

# MERIA

## **TURNING WATER INTO FIRE: THE JORDAN RIVER AS THE HIDDEN FACTOR IN THE SIX- DAY WAR**

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*The dispute over water resources has been a feature of the Arab-Israeli conflict since its beginning, however the issue has been paid little attention in works on the Six-Day War. This neglect stems from the fact that research on water issues in the Jordan basin has often been highly technical and has been mostly overshadowed by the more dramatic diplomatic and strategic narrative.*

Although the dispute over the water resources of the Jordan River basin was not the immediate casus belli, its ramifications provided both the rationale and the organizational framework for the Six-Day War. In a sense, these events served as a "dress rehearsal" for the war. Such a view is consistent with theories of international relations which stipulate that water-related outbreaks of armed conflicts are preceded by a state's unilateral act in developing an international river. Such an act serves as a red flag and, if not mediated by the international community, can lead to a round of increasingly belligerent actions by states bordering the body of water (riparians). Worse, because water is such a basic necessity of life, such conflicts serve as potent vehicles for mobilizing public sentiments on related issues and attract meddling by non-riparians, who use the resulting opportunity to further their own interests.<sup>1</sup>

The outbreak of the Six-Day War is a classic illustration of this theory.<sup>2</sup> While this work does not attempt to reconstruct the

entire background of the Arab-Israeli water dispute, an analysis of the renewed round of water hostilities that began in 1960s is in order.

### **THE FAILURE OF AMERICAN WATER MEDIATION: FROM JOHNSTON PLAN TO OPERATION ROTEM**

The path of the Jordan River and its tributaries complicates the already highly charged relations between Israel and its Arab neighbors. The pattern of riparian rights derives from the fact that Syria and Lebanon are upstream riparians vis-à-vis Israel and the Kingdom of Jordan with regard to two of the Jordan River springs—the Banyas and the Hasbani. Israel is an upstream riparian on the Jordan River, which separates it from Jordan. The Yarmuk River, a tributary of the Jordan River, forms the border between Syria and Jordan (32 kilometers) and then becomes part of the border between Israel and Jordan (14 kilometers).

The issue of sharing the waters of the Jordan-Yarmuk system in an environment of scarcity, suspicion, and hostility emerged as a

major problem after the 1949 armistice agreement. To avert a new war, the Eisenhower Administration became involved and, in 1955, mediated an agreement named after the chief American negotiator, Eric Johnston. The accord provided an equitable scheme for sharing the water backed up by American diplomatic guarantees.

Under the terms of the final version of the Johnston plan, known as the Unified Revised Plan, Israel was allocated a total of 400 MCM of the water (31 percent), Jordan 720 MCM (56 percent), Syria 132 MCM (10.3 percent), and Lebanon 35 MCM (2.7 percent). The plan also envisaged a joint effort to develop the basin's water resources, but the Arabs states refused to cooperate since this would have been perceived as recognition of the state of Israel. On October 11, 1955 the Arab League officially rejected the Johnston accord but refrained from torpedoing the plan. John F. Dulles, the secretary of state in the Eisenhower Administration, offered verbal reassurances to Israel that the United States would support its plan for a unilateral diversion within the Johnston quota. It was also Washington's understanding that the Arabs would accept the plan unofficially and abstain from any diversion which would undermine the Israeli water quota.<sup>3</sup>

However, the tacit understanding behind the Johnston plan began to unravel in the late 1950s. Based on American guarantees, Israel proceeded with a unilateral diversion scheme, the National Water Carrier (NWC). Indeed, Washington guaranteed a \$15 million loan in early 1959 for the NWC, along with a grant to help Jordan build its diversion project known as the East Ghor Canal, another unilateral development project. The NWC was scheduled to become operational in 1964

and was expected to carry about 200 MCM, well within the Israeli quota. Washington's assumptions notwithstanding, the Israeli Carrier elicited a strong response among the Arab countries. In 1958, the president of Egypt, Abdul Gamal Nasser, negotiated an agreement with Syria to create the United Arab Republic, giving Egypt the status of a riparian.

Although the Egyptian-Syrian union subsequently broke down, the struggle for the Jordan waters remained an important symbol of Arab unity. The Arabs claimed that utilizing the Jordan River water would help Israel to increase its ability to absorb more immigrants, further ensuring that state's survival. The involvement of the former mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin al-Husseini, gave the Palestinians a high profile presence in the 1959 Arab League debates about methods of obstructing the Israeli plans. Husseini and the Nasserist wing of the Syrian Ba'th party urged military action against Israel, while others advocated a plan to divert the Banyas and Hasbani springs to reduce Israel's water supply.

Efforts to stop Israel were not limited to debates. Syria, which became the lead actor in the struggle for water, heated up the border in a series of shooting incidents. The close relations between Syria, Egypt, and the Soviet Union, which provided its Arab allies with advanced military equipment, were an apparent factor behind Syrian belligerence. When the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) bolstered its defense along the northern border, the Soviet Union responded by spreading a rumor that Israel was about to attack Syria. According to the Soviet media, this was part of a coordinated "Zionist-

imperialist" plot to undermine the revolutionary regimes in the Middle East.

The Soviet assessment alarmed Syria and brought Nasser on an urgent visit to Damascus on January 14, 1960, to evaluate the situation. A day later, the Soviet embassy in Cairo delivered an intelligence report warning of Israeli plans to attack Syria. Two days later, on January 17, Egypt notified the UN forces stationed in the Gaza Strip of a possible war with Israel. On January 19, 1960, Egyptian armor and infantry forces began crossing the Suez Canal and massing in the Sinai Desert.

The Egyptian action caught Israel by surprise and created deep concern in top echelons of the IDF. With few troops at its disposal, the military could only hope that its limited deployment, code-named Rotem, would deter the Egyptians and their Soviet backers. Indeed, at the end of March, the Egyptian forces returned west of the Suez Canal. However, the Arab propaganda depicted the events as a brilliant victory for the Egyptian Army, claiming that it had deterred an Israeli attack on Syria.<sup>4</sup>

This self-proclaimed victory emboldened Nasser to accelerate the Arabs' own water diversion plans. On August 28, 1960, the League's expert committee unveiled a new plan that was finally approved by the League's Political Committee in January 1962. It was estimated that the project would cost an initial budget of some \$17.5 million and ultimately anywhere between \$166 and \$235 million. The League sought to implement the plan within eighteenth months.

For Nasser, the water diversion scheme and the energetic embrace of the Palestinian

cause had obvious domestic and regional benefits. It cemented his position as the undisputed Arab leader and brought legitimacy to his regime at home. For the Syrian regime, which had little public support and presided over a fragmented country, raising the water issue was perceived as a short-cut to mobilizing popular backing. For the Soviet Union, seeking a wedge issue to promote Soviet interests in the Middle East, the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev and his Politburo threw their support behind the Arab League's water diversion scheme. In May 1961, soon after the Arab League endorsed the water plan, Khrushchev visited Cairo, assuring Nasser of Soviet support and signing an agreement to cooperate on key international issues.

#### **LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS FOR A WATER CONFRONTATION: 1960-1964**

The security implications of the water issue alarmed the Israeli government. Following Rotem, the IDF embarked on an accelerated plan to bolster both its offensive and defensive capacity. Yitzhak Rabin, who served as the IDF chief of operations during Rotem and was promoted to chief of staff in 1964, firmly believed that the Arab League would use the water issue to provoke a major conflict with Israel at some future time.<sup>5</sup> His civilian superiors in the Labor government of Prime Minister David Ben Gurion shared the same misgiving but were not prepared to stop the work on the NWC. On the contrary, Levi Eshkol, the finance minister and an expert on water, was extremely concerned about the looming water needs of Israel. Shmuel Kantor, a former director of Mekorot, the

Israeli water company, revealed that in 1961 Eshkol ordered a study of the projected water shortages and possible solutions, including desalination.<sup>6</sup>

However, Israel was taken aback by the escalation of clashes with Syria in 1962. In one especially intense period between February 1 and March 7 there were several Syrian attacks followed by another round on March 15 and 16, which brought an Israeli retaliation on March 18, causing a large number of Syrian casualties. Given American assurances dating to the Johnston plan, the Israeli Embassy in Washington sought clarification from the Kennedy Administration.

Initially the Israelis approached the State Department which in May 1962 offered to provide a written statement of support for Israel's right to divert Jordan's water within the quota allocated by the Revised Unified Plan. After Israel then directly appealed to the White House, President Kennedy sent a letter to Ben Gurion in November 1962.<sup>7</sup>

Israel's water needs and worries were also taken up by AIPAC, the pro-Israel lobbying organization in Washington. In a series of meetings with congressional leaders and State Department officials, I.L. Kenen, AIPAC's creator and chairman, pressed for an American response. Upset by the even-handed policy of the State Department, Kenen also urged the House of Representatives to issue a declaration deploring the continuing belligerence of Syria and urging direct negotiations between the parties to resolve the issue.<sup>8</sup>

Whether a different American policy could have moderated the Arab water campaign is not clear. Between December 1962 and August 21, 1963, Israel recorded 98

Syrian violations, including kidnapping and murder of Israeli farmers along the Sea of Galilee. The UN Security Council approved a mild Anglo-America resolution to condemn the murder of the farmers but the Arab-Soviet bloc vetoed it. The Soviet Union was also arming Syria and Egypt with the latest in its military arsenal, including long-range Tupelov-16 airplanes. Following a Ba'thist coup in Iraq on February 8, 1963 and a similar one in Syria in March, a plan for a new United Arab Republic of Egypt, Syria, and Iraq was announced whose manifesto called for the liberation of Palestine. There were pro-Nasser demonstrations in Jordan demanding that it join the union.

The U.S. Sixth Fleet moved up to Israel's coastline to protect the Kingdom of Jordan, and Ben Gurion also appealed to the United States for protection. Ben Gurion strongly believed that the Arabs were planning an attack on Israel built around the water crisis, but the CIA held that Israel was exaggerating the threat. Indeed, plans for the new Arab union disintegrated in July amidst acrimonious exchanges between Cairo and Damascus. Kennedy saw this development as an opportunity to win over Nasser and was ready to offer him some of the benefits that Egypt had accrued from its strong alliance with the Soviet Union. Financial support was seen as urgent given the fact that Nasser's socialist policies had devastated the Egyptian economy. American plans to sell Egypt surplus food in exchange for Egyptian pounds were raised to a total of \$431.8 million in 1963. When the Israeli government and Kenen complained about the arrangement, they were told that Nasser had categorically promised the State Department that he would not attack Israel.<sup>9</sup>

Whatever agreement Nasser might have had with the State Department, however, it apparently did not include his water activities. In anticipation of the completion of Israel's National Water Carrier, the Arab League met in Cairo in January 1964. The thirteen Arab countries represented agreed to end their disputes and implement the Jordan diversion project for which the initial sum of \$17.5 million was allocated. The Cairo summit also approved a Unified Arab Command (UAC) to fight an anticipated Israeli reaction. An Egyptian general, Abd al-Munim Riayd, was appointed as the chief of staff with a mandate to make the UAC operational by 1967. In making the diversion project official, the Arab League argued that, irrigated by the National Water Carrier, the Negev would support an additional three million Jews, a demographic increase likely to greatly jeopardize any chance of eliminating Israel. Indeed, much of the debate at the conference was devoted to the Palestinian issue, ending with a commitment to create the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Palestinian Liberation Army (PLA).

The water issue and the Palestinian problem were skillfully used by Nasser to forge a new Arab unity under Egyptian leadership. Although the Arabs spurned efforts to create a cooperative development of the Jordan-Yarmuk basin, they were deeply outraged by Israel's diversion scheme. As one observer noted, "Nothing the Israelis had done since the Sinai war had more fiercely shamed the Arabs or more plainly exposed their importance than the diversion of the Jordan waters."<sup>10</sup> The defense of the

Palestinians only added legitimacy to Nasser's leadership of the Arab world. In any case, the Egyptian leader could not afford to cede the water and Palestinian issues to his rivals in Syria. Syria was also active. In November 1964 the Syrian government began implementing the Jordan diversion project.<sup>11</sup> There was a concomitant increase in the number of border violations and an upsurge of Palestinian terrorist activity from across the Syrian and Jordanian borders.

Israel's response to this development was not long in coming. According to Rabin who became the chief of staff around the time of the Cairo summit, Moshe Dayan advocated seizure of territory to fend off the diversion.<sup>12</sup> However, Eshkol, who replaced Ben Gurion as prime minister, argued for a more measured response. Rabin, who backed Eshkol, argued that a combination of tank and air power would be sufficient to stop the diversion without causing a major conflagration. In fact, Eshkol was so cautious that he had to be persuaded by the IDF to authorize air strikes against Syria.

The American response to the Cairo summit was equally reticent in spite of its prior commitment to Israel's National Water Carrier. Shortly after the summit, Deputy Undersecretary of State Alexis Johnson told the Citizens Committee on American Policy in the Middle East, a newly organized pro-Arab lobbying organization, that U.S. policy would be to refrain from taking sides in Middle East disputes, but that the United States, "would not stand idly if aggression is committed." In an address to the annual dinner of the American Committee for the Weizmann Institute of Science, President

Johnson mentioned Israel's water needs and promised a joint study on desalination techniques worth some \$200 million, but was not specific on possible American steps to counter the Arab League diversion scheme.

The administration's difficulty in maneuvering between the Israeli and Arab water policies was made clear during the spring visit of King Hussein to Washington. The monarch denounced the "theft of Arab waters" and charged that the Israeli scheme would cut into his kingdom's water supply and render the Jordan River "saline and unusable." The statement was openly false, but the State Department refrained from issuing a correction. After AIPAC lobbied Congress, which in turn raised questions, the State Department subsequently issued a statement that the Israeli project was consistent with the Johnston plan.<sup>13</sup>

The growing belligerence of President Nasser following the Arab League conference made the administration's efforts to balance Israeli and Arab interests more difficult. In a number of highly publicized addresses, such as during the conference on non-aligned leaders in Cairo, Nasser attacked the United States. In November 1964, Nasser's fiery rhetoric prompted an Egyptian mob to attack the USIA library, and some 30,000 books were destroyed by fire. Speaking in the Egyptian National Assembly a few days later on November 30, Nasser criticized American and British intervention in the civil war in the Congo, calling it an "abominable crime." Even the mild-mannered U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Adlai Stevenson complained that he had never heard such irrational, irresponsible, and repugnant language. Undeterred, Nasser openly insulted the United States in a December 23 speech,

stating that "whoever does not like our conduct can go drink up the sea. If the Mediterranean is not sufficient, there is the Red Sea, too....We cannot tolerate any pressure or accept insolent words and violence...we are a hot-tempered people."

Given that Egypt was then receiving American aid, Nasser's belligerence made Congress question the administration's Middle East policy. As a result, the Israeli lobby in Washington was able to exert more pressure on the Johnson White House by mobilizing Congress against a plan to sell King Hussein arms, including tanks. The Israelis and their supporters in Washington argued that in case of a regional conflict such weapons would be used against the Jewish state. In stressing the danger of a conflagration, Jerusalem could point to the escalation of border skirmishes with Syria which intensified after the National Water Carrier became operational in the fall of 1964. On January 22, 1965 Eshkol warned that any diversion would be regarded as an "encroachment on our borders."<sup>14</sup>

#### **TURNING WATER INTO FLAMES 1965-1967**

The continued tensions over water promoted the administration to send two envoys, Robert Komer and Averell Harriman, to Jerusalem in the beginning of 1965. They assured Eshkol of continuing American commitment to the integrity of the Johnston plan and asked Israel to call off its resistance to the proposed arms sale to Jordan. In return, the Israelis were promised more arms, but were cautioned not to retaliate too harshly against Syria. In fact, the administration felt that the Israelis were exaggerating the Arab

threat in order to obtain a better arms deal from Washington.

Eager to receive the promised military equipment, Israel did not quibble with the administration's efforts to downplay the water conflict. Eshkol actually assured the two envoys that Israel would retaliate against the Arab League diversion plan only if the Arabs took more than their share of water allotted by Johnston. For his part, Rabin planned to use the new weapons in a massive overhaul of the Israeli army for what he viewed as a "presumable clash with our neighbors."<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile, the IDF used combined artillery and aerial strategy to reduce the Arab waterworks to rubble. By mid-1965, all efforts to divert the headwaters of the Jordan River stopped, and there was a general perception that the Arabs had lost interest in it. This was despite the fact that at two Arab League summits in 1965, one in Alexandria and one in Casablanca, it was vowed to "eliminate Israel's aggression" and pledged to tackle the water issue. Hoping to stimulate a new round of negotiations, Eshkol told the Knesset on May 17 that Israel was ready to discuss cooperative schemes for developing the Jordan basin system and desalination projects.<sup>16</sup>

Any such hopes were dashed when, in February 1966, a coup in Syria brought a highly radical Ba'thist regime to power. Containing many Alawite figures, including Hafez al-Assad, the new regime suffered from lack of legitimacy which was exacerbated by its highly Marxist and secularist rhetoric. To bolster its popular credentials, the new government announced a new campaign to eradicate Israel and redeem

the Palestinian homeland.<sup>17</sup> Syria sought to involve Egypt in a more ambitious regional conflict. As the Syrian president Dr. Nureddin al-Attasi stated in his May 22 talk to troops, "We want a full scale, popular war of liberation... to destroy the Zionist enemy"<sup>18</sup>

Water was not emphasized but the humiliation suffered by the thwarting of the diversion project was not forgotten. Both Syrian regular forces and Palestinian groups continued to launch attacks against Israeli targets, including water installations. In 1966, the IDF recorded some 93 border incidents, most initiated by Syria. In May, Syrian MIGs flew over Israeli territory for the first time to hamper an Israeli rescue effort of one of its boats stranded on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee; the Israeli air force shot down two of the MIGs. Palestinian groups, often sponsored by Syria, crossing either from Syria or Jordan, also intensified their activity, killing and wounding dozens of Israeli civilians as far away as Jerusalem and Beersheba.

Syria's liberation struggle rhetoric had been strongly supported by the Soviet Union. In line with its standard operating procedure, Moscow exploited the water dispute to establish its credibility with the Arabs, denouncing it as a "Zionist and imperialist" plot. Although some observers have argued that Kremlin leaders opposed Syrian efforts to divert the Jordan springs, there is evidence to suggest that Moscow was eager to use the water-generated tensions to design a new structure of opportunity in the region. Success in the Middle East became more compelling in the face of a number of serious

setbacks suffered by Moscow in which leftist regimes were toppled in Ghana, Algeria, and Indonesia.

In 1966 an even more urgent regional imperative arose for the Soviet leaders. The British were scheduled to give up their colony in Aden in 1968, and conservative and radical factions vied for power. King Faisal of Saudi Arabia and the shah of Iran tried to mobilize the more conservative regimes against Egypt's support for the radical insurgency in Yemen. On February 22, Nasser accused the Saudis of financing a plot by the Muslim Brotherhood against his government, and hundreds of Islamic activists were arrested. The Soviet Union sided with Nasser. On March 25, the Twenty-Third Congress of the Soviet Communist Party emphasized the theme of fighting imperialism and colonialism, followed by an official Soviet-Syrian communiqué against Zionism, colonialism, and imperialism. On May 25, the Soviet deputy foreign minister called in Israeli ambassador to Moscow Katriel Katz and read him an official statement accusing the IDF of massing troops on the Syrian border as a prelude to an attack. On October 12, the Soviet ambassador in Israel delivered a similar note to Eshkol. When the Israelis, in an effort to refute the charges, offered to escort him to inspect the Syrian border, the ambassador refused. The Israeli leaders made no headway in persuading the Soviets by using backchannels in Moscow, including a visit by the veteran leader of the Israeli Communist party, Moshe Sneh.

While publicly accusing Israel of planning an attack on Syria, Moscow quietly encouraged a military alliance between Egypt and Syria. It was during 1966 that Egypt,

with the help of the Soviet Union, had developed a new defensive plan for invading the Sinai, called Qahir (the victor). Egyptian military were likewise working hard to activate the united Arab command that was first discussed within the framework of the diversion project. The Soviet Union had also intensified its arms shipments and aid to Syria and Egypt. By the end of 1966, Syria alone received some \$428 million in aid, and Moscow was also busy refurbishing Syria's infrastructure, including a dam on the Euphrates which was even costlier than the Aswan Dam.<sup>19</sup> Emboldened by Soviet backing, Syria increased the provocation on its border, forcing Israel to consider a new round of retaliatory measures.

According to Eugene Rostow, then undersecretary of state for political affairs and chair of the interagency control group which dealt with the growing crisis, the administration persuaded Israel to take its complaint to the UN. The State Department drafted a UN resolution which it negotiated with Moscow. Even this seriously diluted version was subsequently vetoed by the Soviet Union, prompting Rostow to comment that Moscow's behavior was a "salutary" and "brutal" lesson.<sup>20</sup> Still, as he admitted, it did not stop the administration from restraining Israel even when in the spring of 1967, Nasser took a number of increasingly provocative steps. For instance, in an "urgent message" sent on May 17 by the State Department, Secretary of State Dean Rusk urged Eshkol not "to put a match to this...fuse."<sup>21</sup>

Washington also demanded that Israel refrain from retaliation against Jordan, especially after the ill-fated Israeli raid into that country in November 1965, in which a

large number of Jordanian soldiers and civilians were killed. The UN censured Israel, and Palestinian groups resumed attacks on a variety of military and civilian targets. In what looked like a new round of action against Israeli water installations, in the spring of 1967 they blew up a number of water pumps and destroyed irrigation equipment in the north of the country.

No comparable restraints were urged by Moscow on its clients. On the contrary, by early 1967 the Soviet Union intensified its protest against the alleged Israeli mobilization. On April 18, Syrian leaders were flown to Moscow on a military plane where, on May 2, they signed a military defense treaty. On his May 10-18 visit to Cairo, Prime Minister Alexei Kosygin persuaded Nasser to sign a mutual defense pact between Egypt and Syria that was guaranteed by Moscow. In his speech to Egypt's National Assembly on May 17, Kosygin lauded Egypt's important role in the Arab struggle against imperialism and for its support of a Palestinian liberation struggle. Soviet officials also warned the Egyptians about alleged Israeli troop movements toward the Syrian border. Meanwhile in Israel, on May 27, Ambassador Chuvakhin handed Eshkol a message from Kosygin repeating the allegations about troop concentrations and warning Israel against starting a conflict.

Faced with Soviet efforts to increase tension in the region, the United States chose to adopt low-profile diplomacy. A U.S. envoy was sent to Cairo to bolster the efforts of the American Embassy to calm down Nasser. However, there was no sense of urgency, because both the State Department and the

CIA shared the belief that Egypt would not attack Israel in the foreseeable future.<sup>22</sup> Ironically, it was also the conclusion reached by the Israeli political and military leadership which believed that, as long as Nasser was bogged down in Yemen, Egypt would not dare open a "second front." As Rabin noted, the initial assumption in Jerusalem was that, at worst, Egypt would try to repeat the Rotem maneuver.<sup>23</sup> The Johnson Administration was also banking on the fact that, in spite of their saber rattling, the Soviet leaders would not give the Arabs a green light to start a war. Again, Israeli intelligence concurred in this assessment, arguing that the Soviet Union wanted to keep the Middle East on a "slow burn." This assessment prevailed in Washington even though the American ambassador to Moscow warned in his dispatches that the Soviets did not want to settle the escalating conflict in a peaceful manner.<sup>24</sup> His hunch was proven correct when Moscow successfully torpedoed the UN proposals to solve the conflict, paving the way for the war.

A large and growing body of writings on the Six-Day War has sought to explain how the initial conflict over water turned into a full-fledged war. Ranging from serious academic research to conspiracy theories, most of this literature has focused on explaining the behavior of Egypt, Syria, and the Soviet Union. The Soviets in particular have been the subject of a number of analyses aimed at understanding the seemingly reckless act of manufacturing a false intelligence report and encouraging the Arabs to act upon it.<sup>25</sup> While it is beyond the scope of this paper to review this vast literature, a

closer look at the evolution of the water issue may provide some insights into the dynamics which led to the war.

### **WATER AND INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT: PARADIGMATIC INSIGHTS INTO THE ORIGINS OF THE WAR**

Well before the emergence of independent states in the Middle East, it was recognized that an optimal utilization of water resources of the Jordan-Yarmuk basin required a rational cooperative approach by riparian states. The 1938 Lowdermilk plan, which sought to create a Jordan Valley Authority along the Tennessee Valley Authority model, was only one in a series of ambitious cooperative solutions proposed over the years.

Due to the intense hostility between the Arab states and Israel following the 1948 war, none of the cooperative utilization schemes were adopted. What is worse, optimal water-resource development of surface flows gave way to unilateral water projects by Israel, Jordan, and Syria. As noted, the American-mediated Johnston plan sought to address the raising tensions resulting from such practices. But these efforts ran into a roadblock which becomes apparent when analyzed through the prism of international theory paradigms.

The realist and neo-realistic paradigm postulates that under conditions of political-structural anarchy prevalent in international relations, states are motivated by fear and distrust, which leads to competition and conflict over resources. In the absence of an enforceable world order, states become preoccupied with autonomy, security, and power. As a result, they tend to shun

cooperative outcomes, a posture also explained by fear that cooperation might give a prospective partner a larger relative gain. The liberals and their philosophical soul mates--the functionalists and liberal-institutionalists--claim that cooperation could and should become a norm in international relations. To facilitate cooperation, the liberal paradigm in general and the liberal-institutional in particular, favor an activist role for international mediation and other international institutional intervention. The paradigm postulates that small, but cumulative "confidence-building measures" would increase the overall propensity to cooperate over water.<sup>26</sup>

Both paradigms fail to capture the very complex web of motivations that dictated the behavior of the regional actors and their superpower patrons. The actions of the Arab countries could be construed as classically realist or neo-realist in the sense that they feared that cooperating over the Jordan-Yarmuk water resources would give Israel legitimacy and increase its absorption capacity, leading to a better Jewish demographic balance vis-à-vis the Arabs and the Palestinians.

Syria, which had alternative water resources, felt no compulsion to share and the non-riparian Egypt paid no penalties for refusing to cooperate. Moreover, both Nasser and a succession of Syrian leaders turned the highly symbolic issue of water into a rallying cry for a campaign to destroy the Jewish state. Turning water and the equally symbolic Palestinian issues into a banner was also viewed as a sure substitute for lack of internal legitimacy, especially in Syria's case. It is interesting that only Jordan among the Arab states, despite its overburdened water

demands, stayed within the quotas proposed by the Johnston plan.

On its face, Israel's eagerness to cooperate bears out the assumptions of the liberal-institutional paradigm. However, it can be claimed that it was in Israel's interest as defined by the realistic paradigm to achieve a cooperative solution. Not only was such a solution optimal from the perspective of water management in the basin, but it would have accorded the Jewish state a modicum of recognition and legitimacy. Indeed, Ben Gurion and especially Eshkol made a major effort to use water as part of the confidence-building measures in Israel's dealing with the hostile Arab states. Only when rebuffed by its neighbors did Israel proceed with the unilateral National Water Carrier, although not before obtaining America's blessing. As noted, Rotem taught the Israeli leadership to prepare for the worst, thus persuading Rabin to launch the IDF on an ambitious reorganization plan that bolstered Israel's resolve to go to war in June 1967. Still, Rabin was too much of a rationalist to believe that Nasser would decide to launch a war while still involved in Yemen. This view was widely shared by the Israeli intelligence community and virtually everyone else.

The Arab League's renunciation of the Johnston plan and its diversion decision raises another paradigmatic issue. Both the realistic and the liberal-institutional paradigm imply that the actors involved are rational decision makers, an assumption colored by Western notions of rationality which assume conventional notions of cost-benefit. In terms of rational choice literature, such an outcome is known as Stag Hunt where mutual

cooperation is preferred. However, when actors are somewhat hostile or competitive, the preferred choice is called the Prisoners Dilemma where each player's rational interest would be to defect, that is, to engage in a non-cooperative, but not necessarily hostile, posture. When hostilities are very high, the game of chicken would be pursued, with each riparian trying to preempt his opponent by diverting the maximum amount of water.<sup>27</sup>

Even by the rationality standard of the chicken model, the Arab League's decision to divert the Jordan springs is puzzling. Not only were the Arabs ready to accept a suboptimal utilizing of the water, but the technologically daunting diversion project carried extremely high economic costs. According to one study, it represented "a clear demonstration of the triumph of irrational ideology over rational considerations in international relations."<sup>28</sup>

Soviet efforts to use the water problem are clearly envisaged in the Chicken model. It was a long-standing practice of Soviet leaders to seize upon local conflicts to further their interests, often using brinkmanship as the Cuban missile case indicates. Indeed, the Soviet Union, buoyed by its Aswan Dam success, sought to utilize the Jordan River dispute to bolster its standing in the Middle East. Clearly, Stag Hunt or even Prisoners Dilemma would have been counterproductive to such efforts. A careful reading of the Politburo utterances, let alone its actions, reveals that the Soviet leaders used the water dispute as a backdrop for orchestrating their ever growing presence in the region.

As noted, Moscow played a pivotal role in the Rotem episode, which was lauded

throughout the region as a success of the progressive camp against the "Zionists and imperialists." Given the Byzantine structure of decision making in the Politburo and its penchant for reckless decisions even after the removal of Nikita Khrushchev, these "exploitation politics" had created a dynamic which could not be easily arrested.<sup>29</sup> While the traditional view holds that Moscow simply stumbled into its catalytic role in precipitating the war, recent disclosures indicate that Soviet leadership at the highest levels deliberately used misinformation about Israel.<sup>30</sup> Although it is impossible to prove whether Moscow tried to apply the so-called "Cuban model" of brinkmanship--as Meir Amit, a former head of the Mossad asserted--or actually hoped that Arabs could fight and win a brief war that would rearrange the political landscape of the Middle East to their advantage, manipulating the water issue put both the Soviets and the region on a sliding slope toward war.

Standing in an antithetical paradigmatic position to the Soviet Union was the United States. Guided by a mix of realist and liberal-institutional considerations, American administrations since Eisenhower sought to facilitate a cooperative solution in the Jordan-Yarmuk basin, as epitomized in the Johnston plan. American self-interest in a cooperative outcome was quite obvious. In addition to securing Israel's water rights, such a solution would have calmed regional tensions and denied the Soviets a platform. Defusing tensions in the Middle East was at a premium because the Johnson Administration faced increasing difficulties in the Vietnam war. At a more basic level though, American foreign policy culture was suffused with liberal-rationalistic thinking. Such thinking values

symmetry and balance in policy and attributes a transforming efficacy to negotiations, all the while counting on an inherent harmony of interests between human groups. Since liberalism-rationalism involves a high degree of self-projection, it was hard for the administration and especially the State Department to realize that the Arabs would follow the logic of Chicken rather than that of Stag Hunt or Prisoners Dilemma.

American misperceptions of the Soviet Union were even more glaring. In line with the then prevalent view that the Brezhnev leadership represented an embrace of a more cautious and "rational" foreign policy in Moscow, the Johnson White House had a hard time envisioning that Moscow could engage in a reckless game of Chicken of its own, the dispatches from its own embassy in Moscow notwithstanding. Indeed, Under Secretary of State Walt Rostow urged that Moscow be approached in view of the fact that "the Soviets have in past attempted exercise restraining influence on Damascus."<sup>31</sup>

The Israeli diplomat Ephraim Evron noted that the United States had no credible response to Soviet brinkmanship and no contingency plan beyond urging restraint on Israel and appeals to the United Nations, an observation confirmed by Mordechai Gazit.<sup>32</sup> Such misperceptions have been part of the larger revisionist paradigm in American foreign policy which came to view the Soviet Union as a responsible member of the international community rather than as an ideologically motivated player out to export the communist revolution around the world. In this sense, the water dispute was seen by Brezhnev's Politburo as an effort to improve the "correlation of forces" which was

expected to give the Communists a victory over capitalism.<sup>33</sup> These views have even survived the collapse of the Soviet empire. For instance, Ambassador Richard B. Parker confessed that he had been troubled by allegations of Soviet recklessness because "it would have been extremely 'imprudent' of them to do this."<sup>34</sup>

### **CONCLUSIONS: REFLECTIONS ON THE WATER CONFLICT AND PREDICTIVE FAILURES BEFORE THE WAR**

Attempts to understand the dynamics which lead to the Six-Day War have preoccupied scholars, foreign policy practitioners, and intelligence officials. As always, implied in this type of endeavor is an effort to discern the policy choices of the actors, assess the degree of misperceptions which underpinned these choices, and speculate whether different choices could have averted the war. This paper argues that the decision of the Arabs and the Soviet Union to engage in a game of Chicken over the Jordan waters created the dynamics which led to the war. Israel's relative restraint and American misperceptions, combined with the burden of the conflict in Vietnam, fueled this dynamic.

Both the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations disregarded the red flags posed by Rotem, the Arab League diversion plan, and repeated Syrian violations. Distracted by the conflict in Southeast Asia and beholden to the liberal-structuralism paradigm embedded in the Johnston accord, the Johnson White House was late in realizing that the water issue had become

hostage to a wider array of interests that transcended the narrow confines of rational management of water resources.

To the extent that this study offers more general insights into the predictive failures which lead to war, the conclusions are sobering. A successful effort to prevent an escalation of a conflict over resources requires the international community to step in and mediate the dispute. This model was successfully implemented in the Johnston phase of the conflict, but could not be duplicated after Rotem because the structure of opportunity had changed. Preoccupied with the Vietnam War, Washington was anxious to avoid another regional confrontation. The result was a major regional war which reshaped the political landscape of the Middle East forever.

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An earlier version of this article was presented at the U.S. Department of State's conference "The United States, the Middle East, and the 1967 Arab-Israeli War," held on January 12 and 13, 2004.

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## NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> L. C. Brown, "The Origins of the Crisis," in R. Parker (ed.), *The Six-Day War: A Retrospective* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996).

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 61-62.

<sup>6</sup> S. Kantor, Interview, January 1994.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with M. Gazit, November 2003.

<sup>8</sup> I.L., Kenan, *Israel's Defense: Her Friends and Foes in Washington*. (Buffalo, N.Y.

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<sup>12</sup> Rabin, *The Memoirs of Yitzhak Rabin*, p. 62.

<sup>13</sup> Kenan, *Israel's Defense*, p. 175; Kenan interview, op. cit.

<sup>14</sup> T. Prittie, *Eshkol: The Man and the Nation* (New York: Pittman, 1969), p. 236.

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<sup>16</sup> Oren, *Six Days of War*, pp. 20 and 237.

<sup>17</sup> G. W. Gawrych, *The Albatross of Decisive Victory: War and Policy between Egypt and Israel in the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli Wars* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000), p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> Oren, *Six Days of War*, p. 28.

<sup>19</sup> I. Ginor, "The Cold War Longest Cover-up: How and Why the USSR Instigated the 1967 War," *MERIA Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (September 2003).

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<sup>21</sup> D. H. Schwar, (ed.) *Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1967*. (Washington: Office of the Historian, U.S. State Department, 2004), p.

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<sup>23</sup> Rabin, *The Memoirs of Yitzhak Rabin*, p. 55.

<sup>24</sup> Ginor, *The Cold War Longest Cover-up*.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Parker, *The Politics of Miscalculation in the Middle East* (Bloomington:

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<sup>30</sup> Ginor, *The Cold War Longest Cover-up*, *op. cit.*

<sup>31</sup> Schwar, *Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1967*, p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> Ephraim Evron, Gazit, *op. cit.*, (2003), p. 129.

<sup>33</sup> Seliktar, "Water in the Arab-Israeli Conflict", Chapter 3.

<sup>34</sup> Parker, *The Politics of Miscalculation in the Middle East*, p. 12.