

The weight of water

By confronting the water crises that beset the Middle East, The Strategic Foresight Group of Mumbai is seeking to establish the concept of 'co-operation overcoming conflict' in one of the world's most troubled areas.

By David Watts



Lord Alderdice with Sundeep Waslekar, author of the Blue Peace report

Is it possible to solve one set of international problems with another one?

That is the notion the Strategic Foresight Group (SFG) of Mumbai is seeking to establish in what is arguably the world's most fraught region, the Middle East.

Most people outside government and the big, international non-governmental organizations would shrink from such a complex problem, let alone try and offer solutions. But SFG think that by tackling the water crises across the area, lessons can be learned and *modus operandi* established that might one day help bring peace to the region.

Lord Alderdice, who chairs the Liberal Democrats in the British House of Lords, hosted the launch of *The Blue Peace, Rethinking Middle East Water* recently in

the Lords with the report's author Sundeep Waslekar. Both men were seeking to enlist the support of the British government in pursuit of the concept.

Sketching the outlines of the idea, which has been modelled by officials, academics and heads of government in the region with the help of the Swiss and Swedish governments, Lord Alderdice noted that the very essence of the European Union had been the establishment of an area of co-operation unrelated to politics. In the case of the EU it was the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community, the precursor to the EU, encompassing the very commodities which were vital for the production of the instruments of war.

Getting the nations engaged in a joint enterprise based on these commodities

had harnessed energies which might otherwise have been directed to conflict and the result was decades of peace among the nations that were party to the agreement.

For the Middle East the shortages of water and the resulting conflicts could, just as elsewhere in the world, lead to a new world war.

"We felt that water could be an instrument of co-operation in the Middle East if we could think of suitable policy instruments and if they are pursued with sincerity and vigour," said Waslekar. The conclusion was reached, he said, through a very painstaking process through which about 100 heads of state, heads of water authorities, think tanks and independent experts were consulted.

Prince Hassan bin Talal of Jordan noted that every examination of Middle Eastern political problems came back to one aspect: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It was at the heart of the circles of conflict. With the right management and direction such circles could become circles of co-operation, according to the SFG study.

If one looked at water, the first circle of co-operation would encompass Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon. Another circle of co-operation in the area of water was Israel-Palestine and that co-operation could be extended to other fields "at low political cost", said Waslekar.

Since the water issue was raised in the talks between the two sides in Oslo in 1993 there had been a 7% depletion in the aquifers that the two communities relied upon and in parts of West Galilee that reduction was 15%. In the former case there had been 683 million cubic litres in the aquifers which was now reduced to 635m and, given a few years of drought, it could become much worse.

Though there were three bodies dealing with the water outlook in the east

Mediterranean, all were operating at the technical level and a political process needed to be started to ensure that all the countries were "on the same page". To balance Palestinian weakness in the face of Israel would require European intervention.

"We cannot solve a problem which the United Nations and the international community have been trying to solve for years but at least we can get them on the same page," said Waslekar.

He drew attention to the serious depletion in the already poor flow of the river Jordan which had declined some 90% over the past 50 years. Likewise the very existence of the Dead Sea was threatened by a decline from 950 square kilometres to 650 square kilometres, with severe implications for the region.

In the Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon crescent there were big disputes about the Tigris and the Euphrates: Syria and Iraq complaining that they were not getting sufficient water from Turkey. But if you talked to both the Turks and the Syrians and Iraqis you would find that they were both "100% right", he said.

When the Turks quoted their figures for water supply they were indeed

supplying all they were required to but it was going into the Red Sea where there was no requirement for it, and while Damascus and Baghdad came up with the figures for the quantities they were receiving they referred to the driest

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period of the year. All sides were quoting figures that followed no standard formula for such measurements.

This type of problem could be overcome with the co-ordination council proposed by the SFG comprising Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan who would all use standardized data. Next, the countries in the group needed to create their own climate change model

while thirdly they needed to make sure that such water as was available was channelled efficiently—currently about 50% was lost in transit.

A regional co-operation council could take decisions on such matters, which in itself would lead to a "robust technical co-operation system" that would create confidence-building measures at the political level between the Israelis and the Palestinians, which after some years could lead to some form of joint governance.

If that sounded just a little too optimistic, Waslekar pointed to the formation six months ago of a free trade zone encompassing Turkey, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon, which had already shown promising results with vastly increased trade and contacts between the various elements of the zone. It would soon be followed by a further expansion of the concept in the region.

Waslekar said he wanted this concept of co-operation overcoming conflict to go to the major capitals of the world. ■

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