

The future of golf in the Arab world

Despite political upheaval and a slow economy, industry leaders still see a bright future for golf development in the Middle East and North Africa. **BY TREVOR LEDGER**

With all of the political upheaval in the Arab world, especially in Egypt and Libya, it might seem an odd time to host a golf conference in that region.

Nevertheless, KPMG's annual Golf Business Forum at the Dubai Creek Golf and Yacht Club brought together more than 300 delegates from 45 countries to discuss the future for golf in a troubled zone. Somewhat surprisingly, the mood

can proceed."

Slessor is worth listening to about this region, with the host club of KPMG — Dubai Creek Golf and Yacht Club — being one of his firm's creations.

To say that nothing has changed would, however, be a long way from the truth. The trouble in Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, Libya and elsewhere comes hot on the heels of a global recession that has devastated golf developments across the board.

"Before the crash we had 47 projects on our books across the world," said Peter Harradine, who has an office in Dubai. "In two months we lost 20 of them, and for two years we received no further inquiries. But, as a positive sign, in the last 12 months we have had 20 new inquiries for golf facilities, seven of which have led to new jobs."

Statistics such as these are encouraging, and it would seem that, for Harradine at least, there is light at the end of the recession tunnel.

When it comes to the Arab world specifically though, Harradine has had a couple of casualties in the shape of Tunisian and Libyan projects being on hold due to the political situation in the respective countries.

However, Morocco and Egypt still have ongoing Harradine designs under construction, showing a remarkable resilience under the circumstances.

"Golf Club Al Marassi and Uptown Cairo are still going ahead... maybe politics has slowed them down a bit, but they have not been halted," he said. "Also

in Khartoum [Sudan], the golf course is finished and it's doing great."

Slessor said some of EGD's projects have been impacted by the political unrest.

"We've got projects in Morocco, Egypt, Saudi and Bahrain that have been, to one degree or other, impacted by the current financial and political unrest in the Middle East and North Africa," he said.

The Egyptian project is on hold until the political situation has eased. Interestingly, the financial crisis had no obvious impact on them and, until February, seemed to be progressing quite smoothly. The Saudi project is on hold due to the financial crisis. Morocco has been largely unaffected. There have apparently been demonstrations against the government, but none specifically against the King, who is seen by most people to be a 'good thing.' And a scheduled May ceremony in Marrakech to launch a new project was postponed due to a bomb threat.

In terms of day-to-day management of golf facilities, Architect Robin Hiseman said The Royal Golf Club in Bahrain, which opened in 2009 and hosted the Volvo Golf Champions on the European Tour in January this year, has been open.

"Apart from a few days at the height of the civil unrest, when the course was closed because staff couldn't get through the road blocks, the operation of the club has continued as normal," he said. "Some corporate events have been postponed or cancelled, but the course is open and fully serviced."

When it comes to potential new

was upbeat and signs of a modest market recovery were reported more or less across the board.

"I think the future is bright," said Jeremy Slessor, managing director of European Golf Design. "There's no doubt that there will continue to be demand, but the short term is going to continue to be turbulent. I think the main issue is to be sympathetic and patient. Developers need time for the market conditions to stabilize before they





The Arab world has been in turmoil, but experts still predict a bright future for courses like The Royal Golf Club in Bahrain and the Doah Golf Club in Qatar (opposite page).

developments, Hiseman sees recession, and not revolution, as the major stumbling block.

"I think the prevailing economic situation will continue to be the dominant determining factor for new Middle East developments," he said. "These schemes pretty much all ground to a halt during the downturn, and we're not seeing much of a resurgence yet. The tensions in the region won't help, but the trade is just going to have to sit tight whilst the bigger political picture plays out."

Harradine said that despite economic and political conditions that are unprecedented in the region, there is a desire and a means for golf projects to continue and come to fruition.

This determination has led to global exposure in the professional game.

"The region has been, and will continue to be, a stronghold for The European Tour," said George O'Grady, chief executive of

The European Tour. "The early season 'desert swing' has become the focus of the golfing world."

Despite this exposure to foreign golfers, the emphasis on golf in the region has been largely focused on domestic uptake of the game, and Harradine believes that this is a mistake, particularly in Dubai.

"Golf is not really being pushed as a tourist draw at the moment," he said. "Hotels, airlines and courses need to work together to promote the UAE as a golfing destination. Because of this I think that only two or three more courses will be built here over the next 10 years, if that. There are already a lot of golf courses here, and they are relying on local golfers."

The angle that developers take when planning a golf development might need to incorporate a more international clientele, a keystone of the Dubai business model to date. So far though, the golfing model in the region has been real estate driven.

And so the life of the golf course developer and architect has been expanded by the situation in the Middle East. Bombs and revolutions are considerations that were, until recently, very low on the Health and Safety Risk Assessment. Add to this the discovery and subsequent elimination of Osama Bin Laden, along with the recent Palestinian agreement between Hamas and Fatah, and the potential for further disruption to normal life in the Middle East seems heightened.

Despite all this though, the future looks, if not bright, then certainly less dark. There is an air of World War II stoicism about an attitude of "Keep calm and carry on." When speaking to Golf Inc., Harradine emphasised where his attentions lay and what his current attitude is, putting it succinctly: "The conference in Dubai was the best one I have been to."

A case of 'never mind the problems, look at the potential...'