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PROPOSAL TO INITIATE AN SME SET-ASIDE PROGRAM FOR JORDANIAN GOVERNMENT PROCUREMENT FINAL REPORT

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PROPOSAL TO INITIATE AN SME SET-ASIDE PROGRAM FOR JORDANIAN GOVERNMENT PROCUREMENT

FINAL REPORT

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1. Executive summary

This Report sets forth a proposal for the Government of Jordan (GOJ) to initiate a Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) set-aside program for government tenders, to assist the GOJ in negotiating accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) Government Procurement Agreement (GPA or Agreement). It contains the background on these efforts to date, a discussion of the terms of reference under which this report is written, an approach for creating an SME set-aside program, common features of such a program, and recommendations for the next steps in this effort.

2. Background

The WTO's GPA is a plurilateral agreement with the objective of expanding world trade by providing a framework for international competition in government procurement. The GPA establishes an agreed upon framework of rights and obligations among its Parties with respect to their national laws, regulations, procedures, and practices in the area of government procurement. Unlike most other WTO agreements that apply automatically to all WTO member states, individual member states voluntarily accede to the GPA.

An important cornerstone principle of the GPA is non-discrimination. That is, with respect to the procurement covered by the Agreement, Parties to the GPA are required to accord to the products, services, and suppliers of any other Party to the Agreement treatment “no less favorable” than they give to their domestic products, services and suppliers.¹ To meet this obligation, the acceding country prepares an offer comprising a list of government entities that will commit to complying with the GPA for procurements above a proposed threshold value, as well as lists of goods and services proposed to be excluded from the GPA. Additionally, the acceding country can further qualify its compliance with the terms of the Agreement by including provisions in the General Notes contained in the offer.

All of the current GPA Parties have qualified their compliance with the non-discrimination terms, to one degree or another, based upon considerations of their respective interests in domestic industries and domestic procuring entities. Specifically relevant to this Report, many of the GPA Parties have included provisions allowing for a robust collection of development programs to aid SMEs in accessing and performing government procurements. The United States, among other countries, has established a “set-aside program” for the benefit of its domestic small and minority-owned enterprises. Such programs reserve specific categories of government procurements, or a certain percentage of such contracts or total procurement spending, for the designated pool of applicants.

¹ See GPA Article III:1(a).

In July 2000, the GOJ applied to accede to the GPA and established a National Procurement Committee to pursue the steps necessary for accession. The GOJ submitted its Initial Offer for accession to the GPA on February 6, 2003. Following bilateral discussions with existing GPA Parties, Jordan submitted a First Revised Offer on October 19, 2006.

In the General Notes of its First Revised Offer, the GOJ stated in Note 9: "The Agreement shall not apply to procurement involving Jordanian small and medium-sized businesses."² This qualification was designed to address the GOJ's concern about the impact of GPA accession on Jordanian small and medium-enterprises. However, the GOJ received feedback from other GPA members that the language in Note 9 appears vague and requiring of clarification. Specifically, given that almost all Jordanian firms can be regarded as small or medium sized, this provision has the potential to exclude a very large share of total procurement from the provisions of the GPA.

The GOJ also received feedback from local private sector suppliers to Government that are concerned at the potential competition from foreign suppliers once Jordan joins the GPA. However, the GOJ was told that procurement thresholds and provisions protecting small and medium sized enterprises in Jordan's accession agreement will allay most of these concerns.

The GPA Parties also questioned the language of Note 9, prompting a Response from the GOJ. The exchange was as follows:

Q1. Jordan should delete note 9 relating to a
"small and medium business set-aside" or modify
The Note to provide that:

a- Jordan will notify the GPA Parties before it
implements a set-aside program, and may
implement such program, provided that no Party
objects;

b- The program will be limited to small
enterprises; and

c- It will not implement any set-aside program
until the price preference and the offset program
are fully phased-out.

² Application for Accession to the Agreement on Government Procurement of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, Revised Entity Offer (Oct. 19, 2006)

The notification would set out the scope of the program and would include a description of the operation of the set-aside, the definition of small business, and the maximum annual percentage of covered procurement that would be set-aside for small businesses. Jordan would also notify, on a yearly basis, the actual percentage of procurement set aside for small business that would otherwise have been covered by the Agreement.

A1. Note (9) in it is [sic] current drafting in Jordan's revised offer serves the purpose of treatment of SMEs within the context of Jordan to the GPA. SMEs in Jordan constitute a sensitive part in the national economy and need adequate support in the various sectors. Jordan will appreciate more clarification on how SMEs are treated in GPA member's government procurement system.³

Following these exchanges, the GOJ submitted a Second Revised Offer to the WTO. The authors of this Report have not reviewed that document.

3. Terms of Reference

Given this background, the SABEQ Program developed the present consultancy Assignment in coordination with the GOJ and the International Law Institute. The Terms of Reference (TOR) for the consultancy included the following task:

Development of a draft proposal for an SME set-aside program to be adopted by Jordan, taking into consideration Jordan's level of economic development and SME structure, and based on appropriate US programs such as those of the Small Business Administration. The proposal should include the general framework of the SME set-aside program as well as implementation procedures and mechanisms that would fit with the domestic legal framework and government procurement procedures in Jordan, based on background documents to be provided by MIT on Jordanian legal issues and procurement processes.

³ Committee on Government Procurement Room Document, pp. 7-8 (Apr.18, 2007)
After commencing this assignment, the authors of this Report, in consultation with SABEQ, found it infeasible to draft the detailed proposal

sought in the TOR because, although a few studies have occurred on the potential impact of GPA accession on Jordan's major industries,⁴ it appears that the specific analyses necessary for developing a well-tailored SME set-aside program in Jordan have not yet been undertaken. At SABEQ's recommendation, the authors sought input concerning how the GOJ may simultaneously accede to the GPA while reserving its rights to develop and implement a well-balanced SME set-aside program.

The authors were convinced with the idea that the WTO is likely to accept an SME set-aside proposal from Jordan only if it is well-justified and tailored to Jordan's specific circumstances. Otherwise, the proposal likely would be rejected as overly-restrictive of competition. Developing a tailored SME set-aside program would be time-intensive and could not be completed by the time the GOJ hopes to accede to the GPA – which may occur as early as December 2007.

It is suggested that the GOJ may consider following the approach used by the Republic of Guatemala when acceding to the Central America Free Trade Agreement: to indicate in the General Notes to the accession agreement that Jordan intends to develop an SME set-aside program that will be consistent with the GPA, and that Jordan will consult with the WTO Parties before implementing the program. This approach would give Jordan the time to accomplish the tasks necessary to create an effective program.

Accordingly, this Report sets forth a proposal for the GOJ to initiate the steps necessary to establish the basic parameters for an SME set-aside program for government tenders while simultaneously acceding to the GPA. It is designed to assist the GOJ in making realistic, appropriate requests in its Final Offer for accession to the GPA.

4. Approach for Creating an SME Set-Aside Program

The complete development of a well-balanced, effective SME set-aside program can best occur if the GOJ undertakes this process with five key elements in mind.

First, the GOJ should “baseline” its proposed program. This includes studying the economic and market factors that justify the creation of such a program, considering which policy features the program is designed to achieve, and assessing what the GOJ can realistically expect to accomplish

⁴ See, e.g., AMIR Program, Jordan and the WTO Government Procurement Agreement: An Economic Impact Assessment (June 2002).

with such a program.⁵ This baseline analysis will serve as the foundation for the next step.

Second, the GOJ should define the basic parameters of the proposed program, seek input from relevant government agencies, industry, and interest groups, and then fill-out the program parameters as appropriate. The feedback should be sought from both supporters and detractors of such a program to ensure that all relevant voices are heard.

Third, the GOJ should create institutional capacity and commitment for the program. Institutional capacity is necessary to implement, monitor, audit, and enforce the laws, regulations, guidance, and program effectiveness. It may be difficult to achieve an effective SME set-aside program if the institutions that are required to implement the program are absent, weak, or uncommitted.

Fourth, SME set-aside programs are typically implemented through legislation and regulations that are harmoniously added into a domestic legal system. The legislation serves the purpose of signaling the public on the appropriate policy, while the regulations are more flexible and can be more easily adapted to changing circumstances. For example, the United States enacted the Small Business Act to establish government-wide policies, programs, and enforcement mechanisms, and it created the Small Business Administration to issue regulations implementing the law.

Fifth, the GOJ should designate an appropriate institutional structure as “owning” the SME set-aside program. That institution should have the appropriate expertise – legal, economic, accounting, statistic and other disciplines – and structure for the public management of the program. It should be responsible for implementing certain functions in relation to the program: (a) adopting a detailed set of guidelines to ensure that the law or regulation is properly put into operation by the other government agencies; (b) Conducting training of managers in government and industry; (c) measuring results of the program; and (d) recommending changes to the program as necessary. Additionally, a single entity may be responsible for all procurement or, at the least, for ensuring that all relevant government procuring agencies understand and comply with the applicable laws, regulations, and guidelines. In the United States, for example, the Small

⁵For example, some SME programs are designed to assist small and medium-sized enterprises while others assist small and minority enterprises – with the acronym SME being the same. Jordan should reach a threshold decision whether it wishes to support small-sized enterprises, medium-sized enterprises, minority-owned enterprises, or all of these.

Business Administration serves in an advocacy role for small businesses, as well as in an oversight and regulatory role.

5. Common Features of an SME Set-Aside Program

The GOJ wishes to understand the general features of SME set-aside programs in GPA Parties as it develops its own proposed program. Based upon our experience with the United States' SME set-aside programs, as well as our review of the literature describing similar programs in other GPA Parties, there appear to be three common, fundamental features to SME set-aside programs:

- the policy objectives justifying the program and around which the program elements are formulated;
- the basic preferences or requirements for contract set-asides; and
- the definitions for SME qualification and methods of verifying that status for qualifying enterprises.

Within this general framework, the overarching ingredients for a strong program are transparency and well-supported, detailed tailoring of the program elements to the specific government procurement circumstances in each country.

A. Objectives Underlying SME Set-Aside Programs

The GPA Parties have a range of SME development programs to aid small, medium, and minority-owned business in accessing and performing government contracts. These include training and counseling projects, subcontracting requirements that favor those businesses, and business loan programs. Additionally, some of the Parties have qualified their compliance with the GPA's non-discrimination terms by setting aside their SME set-aside programs from GPA coverage – as Jordan seeks to do.

Every SME assistance program is designed to achieve specific policy goals. These goals may be normative in nature, such as political stability, social cohesion, remediation of serious racial or ethnic discrimination, cultural pluralism, “fairer” distribution of wealth where significant imbalances exist because of past government intervention, rapid and “equitable” increases in employment potential, and balanced regional growth. They may also include economic elements, such as the idea that SMEs can be more flexible and innovative than larger businesses and, therefore, often can provide a more responsive level of service.

The United States' SME policy, for example, embraces the goal of increasing competition in the domestic economy. This is based on the theory that developing a strong SME base may increase competition in public procurement, which may provide the government with better value for money and increased efficiency in public procurement. This policy is set forth in the U.S.'s Small Business Act:

The essence of the American economic system of private enterprise is free competition. Only through full and free competition can free markets, free entry into business, and opportunities for the expression and growth of personal initiative and individual judgment be assured. The preservation and expansion of such competition is basic not only to the economic well-being but to the security of this Nation. Such security and well-being cannot be realized unless the actual and potential capacity of small business is encouraged and developed. It is the declared policy of the Congress that the Government should aid, counsel, assist, and protect, insofar as is possible, the interest of small business concerns in order to preserve free competition enterprise. . . to maintain and strengthen the overall economy of the Nation.⁶

In the present case, the WTO expects the GOJ to justify its need for an SME set-aside program. The authors understand that the GOJ is already seeking price preferences and offsets, and an SME set-aside program would limit competition even further. Accordingly, the GOJ should undertake the analysis and policy formulations to justify having an SME set-aside program based on Jordan's unique circumstances. In addition to considering the policies described above for the U.S., the GOJ may wish to study the following issues which have particular relevance to Jordan:

⁶P.L. 85-536, § 2(a), 15 U.S.C. § 631(a).

- Whether Jordanian SMEs face competitive constraints, such as:

- limited access to information regarding procurements.
 - lower skill levels for certain categories of Jordanian workers.
 - Government procedures and practices that favor large businesses, such as contract bundling.
 - restricted availability of capital from normal commercial sources.
 - social constraints such as discrimination or bias.
 - limitations on access to foreign markets covered by the GPA, such as the relatively high cost of preparing tenders and compliance programs.
- Potential positive effects from a government or social perspective such as:
 - an increase in the competitive base and a decrease in industry concentration
 - re-mediation of past discrimination and historical disadvantage
 - promoting social cohesion and mitigating social exclusion
 - equitable distribution of public contract funds
 - the potential to foster job creation
 - redressing mal-distribution of wealth
 - improving access to the large public procurement market for Jordanian companies
 - improvements in the acquisition of knowledge, information, skills, experience, technology, management skills, and a host of other knowledge-related inputs from participation in public procurement
 - assistance in developing competitiveness in the private sector
 - Potential negative effects from a government or social perspective such as:
 - additional administrative and personnel costs for managing the set-aside program and evaluating and monitoring small bidders

- the cost premium that the government pay in awarding a contract to an SME with less competition
- restricted choices for the government, and restricted opportunities for large businesses, from less competition
- social consequences of any set-aside features that may benefit one category of contractors over another

A well-thought-out analysis of these policy considerations is likely to result in a solid justification for an SME set-aside program in Jordan, and it should be beneficial when “baselining” the parameters of the program.

B. Establishing Set-Aside Preferences or Requirements

In all countries for which we reviewed the SME set-aside programs, the objective of the programs was essentially the same: to create preferences for, or to reserve certain classes of acquisitions for, the award of certain categories of procurements SMEs within defined thresholds. The methods for achieving this objective varied from country to country.

The United States has an aggressive program for targeting SME procurement.⁷ Goals for SME participation in federal procurement are set by statute and the Government uses set-asides to target procurement toward SMEs. As explained in the U.S. Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR), “[t]he purpose of small business set-asides is to award certain acquisitions exclusively to small business concerns.”⁸

U.S. Federal procuring entities are required to adhere to the “rule of two” when deciding whether to set aside a procurement. This rule is set forth in two parts: one for procurements exceeding the threshold of US\$ 3,000 but not exceeding US\$ 100,000, and the other for procurements exceeding the threshold of US\$ 100,000.⁹ Acquisitions of supplies or services that fall within the first category of procurement are automatically reserved exclusively for small business concerns unless there is a reasonable expectation that two or more SMEs will not submit offers. Acquisitions falling within the second category are only set aside when there is:

⁷ As described above, the United States’ program benefits small and minority-owned Enterprises. It does not include provisions for medium-sized Enterprises.

⁸ FAR 19.501(a).

⁹ Id. § 19.502-2.

(1) a reasonable expectation that offers will be made from at least two responsible small business concerns offering the products of different small business

concerns; and (2) the award will be made at fair market prices. Unless these criteria are met, a set-aside will not be made. In addition to creating price-specific levels of set-asides, set-asides in the U.S. may be either total or partial. A total set-aside is one in which all quantities sought in the procurement are reserved exclusively for small business competition. A partial set-aside is one in which a portion of the quantities sought in the procurement are reserved exclusively for small business competition.¹⁰

The Indian Government's procurement policies have also taken SMEs into account. India's public buying policy reserves certain items for procurement from cottage industries and SMEs. The items selected are such that the needs of the public buying program for these items are met from those two sectors. In the case of other items, the public buying policy recommends a price preference for the cottage and the small-scale industries sector. The Government of India has established a standing review committee at the highest level of government to periodically review the list of items reserved for exclusive procurement from SMEs.

The GOJ may wish to follow the U.S. model by creating price-specific levels of set-asides, on either a total or partial basis. Alternatively, the GOJ may wish to reserve certain items for procurement from Jordanian SMEs. Either way, these decisions should be based upon the results of the policy analyses and the specific economic and market circumstances in Jordan.

C. Defining and Applying SME Qualifications

When designing its proposed SME set-aside program, a fundamental question will be what numerical definition should be used to define small and medium enterprises eligible for the programs. A related question is whether the size standards should vary industry by industry. A review of the SME set-aside programs for GPA Parties shows that there is no single definition of SME among the GPA Parties surveyed.

Developing well-tailored standards for SME qualifications depends, to a great extent, on understanding local conditions. GPA Parties' varying economic and demographic conditions impact the definition of SME in each country. Other factors impacting the definition include each country's level of development, size, strength of industrial and business sectors, and the particular problems that SMEs face in that country. Thus, an enterprise considered to be an SME in one country may well be larger than many large companies in another.

¹⁰ Id. 19.502-3.

Notwithstanding the diverse definitions afforded to SMEs, there are three parameters that are generally used, either singly or in combination, to define an SME:

- the number of workers employed;
- the firm's level of capital investment or assets;
- its volume of production or business turnover.

In the U.S., the Small Business Administration is responsible for establishing small business size standards on an industry-by-industry basis.¹¹ Small business size standards are applied by:

- classifying the product or service being acquired in the industry whose definition, as found in the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) Manual (available via the Internet at <http://www.census.gov/epcd/www/naics.html>), best describes the principal nature of the product or service being acquired;
- identifying the size standard SBA established for that industry; and
- specifying the size standard in the solicitation so that offerors can appropriately represent themselves as small or large.¹²

For size standard purposes, a product or service may be classified in only one industry, whose definition best describes the principal nature of the product or service being acquired even though for other purposes it could be classified in more than one. When acquiring a product or service that could be classified in two or more industries with different size standards, contracting officers must apply the size standard for the industry accounting for the greatest percentage of the contract price. There are additional qualification standards for an enterprise that submits a bid or offer of multiple end products or for end products that it did not manufacture.¹³ The industry size standards are published by the Small Business Administration and are available via the Internet at <http://www.sba.gov/size>.

¹¹ See 13 CFR Part 121.

¹² See FAR 19.102.

¹³ See *id.*

In the context of a developing country, identifying a common definition

of SMEs can be challenging, as economies tend to vary considerably in their socio-economic and political factors. Additionally, the economic gap between developed and developing countries inevitably disallows the use of same thresholds. For example, small enterprises of the United States are of a size that proportionally matches that of enterprises ranked as “large” in modest economies.

Nevertheless, attempts have been made to identify SMEs in developing countries. The United Nations Commission on Trade and Development reports:

SMEs are widely defined in terms of their characteristics, which include the size of capital investment, the number of employees, the turnover, the management style, the location, and the market share. Country context plays a major role in determining the nature of these characteristics, especially, the size of investment in capital accumulation and the number of employees. For developing countries, small-scale generally means enterprises with less than 50 workers and mediumsize enterprises would usually mean those that have 50–99 workers. In Uganda, a small-scale enterprise is an enterprise or a firm employing less than five but with a maximum of 50 employees, with the value of assets, excluding land, building and working capital of less than Ugshs. 50 million (USD 30,000), and an annual income turnover of between Ugshs. 10–50 million (USD 6,000–30,000). A medium-size enterprise is considered a firm, which employs between 50–100 workers. Other characteristics have not been fully developed.¹⁴

Defining the categories of SMEs in Jordan will require close study. If Jordan were to adopt the U.S. standard of 50 employees as defining a small enterprise, for example, a large portion of the Jordanian market would be

¹⁴ Improving the Competitiveness of SMEs in Developing Countries, The Role of Finance To Enhance Enterprise Development, UNCTAD/ITE/TEB/Misc.3.

closed off from foreign competition. This fact alone makes it unlikely that the

WTO would accept any blanket attempt to rely solely upon the U.S. size standards.

Once the SME qualifications are established, the GOJ also must determine which enterprises qualify for the set-aside program. Two common approaches for determining SME status are the self-certification system and the registration system. The U.S. utilizes both methods, depending upon the program at issue. For most programs, the enterprise self-certifies as to its status as a qualifying SME. In other procurements the enterprise must register to obtain the designated SME status. The registration process requires the enterprise to submit an application and pass a number of regulatory tests. Either the Government or a competitor can protest a competitor's qualification status if they have reason to believe it is incorrect.¹⁵ The GOJ may consider using either or both of these methods.

6. Recommendations

The GOJ has two objectives: (a) to accede to the GPA by December 2007, and (b) to initiate the development of an SME set-aside program that ultimately would be excluded from GPA coverage. The following recommendations are designed to achieve these objectives:

A. The GOJ should designate an appropriate team within the National Procurement Committee to be responsible for developing the setaside program.

B. The SME Team should immediately undertake a workshop (1) to receive training in international best practices for developing an SME setaside program; (2) to "baseline" its proposed program by discussing the economic and market factors that justify the creation of such a program, considering which policy features the program is designed to achieve, and assessing what the GOJ can realistically expect to accomplish with such a program; and (3) to propose basic parameters for the SME set-aside program.

C. Based on the results of the workshop, the SME Team should draft a White Paper describing the workshop efforts and proposed parameters. The GOJ could circulate the White Paper to the GPA Parties as a basis for justifying an SME set-aside program in its Final Offer of Accession.

¹⁵ See FAR Subpart 19.3.

D. The GOJ should accommodate the feedback received from the GPA Parties by including relatively general language in Note 9 of the General Notes of the Final Offer. However, that language would be presented against the backdrop of the White Paper and could establish a basic understanding that the GPA Parties anticipate Jordan to have an SME set-aside program relatively equal in scope to that of the U.S. We suggest language such as the following:

Jordan has commenced development of a set-aside program for small and medium-sized (or minority-owned) enterprises that will be consistent with the GPA. This program will seek to achieve set-aside levels, in terms of a certain percentage of such contracts or total procurement spending, of approximately the same levels as the United States achieves under the its SME set-aside program. Jordan will consult with the WTO Parties regarding the scope of the program and will implement such program provided that no Party objects.

E. The SME Team should then commence the process of defining its proposed program. This should include: (1) seeking input from relevant government agencies, industry, and interest groups; (2) surveying the SME set-aside programs of other GPA countries that have similar characteristics to Jordan, such as population size and level of development; and (3) then filling out the program parameters as appropriate.

F. The SME Team should formulate recommendations for an appropriate institutional structure to “own” the set-aside program.

G. The SME Team should develop draft legislation and regulations that can be harmoniously added into Jordan’s legal system.

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