

The Blue Peace: Rethinking Middle East Water  
*June 2011*

# The Blue Peace: Rethinking Middle East Water

**Commentary by Hadi Tabbara**

"The Blue Peace: Rethinking Middle East Water" is a recent report launched in February of this year by Strategic Foresight Group, a think tank group based in India with support from Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, and the Department of Foreign Affairs in Switzerland. The scope of the report covers Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Territories with input from almost 100 leaders, current and former ministers, senior officials, and water experts in these seven countries. It includes a comprehensive and valuable account of the current water supply and demand for each country as well as projections for the next twenty years.

The report is based on the hypothesis that water crisis in the Middle East can be transformed into an opportunity for a new form of peace - the blue peace where any two countries with access to adequate, clean and sustainable water resources do not feel motivated to engage in a military conflict. Acknowledging that there is a cause and effect relationship between water and peace-while peace is needed for cooperation in water management, a collaborative approach to water management can build peace- the report proposes to define a new water paradigm in the Middle East: water can be managed in a sustainable way that satisfies the social and economic needs of people and thus help build a lasting peace.

The report highlights the challenges facing surface water resources in the region: The river flows in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan have depleted by 50 to 90 per cent from 1960 to 2010. For instance, the Yarmouk River declined from 600 MCM (Million Cubic Meters) to about 250-300 MCM per year while the Jordan River from 1300 MCM to 100 MCM. The Dead Sea, which is fed by the Jordan River basin, would transform into a lake within the next 50 years. The water level in Barada River Basin in Syria has dropped from 50 meters below ground in 1990 to 200 meters at present. The flow of Euphrates in Iraq declined from the long term average of 27 BCM to 9 BCM in 2009 and may shrink by 30 percent by 2100 on account of climate change only. The Tigris River, on the other hand, is suffering from severe pollution from agricultural, industrial and municipal sources with salinity levels that exceed 2500 ppm, further jeopardizing the already fragile Shatt-Al Arab waterway where the Tigris meets the Euphrates.

For shared groundwater resources the report portrays an equally grim picture: The Mountain Aquifer shared by Israel and the Palestinian Territories reduced by 7% in the last decade or so, while the West Galilee aquifer reduced by 15-20% during the same time. The Disi aquifer, a fossil and non-renewable

aquifer shared by Jordan and Saudi Arabia would be depleted in less than 100 years (its predictable lifetime) if the current mismanagement prevails. The Coastal Aquifers in Gaza and Lebanon face serious water quality challenges due to over pumping from illegal wells and the resultant seawater intrusion. Climate change will exacerbate the problems of water quality where the projected rise in sea level, 18 cm by 2030, will further exacerbate the problem of seawater intrusion and render salinity of the groundwater around Beirut unfit to drink.

To address these challenges, The Strategic Foresight Group proposes short, medium, and long term solutions. A key short term solution is the establishment of "Circles of Countries" as units of cooperation governed by a Cooperation Council, an idea first proposed by HRH Prince Hassan bin Talal of Jordan in May 2010. A Circle of Cooperation is defined by a group of countries "which have either demonstrated some appreciation of their common future or those that are intrinsically linked by shared water resources". Two circles of cooperation are identified. The first circle (Northern Circle) includes Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan and the second would include Israel and the Palestinian Territories, eventually expanding to Jordan. The Cooperation Council would have the mandate to help establish standards for measuring water flows and quality, develop regional models for combating climate change, spread new technologies, and facilitate basin level integrated water management. In medium terms, the report proposes Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) for Small Cross Border Rivers in the Northern Circle. This includes the El Kebir River between Lebanon and Syria, the Yarmouk river between Syria and Jordan, and Orontes (Assi) River between Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey. In longer terms, the report calls for joint Desalination Plants, the export of Water from Turkish National Rivers (and possibly from the Litani River) to the Jordan Valley, and the establishment of Lake Tiberias as a "Regional Commons" to be governed jointly by Israel and Syria.

The report finally examines Water Demand Management (WDM) in each of the countries under study and proposes certain measures. This include efficient irrigation such as drip irrigation, shifting from water intensive crops, wastewater and drainage water reuse, water conservation in the domestic, industrial and agricultural sectors, introducing appropriate water tariffs, and rehabilitation of the aging water infrastructures.

## **1. Comments on the Report:**

(i) The authors of the report stress from the onset that an approach focused on circles of countries should be clearly distinguished from an approach based on basin or aquifer management. However and according to the proposed strategies, the next step following the formation of a "Circle of Cooperation", is the "need for basin wide joint watershed development programmes" and the need for "integrated data management systems for the basin" and at a later stage "establishing a joint river basin commission". Thus it is not clear how this approach differs from a river basin or aquifer management.

(ii) The Blue Peace objective is to charter a road map for each country to manage its sovereign water resources, and through collaboration with other riparian(s), to manage its shared water resource. While the report adequately assesses the current and future needs of each country in terms of augmenting its water supply and managing the rising demand, it did not go into similar details when discussing concrete steps or possible solutions for riparians to resolve their perennial disputes over shared water. Strategic Foresight Group initiated the Blue Peace project in 2008. At the same time another study<sup>[1]</sup> on water disputes in the Middle East was published by UNESCO International Hydrological Program (IHP). Authored by Dr. Jon Martin Trondale, the study contains detailed proposals for resolving water disputes in four regions of the Middle East- The Water of the Golan Heights (Syria and Israel), Upper Jordan River and the Wazzani Springs (Lebanon and Israel), Lower Jordan (Palestine and Israel), and the Euphrates -Tigris Rivers (Syria, Iraq, and Turkey). It also contains the necessary hydrological and geopolitical maps necessary to understand the complex nature of water conflict in the Middle East. The UNESCO- IHP publication would thus serve as an excellent companion reference for following the discussions in the Blue Peace report, especially since the latter does not contain the adequate maps and illustrations to help the reader through.

(iii) The premise of the Blue Peace - that no two countries that have access to sufficient, clean, and affordable water would ever go to war in the 21<sup>st</sup> century - is an untested hypothesis. There is an example in recent history where this is not necessarily true: The Iran-Iraq war was between two countries that enjoy relatively abundant water resources. Thus the new strategies and initiatives promulgated in this report should be based on the political reality on the ground. The political map intrinsically shape the water map of the Middle East and not vice versa. Unless the ambitious plan proposed in the Blue Peace is coupled to the social and political reality, its fate will not be different from the Johnston Plan and other initiatives that died of thirst and became wood for fire!

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[1] Jon Martin Trondalen "Water and Peace for the People - Possible Solutions to Water Disputes in the Middle East." UNESCO-IHP Publication. 2008.