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## Water

# The Middle East's Water Crisis: Will the Jordan River Run Dry?

By [Gidon Bromberg](#), *Yale Environment 360*. Posted **September 24, 2008**.

Huge withdrawals for irrigation, rapid population growth, and a paralyzing regional conflict have drained nearly all the water from this fabled river.

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The River Jordan has flowed freely for thousands of years, its name immortalized in the Hebrew Bible and its lush upper reaches once known as the gates to the Garden of Eden. This summer, however, large sections of this storied river were reduced to a trickle, the water so low that grass fires spread freely across the Jordan Valley between Israel and Jordan. Steadily drained over the past half century to quench the thirst and grow the crops of the people of Israel, Jordan, Syria, and the Palestinian territories, the Jordan River has been dealt a deathblow recently by a severe drought and by yet another tributary dam, this one on the Jordanian-Syrian border.

In recent years, all that saved much of the lower Jordan from becoming a desiccated channel has been the agricultural runoff, raw human sewage, diverted saline spring water, and contaminated wastes from fish farms that have been pumped into it. But now even that effluent barely restores a flow to the Jordan, the river where Jesus Christ was baptized and which has long been a vital stopover on the migratory pathway of tens of millions of birds en route between Europe and Africa.

The degradation highlights the failure of the governments of Israel, Jordan, and Syria to take serious steps to rescue a 205-mile river that has deep meaning for Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Although these governments have paid lip service to bringing the Jordan back to life, they have in fact encouraged water withdrawals -- mainly for irrigated agriculture -- that have led to its near-disappearance. This ecological catastrophe has been overshadowed by decades of war and regional conflict. Indeed, for the past 60 years, much of the river -- a fenced and mined border zone between Israel and Jordan -- has been off-limits, enabling its draining to take place out of sight and out of mind.

The governments of the region have blamed the conflict for their lack of action, but as the citizens' group I help run -- EcoPeace/Friends of the Earth Middle East -- has shown, international cooperation to resuscitate the Jordan is possible. Working with local communities, my Jordanian, Palestinian, and Israeli colleagues are striving to restore water to the river. The goal of our group -- the region's only multinational organization -- is to become a catalyst for comprehensive water policy reform. We are

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aided by an unexpected phenomenon: In a region where people often feel helpless after years of turmoil, our efforts at environmental peacemaking offer an opportunity for constructive action, dialogue, and cooperation.

The story of the depletion of the Jordan is hardly unique. Around the world, human activity has pulled so much water out of great rivers -- the Indus on the Indian subcontinent, the Yellow in China, the Rio Grande along the U.S.-Mexico border -- that they now either disappear before reaching the sea or contain long sections that seasonally run dry. The underlying reason is always the same: We view rivers not as valuable in themselves, supplying vital "ecosystem services" to people, fish, animals, and plants, but rather as merely tools for humans and economic development.

That was certainly the case in the early days of the formation of Israel, when the dream of nation building was to "make the desert bloom." In the 1950s, that dream was married to advanced engineering as Israel's National Water Carrier diverted about a third of the original flow of the Jordan to Tel Aviv and the farms of the Negev Desert. Subsequent Israeli water withdrawals, coupled with scores of dam and canal projects on tributaries in Syria and Jordan, claimed the rest of the river's water. For ages, the Sea of Galilee has fed the longest stretch of the river, the lower Jordan, but today not a drop of fresh water flows out of the sea into the river. The largest tributary to the lower Jordan, the Yarmouk River, has similarly had all its waters diverted by Syria and Jordan. As these insults to the Jordan have accumulated, water disputes in this rain-starved region have grown ever more contentious, with unequal water allocations -- coupled with violence and occupation -- becoming a powerful human rights issue and an additional source of animosity.

Massive water withdrawals for irrigation have created lush areas in the Jordan valley but have reduced the river to a trickle in many spots. Just as the Jordan is hitting bottom, another troubling development is unfolding. The World Bank has selected two consulting firms to study the feasibility of pumping water from the Red Sea to the Dead Sea, the terminus of the Jordan River, via a massive and staggeringly expensive pipeline.

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*Gidon Bromberg is the Israeli director of Friends of the Earth Middle East and was a Yale World Fellow in 2007.*

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