

Drinking (Water) With Your Enemy

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If there is political will for peace, water will not be a hindrance. If you want reasons to fight, water will give you ample opportunities. (Uri Shamir, Israeli hydrologist)

As Israelis and Palestinians approach final status talks, water is high on the agenda. As Israelis and Syrians jockey for negotiating room the waters of the Golan and of the Sea of Galilee are points of contention. Yet, tough as these issues are, there is little danger that inter-state conflict will erupt over water. Even in the Middle East, where water is scarcer than anywhere else in the world, water has served as a greater cause for cooperation than for conflict.

Cooperation not conflict

The notion of cooperation over international water resources will strike most readers as anomalous. Have we not all heard that "the wars of the 21st century will be about water," as World Bank vice president Ismail Serageldin stated a few years ago. Or that water was the only conceivable reason for Jordan to go to war with Israel, as the late King Hussein is alleged to have said.

There is, however, very little evidence that disputes over water have led or are about to lead to international conflict. (Nor has anyone been able to document King Hussein's remarks about going to war with Israel over water.) Though some have asserted that Arab-Israeli warfare has been motivated in part by the desire to assert control over water resources, historical evidence shows that water was not a factor in strategic planning by either side during the hostilities of 1948, 1967, 1978, or 1982.

Water problems

If water wars are unlikely, does this mean that we need not be concerned about conflict over water? Not at all. Worldwide water use went up more than six fold in the 20th century and it continues to grow twice as fast as the increase in population. Problems associated with water scarcity and control over water resources are all too common. However, they are much more likely to occur *within* countries — such as the competition for water between urban dwellers seeking drinking water and farmers seeking water for irrigation — than between countries. The violence that erupted earlier this year in Cochabamba, Bolivia, following tariff increases for municipal water illustrates the kind of water conflict that we can expect to see. (see *Globe and Mail*, May 9 and 18, 2000)

Experience shows that the presence of water on an international border is more likely to provide a catalyst for cooperation than conflict between the countries that depend on it. Researchers at the University of Oregon have compiled a Transboundary Freshwater Dispute Database. In examining the cases generally considered to be examples of international water conflict, they have arrived at a surprising conclusion: Instead of fighting, countries that share water resources tend to maintain dialogue and negotiation leading to treaties for joint management of water.

Jordan River

The Jordan River forms much of the boundary between Israel and Jordan and is one of the world's most hotly contested waterways. Even while these two countries were legally at war, they maintained informal contacts on managing the river. As a result, when the Jordan-Israel Peace Treaty was signed in 1994, it was possible to include a well-developed annex devoted "to achieving a comprehensive and lasting settlement of all the water problems between [Israel and Jordan]."

What has been true for surface water on an international border also seems to be true for aquifers underlying a border. Prior to the signing of their historic agreement in 1993, Israeli and Palestinian academics and officials began holding discussions on joint management of the Mountain Aquifer, an extremely important source of groundwater underlying both Israel and the West Bank. The success of these discussions has helped forge a climate within which the broader peace process can take place.

India-Pakistan collaboration

Examples of collaboration over water are not restricted to the Middle East. Despite three wars and numerous skirmishes since 1948, India and Pakistan have managed to negotiate and implement a complex treaty on sharing the waters of the Indus River system. During periods of hostility, neither side has targeted the water facilities of the other nor attempted to disrupt the negotiated arrangements for water management.

In Africa too, where eleven countries share the basin of the Nile, cooperation over water is more evident than conflict. "Perhaps the weight of history lies too heavy in the silt of the Nile valley," writes historian Robert Collins, "but man will always need water; and in the end this may drive him to drink with his enemies." Closer to home, the International Joint Commission, which manages waters shared by Canada and the United States, is considered such a model of success that it is being emulated by other nations.

Minor skirmishes

Approximately 40% of the world's population lives in the 264 river basins shared by more than one country. Put another way, almost half the world's land area is found in international water basins. And yet there have been only seven minor skirmishes over international waters in modern history, and even these involved factors in addition to water. Meanwhile, hundreds of international treaties have been negotiated to deal with water management, about 150 in the past century alone.

There is no doubt that humanity faces a worldwide water crisis. Growing demand for drinking water and the much higher demand for irrigation water are placing enormous pressures on available fresh water supplies. At the same time, increasing pollution is reducing the usefulness of available water. The threats that these conditions pose for the poor and for the environment can not be overstated. Nevertheless, it is far more useful to consider the role of water in promoting cooperation rather than conflict, particularly in international relations.

As the opening quote suggests, those who are inclined to belligerence may look to water as a reason for fighting. But for most of us, water's greatest value may be the way it brings people together.

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Laying a Foundation for Joint Management of the Israeli-Palestinian Mountain Aquifer, by John Eberlee

Watershed: The Role of Fresh Water in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, by Stephen C. Lonergan and David B. Brooks