

Nov 04, 2016 by *Gordon Robison*

A Missed Opportunity ^[1]

Dead Sea, Jordan - 23 May 2005

When I was younger I occasionally tagged along with my father at conferences in Europe where East-West security issues were discussed. Dad taught me two especially important lessons during this time: 1) find a seat on an aisle near the back, that way you can slip out quietly if things get really boring; and 2) all the really interesting stuff happens during the coffee breaks, at meal times and (especially) in the bar.

All this comes back to me as I contemplate this weekend's meeting here of the World Economic Forum, the Geneva-based organization that runs the annual Davos conference. The regional meetings are less well known than the January bash in Switzerland, but they are important. This weekend's conference brought together about 1,000 business, media and political leaders from around the region and the wider world for three days of formal and, more importantly, informal talks.

During a town hall session the occupants of each table were asked to discuss a particular issue, in our case educational reform, and then share thoughts with the rest of the delegates. My companions for this exercise included Radhida Dergham, the chief diplomatic correspondent for Al-Hayat (probably the region's top newspaper); Lakhdar Brahimi, the former Algerian foreign minister and UN Special Envoy; and a Dubai-based regional manager for Microsoft.

At other points during the weekend I had coffee with the Afghan foreign minister, a long chat with a Palestinian deputy prime minister, lunch with the head of the Middle East's largest cellphone operator, and a 15-minute discussion on Egyptian reform with the editor-in-chief of the Arab world's top business newspaper (who is, incidentally, one of the few women in the region to hold so senior a media job).

What an opportunity to show a human face, make contact with opinion leaders and, generally, soften the American image where it most needs softening. For the official American delegation it was a public diplomacy opportunity of the first order. But sadly it's one they fumbled badly.

The official American delegation was huge: four senators (Gordon Smith of Oregon, John Sununu of New Hampshire, Norm Coleman of Minnesota and Orrin Hatch of Utah), two members of the House (Christopher Shays of Connecticut and Jane Harman of California), Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Elizabeth Cheney, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Scott Carpenter and, of course, first lady Laura Bush.

Throughout the weekend they were everywhere and nowhere. They sat on many panels, but

invariably arrived at the last minute (if not later) and left the instant things were over.

Thirty-minute coffee-break-cum-networking sessions separated each round of panels. At these times the conference center's two lobbies were packed with the region's most senior politicians and businesspeople, all milling around, chatting and getting to know each other shorn of the aides, secretaries and other hangers-on who usually accompany them (I have returned from the weekend with a two-inch high stack of other people's business cards).

In three days of talks I only saw one of the above-mentioned grandees bothering to mix with the rest of the attendees. That was Sen. Coleman, who also spent an hour working the bar at one of the conference hotels on Friday night. The rest of the delegation members spent every networking session closeted in private meetings with other big-wigs.

I'm not saying the meetings among the high officials are not important, even necessary, but a bit of balance might have brought America's distinguished representatives into contact with a lot of other interesting people: People who can sway public opinion out here; People who just might have valued a three-minute chat with a key senator or State Department official.

And maybe that human connection would soften some of the delegates' images of the American behemoth.

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