

REGIONAL COOPERATION ON WATER ISSUES:

A MODEL OF PARALLEL TRACKS

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The scarcity of water may act as a factor creating conflict between the sides. Experience has shown however that worldwide, very few full-scale wars have developed as a result of water disputes, and apparently this applies to the Middle East as well. It is possible, however, that a dispute over water will damage the fabric of relations between the parties.

At the same time, water may serve to accelerate cooperation between the sides. The interdependence between the parties and the necessity to preserve shared water resources may encourage the parties to move from a zero sum game to a win win situation. Moreover, The parties will discover that their ability to raise international financial assistance will be greater if they demonstrate cooperation.

The question that many of us are asking ourselves is, “How do we bring about regional cooperation on issues connected to water?” Numerous responses have been suggested; many models have been tried throughout the world. For example, there are those who focus on the economic benefits as the basis for cooperation. Others place the emphasis on institutional solutions, through the establishment of basins commissions.

I would like to suggest one path of regional cooperation in which we, the parties to the Middle –East conflict have gained some experience. Bearing in mind the complexity of a cross-boundary water issue our field of activity is to be found in the border area between water issues and international policy and the solutions between the administration of water resources, science and politics both local and international. In other words, a hydro-political process calls for the involvement of statesmen, politicians and experts in the water field. Though our group was gathered from different countries and representing a wide variety of interests, we have succeeded in creating a common framework of action.

The process is dynamic, complex, influenced by many elements and as yet incomplete. It is still, therefore, unclear whether it will achieve all the anticipated results.

Let me refer briefly to four elements that determine the framework of relations among the parties in the water domain.

1. Chronic Shortages

There is a shortage of water in the Middle East. This is a result of a number of factors: First, the continuing population growth and a far more measured increase, if at all, in

the region's water resources. Secondly, substantial parts of the region are comprised of desert: the precipitation levels in these areas are very low. Indeed the whole region is completely dependent upon annual rainfall levels. The situation is even more severe, with precipitation levels dropping below forty percent of the annual average, more frequently than in the past with devastating consequences for our water resources.

2. A Cross-Boundary Issue

Water in the region is a shared resource. Ninety percent of the surface water in the region flows across at least one border. The Jordan River, one of the main sources of water for Israel, originates in Syria and Lebanon. In this context, Israel is downstream. Nevertheless, Israel is upstream in relation to that portion of the Jordan River, which is shared by Israel and Jordan. Syria is upstream in relation to the Yarmuq River, and Jordan is located between it and Israel. A common aquifer is a source of supply for Israel and the Palestinians.

This complex system creates interdependence in the amount and the quality of the water available to the parties. One would expect the system to develop checks and balances to prevent one side from harming the other. Unfortunately this has not yet sufficiently happened.

3. The Social and Economic Context

There are wide variances, among the parties in the region, in regard to their internal political systems, economic capabilities, scientific abilities and social fabrics. All these differences create gaps, which must be overcome in order to create mutual trust, understanding and the cultivation of common goals.

4. Political Relations

The pattern of relations among the sides involved ranges from active hostilities, as on the Israeli-Lebanese border, to a formal but quiet state of war between Israel and Syria; from an interim agreement between Israel and the Palestinians to a full peace agreement between Israel and Jordan.

The 1991 Madrid process created the official framework for both the bilateral and multilateral tracks. The bilateral track between Israel and each of its neighbors paved the way to the peace agreement with Jordan but has not yet brought about the conditions for agreement with Syria and Lebanon. The Oslo process led to the interim agreement with the Palestinians, which brought about mutual recognition and set various cooperation processes in motion. Some critical issues, however, have been postponed to the final status negotiation framework. Since 2000 the relations can be described as a "low intensity conflict".

Framework of Relations in the Water Domain

The relations among the parties in the water sphere are governed by the nature of agreements between them. In the absence of agreement, the attempt to settle conflicts

over water will not occur through dialogue. The hostility between Israel and Syria over the latter's attempts to divert the waters of the Jordan River in the 1960's are an example of this. There are exceptions such as the partial understanding between Israel and Jordan on the Yarmuq river water allocation many years before they signed a peace agreement. Israel and Jordan signed a comprehensive settlement on the allocation of water resources within the framework of 1994 peace agreement. The mutual recognition between Israel and the Palestinians, which brought about a separate Palestinian entity, also necessitates the building of a framework of relations in the water sphere. As the agreement is an interim one, the Palestinian demand to discuss their water rights has been deferred until the final status talks.

Water as A Key Factor

The influence of the water factor during transition periods on overall relations is much more important. This would apply in particular to delicate cases such as Israeli-Jordanian efforts to bolster the formal agreement that they have signed, or the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians, where each side must learn to live alongside the other. In short during a process of reconciliation, we should seek to enhance our relations in the water domain as a means to strengthening cooperation.

The Development of Parallel Tracks

This was the conclusion of the architects of the Madrid process. The aim was to divide the water issue into its various components. That meant, on the one hand, dealing separately with the more problematic issues, especially those dealing with the allocation of existing resources, and resolving them within the bilateral framework. On the other hand, the parties would identify elements of the water problem that could be resolved through regional cooperation and entrusted these issues to the multilateral track.

In January 1992 a groups was assigned to deal with the water issue. It comprises 47 members and has been divided into three sub-groupings: the core group (Israel, Jordan and the Palestinians), the regional group (Egypt, North Africa and the Gulf) and the donors (led by the USA and including EU, Germany and Norway, amongst others).

The early years, however, were particularly difficult ones; rather than alleviating problems that had cropped up within the bilateral framework, it served as an additional platform for raising basic problematic issues between the parties. Only after the sides made forward progress on the bilateral tracks (the interim agreements with the Palestinians and the peace accord with Jordan) were they able to progress on the multilateral track.

Regional Awareness

Within the Multilateral Working Group on Water Issues the main aim was to create a fundamental "Regional Awareness". The three main parties must capitalize on the aforementioned benefits of regional cooperation and think in regional terms. It is no simple matter reaching this stage from a situation of total conflict.

I will provide two main examples of the ways in which this strategy developed:

Supply and Demand of Water until 2040

In order to develop an original approach we saw the need to carry out a comprehensive survey on the supply and demand of water for the region as a whole until the year 2040, and a study of ways to overcome the shortage. Three regional teams were established and were led by a German team. These teams involved Israeli, Jordanian and Palestinian experts and diplomats. At the outset the participants realized that this was not a technical process of engineering appraisals but, rather, a slow process of finding a consensus among the three parties. The sides understood that it would not be possible to progress if the respective parties concerned themselves only with their own narrow interests. This did not apply solely to the water issue. For instance, how would the parties be able to reach agreement if they failed to determine the borders and ownership of the water sources? We have found different solutions through creative diplomacy. For instance in the maps, we have differentiated between the west of the Jordan river and the east of the Jordan river, averting in that way the need to delineate Israeli and Palestinian resources.

In this way, we have succeeded in describing the supply and demand situation: according to a cautious estimate, by 2010, there will be demand for 4.2 billion cubic meters of water, but there will only be a supply of 3.6 billion cubic meters. A decade from now, we will be facing a water shortfall of 600 million cubic meters.

The next stage was set in motion once the enormity of the shortfall became known. All the parties became aware that the entire region faces a shortage, irrespective of which side draws the remaining fresh water sources. The “short blanket” principle has emerged: “either the leg or the head is exposed”. The main conclusion has been that we must focus on and invest our efforts in developing new and additional water resources for the region as a whole.

It is at this point that we seek regional solutions. At this stage in the project (four years after it was launched), rather than looking solely after their own interests, members of the joint team undertook a functional division in their responsibilities: the Palestinians explore the issue of importing water by sea, the Jordanians studied the option of importing water by land and the Israelis evaluated the issue of desalination – each side acting on behalf of all three sides. The chart provided testifies to the work that has been accomplished. The main conclusion is that desalination is a workable solution - and the most important one.

A second initiative led by Norway sets another example for strategy leading to regional awareness. Here again we began by carrying out a study of the laws and institutions governing water on each side, in order to complement the aforementioned study of the supply of water in the region. On the basis of common denominators, we have worked out a declaration on cooperation in the development of new sources of water.

The “regional awareness” was achieved and the parties could move to the next step – bridging the gap.

Cooperation in Development of New Resources

The group has developed a number of projects totaling nearly 70\$ million. One of these projects is the Data Banks project: a multidimensional project aimed at the development of a common language, for use among technicians, dealing with water quality, measuring amounts of water in wells, use of mobile laboratories, etc. All of this large-scale activity is taking place among the three sides, with assistance from donor states.

In addition, a regional desalination research centre was established in Muscat. The aim of the centre is to find a way to reduce the cost of desalination so as to arrive at a cost that can be borne by the regional states. The centre, which has \$20 million at its disposal, encourages joint research projects among the scientists in the region. It serves as an example of science furthering the cause of peace.

Conclusion

Our aim has been to seek possibilities of cooperation on the problematic water issue within confliction political frameworks. We have seen that by identifying those areas, which enable us to progress, and by advancing on parallel tracks, it is possible to arrive at regional awareness and to find regional solutions.

Our experience suggests the following lessons that might be usefully applied in other regions are: A multi-track approach, developing win-win elements, working with informal teams, continuity even in times of crisis, emphasizing the critical role of the donors, facilitators must deal not only with the technical issues, but show political adeptness as well.

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