

Editor: **Mark A. Heller**

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ISRAEL AND LEBANON: THE BATTLE FOR THE WAZZANI

Eyal Zisser

Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies

Following a brief period of calm on Israel's northern border, the drums of war have begun to beat again in recent weeks. This time, the background to what thus far remains only verbal escalation is not Hizbullah actions against Israel. Instead, it is the Lebanese Government's intention to begin pumping water from the Wazzani River, one of the tributaries of the Jordan.

Israel has warned Beirut that if it goes ahead with its plans, Israel will treat the project as a *casus belli*. And Hizbullah has predictably weighed in with its own demands that the Government of Lebanon proceed as planned and ignore Israeli warnings. Hizbullah spokesmen have added that if Israel acts against Lebanon, Hizbullah will respond by attacking targets in Israel.

Lebanese plans to pump water from the Wazzani, as well as from other sources in the area, are not new. Immediately after the Israeli withdrawal from south Lebanon in May 2000, the Lebanese began to pump small quantities to villages in the vicinity. However, Lebanon has now decided to increase substantially the amounts it will divert. To make that possible, it has constructed a pumping station over the Wazzani and also laid a pipeline to villages as far

as 10 kilometers away from the course of the stream.

The Lebanese apparently did not anticipate Israel's reaction and they continue to underestimate its gravity. Indeed, it appears that the Government headed by Rafiq al-Hariri did not even initiate the project. Although Hariri gives full backing to Hizbullah actions against Israel in the Shab'a Farms region, he much prefers to avoid any drastic deterioration of the situation on the border. Hariri's government and the forces it represents are clearly preoccupied with Lebanon's social and especially economic problems, and Hariri views Hizbullah as a nuisance he would obviously prefer to be rid of but which he has to accommodate.

The Wazzani pumping project was actually promoted by the South Lebanon Development Council, the moving force behind which is Nabih Berri, the Speaker of the Parliament and head of Amal. Amal competes with Hizbullah for the support of the Shi'ite population in Lebanon, especially in the south, which is Berri's major political power-base. It is therefore likely that Berri sought to show the Shi'ite voters in the south that he, and not only Hizbullah, looks out for their needs.

It is also likely that the Lebanese did not expect

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such a forceful Israeli reaction to the diversion of what is, after all, a relatively small quantity of water. Their claim, substantiated by Israeli water experts, is that the Wazzani project will not divert more than 10 million cubic meters (MCM) per annum, based on the capacity of the 16.5 inch pipe laid down. The total annual flow of the Wazzani is about 150 MCM, most of which flows through Israel into the Jordan River. Moreover, the Lebanese claim that they will not divert more than the amount allocated to them in the 1954/55 regional water sharing proposal of American mediator Eric Johnston, and that they will actually use only about a third of that allocation. Incidentally, Lebanon and all other riparian states rejected the Johnston Plan when it was proposed, insisting that acceptance would constitute *de facto* recognition of Israel.

Israel, for its part, minimizes the importance of Lebanese assurances in the context of the Johnston Plan and instead condemns the diversion as a unilateral Lebanese action that violates international laws obligating upstream states to take into account the needs of downstream states and even to secure their approval of any project that will adversely affect them.

Israeli spokesmen have also explained that, from Israel's perspective, the problem is not the quantity of water but rather the precedent of unilateral Lebanese action on a particularly sensitive issue. Israeli decision makers are probably also thinking about past experience, i.e., the efforts of Arab states in the early 1960s to divert the sources of the Jordan River that set in motion a chain of events culminating in the Six Day War of 1967.

It may also be that Israelis are particularly sensitive about Lebanon in the wake of the unilateral withdrawal, which many interpret as an act of weakness that Arabs are now trying to exploit. Consequently, there is a sense that Israel now needs to act forcefully in order to restore the

deterrent it allegedly lost in this sector, even if that means a confrontation with Hizbullah.

In short, both the Lebanese and Israel governments have gone out on a limb and find it difficult to climb down. Israel has threatened war if Lebanon proceeds with the diversion project, and Lebanon, under pressure from Hizbullah (perhaps with Syrian encouragement), cannot easily back down. Still, both Israel and Lebanon (and the Syrians and Hizbullah, as well) prefer to avoid a regional conflagration on the eve of an expected American offensive against Iraq. Israel clearly appreciates the constraints on the northern front given forceful American pressure to avoid any action that could inflame the region and further complicate plans for Iraq. And Lebanon, still preoccupied with domestic affairs, has no appetite for a violent conflict. Finally, even Syria is focused on "the day after" and has no desire to provoke Washington, much less get into a direct clash with it.

This explains the apparent readiness of Israel and Lebanon to cooperate with the United States in its efforts to calm things down. An American water expert has come to the region to examine the problem at first hand and the U.S. will probably come up with a compromise that might satisfy both sides – perhaps by allowing Lebanon to proceed with the project but strictly limiting the amounts of water it can pump.

Whether or not such efforts bear fruit, it is not water that is the source of the real problem but rather the complex and highly charged reality along the border since Israel's withdrawal. It remains to be seen whether the parties can avert an open clash before there is some broader regional détente – perhaps following the resumption of Israeli-Syrian negotiations – or whether a conflict erupts because of the symbolic importance of the issues at hand – water, Israeli deterrence, and the settling of accounts between Israel and Hizbullah.