

Workshop on Cooperation Council for Water Resources in the Middle East

Geneva, 19 September 2011



Strategic Foresight Group convened a workshop on regional cooperation for the sustainable management of water resources in the Middle East at Geneva on 19 September 2011. The workshop had participants from Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, besides representatives of the host organisations: Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, Political Affairs Division IV of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and Strategic Foresight Group.

The objective of the workshop was to discuss one of the key recommendations of the Blue Peace Report, to create a working mechanism for regional cooperation. The Blue Peace report has described it as Cooperation Council; however it may be given an appropriate name by the countries in the region as and when it is created.



Historical Context

The workshop took place in the context of historical developments marked by gradual movement towards regional cooperation in various sectors, which has since May 2011 been suspended by political turmoil in Syria.

The governments of Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Turkey have been involved in new processes of regional cooperation in the Middle East. These include the following landmarks:

- In January 2008, Iraq, Syria and Turkey revived the Joint Technical Committee (JTC) and held its first meeting.
- In February 2009, the second JTC meeting was held.
- In September 2009, the third JTC meeting was held along with a Ministerial level meeting. From September 2009 to September 2011, no further meeting of JTC was convened.
- In October 2009, Iraq and Turkey signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on cooperation in water. The outcome of this MOU is not known. In several meetings of experts since then, Iraq and Turkey continue to disagree about the flow of water at the rate of 500 cubic meters per second from Turkey to Syria and Iraq, and also about mutual exchange of data.
- In December 2009, Syria and Turkey signed an MOU on water quality and another MOU on efficient utilisation of water resources and combating of drought. This was followed by the formation of working groups on both sides on 30-31 January 2011 at Raqa, Syria and 19-20 April 2011 at Nusaybin, Turkey. In these meetings the two sides presented information on the methodology for data collection, respective legal and institutional measures. No discussion has taken place with regards to assessment of existing hydrological measurement stations, establishment of new stations, or calibration of measurements.
- In December 2009, President Abdullah Gul of Turkey inaugurated the Disi Water Plan along with the King of Jordan, when President Gul declared, "Regional Cooperation is a must to tackle water issues and Turkey is open to any kind of cooperation on water".
- In February 2011, Prime Ministers of Syria and Turkey inaugurated the Friendship Dam on the Orontes. All discussion on water cooperation between Syria and Turkey has been suspended since May 2011 due to political turmoil in Syria, and Turkey's criticism of it.
- Syria and Lebanon had entered into an agreement on Orontes River in 1994, which was amended in 1997 and 2001. The two countries also entered into an agreement on the River El Kabir in 2002.
- As compared to these developments in the water sector, there have been positive developments in trade and transit. In June 2010, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Turkey decided to establish a free-trade area. In January 2011, they extended it to create a single visa zone to facilitate the movement of people. In March 2011, they further extended it to harmonise banking standards to facilitate the movement of capital. Since May 2011, there has been no further progress mainly due to political turmoil in Syria.



Focus on Sustainable Management

The workshop emphasised the need to shift the debate from relative allocation of shared water resources to the sustainable management of all water resources in the region. The measures of sustainable management are well explained in the MOUs signed between Turkey and Iraq as well as Syria, in 2009. They include:

1. Sharing of hydrological and meteorological data on trans-boundary rivers.
2. Introduction of modern water treatment techniques.
3. Installation of early warning systems for floods and droughts.
4. Cooperation in cloud seeding, drought resistant crops, crop disease.
5. Assessment of existing hydrological measurement stations, studies concerning their calibration and installation of new stations if required.
6. Knowledge sharing in drip irrigation.
7. Joint studies to modernise existing irrigation systems and adoption of closed and pressurised systems to minimise conveyance losses.
8. Loss prevention in domestic water supply.
9. A joint data base of hydrological and meteorological data to observe droughts and their impact.
10. Development of equipment and tools to monitor climate change and to utilise water resources efficiently.
11. Cooperation in waste water treatment.
12. Several measures for cooperation in agriculture, including land use techniques to save water, efficient use of water in farming, management of plant disease, development of drought resistant crops and seeds, and other suitable measure.



As these measures are prescribed in various agreements between three parties in the Middle East and not imposed from outside, they may form the basis of a regional cooperation arrangement in the water sector. It is clear from these MOUs that the parties are aware of what needs to be done, however, it is required to have a mechanism to translate their appreciation of needs into a working programme of cooperation. Obviously, ad hoc working groups meeting periodically are not able to do the needful. It is important to have a permanent mechanism which can pursue in a systematic way various measures for cooperation.

If the five countries in the Middle East wish to maximise benefits from sustainable management of water resources, they will need to make the following two changes:

- Shift emphasis from endless negotiation on absolute or proportionate numbers to allocate water flow to management of all water resources on the basis of commonly agreed principles, measures and measurements.
- Shift approach from ad hoc working groups in individual ministries to a permanent and joint mechanism backed by a professional secretariat.

Cooperation Mechanism

The five countries have a practise of establishing High Level Strategic Cooperation Councils, most noticeable in the regional context in the area of free trade, which has resulted in concrete results as enumerated earlier. Such Councils meet at the Prime Ministerial levels and take political decisions, which are then implemented at all levels of governments. Any cooperation in the sustainable management of water resources will need to draw from the experience of existing HLSCC in the region. It is in deference to the regional tradition that The Blue Peace report has recommended such a mechanism to be called Cooperation Council. However, several participants in the workshop recommended that the name of the mechanism may be determined by those who create it at a later stage. The Heads of Government may appoint suitable committees and a permanent body of experts to ensure smooth implementation of their decisions. In the absence of such a permanent body, many decisions may remain on paper. The experience of EU, ASEAN, SAARC, GCC and others shows that a permanent body helps to pursue the agenda of regional cooperation vigorously. Such a body has to be constituted by nationals of all countries in the region and may receive purely technical and financial input from outside, without anything that could be interpreted as interference in internal political affairs.

From Concept to Creation

In light of the observations made above, the workshop recommended the following:

- The workshop asked Strategic Foresight Group to seek formation of a High Level Group to explore and harness political will at the highest levels to pursue regional cooperation for sustainable management of water resources, and to create a mechanism for such cooperation.
- The workshop encouraged technical experts and representatives of ministries of water resources to prepare joint proposals for cooperation in water resources, or the harmonisation of hydrological data, for three or more countries in the region.

Strategic Foresight Group informed the workshop that it would like to request HRH Prince Hassan bin Talal of Jordan to chair High Level Group. It may approach other distinguished persons from the region, whose names were formally and informally suggested in the course of the workshop, to constitute the independent body.



Strategic Foresight Group has requested workshop participants to present joint proposals for practical cooperation, in the form of a pilot project, which it will help strengthen and forward to Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation for its consideration of support.

The workshop thanked the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, in particular Political Affairs Division IV and SDC, for their hospitality and coordination.

List of Participants

Iraq

- Dr Hamid Ahmed, Member of Parliament and Chairman of Parliamentary Committee on Water
- Dr Maha Rasheed, Senior Expert, Ministry of Water Resources

Jordan

- Dr Maysoon Zoubi, Secretary General, Ministry of Water Resources and Irrigation
- Dr Hazim El Naser, Former Minister of Water Resources and Irrigation
- Dr Koussai Quteishat, Former Secretary General of the Ministry of Water and Irrigation and Water Authority of Jordan

Lebanon

- Ms Karma Ekmekji, Director of Foreign Policy in the Office of the Opposition Leader
- Dr Selim Catafago, President of Board of Litani Water Authority

Turkey

- Mr Yasar Yakis, Former Minister of Foreign Affairs
- Mr Saban Disli, Economic Advisor to the Prime Minister and Member of Parliament
- Dr Aysegul Kibaroglu, Professor, International Relations Department, Okan University

Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation

- Dr Francois Muenger, Head, Water Initiatives
- Mr Johan Gely, Programme Manager, Water Initiatives
- Mr Mauel Stark, Program Manager, Water Initiatives

Political Affairs Division IV of Swiss FDFA

- Ambassador Jean Daniel Ruch, Special Representative for the Middle East
- Mr Mario Carera, Senior Advisor

Strategic Foresight Group

- Mr Sundeep Waslekar, President
- Ms Ilmas Futehally, Executive Director
- Ms Ambika Vishwanath, Project Coordinator and Research Analyst

This report represents the understanding of the workshop proceedings by SFG in its capacity as convenor. It is not a consensus statement and does not necessarily reflect any agreement by participants.

The workshop was especially organised as a follow up to the Blue Peace report. It was prepared by Strategic Foresight Group, with input from almost 100 leaders and experts from the Middle East, and support from the Governments of Switzerland and Sweden. It was launched by the President of Switzerland in February 2011, presented to cabinet ministers of Jordan, Turkey, Syria and Lebanon, discussed at the UK House of Lords and the European Parliament, and quoted by almost 500 newspapers and internet sources from 70-80 countries. More details on the report and other activities of Strategic Foresight Group are available at

www.strategicforesight.com