

Welcoming Remarks at the Conference on
Building Mathematical and Scientific Talent in the BMENA Region
Norman P. Neureiter, Ph.D., Senior Advisor
American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS)

Greetings. Let me start with some important thank-yous. We are particularly grateful to Her Royal Majesty, Queen Rania Al Abdullah of Jordan, the patron of this conference. And we thank you, Your Excellency, serving as Deputy of Her Majesty, Minister of Education Professor Khaled Al Karaki, for your presence here this morning. We also want to extend special thanks to Her Royal Highness Princess Sumaya bint El Hassan, for hosting us here at the Royal Scientific Society.

What a wonderfully alert and intelligent-looking assembly I see here this morning. Florence, you must have invited a lot of mathematicians—and I see some scientists in the audience as well. How appropriate that is—as a kind of salute to the great mathematics and science legacy of the Islamic world—about which I think we are going to hear much more soon from Dr. Eleanor Robson.

On behalf of AAAS, I am delighted to welcome all of you to this conference on building scientific and mathematical talent throughout this region of the Middle East and North Africa. It promises to be a most interesting three days of getting to know each other, comparing experiences and sharing problems and solutions to the challenge of nurturing these talents among the region's young people. Every country in the region is focused on national development, which cannot happen without the best scientific minds brought to bear on the issues associated with development.

In fact, all countries of the world are faced, to a greater or lesser extent, with similar challenges: water and food security, health, energy, environmental protection, climate change, etc. Technology has caused some of the problems, but science and mathematics and their application in engineering and technology will have to provide the solutions. That will require gifted, creative, imaginative minds. That is why our work here is so important.

But permit me just a few words about AAAS. This abbreviation stands for the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and we are the largest general scientific organization in the world. We represent science broadly—all of the disciplines. Our mission statement is very simple: “Advancing science, serving society.” We do not have laboratories and we do not do traditional research. We are concerned with the vitality and strength of science—not just in the United States, but around the world. We focus on the broad issues that affect global science and on policies for science and science education. Our weekly publication *Science* is known around the world as a premium venue for publishing the latest cutting-edge scientific discoveries and also for reporting on important science policy issues and science news on a global basis. The editor in chief is Professor Bruce Alberts, whom many of you know as former president of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences. He is also one of the science envoys named by President Obama to promote science engagement with Muslim-majority countries.

We at AAAS are also increasingly convinced of the need for greater harmonization of the norms and standards in the practice of science throughout the world. Stated in even more ambitious terms, it is about creating a truly global science community, where results from anywhere in the world can be evaluated and understood everywhere else and, through our combined efforts, we can eventually meet the big challenges that we all face.

Now, perhaps you have wondered how this conference came about and why AAAS is involved in it. It began when the John Templeton Foundation approached us about convening a conference on the subject of identifying and educating gifted youngsters in mathematics. As this conference was being prepared, President Obama delivered his speech in Cairo, in which he laid out a series of initiatives to reach out to the Muslim world through science. It seemed only fitting to broaden our mathematics focus to include other disciplines and to do it in a region of the Arab world. President Obama has also dispatched a number of science envoys to travel throughout the Arab countries to discuss the building of constructive partnerships with them in science and technology. Some of you have already met with two of the envoys: Dr. Elias Zerhouni, the former Director of the NIH; and Dr. Ahmed Zewail, the Nobel Prize-winning chemist now at the California Institute of Technology.

There certainly appears to be a great deal of attention focused on science, technology, and development here in Jordan. On the plane last night, I saw a picture of Her Majesty in the weekend issue of the *Jordan Times*. She was with Ted Turner at the UN meeting in New York about achieving the Millennium Development Goals on time—a big challenge. The picture showed her talking and Ted Turner listening—which, by all accounts, is a rare phenomenon on his part. In a small, but important, way, I think this meeting, which focuses on the education of your brightest youngsters in science and mathematics, is a real step toward reaching those millennium goals.

And that was not all that was in that newspaper: It was loaded with science-related information. An article on the major damage to this year's Jordanian tomato crop by the larvae of an invasive moth species relates directly to the problem of food security. Another article about the huge sinkholes devouring agricultural land because of falling water levels in the Dead Sea and the diminishing flow of water in the Jordan River relates to both food and water security. There was also an item about the chairman of the Jordanian Atomic Energy Commission being appointed to the Board of the International Atomic Energy Agency—a very significant development.

Furthermore, there was also a picture of Her Royal Highness Princess Sumaya inaugurating an international medical conference here in Amman, where she stressed the importance of women's health in advancing the role and position of women in society. Let me just thank you again, Your Royal Highness, for being with us this morning and opening this conference. Also, it is clear to us that, as President of El Hassan Scientific City, you are a major force in Jordan for sustained scientific advancement and that you certainly have a commitment to the theme of this conference.

Let me conclude with a few words about science cooperation. When you work together in science, you share a common goal and you cooperate in reaching that goal. You are building trust and you often quite quickly find a common language. I have been working at building international scientific alliances for almost 50 years—not just with our friends, but, during the Cold War, with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, with

scientific benefits for both sides. Then, 30 years later, I served in the State Department as science advisor to two secretaries of state: Madeleine Albright and Colin Powell. Again, much of my time was spent building cooperative ties in science around the world. At AAAS, we recently established a Center for Science Diplomacy that will foster this kind of cooperation, in the belief that it can result in better relationships among nations—even where overall political strains may be quite severe. Iran and North Korea are two especially challenging examples where useful meetings have been held.

So, in conclusion, I hope you can sense how important I think today's meeting can be. I do hope that you all will take something useful from it back home, that it may stimulate more cooperation among you in nurturing and supporting the talented youth of this region, and that it will indirectly move your nations closer to meeting their development goals. Science, mathematics, and technology will not provide all the answers, but they are absolutely essential variables in the formula for success of each nation's development plans. I look forward to a meaningful and productive meeting.