

# Water policies and security in Israel

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **ASMZ : Sicherheit Schweiz : Allgemeine schweizerische Militärzeitschrift**

Band (Jahr): **170 (2004)**

Heft 3

PDF erstellt am: **17.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-69181>

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# Water policies and security in Israel

**Wasserpolitik stellt in Israel eine Funktion sicherheitspolitischer und ideologischer Überlegungen dar. Dies führt zu einer suboptimalen Verteilung der lebenswichtigen Ressource und ist damit eine weitere Konfliktursache.**

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Stefan Deconinck

## Water scarcity in Israel

Water scarcity in Israel is the resultant of three different variables: the demand for water, the availability of water to meet the demands, and the policies that determine the distribution of water within the society. Understanding the possibilities and the limits of water resources for Israeli development is essential to define the problem of water as a security issue in Israel.

Just like other countries in the Middle East, the demand of water is growing steadily in Israel. This growth is caused by two main factors. The first one is the increase of the population. Currently, natural population growth in Israel is rather modest compared to an average Palestinian growth rate of 4.5 per cent. But increase of population in Israel is also produced by continuing immigration of Jews and other immigrants from abroad. For its water policy planning, the Israel estimates the number of inhabitants to grow from 6.5 million in 2002 to 7.3 million in 2010, and 8.6 million in 2020. The second factor that leads to a larger demand of water is economic development. As a rule of the thumb, the amount of water that for the average package of basic domestic water needs and for public uses grows alongside the growth of BNP per head within a country. Therefore, industrialisation and modernisation of the Middle East societies caused a sharp increase in the *pro capita* water consumption. Added to that, the many immigrants to Israel from western societies imported their corresponding western-style water needs into a country that is located in an arid or semi-arid region.

Compared to the world average of about 1500m<sup>3</sup>/person/year, natural water resources are very limited available in Israel. Based on figures from the Israeli Water Commission, every Israeli has an average share of about 251m<sup>3</sup>/p/y from the natural water resources, which is remarkably low, given some averages in other western-style societies. For internal use, Israel handles its own minimum standard of 100m<sup>3</sup>/p/y. Even then, the so-called non-Jewish sector (which represents one fifth of the Israeli population) even doesn't reach an average of 45m<sup>3</sup>/p/y.

As the total amount of natural water resources in Israel is estimated at 2.2 billion m<sup>3</sup>, the present utilisation rate of 75% of

these resources makes it difficult to expand consumption. Although these resources must be considered as yearly renewable damage to the systems due to pollution and over-consumption might decrease the availability of water of drinking quality. The use of additional or non-conventional water resources for the domestic and municipal sectors is at this moment hardly an alternative.

Within the straitjacket of limited water availability, different sectors within society compete for access the resources. According to the Israeli figures for 2002, the total internal water consumption was divided as follows: 38.2% domestic, 7.0% industrial and 54.8% agricultural.

The share of irrigated agriculture in the total water consumption has dropped considerable during the past ten years, from 75% in 1991 to less than 55% in 2002. The share of agricultural use of fresh water (drinking water quality) shrunk to about 42% in 2002. Nevertheless, agriculture remains a major consumer of the scarce resource, whereas its economic importance is rather limited: 1.8 of the NDP. The other sectors with only 7% of the water resources make more than 98% of the economic production of the country. In the light of growing water stress, the dominant position of agriculture in the overall water consumption seems irrational from a developmental point of view. As we will discuss below, the special position of agriculture is sound within the political economy of water in Israel.

## Shared water resources as a security issue

The largest freshwater resource for Israel is the Jordan River. Its sources can be found in the north of the country, where three smaller rivers flow together. Two of them, the Hasbani and the Baniyas, are originating respectively from Lebanon and the Syrian Golan heights. Israel uses the Lake of Galilee as a natural reservoir to regulate the distribution of water from the Jordan River throughout the country; water is transferred through the National Water Carrier – a network of canals and pipelines – to the more populated coastal plain in the west and the farms in the Negev in the south.

South of the Lake of Galilee the Jordan River flows together with the Yarmouk River, containing water from Syria and Jordan, and continues its course towards the

Dead Sea. Syria and Jordan established a series of dams, drainages and discharges on the Yarmouk River as well, for maximum profit of every drop of water within their national borders. When the river eventually reaches the Palestinian West Bank, the upstream riparians used all the water they could, and what is left for the Palestinians is nothing more than a brackish muddy stream.

The second important sources for potable water are the aquifers, groundwater layers which are shared with the Palestinians. One third of the Israeli water consumption comes from resources from the mountain aquifer under the West Bank. Another aquifer is located under the coastal zone and includes the Palestinian Gaza Strip. Here Israel is the upstream riparian state, which means that water is flowing from under Israeli territory into Gaza.

After the military victory over its Arab neighbours in the war of 1967, Israel country gained control over these water resources which are so essential for its water budget. The occupation of the Golan Heights and the West Bank enables Israel to consider these resources as "national" resources and to manage them for its own benefit. A new regime was imposed on the water of the Palestinian Territories and the resources became subject to Israeli water legislation. They became public property that could be "destined for the requirements of its inhabitants and for the development of the country", quoting the Israeli water law. Palestinian landowners could no longer claim any rights to water resources and the authority over the water resources to the military commanders of the area. These military commanders became responsible for granting exploitation licences for existing and new water installations, or to plant new citrus gardens. Meters were placed on the Palestinian wells to limit their capacity. The institutional control over the water resources in the Occupied Territories was finally completed in 1982 when water management was transferred to the Israeli national water company *Mekorot*. Water policies in the West Bank and Gaza were from then principally focused on the supply of the Jewish settlements and the population in mainland-Israel. The result is devastating for the Palestinian population, which has to live under harsh conditions due to water shortages that lead to the gradual collapse of the Palestinian economic life and the present humanitarian crisis.

[www.asnz.ch/news](http://www.asnz.ch/news)

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In the Oslo-peace process between 1993 and 2000, it became clear that Israel regards the transfer of authority over the water resources of the West Bank to the Palestinian provisional government as a serious threat to the national water household, since it means giving over the control over vital resources in the hands of what they see as an unreliable neighbour. Therefore, the issue of the water resources was one of the five matters (together with Jerusalem, the Palestinian refugees, Jewish settlements and the future status and borders of a Palestinian entity) over which the negotiators failed to reach a final agreement on.

The incident on the border with Lebanon in autumn 2002 is another illustration of the Israeli concern to keep control over the main water resources. Lebanon started to withdraw 2 million m<sup>3</sup> from the Wazzani River, which is a tributary to the Jordan River via the Hasbani, to provide some villages close to the Israeli border with drinking water. Until May 2000, this area was part of the Israeli-occupied security zone; the withdrawal of the Israeli army enabled Lebanon to regain control over a part of the sources of the Jordan River. The new Lebanese activities alarmed the Israeli government and prime minister Ariel Sharon called it a *casus belli*. He threatened to use military means to force the Lebanese to abandon their plans. An American technical mission, involvement of UN-Secretary General Kofi Annan and diplomatic efforts from the EU and the *Franophonie*-conference (which happened to take place in Beirut at that very moment) resulted in the cooling down of the tension. But from the Israeli side, the signal was clear that touching even the slightest amount of water from what it considers to be its national resources (in this case it concerned only about 1 per mille of the total amount of water in Israel) represents a major threat to the national security, and that the state would react with all means at its disposal to protect its interests.

## Water and ideology

In June 2001, the Israeli parliament (Knesset) set up a committee of inquiry on the Israeli water sector. Its main tasks were to investigate the causes of the lousy state of the Israeli water resources, and to formulate recommendations to respond to this emergency. The committee worked for almost one year, and published an extensive report on its investigations and hearings. This document gives an interesting insight in the basic assumptions and guiding principles of the internal water policy since the establishment of the state in 1948.

The chapter on the "background to the crisis in the Israeli water sector" contains 7 pages on "agriculture and water". A con-

frontation of opinions amongst academics and stakeholders on the responsibility of agriculture for the crisis and the influence of interest groups in decision-making reflects one of the most sensitive parts of the commission's inquiry. In relation to the discussion on agricultural policies, various references were made to Zionism as the leading ideology on which the current Israeli state is based. In the report, a spokesperson of the farmers defined one of the foundations of Zionism as "the return of the Jews to the soil, and farming (...) to make the desert bloom". The Knesset committee formulates it in its conclusions as follows: "In the eyes of the Committee agriculture has a Zionist-strategic-political value, which goes beyond its economic contribution".

However, this approach becomes more often contested within the Israeli society; in an interview with a representative of the Knesset committee, Prof. Hillel Shuval claimed that "Zionism today means absorbing immigrants, and become a State with a population of 10-12 million people – not being a State with an unprofitable agriculture". By this, he referred to the most important aspect of Zionism as state ideology, notably the *aliyah* or the 'return' of Jews from abroad a Jewish national home, which is considered the main *raison d'être* of Israel. The availability of sufficient amounts of water to absorb these immigrants and to offer them a western-style standard of living is essential to attain this goal. Within this ideological framework internal water security clearly links up with state security.

## Water policies for the future: redefining security?

In August 2000, the Water Commissioner presented a long-term water policy document, called "Long term tasks of the Israeli water sector". The document outlines the general framework for a water policy towards 2020, during which period Israel faces the challenge to cope with increasing water scarcity. The plan aims at the maintenance the present level of water consumption by households, industry and agriculture while preserving the country's natural water resources – especially during years with under average winter rains that fail to recharge the underground and surface water systems. The core of the plan consists of the creation of additional resources of potable water for direct human consumption through a major investment in desalination facilities, and the substitution of drinking water for irrigated agriculture by using increasingly more recycled wastewater. Also here preserving agriculture is justified in ideological rather than in economical terms.

## Gelesen

Gelesen im Heft «Schiffbruch mit Zuschauern» (Schweizerzeit-Schriftenreihe Nr. 45) von Dr. iur. Hans Bachofner, Divisionär aD, vormals SCOS, früherer Chefredaktor der ASMZ:

«Der neue Terrorismus hat viele Gesichter und viele Ursachen. Islamistischer Terrorismus steht im Zentrum der Tagesaktualität, aber er ist nicht der einzige. Terror ist eine Methode und kein Feind. Er lässt sich nicht verhindern und ausrotten.

Aber er lässt sich erschweren, indem man eigene Gegenmassnahmen vorbereitet und eintrainiert. Terror wird verschärft durch falsche Reaktionen. Rache, Kollektivstrafen und Tötung Unschuldiger sind falsch.» G.

The absolute necessity to provide additional water for domestic use urged the policymakers to speed up the schedule of the construction of desalination facilities in order to dispose already in 2010 of a desalination capacity of at least 500 million m<sup>3</sup> (which counterbalances the expected water deficit), as stated in the "Transitional master plan for water sector development in the period 2002–2010".

However, opposition to the construction of the desalination capacity by the finance ministry for budgetary reasons has caused a substantial delay in the implementation of this essential part of the new policy. As the cost of the present water policy and its ideological component is becoming more and more criticized, a different water security regime might be considered, like linking up water policies with a regional approach and promoting functional cooperation among all the riparian states. Although water has been used as political change in the Israeli-Jordanian peace agreement of 1994, under the present state of the conflicts in the region this doesn't seem realistic. Have a look at the Geneva Accord, which were negotiated by well-meaning Israeli and Palestinians who brought about a breakthrough on the mutual positions on Jerusalem, refugees and settlements but who left open the articles on water. Can we consider it as a meaningful sign that a "technical" solution on sharing the water resources remains a political obstacle for them, too?

Background information and footnotes can be obtained at the author via <http://waternet.UGent.be/>



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