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# Kluwer Mediation Blog

## The Middle East's Mediator?

John Sturrock (Core Solutions Group) · Tuesday, March 29th, 2016

As I write this, I am looking across the Gulf of Aqaba at the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt, near the place where the Egyptian border abuts Israel, south of the Israeli Red Sea port of Eilat. This morning's BBC news tells us that Israel is on alert for IS attacks in the Sinai. The accompanying photograph on the BBC website shows an Israeli patrol boat in the Gulf of Aqaba. The background landscape in the photograph seems remarkably similar to the view we have from our hotel overlooking the Gulf, just to the south of the port of Aqaba in Jordan. Indeed, I have just gone to the shore and compared the two and they are virtually identical. Just a few miles to the south of our hotel lies Saudi Arabia. Quite a juxtaposition of nations.

We are on holiday in the heart of that part of the Middle East which seems engulfed in conflict. Three days ago, we looked across from the ancient once-Roman city of Umm Qais in northern Jordan at the Golan Heights, the strategic location taken from Syria by Israel in the Six Day War in 1967. It was just a mile or two away, with the Sea of Galilee (Lake Tiberius to Jordanians) to the west and Syria just a further mile or two to the east. The second largest Syrian refugee camp is located to the south east of that spot. Further east, Jordan bounds Iraq. Lebanon and the old town of Nazareth lie further to the west and, not far in the south west, the twinkling lights of Jerusalem are clearly visible at night from across the Dead Sea.

A day later, Good Friday as it happened, we stood on Mount Nebo where Moses surveyed the Promised Land (and where he died) and, a few miles away, we stood in the narrow River Jordan, by its tree-covered east bank, where the opposite side of the river is about ten feet away. A few hundred metres to the east, at a spot where the Jordan once flowed, it is said that John the Baptist baptised Jesus. At the place we were standing, the west bank of the river is in Israel/the Palestinian Territories and we were overlooked by Israeli guards, just as Jordanian guards watched from the east side. This appeared to be the Middle East summed up in one location.

Or so it may have seemed. But it is not quite that simple. We feel entirely safe in Jordan. It is a fascinating country. Owing to the efforts of the highly-esteemed late King Hussein and followed by his son, the current King Abdullah II, Jordan has assumed the role of peacemaker in recent years. King Hussein was a recognised mediator in the Middle East, particularly in the latter years of his lengthy reign. The Jordanian people are tolerant, inclusive and hospitable. In recent times, Jordan has assimilated millions of refugees in waves, Palestinians, Iraqis, Syrians. But the Jordanian economy has been grievously wounded by the conflicts, not by war itself but by the perception in the West that every country in the Middle East must be avoided by travellers. Tourism is Jordan's staple income-generator. Some estimates put the reduction in tourism in the

past five years at 95%. These welcoming, thoughtful people are hurting badly as a result.

What has this to do with a Kluwer blog on mediation? Well, it's fascinating to ponder, while in this part of the world, what we do as mediators and what we might learn. In navigating its geographical, ethnic, religious and cultural positions, Jordan has balanced many interests. This was sharply focused in the two Gulf Wars where the father and son kings each used consummate diplomatic skill to preserve Jordan's carefully-won status as a "bridge between two ideologies", and as a kind of "buffer-state". The Arab Spring, with all of its hope and despair, has not really gained much traction here. Interestingly, 2000 years ago, the Nabataean people, who occupied the ancient lost city of Petra in Jordan (now a seventh "new" wonder of the world), accorded women equal rights. As the exhibit at the entrance to Petra poignantly records, the Nabateans were more advanced than many cultures in the world, even to this day. Jordan nowadays, while not a democracy, statutorily requires that a minimum percentage of women hold elected office.

The Amman Message delivered by the Chief Justice of Jordan in 2004 is an extraordinary statement of tolerance and peace and deserves full reading by all who would comment on Muslim affairs. The Chief Justice emphasises peace, security, neighbourliness, coexistence and respect for others, including those of different faiths and ideas, and the honouring of every human being, without distinction of colour, race or religion. He says that Muslims are called to shun violence and cruelty and to speak with kindness and respect, emphasising compassion and tenderness. The Message rejects extremism and denounces terrorism, which it describes as aberration, despotism and deviation. It places great value on scholarliness to help meet the challenges of the 21st century.

Our job as mediators is to help bridge chasms. It is to help bring understanding where people are polarised and frightened and where perceptions have been shaped by events beyond their control. Our job is also to challenge current thinking and the assumptions and prejudices held by many disputants and observers of disputes, including those in our own countries. In its own way, it seems that Jordan has played a similar, mediator, role in the last several years in the Middle East. Jordan deserves the respect of mediators everywhere and our continued, thoughtful, even radical, participation in the great task of bridge-building and peace-making which it has set itself. We might also support it by visiting the country. Let's have a mediation conference in Amman or Aqaba?

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