



SPEECH GIVEN BY HE MRS ASMA AL ASSAD AT WOMEN IN BUSINESS FORUM
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My Dear Friend Mrs Erdogan

Fellow First Ladies and Colleagues

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good Morning

What a pleasure it is for me to be back in Istanbul and to share this podium with so many distinguished friends and colleagues.

If you were to ask my four year old son what he remembers of our last visit to Turkey, he would simply say "lots of people and lots of snow!"

For me, the memories are more distinct.

Whether it was the rapturous reception at the Stock Exchange or the hospitality and warmth of the villagers, I was incessantly struck by the vivaciousness of the people I met. Everywhere I went, I saw a passion and desire to be part of the modern world, but also a strong commitment to safeguard traditional and important customs. Perhaps this explains the choice of Istanbul as the 2010 European City of Culture, for which I would like to extend to you all, my sincere congratulations.

My warmest thanks to Mrs Erdogan for her kind invitation and generous hospitality. Your tireless efforts and commitment to promoting the role and equal rights of women, continues to be a source of inspiration to all of us.

To Christine, Ahmad and the team at Women in Business, your commitment to advancing the role of women in the business world continues to nurture success, least of all for the women you support.



Businesses can build partnerships beyond national boundaries and despite differences in language and customs. And of course, like any astute business leader, you choose your partners well. Your association here with TIKAD is testimony to that. I hope this gathering builds on the advances achieved and continues to be a source of knowledge and inspiration.

In May last year, Syria was proud to host the Annual Women in Business Conference. The first of its kind in the Middle East, that gathering broke all records and exceeded all expectations. But more importantly, it challenged many of us to break new boundaries and explore new horizons.

Since then, I am delighted to say that Syria has joined Turkey as one of the few countries in the world, where women have reached the highest posts in office. I am proud that President Assad is the first Arab leader to appoint a woman Vice President. This is a clear message at the highest level that women can and do have an important role to play in our nation's development.

We also continue to make progress in other areas. On the business front, two Syrian women were included in the recently published Forbes Magazine of the 50 Most Powerful Arab Business Women. And on the world stage, three Syrian women were nominated for last years Nobel Peace Prize.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today, I would like to use this platform to talk about youth in our region.

In a constantly changing world, where our interactions have local impact and global consequences and where the wealth of nations is traded at the speed of light between cities that can never share the same sunshine, the onus is on us to empower the young people in our region to participate fully in the world of the 21st century.



Indeed, in a future that will be increasingly dominated by globalized trends and pressures, we need to create the conditions for success - a modern economy and an energetic, skilled and enthusiastic workforce.

But before this can fully realized, we need to ensure that we continue to engage our young generation not only as tomorrow's leaders but as today's partners in change. In my meetings and exchanges with young people from all walks of life, I am always inspired by their drive and enthusiasm, which I know if channeled properly, will not only assist in our nation's development but will move mountains as well.

Syria is currently tackling this very challenge. With 65% of our population under the age of 25, the need is now more pressing than ever before.

Our vision is to develop a generation of young people with the independence and self confidence to take control of their own lives by encouraging, educating and empowering them.

Women stand to play a role of unprecedented importance, helping to speed this process to fruition. Offering new solutions, new insights and moving into politics and business as never before.

To turn vision into reality, Syria has begun instituting fundamental changes to the education system designed to provide every possible chance and encouragement for our young people to thrive in market conditions, which will attract investment, drive modernization, and secure our competitiveness.

And for the business leaders of tomorrow, I am delighted to be personally working hand-in-hand with the United Nations Youth Employment Network to help young people find decent and productive work through entrepreneurship.

Our project, which is one of only twelve in the Global Youth Employment Network, marks a key step in building a culture of self reliance and creativity amongst our young people so they can contribute to the prosperity and well-being of our country.



Ladies and Gentlemen,

But the realization of this process also depends on other forces, not least stability. We are currently living in a more unstable, violent and chaotic Middle East than at any other time in the region's modern history. This is inevitably having a detrimental impact on our development, not least in Syria.

Our ability to move forward is constantly being checked by the tension and instability that plagues our region.

And for our youth, this means that their drive and enthusiasm is often eclipsed by uncertainty and despair.

Day by day it is becoming increasingly clear that the instability in the Middle East is having far reaching global repercussions, which mean the crisis of the region can no longer be viewed in isolation.

Today we are at a critical junction in time throughout the world. A time when the ways of governing, the ways of living and doing business, the ways of interacting amongst peoples and nations is in flux. A time when we must partner one another if we are to facilitate constructive dialogue between East and West.

In fact no city captures this more than the one we are gathered in today. Istanbul is both the nearest Asian city to Europe and the nearest European city to Asia.

The challenges and uncertainty are there to be overcome, not feared, but it is up to us to work together to ensure a future of peace, stability and prosperity for our youth.

Thank you