



# Linux in Government: Jordan - A Surprise in the Middle East

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Created 2005-08-01 01:00

A report from last week's open-source software seminar in Amman.

I stood on a street in Jerash and suddenly realized that no one ever told me what to expect. I had seen ruins before, and I had viewed photos (see Figure 1) of this Roman city. Still, I cannot think of anything that could have prepared me for the experience. Jerash isn't some pile of rocks left over after people pillaged it as a quarry, as are most remnants of the Roman era. As I looked in all directions, I saw the equivalent of a major city too large to cover by foot and ready for habitation.



Figure 1. One Small Street in Jerash

When Ed White of DevIS contacted me in April to speak at last week's OSS event, I wondered if he was joking. With all the trouble in the Middle East I could not imagine why anyone would want to go there. As Richard Stallman wrote, "In late February, when I mentioned to people in Europe that I was soon going to Syria, they were worried for me". Obviously, Richard had little if any trouble in Syria. But was that a fluke?

I could have buckled under and declined, as many invitees from the US did. Instead, in spite of the propaganda on the US street, I chose to step off the plane in Amman. As with my visit to Jerash, I cannot think of anything that could have prepared me for the experience.

## Beyond Open Source

With one exception, you probably can jot down a few thoughts about Linux and free software, and you'll know what we discussed. The sponsor, INT@J [1], devoted this seminar to applying OSS to government,

business, finance and academia. So, the presenters spoke about real-life scenarios and projects throughout the region. As one might imagine, sincere interest in and many deployments of Linux exist.



Figure 2. One of the panel discussions; note the decor.

Although the presenters abstained from Microsoft bashing, we all were aware of the Redmond company's large footprint in the region. Someone said that Microsoft has 29 offices in the Middle East. I visited one of its Gold Partner's offices and saw about 40 busy developers working on a variety of projects for the government.

The gentleman showing me around the Gold Partner's office introduced me to one of the project managers and mentioned that I was speaking at the open-source software event. Immediately, the chap stood up and began to tell me what was wrong with Linux. When I asked him if he'd ever used it, he said he had not. Ever the diplomat, I stopped the conversation there and told him how pleased I was to meet him.

I also spoke to a number of businessmen from the region attending the seminar who are ready to start doing business now. People eat lunch later in the day in Jordan and use the noon hour for what they call a coffee break. Coffee breaks and lunches provide ample time to speak about business. I entered several conversations about real business issues, and many people followed up with me by e-mail before I returned home. I have never seen this happen before at one of these seminars, not to this extent.

## What About Jordan?

Throw your preconceived notions out the window. I used to say the friendliest people in the world live in Texas. Jordanians, both Hashemites and Palestinians, convey more friendliness than Texans, along with a gentle and loving nature. Their warmth isn't a facade either. Also, I saw no evidence of a repressive religious regime. Christians represent as much as 20% percent of the population in Jordan. But how would one know when Jordanians themselves pay no attention to such things?

Jordanian people have an attitude of acceptance towards everyone. I asked about and saw no evidence of anyone attempting to convert people, and I saw no discrimination because of religion. One of the people I met works in a high position in the government, and she is Christian. It's simply not an issue as far as I could tell.

Jordanians also have a high level of education. Two of the people with whom I spent time attended college in Texas. Most of the participants I met at the conference either attended universities in the US or Britain. That may account for the population's fluency in English. Street signs demonstrate the bilingual nature of Jordan, English and Arabic.

I could say more about how Jordan and its people impressed me, but this isn't a travel column, so we'll move along with our discussion of ITC.

## What About the Region?

IBM and Oracle, as well as European and local firms appear to have the enterprise Linux business tied up in the Middle East. Syria leads the region in government-sponsored projects, and it's believed that the majority of Linux and free software developers live in Syria. One of the seminar participants suggested that Syria became extremely active with open-source software because of the US-imposed economic sanctions initiated in 2004 and extended this year.

The founder of Arab Eyes [2], Mohammed Sameer, (see Figure 3) spoke twice at the conference. His participation has made Egypt one of the leading Linux communities. Sameer spoke on both days and participated in the panel discussions. On the second day, he addressed the issue of localization of Linux and open-source software.



Figure 3. Mohammed Sameer

Sameer made perhaps the most humorous and controversial comment of the conference when he said, "Here I am speaking English and discussing Arabization of Linux at a English-speaking conference in an Arab country. But of course, we are a small community, and we need all the help we can get, but then we're all Arabs and we don't get along, so this may take longer anyway." That comment began a 30-minute argument among many participants who either said Arabs work together or they don't.

Aside from Egypt, Jordan and Syria, Linux is popular in Dubai, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Kuwait, Iraq, Yemen, Palestine, Morocco and Israel.

## Creating Their Own ICT Industries

One of the main topics in regions such as the Middle East deals with using Linux to establish economic independence and to increase the gross domestic product (GDP). I focused on this topic during the conference in my keynote and my discussion of global adoption. The regional director of IBM also brought focus to this macro-economic issue in his discussions. Yet none of the presentations either day brought up the topic of purchasing power parity.

Simply put, when one adjusts prices for the GDP of an importing country, software costs more than one might think. On a slide from a conference in Syria, Philipp Schmidt demonstrated the cost of Microsoft Windows XP plus Office, using purchasing price parity. He showed three prices, including:

- Street price (US) \$560 US
- Street price (South Africa) \$952 US
- Real price (South Africa) \$7,514 US, taking into account national GDP

Note: Windows plus Office XP equivalent US\$ cost calculation =  $\$560 * (\text{US GDP per capita} / \text{Country GDP per capita})$ . Source: Rishab Aiyer Ghosh, *First Monday*.

In his [article](#) [3], Ghosh states:

ICTs are supposed to be an 'enabler' for growth in developing countries. Such growth cannot spread much beyond a very small elite if the basic enabling software infrastructure requires the investment of several months' worth of GDP on software license fees, repeatedly, every few years in an upgrade cycle beyond the control of users.

Although many countries outside the US have embraced Linux and open-source software, I wonder how many consider the real costs in terms of the number of days a person has to work to purchase Microsoft products. Jordan has enormous potential, but I don't believe its government actually understands what it costs the citizens in terms of their own production.

Jordanians on average earn \$1,700 annually. Using averages doesn't really represent the economic picture, however. In actuality, 10% of the population has wealth, and 20% work at white-collar jobs and have good lives. The remaining 70% simply get by.

Of the 70% of Jordanians that fall into the "getting by" category, 80% have jobs and 20% live off the social security system. And Jordan happens to be one of the most prosperous countries in the region. As long as the country imports software, it misses out on the opportunity to help itself. It misses the opportunity to lead the region, to provide skilled workers for the region and to end the region's dependence on imported software.

## Final Thoughts

If you are familiar with British history, you probably know about the English East India Company. Americans usually have little context for the significance of this once monopolistic trading body that became involved in politics and acted as an agent of British imperialism. In fact, the Boston Tea Party was an insurgency against the company. The old quote that says the "sun never sets on the English empire" really should say that the sun never sets on the holdings of the East India Company.

Why bring up a reference here to the English East India Company? Possibly because of the parallel to a remarkably politically involved company in the United States that seems content to use federal law enforcement agencies and foreign governments to enforce that company's policies. In fact, that company seems content to take from regions outside the US instead of helping them become more able.

Considering the amount of free software growing in the wild, I hope that countries such as Jordan will come to see for themselves that it makes no sense to import software. Although such a realization may be difficult to grasp, perhaps a walk through the markets in Jerash might provide an example of the difference between a Microsoft concept and the reality of becoming a self-reliant producer of ICT products. Because, until a country embraces free software and commits to becoming its own producer, it will continue in the cycle that creates two worlds--an industrial one and an impoverished one. In the 21st century, perhaps it's time for that cycle to come to an end.

Tom Adelstein is a Principal of Hiser + Adelstein, a consulting and operating company specializing in free and open-source software solutions and support. Tom is the co-author of the book *Exploring the JDS Linux Desktop*, author of an upcoming book on Linux system administration and has written prolifically since 1985. Tom's business career began in public accounting where he first learned to program and develop software and later progressed to Wall Street, where he became the designated principal of a NYSE firm. He later returned to technology and has consulted and worked with start-ups as well leaders of the Fortune 500.

## Links

[1] <http://www.intaj.net/>

[2] <http://www.arabeyes.org/about.php>

[3] [http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue8\\_12/ghosh/](http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue8_12/ghosh/)

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