

Turkish Water to Israel?

Aug 14, 2003



Brief Analysis

A Turkish delegation is expected to be in Israel within the next few weeks, perhaps as early as August 20, to sign an agreement committing Israel to buy 50 million cubic meters (mcm) of water annually from Turkey for the next twenty years. Once the operational details -- price, timeline, and transportation methods -- are worked out, Turkish water will flow to Israel via purpose-built supertankers.

Turkish water would satisfy less than 5 percent of Israel's water needs, but would be used for emergencies such as droughts. Officials of both countries agree that the accord is not solely about water supply but about strengthening relations between the two countries, and setting an example of economic interdependency in the Middle East.

Israel's Water Demand and Supply

Israel's fresh-water resources, which average about 2,000 mcm annually (three-fourths of it potable), are already being exploited to the limit. With a steadily rising population, Israel will need as much as 30 percent more water to meet the needs of the population in 2020.

Israel has three immediate options to meet the problem of increasing water demand and irregular water supply. It can 1) import water from Turkey, which is estimated to cost around \$0.80 per cubic meter; 2) desalinate seawater, at a cost of \$0.52–0.55 per cubic meter; or 3) recycle used water via wastewater processing plants, for around \$0.35 per cubic meter.

It would seem that recycling wastewater is the low-cost way to meet Israel's water needs. Indeed, Israeli water-processing plants have been operating for thirty years in the Haifa area and in Dan, south of Tel Aviv. The volume of recycled water is estimated at 270 mcm a year, and could reach 620 mcm by 2020. However, the recycled water Israel obtains is not considered drinking-water quality and is used by Israel only for industrial purposes.

Seawater desalination is also operational in Israel, but on a much more limited and local scale. It can be cost effective, but is not always guaranteed to reach the desired drinking quality and has environmental consequences such as leaving salt residue. According to Shlomi Dinar, a Johns Hopkins University-based expert on international water issues, brackish water from boreholes is another viable option, as it can reach drinking quality when desalinated. At a cost of \$0.33–0.42 per cubic meter, brackish water is relatively inexpensive to desalinate. However, Israel can at best procure 50 mcm drinking water annually through this method, and the country therefore has to look elsewhere to quench its thirst.

Some Israeli officials have long been skeptical of importing water from Turkey. Israel's Ministry of Finance, for example, has been opposed to it on grounds of cost. The Israeli Water Commission has been lukewarm at best to the idea, generally preferring desalination and recycling. According to rumors in 2002, Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon said at the time that Israel would not buy water from Turkey since it would cost Israel less to desalinate its own water -- instead offering Turkey \$147 million compensation in installments for the investment it had already made in the water export project. Turkish officials refused the offer and repeated Ankara's position that the project was also a political matter. Now Israeli officials say the water desalination projects will continue and the imported

water from Turkey will serve as an additional source for emergencies such as droughts.

Turkish Water

By the standards of the Middle East, Turkey, with 1,850 cubic meters of water per person, is not a water-poor country. In the region, only Iraq has more, with 2,150 cubic meters per person. By contrast, Israel has about 325 cubic meters per person, and the United States has about 9,000 cubic meters per person.

Since the mid 1990s, Turkey and Israel have strengthened their relationship by cooperating on a wide array of initiatives, ranging from defense-industrial projects to joint military exercises. It was the late Turkish president Turgut Ozal who first proposed the idea of exporting water to the Middle East from the Seyhan and Ceyhan rivers in southeastern Turkey in 1987, in what was called the "Peace Pipeline Project." This scheme did not materialize because of the political turmoil at the time, as well as Ozal's premature death in April 1993.

After years of lull, the idea of exporting Turkish water from the Manavgat River to Israel appeared on the radar screen when Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak visited Turkey in 1999, a time when Israel was in the midst of a serious drought. Since then, Turkey has finished a \$150 million anchorage (a pumping station and treatment plant) at the estuary of the Manavgat. That estuary, near Antalya on the Turkish Mediterranean coast, is approximately 325 nautical miles from Israel's Ashkelon port, to which the water would be shipped.

The Manavgat River has facilities capable of exporting 180 mcm of water using tankers. This means that, at 50 mcm of water per year, Israel would purchase only a portion of the river's annual water supply. Turkey hopes that the Manavgat River project will eventually supply water to other eastern Mediterranean countries suffering from water shortages, including Syria, Jordan, and Greece. So far, however, there have been no willing customers for Turkish water other than Israel. As a result, Turkey's expectations from Israel regarding previous trading commitments have intensified. On July 23, the Jerusalem Post reported that "Turkey threatened to call off military deals with Israel if the water deal was not signed, and at one time there was even concern in Jerusalem that Israeli firms would be frozen out of lucrative tenders in a massive development program in southeastern Turkey if the water deal was not finalized."

Water transport on the scale of the proposed annual 50 mcm to Israel from Turkey has no precedent. There will be concerns about two issues:

- **Security.** Turkish authorities say the Manavgat River basin is secure and that all necessary measures will be taken to guarantee the safety and quality of water up to the loading point. Although a pipeline would be the most desirable way of bringing water from Turkey to Israel, such a pipeline would have to pass through Syria, a project that, at present, seems impossible politically.
- **Logistics.** The first delivery of water to Israel will depend on the availability of new purpose-built tankers. Other alternatives like water bags may not be reliable in severe sea conditions for long distances.

Implications

Water is a strategic asset in this dry region, and Turkey's water supplies could contribute to reducing tension over this politically sensitive resource. If signed, the Manavgat Water Agreement will also serve as a step in strengthening the friendship between Turkey and Israel.

To the extent that the Manavgat water improves water availability in Israel, it may be possible for Israel to share more water with the Palestinians and possibly Jordan, especially in the context of an overall political settlement in the region. This could reduce tensions in the region, given that Israel, Syria, Jordan, and the Palestinians all have serious concerns about scarce water supplies.

Ozal's vision to transform water from a source of conflict to a means of cooperation was last discussed in April by

Israeli foreign minister Silvan Shalom and his Turkish counterpart Abdullah Gul. Although Israeli officials still hesitate to publicly announce a date, it looks like the \$1 billion agreement for the transport of water from the Manavgat to Israel is finally about to be signed. If the deal materializes, Israelis will be drinking Turkish water by late 2004.

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