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**Statement of H.E. Mr. Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser,  
President of the 66<sup>th</sup> Session of the General Assembly,  
at the Lecture “The Middle East and North Africa at the Dawn of the  
21<sup>st</sup> Century: Challenges and Hopes”**

Distinguished Director, Moscow State University,  
Distinguished scholars,  
Students of this great University,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honored to be here with you in this august, world-famous Moscow State University. I thank you all for giving me this opportunity to address you. It is always a great pleasure for me to be among scholars and students. I come here today after addressing New York University and the University of Oxford. What a privilege to now be at Moscow State University. Thank you again for this opportunity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This is an unprecedented moment in world history. Strong winds of democratic change are blowing across the globe. Voices previously unheard are carrying the call for justice, for freedom, for dignity.

These calls are clear and loud in the Middle East and North Africa (the “MENA region”, if you wish). Across these lands, men and women, young and old, are mobilizing, organizing, taking their destiny into their own hands. This movement of people, of generations, is filled with dedication, with commitment, with hope.

But, I must confess, I am concerned. I am concerned about how these legitimate aspirations, these hopes, these dreams, will be transformed into real reform and long-lasting change. I am concerned about how it will be ensured that the pendulum that has now swung away from tyranny, corruption and oppression, and towards freedom, transparency and dignity, will stay where it rightly belongs. How to ensure that the pendulum will not swing back, nor be hijacked by movements with self interested or unconstructive ideologies.

This, I believe ladies and gentlemen, is the challenge that both the international community and the people of the region face: How to support these cries for freedom and dignity, so that they fully develop into strong, vibrant, sustainable democracies? In a word, how to ensure that no one has died in vein?

I am deeply honoured to address you on this very topic today: the challenges and – most importantly – the opportunities in the MENA region. This topic is close to my heart. As President of the General Assembly, my responsibility is to support Member States as they address the global issues facing our

times. Hailing from Qatar, you can also understand my particular interest in the destiny of the region. Add to this, being the father of a 6 year old son. I cannot help but to care deeply about the future of this region.

I will, therefore, share with you a few thoughts on my vision for the MENA region, and where I see a role for the international community in supporting governments and their people to achieve their dreams. I will do so under five distinct, but entwined headings: economics, education, political affairs, security and culture.

Before I begin, I would highlight that it would be a mistake to view the countries in the MENA region as a monolith, where one size fits all. On the contrary, each country of the Arab world is unique. The dynamics of the uprisings, where they have taken place, vary in each situation. Therefore, for the remainder of my remarks, although I will refer to the region as a whole, I will ask that you bear in mind the distinct historical, cultural, and political character of each of the countries that make up MENA.

Allow me then to address our first area: “Economics”. Economic exclusion - including a lack of decent work and opportunity – is arguably one of the driving forces behind the Arab Awakenings.

Let me share with you a bit of history, although it is condensed, I must admit. Following their independence, many Arab nations adopted a development model based on the intervention of the state. Over-time, state-led development policies, and the public provision of basic social services, came to form an integral part of the Arab social contract. These policies, in some cases, contributed to the emergence of a middle class. Eventually, however, for macro-economic reasons, this model was gradually replaced by large-scale privatization of public assets.

The down-side of this new model was three-fold:

One - politically well-connected individuals got richer;

Two - public officials became less accountable;

And three - widespread economic inefficiency and inequality grew.

The dysfunction of the model was such that asset concentration in the region is today a glaringly visible phenomenon. Meanwhile, a large and increasing number of the urban poor cluster in areas without sanitation, recreational facilities, reliable electricity and other basic services. Unemployment rates among youth in Arab states are twice the global average.

Overall, despite impressive rates of economic growth in the region, there has not been a significant reduction in poverty, nor creation of decent employment. It is these economic distortions that largely drove protesters into the streets and sparked waves of un-rest. Who can ever forget the searing image of Mohamed Bouazizi - a highly educated young Tunisian man – claiming the right simply to make a living as a fruit vendor? We know how Bouazizi’s drama ended. We also know that so many in the region saw in his fate, their own fate - and this has not yet ended.

Looking to the future, the challenge is how to build - throughout the region - inclusive economies. How to build economies that will raise living standards and create sustained job growth. Economies that are geared to the interests of peoples and are protected from corrupt practices. In a few words, economies that will uphold the ideals of justice and dignity for all.

To do so, the wealth generated by extractive industries in countries rich in resources must be employed for the benefit of all. To do so, fiscal revenues should be used to finance development policies. To do so, corrupt practices should be, once and for all, eradicated. To do so, the rule of law must become the rule of the land.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Carrying out economic reform in times of political upheaval is, no doubt, challenging. But leaders of the region must make the necessary effort, despite these challenges. For no one doubts that a sound economy can much improve the prospects of a democratic transition.

But let us not hide the truth from ourselves. Tough developmental and fiscal choices in the Arab region can only be made by responsive and accountable governments. Governments that represent the needs and aspirations of the many, not the few.

The international community must help this process in every way that it can. The international community can assist directly, through political support and technical cooperation. The international community can also assist indirectly, through providing a macroeconomic context favorable to the success of development efforts in the region. Here I would emphasize that national ownership is key.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me now move to my second topic: Education. We know that education is a basic human right, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We know that education is fundamental to development, growth, and poverty eradication. We know that education is central to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

What we, as the international community, are still figuring out is: How to support governments of the MENA region in strengthening their education systems, to make them more efficient and responsive to the needs of their societies.

There is no doubt that the region has made progress in improving the education of its people. The entire MENA region has increased its expenditure in this sector, both as a percentage of public spending and of GDP.

Yet, illiteracy and massive unemployment persist. There is a shortage of qualified teachers. UNESCO estimates that the Arab world will need an additional 450,000 teachers by 2015. Overall, the World

Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Report 2010–11 found that most countries in the MENA region score low on the quality of education and training.

Providing access, with special opportunities for girls, and imparting quality education should be, therefore, among the top priorities of governments in the region. Here to, the international community can play a supportive role by strengthening the sustainability of funding for national education systems. Such sustained funding will provide more and better equipped classrooms, as well as more qualified teachers.

I would also highlight the important contribution of South-South and triangular cooperation in the field of education. Such cooperation offers an opportunity to share, for example, innovative instructive methods in literacy.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The third theme I wish to discuss relates to the political sphere. I have already touched upon the need for accountable governance. Accountable governance is one of the most significant expressions of good governance. And good governance is central to ensuring that the voices of the people, expressed in legitimate, democratic ways, are heard, truly considered and respected.

But, of course, elections are not enough. What is needed is a culture of democracy in the Arab world. A culture in which the peaceful selection of a country's leaders is the norm, not the exception. A culture in which mutual respect among citizens of different views is intrinsic to the civic mind-set.

This transformation towards a culture of democracy takes time. It is a long, challenging process, in which citizens need to learn:

How to emphasize plurality and diversity. Plurality of opinion and ideas; diversity of faith and ethnicity;

How to build political space that can peacefully accommodate the diverse components of civil society;

How to be inclusive and not resort to demonization or exclusion.

In the end, how to eradicate violence from the political sphere, and enshrine the peaceful workings of democracy as a civic culture. This transformation, I repeat, will take time, but it is fundamental to democracy and to answering peoples' calls for representative, functioning, efficient governments.

The United Nations has much to offer in mobilizing political will and international support for those countries facing the challenge of democratic transition. The UN provides technical support to countries who request it. The UN has a long and vast experience in providing support for state capacity-building, such as electoral assistance, judicial reform, and other aspects of strengthening the rule of law. Indeed, we have already witnessed the United Nations' important contribution to supporting democratic change in recent months. I would reaffirm here that, in undertaking the UN's work, there is no one-size-fits-all

model for reform. The international community must respond to the needs as presented by the concerned populations, to ensure that true ownership and legitimacy are the way forward.

Let me now turn to the 4th theme that I identified: “Security.” Today, security concerns in the Middle East are largely dictated by the following factors:

One - a stalled peace process;

Two - a blocked and ever-more growing threat of nuclear proliferation;

And three - conflicting national approaches to security.

It is safe to say that we do not know yet exactly how the new regional dynamics in the Arab world will reflect on States’ approaches to these three issues. What we can say with a fair amount of certainty is that these new regional dynamics will have some impact on the emergence of a new - or at least a different – political order in the Middle East.

In my view, to ensure the future and the stability of the region, we have to work harder to find a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Palestinians cannot be left out from these winds of change. It is in the interest of the Israelis and the Palestinians that the parties come back to the negotiating table.

Speaking of stability, the international community also has to work harder on a solution in Syria that will meet the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people.

With regards to the proliferation issue, I would recall the decision at the 2010 Review Conference mandating the United Nations Secretary-General to convene a conference in 2012 for all States of the Middle East on the Establishment of a zone free from nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. The Review Conference represents, I believe, an exceptional opportunity for States of the region to re-define the regional security framework, in the aftermath of the Arab Awakening. The fact that a number of key Arab States will, for the first time in decades, be represented by democratically elected governments, might bring an important, necessary element to the durability and stability of any future regional arms control and security agreements.

And so, I am optimistic.

I would also take this opportunity to highlight that, not only as an Arab, but as President of the UN General Assembly, I attach great importance to achieving international peace and security. Out of this universal desire, I have chosen the theme of mediation for the General Assembly to focus on during my Presidency.

Another philosophy for peace I am focusing on during my Presidency is building bridges between different cultures and faiths, through what we call at the UN “the Alliance of Civilizations”. I firmly

believe that strengthening the role of mediation and supporting its efforts through the Alliance, will significantly advance the area of conflict prevention and peaceful resolution of disputes.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would now turn to the last of the five themes I wish to address today: that of culture.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am an Arab, proud of the achievements and civilization that the Arab world built over centuries and offered to the rest of the world. Achievements in philosophy, science, medicine, arts and in all the other ornaments of the world. You, scholars, in this world-famous university, and you, Russian intellectuals who study Arab and Islamic culture and civilization, will testify to the greatness that was in centuries past.

However, I have to be frank with you. Today, the Arab world is largely absent from the forces moving the world in science, technology, the arts, music, literature, and other fields of creativity. This is the sad truth, testified to by the United Nations Human Development Reports. With very few exceptions, the current landscape is desolate.

The region would once again excel if, every year in the future, it could claim its Nobel prizes in chemistry, in physics, in medicine, in literature, in economics.

Arabs would once again excel if their highly qualified sons and daughters, who today contribute, as exiles, to the development of science and technology in Silicon Valley, to the brilliance of literature and fashion in Paris and London, would find themselves comfortable in political and social settings in their home countries, in which they would reclaim the status of the region as an ornament of the world, the way it was in times past. This is possible today, with the dawn of democracy.

The premises of democratization, of openness, of transparency, of the rule of law, of universal values are there to give the region a chance at joining the movement of history. To be part of the global village and the modern world, and to contribute to their progress, not only through providing the world with energy resources, but also with universally-acclaimed products of the mind.

The region would once again excel if its affirmation of universal values, of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is total and unqualified by any cultural relativism or other restriction.

The region would once again excel when freedom of thought, freedom of expression, freedom of religion, freedom of conscience, full gender equality, are the unrestricted rule of the land, upheld by all institutions of government and nurtured by civil society as a culture.

Let me now dream with you, and try to imagine what the Arab world will look like, 10, 15 years from now, when my young son will be an active citizen.

If all goes well;

If Palestinians and Israelis live in peace and harmony, in two states recognized by the world community and integrated into the region;

If a nuclear weapon free Middle East is finally achieved;

If solid democratic institutions are built to sustain and manage the normal political life of a peaceful, participatory democracy;

If investment in modern education and culture take the lead in the setting of national priorities;

If the Arab world pools its enormous natural resources and its efforts, and puts them in the service of collective regional development;

If openness, tolerance, transparency, the rule of law, justice, freedom of thought, freedom of information and of expression, become embedded in the civic culture;

If all these challenging yet possible outcomes are realized;

Then I can see a Middle East and North Africa reconciled with itself and with modernity. I can see a Middle East and North Africa becoming the land in which civilization again blossoms, and offers the world that which only this great region offered throughout history.

A mix of a good life and spiritual elevation, where the holy land as the birthplace of three great Abrahamic faiths becomes also the source of a new modernity, aligning the material and the spiritual.

This, I can see.

Thank you.