

82. Glass half full or half empty? Transboundary water co-operation in the Jordan River Basin

by
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Extreme water scarcity and political conflict in the Middle East mean that transboundary water can be a source of conflict. Yet conflict and co-operation do exist side by side between Israel and the Palestinian Authority and between Israel and Jordan. A social science perspective is instrumental in understanding how water co-operation in the Jordan River Basin has developed.

Introduction

As the 2006 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) *Human Development Report* noted, managing hydrological interdependence is “one of the great human development challenges facing the international community”. The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is the region with the smallest per capita share of fresh water in the world (Allan, 2001). The region has only 1% of the available fresh water on the planet, and more than 5% of the population. In addition, much of the available water is found in rivers and aquifers shared by two or more countries, making conflict likely (Jägerskog, 2003).

Twenty years ago, researchers and politicians identified water as the next reason for war in the MENA region (Starr, 1991; Bulloch and Darwish, 1993; Homer-Dixon, 1994). However, none of the wars and conflicts that have occurred since were fought primarily over water (Wolf, 1995; Allan, 2001; Jägerskog, 2003). The analysts who predicted war over water did not take into account the water footprint of imported food. This covers the “deficit” of water in the region, and has led to a reduced risk of conflict as the global food market made more water available in its virtual form (Allan, 2001). Another reason for the decrease in the risk of conflict is that the states realised they had to co-operate over their shared waters, and did so despite other conflicts (Jägerskog, 2003). However, water still remains an issue of contention (Jägerskog, 2008).

Zeitoun and Mirumachi (2008) have shown that in transboundary systems, conflict and co-operation often exist side by side, and there is continuous negotiation even in periods of apparent disagreement (Earle, Jägerskog and Öjendal, 2010). This article discusses the quality and strength of the co-operation between the parties, which in turn

permits ongoing dialogue and negotiation. A social science perspective (primarily that of political science and international relations, but also sociology and discourse analysis) is instrumental in understanding how water co-operation in the Jordan River Basin has developed (Jägerskog, 2003).

Israeli–Palestinian and Israeli–Jordanian water conflict and co-operation

Since the 1950s, Israel and Jordan have co-ordinated issues pertaining to their shared waters from the River Jordan. Under the auspices of the UN Truce and Supervision Organization, the parties have discussed their common concerns in the so-called “picnic table talks” since the 1970s (Wolf, 1995).

In some respects, this technical co-operation was later codified in the 1994 Israeli–Jordanian peace agreement, of which water was a central aspect. Some previously informal water arrangements became central to the agreement, which takes many of the aspects relevant for proper transboundary water management into account. However, it is still unclear on other aspects. One of these concerns water allocation during drought years, which are frequent. The peace agreement specifies that the Joint Water Committee (JWC) should deal with this matter, instead of having a clear formula within the agreement to address recurring droughts (Jägerskog, 2003). In spite of the challenges, the agreement has functioned relatively well since it was signed. Jordan even stores its winter water inside Israel by pumping Jordanian water from the Yarmouk tributary to Israel’s Lake Tiberias; this water is returned to Jordan during the dry summer (Earle et al., 2010).

Israeli–Palestinian co-operation regarding water follows a different pattern. Before the Oslo process, there had primarily been unofficial dialogue between academics. Negotiations only started formally with the Oslo process. Further, the Declaration of Principles agreed on in 1993 and the subsequent Oslo II Accords in 1995 were never a full agreement on water – or any other issues – but dealt only partially with the water issue. The thinking was that negotiations about water would be concluded during the final negotiations between the two states, which were supposed to happen within five years of the Declaration of Principles. It was, however, agreed that the Palestinians had water rights, although these were not defined (Jägerskog, 2003). As with Israel and Jordan, a JWC has been institutionalised. This operates on a consensus-based approach, deals with West Bank water projects, and allows Israel to veto Palestinian projects. The original academic-level co-operation has rarely moved up to the political level (Jägerskog, 2003). While common norms and a certain degree of trust have been established between the professionals, political co-operation has been challenging. Selby’s analysis (2013) of the JWC since its inception reveals a rather damning picture of a failing structure that prevents the Palestinians from developing their own functioning water sector.

A political analysis of Jordanian–Israeli water relations shows that discourse and understanding at the technical level have provided improved co-operation, and that the political level generally accepted the discourse and development of norms that occurred at the technical level. This did not happen in the Israeli–Palestinian case, as entrenched political conflict overshadowed both water relations and efforts to build joint academic knowledge (Jägerskog, 2003). From a social scientific perspective, the conclusion is that in a situation in which the discourse affects co-operation positively – as was the case between Israel and Jordan but not to the same extent between Israel and the Palestinians – technical understanding can develop into a certain level of co-operation (Ryan, 1998).

Conclusions

The process of establishing and maintaining co-operation in the Jordan River Basin is challenging. In this short article, only part of the basin has been analysed, with Syria and Lebanon excluded. One important observation is that establishing co-operation is a process. It takes time and patience. Providing scientific material in order to gather data on flows and other aspects can contribute to improved decision-making. In regions that are “securitised”, as is the Jordan River Basin, politics is more important than scientific knowledge. However, joint research and projects can prepare the ground for when a political situation is ready for a solution.

A second observation is that while establishing co-operation is important, the analysis cannot end there. It is essential to analyse the quality of co-operation. Is it robust, and does it improve justice and the equitable sharing of resources? In the case of Israel and the Palestinian Authority, the institutionalisation of co-operation via the JWC has maintained a structure that allows Israeli domination of its Palestinian counterparts (Selby, 2013).

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