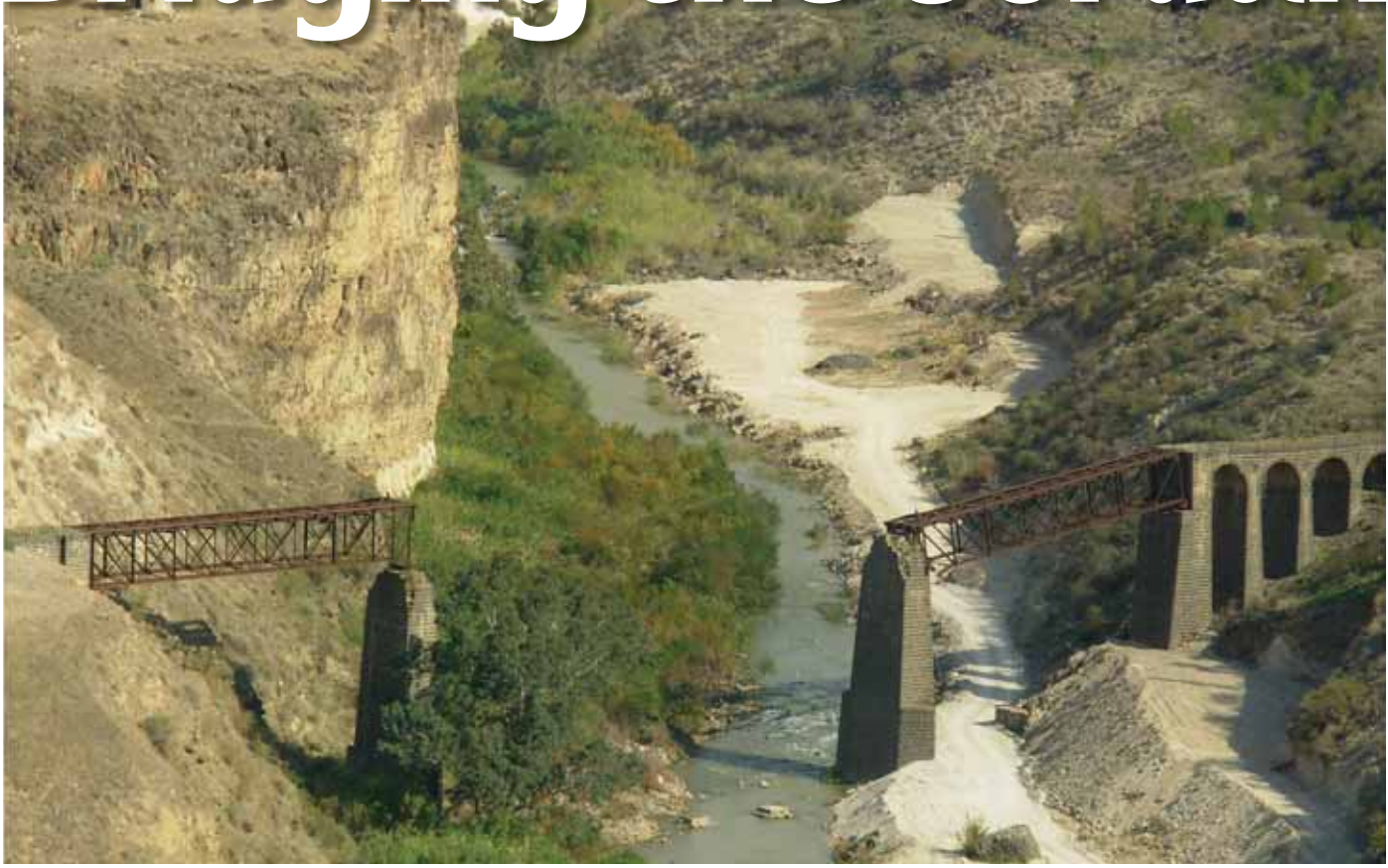


Bridging the Jordan



MIDDLE EAST: CROSS BORDER COOPERATION **GIDON BROMBERG**

Reporting on the Middle East often concentrates on violence and the conflicts that produce it. Would-be peacemakers look for grand solutions to deep-seated problems. But there are activists at a community level who, despite the personal dangers, try to pour oil on troubled waters.

WHEN YOSSI VARDI, ISRAELI MAYOR OF THE Jordan Valley Regional Council and Abdalla Salman, Jordanian Mayor of the Moath Bin Jabal Municipality, toured the Jordan Valley together late last year, they did not see themselves as peaceniks or environmentalists. They were, however, somewhat tense. This was their first meeting and they were well aware that some residents in their respective communities would either be cynical about its value or condemn them outright as 'collaborators' for talking to the 'other side'.

Despite the fact that Israel and Jordan signed a peace treaty twelve years ago, the still unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict ensures that tension between Arabs and Jews remains high throughout the Middle East. Ignoring the possible political fallout, the two mayors visited the valley together as neighbours, trying to solve cross border environmental problems and identify concrete, local opportunities that could directly benefit their respective residents.

Powerless

One of the highlights was the visit to the bombed Rotenberg hydro-electric power station. Completed in the 1930s by a Jewish entrepreneur, the plant was built at the convergence of the Jordan and Yarmouk rivers to capture the power of the waters to generate electricity. At its peak the station produced forty percent of the electricity of Mandate Palestine.

Construction itself was an example of regional cooperation. Half the facilities were built on what was then called Trans-Jordan, requiring the granting of a concession by King Abdullah I to the Jewish entrepreneur to build and operate the site from the Mandate Palestine side. Prior to the tour, neither mayor had been there and since the signing of the 1994 peace treaty only one Israeli group had visited the plant.

The fate of the power station sums up what has happened to the border area since the 1948 war between Israel and its Arab neighbours. The plant itself was bombed in 1948 and ceased to

operate. The banks of the Jordan river were mined, fences and security measures put in place and it was declared a closed military area.

Since the 1950s, the fresh water that used to flow down the Jordan and the Yarmouk has been diverted upstream, so that less than ten percent of the historical volume remains. With the fresh water removed, untreated sewage was discharged in its place, transforming the Jordan, from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea, into little more than a sewage channel.

The 1994 treaty reopened an international border crossing over the Jordan, but the river remains polluted and for most of its length is closed to the public on both sides. The Jordanian, Israeli and Palestinian communities who saw the peace process as the opportunity to transform their border towns into gateway centers have yet to realise their dreams.

So what brought the two mayors together for the first time with other Palestinian, Israeli and Jordanian municipal officials in a delegation representative of all the Jordan River Valley's residents? It was not the peace treaty, for these representatives no treaty even exists. Violence remains the norm.

Managing Together

In the six years since the outbreak of the Palestinian uprising, or Intifada, the communities have been participating in a project called Good Water Neighbours. It is the brainchild of EcoPeace and Friends of the Earth Middle East, a unique non-government organisation that works at the local level to raise awareness concerning the shared water problems of Palestinians, Jordanians, and Israelis. The methodology is based on identifying cross border communities and utilises their mutual dependence on shared water resources to develop dialogue and cooperation on sustainable water management issues.

Between 2001 and 2005, eleven Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian communities agreed to participate. Since September 2005 the project has expanded to include seventeen. Each is matched with a neighbouring community on the other side of the border or political divide to work on common water issues.

Water-saving devices have also been installed in all public buildings, and schools transformed into model water-saving buildings. Youth Water Trustees surveyed all taps in public buildings and then cut consumption by a third by installing the devices. In each school the principal, teachers, students and caretaker helped design a system specifically for their needs – for example, a simple device that would catch rainwater, or collect the wastewater from drinking fountains or the condensation created

by air-conditioners – all to be re-used for toilet flushing, garden watering and, in some schools, to provide additional drinking water.

However, trust building is not a simple, automatic consequence of cross-border programmes. It is a complex, difficult process that can take time and diplomacy and involves serious physical risk to those taking part. There have been threats, vandalism and even armed attacks.

With the project launched soon after the outbreak of the second Intifada, a key challenge was to find community groups willing to work with the other side. The focus on shared water

resources played a key role in building trust. People recognised, in principle, the necessity of working together even in the midst of violence.

Hiring a local staff person was a key trust building factor. The local resident grew up in the community and had already developed relationships with schools, community groups and the mayor's office.


Investment in the physical improvement of a community was another key factor. Field staff and project supporters could turn to these achievements when accused by others objecting to regional cooperation. In the middle of a public meeting organised by the local field staff in one community, someone called for everyone to leave, since the project was a regional Arab/Jewish one. The principal of the local school, whose building was being adapted to become a model water-saving building, immediately defended the scheme. He cited the investment and tangible benefits produced by local community members.

Trusting More

Once trust is gained, new possibilities are created. Cross-border meetings become not only possible, but desirable. Cooperation extends beyond water to other environmental issues, to economic interests such as agriculture and tourism, and political issues such as the building of the separation barrier. The 'other side' becomes a point of intrigue and genuine interest, rather than just an outlet for suspicion and accusation. Community members value, and therefore defend, the cooperative actions they have taken and the relationships developed. The circle of peace supporters in each community is widened.

For mayors Vardi and Salman the bombed out hydro-electric power station is now seen as a potential tourist site and revenue winner for local residents. They are considering flooding the old lake behind the plant to attract the hundreds of thousands of birds migrating each year from Europe to Africa. It would become a bird sanctuary; the power plant converted to a visitor's centre. Developing tourism trails to link the site with a two thousand-year-old Roman bridge just south of the plant would rejuvenate the whole area. Renewed access to the Jordan river banks and local economic gains, help justify removing the sewage and replacing it with clean water. Environment, economy and peace can go hand in hand.

To many people, the project is a symbol of hope that the region's people can live together and constructively resolve the crucial problems they face. Progressive politicians from the respective peace camps unsurprisingly embrace the project. It is the reaction of the Israeli and Jordanian military, however, which have been most open to help cross border activities, including access to closed military areas, that has been surprising. The success of the project in the midst of violence has also attracted the attention of research institutions and organisations, including Chatham House, seeking to apply the experience to other conflicts.

Without understating the difficulties, the frustrations and, at times, the genuine threat to individuals involved in advancing cross-border community cooperation, cautious optimism has been created. Through water issues the project has touched the hearts and minds of people at the community level and helped bridge the River Jordan with hope for a more constructive future. 

GIDON BROMBERG is the Israeli Director of EcoPeace/Friends of the Earth Middle East, a Palestinian, Jordanian and Israeli environmental organisation promoting sustainable development and peace. The Good Water Neighbours project has been funded by the European Union since 2001, with matching funds since 2005 from the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Foundation, and the British government's Global Opportunities Fund.

International Events February 2007

FEBRUARY 5

South African trial of men accused over alleged coup attempt in Equatorial Guinea.

FEBRUARY 11

First visit by a Russian president to Saudi Arabia.

FEBRUARY 15

Summit meeting of African and French heads of state.

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