

# Access to Water in the Eastern Mediterranean: A Cause of Conflict or Source of Cooperation?



1998-12-25

*John Eberlee*

One of the historic causes of conflict in the Middle East is emerging as a potential instrument for promoting regional cooperation. In the long run, "the common need for water ... can also serve as an important element in the peace building process," suggested speakers at a recent seminar on water resources in the Eastern Mediterranean, jointly hosted by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and [Carleton University](#).

"For all the attention given to petroleum, water remains what it always has been: the key development resource of the Eastern Mediterranean," said IDRC President Maureen O'Neil, who introduced the event. "Per capita water supplies are only about one-sixth of the world average, yet the population and the economies of almost every country in the region are growing very rapidly."

## **Crisis proportions**

"A number of recent reports that review global water supply and demand differ in methodology and to some extent in conclusions, but they all agree on one point," she added. "It is in the Eastern Mediterranean that the gap between water supply and water demand is most rapidly reaching crisis proportions."

In the past, this gap has twice led to military action between Israel and Syria. In the early 1950's, they exchanged fire after Israel began a water development project in the Huleh Basin, which lies between the two countries. "In the 60's, there was an [Arab] attempt to divert water [from the Jordan River], which actually accelerated into artillery attacks and finally bombing raids," noted [Aaron Wolf](#), coordinator of the Transboundary Freshwater Dispute Database.

## **Breaking the link**

"But the interesting side is what's happened since then," Dr Wolf continued. "In 1991, the [Israeli-Arab] Peace Process started with water as one of the multilateral focuses." At the beginning, Israeli negotiators relied on maps and studies claiming that some of the occupied territories were "critical not just to Israel's hydrologic survival, but by extension, to its very survival. What actually happened in the negotiation was the link between territory and water security was broken — the territorial water imperative was absolutely ignored."

"How were they able to do it? Simple human creativity," said Dr Wolf. First, they bridged the Israeli approach of focussing on water allocation and the Jordanian approach of focussing on water rights by speaking of "rightful allocations." Then, "they thought about creative ways of joint co-operation, joint management to supersede the territorial imperative. And so now, even in areas that are entirely within Palestinian control, these joint water committees have jurisdiction." The result: in the Wye agreement signed in October between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, water does not receive even a mention.

## **Water conservation**

While initiatives like this are important, other speakers stressed the need for increasing water conservation and water availability in the Middle East. In the near term, they said, fresh water that is now used for irrigation will gradually shift to higher value household and industrial uses. Rooftop rainwater harvesting will also be common, and the Israeli practice of recycling treated sewage water for irrigation will become widespread — but not without risks. For example, rooftops must be kept clean to provide drinking water, and the continued use of treated sewage can lead to salt and nitrate build-up in the soil.

Many of the speakers warned that alternative water sources will be needed over the next few decades. "The region is already running dry now with orchards and cultural lands suffering .. due to falling water levels," said [Ozay Mehmet](#) of Carleton University. "But because of our population growth, because of industrialization, there's a time limit" to address the water deficit problem.

## **Water availability**

"It isn't simply a question of how more equitably or more efficiently watersheds can be managed. That is really important. But to meet the region's water needs for consumption, for industrial use, for tourists, for everybody else over the next 25 years, we need to find technologies, we need to find ways, we need to find modalities of increasing the water availability in the area in a massive way," argued Dr Mehmet.

According to Dr Mehmet Tomanbay, an economist at [Gazi University](#) in Ankara, Turkey is the key to resolving the Eastern Mediterranean's water problems. "All you have to do is look at the map... The only significant source of exportable water potential in the region is Turkey."

## **North Cyprus**

Researchers in Turkey and Cyprus are currently investigating how to supplement water supplies in what they call the Turkish Republic of North Cyprus, which faces an annual shortage of about 15 million cubic metres in the coming decades. The options include transporting water from the mainland via tankers, huge plastic water bags, or a 66 kilometre pipeline. Dr Hasan Bicak, an economist at [Eastern Mediterranean University](#) in North Cyprus, reported that the cost of transporting water bags compares favourably with the other options.

"If [the technology] succeeds, there is a great opportunity here." Turkish water bags may eventually serve Greece, Malta, Libya, "and definitely Israel and Egypt," he concluded.

*John Eberlee is the Features Editor of IDRC Reports online. (Photo: F. de Repentigny, CIDA)*

---

## Resource Persons:

**Ozay Mehmet**, Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, Carleton University, 1125 Colonel By Drive, Ottawa, Ontario, K1S 5B6, Canada; Tel: (613) 520-3532; E-mail: [ozay\\_mehmet@carleton.ca](mailto:ozay_mehmet@carleton.ca)

**Aaron T. Wolf**, Assistant Professor of Geography, Department of Geosciences, Oregon State University, 104 Wilkinson Hall, Corvallis, Oregon 97331-5506, USA; Tel: (541) 737-2722; Fax: (541) 737-1200; E-mail: [wolfa@geo.orst.edu](mailto:wolfa@geo.orst.edu)

**David B. Brooks**, Research Manager, Programs Branch, IDRC, 250 Albert Street, PO Box 8500, Ontario, Canada K1G 3H9; Tel: (613) 236-6163, ext. 2333; Fax: (613) 567-7748; E-mail: [dbrooks@idrc.ca](mailto:dbrooks@idrc.ca)

---

## Links to explore ...

Sidebar: ['Rightful Allocations': Breaking the Impasse in Middle East Water Negotiations](#)

[Catching Rooftop Rainwater in Gaza](#), by Stephen Hunt

[Combating Desertification: Rainwater Harvesting in Jordan](#), by Leila Deeb

[Israeli and Palestinian Waters: Economics, Ecology and Equity](#), by David Brooks

[Laying the Foundation for Joint Management of the Israeli-Palestinian Mountain Aquifer](#), by John Eberlee

---

[Management of Water Demand in Africa and the Middle East: Current Practices and Future Needs](#)

[Water Management in Africa and the Middle East: Challenges and Opportunities](#)

[Watershed: The Role of Fresh Water in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict](#)