

High Level Roundtable on Regional Cooperation in the Middle East: Water as an Instrument of Peace

Archbishop's Room, Millbank House, House of Lords
UK Parliament, London

Monday, 26 September 2016

Co-hosted by

Strategic Foresight Group

***Centre for the Resolution of Intractable Conflicts at Harris Manchester College, Oxford
University***

Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation

Human Security Division of Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs



A group of ministers and parliamentarians from Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey met at the House of Lords in London on 26 September 2016 to explore prospects of regional cooperation using water as an instrument of peace in the Middle East. The meeting was co-convened by the Strategic Foresight Group and the Centre for the Resolution of Intractable Conflicts at Harris Manchester College, Oxford University in cooperation with the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and the Human Security Division of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs of the Government of Switzerland. It was co-chaired by the Right Honourable Lord Alderdice and Dr Sundeep Waslekar.

In his opening remarks Amb. Pio Wennubst explained the importance of resilience and continuation in the process of dialogue in challenging environments, such as the Middle East. He emphasised that

there is a need to find a way ahead for daunting disputes. This message set the tone for the discussion during the day.

Challenging Context

The participants from the Middle East explained the context in which they were meeting. Escalation of violence, weakness of the democratic institutions, growing number of refugees, vulnerability of women and children are some of the key elements in the crisis.

They noted that a fundamental shift is taking place in the nature of conflict in the Middle East. For sixty years from 1950 to 2010, the Arab Israel conflict dominated the Middle East. Now the region is seized by sectarian conflict as people define their identity in sectarian ways rather than in nationalist terms. The governance of states poses to be a problem. Millions of refugees and internally displaced persons change demography and put pressures on the resources in an unprecedented way. In such an unstable political environment, water provides a rare opportunity for building cooperation and mutual trust.



Search for Solutions

In an otherwise gloomy environment, the countries in the region are exploring practical means of cooperation to the shared water resources.

- Iraq and Turkey have recently concluded agreements to commence feasibility studies for three “Friendship Dams” in the border area. Once constructed the benefits from the dams will be shared by the two countries.

- Israel and Turkey have concluded an agreement to set up a desalination plant in Gaza with Turkish financial sponsorship. Israel is also contemplating increasing the supply of desalinated water to Gaza.
- Lebanon has visa free travel to the neighbouring countries.

There was appreciation that only six years ago Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Turkey had created a Quadrilateral Free Trade Area with an invitation to Iraq to join them. It led to regional integration at an exceptionally fast pace. Even though this initiative has been suspended for the political crisis, it demonstrates that the countries in the region can usher in an era of cooperation, if they have the political will to do so.

One of the reasons for the failure of the Quadrilateral Free Trade Area was the lack of regional institutions. Some of the old institutions such as the Arab League have effectively collapsed, while new ones have not been formed. It is therefore necessary to address the issue of institutional void in the Middle East. While bilateral efforts are essential, it is necessary to have regional institutional mechanism for cooperation.

Second, it is important to exploit new technologies. In particular, desalination, drip irrigation, water saving techniques, waste water treatment that help reduce demand pressures at a time when resources are depleting. It is necessary to stop thinking of water as a zero sum game. Water can be treated and reused for some purposes.



Third, cooperation in the operation of Dams is essential. Coordination of filling schedules between upper and lower riparian countries can help optimum use. Also, operational coordination for the management of floods and drought can benefit all.

Fourth, sharing of data, calibration of measurements and harmonization of standards are of grave importance. It is important to have transparent and efficient exchange of data. Joint training of technical experts from Water Ministries can be instrumental in building confidence.

Fifth, it is important to have a regional forum for political dialogue. It is necessary to talk to each other about problems and challenges. In an ideal political environment such a mechanism can take the form of a high strategic council led by Heads of States and Government. Until such an ideal situation is available, it is useful to have a regular dialogue process where Ministers, Parliamentarians and other representatives can meet. Political leaders can also support joint projects which can create stakes in each other's countries. It is important to create common interest platforms as they can contribute to the stability.

Sixth, it is useful to treat water in a comprehensive framework and not in an isolated manner. Water is closely linked to food and energy and this nexus needs to be harnessed. It is also necessary to address various geographical linkages.

- Iraq shares rivers not only with Syria and Turkey but also with Iran.
- Jordan shares aquifers with Saudi Arabia. Therefore, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Syria need to be included in a dialogue process, along with Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey.

Seventh, post conflict reconstruction of Syria can provide opportunities for cooperation and optimum utilization of resources. If for instance, some agricultural energy projects are established in post conflict Syria, the neighbouring counties can receive the output through trading arrangements. This will relieve them of some of the stress on their own water resources. The Quadrilateral Free Trade Area of 2010 should be revived, rejuvenated and expanded in the post conflict scenario.



The Way Forward

The search for solutions has opened the ways for proposals for concrete cooperation.

- **Bilateral Track:** it is useful to strengthen all bilateral efforts for water cooperation with technical support, training and investments, where initiatives for cooperation are rewarded.
- **Regional Technical Track:** it is important to have training programmes for experts in the Ministries of Water Resources and Government owned water institutes for data exchange, harmonization of measuring standards, calibration of data and technical cooperation.
- **Regional Political Track:** it is necessary to build a quasi-formal process which should then gradually evolve into a formal political process. It can be initiated by the frontline states surrounding Syria and eventually be expanded to cover Syria and other neighbouring countries. It should also transcend vertically with an eventual possibility of the engagement of top government leaders.

These three tracks should pave the way for practical projects, which are modest in the beginning and gradually assume larger space. Some participants suggested an educational platform where young people from the region can study together about regional cooperation.

There should be a linkage between efforts involving experts and efforts involving politicians. The experts can inform the leaders about evidence on the need for sustainable trans-boundary water management. All efforts being made by different actors should eventually go in one direction.

Finally, the importance of public awareness cannot be underestimated. Hence, the media and the academia have an important role to play.



List of Participants

Co-Hosts

- ◆ The Rt Hon Lord Alderdice, Director, Centre for the Resolution of Intractable Conflicts at the Harris Manchester College, Oxford University
- ◆ Dr Sundeep Waslekar, President, Strategic Foresight Group

Iraq

- ◆ H E Dr Hassan Janabi, Minister of Water Resources, Government of Iraq
- ◆ H E Mr Nazar Al-Khairallah, Undersecretary for Bilateral Relations, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- ◆ Dr Bakhtiar Amin, former Minister of Human Rights
- ◆ Ms Bohar Isa, Member of Parliament
- ◆ Mr Mohamed Amin Fares Amin, Director General of Water Resources, Kurdistan Regional Government

Jordan

- ◆ Mr Salim Batayneh, former Member of Parliament
- ◆ Dr Hakam M. Al Alami, Advisor to HRH Prince El-Hassan bin Talal on Water and Sanitation at the Royal Palace

Lebanon

- ◆ Mr Mohamed Kabbani, Member of Parliament, Chairman of Parliamentary Committee on Water
- ◆ Dr Bassem Shabb, Member of Parliament
- ◆ Mr Alain Aoun, Member of Parliament
- ◆ Mr Yassine Jaber, Member of Parliament

Turkey

- ◆ Mr Reha Denemec, Senior Adviser to President of Turkey
- ◆ Mr Saban Disli, Member of Parliament, Deputy Chairman of AK Party

Switzerland

- ◆ Ambassador Pio Wennubst, Head of Global Cooperation Department, Assistant Director General, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation,
- ◆ Mr Johan Gely, Head of Global Water Programme, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
- ◆ Mr Mario Carera, Senior Advisor, Human Security Division, Federal Department of Foreign Affairs

Strategic Foresight Group

- ◆ Ms Ilmas Futehally, Executive Director

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