

CONFLICT RESOLUTION THROUGH BUSINESS COOPERATION

Bringing about peaceful co-existence is the core aspiration of any responsible government. But what role can business play in helping to resolve war and violence? We talk to Mohammad Al Duaij, CEO of Alea Global Group – winner of Business Worldwide Magazine’s Man of the Year Award 2017 – about the role of business in conflict mediation.

Conflict seems an inevitable part of how the world functions. We never cease to see new reports of wars, civil disputes and violence. But what causes this conflict, and how can some of the major stakeholders in our society, from governments to independent agencies, to business, play a role in easing tensions?

In normal circumstances, institutions such as the UN or leading Western governments play a central part in resolving (or in some cases increasing) conflict. Yet there is an increasing recognition that business is intrinsically bound up with the nature of conflict. More importantly, questions are being asked about how business itself can step outside of the role of neutrality to use its extensive networks and expertise to help lower the temperature.

A report by the Corporate Engagement Project, published in 2003, recognised the increasingly important role of business

in conflict mediation and resolution but said that companies are not above the environments in which they operate. Sometimes they act with one side against another, and that can harm the decisive role they could play. But working as mediators not only is an intrinsic part of the corporate responsibility agenda, it also benefits business, because:

“The majority of large multinational companies that work in conflict zones prefer their working environment to be stable and peaceful. The reputational risks, legal risks and opportunity costs for operating amidst conflict are considerably higher than for operating in stable environments. This is particularly true for companies that make long-term investments in a country.”

Alea Global Group is an investment company formed by the prestigious Kuwaiti Al Duaij family in 1998. It has a wide portfolio, including direct national

and international real estate and private equity investment, an advisory investment service, physical commodities trading and business development.

It’s location, influence and interests make Alea an intriguing candidate to take on the role of conflict mediator. But its CEO - Mohammad Al Duaij – has stepped up to the task, increasingly being asked to step into the role of mediator between governments to facilitate trading relationships.

We talked to Mr Al Duaij about the remarkable role he plays in major peace processes and why business has a stake in conflict resolution.

Welcome to Business Worldwide, Mr Al Duaij. Could I start by asking you to summarise why you think business is so important to conflict resolution?

Put simply - and I’ll talk about this later – people need an economy to live well.

Conflict and violence are in very few people’s interest. Business also needs peace to thrive. We all do better if we can make deals which help the trade in goods and increase employment and wealth.

In Western countries, this principle is intrinsic to the function of cross-continent bodies like the European Community (now the EU), where open trade has largely ensured peace within its borders for over sixty years.

Much of your work is in the Middle-East (or West Asia, which is the correct term according to some). What would you say was the main sources of conflict there?

There are several factors at play:

- The importance of geographical location.
- Israel and the middle east peace process.
- The possibility of the spread of

weapons of mass destruction.

- Terrorism.
- Resources - including oil - with the low population density, which made the inhabitants, especially in the Gulf region, extremely rich.
- The religious differences between Shia and Sunni Muslims.

Also significant are changes in the governance structure of the region because of globalisation, and the integration of economics, communications and cultures across national boundaries.

Lastly, there is the impact upon the social fabric of social, economic and political underdevelopment, which was inherited by the region after independence from its colonial masters.

So how can business help?

Money is the medium of exchange, and doing business brings people to the table to negotiate and close deals.

Between the parties in conflict, if we

start speaking about the benefits of making money and satisfy each party’s needs, that will smooth and relax the relationship and allow people to talk.

Talking, in itself, brings people together and overcomes boundaries. And this process reflects how people do business. Most of the time, when you start doing business, you build a relationship - you send seasonal greetings, you have meals and coffee together – all of which relaxes the stressful business environment. It becomes a social relationship more than a business relationship.

However, you also need to be aware that money can split people apart if there is a disagreement and widen the gap between the conflicted parties.

What role do you play as the mediator?

I bring people together to clear the air between them. Talking to each other





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with no obstacles or hidden agendas is the only way to remove conflicts. Stating what you need, your requirements, and the reason for the conflict is the starting point for solving the problem.

The belief system I use in my work is as follows.

People who are interested in doing business and making money will compromise to make things workable.

I believe it is our right to go anywhere in this world and make what we want to make with no restriction. We born free, and we will die free. For that reason, I will continue doing what I am doing now, which is to work to make the world one world with one community.

My business role and my life experience have enabled me to succeed in this role.

I have a large global network and a talent for business and opening doors. People really enjoy working with me.

I have travelled widely since I was a child, so I've met many people from different cultures and backgrounds, which has enabled me to understand how to manage local mores and attitudes.

I see myself as a bit of a risk taker. I do extreme sports, from mountain climbing,

surfing and skydiving, which has shaped my capacity to take risks and enjoy the ride, or in our case the business strategy - with all its inherent obstacles.

One thing I've learnt from life is that everything has a solution and that I have to simplify things rather than complicate them.

Where do requests for mediation come from, and how do you start the process?

I get enquiries from private or government bodies to start a dialogue with a group or organisation in dispute (or banned) in another country.

I start studying the situation and see what the other party needs.

I then present to them the solution and look for a neutral place to bring the two bodies together. My role then is to facilitate conversation - to bring them together and smooth and relax the relationship between them and then close the deal.

Without them noticing, at the end they are sitting together, talking and shaking hands. That obviously sounds simple, and it's not - it does consume a lot of time - but it's worth it in the end.

What would you like to see happen with current global conflicts, and what will your company do to help change our futures?

I think the majority of people want to live in peace and see their kids grow in a healthy environment. They really do not care about who ruling them as long as they have good life.

What we are doing besides helping people with, for example, charity is that we try to satisfy their current needs, such as creating job opportunities, education and helping them have a better life.

We believe giving money is just a temporary solution, but planning the future is what is needed and moreover its permanent.

We will continue trying to open a dialogue between governments or between parties in the private sector.

We think our contribution in the area of conflict mediation will continue to be significant, and we hope our vision will also be carried forward by others. The world should have no borders, only horizons. We do not believe in boundaries, and we want to bring people together. We can change the world.