

# BLUE PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST HIGH LEVEL FORUM

*Co-Hosted by*

Strategic Foresight Group  
*and*  
University of Geneva

*In Cooperation with*

Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation  
*and*  
Human Security Division, Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, Switzerland

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The High-Level Forum on Blue Peace in the Middle-East was co-hosted by the Strategic Foresight Group and the University of Geneva in cooperation with the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and the Human Security Division of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs on the 8th and 9th of October 2015. About 70 policy makers, Members of Parliament, serving and former Ministers, media leaders, academics and water experts from across the Middle East came together for the forum which was held in Geneva, Switzerland.

The High Level Forum marked the continuity of the Blue Peace community which has emerged as the soft infrastructure for dialogue and a rare channel of communication between countries affected by internal and inter-state violence. It endorsed specific confidence building measures at the bilateral and sub-regional level. It included a capacity building workshop for the media in the Middle East. It



concluded with the proposition of new directions for its work. While in the long run, the Blue Peace community in the Middle East will work towards the achievement of water as a sustainable development goal, in the short run, it will foster efforts to protect water as a strategic and humanitarian asset. On behalf of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, Ambassador Thomas Greminger delivered the Opening Address and Mr Dominique Favre made the valedictory remarks at the High Level Forum.

## **OPENING SESSION**

The session kicked off with a message from HRH Prince El Hassan bin Talal of Jordan, delivered by Dr Hakam Al-Alami. HRH Prince Hassan expressed concern over the fact that despite efforts by the international and regional water community, water is still being used as a tool of war. He also highlighted the relationship between water and refugees, the nexus between water, food and energy and the impacts of the lack of a regional framework on the overall economic growth of the region. He said that regional stabilisation, innovative practices, strategic

partnerships and human security were necessary in solving the water crisis and called for the prioritisation of water and sanitation needs in accordance with the Sustainable Development Goals.

Ambassador Thomas Greminger, in his opening address, observed:

- On 25 September all 193 UN-members formally adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development including a global goal on Water. The new 2030 Agenda makes it clear that we all have a shared responsibility to address this global risk by ensuring available and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.
- The global water crisis is not just a threat but a threat multiplier, with implications for food and energy security as well as for political and social stability. This is illustrated by increased competition between water uses, growing debates around large dams and tensions over land and water at local and international levels.
- The Blue Peace community is a soft infrastructure for dialogue that is operational, even when political realities do not allow for more formal track one processes for dialogue and cooperation between nations. It is the only platform that is currently engaging multiple stakeholders from Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey and to a limited extent even Syria not just on water but on any issue at all.
- When we started work on Blue Peace in the Middle East, after the launch of the report in 2011, water was seen widely as an item on the development agenda. Today, water is perceived as a strategic and humanitarian good. Its supply and demand is closely linked to refugees, displacement, gender situation, terrorism and drought. Therefore, in the short run we need to create mechanisms that address these linkages between water and other humanitarian and strategic issues, and in the long run, we have to ensure the sustainability of water supply and good governance in the sector for the sake of development.



Mr. Abdul-Sattar Majid Qadir, Minister of Agriculture and Water Resources, Kurdistan Regional Government, Iraq delivered the keynote address. He stressed that the collective management of water resources is extremely necessary in light of the fact that the Middle East is experiencing a high incidence of water

conflicts. This could be achieved through cooperation, sustainable use of existing resources and also by supplementing resources with other means such as rain water, spring water and use of new and advanced technology. He spoke about the need to activate Dukan and Darbandikhan dams for providing water to the surrounding areas, the need to stop wasting water and recognised the threat of global warming for depleting water resources in the region.

He urged that water should not be used as a pressure point in relations between countries, but should rather be seen as an instrument of developing dialogue and peace. The Minister declared support for the Blue Peace process and called for senior policy makers in all countries to be further involved in the process.

Ambassador Majid Hassan of Iraq conveyed the support of the Government of Iraq to the Blue Peace process and particularly to the bilateral confidence building measures between Turkey and Iraq.

## REGIONAL APPROACHES

A panel comprising of senior policy makers and parliamentarians from Turkey, Jordan and Iraq chaired by the Rt. Hon. Lord John Alderdice discussed regional water cooperation mechanisms beyond 2015 in light of the transformation of the region from an era of cooperation in 2010 to an era of conflict and crisis in 2015.



- The panel recognised the enormity of humanitarian crisis in the Middle East at present due to displacement, violence and extremism, all of which create a sense of loss of dignity and justice among common people.
- In the short run, we need to address immediate problems arising out of breakdown of trust and growing humanitarian crisis. All efforts should be made to declare water off limits for war. Organisations such as the Red Cross and Red Crescent should be approached to address the problem. It is also necessary for the Blue Peace network to continue to function to fill some of the void created by the absence of official regional cooperation institutions.
- In the long run, it is necessary to have concrete institutional framework for cooperation. It is necessary for us to begin thinking about “the day after”.
- There is a sharp decline in the per capita availability of water in parts of the region, both due to depletion of water resources and pressure on demand placed by influx of refugees.
- Some of the speakers rued the losses created by lack of cooperation in the last 25 years. There is a need to assess the cost of inaction.
- Water has to be seen in its multi-dimensional perspective. On the one hand, it is a security issue - used by non-state organisations like ISIS (Daesh) as a target and weapon of war - and on the other hand it is a development issue closely linked to agriculture and energy.
- It is absolutely necessary to have a futuristic approach for a sound regional organisation with a mandate to solve the water problem in a collaborative manner. It is about time that a pre-emptive approach replaces the prevailing reactionary mindset. It is important to introduce basin-centric approach in planning and to explore trade-offs between water and other related sectors. In order to do this, it is necessary to have an intergovernmental organisation at the regional level in the Middle East.

It must be noted that while a large number of participants supported the establishment of a permanent interstate regional organisation for the management of water resources, some participants expressed preference for a gradual approach based on specific technical measures and practical projects for exchange and harmonisation of data.

## BILATERAL APPROACHES

The following bilateral approaches for joint water management in the region were discussed by the experts.

### 1. The Iraq – Turkey Track

Dr Ahmet Saatci of Turkey and Mr Forat Al Timimi of Iraq led the discussion, which included the review of bilateral agreements, treaties and efforts at the track one and track two levels in the past. There is a concrete progress on the Tigris Consensus initiative between the two countries, under the auspices of the Blue Peace process, for exchange, harmonisation and calibration of data on the Tigris River, using output from designated monitoring stations in the border areas - one each in Iraq and Turkey. In the case of Turkey, a high quality monitoring station capable of performing such tasks is already in operation. In case of Iraq, a monitoring station near the border will need to be built, for which Iraq can expect technical input from Turkey and technical and financial support from Switzerland. At present, the border areas in both countries are under the domination of violent non-state actors. However, considering the willingness of the two countries, it can be expected that such a measure will be implemented as soon as there is a political space and reduction in violence.

### 2. The Israel- Palestine Track

Mr Mario Carera introduced the Israel-Palestine initiative on water to the group. Water experts from Israel and Palestine met in June and August 2015 in Mumbai and Stockholm respectively to understand ways to revitalise the Joint Water Committee. Palestinian water experts have submitted a list of water development projects as “fast-track” projects for immediate approval. The Israeli experts will review them to explore if the implementation of such projects could be facilitated to build confidence between the two sides.



### 3. The Lebanon – Syria Track (The Orontes River Basin)

Prof Ronald Jaubert introduced atlas of the Orontes River Basin in the context of transboundary water issues between Lebanon and Syria and the role of water in the Syrian conflict.

#### MEDIA WORKSHOP

To strengthen the involvement of media in spreading awareness and creating demand for the sustainable management of water resources in the Middle East, a capacity-building workshop for media experts from the region was organised on the 8<sup>th</sup> of October, 2015.

The workshop has presentations from:-

- Prof Martin Beniston from the University of Geneva who spoke about the impacts of climate change on available water resources, upstream and downstream links and changing hydrology in the Alps.
- Dr Christian Brethaut made a presentation on the instruments of cooperation used for transboundary river management. River management is governed by different organisational frameworks, legal regimes and the ‘context’ of water.
- Dr Francesca de Chatel spoke about the challenges in mainstreaming water stories in the media and its role in shaping perceptions about water. She also drew attention to the problem of reporting unchecked and inaccurate data.
- Mr Stuart Reigeluth presented the case study of Revolve magazine and its work in publishing on water.



A panel of media leaders from Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq discussed how to mainstream water issues in regional and national media. Some of the observations were:

- The issue of transboundary water management must be brought closer to basic needs of the common person in the Middle East.
- It is important to underline the urgency of water issue - this is about crisis on our doorsteps and not about a future risk.



- There is a need to simplify data so that media can effectively communicate with the public.
- It is important to have dialogue between media persons on the one hand and policy makers and scientists on the other so that the media would get credible information and the policy making and scientific community would be able to transmit its key messages to public.
- Social media can be harnessed in sensitising people to water issues.
- Images, info-graphics, historical photographs help people better understand data surrounding water depletion and scarcity.
- Women have a close relationship with water and therefore links between women, water and peace should be highlighted.
- It is necessary to undertake coordinated and shared efforts by media leaders from different countries in the Middle East for greater impact of the collective approach than what can be achieved through individual approaches.
- There has to be continuous commitment and engagement of water journalists to periodically research and publish about water.



- The media leaders can also use their access to political leaders to convey messages informally.

## **CONCLUSION: KEY MESSAGES**

1. The Blue Peace Community in the Middle East is a soft infrastructure for dialogue. It will be in a position to contribute to positive change as soon as the political space opens up. It should be nurtured, diversified and strengthened.
2. The long term objective for enabling water cooperation in the Middle East is to create an institutional mechanism such as a Cooperation Council for the sustainable management of water resources. In the Middle East, Heads of States and civil society organisations have fostered regional cooperation in different spheres of economic life. However, it has floundered in the absence of interstate, effective institutionalisation of cooperation. The experience of river basins around the world shows the importance of such institutionalisation. In the Middle East, some countries support institutionalisation of cooperation, whereas some have reservations. It is important to note that there is no single and ideal model of institutional cooperation. The countries in the Middle East can construct a model which is appropriate for their environment drawing from best practices from around the world.
3. The states and civil society should not allow non-state violent actors to target water infrastructure in the course of conflicts, or to use water assets as an instrument of violence. Any attack on water assets or their use as a tool in warfare or terrorism should be treated as a threat to humanity. This is a relatively new phenomenon in the Middle East due to the rise of Daesh or ISIS. It is necessary to use our intellectual capital to decide how to respond to these phenomena. In particular, the role of organisations such as International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC), should be explored.
4. It will be useful to engage Iran in the Blue Peace Process, as the tributaries of some of the rivers flowing into Turkey originate from Iran, that country is very much part of the Middle Eastern hydro-political region. In the past it was not possible to engage with Iran due to geo-political and practical constraints. With the growing improvement of

relationship between Iran and the international community, a future engagement should be possible.

5. Specific bilateral confidence building measures should be promoted. In this respect, the progress made by Iraq and Turkey to exchange, harmonise and calibrate data about the flow of the Tigris River is welcome. It has been agreed to use one hydro-metrological station each from Iraq and Turkey in the border area for this purpose. In the case of Turkey, such a station already exists. In the case of Iraq, it would be necessary to establish such as a station with technical cooperation from Turkey and financial support from Switzerland. In both cases, the border areas of two countries are currently experiencing extremist violence, which makes it difficult to use the stations in an optimum way. Therefore, the understanding that has been reached can be translated into action, as soon as the political situation allows. This initiative will help translate the agreements reached in bilateral intergovernmental meetings between Iraq and Turkey in mid-2014 and December 2014 into a reality. Similarly, a discussion on bilateral confidence building measures between Israel and Palestine are in progress. More such specific bilateral or sub-regional confidence building measures should be encouraged.



6. Besides the quantitative aspects of trans-boundary water management, it is important to focus on governance, demand, and quality of water courses. The countries in the Middle East can organise expert sessions for exchange of experiences in governance and quality related issues. Such sessions can be useful in exchanging best practices from one another. It would also be useful to explore the role of various catalysts in the society to educate public opinion.

7. The role of media is immensely important. The sharing of knowledge and experiences between the countries within the region as well as River Basin Organisations outside the

region is highly important. The participation of media leaders in the Blue Peace community should be enhanced.

8. The process of Blue Peace should be shaped simultaneously bearing in mind short term as well as long term objectives. In the short term, immediate issues need to be addressed, including specific confidence building measures, expansion of knowledge sharing initiatives, condemnation of the use of water as a weapon or target of violence, promotion of institutional mechanisms and engagement with decision makers, as outlined above. In the long run, water as a sustainable development goal has to be promoted. While in the immediate future in the Middle East, water may appear to be about strategic and humanitarian crisis, it is important to remember that in the long run, water is indeed about sustainability and development.

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- ◆ Mr Safa Alsheikh, Deputy of National Security Advisor to the Iraqi Government
- ◆ Mr Forat Al Timimi, Chairman of Parliamentary Committee on Water and Agriculture
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