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WATER SHORTAGE POSES SERIOUS PROBLEMS

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[Article by Badr 'Abd al-Haqq: "Economy: 'Amman Drinks Yarmuk Water With an Eye on the Euphrates! How Did a Jordanian Housewife's Problem Become a Political Problem?"]

[Text] Housewives in 'Amman, capital of Jordan, try to use as few dishes and kitchen utensils as possible for every meal. People here try to bathe no more than once a week. Private gardens and plants adorning the balconies of private houses and apartment buildings are dying away. All that is the result of the stifling water shortage currently experienced by 'Amman and most Jordanian cities, so much so that the popular maxim, "Jordan is a thirsty country," has become the most faithful description of the terrible water shortage currently experienced by this small country.

Social and psychological effects are not the most serious consequences which Jordan has to face owing to this situation. In fact, there also are what may be called "political dangers." How?

The potable water shortage in Jordan actually is nothing new. The city of 'Amman itself has suffered a shortage of water for more than 20 years, and the other Jordanian cities suffer a similar shortage, to various extents. However, this shortage has increased in intensity during these last years, and has become an overbearing survival problem for the local people, as well as a serious concern for the authorities, for some years, because Jordan has been affected by an unprecedented drought wave. Springs have dried up. The running waters of the rivers and streams alike have become nostalgic memories of the past. This may be clearly seen with reference to the Nahr al-Zarqa, which in the 50's was one of the most important local rivers in Jordan, and which has now become nothing more than a dry riverbed, where frogs are dying from thirst. This river itself is the main source of potable water for the city of 'Amman and the nearby city of al-Zarqa. In the north, the city of Irbid was the first Jordanian city to be hit by the water

shortage, but it also was the first city where this crisis was partly solved, when they managed to bring to it water supplies from the desert oasis of al-Azraq, which is close to the Saudi border and at a distance of over 150 kilometers from Irbid itself.

The authorities in charge of potable water supplies in Jordan currently think of bringing more water from the oasis of al-Azraq to the city of 'Amman in order to quench the thirst of the local people. However, the people of the city of Irbid are worried about the possible results of this solution, as they think that it may be detrimental to them, and that the water of the oasis of al-Azraq may not be abundant enough to meet the requirements of both 'Amman and Irbid, the two largest Jordanian cities. All that has contributed to increasing the concern about the potable water shortage, so that it has almost or actually become a political problem. How?

While undergoing such a crisis, Jordan naturally had to seek the assistance of the closest Arab country, which actually has more potable water supplies at its disposal, and that is Syria. Syria has the Yarmuk River, out of which thousands of cubic meters of water uselessly disappear into the lake of al-Hawlah, in an area occupied by the Zionist entity, while Jordanian farmlands-dry up, as well as people's throats. *untrue*

This gave birth to the idea or project of the dam of al-Muqarin, an area in the northern part of Jordan, from which it is possible to see the occupied Palestinian land as well as the Syrian territory. That spot consequently has its own military importance, in addition to being important with reference to water supplies.

The idea concerning the construction of the dam of al-Muqarin came up a number of years ago, when the consolidation of relations between Jordan and Syria reached a peak. Such an idea actually might not have crossed anybody's mind without the mutual trust which the Syrian and Jordanian parties felt at that time for one another, and without each party's desire to give the other all possible resources and facilities concerning the intended economic and human unification to be realized between the two countries.

Nobody knows exactly why the final agreement concerning the initiation of the construction work for the dam was delayed. However, it is a sure thing that the "question of the dam" and the fact that Jordan needs water, generally speaking, were among the major points which brought relations between Syria and Jordan to a standstill. In fact, some people claim that this very problem actually was the direct cause of the standstill which affected relations between Syria and Jordan a short time ago.

Nobody can definitely confirm or deny that Syria has at any time refused to provide Jordan with its water requirements or to transfer any portion of water from the Yarmuk River to be stored behind the dam of al-Muqarin. The only sure thing is that the talks between Syria and Jordan concerning the dam have taken a long time and involved a large number of mutual visits and delegations between both sides.

According to some sources, King Husayn's last visit--which lasted a few hours--to Syria, about 3 weeks ago, mainly concerned this topic. According to the same sources, the Jordanian king came back from that visit with an unconditional Syrian agreement to complete the dam. This evolution of the situation seems to be confirmed by the fact that Syrian Prime Minister Muhammad al-Halabi, 3 days after King Husayn's visit, actually went to visit the project of the dam at al-Muqarin, not just Jordan itself, and proceeded with an extensive inspection of the construction sites there, accompanied by Jordanian Prime Minister Mudhar Badran. Official talks between the two parties also took place there, and this gives the impression that all the Syrian reservations concerning the construction of the dam have come to an end.

According to the information obtained by AL-MUSTAQBAL, the construction work concerning the project of the dam of al-Muqarin should be completed within 4 years. This project will provide 370 million cubic meters of water a year, of which 120 million cubic meters are destined to meet the requirements of the population of 'Amman and Irbid.

The dam of al-Muqarin is supposed to be the highest dam in the Middle East. The final planning concerning the body of the dam and its various related projects is currently under way, in anticipation of the publication on 1 February 1980 of a world tender for the construction of the dam. The dam will be 148 meters high, and will have an annual storage capacity of about 270 million cubic meters. The dam will be built with "piled up material" consisting of earth, rocks and clay, and will have tunnels and other installations made of concrete. The dam will create a large lake with ramifications extending in both Syrian and Jordanian lands.

Both this project and the project concerning the diverting of water from the oasis of al-Azraq to 'Amman will bring Jordan close to the termination of the water shortage by 1980. However, the main topic of conversation in every Jordanian home deals with the necessity of finding a more comprehensive and lasting solution to the water shortage. On the other hand, the idea of negotiating with Iraq about diverting some water from the Euphrates to Jordan is still a mere thought, but many observers already believe that nothing should prevent it from materializing, especially since Sidam Husayn's last visit to Jordan made Iraq more aware of the magnitude of the water problem in Jordan and also more willing to discuss such an idea, without necessarily going to the extent of saying that Iraq not only approved the idea but also agreed to finance the project.

Generally speaking, one might say that the potable water shortage--as well as the irrigation water shortage--in Jordan actually is one of the worst crises which may prevent Jordan from being able to sustain the pressure to which it is subjected by many powers at the present stage. This is what Jordanian officials state on every occasion and during all the negotiations which they conduct with any visiting delegation. On the other hand, both Arab and foreign rulers, leaders and officials who visit Jordan are convinced of the importance of finding a solution to this crisis, not only as a local and marginal crisis, but actually as a political and general problem which may influence the political attitude assumed by Jordan at the present stage. This was confirmed to AL-MUSTAQBAL by some Jordanian sources, according to which this matter was thoroughly considered and understood by all the Arab leaders who recently visited Jordan, in particular by Mu'ammarr Qadhdhafi, president of the Libyan Arab Jamahiriyyah, and Iraqi President Sidam Husayn (who was vice president at the time of his visit).

While housewives in Jordan may be unaware of the political implications of the crisis and the contacts currently undertaken at the higher levels in order to solve it, it still is a fact that there is a direct and actual relationship between these housewives' lack of sufficient water to clean their dishes and cooking utensils, as well as to water their plants, and the foreign relations of Jordan at the present stage. The fact is that the solution to the housewives' problem seems to be only a portion of the overall solution to the Middle East crisis. Down with the theory which says that "political kitchens" have nothing to do with private kitchens!

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