

Lib Dem News, 8 July 2011.

A community of interest in the Middle East

JOHN ALDERDICE on a striking new proposal for peace in the Middle East: a water community...



Struggles to access natural resources have been a frequent source of conflict all over the world. But such resources can also be a basis for co-operation.

After the Second World War, the Treaty of Paris established the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), which put the coal and steel industries of France and Germany, which had been the target of annexation at the start of the war, under joint management. The ECSC evolved into the European Community, and eventually the European Union, the organisation which as Liberal Democrats we regard as the fundamental guarantor of peace in Europe.

We tend to associate the Middle East primarily with oil; but an equally fundamental natural resource in that arid region is fresh water. Rivers and aquifers, like oil fields and coal seams, are no respecters of national boundaries. Because of this, however, they lend themselves to joint management where the political will is present.

In March, I hosted an event with Dr Sundeep Waslekar, the President of the Strategic Foresight Group, at the House of Lords, where he launched his organisation's ground-breaking new report, *The Blue Peace: Rethinking Middle East Water*. The report's aim is to promote measures to transform water into what coal and steel became for post-war Europe: a source of co-operation between previously hostile nations.

The report has been developed on the basis of extensive research and consultations with government officials, NGOs and experts, and has attracted strong interest from several governments in the region. HRH Prince Hassan of Jordan, in particular, was an enthusiastic participant in the preparatory workshops. Internationally, the report is backed by the Swiss and Swedish governments. I, myself, have had the privilege of having been involved in the project from the beginning.

Several previous attempts to promote water sharing in the Middle East, beginning in 1955 with the Johnston Plan for unified water management in the Jordan Valley, have foundered on the vexed issue of Israel's relations with its northern neighbours. The great strength of *The Blue Peace* is that it not only recognises the political reality in the region, but aims both to work within it and to shape it for the better.

In order to avoid confronting the most difficult issue head-on, the report proposes that co-operation be developed, initially, in two separate but intersecting 'Circles': a

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Northern Circle, to comprise Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan; and a Southern Circle, also to include Jordan, along with Israel and the Palestinian Territories.

At the centre of the report is a proposal for a Co-operation Council to develop shared water policies based on agreed principles of political co-operation. It would start as a Northern Circle organisation, but with the capacity, like the European Community, to expand.

The Council would be governed by a Steering Committee directly appointed by Heads of Government, and supported by

organisations capable of building grass-roots support and of implementing its policy decisions.

In the Southern Circle, the report recommends the high-level sharing of information and expertise between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, in order to build trust between the two sides. As to Israel's relations with Syria, it suggests that one positive step towards normalisation might be for the parties to agree to manage the Sea of Galilee jointly as a regional 'commons.'

It also proposes the building of internationally-financed joint

desalination plants across the region, as a further opportunity for cross-border co-operation in solving a common problem, namely the availability of adequate fresh water for irrigation.

Clearly, some of the report's proposals will be more feasible in the current climate than others; but the current upheavals in the region show that the political weather is capable of changing rapidly. As the report puts it, it is important to have the 'intellectual infrastructure' in place for when the opportune moment arises.

What is most powerful, and most ingenious, about *The Blue Peace* is that its recommendations would start to bring politicians together on matters of mutual concern in which the solutions are technical in nature, rather than politically fraught.

Early on in the successful Northern Ireland peace process, I remember that one of the things that brought the two sides together was the regeneration of the centre of Belfast. The recognition that they were, in fact, capable of working together, albeit on a non-political matter from which there could be mutual benefit, was psychologically invaluable.

The Blue Peace shows that such co-operation and confidence-building is possible elsewhere. For anyone interested in practical ways of promoting peace in the Middle East, it will be essential reading. *John Alderdice is Liberal Democrat Convenor in the House of Lords and a former Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly*