Electoral Practices in Jordan

and the

Regional Cooperation between Arab Election Management Bodies

Mr. Szolnoki SG of ACEEEO

Dr. Jung Ae, System Manager of A- WEB,

Mr. Soudriette, President of the Center for Diplomacy and Democracy

Distinguished colleagues from the elections field

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Independent Election Commission of Jordan, allow me to start by expressing the appreciation of IEC to the organizers of the 23rd Annual Conference of ACEEEO represented by its Secretariat and our hosts the Romanian Permanent Electoral Authority for firstly having invited us to participate in this conference and secondly for their warm welcoming and generous hospitality.

For me being in Romania for the second time in my life brings many memories to my mind, I was here back when I was seven with my family for a month and half when my late dad was under medication (physiotherapy), I had great time despite the pain of him being sick. I do remember very well how welcoming this country and its people were at that time and this visit simply proves that at least this hasn’t changed through time.

My presentation for you today will include two main topics: I will try to briefly introduce you to the improvements on election practices in Jordan during the past few years, while the second topic will cover the efforts made by Arab Election Management Bodies towards the establishment of a regional mechanism for cooperation and coordination between them supported by the regional election project of the UNDP regional office in the Middle East.

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is a Middle Eastern country with a population of approximately 6 million and surrounded by heated neighbors. Jordan proved to be positively affected by what is so called the Arab Spring. Gradual political reform started back in 2011 by
establishing a National Dialogue Committee headed by the Speaker of the Upper House of the Parliament and included 52 members representing political parties, civil society, bar associations, journalists, women organizations, youth organizations, legal experts, a representative of the government and a representative of the Lower House of the Parliament. The Committee’s main task was to facilitate an intensive national dialogue on the laws related to political aspects and to suggest amendments for the improvement of these laws to meet the demands of the people of Jordan and to better comply with International Human Rights Treaties ratified by it.

Upon the recommendations of this committee the King formed a Royal Committee for Constitutional Amendment. One of the most important amendments of the Constitution that actually responded to public demands was reflected in paragraph (2) of article (67) that stipulated the established of an independent commission to supervise parliamentary elections and administer all its phases, in addition to supervising any other elections decided by the cabinet.

After the constitutional amendments were approved and endorsed by the King, a new elections law was adopted, as well as the IEC law no. 11 for the year 2012, which established a permanent and independent election management body called the Independent Election Commission (the IEC). The law guarantees IEC’s financial and administrative independence of the executive authority, stipulates its structure and identifies the mandate and responsibilities of its governing body which is the Board of Commissioners and its secretariat.

According to the law IEC is governed by a full-time Board of Commissioner that consists of a Chairman and four members appointed by a Royal Decree upon the recommendation of a committee headed by the Prime Minister and includes the Speakers of both houses of the Parliament and the Head of the Judicial Council based on the criteria identified in the law for a six non-renewable tenure. The Secretariat is the executive body of the IEC and is headed by a Secretary General appointed by a decision of the Board accompanied by a Royal Decree.

Prior to the establishment of the IEC elections in Jordan was administered by the Ministry of Interior. Despite the limited access of civil society organizations to observe the electoral processes in 2007 and 2010, they were able to publish reports that highlighted fraud and malpractices which were later declared by the highest authorities in the Kingdom. The public perceptions towards the electoral practices were quite negative; people doubted the whole
process and nearly lost interest in participating in it. Many had doubts in the newly established IEC which was requested to implement its first elections only after 7 months of its establishment. They questioned the ability of this body to shoulder its responsibilities and the same time to build itself as an institution that is starting from the scratch. They also questioned the level of seriousness in the political will to deliver free and fair elections without any interference of any kind. This was IEC’s biggest challenge back then, to regain and rebuild the credibility of the electoral process and to encourage participation of all segments of the Jordanian Society.

Linked to the time challenge were the difficulties related to institutionalizing the IEC and supporting it with the required cadres, as well as members of election committees and polling and counting committees. Other difficulties included creating the infrastructure and securing the supplies needed for the electoral process.

Since its establishment, IEC decided to keep at the same distance of all concerned parties. It has taken seriously the concerns of Jordanians, and adopted an approach of openness, transparency and neutrality in dealing with different electoral stakeholders. It encouraged them to participate in making decisions related to the electoral process and in developing and conducting plans. IEC believed that to regain public trust it needs to prove its ability to improve the electoral process through adopting procedures that would guarantee the rights of voters and contestants. These procedures, many of which were followed for the first time in Jordan, included:

1. Posting drafts of the executive instructions of the electoral process on the IEC website and newspapers to allow the public to review and give feedback on such drafts
2. Establishing an accurate and clean voter register.
3. Issuing voter cards with special security features and matching them with the civil ID card for verification purposes.
4. Assigning voters to polling centers and stations to avoid repeated voting.
5. Setting a maximum number of voters in each polling station to facilitate the voting process.

7. Retaining the voter card after polling to prevent repeated voting and to act as an additional verification mechanism of the number of actual voters.

8. Linking all polling and counting centers electronically to the centralized database of voters, so that once the voter cast his/her ballot, his/her name appeared at all polling centers as having already voted.

9. Using a ballot paper which includes names and photos of the candidates, as well as names, numbers, and symbols of lists. This enhanced the secrecy of the vote for illiterate voters and limited opportunities for vote buying.

10. Counting ballots at the same polling station in the presence of candidates, agents, and domestic and international observers.

11. Posting a copy of the results form on the door of the polling station and making it accessible to candidates, agents, etc.

12. Applying a two-stage audit to the results: 1) through the district election committees, and 2) through a special committee at central level to verify the preliminary results.

13. Introducing the concept of disclosure of sources of funding and spending in campaigns as a first step to regulate and control this area.

14. Establishing a database, electoral information system, and GIS covering all stages of the electoral process.

15. Conducting a large-scale awareness campaign under the title: Because it’s Your Decision” targeting all segments of society and including clear, differentiated, and directed messages to raise awareness on all procedures of the electoral process.

16. Engaging youth in the electoral process by establishing volunteer teams to provide assistance to voters on Election Day. 3,463 volunteers, distributed on all the polling and counting centers throughout the Kingdom, greatly contributed to organizing voters’ entry
to the centers and guided them to their respective polling rooms. Women constituted 51% of the total number of volunteers.

17. Conducting a comprehensive assessment of the electoral process to identify the strengths and weaknesses, and improve the process.

Additionally, the IEC has utilized its legislative power provided by the law to issue executive instructions that interpret the provisions of the law. In drafting these instructions IEC referred to the international human rights treaties ratified by Jordan and sought to harmonize the electoral legal framework with them. A clear example on this was when the polling and counting instructions allowed the disabled voter to be supported by someone of his/her choice instead of a member of the polling and counting committee members, which complies with the international treaty on the rights of people with disabilities. And in order to prevent candidates and/ or their supporters from making any advantage of this step by influencing the freedom of choice of the disabled voters IEC identified a criteria for the assistant, prevented the assistant from providing assistance to more than one voter, listed the assistants names in a special registry and used the electoral ink.

The elections were conducted in the presence of domestic and international observers who had access to all stages of the electoral process. On Election Day, a total of 7,300 domestic observers, representing 13 bodies or coalitions, as well as 306 international observers, worked in an atmosphere that ensured their free presence and enabled them to perform their work easily without interfering in or interrupting the conduct of the electoral process.

Training was among the most important and unprecedented measures adopted during an electoral process in Jordan. The training program aimed to enhance the capacities of the staff to enable them to perform their tasks efficiently and to ensure that the process is carried out accurately, transparently and impartially. The training program also sought to ensure the conformity of all measures adopted throughout the various stages of the electoral process with legislation and standardizing these measures for all the districts and polling and counting centers and stations. To achieve this goal, the IEC succeeded within less than two months in planning and implementing training programs for all election staff as well as administrative officers and volunteers. Around 32,000 people participated in the training program, which required the IEC to
recruit and qualify 174 trainers, who in turn went through several stages of training and conducted around 800 training sessions over a period of 22 days.

To guarantee the quality and effectiveness of the training programs, the IEC developed a number of necessary standards; for example, the number of trainees in each training program did not exceed 40; each trainee had to receive no less than 6 training hours; and each training program had at least two trainers. The training program was distinguished by adopting a simulation approach to explain the electoral procedures, and to make the trainee familiar to the materials and forms used in the electoral process.

All these efforts have, according to domestic and international observers, improved the electoral process and started to rebuild the public trust in it. But, as any elections the 2013 parliamentary elections in Jordan were not perfect, individual mistakes did take place in some districts and violations of the legislation were perpetrated not only by election staff but also by candidates and/or their supporters, voters and others involved.

This has led the IEC to commit itself to conducting a comprehensive evaluation of the components of the electoral process. Believing in the importance of scientifically and accurately reviewing the electoral process in order to identify and build on strengths and diagnose and avoid weaknesses, the Commission conducted a series of meetings with domestic and international observers, as well as with civil society organizations, it also designed and distributed a detailed questionnaire among election staff and conducted focus groups discussions with members of polling and counting committees and administrative liaison officers to evaluate the polling and counting procedures.

A thorough capacity needs assessment was conducted in cooperation with the UNDP, and a capacity development plan of a three-year period was adopted by IEC’s Board of Commissioners. The plan included actions that aim at building the IEC’s institutional capacities in terms of drawing it general strategies and policies and developing and documenting procedures to improve the work of the commission in the future and the capacities of its permanent and temporary staff to equip them with the knowledge and skills necessary to enable them to better implement elections in the future.
Based on this plan the IEC in cooperation with its partners (UNDP and IFES) is currently implementing a number of activities, some of which are:

1. Developing its strategic plan for the years 2015-2018 based on a consultative approach both internally and externally.
2. Reviewing, amending and documenting the procedures of all the phases of the electoral process.
3. A long-term professional development program is being implemented in cooperation with IFES and UNDP, based on the BRIDGE program after customizing the materials with the case of Jordan. The program targets all IEC permanent staff and temporary election staff who had worked with IEC on implementing the 2013 elections. The main objective of the program is to build the capacities of the target group and to make them familiar with the international standards and best practices of free and fair elections.
4. Enhancing the accessibility of polling and counting centers and this will include a comprehensive assessment of these centers in terms of the infrastructure, facilities and equip them to be more accessible by all voters with special focus of PWDs.
5. Improving and updating the voter registry so as to guarantee its inclusiveness and integrity, this will include running a number of surveys to measure the accuracy of the civil registry which is the main base of the voter registry. In addition to establishing a parallel registry at the IEC that reflects all the updates (inclusions and deletions) and their justifications.
6. Networking with regional and international EMBs to benefit from their experience and at the aim of establishing a regional mechanism of cooperation between Arab EMBs.

This leads to the second topic of this paper which is the efforts being made by Arab EMBs to establish a platform of dialogue and channels for exchanging experiences with the aim of improving electoral practices in their countries in a manner that better responds to public demands.

The starting point of this initiative was in April 2014 when 8 Arab EMBs participated in the regional meeting which was held on the side of the international workshop “Reinforcing the
credibility and acceptance of electoral processes” organized by the EC- UNDP Joint task Force for electoral assistance in cooperation with the IEC at the Dead Sea in Jordan. They expressed their interest and need to set the rules of the Arab cooperation in the area of development of electoral operation, and form a nucleus to an Arab platform consisting of the different types of the elections management bodies, and agreeing on a set of standards and best practices to be adopted as indicators to measure the performance, efficiency and effectiveness of these bodies.

The Regional Electoral Support Project of the UNDP has committed to facilitate this idea, and invited the EMBs for a follow-up meeting in Cordoba, which took place in June with the participation of 7 EMBs: Jordan, Palestine, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan and Tunisia.

The participating elections management bodies formed a preparatory committee consisting of a representative of each of the EMB. The main goal of the work of the committee is to propose the mode of cooperation, and the founding platform detailing its nature, goals, mode of operation, membership, decision making mechanism, and source of funding…

In order to achieve its goal the committee has established electronic communication tools between the members of the committee, including emails and a discussion group hub hosted on IEC’s website.

Additionally the committee is working on comparative analyses that targets Arab EMBs and will include the legal and procedural aspects related to their work to provide ground information to help the committee in making some decisions related to the criteria of members.

One of the main reasons behind our participation in this event is to get acquainted with the experience of ACEEEO. We had quite a fruitful meeting with the ACEEEO Secretariat who, despite the work load related to the organization of such a big event, met with me and my two colleague from Iraq earlier this morning to introduce us to the work of ACEEEO which has been quite useful and will add to the work of the prep. com.

Finally, I wish to re-express my appreciation for the organizers of this event and to wish we all get what we want out of it.

Many Thanks