



First Flanking Cooperative Idea

Environmental Peacebuilding across Borders and Sectors

A Concerted Approach to Multilateral Cooperation in the Middle East

Inga Schierholz

Disputes over water constitute a major area of disagreement between Israel and Palestine. The uncoordinated and irresponsible environmental actions on both sides have created serious ecological and humanitarian hazards that require rapid, yet sustainable action. Those who argue that the water problem can be resolved only as part of a comprehensive peace deal between the Israelis and Palestinians fail to recognise both the urgency and the potential of cross-border water cooperation. The bottom line of this Flanking Cooperative Idea is that because water- and sanitation-related issues extend both horizontally across national borders and vertically across various sectors, environmental cooperation can be used to create positive linkages with and spill-overs into other policy fields with the potential to initiate new forms of collaboration in currently deadlocked areas, including the field of disarmament and non-proliferation.

Reaching out to New Policy Areas

One of the objectives of the Expert Panels' contribution at the 2017 NPT PrepCom in Vienna (see POLICY FORUM No. 2) was to introduce Track I and Track II actors to a wider range of policy areas with the potential to generate mutually beneficial cooperation among players in the Middle East. The rationale behind this approach is based on the following four assumptions:

1. The traditional notion of security has been expanded to include human, economic, and ecological security.
2. Policy fields are different, but not encapsulated, thereby opening up possibilities for positive linkages and spill-overs to revive other currently stagnant fields, most notably that of disarmament and non-proliferation.
3. The interdependence of policy fields can serve to encourage stakeholders from different sectors and backgrounds to collectively support shared interests and common goals.
4. Advancing ideas of cross-border cooperation in one policy field can help pioneer other cooperative initiatives by sending positive signals and thought-provoking impulses to policymakers and Track-II actors.

Based on these four assumptions, *the Flanking Cooperative Idea discussed in this POLICY FORUM issue promotes a concerted*

approach to advance cooperative efforts among various Middle East actors with the ultimate goal of establishing positive linkages between and spill-overs into various fields, including that of disarmament and non-proliferation. In this process, it is crucial not to mistake a concerted approach for an “all-or-nothing” strategy by which the resolution of contentious issues, such as shared water management, is held hostage until a comprehensive Middle East peace deal has been struck. Rather, a concerted course of action recognises the viability of step-by-step advances through the creation of positive linkages between innately interconnected policy fields, thus maximising the sustainability and effectiveness of cross-border agreements.

The Conflict over Water in the Levant

The conflict over water resources has been a major source of disagreement between Israel and Palestine for more than three decades. At its core lie two different but interconnected issues: water supply (i.e. the availability of and access to water) and water contamination (i.e. the salinisation of water supplies and the pollution of the environment). As part of the Middle East and North Africa region, Israel and Palestine experience a naturally arid climate that is prone to periodic droughts, rising temperatures, and six to seven months of little to no rainfall each year. Because many of the region's natural freshwater sources are shared by at least two riparians, water

supply is also always intricately bound to the ability to access local water resources. Under the current Israeli military occupation of the West Bank the Palestinians have only limited ability to withdraw water from the Mountain Aquifer and Jordan River. This situation, combined with the additional accessibility barriers created by the Israeli-built separation wall, is further fanning the dispute over water rights.

Parallel to rising rates of per capita water consumption are steadily increasing amounts of wastewater that need to be discharged and treated in appropriate water treatment facilities. For this reason, the water problem is no longer only a matter of water supply, but further involves questions of ecological sustainability, appropriate methods of sewage and waste disposal, and enforceable environmental standards. The continued over-extraction of water resources as a response to the steadily growing demand for water causes the ground- and freshwater resources to become increasingly saline. The results range from unusable water resources to the collapse of entire eco-systems. Meanwhile, the lack of water treatment and sewage disposal facilities in the Palestinian territories produces massive amounts of pollution that contaminates the Mediterranean Sea and transboundary freshwater basins.

The failed attempt to address the water and sanitation problem through the Israeli-Palestinian Joint Water Committee has prompted both governments to opt for a strategy of environmental unilateralism

»EcoPeace understands that the water and sanitation problem is both multinational and multisectoral, which is why the organisation actively attempts to combine ecological protection with other policy sectors, including regional economic development, women's empowerment, and education. One of EcoPeace's greatest successes has been the development of the first ever NGO regional master plan, which includes more than a hundred proposals for interventions aimed at systematically rehabilitating the Jordan River Valley.«

instead of cross-border cooperation. Israel, a 'water superpower' in the field of hydro-engineering, relies on innovative and cost-effective methods such as water recycling and desalination. As proficient as the country has become at managing its water resources, however, it cannot escape the fact that the environment does not simply stop at its borders. Instead, large quantities of sewage and contaminated run-off from the West Bank and Gaza continue to flow into Israeli territory. The problem is most pronounced in the Gaza Strip, where daily amounts of more than 120 million litres of raw or poorly treated sewage reach the Mediterranean Sea, and where over 96 percent of all water resources are currently unfit for human consumption. The sewage that reaches Israel needs to be adequately treated before its water content can be reused. The costs of this procedure are later translated into tax deductions from the Palestinians. The much more sensible solution would be to enforce appropriate environmental regulations and construct additional water treatment facilities in the Palestinian territories. But the implementation of such solutions has been made extremely difficult due to the geographically and politically fragmented nature of the West Bank, the limited political and financial capacity of the Palestinian Authority, and the ongoing internal strife between Fatah and Hamas.

The problems of water scarcity and contamination stretch not only horizontally across political borders, but also extend vertically across other sectors of society. As a precondition for social and economic development, sufficient water resources are indispensable if agriculture and industry are to grow. Chronic water shortages and limited accessibility to resources create barriers to economic development, which in turn spur unemployment and social discontent. Besides, the more time and money that need to be spent on ensuring a steady and safe supply of water for personal and household uses, the less time and resources can be invested in education and other forms of development – a problem that disproportionately affects young girls and women, who are often responsible for managing domestic water supplies. Inadequate sanitation and hygienic conditions further increase the danger of the outbreak of water-borne diseases with the potential to cause widespread epidemics that are particularly hazardous in densely populated areas.

Thus, the absence of safe and sufficient water resources has implications not only for the environment, but for other aspects of society as well. In situations marked by high unemployment, low levels of education, and poor health conditions, water insecurity can be an instigator of social discontent and unrest. Worse still, in an already flammable environment such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where social unrest and violence erupt easily and periodically, water insecurity can pose a real threat to the security of the wider region.

Cooperation amid Conflict

The interdependence of water issues with other policy fields has created an Israeli-Palestinian landscape in which initiatives for cross-border environmental cooperation are periodically obstructed by the political turbulence caused by the reality of the conflict on the ground. Ecological organisations such as EcoPeace Middle East are highly aware of this problem. This regional environmental organisation has been advocating for a sustainable approach to joint cross-border water management for more than 24 years. As one of the most renowned environmental organisations in the region, EcoPeace is a pioneer of cross-border cooperation. At its three local offices in Tel Aviv, Ramallah, and Amman EcoPeace brings together Israelis, Palestinians, and Jordanians to develop common approaches to establishing environmental sustainability and social stability in the region. The organisation's work is based on a simple equation: Environmental cooperation + trust building = environmental peacebuilding.

EcoPeace understands that the water and sanitation problem is both multinational and multisectoral, which is why the organisation actively attempts to combine ecological protection with other policy sectors, including regional economic development, women's empowerment, and education. One of EcoPeace's greatest successes has been the development of the first ever NGO regional master plan, which includes more than a hundred proposals for interventions aimed at systematically rehabilitating the Jordan River Valley. The master plan's primary function is to signal how cross-border cooperation can generate tangible benefits both for the valley and its people, and for the local environment, within a feasible financial and economic framework.



EcoPeace also invests in bottom-up grassroots initiatives such as educational programmes to increase environmental awareness, trilateral youth camps that seek to foster inter-cultural dialogue, faith-based initiatives with the aim of establishing connections between members of the three Abrahamic religions on the basis of the Jordan River's symbolic significance for all three faiths, and programmes to bolster the local economy and tourism industry.

By running these programmes (and taking the abovementioned assumptions into account), EcoPeace is able to generate the following four results:

1. The organisation's work creates tangible results for the people on the ground, in whatever country they inhabit.
2. Creating overlaps between policy spheres reinforces the message that a sustainable and fair solution to the water and sanitation problem requires a comprehensive approach that goes far beyond merely the technical aspects of water management.
3. By working across national, occupational, and social lines, EcoPeace is able to widen the pool of stakeholders that support peaceful cross-border cooperation.
4. By engaging children and adults of all three nations in inter-cultural and educational programmes, EcoPeace communicates the necessary know-how and mindset for peaceful, cross-border cooperation in the ecological realm and related areas.

Next Steps on the Path to Success

Water insecurity has been increasingly recognised as a real threat to the regional stability of the Middle East. While they have yet to cause a full-scale military conflict, issues of water and sanitation have proved to be directly linked to the eruption of social unrest and violent uprisings, not just in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but also in other regions of the Middle East and North Africa. Nonetheless, for all their apparent dangers, issues of water insecurity have also created a strong basis for environmental protection and cross-border cooperation. This alone has been an important step on the path to

transforming and defusing social conflict. What is more, the strategies that have been used in the field of cross-border environmental cooperation are transferrable to other policy sectors, including that of disarmament and non-proliferation. Cross-border cooperation on the basis of shared interests and mutual benefits can become an effective tool for inter-cultural dialogue and trust building. It is the task of Track II actors to use the interdependent nature of policy fields to extend such newly forged areas of cooperation into other realms, with the ultimate goal of widening the pool of stakeholders and maximising the effects of existing multinational cooperation.

The lessons learnt from cross-border environmental cooperation could serve as a valuable way of reviving the currently dormant field of disarmament and non-proliferation by initiating new rounds of collaboration both horizontally among opposing actors and vertically across sectors based on shared interests and common goals to achieve peaceful, multinational cooperation. Based on these insights, further systematic and in-depth research could show how an ecological organisation such as EcoPeace is able to reach out to corresponding groups in the disarmament and non-proliferation realm to the mutual benefit of Track II actors in both policy fields, thus optimising the Flanking Cooperative Idea developed in this POLICY FORUM issue. ■

The Author

Inga Schierholz is a master's student in Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Manitoba and the University of Winnipeg, Canada. She is currently writing her thesis on environmental cooperation as a tool for peacebuilding in the Israeli-Palestinian water conflict. In 2017 she spent three months in Israel, Palestine, and Jordan to conduct field research in cooperation with EcoPeace Middle East.

APOME and GCSP wish to cordially thank our generous sponsor:



References/Further Reading

- David Brooks and Julie Trottier, "Confronting Water in an Israeli-Palestinian Peace Agreement", *Journal of Hydrology*, Vol. 382(1-4), 2010: 103-114.
- Annabelle Houdret, Annika Kramer, and Alexander Carius, *The Water-Security Nexus: Challenges and Opportunities for Development Cooperation*, Eschborn: Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), 2010.
- Tobias Ide and Christiane Fröhlich, "Socio-environmental Cooperation and Conflict? A Discursive Understanding and Its Application to the Case of Israel/Palestine", *Earth System Dynamics*, Vol. 6(2), 2015: 659-671.
- David Katz and Itay Fischhendler, "Spatial and Temporal Dynamics of Linkage Strategies in Arab-Israeli Water Negotiations", *Political Geography*, Vol. 30(1), 2011: 13-24.
- Inga Schierholz, "Transboundary Water Conflicts in the Middle East - Exploring Multilateral Environmental Cooperation between Israel and Its Neighbors", *ACADEMIC PEACE ORCHESTRA MIDDLE EAST, POLICY BRIEF No. 47, August 2016*. Online, available at <http://www.academicpeaceorchestra.com>.