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## Water for Peace

By Stanley A. Weiss

LONDON — Just days after the death of his father, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was asked to rank the issues of dispute between Syria and Israel. “Israel ranks her priorities in the following way: security, land and water,” he said. “But the truth is different. They consider water to be the most important.” He added, “Discussing this matter now is premature and its turn will come only after the land issue is discussed.”

Nine years later, the land issue remains frozen. The issue of water, however, has taken a dire turn. After a five-year drought, the region is headed toward a water calamity that could overwhelm all efforts at peace.

The Jordan River now has large sections reduced to a trickle. The Sea of Galilee is at its lowest point ever. The surface area of the Dead Sea has shrunk by a third. Iraq’s ancient marshes are now marked by large swaths of stalks and caked mud.

In northern Syria, more than 160 villages the past two years have run dry and been deserted by residents. In Gaza, 150,000 Palestinians have no access to tap water. In Israel, the pumps at the Sea of Galilee (Lake Kinneret), its largest reservoir, were exposed above the water level, rendering pumping impossible. In Lebanon, 70 percent of wastewater is dumped into cesspools, polluting groundwater; Jordan is struggling with just 10 percent of its average rainfall.

Little wonder that many warn that future wars will be fought over water, not land.

But can crisis be turned into opportunity? Could water, rather than land, be the way to cooperation and peace in the Middle East?

“We are great believers in the water issue as a catalyst for regional peace,” says Gilead Sher, Israel’s chief negotiator at the Camp David summit and the Taba peace talks in 1999-2001. “In all previous rounds of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, the water section has been very close to concluding between the sides within the agreement framework.”

Others, like Jordanian Munqeth Mehyar, Palestinian Nader Al-Khateeb, and Israeli Gidon Bromberg, believe water provides new avenues for dialogue. Together, the three run EcoPeace, an organization that brings together Jordanian, Palestinian and Israeli environmentalists to promote sustainable development and build “Good Water Neighbors” in the Middle East.

Syria itself is also taking a leadership role. Syrian Prime Minister Mohammed Naji Otri met recently with Iraqi Minister of Electricity Wahid Kareem in Damascus to discuss water resources. This came on the heels of a recent meeting in Baghdad of the energy ministers of Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria to discuss energy and security, which led to talk of a regional compact — a “new Baghdad Pact, without the U.S.,” as Zaab Sethna calls it. Sethna, co-founder of Northern Gulf Partners, working to bring investment to Baghdad, adds: “Water would be a natural area for cooperation.”

It is time to make peace on behalf of water.

First, the U.S. should work with Turkey, Israel, Lebanon and Syria to convene a conference — in Istanbul. “The best way to resolve the water shortage is to bring water from super-abundant sources in the north — that is, Turkey,” says the Israeli scholar Bernard Avishai.

The carrier would have to run through Syria and possibly Lebanon. Turkey has offered to lead such efforts in the past — most recently proposing a “water plan for peace,” using water from the Manavgat River to aid its neighbors.

Second, the United States must persuade Israel to share its water expertise and technology with its Arab neighbors. Water, rather than land, could form the basis of an agreement between Israel and Syria, revolving in part around the disputed Golan Heights, the source of more than 55 percent of Israel’s fresh water.

The U.S. should also broker a new agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority to replace the failed Joint Water Committee. The agreement should make each side a partner in both supply and management. Without it, Gaza will run dry, and pollution from the Strip will continue to threaten Israeli water reserves.

Third, the U.N. should mobilize a global effort to find cheaper, more environmentally friendly ways to convert seawater into drinking water. While widely practiced in Israel and Gulf states, desalination costs three times what it costs to tap traditional sources, and can use 10 times the energy. At its climate change conference in Copenhagen this December, the U.N. should launch a campaign to build public-private partnerships to turn the promise of desalination into a more tenable solution.

It has been said that if Israel were on fire, its Arab neighbors would not supply the water to put the fire out — and vice-versa. But when it comes to water, every nation is in the same boat.