

The Blue Peace: Achieving Peace and Security through Water Cooperation

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ABSTRACT Water is about people and human security. Unfortunately water has become a source of conflicts around the world, especially in the Middle East. There is a critical need for active water cooperation between nations in the region. This article discusses possible ways to achieve such cooperation, using tools developed under the Blue Peace concept. The article highlights a positive example of concrete steps taken by Turkey and Iraq in the area of track-two hydro diplomacy, which could potentially expand to other countries in the region. Experiences from around the world demonstrate that sustainable active water cooperation is possible and there are many examples that could be adapted by countries in the Middle East.

In 2010 in a historic series of meetings, four proactive leaders in the Middle East came together and forged ties for the creation of a future economic regional community. They had a vision to create a European Union for the Middle East and term it ‘*Shamgen*.’ The term was coined by the current President and the then Prime Minister of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, from Syria’s historical name of ‘Al-Sham,’ which stretched from Mesopotamia to the Eastern Mediterranean.

Their vision would cover trade and transport, banking and business laws, eliminate visa constraints, and allow for free movement of goods and

people across the region. Within six short months they achieved tremendous success, sparking hope for the future of people in the region. The international community lauded their efforts and was eager to aid in these endeavors. There was talk that the community and union could further expand in the future to cover other aspects of governance and life and continue to grow in the future. The leaders of the four countries, namely Turkey, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, intricately connected by a common history, people and resources, also invited Iraq to join in their journey. This invitation was borne out of a realization that Iraq is closely linked to three of the countries in the *Shamgen*

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zone. It was expected that Iraq would join once it had solved internal constitutional constraints.

While in view of the political volatility since 2011, such cooperation may appear to be a dream; the situation was different in the second half of 2010. The decision taken by the leaders in June 2010 to promote regional integration was very promptly implemented through various policy measures, mechanisms and arrangements within six months.

In the same spirit of cooperation a few years earlier, in July 2008, Turkey and Iraq signed a Joint Political Declaration on the Establishment of the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council (HSCC). The first ministerial meeting of the HSCC, a forum for joint meetings of the Iraqi and Turkish cabinets, was held in Istanbul on 17-18 September 2009. The Turkish foreign minister was accompanied by seven executive members of the cabinet, including the ministers of trade, energy, transport, agriculture, and the environment (water) while the Iraqi minister was accompanied by nine executive cabinet members, the counter-parts of the Turkish min-

isters, and their deputy ministers. According to the strategic partnership agreement between Turkey and Iraq, the HSCC was to meet at least once a year, with the Prime Ministers of the two countries chairing the meetings. Ministerial meetings, on the other hand, would be held at least three times a year and technical delegations would come together four times a year. Decisions made by the HSCC would be implemented within the framework of an action plan. Barham Salih, Iraq's former deputy prime minister, called the agreement "the starting point of the Middle East common market" and likened the improving relations between Iraq and Turkey to the relationship between France and Germany in the 1950s.¹

A land and people that was once the cradle of civilization, which saw the birth of amazing scientific and cultural discoveries, had the potential to resurrect itself through cooperation and a common vision. Unfortunately, the process of integration was interrupted in early 2011 due to the Arab Spring, then suspended and then reversed. Soon barriers came up and trade between countries came to a standstill. Leaders changed and open dialogue and diplomatic channels ceased to exist between some countries. In a matter of weeks, everything changed.

Yet, however bleak the future might look, the *Shamgen* experiment of 2010 demonstrated that cooperation is possible. When the next window of opportunity opens, the five countries, including Iraq, will have to demonstrate the same vision and foresight



and create new means of cooperation. However, it is extremely important, that any community in the future expand their spheres of cooperation to include water and environment. Water is the core of all life, and any cooperation on sustainable management of shared resources would bring people and countries closer together. The recent conflict in Syria and Iraq, which has had deep impacts and spill over effects on all their neighbors, demonstrates that while the genesis of the conflict have complicated explanations, water is a part of it. The depletion of lakes and rivers, the lack of clean water to drink, the loss of livelihood of farmers and fisherman dependent on the water resources are integral parts of these conflicts.

When the Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu paid a visit to Baghdad in November 2014, one can argue

that Turkey aspired to stronger bilateral relations with Iraq. The most recent example of bilateral cooperation between the two States is the complete abolishment of visas. This will facilitate greater trade between Iraq and Turkey. This step will revive the 2009 Iraqi-Turkish HSCC, and possibly revive the spirit of the 2010 *Shamgen* experiment. Turkey did not stop here; it went further to consider Iraq's internal security as paramount to Turkey's economic stability. Throughout 2014, Turkey proposed mediations between the Federal Government in Baghdad and the KRG to solve their half-decade-long oil conflicts, in order to eschew any unwanted consequents in Iraq, and was to certain degree successful. Thus, one can argue that bilateral cooperation does actually exist on the ground between the two States although no final binding agreements have been reached.

An Iraqi boy, whose family fled the city of Ramadi after it was seized by DAISH, carries a jerrycan of water at a camp housing displaced families.

AFP PHOTO / AHMAD AL-RUBAYE

One such successful example has been the 2014 Tigris Consensus, a plan of action to promote exchange and calibration of data and standards pertaining to the quality and the flow rates of the Tigris River. The civil war in Syria with its spillover effect into the region and a cold peace between Iran and Iraq, has guaranteed that any agreement on the whole Euphrates Tigris river system is near impossible at this current juncture. Analysis of the hydro-politics of only the Tigris basin tells us that while there have been a number of meetings over the years, the major riparian countries, Turkey and Iraq, have been unable to reach a basin wide agreement to jointly manage the shared river.

However, in the last decade there has been an improvement of relations between Turkey and Iraq, despite the political uncertainties, and the high level visits and positive political statements have paved the way for future dialogue and cooperation. Despite the extreme political tensions in the region, these two countries have recognized that water and environment are important aspects of cooperation and have thus mutually agreed on moving forward in this direction. The Governments of both Iraq and Turkey have both agreed in principle to promote harmonization and technical cooperation on water. The most recent of this was a high level meeting in May 2014.²

Seizing upon the positive tone and space created by the governments of the two countries, the stakeholders involved in the Blue Peace process developed the Tigris Consensus, over

a series of track two meetings, which began in Bern in September of 2013 and ended in Istanbul in September of 2014. The proposed plan, in line with the Blue Peace philosophy would help the countries to take existing agreements, currently only in principle, ahead to the next level of an operative plan of action. The consensus specifically focuses on identifying existing monitoring stations along the Tigris River, where existing data can be exchanged. Once this is done there can be further discussion on finding common monitoring methods and common techniques and calibration for data collection and measurement. All of this will serve to identify problems and gaps, and thus increase the confidence in the operational calibration of individual stations in both countries. By agreeing upon techniques, statistical models, reporting techniques, quality parameters to be measured and standards of data analysis, the two countries will ensure that the environmental and ecological balance and future health of the Tigris River is maintained.

The stakeholders that participated in this process also recognized that development of expertise for the purpose of improving their performance and knowledge is an important pillar of cooperation between Iraq and Turkey on the Tigris River, and can be achieved if the two parties work on joint capacity building programs to implement the objectives of the project.

In this time of extreme turmoil, in a region besieged with problems, the consensus and plan proposed by

members of the Blue Peace community and leaders and experts of Turkey and Iraq, offers a ray of hope and promise that cooperation is possible. The progressive thinking demonstrated by the governments of Iraq and Turkey encourages a positive atmosphere that will hopefully expand in the future. Once there is an element of trust, the scope of cooperation is limitless. The experience of the 2010 quadrilateral framework dictates that cooperation in one area has the possibility of a positive spill over into other areas. Along the Tigris alone, the two countries can work together on preserving the health of the river, economic development of the communities along the river, collaboration on technology and navigation.

Water is not just about providing a resource to people. Water is about security, be it food, health, energy or environment. Water is about people and human security. Unfortunately, water has become the core of, the trigger to, and a weapon in the conflicts in the Middle East region.

There is no alternative to cooperation. Cooperation on water resources, by building sustainable institutions and a strong policy framework, is no longer only about cooperation on water. It transcends into cooperation on science and technology, into cooperation on the economy and finance, into cooperation on growth and development. Countries, especially those that share resources, need to realize that cooperation on water has a wider scope and examine the concept of water from a larger lens.

There are plenty of examples around the world that demonstrate that water and the sustainable management of the resource is an excellent source of cooperation. The mere decline in water availability does not lead to conflict. Senegal and Singapore, Botswana and Brazil are positive examples of how water can be a means of dialogue and trust. These countries and many others around the world demonstrate that building strong institutions that

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effectively govern shared water resources in a collaborative manner are tools to manage any natural calamity as well as prevent any conflict based on other reasons.

A 2013 report by the Strategic Foresight Group, “Water Cooperation for a Secure World”³ details that any two countries engaged in active water cooperation do not go to war for any reason whatsoever. Ban Ki Moon, Secretary General of the United Nations, has expressed concern on several occasions about linkages between water, peace, conflicts and security. Water cooperation between countries sharing trans-boundary water resources is directly correlated with security of nations involved in such cooperation and peace in the continent

The Blue Peace approach advocates the implementation of small confidence building measures as a means to begin and sustain dialogue

or subcontinent they belong to. Conversely, absence of active water cooperation is directly correlated with risk of conflict between countries sharing trans-boundary water resources.

Examples of active water cooperation mechanisms indicate that it is not the size and nature of a country or its economy, or its recent history or political markup, but political will and commitment at the highest level that are the key to success. There are also no set formulae for such institutions and mechanisms, and over time countries and regions have devised their own success stories. The Senegal River Basin as a supra-national organization, the Rhine River Basin with a focus on pollution or the Amazon Treaty provide a range of experiences for other countries looking to construct a river basin organization or enter into some form of regional water cooperation arrangement. If we look closely, we realize that countries engaged in active water cooperation, that expands to include energy, environment, and other development factors tend to move beyond their differences over other issues.

The example of the Senegal River Basin is especially one to be lauded,

examined, and learnt from. Emerging from decades of war and military rule, in the early 1970s Senegal, Mali and Mauritania formed the Senegal River Basin Organization. Guinea, the fourth riparian joined in 2006. When hostilities broke out between Senegalese farmers and Mauritanian breeders in 1989 along the shared border, followed by the 'fossil valley crisis' between the two countries a few years later, the river basin organization was able to mediate between them and prevent a war. Similar experiences have been observed in Europe, the Mekong River region, and South America.

The example of the European Union, which used steel and coal to begin their process of cooperation and the Southern African Development Cooperation, which used broad economic development as their starting point clearly indicate that a regional approach is essential. The Africans learnt from the European example, and expanded the SADC to include a number of other aspects, including a common water region for all member countries, even though several of them such as Madagascar and Malawi do not share common water resources. The countries have found a value in a shared policy framework and use that framework as the basis to negotiate specific basin agreements. The wisdom demonstrated by countries in Europe and Southern Africa can be relevant for those in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Regional institutions and formal structures will be necessary if coun-

tries in the Middle East were to choose this path. The Strategic Foresight Group advocates the path of the Blue Peace, which is about transforming water from a potential source of crisis into a potential instrument of cooperation and peace, through concrete actions. Unlike conventional concepts of peace, which are often armistice or arms control agreements, to prevent a war the Blue Peace approach proposes a proactive process of cooperation in water which is the most crucial element in socio economic development of the poor. If countries in a given neighborhood are actively engaged in cooperation for harnessing benefits from water resources and preserving fresh water, rather than merely allocating shares of water resources, they will have little incentive to go to war.

Cooperation in fresh water goes beyond dams and canals, as per the Blue Peace approach. The marriage of water with the “knowledge industry” is an important subtext of the Blue Peace. Experiments being carried out in different parts of the world demonstrate that new irrigation techniques and computerized monitoring of water flow to plants can reduce water requirement by more than half of current rates. It is possible to treat waste water using nano-technology and regenerate it to the level of drinking water. Changes in urban planning can lead to conservation of water resources. Thus, availability of water will have more to do with nano-technology, bio-mimicry, urban planning, efficient production of food grains and industrial mate-

rials and less to do with the formula for determining how much water an upper riparian should allow to flow to the lower riparian countries. The countries that miss this point are the countries that are failing to see a revolution in the making.

Cooperation does not develop overnight or even in the space of a few months, it takes time and a great deal of trust. The Blue Peace approach advocates the implementation of small confidence building measures as a means to begin and sustain dialogue. The Tigris Consensus and the project between Turkey and Iraq, as detailed above, is one such confidence building measure. Confidence building measures are important steps in the right direction and have the potential to create long lasting relationships between nations that can expand in other areas. Experiences from around the world demonstrate that countries that have grasped this concept have prospered together and kept the threat of conflict at bay. It is time the countries in the Middle East realize that there is no alternative to sustainable water cooperation and take the necessary steps to sail together in that direction. ■

Endnotes

1. “Iraq, Turkey Want to Integrate Economies, Transform Mideast,” *Today’s Zaman*, E-Gazette, 18 September 2009, http://www.todayozaman.com/diplomacy_iraq-turkey-want-to-integrate-economies-transform-mideast_187456.html
2. Minutes of the Bilateral Cooperation Meeting on Water between Turkey and Iraq, May 2014, on file with the authors.
3. http://strategicforesight.com/publication_pdf/20795water-cooperature-sm.pdf

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