The War That Never Was

MUNTHER J. HADDADIN
Former Water and Irrigation Minister
Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan

The first outcry that drew attention to an impending water war was made in early 1987 when the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), then affiliated with Georgetown University, issued a publication about the subject. The authors forecasted that “water, not oil, will be the cause for the next war in the Middle East.”1 CSIS hosted a two-part seminar on water disputes in the Middle East. The seminar deliberations focused on the Jordan, Euphrates, Tigris and Nile basins. None of the contributors to the seminar, however, believed there was an impending water war in the region. Nevertheless, leading newspapers in the United States continued to publish several articles that preached expectations similar to those expressed by the CSIS report.

The rhetoric of water wars persisted and became contagious. The print media in the Middle East followed suit; journalists soon started to echo similar forecasts. Some have gone as far as saying that water caused the 1967 war, in which Israel dealt the Arabs a stunning blow and occupied Arab territories more than twice its own size. Some leading politicians supported such claims, citing the water dispute over the Jordan River as the cause of the war. Facts revealed 30 years later in declassified U.S. government documents, as well as the turbulent events in the Middle East after the 1967 war, proved the error of such claims.
The Cycle of Middle East Wars

The June 1967 war between Israel and neighboring Arab States was not a water war. Water was clearly not the cause of the wars that followed. Water contributed, however, to the tensions that prevailed in the region between 1964 and 1966. An Arab League Summit convened in Cairo in January 1964 decided to divert as much of the Hasbani and Banyas tributaries as possible towards the Litani in Lebanon and the Yarmouk in Jordan, in order to use this diverted water to irrigate Arab lands. The diversion project intended to secure the Arabs’ shares in the Jordan River basin without having to subscribe to a cooperative plan among the riparians on the basin. The Arabs shied away from such a plan for fear of signaling an implicit recognition of Israel before the basic causes of the rift between them were resolved. The Arab diversion project would not have secured the Arabs the shares stipulated in the Unified Plan, which had been coordinated by U.S. presidential envoy Eric Johnston in shuttle diplomacy from October 1953 to October 1955. The diversion works on the Banyas and the Hasbani were stalled in 1966 months before the June war broke out; the reasons cited were lack of funds and the lack of Arab preparedness to withstand the air raids that Israel was mounting on the Syrian territories. Documentary evidence, declassified by the U.S. government, indicates that the primary reasons for the Israeli assault at 8:00 a.m. on 5 June 1967 were withdrawal from Sinai of the UN Emergency Force and the subsequent closure to Israeli shipping of the Gulf of Aqaba by Egypt. As a matter of fact, the Israeli Prime Minister, Levi Eshkol, made it clear to President Johnson’s special envoy in February 1966 that the departure of the UN Emergency Force from Sinai would be considered a declaration of war against Israel.

The Middle East war that followed the June war was a joint Egyptian-Syrian offensive on 6 October 1973, waged both to recover their respective territories occupied by Israel since the June war and to bring the Arab-Israeli conflict to a point of resolution. Water was therefore not a significant cause of that war, despite the fact that the territories to be recovered contained surface and ground water. The Banyas tributary rises at the foot of Mount Hermon in the Golan, and the occupied Syrian territories contain groundwater aquifers. The war resulted in a partial resolution of the conflict when Egypt and Israel engaged in intensive negotiations at Camp David under the auspices of U.S. President Jimmy Carter. Both countries signed the Camp David Accord in 1979.

War broke out in the Middle East again in 1978 with the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon. It was rumored at the time that the Israeli assault targeted the Litani River, the Lebanese river long coveted by Israeli water planners, who had earlier proposed its inclusion in a Unified Plan for the development of the Jordan Valley. At the time of the Johnston negotiations, the American envoy
struggled hard with the Israelis to keep the Litani out of the Jordan Valley Plan he was proposing, and he succeeded in having the Litani inclusion postponed. Several articles were written in Middle Eastern papers after the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon pointing to the alleged Israeli aims. But facts on the ground demonstrate that Israel did not carry out its Litani diversion scheme. A report by the Lebanese government to the Arab League in 1992 denied rumors speculating Israeli diversion of the Litani River. The unilateral withdrawal of Israeli forces from South Lebanon in May 2001 confirmed the Lebanese Government report.

The following Middle East war, between Iran and Iraq, broke out in 1980 and lasted for eight years. Water was not the cause of that war but had been a source of tension between the two countries. Iraq and Iran had earlier disputed their common borders along the Shat-el-Arab waterway, but the dispute, having a territorial character, had been settled in their Algiers agreement signed in 1975. The agreement had put an end to the border dispute in the Shat-el-Arab and to Iranian support for the Iraqi Kurds’ rebellion against the central authority in Baghdad.

The war in 1980 was triggered by border incidents and by acts of insurgency carried out by political factions inside Iraq that were supported by Iran’s Islamic Revolution. These events directly challenged the 1976 agreement between Iraq and Iran. When the war started, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein tore apart the Algiers agreement. Thus, the motivation behind this war was an issue of territorial integrity, not an issue of freshwater sources.

Water was never mentioned among the causes of the Israel-Lebanon war of 1982, despite the aforementioned claims by some analysts that Israel intended to capture the Litani waters and have them diverted to Israel. The declared reason behind Israel’s action was the security of Galilee. Israel intended to dislodge the Palestinian and Lebanese militia who had become a menace to northern Israel. Israel’s army advanced as far north as the capital city of Beirut and occupied its western part.

Water did not cause the Gulf War either. Oil, however, was the valued resource that caused this war. Iraq had a few grudges against neighboring Kuwait, all related to oil. Kuwait’s exploitation of an oil field underlying both countries’ territory and OPEC limits on oil production to control world oil pricing were the main sources of tension. Historically, Iraq had always claimed that Kuwait was a province of Iraq, but that the British had carved it out as a separate
entity. When Kuwait became independent in 1961, then Iraqi ruler General Abdul Kareem Qassim mobilized troops to invade Kuwait. He even issued a decree appointing the Emir of Kuwait as a local governor reporting to the governor of Basra in Iraq. However, due to the efforts of the Arab League and the backing of Gamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt, Iraq did not invade Kuwait in the 1960s. Instead, it postponed this plan for 30 years. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990 was not, therefore, caused by a dispute over water. In fact, Iraq expressed readiness in April that year to supply Kuwait with water from the Tigris River. The Kuwaiti government placed an announcement in international newspapers in July 1990 to pre-qualify consulting firms to do the necessary studies for such a water project. This evidence indicates there was agreement and harmony over water, leaving only the oil dispute to trigger the Iraqi invasion. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was the first outbreak of new hostilities after the water war outcry in 1987. The invasion and its aftermath proved the water wars theory incorrect. Ironically, it was oil, not water, that caused the next major war in the Middle East—exactly the opposite of what the water wars’ proponents had predicted.

The Gulf War that followed the Iraqi invasion was waged by an international coalition led by the United States to drive Iraq out of Kuwait. Water was not a cause of that war, although the press made attempts to bring it in, as will be shown below. As a matter of fact, water was declared a non-weapon in the war. The late President of Turkey, Torgut Ozal, during mobilization of the allied forces, announced that water of the Euphrates—which Turkey could cut off—would not be used as a weapon against Iraq. Both Turkey and Syria, countries that were in the coalition against Iraq, are upstream riparian parties on the Euphrates and could have used it in the campaign against Iraq, but they did not. Turkey alone had dams on the Euphrates with storage capacities, yet unfilled, capable of cutting off the supply of water downstream. Syria had storage space in the Tabqa Dam that could supplement any cut off attempts by the allies. Therefore, water was neither a cause of the Gulf War nor an issue of dispute during the war.

**Water in the War Process**

The association of water with the June 1967 war is not accidental. The riparian parties on the Jordan had been competing for its waters since before the establishment of Israel. The Zionist Organization had created detailed plans to deal with this issue long before Israel was established. Britain—the mandate power in Palestine—granted concessions to Pinhas Rutenburg to utilize the waters of the Yarmouk and the Jordan for generation of electricity, and a power house was built at the confluence of the Yarmouk and the Jordan in 1932. The
Trans-Jordan government formulated a plan to utilize the Jordan waters in 1939. In response, another competing plan was laid down for the Zionist Organization by the American soils engineer, Walter Clay Lowdermilk in 1944, and was later detailed by Hays and Savage in 1947. Jordan updated its plan by commissioning the British consultants, Sir Murdoch MacDonald and Partners in 1949. Israel was established in 1948 and had the Zionist plans as a basis for its seven years plan for the development of water resources. A water plan for Israel, the All Israel Plan, was detailed by the American engineer John S. Cotton in 1953. Jordan, in turn, presented a Master Plan for the development of the Jordan Valley in 1955 through the American consultants Harza Engineering Company and Michael Baker Inc. The Jordanian and Israeli plans were essentially competing for the waters of the Jordan basin, and the Israeli plans called for the transfer of Jordan River water southward to irrigate the dry Negev in Israel.

When the Unified Plan proposed by Eric Johnston in 1955 did not win the endorsement of the Arab League, Israel proceeded to implement its own water projects, and so did Jordan. The United States provided funding for both on condition that neither party would draw from the Jordan basin more water than allocated to it under the Unified Plan. Israel had started a major undertaking, the National Water Carrier, in 1952, and resumed it in 1957. It was scheduled for completion in 1964. The Arab parties, heavily engaged in a cold war of their own, responded to a call by Nasser of Egypt to hold a Summit meeting in Cairo in January 1964. The Summit decided to divert what they could from the upper tributaries of the Jordan, and work started on that project after a second summit in Alexandria, Egypt, in September of the same year. Work on the diversion project commenced in early 1965 with funds provided by the oil-producing Arab states, and military arrangements were made to confront any Israeli intervention in the Arab diversion project.

Palestinian paramilitary activities started to bother Israel in 1965-1966 after the Fatah Organization was established. They were supported by the Syrian leftist regime that took power in February 1966. Israel bombed the diversion works in 1965 and 1966, and, consequently, work on the diversion project came to a halt. Palestinian paramilitary activities increased across the Syrian and Jordanian borders, and Israel retaliated heavily against targets in both countries. Israel raided the village of Samu’ in the West Bank, then part of Jordan, and conducted retaliatory raids inside Syria. The Israelis and the Syrians were engaged in an air battle in April 1967 in which eight Syrian MIGs were downed. The situation escalated until its culmination in the devastating Israeli strike on the morning of 5 June 1967. Although water played some role in the tensions of the pre-war period in 1965 and 1966, it was never close to being the cause of the outbreak of the June war of 1967.
Other attempts to cite water as a possible cause for war in the Middle East were made in the spring of 1990. Turkey had closed the diversion tunnel of the huge Ataturk dam and had started to impound Euphrates water in its reservoir. Arrangements were made with Syria whereby Turkey increased the releases of Euphrates water to Syria to a high rate of 750 cubic meters per second starting in September 1989 to account for the stoppage of flow when the diversion tunnel of the Ataturk dam would be closed for a certain period of time. But there was tension in Turkey-Syria relations because Syria had given refuge to Abdallah Ocalan, leader of the PKK (the Kurdish Workers Party in Turkey), and had provided training and equipment to his fighters. Syria-Iraq relations had been strained since 1979 when the Baath Party faction running Iraq turned against the faction of the same party that was ruling in Syria. However, the two countries managed to work out a water sharing agreement over the Euphrates water in April 1990, whereby they would share the flow coming in across the Syria-Turkey border at 58 percent to Iraq and 42 percent to Syria. Turkey was not party to that agreement, but the two countries formed a joint delegation in June 1990 headed by the Iraqi Acting Minister of Irrigation, Mr. Isam Chalabi, and went to Ankara for talks over water sharing with Turkey.

In the winter of that year, 1990, relations between Iraq and Britain were damaged beyond repair. Iraq had arrested two British subjects, a journalist of Persian origin and a nurse, and charged them with espionage. The journalist was executed despite all diplomatic efforts to save his life. Britain responded with a fierce verbal assault on Saddam Hussein and released Heathrow Airport security reports on confiscations of atomic detonators on their way to Iraq. The British continued to levy more charges against the Iraqi regime and its hostile attitudes. The Western press took to the road and conducted several interviews with people in the Middle East; the author, for example, gave interviews to four leading Western press organizations. Such correspondents covered what they claimed would be the cause of an imminent Middle East war: riparian disagreements over the Euphrates. Reports of a water war were flying in all directions throughout the spring of 1990. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait overshadowed those reports, and they abruptly disappeared from the media as the allies started mobilization to evict Iraqi forces from Kuwait. During the mobilization, President Ozal of Turkey announced that the Euphrates would not be used as a weapon against Iraq, and the stories of a water war faded as the Iraqi forces were demolished.
Water in the Peace Process

After Iraq was driven out of Kuwait, U.S. President George Bush announced the dawning of a New World Order in his “State of the Union” address to Congress. He also announced his intention to launch an American initiative on cooperation with the Soviet Union to bring peace to the Middle East. His Secretary of State, James Baker, in consultation with the concerned parties, worked on a formula for starting a peace process in the Middle East. A peace conference was held in Madrid on 31 October 1991 with participation of the core parties (Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and the Palestinians) and the regional parties (Egypt, Saudi Arabia representing the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, and Tunisia representing the countries of the Maghreb Union). The European Union and the Secretary General of the United Nations attended that meeting in addition to the host country, Spain. The Madrid Conference yielded two peace forums: the Bilateral Conference and the Multilateral Conference. The first had its series of meetings in Washington, D.C., starting on 5 December 1990, and the second opened in Moscow on 26 January 1991. This second conference produced five working groups, one of which was on water resources. Water disputes, along with all other political disputes, were to be addressed at the Bilateral Conference as well.

In the Multilateral Working Group on Water Resources, the agenda was decided such that issues reinforcing peace-building would be discussed. About 38 countries participated in the Multilateral Conference, and the group’s gavel holder was the representative of the United States. Syria and Lebanon—two core parties to the peace process—declined to join the Multilateral Conference, however, on the grounds that such talks would normalize relations with Israel before peace was achieved. The topics of the Multilateral agenda included: data availability, efficiency improvements, incremental water supplies, and issues of regional cooperation.

The Multilateral Working Group on Water Resources convened its first meeting in Moscow and discussed its agenda. It subsequently held meetings in Vienna, Washington, D.C., Geneva, Beijing, Muscat, Athens, and Amman. Some progress was made in discussing the topics of the agenda, although clashes between the joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation and the Israeli delegation were frequent. Despite these clashes, the Working Group initiated projects to establish a regional water data bank and to study the supply-demand situation in the territories of the core parties. Cooperative working sessions were held in different countries, and joint visits were made to water projects in the host countries and in the United States. In addition, the crucial water supply-demand study was successfully conducted by the Federal Republic of Germany. The activities of the Multilateral Working Group on Water Resources, however,
stalled in 1996 when the Likud coalition ascended to power in Israel, and progress in the peace process practically came to a standstill. The Multilateral Working Group has never convened since.

The Bilateral Conference in Washington, D.C. held 11 sessions before it was interrupted by the Oslo Declarations. On the Jordanian-Israeli track of negotiations, water had a high priority. It is noteworthy that the two delegations agreed to the wording of the agenda item addressing water before they had agreed on any other item. Item 3, water, was the first item the two delegations approved on their negotiation agenda. The item addressed the need to agree on the rightful share of each party from the Yarmouk River, and the need to search for ways to alleviate water shortage. What was thought to be one of the more difficult tasks turned out to be the first item the two parties approved. Detailing a sub-agenda for water was not quite as encouraging. The sub-agenda combined three topics for discussion in one group, namely, water, energy, and the environment. For the issue of water, Jordan had the weaker position because it had to recover water that Israel had been using. In the environment, Israel had more interest to come to an agreement with Jordan on account of environmental problems encountered in border areas (Eilat and Aqaba, Safi and the Dead Sea resorts in Israel, and the Jordan Valley). House flies, mosquitoes, pigeons, and wildlife were issues of concern for the Israelis, while atomic radiation, wastewater treatment, and the pollution of the Jordan River were the primary environmental concerns of the Jordanians. On the energy topic, Israel had more interests than Jordan, and the Israeli interests focused on the interconnection of electricity grids in the two countries, and on joint cooperation to exploit the oil shale deposits to produce electricity.

The two teams maneuvered, each to serve their own purposes and to stress them in the wording of the sub-agenda. The emphasis that the two teams put on their respective topics of interest made a give-and-take mechanism possible by which the interests of each party were not fully met. The items of the sub-agenda were so negotiated as to make them reflect agreements. As a matter of fact, the sub-agenda on the environment and energy were fit to be separate appendices to the peace treaty. Annex 4 to the treaty was a copy of the items of the environment section of the sub-agenda.

With the sub-agenda items negotiated during the period of 15 February through 7 June 1994, the hard-core negotiations over water started on 9 August 1994 and lasted until the early hours of the morning of Monday, 17 October.
1994. The negotiations were not easy, but arriving at an amicable resolution of the bilateral water conflict was not impossible. It took a lot of effort and intervention from the leaders of the two countries to overcome some hard obstacles, but an agreement was finally reached. An article in the treaty (Article 6), and a separate annex to it (Annex II) detailed the water agreement between Jordan and Israel. The Annex addressed quantitative water sharing, water storage, water quality, protection of water resources, operation and maintenance, and ground water. It also formed a Joint Water Committee to chart fields of bilateral cooperation.

Implementation of the Water Annex of the treaty proceeded without much difficulty. Water flow from the Yarmouk was adjusted in Jordan’s favor almost immediately after the treaty was ratified on 10 November 1994. Water started flowing to Jordan from Lake Tiberias on 5 July 1995, immediately after the infrastructure needed for that transfer was put in place. The provisions of the Annex were implemented despite the difficult drought years of 1998-2000. The water agreement withstood all the difficult developments in the peace process even when implementation of the majority of the other items in the treaty fell through due to the political hardships that have prevailed since 1996.

On the Palestinian track of negotiations with Israel, the negotiations over water sharing were postponed until the permanent status negotiations could take place. However, during the Taba negotiations in September 1995, the Israeli government and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) reached an interim agreement on the management of water resources under their respective jurisdictions. Israel recognized the water rights of the Palestinians and agreed to supply certain Palestinian towns under PLO administration an additional 28.6 million cubic meters of water. The settlement of Palestinian water rights would be negotiated in the permanent status negotiations (Article 40 of Annex III of the Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement signed at Washington, D.C., on 28 September 1995).

The water issue in the permanent status negotiations will not be easy. Both parties have to negotiate Palestinian water rights in the Jordan River basin and the shared groundwater resources. The difficulty arises from the fact that Israel has been using the Palestinian share of those waters for over thirty years, and the Palestinians are in bad need of incremental water supplies.

The water negotiations on the Syrian track started with the Wye River talks between the two parties. No agreement was reached because the water issues are directly linked to the territorial issues between Israel and Syria. Syrian water rights over the Jordan River are intended to irrigate Syrian lands in the Golan and in the Rift Valley close to the eastern shores of Lake Tiberias. Both the land and water sources are occupied by Israel and will have to be recovered upon full Israeli withdrawal from the Syrian territories.
Another complication that arose between Syria and Israel pertains to the northeast shore of Lake Tiberias. The truce signed between the two countries on 19 July 1949 demarcated the “cease fire line” at 10 meters away from the northeast shoreline of the lake. In 1964, when Israel finished construction of the National Water Carrier, it closed the exit of the Jordan River out of Lake Tiberias so that the lake would act as a huge water reservoir. The damming was done by steel gates (the Dagania Gates) a few meters after the Jordan River leaves the lake. By so doing, Israel allowed the water level in the lake to be raised above the normal water level by about four meters. The raising of the lake surface made it encroach upon Syrian territory past the 10 meters-line on the northeast shore of the lake. In their negotiations, the Syrians insist that Israel withdraw to the June 1967 lines. Such a line on the northeast shore now lies inside the lake after the raising of its level. Israel, on the other hand, wants the entire lake under its jurisdiction and would not allow Syria’s borders to extend into its waters. This complication is, in fact, territorial and not water-related. Syria’s water rights are drawn not from the lake, but from the Banyas tributary, and from the Jordan River itself before it enters Lake Tiberias. This complication over territory has to be resolved in the Syrian-Israeli negotiations.

On the Lebanese track, water negotiations will focus on the Hasbani tributary, and its sub-tributary, the Wazzani Springs. Lebanese water rights are drawn from these two sources. Again, the Israelis have been using the Lebanese share for decades and have to give them up before a peace treaty is signed between the two countries. In March of 2001, some Israeli military generals threatened Lebanon because the Lebanese were installing a four-inch diameter pipe on the Wazzani Spring to supply the Lebanese village of the same name with domestic water. United Nations observation teams downplayed the significance of the Lebanese project, and it was completed without problems.

Another field of negotiations between Lebanon and Israel would concern an underground water aquifer underlying the territories of both countries south of the Litani. The Litani itself is off the table as it is an entirely Lebanese river. However, agreement on the abstraction rates from that aquifer will have to be reached and a mechanism for its management established. It is to be noted that the Lebanese track and the Syrian track of negotiations with Israel, although separate, are intertwined in actuality and the settlement of issues on both tracks is most likely going to be concurrent.
Troubles in the Peace Process

Water was never a cause of any of the wars in the Middle East. In fact, far from being the source of trouble, water in the midst of conflict was an issue that prompted mutual understanding and cooperation. Three years of drought elapsed during the recent period of trouble that has stalled the peace process, and the continued cooperation on water has been an encouraging sign that peace agreements can endure.

The troubles that have rocked the peace process are attributed to territorial disputes and disputes over religious sanctuaries, particularly the Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem and the Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron. A Palestinian revolt erupted in September 2000 when the leader of the Likud coalition, then General Ariel Sharon, guarded by state security, paid a public visit to the Aqsa Mosque. The revolution continues to this day with victims and casualties on both sides. The feelings that ran high as a result of the visit were not actually cool before it. The Israeli-Palestinian talks did not produce an agreement, and the Palestinians felt they were confronted by both the Israelis and the peace sponsor, the United States. Agreements on the turn-over of territories to the PLO administration were not fully implemented, and the long awaited permanent status negotiations did not materialize. The issue of Palestinian refugees was not seriously attended to, and Israel’s denial of their right to return did not make matters easy. These matters formed the base of an uprising that was triggered by Sharon’s visit to the Aqsa Mosque.

On the Syrian track, the President of the United States had a summit meeting in February 2000 with the late Syrian President Hafez Assad in an attempt to bridge the differences between Israel and Syria, but that summit did not produce results. Any conflict connected to water is territorial in nature, as explained above. Water sharing did not attribute to the failure of the talks. The primary reason for their failure was the Syrian insistence that Israel withdraw to the 4 June 1967 lines. Israel was prepared to partially withdraw against certain security guarantees.

On the Lebanese track, negotiations were suspended at the same time as the talks stalled on the Syrian track. Israel then withdrew from Lebanon unilaterally, but conflict has continued because Israel still occupies the Chaba’a farms that Lebanon claims as part of its territories. After the Israeli withdrawal, United Nations observers testified that Israel had withdrawn from all Lebanese territories. Accordingly, Israel thinks that Chaba’a farms are part of the occupied Syrian territories and, therefore, should be settled through talks with Syria. Again, water is not related to the conflict in Chaba’a where Lebanese resistance continues to be active against the Israelis.
While the Israeli-Palestinian situation escalates, water issues between them remain the same. Water was not the cause of complication for the Israeli-Syrian track except when water is involved in territorial issues, nor was water an issue in the Lebanese-Israeli confrontation.

On the Jordanian-Israeli front, water proved to be an element of cooperation rather than conflict. Its management has run smoothly ever since the peace treaty was concluded on 26 October 1994. It can, therefore, be predicted that water is likely to be a factor of cooperation among adversaries once they have concluded peace agreements between them.

The author predicts that water will be an element of cooperation during future conflicts. Even if one party engages in war to capture another party’s freshwater sources, the recognition of common water rights will prove a basis for peace and cooperation. Capturing territory would enable the party who wins the war to acquire water that belongs to the party that lost that war. However, both parties, being neighbors, would have to address the needs of the residents in the disputed territory. Eventually, peace has to prevail between the neighbors, and water rights will have to be restored. In essence, war may allow a party to use the water of another party (after the needs of the occupied territories are met), but cannot result in a permanent gain for the victor. Water, by its very nature, is used to extinguish fires, not to ignite them.

Notes