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Water and world peace

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Little over 1,300 years ago, in 715 AD, Caliph Al Walid dedicated a grand mosque to the people of Damascus.

In his dedication address, he said that four things made his city superior: climate, water, fruits and baths.

The mosaics at the entrance of the Ummayyad Mosque depicted flowing rivers and rich greenery. Even today visitors to the mosque can look upon these mosaics.

Until only 60 years ago, people of the Levantine region could identify themselves with the mosaics. Indeed, all over the world, rivers and lakes nurtured lush green pastures, and trees provided livelihood to farmers and fishermen and gave birth to the music of oarsmen.

In Asia, Europe and Africa blue streams inspired musicians, artists and authors.

In the 1950s, the area of the Dead Sea was 950 square kilometres, of the Aral Sea 68,000 square km and of Lake Chad 25,000 square km.

Today, the Dead Sea has an area of 637 square km, the Aral Sea 17,000 square km and Lake Chad about 1,300 square km.

The shrinking area of these bodies of water is a result of the diversion and degradation of rivers that feed them.

More significantly, it represents the shrinking of common sense, goodwill and understanding between countries that share water resources.

Sadly, the most arid parts of the world can often be found between our ears.

Experts say that water was one of the major factors in the war of 1967 in the Middle East.

They also say that if a war ever takes place in Northern Africa or Central Asia, it will be over disputed water sources.

While water on its own may not be the main trigger for a war, it can exacerbate existing crises and elevate those crises to critical levels.

The Water Cooperation Quotient developed by the Strategic Foresight Group, analysing almost all of the 286 shared river basins in 148 countries in the world, clearly showed a strong correlation between water cooperation and a reduced risk of war. Indeed, countries engaged in active water cooperation do not go to war.

It is necessary to make a distinction between basic water cooperation, which is about daily management of a shared basin, and active water cooperation, which is about high-level political engagement to use water as a force for peace.

It is also necessary to make conscious efforts to promote active water cooperation.

At the beginning of the decade, we came together to launch the Blue Peace Process in the Middle East.

It has created a community of champions amongst policy makers and shapers of opinion who go against the current trend to transform water from a potential

source of crisis into an instrument of peace.

The Blue Peace process has also contributed to the renewal of cooperation between Iraq and Turkey on the Tigris River.

It will reach its logical conclusion when a "cooperation council for the sustainable management of water" is established in the post-conflict scenario.

The efforts that began in the Middle East with the Blue Peace process spread elsewhere in the world.

Last November, for the first time in the history of the United Nations, the Security Council convened a special session on Water, Peace and Security, where it emphasised the value of cooperation.

Once the refined Water Cooperation Quotient is available, in the second half of 2017, riparian countries will have a decision support tool to develop transboundary cooperation in a phased manner.

There is growing realisation of the importance of water cooperation.

China has taken a lead to create Lancang Mekong mechanism to support the Mekong River Commission.

India and Bangladesh hope to sign an accord over Teesta River.

The presidents of Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan have made a beginning for addressing mutual concerns in the construction of Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.

Peru and Bolivia treat Lake Titicaca as a regional common, as a unified body with shared sov-

erignty.

The growing challenges of security arising from the lack of water cooperation and the new glimmers of hope emanating from increasing appreciation of its importance require a systematic analysis of the relationship between water and peace.

Such an analysis must lead to recommendations for a new global architecture of water and peace.

The 15-country Global High Level Panel on Water and Peace aims precisely at proposing such architecture. It has met several times across multiple continents and is preparing to submit its report to the United Nations in September 2017.

It is fortuitous that the conclusive meeting of the Global High Level Panel is taking place in Amman on May 3-4, 2017.

It was in Amman, in 2013, that we first revealed the link between water cooperation and world peace. And it is in Amman that the great minds that form the Global High Level Panel will finalise their recommendation on how water can enhance world peace.

We hope that Amman will be known as a place that turned the tide.

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