



Briefing Paper: Water Issues & Middle East Peace

Recommendations on 'Low Hanging Fruit' - January 2016

Introduction:

Over the last 20 years, Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations have all been predicated on the conviction - prevalent on both sides - that a simultaneous solution to all of the conflict's core issues can and must be found in order to reach a final status peace agreement. Under this approach, the equitable allocation and efficient management of Israeli / Palestinian natural shared waters have been held hostage to the failure to agree on the other final status issues. A consensus is slowly being reached that the all or nothing approach has become part of the problem, and that moving forward on 'low hanging fruit' issues like water can help rebuild public trust that peace and end of hostilities are possible.

Water – Low Political Cost / High Political Gain:

While the resolution of issues related to water will not alone bring about peace, any future final status agreement will not be complete without a fair and efficient allocation of the region's fresh water resources. Moreover, due to the instrumental role of water and sanitation in social and economic development, the sustainability of any such agreement will be compromised in the absence of a joint mechanism for equitable allocation and efficient management of water resources.

Israeli leadership in desalination and wastewater treatment / reuse can be a political game changer not only in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but for the Levant as a whole. Israel today produces excess quantities of water so that no sector in the country will lose if Israel more fairly shares natural water with the Palestinians and continues to sell desalinated water to Jordan. Reaching a new agreement on shared natural water allocation between Israelis and Palestinians therefore comes at low political cost to Israel. Israeli farmers, who in the past would have had water quantities allocated to agriculture cut and therefore would have objected to such a move, will have no reason to object today. On the contrary the Israeli government and public have become proud of their leadership in the water sector and increasingly see the trade in water as a strategic / security / stability issue, as witnessed in recent water agreements reached with Jordan. Equally the Palestinian government is eager to show a measure of success in improving the lives of the Palestinian population. More water in every Palestinian home would dramatically improve the lives of every Palestinian and be a real boost to the Palestinian economy.

In light of this, there is much political, social and economic sense in moving forward first on water issues in the Israeli Palestinian political process. Such a move may be criticized as normalization of the existing political status quo; however, if crafted correctly, with the aim of rebuilding the trust between the two parties, the resolution of this relatively "easy" final status issue can pave the way for the revival of broader political issues.

Regional Opportunities and Priorities:

The logic of a water-focused lead is further strengthened when one considers the broader instability of the region. With Syrian refugees settled and continuing to flood into neighboring Jordan, promoting water related economic opportunities for both the refugees and the local Jordanian population is paramount if we are to avoid further regional instability.



Advancing regional projects related to regional water issues such as increased water trade and a [Jordan Valley master plan](#) present additional opportunities to not only both build trust with Palestinians but integrate Israeli leadership in the water sector to help stabilize the situation at a regional scale. Linkage of water and energy issues both natural gas and renewable energy can advance stability through the creation of interdependencies between the energy source (natural gas and solar) and new water manufactured through desalination.

Immediate, Bilateral Israeli / Palestinian steps recommended:

- Double again the water sold by Israel to Gaza from 10 to 20 mcm p.a. (to match the existing pipelines' capacity). This entails building of reservoirs on the Gaza side, to which donor states are willing to undertake.
- Supply an additional 20 MCM of water to the thirstiest southern towns and cities of the West Bank via the newly built, USAID funded Dier Sha'ar pipeline, which is now the main conveyor of water to 200,000 Palestinians in this area. It currently transmits only 5 MCM but can accommodate 26.3 MCM if additional water was made available..
- Both the above mentioned volumes of water could be sold to the Palestinians as part of the "Red-Dead" MoU that allows for the sale of up to 30 MCM from Israel to the PA. The Palestinian Minister of Water recently issued a letter requesting this additional purchase.
- Approve the sale of additional electricity to the newly built North Gaza sewage treatment plant (NGEST) – The project's first phase was completed last year but is lacking 3.5 MW to operate and treat 35,000 cubic meters of sewage per day – more than a third of the daily amount of sewage that finds its way from Gaza into the Mediterranean.

Interim measures:

- Fast track approval of the Palestinian water and sanitation projects held up due to the Joint Water Committee not meeting for close to 5 years.
- Increase by 30mcm the amount of water Palestinians can abstract from existing wells in the northern and western basins of the Mountain Aquifer.
- Approve the building of a gas pipeline linking Israel and Gaza
- Create a joint task force to advance the exploitation of Gaza Marine natural gas.
- Commit to finalizing a new Israeli / Palestinian water agreement within a defined period of time

Regional Measures:

- Call for the international community to create a Marshal Plan for Middle East stability based on regional integration of natural resources.
- Declare support for a Jordan Valley Master Plan to rehabilitate the Jordan River and create new wealth and jobs in the Jordan Valley.
- Create a regional working group to advance cooperation between Israelis, Jordanians and Palestinians on a large scale water and renewable energy program.