

## Israel, Jordan, Palestinians to Sign Water Agreement

### Deal a Rare Example of Cooperation in an Embittered Political Environment

By Joshua Mitnick

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TEL AVIV—Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority signed a water-supply agreement to slake rising cross-border demand, a rare step toward economic integration despite persistent political rancor holding up progress on a Middle East peace accord.

The deal reached Monday also aims to slow the steady drop in the Dead Sea water level through a pipeline that will be built from the Red Sea.

It is one of the few regional cooperation projects surviving from the heyday of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process in the 1990s, when many envisioned a Middle East remade by economic interdependence.

"It is no less than a historic agreement," Israeli Water and Energy Minister Silvan Shalom told Israel Army radio.

Mr. Shalom signed the agreement at World Bank headquarters in Washington along with Jordanian Water and Irrigation Minister Hazem Al Nasser and Palestinian Water Authority Minister Shaddad Attili.

"It has the blessing of the prime minister, [Palestinian Authority President] Mahmoud Abbas, and of course the king of Jordan," Mr. Shalom said.

The water deal was reached despite apparent stagnation in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations after four months.

Even though it deals with economic infrastructure, it will nonetheless boost the prospects for an eventual political deal, predicted **Oded Eran**, a former Israeli ambassador to Jordan.

"This is very important. It doesn't change the geopolitics of the Middle East, but it changes the infrastructure map," said Mr. **Eran**, a fellow at the **Institute for National Security Studies**, a think tank at Tel Aviv University. "Once nations have concrete economic interests to protect, they become more interested in peace and security."

Israel and Jordan signed a water supply deal as part of their 1994 peace treaty. Though the neighbors are quiet geopolitical allies in the region, trade is thin and signs of normalization are rare.

The agreement calls for construction of a water-desalination plant, at a cost about \$300 million, in Jordan's Red Sea port city of Aqaba. It will be built, operated and financed through private investors chosen in a bidding process.

The plant will supply Aqaba with 30 million cubic meters (1.05 billion cubic feet) of drinking water annually. It will also supply as much as 50 million cubic meters (1.75 billion cubic feet) of water, valued at about \$50 million, to the neighboring Israeli city of Eilat and Israeli farms in the Arava Valley.

But instead of paying, Israel will swap the same quantity of fresh water pumped from the northern Sea of Galilee, sending it back across the border to Amman and northern Jordanian cities. The idea is to find more local solutions to water needs in the north and south of both countries.

Israel also committed under the agreement to sell the Palestinians an additional 30 million cubic meters annually at cost. The source of that water isn't fixed.

The agreement will alleviate water shortages in both countries. But it is crucial for Jordan, one of the world's poorest countries in terms of water resources, which is straining to absorb hundreds of thousands of refugees from neighboring Syria's civil war.

"It is a short- to medium-term solution to manage a crisis," said Dureid Mahasneh, a Jordanian water expert and a former Jordan Valley Authority chief.

Palestinians in the West Bank are also grappling with chronic water shortages, which affect farmers.

"We are living in water shortage crisis," said Walid Assaf, the Palestinian Minister of Agriculture.

Though Israel has enough desalination capacity to satisfy demand, the Jordanian desalination plant will provide a local water supply to satisfy rising usage in Eilat and among Israeli farmers at the southern tip of the country without having to build more costly infrastructure to pipe water in from central Israel.

The leftover seawater pumped from the Red Sea, about 100 million cubic meters (3.5 billion cubic feet) annually, will be sent through a 180-kilometer-long (108 miles) pipeline to the Dead Sea to partially offset the decline in the water level there.

It is pilot project for a more ambitious decades-old vision of regional planners to build a canal between the two bodies of water to replenish the rapidly shrinking Dead Sea—a tourist attraction.

Dubbed the Red-Dead canal, a recent plan called for 2 billion cubic meters (70 billion cubic feet) of water to be funneled from the Red Sea to the Dead Sea and would have cost \$10 billion.

Israeli environmentalists have opposed the canal, arguing the water from the Red Sea would upset the ecosystem of the Dead Sea. The World Bank has been studying the economic feasibility of the canal for more than a decade.

"The political climate in the Middle East didn't support such a megaproject, particularly with the differences between the Palestinians and the Israelis," said Mr. Mahasneh.

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