

Regional Collaborative Water Management Approach in the Middle East

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ABSTRACT

We have always been told that life has started in water. We do not know it for sure but we know that without water there will be no life. Water is so crucial.

And water is scarce. At least it is now, due to the fact that world population has risen to today's level and it is still rising.

So people started talking and writing that soon we would find ourselves in "Water Wars." And these most probably will be fought in and around the Middle East which hardly needs another war or conflict.

This is an imposed perception and it is being imposed on the peoples of the Middle East deliberately as if there was no other option.

If war is being considered as a means of reducing the population so that the available water resources suffice then it makes sense but a bad one.

If this option is being promoted to sell more arms to the will be fighting sides again it makes sense but a cruel one.

When water, so important element of life is the issue the key word should not be "war" but "collaboration."

If a resource is scarce and getting even more scarce every day then the aim should be working together in order to make it available for all and as long as possible. This makes better sense.

Roughly speaking there are five main rivers and their basins in the Middle East, Turkey- although not a Middle East state- included: Firat (Euphrates), Dicle (Tigris), Asi (Orontes), Jordan and the Nile. All these rivers originate in one country, transcend one or more others and join the sea/lake in another.

So the picture is clear: As the resource can not be increased forever, all those countries are obliged to cooperate in order to make the best use of what is at their disposal.

This cooperation should aim at rational and optimum use of water resources of the region and should be based on accumulated and scientifically evaluated data.

The "Three Stage Plan" which Turkey had proposed to Syria and Irak in 1984 was based on such an approach. Three Stage Plan or a similar one may still be the best option for the peoples of the region.

Middle East countries which share the same environment, face with similar water problems. Problems on the other hand could and should be an incentive to facilitate and promote regional cooperation that could in turn also help solving political, social and economic issues. As decisions we made today will have a significant impact on future we are obliged and responsible to avoid water crises in the region and around also for the well being of future generations.

Regional Collaborative Water Management

Some twenty years ago around this time, in November 1998 to be precise, I said good-bye to Jordan as Turkish Ambassador to the Hashemite Kingdom.

The three years I was in Amman were again hectic and turbulent times in the Middle East -when it was not?- and more than that Turkey and Jordan were about to be at odds due to some words spoken by the then King of Jordan that wonderful personality, His majesty the King Hussein and the experienced statesman, the late President Demirel of Turkey.

With the invaluable help and support of King Hussein, Prince Hassan and all those close friends of mine some of whom are sitting among us today we were able to mend ties quickly and brought the relations of our two countries to a level maybe never reached before.

This state of affairs between Turkey and Jordan has also helped to bring in Israel and for the first time in history the three countries has started a strategic partnership dialogue among them.

I was from the very beginning involved in this process and tried my best to promote and encourage this kind of relationship and even dreamed of enlarging the group to include Egypt and others. Emir Hassan and the then Prime Minister Abdul Karim Kabariti shared and supported this opinion.

My personal involvement in Middle East affairs had come as a result of the first Multilaterals held in Moscow in 1992 of the Madrid Peace Process. I was the Deputy Director General for International Security and Disarmament at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and believed that with her long NATO and OSCE (now CSCE) experience Turkey could be of assistance to encourage meaningful dialogue and promote cooperation among the states of the Middle East. And this idea paid off rather unexpectedly and well.

The key words were “dialog” and “cooperation”. Only through these the region where a “crisis of confidence” were reigning for decades if not centuries could develop a feeling of security and solve many problems that prevented the countries of the region from achieving the positive progress in all fields. Something which they all longed and deserved for so long.

One of the crucial issues the region was facing with was water.

Except air, two elements are indispensable for life: Bread and water.

By the way, I just learned that Jordan with recent discovery of bread crumbs in Qa'Shubayqa in north-eastern Jordan have beaten Anatolia by nearly 5000 years as the place where bread was first baked.

Bread, I mean food we may increase its production although not indefinitely and for this too we need water.

Water is another matter though.

Water is a natural resource which the humans have very little influence on its quantity and quality except in the negative.

So we have to settle for what mother nature provides us with. And although we call it "mother", nature seldom is totally just in its distribution. So there are "haves and have nots" to various degrees.

Irak for instance is a water rich country.

Contrary to what is being pumped by some, Turkey on the other hand is not a water rich country according to the accepted criteria. And it is becoming more and more water poor due to many reasons including the climate change as a result of global warming or for its own repeated mistakes made in the course of many years.

Jordan is in desperate need of water and the need is becoming more and more pressing.

Reasons of it starting from inability in optimal use of water to pollution, non implementation by Israel the 1994 Wadi Araba Peace Treaty are all well known to you so I will not dwell upon them.

I will not involve in any technicality of the water issue either as I am not a water expert.

What I will in short try to give my opinion is how the crucial issue of water should be dealt with and solved to the benefit of all in the region.

And this is not an easy task as opinions as well as expectations widely differ and in the majority of cases they are quite selfish.

I remember for instance a very friendly but frank in terminology an encounter with His Royal Highness Emir Hassan by the side of the fireplace in his study room late one night when he asked my friend the then Water Minister Haddadin to read out his contribution to a water conference in İstanbul. A contribution which did not please Ankara at all.

We have to understand that rivers that are flowing through the Middle East be it Fırat (Euphrates), Dicle (Tigris), Asi (Orontes), Jordan (Şeria) or Nile are all "transboundary" rivers.

We have to admit also that no one will readily agree to “share” the waters of the rivers that originate in its land with other countries which these rivers later flow through.

Trying to attach different description to these rivers and to force “sharing” of their waters may make the much talked about “water wars” a dreadful reality.

However, another war or armed conflict of any other kind is the last thing the Middle East, that war and armed conflict thorn region should be looking forward to.

And this idea which is being put forward as if there were no other options is in my opinion is a deliberately “imposed perception” which if and when occurs will only serve the interests of main arms producers and will cost dearly to the peoples of the region.

Water issues whether national or international can only be dealt with satisfactorily through collaboration/cooperation of directly influenced and interested countries. As water is scarce and getting more and more scarce every day and that we the humans have nearly no say in increasing the amount nature provides us with key phrase for such cooperation is, “equitable, optimal and reasonable allocation of the use of water.”

The very first step in this direction which each and every country should take independent of other interested parties is to save and not waste and pollute water.

Next comes data collection which should be made through long years and using scientific methods. Data collection is crucial as only through reliable data we can make the right decisions on allocation to and use of water by cooperating partners. Right decisions will make the optimum use of available water by countries through which the rivers in question flow possible and bring high benefits in terms of valuable crops.

For those who are familiar with the issue and followed developments long enough these words of mine will surely bring into memory the Three Stage Plan which Turkey had proposed to Irak and Syria in 1984.

The Plan foresaw the three countries getting together to evaluate available data on the flow of Firat (Euphrates), establish the real needs of each and try to decide on an “equitable, optimal and reasonable allocation of the use of water” of the river.

To sum up, be it another three stage plan or call it something else the solution to the crucial and vital water issue in the Middle East in general or Jordan in particular lies in cooperation.



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Born in Istanbul in 1945. Graduated from the Faculty of Political Sciences (Ankara University) in 1966. Served as counsellor and Deputy Permanent Representative in Turkish Delegations to the Council of Europe, NATO and the CSCE/OSCE. In 1995 appointed as Ambassador to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Retired voluntarily in 1999. Upon request of the Minister of Foreign Affairs returned to duty and appointed as Director General for Bilateral Political Affairs. Served as Ambassador of Turkey in Belgrade-Serbia between 2008-2010.

He has written two books (“Belgrade. 500 Years Later” and “Desert Patrol. Jordan Memoirs”.) and many articles. He is a section chief of Hydropolitics Association.