# The Wazzani Water Dispute:

## More Tension along the Israel-Lebanon Border

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Brief Analysis

According to the September 17, 2002, issue of Ha'aretz, a delegation of American water experts toured the Wazzani River in southern Lebanon on September 16 to review Lebanese government projects aimed at directing water to nearby villages. Ever since the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) unilaterally withdrew from southern Lebanon in May 2000, relations between Israel and Lebanon have been tense, a result of the Lebanese government's tolerance of Hizballah attacks on Israeli targets along the border.

Hizballah's provocations have so far elicited limited, proportional Israeli military responses due to Israel's reluctance to open a second front alongside its ongoing conflict with the Palestinians. Yet, the new Lebanese initiative to divert water from the Wazzani River—the main source of the Hatzbani, which contributes approximately 25 percent of the Jordan River's water—is deepening the rift between Israel and Lebanon.

The project—carried out by the Council of the South, a government body affiliated with the Shi'i movement Amal—will divert by pipeline as much as 9,000 cubic meters of water daily to dozens of villages. This portion of the project is expected to be complete by the end of the year, after which the Lebanese plan to construct a pumping station and a reservoir from which the water will be channeled. The amount of water that such a project could divert from Israel would be enough to lower the level of the Sea of Galilee by almost an inch. Under normal circumstances, such a unilateral step would likely have passed without incident. Considering the existing tension along the border, however, this seemingly small water dispute could deteriorate into a military confrontation. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has warned that Israel will not accept Lebanon's project, telling Army Radio that he sees the plan as " a pretext for war." Indeed, water is a sensitive topic that has contributed to several Arab-Israeli conflicts, including the 1967 Six Day War, which resulted in part from a Syrian-Lebanese plan to divert the Jordan River's tributaries. Given this history, the United States is devoting serious attention to settling the current dispute diplomatically, largely in order to avoid any flare-up that could impede its attempts to build a coalition against Iraq.

Israel's Water Anxiety

For years, Israel's fresh water supply has been declining in both quality and quantity. The combination of low precipitation, growing population, and over-pumping has created a national water crisis. In recent years, Israel's water balance has been so negative that the country failed to meet its allocation transfer quotas to Jordan from the shared Jordan and Yarmouk Rivers—transfers mandated by the 1994 peace treaty between the two nations. In order to meet its needs, Israel has been forced to import water from Turkey. Last month, the two countries signed a water accord in which Turkey undertook to export 50 million cubic meters of water to Israel over a 20-year period.

Israel's water anxiety stems from the fact that all of its three main water sources—the Coastal Aquifer, the Mountain Aquifer, and the Sea of Galilee—are currently under stress. First, the Coastal Aquifer is rapidly deteriorating due to contamination, low rainfall, and the growing population in the coastal plain. Second, the Mountain Aquifer may be threatened by the future establishment of a Palestinian state in Judea and Samaria. Third, the Sea of Galilee depends

on an inflow of water, and 50 percent of this inflow originates in Syria and Lebanon, both of which are still in a state of war with Israel. With no diplomatic relations between these neighbors, water division is regulated by a number of unwritten accords and understandings in place since the 1920s, all designed to preserve a certain status quo in the region and minimize disputes. But these understandings are not binding; they are predicated only on the goodwill of Syria and Lebanon.

When Israel controlled southern Lebanon, Beirut had no access to Israel's water sources. Since Israel's withdrawal, however, Lebanon has twice attempted to unilaterally change the status quo of water usage in the Hatzbani basin (in March and August 2001). Both times, Lebanon's actions elicited Israel's condemnation, but no military action. Israel is concerned that its tolerance of past incidents created a dangerous precedent that prompted the Lebanese government to initiate larger water projects. Failure to act now could lead to more water withdrawals from other sources originating in Lebanon and Syria.

Lebanon's Motivation

In order to justify its decision to ignore Israel's water concerns and pursue its latest diversion project, the Lebanese government claims that demand for water in the south has increased due to the return of residents following Israel's withdrawal. Beirut also alleges that Lebanon is entitled to water reparations for Israel's " plundering" of southern Lebanon's rivers during the occupation years. Lebanese energy minister Muhammad Abdul Hamid Baydoun has even said that he intends to file an international suit to force Israel to pay such reparations. But the allegation that Israel stole water from Lebanon is baseless. Israel did not use Lebanese water during its occupation. Even IDF outposts in the Security Zone were supplied exclusively with Israeli water. Moreover, Israel provided water of its own to Lebanese villages in the Security Zone and financed water infrastructure projects (e.g., sewage systems and pipelines) for the welfare of the southern Lebanese population.

Contrary to Israel's dire water situation, Lebanon enjoys an abundance of water, with a per capita supply five times larger than Israel's. Its climate provides enough rainfall to make it independent of water from the Jordan River Basin. Even though it has the right to draw water from any river running through its territory, Lebanon could avoid reducing Israel's supply by tapping into other sources such as the Litani River, which flows into the Mediterranean. The fact that Lebanon is not pursuing this option may indicate that its Wazzani project is motivated by considerations other than the welfare of the southern population.

Israeli defense officials believe that Hizballah, which is looking to extend its hostile activities beyond the disputed Shebaa Farms, may also be involved in the Lebanese water initiative, with the goal of heating up the conflict with Israel. Indeed, Hizballah has wasted no time in adopting an aggressive position on the issue. According to the Daily Star newspaper, Sawyed Hashem Safieddine, head of Hizballah's executive council, has warned that the group would " chop off the hands of the Israelis" if they tried to stop the project by force. Hizballah's leader Shaykh Hassan Nasrallah called the work at the Wazzani source a " new victory" for Lebanon. Hizballah's attempt to create a linkage between water rights and Israel's alleged occupation of the Shebaa Farms is designed to lock the Lebanese government into an inflexible position and force it to demonstrate in deed that the era of Israeli interference in Lebanese affairs is over. Lebanese president Emile Lahoud himself emphasized this linkage in the September 12 Daily Star: " Israel does not want to believe that its occupation of south Lebanon is over. Its presence in the Shebaa Farms and its control of Lebanese waters should be given up."

Settling the Dispute

Both Israel and Lebanon have invited international intervention to prevent the Wazzani dispute from turning into a crisis. Lebanon has even appealed to the five permanent members of the UN Security Council to prevent Israel from resorting to military action. In response, the United States sent its delegation of water experts. The team's goals

should be to reach a better understanding of the nature of the Wazzani project and to determine whether the Lebanese government has exhausted all other remedies before resorting to this contentious action. If Beirut has not adequately pursued other options, the team should recommend alternative means for Lebanon to meet its southern villagers' water needs.

Regardless of how the dispute is resolved, it demonstrates the pressing need for international agreement on water usage in the region. A plan should be drafted that includes principles and understandings regarding future water allocation. Most important, this plan should offer an effective mechanism for settling any future water disputes.

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