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Analysis: Middle East water wars

By Adel Darwish

Writer and commentator on the Middle East

After signing the 1979 peace treaty with Israel, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat said his nation will never go to war again, except to protect its water resources.



Darwish says that water is at the heart of the conflict

King Hussein of Jordan identified water as the only reason that might lead him to war with the Jewish state.

Former United Nations Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali warned bluntly that the next war in the area will be over water.

From Turkey to Uganda, and from Morocco to Oman, nations with some of the highest birth-rates in the world are all concerned about how to find enough water to sustain urban growth and to meet the needs of agriculture, the main cause of depleting water resources in the region.

All of these countries depend on either the three great river systems which have an average renewal rate of between 18 days to three months, or on vast underground aquifers some of which could take centuries to refill.

The Nile, the world's longest river, is shared between nine countries whose population is likely to double within two decades; yet the volume of water the Nile provides today is no larger than it was when Moses was found in the bulrushes.

“ International law is inadequate in defining and regulating the use of shared water resources. ”

The list of 'water-scarce' countries in the region grew steadily from three in 1955 to eight in 1990 with another seven expected to be added within 20 years, including three Nile nations.

The hidden factor

International law is inadequate in defining and regulating the use of shared water resources. Few agreements have been

The WATER DEBATE

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reached about how water should be shared.

Middle Eastern nations have resorted to force over issues less serious than water.

Since the Madrid conference in 1991, Palestine-Israel negotiations and the now frozen negotiations with Syria have always stumbled over the issue of sharing water.

With the Israeli army in control prohibiting Palestinians from pumping water, and settlers using much more advanced pumping equipment, Palestinians complain of "daily theft" of as much as 80% of their underground water.

During the research for the book: Water Wars both my co-author and I, discovered that water was the hidden agenda for past conflicts and one major obstacle to reach a lasting and final settlement in the region.

Ariel Sharon went on record saying that the Six Day War started because Syrian engineers were working on diverting part of the water flow away from Israel.

"People generally regard 5 June 1967 as the day the Six-day war began," he said.

"That is the official date. But, in reality, it started two-and-a-half years earlier, on the day Israel decided to act against the diversion of the Jordan."

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