

Water and the Syrian-Israeli Negotiations

As the inauguration of the peace talks between Israel and Syria approached, during the Sheppardstown round of talks, public and political interest turned to water as a key issue in the negotiations. Israel's and Syria's divergent attitudes to water should be viewed against a background populated not only by security issues, border alignments, and water as important factors in the negotiations, but also, apparently, by beliefs, emotions, and even phobias that have penetrated the issue over the decades.

The ease with which public opinion continues to be swayed on the subject results from diverse circumstances. These include the declining quality of Israel's water reserves (particularly during the past two years), the intensifying shortage of this basic natural resource even in years blessed with rainfall, the increasing the public awareness of the problems associated with Israel's inventory of water, and the anticipated difficulties surrounding water within the framework of the negotiations with the Palestinians.

The status of the water resources found in the North (i.e., the Golan Heights) has served as a supplementary pretext - and often reason - for confrontations, conflicts, and even military operations, waged at various intensities, between Israel and Syria starting in the 1950s until 1967. Prior to 1967, Israel, in effect, exploited the Jordan River and the Kinneret (the Sea of Galilee) for its own needs. The Golan Heights occupies an important portion of the territory comprising the Upper Jordan and the Kinneret basin. This basin is the major upland source - and, in effect, almost the only source - of Israel's water. It provides more than one-third of the daily renewable potable water flowing to Israeli households. In the Lower Jordan (lying between the south-central portion of the Kinneret and the Dead Sea), little water, and that of low quality

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(brackish water, sewage, and water flowing back after various agricultural uses) is available. The Lower Jordan's main inlet, the Yarmuk River, is exploited almost entirely by Jordan and Syria, but rather marginally (i.e., 25 million cubic meters annually) by Israel, in accordance with the peace agreement signed with Jordan.

Almost all the potential natural water reserves capable of being exploited by Israel are already supplying Israel's household needs. In practice, a regime of over-production, not limited to dry years, is endangering part of the existing resources. Under present circumstances, the gap between the available reserves and the growing needs, both in quality and in quantity, is expanding. Israel thus finds itself at the brink of making difficult decisions governing the future management and exploitation of this resource.

The importance of the Golan Heights basin was apparent to Israel's leadership as early as 1967. In June 1967, immediately after the conclusion of the war, the government of Israel declared that within the framework of a peace settlement with Syria, non-intervention in Israel's exploitation of these resources would be one of the conditions to be guaranteed.

Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that within the context of the negotiations between Israel and Syria, water - irrespective of its significance - is not being addressed independently. Nor, apparently, will it be the main issue on the agenda. The issue will be discussed by the same team of experts that headed the negotiations over water rights conducted with Jordan and the Palestinians.

In quantitative terms, the Golan Heights provides about a third of the water flowing from the Jordan and Kinneret basin, or about 300 MCM (million cubic meters) within a total of 900 MCM consumed annually. After taking evaporation into account, about 600 MCM (multi-annual average) is fully exploited. Within this amount, about 400 MCM (multi-annual average) is drawn from the Kinneret and pumped into the National Conduit. Another considerable amount of water comes from segments of the Golan's northern basin. The entire quantity (i.e., 600 MCM) is fully utilized by Israel (beyond the 40 MCM utilized by Golan Heights residents for their own needs). In the context of Israel's resources, this water is irreplaceable both in quantity and quality.

It is obvious that Syrian control over the Golan Heights could influence the possibilities for exploitation and the very amount of water flowing from this area into the Jordan and the Kinneret. Estimates regarding the maximum loss of water resulting from combined Syrian control of the Golan Heights and the maximal economic exploitation of these sources by Syrian consumers on the Heights and elsewhere, ranges from 160 to 170 MCM annually. However - and more significantly - the real threat to supply is pollution. Massive Syrian settlement and industrialization of the Golan Heights (estimates range in the area of half a million new residents) will surely endanger the entire basin, whether as a result of human, industrial, or agricultural activity.

Therefore, numerically as well as technically, a real threat is materializing to the 10%-15% of all of Israel's renewable potable water resources. Potentially, Syria could demand additional access to the Jordan's waters (based on Syria's status as a participant in the development of the water basin and the

River) and to the Kinneret. Its claim could rest on the basis of the contour of the border to be agreed upon, or on the basis of the conclusions reached in the talks conducted by the American envoy, Johnston, in the 1950s. (During these talks, 132 MCM were allotted to Syrian, an amount that included 90 MCM originating in the Yarmuk. Syria rejected these arrangements at the time).

The condition of sovereignty over the area will determine, to a great extent, the potential of any power to exploit and utilize the available water resources. Almost every border demarcation currently debated with Syria will significantly expand its ability to utilize these water resources, whether by pumping, storage, seizure and drilling. The debated area extends from the Baniyas, includes other sources found along the border, continues through the springs that intersect the cease-fire line, and ends at the streams flowing south of the Jordan Effluent into the Kinneret.

During the negotiations, it will be necessary to formulate agreements and understanding regarding exploitation of the sources and quantities of water as well as prevention of pollution. The environmental sensitivity of the Jordan and Kinneret, and Syrian intentions to densely settle the Golan Heights on the other, will raise the issue of water quality to a higher place on the agenda than it has ever been. Irrespective of the problems that may arise if the amount of the water currently flowing to the Kinneret is reduced, pollution could seriously deplete the quality of the lake's water and would increase its salinity. Nonetheless, it should be stressed that this scenario is not inevitable. We have no confirmed evidence regarding Syrian intentions and capacity to implement its precarious program. The issues of water exploitation, prevention of pollution, and damage to its sources have been treated in many parts of the world, and settled by negotiation concluding in detailed agreements. The technology and institutional arrangements required are well known. Moreover, the picture can be improved through regional cooperation. Initial steps in this direction have already been taken in the context of the multilateral peace talks, specifically, by the workgroup on water involving representatives from Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority.

Hence, the significance of water as an issue in the Israeli-Syrian negotiations cannot be denied. Nevertheless, this issue is not of the utmost priority. To repeat, attempts can be made to devise solutions that are independent of the border question. These include detailed arrangements and hydrological agreements, procedures to confront environmental issues and obligations to prevent pollution.

In conclusion, we should also note that with respect to every aspect of the Jordan and Kinnwater basin, Lebanon should play a considerable role. Some of sources of the Jordan River originate in Lebanon (e.g., the Hatzbai'ah Springs). Lebanon also has the capacity to endanger other sources of the water currently used by Israel, such as the Snir River (the Hatzbaanii) and the Iyun River.