



Friends of the Earth

Middle East



How Past Trans-boundary Security Arrangements Can Change the Future of Peace Parks in the Tri-partite Region

Friends of the Earth Middle East (FoEME) is one of many local environmental organizations who have made it their mission to address environmental issues and accelerate sustainable economic development surrounding the Jordan River using a unique precedent; trans-boundary areas, or as they are more aptly coined 'peace parks'. Trans-boundary Peace Parks aspire to cultivate cooperation and peace between countries and to conserve ecosystems which do not recognize national borders. These areas will not only benefit from eco-tourism and economic development, but will also show the international community that peace in the Middle East is achievable, albeit one hectare at a time. Proposals have been/will be made to representatives of both the Jordanian and Israeli governments to consider turning the area near Naharayim / Gesher / Bakoorra (Jordan) into a peace park.

In order to gain a better understanding of the peace parks proposal, it is helpful to look to precedents on the Israel-Jordan border that have set the tone for joint-cooperation, economic development and environmental sustainability. The following illustrates a sample of regional agreements that vary in nature (industrial, environmental, educational, religious), but whose scope is universal; international collaboration with an environmentally-centered vision for the future. Interviews with Ministry of Foreign Affairs staff found that the Israeli government supports any and all civilian cooperative activities with Jordan. This is good news for FoEME, as well as for Israelis and Jordanians who have called upon their respective governments for some time to rehabilitate the Jordan River Valley.

This report's focus on the security arrangements-aspect is two-fold; security of the parks is vital for environmental and human life preservation. While some of these projects have existed for some time, others are in their final and beginning planning stages. It is beneficial to summarize all of these projects, as they approach security and security arrangements from different vantage points and are worth noting.

The Jordan River Industrial Gateway Project

The Jordan River Industrial Gateway Project (JRIGP) was conceived by the governments of Israel and Jordan as a joint industrial area where citizens could enter without customs or immigration procedures, a literal 'free-zone' for workers or tourists who wish to purchase goods in a duty-free zone. The Project site is located in the southern part of Jordan Valley North, approximately 8 km south of the Sheikh Hussein/Gesher area and is sponsored by FIBI Investment House LTD, with

**NGO in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations*

additional funding from the International Finance Corporation, the financial arm of the World Bank. The land use for the Project is projected at 65 hectares total; 15 hectares in Israel and 50 hectares (with expected expansion) in Jordan. While the Jordan Valley Authority (JVA) has ultimate control over the land area, groups such as the Israel/Jordan Border Committee hold meetings to address issues that confront stakeholders, decision-makers and local community members.

The Project is seen as advantageous by both governments as a means to sustained peace through joint economic development. It is expected that the Project will create over 16,000 jobs, as it is geographically-close to two of Jordan's largest cities, Amman and Irbid. The JRIGP benefits business operations as well, offering Qualifying Industrial Zone (or QIZ) status which allowing businesses to export goods to the U.S. market duty and quota-free. The Project hosts garment, telecommunication, electronic and computer industries and features local and international companies from the Americas and the Far East.

While the Jordanian side of the Project has been developed and significantly expanded, Israel has not yet begun industrial development on their side. The Israeli environmental community's concern with the location of the Project, and the subsequent damage it would cause to the Jordan River and surrounding areas resulted in the site's location change farther back from the river. Construction on the Israel side of the river is expected in the near future, as the complaint filed against the project was closed in January 2005.

According to the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), the Project is required to utilize the Jordanian workforce and train them, if necessary. If labor isn't available, only then can outside workers access the area. The construction company for the project is responsible for insurance, security, sustainable development and is obliged to comply with Jordanian environmental law. According to the MOU "the company and the existing projects on its zone, is obliged to undertake the full insurance on all its properties within and on the Private Free Zone against all dangers" as well as be responsible for smuggling, fraudulent activities and must provide all means and procedure of public safety, which could be construed as rather vague in nature and subject to conflict between the two states. Additionally, all companies in the Industrial Park must have proper registration and licensing and are prohibited from manufacturing certain substances, weapons and other harmful commodities.

Gili Dekel, the Project Manager for the JRIGP, spoke with FoEME earlier this month and explained that a security protocol is instrumental to a successful border operation between Israel and Jordan. Mr. Dekel noted that the security protocol should consist of the following factions: general security service, the Israel Defense Force Planning Division, the Ministry of Defense, Central Command, Central Brigade, the police (Explosives Protection Unit), Customs, the Counter Terrorism Unit (which would be the leading consultant) and the Ministry of Interior Affairs.

Mr. Dekel further noted that emphasizing the trans-boundary parks as a national, rather than local, project would raise awareness and by appointing a coordinator, preferably from the office of the Prime Minister, it will ensure that the project receives the attention it deserves.

Bakura Peace Island

Naharayim, or Bakura Peace Island is a unique example of an eco-tourism area (a free zone park) that came to be as the result of an exemption in the 1994 Israel/Jordan Peace Treaty. The Island was approved by the Hashemite Kingdom, without the approval of the Jordanian Parliament, which is under Palestinian-majority rule. Under the Treaty, Bakura/Naharayim received special status as a tax-free, immigration-free area that allows free entry onto the Island for Israeli land-owners, their invitees and workers, as well as tourists. The area is located south of the Kinneret, where the Yarmuk and Jordan Rivers meet and was originally used for a trans-boundary hydroelectric plant that supplied power to Jordan and Israel through three dams. The Island now contains a peace garden, the remains of the hydroelectric plant and their dams and an observation area. While the area is mutually run by a kibbutz (Ashdot Yaakov Ichud-one of the oldest kibbutzim, dating back to 1924) and the two countries respective police forces, the area is under Jordanian sovereignty. It is important to note that Jordanians are allowed by law into the Peace Island per legislation, but are forbidden by their own government at the current time due to security. It is also important to note that while Jordanian law applies to the area, Israeli nationals are exempt from Jordanian criminal laws. This arrangement could have serious implications, peace-wise, should an incident occur by an Israeli national in the Park.

The Island is guarded on the Israeli side by Israeli military that coordinate openings of the fences with Jordanian police for entrance into Jordan for the tens of thousands of visitors who come annually (there have been approximately 150,000 visitors since the park's inception). The Jordanian border is guarded by Jordanian (Bedouin) soldiers. It is not possible to sneak into the opposite country, as there are fences and elevated security outposts. While the border security may see each other daily from afar, they hold joint meetings periodically to discuss issues and promote cooperation. The park is open daily and guided tours are available only from approved guides, aka members of the Ashdot Yaakov Kibbutz. There is a small entrance fee for visitors. Visitors must also 'give the guide their names and vehicle information', as the tour is a driven, not walking tour, according to Naomi Shoshani, a guide at Bakura. Vehicles are not checked by security, nor are visitors required to go through a security checkpoint. Representatives from Bakura Island insist that no security breaches have occurred in years, as the majority of visitors are students, families and pensioners (Israeli's on travel). Bakura Island is open Sunday through Thursday 9am-4pm and Friday and holidays from 9am-2pm. The site is closed on Saturdays during the summer, except for groups larger than 35 people.

Old Gesher/Three Bridges Site

The Old Gesher/Three Bridges area, located just 3 km south of Peace Island in the Jordan River Valley, has an exceptional history to share with local and international visitors. Gesher is home to a kibbutz whose history dates back to 1920 and has been home to many battles that assisted in the independence of the State of Israel. The area also contains the remains of Roman, Ottoman and British bridges that stand side by side at what was once the major thoroughfare between the eastern

Levant cities and the Mediterranean. Additionally, the remains of an old Khan, or inn, are located at the site, giving visitors a glimpse of ancient history.

Today, the area is a major Israel tourist attraction and hosts thousands of visitors per month. Gesher is operated by the Gesher Kibbutz, in cooperation with the military. Reservations are normally made at least one day in advance, with prior approval from the military. According to Nirit Bagron, a tour guide at Gesher, Kibbutz guides obtain the number of guests, their names and time of arrival and submit them to the military for approval. A small fee is charged for entrance into the site and photos are permitted. Military presence may be required during times of duress; however, tours are normally given solely by the Kibbutz. A boardwalk exists for easy viewing of the three bridges; fence for access to the bridges. The fence is approximately 8 feet high and surrounds the 3 bridges site; it is not possible to cross over into the other country's territory. There is no official security checkpoint, nor are there security guards on site, they are located at security outposts, like Bakura Island. This site was recently renovated and has been enjoying immense success, with 40,000 visitors in 2005 alone. It is important to note that relations with the Jordanians at this site have been strained since renovation of the boardwalk was initiated and completed without the approval of the Israel/Jordan Border Committee, despite the fact that the boardwalk is solely on Israeli territory. The site is open Saturday through Thursday, 10am-4pm and Friday and holiday evenings from 9am-1pm.

Baptism Site-Kaser El Yehud

Kaser El Yehud is located (just) outside Jericho, a Palestinian city whose tourism, and sadly Kaser El Yehud's, has suffered tremendously since the Intifada. Traditionally, Christian pilgrims stopped along the ancient route between Jerusalem and the Jordan River at the many religious sites and monasteries, including the Mount of Temptation, where Jesus fasted for 40 days and was allegedly tempted by the devil. Christians still come, in smaller numbers 9 km south of Jericho, to Kaser El Yehud, the Western river site that is associated with the baptism of Jesus Christ. The area around Kaser El Yehud contains four churches of different denominations (Greek Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, Armenian and Ethiopian churches) that are situated just outside the military road which leads to the Baptism Site.

Old Gesher is an example of a precedent that exists where the military provides controlled access to the Jordan River via the Gesher Kibbutz. Increased tourism to Jericho and the surrounding Kaser El Yahud area would not only benefit the economy's tourism-related workforce, but also would help to justify the rehabilitation of the Jordan River.

Baptism Site-Al Maghtas

Al-Maghtas is the Eastern river Jordanian site that is associated with the baptism of Jesus Christ. Interestingly, this side of the river is well-developed and contains trails that lead to the baptism site, called "Bethany Beyond the Jordan". According to the Jordanian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, this area attracted

over 61,000 tourists in 2004 who not only came to see the Baptism Site, but other areas of the riverbank as well; including John the Baptist Church and spring, cave cells, the saint Mary of Egypt site, remains of a monastery and churches and Elijah's Hill.

Bethany also includes pedestrian paths, a heliport, baptism pools and a visitor's center that contains a five-star restaurant, gift shop, and presentation room. Israel's cooperative relationship with Jordan may assist in facilitating stronger economic development ties in terms of tourism. Israel can learn a lot from Jordan's successful Bethany tourist attraction.

Dead Sea Area

The 'Bridging the Rift' or BTR Center is the product of Steven Tanksley, a Cornell University professor who had a vision of creating the world's largest databank of living things. The result of this dream is the Library of Life, the focal point of the BTR Center, an educational institution accredited by both Cornell University and Stamford Universities and located on 150 acres of land on the Israel/Jordan border. The bioresearch center will be privately funded by the BTR Foundation and is heralded as (one of?) the first free-education zones in the world, allowing students and researchers to enter the campus with magnetic cards and without passports or customs procedures.

Security measures for the BTR Center are of utmost concern and consultations have been done with senior Israeli and Jordanian military officials. The Center is slated to open in the next 3 years, with a ground-breaking ceremony already having occurred in 2004.

Gulf of Aqaba

The Gulf of Aqaba's security arrangements are worth noting because they utilize local employment and have fostered long-term sustainable relationships between the parties. A simple verbal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was created by the parties which allows them to not only share infrastructure, but also allows 300 Jordanian workers to work in Eilat and live in Jordan. All workers receive security clearances and use magnetic identification cards to enter the border. Aqaba's success was noted by Shimon Peres, who is in the process of rallying both governments to create a trans-border airport facility in the Eilat region.

Emek Hefer/Tulkarem: Alexander River Project

Emek Hefer is a rural community in Palestine located on the banks of the Alexander River, one of the most beautiful rivers in Israel. Tul Karem, the Israeli community on the other side of the river, has, along with Emek Hefer, created a precedent for communities who share similar environmental issues and confront them together. The communities both suffer from pollution incurred upstream that can be so bad during the olive picking season that the river turns black. The two communities have been working together continuously since 1994 on improving the

status of the river and have, and a result, created two cooperative agreements, a joint plan of action, 7 parks and several community youth programs. The impressive progress made in the communities was noticed by the international environmental community, winning the International Riverprize. The projects in the communities are jointly sponsored by Israel's Ministry of the Environment, the Emek Hefer Regional Council, the Jewish National Fund, the Alexander River Restoration Project and the Government of Germany. There are plans to make a peace park within the Emek Hefer/Tul Karem communities; however, the plans are currently on hold due to the political climate in the region.

Peace Parks: Cautionary Measures:

While no government would deny that peace or trans-boundary parks are worthwhile ventures, there are issues that can arise between even the most amicable of parties. This list includes, but is not limited to: conflicting laws (environmental, labor, etc.), differences in commitment and/or resources (economic standing) could cause a difference in professional standards resulting in a dominant/weak relationship, a difference in resource protection, or an inequality in security in terms of communication devices, emergency equipment.

Precedents: Peace Parks Best Practices

There have been many types of peace parks that have been tried and tested throughout history, with various levels of success. While Israel's geographical, religious and cultural makeup is certainly unique to other countries in the world, the country can still benefit from the so-called lessons-learned from other, similar peace parks around the world. The following list of best practices is noteworthy and creates an applicable outline for the proposed peace parks in Israel.

Precedents: Peace Parks Best Practices:

1. Identifying and promoting common values (for example, develop a joint vision statement, create a symbol (logo), and advertise joint tourism in the area)
2. Involving and benefiting local people (for example, (Earth Day) festivals that bring the communities together, economic incentives (i.e. jobs for transport companies, historians, artisans, food vendors, nature guides, private industry), including local history (i.e. 'family trees of local families that date back to Jesus' baptism), tax incentives for companies, schools who help clear the land for paths.
3. Obtaining and maintaining support of decision-makers (consult with security authorities-maintain positive relations, obtain high-profile support/patrons by asking nationally-known community leaders, celebrities, artists, sports figures who grew up near the area?)
4. Promoting coordinated and cooperative activities (joint website and research opportunities, common code of conduct for the park, staff retreats and speakers, joint emergency plans, cultural awareness training, informational chain of command, joint activities regarding pest elimination)

5. Achieving coordinated planning and protecting area development (create a joint task force of community leaders, NGO's, national and regional government representatives and protection area managers; develop compatible zoning, EIA and development plans)

6. Developing cooperative agreements (hold meetings in a neutral territory; clearly define roles and responsibilities of each party; create a MOU; develop a policy advisory committee for stakeholders and local community members; lobby for park to have special trans-boundary (or other) designation that could be beneficial to both parties.

7. Working toward funding sustainability (celebrity sponsors; identify costs for each party and potential sources (MNC's, philanthropists, religious organizations); joint fundraising campaigns; identify 'charismatic' flagship species unique to the area that could be used as a symbol, to attract different organizations; identify alternative means to obtain funds such as debt-for-nature swaps, creating a trust fund or foundation, carbon-sequestrian credits.

8. Monitoring and assessing progress (implement and create joint management plan; assess whether local communities have benefited from progress (economically, socially, educationally, religiously); assess public profile (effective media exposure?), government relations (decision-makers are aware of park status and are relaying info to constituents, etc.), evaluate the effectiveness of best practices in an annual report available for public comment).

9. Dealing with tension and armed conflict (supply the Draft Code (within trans-boundary document) to each party, military, police and post in prominent areas of the park, should tension break out; provide timely and accurate information to relevant authorities; maintain updated contact information on security forces; in times of peace, develop mechanisms that can provide for strictly neutral liason in times of conflict and use a neutral 3rd party, such as the ICRC (Red Cross)/IUCN (World Conservation Union) to facilitate, train; train employees in self defense; have an evacuation plan and location and keep location appropriately supplied (water, communication, etc.); if tensions arise, do not contact UN, embassies in order to give strategic advantage to either party, as it will decrease legitimacy of park.

Conclusion

Peace parks are not a new phenomenon; from the first in 1932, Waterton-Lakes International Peace Park in Canada, to the numerous parks currently in planning worldwide, nations are learning that these arrangements benefit both parties and can be both environmentally-sustainable and safe for visitors. The creation of peace parks between Israel and Jordan will further actualize the commitments made in the 1994 Peace Agreement to advance cooperation in the conservation of nature and prevention of pollution. By creating peace parks that not only benefit nature and the Jordan River Valley, but also provide a secure location for Israelis and Jordanians to interact, peaceful co-existence will be a tangible reality.

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