

Speech

Taher Masri

On

**National Dialogues in Jordan and the
Broader Middle East**

Berlin 3-4 September 2015

Good morning your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, distinguished guests. I have the pleasure this morning to share with you some broad thoughts about national dialogues, with a particular focus on my own experience, both in Jordan and regionally. I want at the outset to thank my kind hosts at the Berghof Foundation for their hospitality.

As many of you are practiced diplomats and statesmen, and because my time is limited, I will try to move quickly beyond elementary issues and try to focus on more substantive points.

I am grateful for the introduction I have been given. While my official and political CV is indeed long – I am getting on in age – my own view of myself looks somewhat different than my official biography. I have devoted the recent years of my life to a very important objective, which is the development of the institutions which we might call civil society, whether political, educational or social. I have played a role in particular in bridging the gap between the state and civil

society, with the ultimate view that a developed civil society leads to a fair and balanced relationship among citizens and with the state. At the heart of this is the concept of national dialogue.

My experience with national dialogue is wide. Outside of my official capacity, I have always been an active participant in Jordanian life. My official experience is also multi-faceted.

- During my tenure as president of the Senate, I was tasked by His Majesty King Abdullah in 2011 with forming and leading the National Dialogue Committee. The committee, which brought together 50 members from different political, social and religious constituencies, sought to offer Jordan a guideline for national reforms in various areas, including political parties, electoral laws and practices, constitutional amendments, and other, more general reforms.
- I have also served as a member of various committees and commissions in Jordan that aim at reform in the country, with a special emphasis on bringing together

the disparate voices of society to agree on meaningful reforms. These include the Royal Commission for the Drafting of the National Agenda.

- OTHER?

That is a rather lengthy introduction to myself, but I think it is important to have some context as to the speaker that a CV alone does not provide.

For me, the timing of today's gathering and the previous days' work cannot be more opportune. As I look at the Middle East region today, I am distressed at the picture I see before me. Never in my lifetime have the fractures in Arab society been so overt, destructive, and deep. Conflict grips Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and Sudan, in many cases threatening to break these states apart. Lebanon and Bahrain sit on a knife's edge. Other states are embroiled in low level conflict, whether in Egypt or elsewhere. And while many Arabs may blame outside influences for their misery, they must look closer to home to understand their problems. For a common thread runs across much of the Middle East's

problems: the obvious and unresolved differences between people in each country, whether these differences are religious, ethnic, or otherwise. These differences, when left to fester, have led to the conflicts we see today. They can only be resolved with a national dialogue. This is a less exhausting and heart-breaking solution than the wars we are witnessing.

Clearly, then, never has the need for national dialogue been more necessary, and never has a strategy for maximizing the success of these national dialogues been more necessary. Maximizing success today means saving lives and saving societies.

When I talk about national dialogue, I do not only mean literally an internal dialogue in a particular nation. Everyone here understands that there are broader dialogues of extreme importance in the region, dialogues that transcend a particular nation. The big obvious ones are those between Arabs and Israelis; between Iran and Western states eager to integrate Iran into a more normalized

international framework; between Sunni and Shia Islam; and more recently, between the dark vision of Islam espoused by ISIS and the modern, tolerant and enlightened vision of Islam that is espoused by Jordan.

I have chosen to think more broadly about dialogue for the obvious reason that, whether we like it or not, international events shape national events. Thus, the rise of extremist thinking in ISIS-controlled areas has emboldened extremists across the region, and each nation must deal with this emerging threat at the national level before the international level.

I would like to elaborate a little on my statement earlier that a common thread runs through the problems of the Middle East, and that at the heart of these problems are unresolved internal issues between peoples. We will not explore each Arab case, but let us at least take a few concrete examples. The civil war in Syria started as a series of incidents, inspired by the Arab Spring, in which ordinary people protested against a local official in a small town called Dar'a.

Because there is virtually no forum for dialogue in Syria, these protests were violently broken up by the state, causing loss of life. This in turn caused further protests, and further loss of life.

It is bewildering to outside observers that the Syrian government did not deal with the protests more intelligently given that they could already see the Arab Spring in full swing and could thus correct the mistakes committed by other Arab governments. But there was no context or history in Syria for national dialogue. The state only knew how to respond with force. And this tells us something important as we consider the question of how we can maximize the success of our national dialogues: we must understand the context of each country, how developed the idea of dialogue is within each country, and whether governments can engage in dialogue without coming across as weak or indecisive to their internal audience. The lack of context for national dialogue and a desire to come across as

strong may have led the Syrian government to fan the flames of protest.

By contrast, in Jordan, several thousand protests were held during the Arab Spring without loss of life. The government, more accustomed to communicating with people and accepting that different segments of society have a point of view, ensured that the protests were handled with a philosophy that became known as “soft power” or “soft security”.

Let me delve briefly into a third example with Iraq. This is a country with so many forces pulling at it from so many different directions. This includes Kurdish aspirations for independence, a Sunni/Shia divide, the Iranian desire for influence, and more recently, the Islamic State’s visions for a Caliphate with medieval trimmings.

To be frank, there was plenty of dialogue to be had in the past 10 years in Iraq, whether in parliament, between political parties, in the media, and so on. Yet this dialogue did not prevent the circumstances that led to the ascendancy of

the Islamic State in central Iraq. So here is an example of dialogue that did take place in many contexts but did not result in a satisfactory outcome. Why not? My belief is that the Iraqi Prime Minister during much of this period, Nouri Al Maliki, never intended to address the real grievances of the Kurdish and Sunni populations. So if we want to maximize the success of national dialogue, we must first ensure that the sides have come to the table in good faith.

In my three examples above, I was complimentary of Jordan's handling of the Arab Spring. Of course it is natural for me to look at the Jordanian experience in a positive light, given that I am Jordanian and was at the time the president of the Senate. But I look at the Jordanian experience with objectivity. So while the Arab Spring was well handled by the Jordanian establishment, nonetheless the post 9/11 world has seen a rise in the power of the security establishments of many regional states, often at the expense of civil society. The fear is that a stronger state security apparatus stifles national dialogue, in particular when problems that could be

tackled through dialogue are instead framed in the context of “national security” and then dealt with from that standpoint instead of through a discussion. Think here of the various Muslim Brotherhoods across the region. Should they be dealt with through dialogue or seen through a security lens? This is an open question, because the Brotherhood comes in many shades, some benign and some malignant.

The tension between national security systems and the concept of open dialogue is fairly obvious to me. Nobody living in the Middle East today can credibly argue that national security is not important and even of growing importance. But national security is an elastic concept in the Middle East and can be defined to encompass everything. It must not be allowed to encroach on the basic elements – such as freedom of speech, free journalism, and so on – that create the context for successful national dialogue. If no context of dialogue exists – as we saw in the Syrian example – then governments are likely to view national dialogue as

unnecessary, undesirable, or as a cynical ploy to manage their internal populations without having the intention to carry out the outcome of the dialogue.

Before moving on to the Jordanian experience in national dialogue, let me extract a few of the key observations in my remarks so far.

- First, that the Middle East is suffering from an unprecedented number of conflicts and at their heart are unresolved issues between peoples.
- Second, that there is an urgent need not only for dialogue, but for strategies to maximize the success of a given dialogue.
- Third, to the maximize the chances of successful dialogue, we should understand the context of the parties. Countries with no history of dialogue must be treated differently from open societies.
- Fourth, that good faith in the negotiations is essential.
- Fifth, that we should fight to enlarge the enabling space around dialogue by protecting civil society, freedom of

speech, and otherwise limiting the influence of the security state. Without this enabling environment, the chances of successful dialogue are diminished.

My observations today are not exhaustive, of course. But they give some framework for my upcoming remarks on national dialogue in Jordan and on the National Dialogue Committee in particular. The committee, as I stated in my opening remarks, was put in place as a forum in which Jordanians of different political and social views could come together to offer a unified platform for political and other reforms.

First, let me say that the concept of national dialogue in Jordan has historically been better developed than in other countries of the region, if sometimes informal. While formal political parties were weak, there were other forums for people to interact with the state and have political discussions. So the context for a fruitful discussion did exist.

Second, the Arab Spring created popular demands for government reforms and these demands were frequently at odds with the state security push that became a regional reality post 9/11. The post 9/11 world saw the increased power of state security as a counter to terrorism while the Arab Spring sought more freedoms for populations. The National Dialogue Committee sprang from this gap between what people wanted and their post 9/11 reality. Our recommendations were designed to close these gaps in a way that catered to all parties.

Third, we had to grapple with vexing questions to which we sometimes did not have answers.

- For example: Was the state serious about the reforms, or just posturing? This was a key question as we formulated the committee, and a number of members nominated for the committee declined to join because they did not believe the government intended to honor the committee's recommendations. Here, let me say that the entire Muslim Brotherhood opted not to join

the committee and thus put themselves clearly outside of the context of national dialogue. And this despite strong government efforts to persuade them to join the committee and participate in its work. Ultimately, the young hawks in the Brotherhood prevailed over the older doves, and the Brotherhood stayed out. Because the committee had many positive elements, the self-exclusion of the Brotherhood from the committee I believe hurt their credibility.

- Another difficult question we had to answer revolved around a new electoral system that strengthened the future development of political parties, with the ultimate goal of creating strong political parties that could have meaningful influence on government policy. There was resistance to this concept from parts of the establishment, which did not wish to see political parties strengthened.

Ultimately, I think that the success of the committee revolved around those issues we've discussed today. If I were to single out a decisive factor, it was the notion of good faith, meaning the positive intention of the parties to achieve something based on compromise, rather than focused on the narrow agenda of one party.

I want to close with a brief mention of another important dialogue and one that goes beyond Jordan and is more relevant across the Islamic nation. Here I refer to the moderate Islamic message that His Majesty King Abdullah is spreading. Known as the Amman Message, this dialogue seeks to strengthen the hand of moderate Islam in the face of the extremist ideologies that have continued to spread across the region. At the core of the Amman Message is the concept of tolerance. And if I were to close with one final factor for the success of national dialogues, wherever they may be, it is that they must embrace the concept of tolerance.

I thank you for your kind attention. I know that the topic is very wide but that with just a few minutes to talk, it is hard to fully cover it. And I hope to engage with you in more detail during the day.