



BLUE PEACE FOR THE MIDDLE EAST ROUNDTABLE ON ISRAEL-PALESTINE-JORDAN

Co-Hosted by
Strategic Foresight Group
and

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

In Cooperation with
Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
and

Political Directorate, Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, Switzerland

**October 1-2, 2014
Oxford, United Kingdom**

OXFORD ROUNDTABLE

Several distinguished policy makers, including former Cabinet Ministers from Israel, Palestine and Jordan met at Harris Manchester College, Oxford, on October 1-2, 2014, to discuss possible ways forward in improving water relations between the three countries as a contribution to building trust, cooperation and peace in the region. The roundtable was co-hosted by the Centre for the Resolution of Intractable Conflict at Harris Manchester College, Oxford University and Strategic Foresight Group, in cooperation with the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and Political Directorate of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, Government of Switzerland.



HRH Prince Hassan bin Talal of Jordan sent a message to the roundtable encouraging discussion on water resource in the Middle East as a Regional Common. He welcomed the initiative strongly and found it essential for improving the atmosphere in the region.

BACKGROUND

The roundtable took place in the context of an extremely challenging political environment in the region. A military confrontation between Israel and Palestine in the Gaza strip took place from early July till the end of August and was suspended at the time of the roundtable. However, the fear of revival of military escalation loomed large in the region. The confidence and trust between people has reached its lowest ebb. The Israeli authorities had introduced measures to prevent interaction between Israeli officials and their Palestinian counterparts. Important components of the Palestinian civil society had announced boycott of engagement with Israeli counterparts. Under the circumstances it was essential but extremely difficult to establish lines of communication between Israel and Palestine. Despite the grim scenario preceding months had also seen some positive developments, particularly the signing of a water agreement by Israel, Palestine and Jordan.

Under the circumstances, Strategic Foresight Group convened the roundtable with the modest objective to initiate communication between the parties and identify some ideas for a positive forward movement.

DISCUSSION ON POLITICAL DRIVERS

The participants suggested that a discussion on water resources was closely integrated with the assessment of political realities. There were wide ranging views about the political future of the region. They range from the feasibility of a two state solution in a way acceptable to all parties on the one hand and the outcome of a bi-national single state future on the other. There was a considerable interest in the Arab Peace Plan as a possible framework for the two state solution. The participants took cognizance of the rise of extreme political forces in Israel and the Palestine territories, as well as other parts of the world. The participants believe that any forward movement would have to be structured taking full cognizance of the political challenges and the emerging alternative scenarios.

Therefore, there was a general consensus that it would be ideal to concentrate on a few, specific, and modest objectives for cooperation in the water sector, which would be helpful in the improvement of overall relations.



RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Reconstruction and Development in Gaza: in view of the confrontation in Gaza, the need for reconstruction and interest in the international community to discuss reconstruction plans in a collaborative way, some specific ideas were suggested in the roundtable. The ideas are based on the following assessment of realities in the water domain in Gaza.
 - ◆ Destruction of pipes, water supply systems in the course of military confrontation
 - ◆ Depletion of the coastal aquifer, the main source of fresh water to almost full extent
 - ◆ Increasing salinity and contamination of fresh water sources causing disease and health problems
 - ◆ Lack of water infrastructure such as water desalination plants and treatment plants on the back of extremely difficult political environment and financial limitations.



The roundtable noted that water resources in the Gaza are managed by the Palestine Water Authority and not by any political group. With this background, the following ideas emerged to address and aid the water situation:

- a. *Short Term* – it will be essential to build a pipeline from Ashkelon to Gaza on an urgent basis. The establishment of such a pipeline should be possible within a few months. It is also possible to receive political support for this idea from the Government of Israel and the Palestine Authority, despite other tensions and differences.
- b. *Medium Term* – considering the quality, level of salinity and level of pollution of water resources in Gaza, it would be necessary to prepare a waste water treatment plan. The authorities and experts may decide whether this plan will provide for one or more large treatment plants or several smaller treatment facilities. The choice depends on availability of finances, technical specifications and other practical issues. In any case it can take upto 3-4 years to implement the plan and build plants and other facilities. It is important that such facilities will not be destroyed in the event of a military confrontation.
- c. *Long Term* – in the long term it would be useful for Gaza to have a sizeable desalination plant taking advantage of its geographic location. This will create a new source of water. However, it would require a period of 7-8 years and significant amount of capital investment to establish such a plant. Nevertheless, this idea may be relevant as an important element in the long term.

2. [Joint Water Commission](#): It is important to have a properly functioning mechanism between the three countries or perhaps a trilateral commission between Israel, Palestine and Jordan for the sustainable management of shared water resources. The common perception in the roundtable was that the Joint Water Commission (JWC) is presently paralysed. The participants discussed difficulties in the working of the commission. Also, it seems apparent that the JWC has been more of a force for negotiating competing claims and interests, than in managing the water resources jointly in spirit and in letter.

Considering the vacuum that exists due to the breakdown of the JWC, it is important to have a new mechanism in some form. There are examples from different parts of the world which show that the presence of an efficient functioning mechanism of sustainable management of water resources protects water resources in times of political discord and crisis. Some of these examples demonstrate that joint management of water builds trust and contributes to wider confidence and cooperation. It could be therefore useful to assess the difficulties faced by the JWC and discuss how to restructure it or create a new institution in its place.

3. [Role of Civil Society](#): the participants felt that in times of political vacuum but also otherwise, civil society in Israel, Palestine and Jordan can play a very useful role.
 - ◆ The water chapter of the Geneva Initiative has produced detailed recommendations on water cooperation between Israel and Palestine. If the Geneva Initiative efforts continue in a strengthened way they would be able to contribute to a positive movement ahead.
 - ◆ The media plays an important role in the region as elsewhere in the world. It would be useful to engage the media not only as reporters but also as participants in peace and confidence building measures.



CONCLUSIONS

The Oxford Roundtable met in an extremely difficult environment posing several challenges to participants and others involved in the process. The mere fact that it took place was in itself useful to provide a communication link and an avenue for the understanding of mutual perceptions; at a time when all other communication channels have broken down.

The roundtable discussed a few but focussed ideas for forward movement in a phased way, as elaborated earlier. Such a pragmatic approach is the only way to break the deadlock and create small windows of opportunity in the current environment. The political future of the region is extremely uncertain. Emotions are high. Confidence levels are low. Under the circumstances it is essential for the decision makers as well as the international community to build on the practical and realistic approach presented here with enough dedication, and some progress in an otherwise pessimistic situation.



This report is a reflection of Strategic Foresight Group on the proceedings of the workshop on Blue Peace for the Middle East: Roundtable on Israel, Palestine, Jordan held at Harris Manchester College, Oxford, 1-2 October, 2014. It does not represent views of any of the above mentioned organizations, nor does it indicate consensus of the participants.

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

Participants from the Middle East

- ◆ Dr Ephraim Sneh, former Minister of Health and Transportation of Israel
- ◆ Prof As'ad Abdul Rahman, former Minister of Refugees of Palestine and Executive Chairman, Palestine International Institute
- ◆ Dr Maysoon Zoubi, former Secretary General, Ministry of Water Resources of Jordan
- ◆ Prof Avishay Braverman, Member of Knesset and Chairman of the Economic Affairs Committee, Former Minister of Minority Affairs of Israel
- ◆ Engineer Saleem Batayneh, Member of Parliament of Jordan
- ◆ Mr Avshalom Vilan, Secretary General, Israel Farmers Federation, and former Member of Knesset of Israel
- ◆ Dr Hakam Alami, Advisor on water and sanitation to HRH Prince Hassan bin Talal of Jordan
- ◆ Dr Prof Uri Shani, former Water Commissioner of Israel and Professor of Soil and Water at HUJI, Head of Novel Agriculture Technologies, Makhteshim-Agan Group
- ◆ Mr Nidal Fqaha, Director General, Palestinian Peace Coalition
- ◆ Engineer Saul Arlosoroff, former Water Commissioner & Member of Mekerot Board of Israel
- ◆ Dr Muhamed Saidam, Chief Science Office, Royal Scientific Society of Jordan
- ◆ Dr Alon Liel, former Secretary General, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Israel
- ◆ Prof Dan Rabinowitz, Head, The Porter School of Environmental Studies, Tel-Aviv University
- ◆ Ms Laurie Balbo, Writer, Green Prophet
- ◆ Ms Sharon Udasin, Senior Environmental Journalist, JPost

Representatives of Host Organizations

- ◆ The Rt Hon. Lord Alderdice, John, Chair of Liberal Democratic Parliament Party in the House of Lords, UK and Senior Research Fellow at Harris Manchester College, Oxford University
- ◆ Mr François Münger, Head, Global Programme Water Initiatives, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, Switzerland
- ◆ Mr Mario Carera, Senior Advisor, Office of the Special Representative for the Middle East, Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, Switzerland
- ◆ Dr Sundeep Waslekar, President, Strategic Foresight Group
- ◆ Ms Ilmas Futehally, Vice-President and Executive Director, Strategic Foresight Group
- ◆ Ms Ambika Vishwanath, Senior Programme Manager, Strategic Foresight Group
- ◆ Mr Mansoor Fazli, Intern, House of Lords, UK