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# Water Conflicts in the Middle East

Despite its notable lack of resources, water has rarely formed the basis for conflict throughout the Middle East, or so argues Hannu Juusola. However, climate change and extreme weather conditions point to a future in which water disputes may trigger conflict, most notably between Israel and its immediate neighbors.

By Hannu Juusola for ISN

The Middle East is one of the most water insecure regions in the world. This already scarce natural resource has the potential to spark local and inter-state conflict throughout this troubled region. Indeed, the importance of the latter is reinforced by the fact that many of the region's central waterways are shared by several riparian states. In this respect, the most likely sources of inter-state water conflict are the Nile drainage basin, the Tigris-Euphrates River and the Jordan River. All of these potential sites of conflict involve several countries.

Yet, despite the scarcity of water throughout the Middle East, there have been surprisingly few military conflicts between disputing parties. The most likely reason for the absence of "water wars" is that in each potential case, there has always been one party that is clearly the most powerful military and economic power. In the case of Nile basin, for example, the hegemonic power has traditionally been Egypt, whereas Turkey and Israel are influential in disputes related to the Tigris-Euphrates and Jordan River.

Another contributing factor has been the relative insignificance of water as a strategic asset. Even though the region has always been 'water scarce', it is only in recent years that the strategic importance of water has grown significantly, often as a consequence of population growth and the mismanagement of existing resources. However, the Arab-Israeli conflict provides the most notable exception to the principle that water resources are not a major source of conflict throughout the Middle East.

## One of Many Causes of Conflict

From the very outset, disputes related to water resources have formed part of the Arab-Israeli conflict, most notably between Israel and Syria. In 1949, for example, peace negotiations after the first Palestinian war broke down in response to Israel's demands to keep tight control over the economically important Lake Tiberias and Jordan River. The water issue resurfaced again in the early 1960s after Israel announced plans to divert water from Lake Tiberias to the Negev. The Arab states strongly denounced the plans, which would have increased Israel's industrial and agricultural capacities and, consequently, encouraged further Jewish immigration to the country. Their response

was a counter-plan that aimed to considerably reduce the amount of water reaching Israel from the tributaries of the Jordan River. However, repeated Israeli military strikes in 1965–1966 prevented Syria from implementing the plan.

The conflicting water-diversion projects by Israel and Syria were a significant contributor to the 1967 Six Day War. However, strategic water resources were by no means the only source of tension between Damascus and Tel Aviv. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that the dispute between the two countries could have been solved if water rights were the sole reason for conflict. For instance, Israel and Jordan settled their water disputes in the 1994 peace agreement. This led to Israel agreeing to transfer additional water supplies to Jordan. By sharp contrast, water remains an important source of tension between Israel and Syria and, by default, between Israel and Lebanon. Here the problem is not only the strategic importance of water but also the fact that this resource forms part of a more extensive range of problems.

Water disputes also contributed to the failure of peace talks between Israel and Syria in the 1990s, as well as those between Tel Aviv and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). In 2002, there was also a short period of political tension related to water resources between Israel and Lebanon. This was caused by Beirut's attempts to construct a pipe on the Wazzani River, a tributary of the Jordan River, in order to connect a number of communities to running water in the under-developed south of the country. The proposal reflects the fact that southern Lebanon's water resources were under Israeli control from the 1982 war between the two countries until Israel's withdrawal in 2000. The Lebanese construction works were the first significant attempt to challenge the status quo that had prevailed over the Israel-Arab water disputes since the 1960s. Despite several threats, Israel did not use military means to thwart the Lebanese project, a fact that might be explained by international condemnation led by the United States.

### **Maintaining the Status Quo**

In general, Israel's neighbors have accepted Tel Aviv's *de facto* control of the water resources of the Jordan River basin. Two key factors help to explain the status quo. First - and perhaps most importantly - Israel has been the dominant military power throughout the Arab-Israeli conflict. Indeed, Israel's military might strengthened after the signing of 1979 peace treaty with Egypt as well as continuous American political and military support. Consequently, Syria has been too weak to seriously challenge Israel over the issue of strategic water resources. The same can also be said of the PLO and other organizations that lack the political and material resources to effectively counter Israel.

Another important reason for preserving the status quo is that the disputed water resources have so far not been of prime importance to the strategic calculation of the Arab states. Syria, for example, is by no means dependent upon the disputed waters it shares with Israel. The country also has access to 16 main rivers or tributaries in Syria, including the Euphrates (the largest water source in Syria) and the Tigris, which it shares with Turkey and Iraq. Accordingly, Syria's dispute with Israel over water supplies is just one - and not necessarily the most important - water conflict that Damascus has to negotiate. It was no coincidence, for example, that during the peace negotiations with Israel in the 1990s, Syria's Foreign Minister pointed out that the water dispute could be solved if the United States and Israel helped the country to resolve its water disputes with Turkey.

### **Future Tense?**

Even though the parties to the Arab-Israeli conflict have been able to effectively manage their water disputes since the 1960s, there are no guarantees that this will always be the case. Climate change in the region is likely to increase the frequency of extreme weather conditions throughout the Middle

East, potentially leading to decreased rainfall, droughts and water shortages. As a result, water scarcity across the region would further increase, with the consequences for water and food security likely to be dramatic. This, in turn, suggests that the role of water may increase as a source of tension between Israel and Syria and the Palestinians. Indeed, such a possibility is further underlined by the stall in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and the uncertain future facing Syria. The heightened regional instability may even put the Israeli-Jordanian consensus on water allocation under growing pressure.

It is, therefore, apparent that the existing and mostly unofficial agreements over water resources in this part of the Middle East will need to be renegotiated in the not-too-distant future. In addition to the impacts of climate change and water mismanagement, the changes in the regional balance of power due to the ongoing upheavals resulting from the “Arab Spring” further emphasize the need for changes. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that these agreements will be reached without the risk of military conflict. If so, then water disputes will once again be just one significant factor in a much larger whole, whereby this resource is linked to disputes over security, territory and economy.

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