribution. They also highlighted the need for the participation of foreign experts in meetings discussing the situation in Arab countries, as well as the assistance of the United Nations in debates involving both supporters and opponents of regional integration. Having underlined the need for the roles of Arab States, citizens, civil society, and the public and private

sectors in the social movements to be redefined, they discussed the need for further investment in education, health care services and the renaissance of Arab countries. There was broad agreement that Arab intellectuals should be involved in United Nations meetings and reports related to maintaining social movements in the region. They concluded by stressing the central role of Arab and international media in the transition to democratic change and by asserting that greater consideration needs to be given to ways in which cooperation between the United Nations on the one hand and Arab peoples and Governments on the other hand can be increased.

B. SESSION 2 – HARNESSING THE POWER OF POPULAR MOVEMENTS INTO EFFECTIVE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

23. Session Chair, Ms. Amat Alsoswa (UNDP) set out the purpose of the session, which was to identify challenges to maintaining the momentum of reform and provide insight into rebuilding of the infrastructure of governance. The session was structured around the experience of three case studies: Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen.

24. After arguing that the failure of the old development paradigm has led to the current situation, she conjectured that the strategic trends of development programmes in the region should be reoriented, rejecting foreign intervention and redrawing strategic development plans based on human rights, citizenship and increased participation. She noted that in a number of Arab countries, certain development activities had been suspended as a result of limited resources and the use of military options to resolve problems, and concluded by arguing that in this transitional period towards democratic change, Arab countries should have prepared both medium and long-term responses within a unified regional framework.

1. *Presentations*

(a) *Egypt*

25. In his presentation, guest speaker Mr. Abdelrahman Gad Hassan, a youth activist, explored the period prior to and during the uprising in Egypt. He observed that the crisis was not political, but human-centred. He also highlighted a lack of objective data, the right to knowledge, and the freedom of access to information as being among the causes that led to the uprising. Arguing that people were calling for freedom, human rights and justice, irrespective of any legislative and administrative measures which may be taken, he considered that solutions lay not only in punishment, but also in transparency, reconciliation and trust. By contrast, participatory development was being undermined by political centralization, the exclusion of minorities, an absence of political standards, family-ruled succession and the representation crisis, all of which underlined the need for a new social contract in which the roles of all actors are redrawn to reflect the changed situation.

26. On the question of the role of international organizations, Mr. Gad Hassan indicated that the United Nations should engage in the country with a view to assisting the State to regain its role and rebuild society in order to achieve comprehensive and sustainable development. He considered that international organizations need to reactivate their role in Arab countries, working in cooperation with civil society to rebuild public organizations, supporting local communities and undertaking civil supervision of common projects with the State. However, this would necessitate rebuilding trust between the people and the State, and remodelling the image of the United Nations.

(b) *Tunisia*

27. Guest speaker Mr. Obeid Briki, Deputy General Secretary, Tunisian Trade Union Federation, set out what he believed to be the direct causes of the Tunisian Revolution. At the social level, these included youth unemployment, exploitation of the workforce, the emergence of low-income groups, impoverishment of the middle class and regional disparity. At the political level, causes included containment and direct repression

policies, dictatorship, control of the judiciary and the media, policies of denial, corruption and unfairness in taxation. Deeper causes included the failure to benefit fully from globalization, and the adoption of solutions imposed by international financial institutions.

28. Furthermore, Mr. Briki stressed that democracy is the only way to achieve social justice in a way that transcends ethnic, gender, sectarian and religious affiliations. The outcome of the uprising will depend on encouraging individual and general freedoms, rebuilding the independence of the judiciary and adopting internal solutions which fully encompass the needs of the country. At the social level, the country needs to formulate a new social contract that brings together the interests of all parties. He observed that the current situation requires training on democracy; support for youth groups, university graduates and sectors of high unemployment; improving its infrastructure; reviewing United Nations programmes; and encouraging focused political reform.

(c) *Yemen*

29. Guest speaker Mr. Ezzadin al-Asbahi, Coordinator of the Human Rights Information and Training Centre in Yemen, gave an overview of the current situation in Yemen and warned that deteriorating security levels could drag the country into civil war. Already lacking reliable institutions, the authority of those which do exist is fragile, and the country is suffering from rural isolation, capital fragmentation and corruption. He argued that that ruling family succession was the main trigger for the revolution, and highlighted the active role played by women and young people, particularly at the beginning of the crisis.

2. *Discussion*

30. Participants called for the United Nations to launch an in-depth discussion on the new concept of development, with a view to drawing up an updated definition that is no longer based on gross domestic product and economic growth. They emphasized that the sectoral and policy-oriented programmes of the United Nations, which aim to bridge the gap between State institutions, are preferable to the current trend of inclusive socio-economic initiatives. In this regard, RCM members were encouraged to share their experience in dealing with social movements in order to draw out a common model, to which United Nations agencies working in the region could contribute.

31. It was suggested that while external regional and global forces were an important agent and had been affected by the collapse of the Egyptian regime, they appeared to have been overlooked. With regard to Tunisia, it was argued that greater attention should be given to the external economic and financial assistance provided to the country, which may influence political decision-making.

32. It was suggested that Arab youth need to be supported by having strong communication networks, using information and communications technology to pave the way for change. Participants emphasized that the Internet and media outlets have played a crucial role in shaping recent social movements, and noted the need for non-violence and peaceful strategies to be included in the exchange of youth experience.

33. Participants discussed a wide range of issues, including economic integration and opportunity; the role of young people in shaping the future and triggering change for the better; women's affairs; social justice and social protection; equality; the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a basis for humanitarian assistance; political and social participation of individuals and institutions; freedom of expression and assembly; the need to revisit employment structures; and ways to increase accountability and efficiency.

34. Participants emphasized the need to rebuild trust between the United Nations, other organizations and civil society. They also concluded that in view of the need to respond to developments as they unfold, the policies and approaches of the United Nations and those of other national, regional and international institutions should be revisited.

C. SESSION 3 – MOVING FORWARD: GRASPING NEW OPPORTUNITIES TO ENGAGE

35. The purpose of this session was to discuss opportunities for the United Nations policy and technical expertise provided to Arab countries; opportunities for engagement between the United Nations and other regional stakeholders, including the League of Arab States, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and regional banks; and the development of a position by the RCM on engaging Arab countries to facilitate the transition to democracy in the region and determine clear mechanisms for the initiation of social transformation dialogue.

Discussion

36. Participants emphasized the importance of civil society engagement to enhance the credibility and image of the United Nations. Moreover, they noted that the credibility of the Organization could be further strengthened through campaigns which identified its partners, shared the results of the projects which it has implemented and explained not only its programmes, but also its underlying strategies. In this regard, the need for open dialogue could not be underestimated. Furthermore, the importance of transparency, good governance and public access to data was identified as critical.

37. Participants contended that enhancing dialogue with youth would create an enabling environment in which young people could become agents of change and develop a vision for their own future. They also stressed the importance of engaging women and youth in small enterprises, and of enhancing access to social protection, health and education in order to reduce inequality. They concluded by arguing that the United Nations should support changes in legislation to better serve the interests of vulnerable groups. This also highlighted the pressing need to generate employment opportunities and support socio-economic institutions.

38. Noting the international mandate and convening power of the United Nations, RCM members called for the creation of joint programmes under two headings: transparent, accountable governance and equitable, sustainable development. Participants called for improved coordination between agencies and for country-specific strategies, adding that the agendas to be implemented should be determined by countries themselves and should include more action-oriented activities. In this regard, the importance of data for effective, evidence-based policymaking was reaffirmed.

III. ORGANIZATION OF WORK

A. DATE AND VENUE

39. The fifteenth meeting of the Regional Coordination Mechanism (RCM) for the Arab States was held at United Nations House, Beirut, on 1 June 2011. It convened four sessions for the discussion of agenda items, following which it was agreed that the next meeting will be held on 17 and 18 November 2011.

B. OPENING OF THE SESSION

40. United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Executive Secretary of ESCWA, Ms. Rima Khalaf, opened the meeting with a statement in which she welcomed participants to United Nations House in Beirut. She congratulated the League of Arab States on the election of its new Secretary General and emphasized the role of the RCM in facilitating regional partnerships, hoping that the meeting would result in a shared understanding of the magnitude of recent events in a number of Arab countries, as well as the unfolding challenges and opportunities created by such events.

41. Ms. Khalaf stressed the need for the United Nations to adapt to changing situations in order to maintain credibility and relevance. She referred to a number of measures already taken by United Nations organizations to respond to the Arab spring, including political and diplomatic missions, meetings and new flagship publications. She classified countries that require assistance from the United Nations into three

groups: countries that have pledged to undertake a series of political and socio-economic reforms; countries in which the political struggle has degenerated into State-led violence, resulting in increased potential for civil conflict; and countries in which the political establishment has deflected demands by its citizens for greater democratization and rights by providing increased social and financial transfers. She called for the articulation of a new development paradigm that fully captures the impact of growth and development, governance variables, environmental sustainability, political systems and decision-making processes. Above all, country-tailored solutions need to be based on full respect of fundamental freedoms, human rights and personal dignity.

42. In her opening statement, Ms. Sima Bahous, Assistant Secretary-General for Social Affairs at the League of Arab States, highlighted the interest of the League in enhancing partnership, cooperation and coordination with the United Nations. She stressed the importance of the RCM meeting at a time when the Arab region is experiencing profound change. People at all levels of society are calling for change, reform, democracy and poverty reduction; and for an end to unemployment, social marginalization, corruption, and the absence of freedom, democracy and human rights.

43. She argued that now is the time for regional organizations to explore the roots of social uprisings, and to revise orientations and priorities accordingly. A number of high-level summits, including most recently the second Arab Economic and Social Development Summit (Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, 19 January 2011), have made clear calls for developmental paths to be revised, production to be diversified, poverty to be combated, social care to be improved, unemployment levels to be reduced, decent work opportunities to be provided, education to be improved, and for the role of youth and women to be enhanced at the political, economic and social levels, all with a view to achieving the Millennium Development Goals, realizing comprehensive development in the region, and improving the living standards of all Arab citizens.

44. She contended that it is clear that regional organizations have not yet succeeded in achieving such goals and, in their pursuit, should work towards both a new social contract and a new Arab developmental agenda. The recent uprisings in the region are clear evidence that centring strategies on people, and investing in education and development are key to social peace and justice. She expressed the readiness of the League to reorient its vision and developmental programmes and to use all available means to collaborate effectively with all stakeholders during this transitional period.

C. PARTICIPANTS

45. The meeting was attended by representatives of regional United Nations agencies, other regional organizations, international financial institutions and the League of Arab States. A list of participants can be found in annex I to this report.

D. AGENDA

46. At its fifteenth meeting, the RCM discussed the items on the agenda which is reproduced in annex II.

E. DOCUMENTS

47. The list of documents submitted to the RCM at its fifteenth meeting is contained in annex III to this report.

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G. UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA (ESCWA)

Ms. Rima Khalaf
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Ms. Anhar Hegazi
Deputy Executive Secretary, a.i.

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Mr. Youssef Chaitani
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Related Issues Section

Mr. Tarik Alami
Officer-in-Charge, Economic Development and
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Mr. Albagir Adam
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Director, Social Development Division

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Administrative Assistant, Programme Planning
and Technical Cooperation Division

Annex II

AGENDA

	Opening	Speaker
08.30	Registration	
08.45	Welcome by ESCWA Executive Secretary	Rima Khalaf
08.55	Introduction by League of Arab States Assistant Secretary General for Social Affairs	Sima Bahous
Session 1 - The Arab Region at a Cross Roads: Towards a New Development Paradigm		
09.05-09.20	Presentation by Mr. Taher Kanaan (Jordan) <i>Synopsis: Independent of whether popular uprisings succeed in their agendas, the context of the region has been altered dramatically by a regional reaction to political, economic and social exclusion. What will be the main challenges for member countries following the popular uprisings recently witnessed in the region? Public sector reform, reconciliation and security sector reform are examples of areas in which member countries will need to redefine policies to adapt to the new climate. How can economic and social actors engage, and what opportunities have been created for the United Nations and others to use such opportunities to address underlying poverty and inequality to ensure the full enjoyment of economic, political and social rights by all citizens? What is the role of youth in addressing these challenges, given their primary role as an instrument of change in the region?</i> <i>Purpose:</i> <i>1. To identify key features of the region following the uprisings in a number of countries in the region.</i> <i>2. To identify new openings in which the United Nations and other regional actors can respond and react.</i>	Session facilitated by Sima Bahous, League of Arab States
9.20-11.00	Discussion	
11.00-11.15	Coffee Break	
Session 2 - Harnessing the Power of Popular Movements into Effective Political, Economic and Social Transformation		
11.15-11.25	Introduction of draft UNDG response strategy to Chief Executives Board (CEB)	Introduction and session facilitated by Amat Alsoswa, UNDP
11.25-12.30	Panel Discussion: 1. Abdel Rahman Jad Hassan (Egypt) 2. Obeid Briki (Tunisian Trade Union Federation) 3. Mr Ezzadin al Asbahi (Human Rights Information and Training Centre, Yemen)	

12.30-1.15 **Synopsis:** *To review the common threads across the region through interaction between panel members with experience from Egypt, Tunisia and elsewhere.*

Purpose: *To identify challenges to maintaining the momentum of reform and provide insight into rebuilding the infrastructure of governance.*

Discussion

1.15-2.15 Lunch

Expert Guest Participants

Samir Aita Rédacteur en Chef et Directeur Général, Le Monde Diplomatique Editions Arabes, Président du Cercle des Economistes Arabes

George Corm Former Lebanese Minister of Finance; Professor, Université Saint-Joseph, Beirut

Yezid Sayigh Professor of Middle East Studies, King's College, London

Omar Razzaz Advisor, Middle East and North Africa Region, World Bank

Mehmet Serkan Tosun Associate Professor, Director of Graduate Programs, Department of Economics, College of Business, University of Nevada, Reno

Arkan el-Seblani Regional Legal Specialist, Regional Bureau for Arab States, UNDP

James Eberlein Communications and Research Advisor, Partnership for Democratic Governance, OECD

Raghid el-Solh Consultant, Issam Fares Center for Lebanese Studies

Khalil Gebara Head of Good Governance, Office of the Caretaker President of the Council of Ministers, Lebanon

Jad Chaaban Associate Professor of Economics, American University of Beirut

Nadim Shehadi Associate Fellow of Chatham House and Academic Visitor, St. Anthony's College, Oxford University

Elizabeth Sellwood Center on International Cooperation, New York University, currently on temporary assignment with the United Nations Special Coordinator for Lebanon

Havard Hegre Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Oslo and Centre for the Study of Civil War

Havard Nygard PhD. Fellow, Department of Political Science, University of Oslo and Associate Researcher, Peace Research Institute, Oslo University

Session 3 - Moving Forward: Grasping New Opportunities to Engage

Purpose: *To discuss the following:*

1. *Opportunities for United Nations policy and technical expertise to member countries – what are the new opportunities for the United Nations and others to engage?*

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2. *Opportunities for engagement between the United Nations and regional stakeholders – including the League of Arab States, International Monetary Fund, World Bank and regional banks – on engagement with member countries*
 3. *Developing a common position by the RCM on engaging member countries with a view to facilitating the transition to democracy in the region*
 4. *Determining clear mechanisms to engage social transformation dialogue*

5.00-5.20 Wrap-up and closing

Rima Khalaf and
Sima Bahous

Annex III

LIST OF DOCUMENTS

Title	Details
Speech by Ms. Sima Bahous	Assistant Secretary General for Social Affairs, League of Arab States
Statement by Ms. Rima Khalaf	Under-Secretary-General and Executive Secretary of ESCWA
The Arab Region at a Cross Roads: Towards a New Development Paradigm	Presentation by Mr. Taher Kanaan
Dignity and Freedom: the Tunisian Revolution ثورة الكرامة والحرية في تونس : الدوافع والآفاق	Presentation by Mr. Abid Briki (Arabic) تقديم السيد أديب بريكي
Presentation إعادة بناء المجتمع والدولة	Presentation by Mr. Jad Hassan تقديم السيد عبد الرحمن حمدي
Rebuilding Society and State	Presentation by Mr Ezzadin al-Asbahi