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The Geopolitics of Water

Paul Michael Wihbey and Ilan Berman

The current freeze in negotiations between Israel and Syria underscores the fact that water is rapidly becoming a crucial — if not the most significant — strategic issue between nations in the Middle East. According to Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, speaking on Israeli television, water was one of the three key issues that stood in the way of an agreement in Geneva.

From the start, water has been a central theme in the Israeli-Syrian dialogue. Suffering from over-irrigation, excessive pollution, and a growing population, Syria has viewed negotiations with Israel as a means by which to alleviate its chronic water problem. Hence, Syrian President Hafiz al-Assad's insistence on an Israeli withdrawal to the June 4, 1967, border. Aside from the political victory that such an action would signal, the demand is also an effort to gain control over water sources on the Golan Heights. An Israeli withdrawal would give Syria access to the eastern half of the Jordan River headwaters and bring it to the shores of Lake Kinneret. This would make Mr. Assad a partner to Israeli water, giving Syria legal rights to use Lake Kinneret as it deems fit, including piping fresh water back to Damascus.

By contrast, the United States and Israel have sought a regional approach. The original idea seems to have been to stave-off Syrian demands for sharing the Kinneret by integrating Turkey into the talks to provide additional water. To this end, State Department spokesman James Rubin emphasized on January 12 [2000] that "water, given its nature, is an issue that is not only between Israel and Syria but has a regional dimension as well, including Turkey, and any solutions must take on that same regional dimension." Turkey, however, has clearly signaled its lack of enthusiasm. A recent report in the *Turkish Daily News* (February 10) stated that, according to a senior Turkish diplomat, the United States and Israel understood Turkey's message that Turkish water could not be bargained over in the equation of the Middle East peace process.

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This reluctance stems from a mature Turkish reading of Syrian intentions. Since the 1980s, relations between the two countries have been strained at best, in part due to Turkey's construction of the ambitious Southeast Anatolia (GAP) Project on the headwaters of the Euphrates. Despite efforts to allay Syrian fears, such as a protocol between the two countries in 1987 that codified Turkey's water commitments to Syria, Damascus has bridled at the loss of control over Euphrates water, and has consistently attempted to regain the strategic initiative. In Mr. Assad's mind, integrating Turkey into the negotiations might just do the trick. A Turkish commitment to water-sharing as part of an Israeli-Syrian peace deal would shift the momentum in Syria's favor, making Ankara accountable to Damascus for its water use and allocations. With this in mind, Turkey has understandably chosen to keep a safe distance from the Syrian-Israeli talks.

Recognizing Turkey's hesitation, Syria has opted instead for a full-court press on the water issue in negotiations with Israel and the United States. The incentive for Mr. Assad, of course, is the enticing prospect of rolling back Israeli sovereignty without any significant political, diplomatic, military, or economic cost. But Syria's gambit to retrieve the Golan is not just an effort to score a diplomatic coup and provide a solution to its domestic water needs. It is also a concrete move by which to seize control of this strategic resource away from Israel. In the Syrian view, water is not only a commodity, but also a strategic resource and an essential tool by which to alter the balance of power equation in its favor. Mr. Assad understands that water can be the instrument by which to gain an economic and strategic advantage over Israel.

Thus, by targeting Israel's most vulnerable strategic asset, its dwindling water supplies, Syria has been able to position itself to profoundly influence Israel's bargaining posture over borders and security. This, more than any other factor, may be the reason why Israel has not committed itself to a written agreement regarding a redeployment to the June 4, 1967, line. To do so would be to signal an irrevocable surrender of both the Jordan River and the Kinneret. But renewed rhetoric in Israel seems to suggest that policymakers are seriously considering just such a move. This would be a win-win situation for Syria. At best, Mr. Assad would not only score a major victory by gaining back the Golan, but also dramatically alter the water equation, and by extension the balance of power, between Israel and Syria. At the very least, the water issue could drive a wedge between Israel and Turkey.

As policy planners struggle to revive the Syrian-Israeli dialogue once again, resolving the topic of water remains the most difficult task for the two countries. It is also the most important. The way the water issue plays out will have major repercussions not only for Israel, but the region as a whole. The ensconcement of Syria on the Golan would allow Damascus not only to virtually dictate terms to Jerusalem, but exert influence over Amman and create a rift in the Israeli-Turkish military partnership as well. Given the signals made by Israel's continued efforts to reopen talks with Syria,

Jerusalem has not yet understood the geopolitical significance of water to its relations with its neighbors. As a result, Mr. Assad has been given an incentive to continue to apply the appropriate pressure, diplomatic as well as military, to achieve his goals.