

U.S. SPONSORED CONFLICT RESOLUTION THROUGH COOPERATION IN THE WATER SECTOR

Miriam Schafer

Master's Degree Candidate, LBJ School of Public Affairs

Center for Middle Eastern Studies, The University of Texas at Austin

2501 Manor Rd #304, Austin, TX 78722

Rmiriam@mail.utexas.edu

Elizabeth Lien

Master's Degree Candidate, LBJ School of Public Affairs

Center for Middle Eastern Studies, The University of Texas at Austin

204 E. 46th Street, Austin, TX 78751

Elien@mail.utexas.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper examines U.S.-sponsored water dispute prevention and resolution programs on water issues between Palestinians and Israelis. The intent of these efforts has been to facilitate the development of water infrastructure, including water and wastewater systems in the Palestinian Authority and Israel. The report is based on reviews of project statements and ex-post interviews with program participants. The paper describes some of the goals of program organizers and discusses whether those goals were and continue to be met. The paper focuses on programs' effect on conflict prevention and resolution as well as the results on the water and wastewater industry. Program participants were interviewed to establish their goals for each program in which they were involved, both prior to its commencement and how or why these goals may have adjusted through the course of their experience. These results are used to form recommendations for trilateral efforts between the U.S., the Palestinian Authority and Israel.

KEYWORDS: Conflict resolution, Technical programs, Texas, Water cooperation

INTRODUCTION

Of all of the issues between Palestinians and Israelis, access to fresh water for drinking and agriculture is one of the most visible to the people involved. Water is one element necessary to survive, and

concerns are often voiced about “water security” or the fair allocation of scarce water resources in that arid region. However, water is also one issue in negotiations that has the potential for a solution amenable to all involved. It also provides opportunities for citizens on both sides of the conflict to work together to make their fellow citizen’s lives noticeably better through technical activities. The former Water Minister of Jordan pointed out that,

“...water is needed to keep the talks alive and to have them bear fruit. Alternatively, water is capable of inflicting damage and destruction when floods are not controlled. In other words, by its very nature and occurrence water can promote fruitful cooperation, or may trigger and accelerate destructive conflicts” (Munther, 1992).

A senior official at the U.S. Department of State also stressed the issue that water cooperation projects should be supported since it is one of the few areas where Palestinians and Israelis are currently still working together. He stated that water cooperation discussions could also bridge into other negotiations in other industries (Senior Official, 2004).

Politicians and policy experts are often perceived as the sole parties involved in solving political disputes. However, scientists, by the nature of their occupation, can advance international conflict resolution. Because science is an international field – scientists need the support and critique of scientists from the international scientific community in order to gain credibility in their fields – it is natural for scientists to play a role in resolving international disputes. Alexander Keynan points out that, “the permanent intellectual communication framework used by scientists for mutual cooperation within science can also be useful for contact and cooperation between scientists on other matters across lines of conflict” (de Cerreno, 1998). In addition, scientists share a culture which can be utilized in promoting understanding between citizens of conflicting nations. They share a common language and a belief in a universal and objective reality of physical, geological, chemical or biological systems.

Water is a very visible issue to those who use it every day of their lives. In Gaza, for example, where the water table has sunk and the water is increasingly saline, many people have preventable illnesses

that are related to poor water quality (Palestinian Professor of Geography, 2004). These health issues, which are tied to the political conflict, can be approached in a multitude of ways. For example, at The University of Texas at Austin a number of programs have sought to bring people together by addressing water as an issue of importance to all involved parties, no matter what side of the border they live on. People who have worked with so-called back-channel programs often believe that by bringing people together in any capacity, building blocks for peaceful, stable societies can be created, using microdiplomacy to promote peace (Official, 2004).

This paper takes past academic, technical and political programs into account, focusing on academic and technical programs, especially at The University of Texas at Austin. The design, implementation and evaluation of such programs have sensitive structural issues. This study focuses on vetting some of the past initiatives based on over fifty interviews. It is possible to identify successful aspects of programs that will be useful for future water infrastructure and conflict resolution modules.

METHODS

Research is extremely sparse on the efficacy of using technical programs for conflict resolution. With the exception of a few publications, the subject is rarely addressed in academic publications. Therefore, much of this research is based on conversations with people who have organized and participated in technical programs in the past. This study is weighted toward an analysis of technical programs that have been held at The University of Texas at Austin, since we did have access to participants in these programs. Interviews were also conducted with program organizers at the U.S. Department of State, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, the Environmental Protection Agency, and various non-governmental agencies in Washington, DC and in the Middle East. Names of people who were interviewed have not been included without their explicit permission. The few academic works that do exist were also utilized.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Types of Cooperation Programs

There are several types of joint Palestinian-Israeli water programs – political, academic, and technical – that address conflict resolution in the Middle East. Each type has its own characteristics and sets of expectations.

The most visible and the least frequent kinds of programs are political. Ministers or other political figures attend these political programs. Activities focus on finding a political solution to water problems between the Israelis and Palestinians. Participants usually deal directly with the issues that need to be resolved. Participants might partake in a role-playing exercise in which they are asked to play the role of the opposing side when discussing a contentious issue and then discuss the current situation, trying to arrive at a mutually agreeable solution. Exercises like this are meant to open participants' minds to the point of view of the other side. These programs usually attempt to move negotiations forward through direct changes to Israeli and Palestinian governmental policies. Political programs have strong support and opposition.

Political programs have the advantage of dealing with the water situation in the manner it must eventually be addressed – through political discussion. Political programs have the advantage of providing an example of how negotiations *could be* conducted by the official negotiators. However, negotiators attending privately funded programs are generally unable to perform official negotiations because governments prefer that negotiations be conducted in more formal settings.

The risk of dissonance between what could occur and what can be accomplished can lead to disappointment, because participants might wish to negotiate concrete policy solutions. For example, Yoav Kislev, a professor at the Hebrew University, felt that one Texas program in which he was involved did not advance the solution to the problem because the program failed to come to an agreement on concrete policies for either side. One intangible benefit of political programs, regardless of the policy outcome, is that they may allow participants to develop relationships between people from each side of the conflict. Although this may seem like a small thing, it is of vital importance when the parties sit down to negotiations. If

negotiators already know one another and recognize their partners' desire to see an end to the conflict, it may be easier for negotiators on both sides to come to agreements that are beneficial for all parties concerned either at the time or in future negotiations. Prior to the Oslo accords, an informal Palestinian-Israeli academic community was established which facilitated later negotiations.¹ Efforts in micro-level diplomacy, such as having non-politicians partake in conflict resolution exercises, can help in establishing mutual respect (Official, 2004).

Academic programs are attended by academics or researchers. In general, the aim of these programs is to produce joint research done by both Palestinians and Israelis. Papers produced by such programs are meant to be used by negotiators in discussions about the water situation. With research done by both Palestinians and Israelis, the hope is that negotiators will have a firm starting point from which to broker a deal, rather than having to argue about scientific aspects of the situation. Academic programs are somewhat easier to organize because persons involved in teaching and research tend to pride themselves on not being involved in politics. For example, some of the academics involved in one University of Texas program stated that politics does not affect them and that what they study is too important to be tied up with the conflict between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.² In general, academics who are involved in these types of programs are open to discuss a variety of solutions to the water situation, because they openly recognize the technical restrictions placed on both parties by the struggle over water rights, wastewater treatment, and pollution. Many academic programs produce a concrete product, usually an evaluation of the water situation on recommendations for managing water resources. Such a research product may be useful to political actors when attempting to negotiate water issues. By providing an analysis agreed upon by professionals from opposing sides, academic papers may assist negotiators in arriving at a feasible solution. Forming relationships

¹ Shoham, Dany, "Palestinian-Israeli Academic Encounters," in de Cerrena, Allison L.C. and Alexander Keynan, ed, *Scientific Cooperation, State Conflict*. New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1998. p. 211.

² Levy, N. (2004) Interview, *Israeli Ministry of the Environment* and Yaqubi, A. (2004). Interview, *Palestinian Water Authority*.

between researchers on both sides of the conflict, academic programs may also lead to future cooperation between universities or other institutions. For example, one Israeli professor has organized events in which his Palestinian counterparts come to his university for symposia (Israeli Professor of Geology, 2004). On the other hand, academics rarely wield any political power or direct influence in their countries. In Israel, for instance, as in many other countries, there is a clear divide between academia and government. In the Palestinian Authority academics can sometimes participate in an advisory or official role in government.

The third type of program can be referred to as a technical program. These programs are attended by professionals who work in the field of water and wastewater. Participants can include engineers, plant managers, program managers, or anyone else who works directly in water and wastewater provision. Technical programs may be billed as training programs, the aim of which is to enhance the technical capabilities of water professionals. The technical programs can include elements that address cooperation between or among multiple parties. An additional aim of these programs is, of course, to build relationships between people who must cooperate on a day-to-day basis or to allow parties to work together who are separated by political boundaries. Outcomes of these programs are usually less tangible, since they are capacity-building programs. As with any program, the ultimate goal is cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians. However, even if this goal is not achieved, technical training programs contribute to the capabilities of water professionals in both countries. Technical programs, particularly those involving younger participants, are unlikely to yield concrete results in the immediate future. Instead, they are an investment in the future of both countries and in the future of the peace process. As a water specialist at the U.S. State Department commented, “you can’t teach ministers” (Water Specialist, 2004), meaning that once people are high up in government, their attitudes and biases may be set. By working with people who do not yet have political power, future political players may become more open to cooperation and reconciliation with the political opposition. Technical programs also have the advantage of being non-political, allowing participants to assume an objective, somewhat removed position from the political

situation and focus on water provision rather than on the politics of water provision (Senior Official, 2004).

Middle East Regional Cooperation (MERC)

Robert B. Abel constructed an analysis of the Middle East Regional Cooperation (MERC) Marine Program, a program designed to “solve the water program by an altogether different means” (Abel, 1997). Abel and other creators of the MERC program found that few politicians dealt with water issues in the Middle East before the mid-1990s and understood the importance of working toward a solution regarding this precious natural resource (Abel, 1997).

The MERC program was different from other technological programs that broached conflict resolution issues, in that it was directly instituted and funded by the U.S. Congress, as opposed to non-governmental or international service organizations. The MERC program also differed from previous programs because of its innovative methods of integrating technological cooperation project initiatives and conflict resolution topics in the water sector. Due to the lack of precedence, Abel and his associates were able to construct a program individualized to their goals and make adjustments as needed (Abel, 1997). One of their goals was to involve both professionals willing to participate in conflict resolution exercises and younger scientists and academics in the project, so as to invest in the future of water cooperation in the Middle East. This approach has also been adopted by The University of Texas at Austin in its planning for a technical program in January, 2005.

The United States contingent’s role in the MERC program was instrumental in its construction and initial implementation. However, the program was designed to have the U.S.’s role diminish over time, so as to allow the local professionals a certain level of autonomy and build independence into the program. In congruence with the commitment to have the U.S. disengage as the program flourished, the creators were hesitant to allow other states to become involved, even though there was a high degree of interest from other governments in the region to be involved (Abel, 1997).

After the initial success of the MERC program, the designers of the program offered several future aims to take into consideration. They

argued that outside groups that were not participants in the original program should be involved, so as to spread the idea of integrating innovative industry findings with political cooperation in a volatile region. This cooperation can only be maintained by scientists working with counterparts on the other side, visiting their peers across borders and creating bilateral plans to stabilize the water sector in the Middle East. If these industry findings could be translated into economic and cultural gains to be offered to government officials, the program's effectiveness could rise (Abel, 1997).

Participant Profiles

One critique of bilateral cooperation programs is that programs of this nature tend to invite people already receptive to cooperating with the other side on water issues. Inviting those open to dialogue may facilitate a pleasant and productive program. However, some participants argue that the people who are already open to cooperation are not those who need to be involved. In order to change people's attitudes toward cooperation, they argue, it is necessary to involve people who are not already open to such experiences.

One past participant, Nitsan Levy, lives in one of Israel's West Bank settlements and deals with environmental issues in the West Bank. He has advanced the argument that settlers should always be a part of bilateral programs because they are the Israelis who deal with Palestinians on a day-to-day basis (Levy, 2004). Since many Israelis believe that some settlements may be evacuated in the event of a peace agreement, he may have a point. Palestinians, however, generally feel that their interpretation of international law dictates settlers would not be allowed to live in the West Bank. In other words, Palestinians may see no reason for talking or cooperating with people who are attempting to appropriate Palestinian land. One Palestinian academic felt that the presence of settlers in a bilateral program will cause so much tension that nothing could be accomplished (Palestinian Professor of Engineering, 2004). Currently, most program designers tend to avoid inviting settlers to attend U.S.-sponsored programs due to the political implications of their presence. However, if the United States recognizes settlements as "facts on the ground," this policy may change, at which point it may become necessary to reevaluate the pros and cons of having settlers participate in programs.

A Palestinian water professional, who has been involved in many bilateral programs, including the 2002 program at The University of Texas at Austin, points out that participants must be mature enough to adapt to new situations and to communicate with others in the program even though they are new acquaintances. He also points out that programs should involve women as much as possible, because they do not get many opportunities in the Palestinian water sector (Palestinian Water Professional, 2004). The inclusion of women would reflect U.S. commitment to gender equality, and may be justified because women are relatively rare in the water sector, and therefore may be overlooked by the Palestinian bureaucracy.

In the interest of long-term results, it is useful to involve younger, less experienced water sector participants. Ahmad Yaqubi commented that “small” (less-qualified) Palestinians should be involved in bilateral programs because they do not understand anything about Israelis and are still afraid of them. When they start to realize that Israelis are human, they are better able to work with them (Yaqubi, 2004). Drs. Yoav Kislev and Shimshon Belkin also agree that it is vital to provide opportunities for younger professionals to cooperate with the other side (Kislev, 2004 and Belkin, 2004).

Location

Holding programs outside of the region is ideal in the current political climate since it has proven difficult to gather groups of Palestinians and Israelis in either nation due to travel restrictions, as well as geographic proximity to the current political crisis. Having programs in a neutral location, such as a foreign research institution like The University of Texas at Austin, allows participants to distance themselves somewhat from the realities of the political situation at home. It also limits advice from friends, family and coworkers, who may not support cooperation between Palestinians and Israelis. Being in an unfamiliar place allows participants to bond over the exploration of Austin and the differences between Texas and their homes. Texas is also an ideal location for water issues in the Middle East, because the two areas have a similar climate and therefore similar water issues. Finally, the university’s proximity to the U.S. border with Mexico allows participants to witness the trans-boundary water issues between those two countries. Many academics who participated in University of Texas programs found the comparison to be apt,

including one participant who is writing his doctoral thesis on the U.S./Mexico water conflict and its applications in the Israeli/Palestinian situation (Levy, 2004).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although the participants in cooperation initiatives generally dub the programs successful and positive experiences, their lives after the programs do not usually change drastically. Part of the reason for this conclusion is that when programs are evaluated, the time between the program and the evaluation is usually quite short. Participants return to the same homes and jobs as before their program, and it is difficult for them to implement immediate changes in their professional lives. It is one goal of programs, such as those organized by The University of Texas at Austin, that participants can use the connections they have made and to foster professional relationships over political lines in their current and future service.

Some participants do use what they have observed in their programs. For example, one Palestinian professor mentioned that he regularly uses the example of the U.S./Mexico water conflict in teaching his classes at al-Azhar University in Gaza to discuss bi-national cooperation in the water sector in a politically-separated region. He is also in regular contact with a professor at Ben Gurion University in Israel; they have collaborated on project proposals since the Texas program at which they met (Palestinian Professor of Geography, 2004). In fact, this Israeli professor has held four workshops and symposia to which his Palestinian colleagues were invited. All of the Palestinians he invited were eager and able to attend his events (Israeli Professor of Geology, 2004). Professors from an-Najah University in Nablus and The Hebrew University of Jerusalem have also maintained contact and regularly submit proposals for joint research projects. Cooperation and friendship between these two men illustrates one tangible outcome of academic programs.

Many of the participants have suggested that any opportunity to get to know individuals from the other side will plant the seeds for eventual cooperation, even if there may be few concrete changes in their professional lives. By understanding that the other side “doesn’t have horns” (Kislev, 2004), participants will be more willing to consider cooperation with members of the other nation, even if they are not

acquainted with the individual. This issue was identified and addressed within the MERC program by encouraging industry professionals, academics and scientists to remain in contact with their counterparts across borders and visit their peers' place of work, which would add to the professional relationship and prove to other peers in the region the benefits of cooperation (Abel, 1997).

Based on the discussion above, there are a number of ideas that should improve third-party water sector programs related to Palestinians and Israelis. These ideas relate to the program location, participant selection, duration, activities and follow up.

Location In order to take advantage of the willingness of scientists and academics to talk, it seems best to locate cooperative programs in a country other than Israel and the West Bank and Gaza. Although it would be ideal to address water problems in the area where they occur, having a program on location may add to tension and prevent participants from forming fruitful relationships. Texas has been a useful venue because of the correlation between the United States/Mexico water issues and the situation between Israel and the West Bank and Gaza, in addition to similar issues Texas and Israel/Palestine face in an arid climate. Cyprus or Turkey have been convenient locations. Egypt and Jordan have arid climates similar to those in Israel and the West Bank and Gaza.

Participants Programs involving senior academics and scientists have proven successful in the past. Many past participants and contacts in U.S. government agencies have suggested that now may be the time to invest in a future generation. Therefore, future programs should focus on graduate students or young professionals who are likely to be future leaders in the water sector, in conjunction with professionals who have more experience to act as mentors and/or facilitators. In addition, the United States should consider expanding program participants to include Israeli settlers and other participants whose presence may have political implications, but who might have their views of the water situation altered dramatically through contact with the other side. Although this will be a sensitive suggestion to implement, programs not limited to people already willing to cooperate may benefit the region.

Duration of Program Programs that allow repeated contact may increase the likelihood of personal change, as opposed to the current practice of one-time attempts at intensive relationship building and conflict resolution. Ideally, once a group of academics, scientists or technicians is selected, they should be able to meet at least twice for at least a week at a time. This would allow them to build long-term relationships and maintain cooperation over a longer period of time; participants should be encouraged to bridge gaps over borders by visiting peers in their place of work. Such visits could prove the effectiveness of cooperation created by the programs and spread the efforts of bi-national collaboration to other professionals in the visited organization. If budget limits preclude such repeated interaction, short informal efforts by participants may be useful.

Programs organized for fresh teams of participants should be as long in duration as possible to allow the ice to break and an atmosphere of cooperation and friendship to develop. A longer program will also allow more time for social and educational activities in which participants may form sincere relationships. The longest possible duration is probably one month, since participants have professional and personal obligations at home. An official at the U.S. State Department, believes that the most important way to resolve environmental conflicts is to create communities of people who are willing to interact, such as those who work in the same field (Official, 2004). Longer and repeated programs may help accomplish this goal.

Activities Friendships are rarely formed in a heavily supervised formal setting. Therefore, it is important to have both organized social activities and free time for participants to get to know one another independently. Meals taken together can provide a forum for independent and personal conversations. Planned activities, such as concerts, field trips, and museums, will give participants a starting point for conversations. Free time is important, so people can choose to communicate instead of being forced to converse. However, free time will be more fruitful later in the program, after the ice has been broken and people are more familiar with one another.

Follow-Up Since one of the goals of multilateral programs, such as those at The University of Texas at Austin, is to help participants form lasting professional and personal relationships, it is fitting that program organizers devote some time after the program to maintain

contact among participants. Contact can occur through a monthly newsletter for all the participants about new developments in water technology, conferences that might be of interest, and personal milestones for former participants – much like an alumni newsletter from a college. It may also be useful to establish an Internet group, where participants can chat and post messages about their lives and their work. The external organization's involvement should be somewhat limited and diminish over time, contingent upon the success of bi-national cooperation between Palestinians and Israelis. Joint research and projects should also be encouraged to foster continued discussion. One advantage of tangible results would be that the sponsors would be pleased by concrete outcomes.

Any program that builds bridges between members of conflicting nations can be valuable, although that value might not be immediately apparent. Even organizations that are not involved in bilateral activities, such as USAID, regard bridge-building programs as useful and necessary for cooperation on vital activities, such as the provision of water and wastewater (USAID Official, 2004). In this era of constant low-level conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, water sector discussions have continued represent a means to advance cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians on water issues and the political arena.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by grants from the U.S. Department of State and U.S. Department of Education to the University of Texas at Austin. Additional support was provided by the RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service and the Bess Harris Jones Centennial Professorship in National Resource Policy Studies. The authors acknowledge the advice of Professors David Eaton, Marwan Haddad, and Eran Feitelson in the development of the research methodology. The authors appreciate the willingness of program participants and government officials to discuss their experiences.

REFERENCES

- Abel, R. (1997). *The Influence of Technical Cooperation on Reducing Tensions in the Middle East*, University Press of America, Inc., Lanham, Maryland, pp. 20-97.
- Palestinian Professor of Geography. (2004). Interview, *Al-Azhar University of Gaza, Geography Department*.
- Israeli Professor of Geology. (2004). Interview, *Department of Geology, Ben Gurion University of the Negev*.
- Belkin, S. (2004). Interview, *Department of Environmental Sciences School of Applied Science The Hebrew University of Jerusalem*.
- de Cerreno, A. Keynan, A. ed. *Scientific Cooperation, State Conflict: The Roles of Scientists in Mitigating International Discord*. New York Academy of Sciences, New York, Vol. 866., pp. xii.
- Palestinian Professor of Engineering. (2004). Interview, *Al-Najah University*.
- Official. (2004) Interview, *U.S. Agency for International Development, West Bank and Gaza Mission*.
- Official. (2004) Interview, *U.S. Department of State*.
- Kislev, Y. (2004). Interview, *Department of Agricultural Economics and Management Faculty of Agriculture Hebrew University*.
- Senior Official. (2004) Interview, *U.S. Department of State*.
- Levy, N. (2004) Interview, *Israeli Ministry of the Environment*.
- Munther H. (1992) A View from Jordan. *Washington Institute Research Memorandum Number 23*, Washington, D.C.
- Shoham, Dany, (1998) "Palestinian-Israeli Academic Encounters," in de Cerrena, Allison L.C. and Alexander Keynan, ed, *Scientific Cooperation, State Conflict*. New York Academy of Sciences, New York.
- Water Specialist. (2004). Interview, *U.S. Department of State*.
- Palestinian Water Professional. (2004). Interview, *Palestinian Hydrology Group*.
- Yaqubi, A. (2004). Interview, *Palestinian Water Authority*.