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ISRAELI, JORDANIAN DEAD SEA PROJECTS CONTRADICTIONARY

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[Report by Arye Wolman]

[Text] The Jordanian plan to build a Dead Sea canal for hydro-electricity generation--as disclosed to a UN energy conference last week in Nairobi--makes economic sense, according to Energy Ministry officials who attended the sessions. But this will not hold if Israel goes ahead with its own \$800 million canal project, approved by the cabinet last August.

Yona Bar-Gur, director of the ministry's planning and policy division, said yesterday that either country could undermine the economic viability of the other's project by going ahead with its own. This is because only a limited amount of water can be allowed to cascade down the cliffs into the Dead Sea to generate hydro-electric power. Otherwise, the level of the salt lake will rise too high and flood the surrounding potash works, hotels and nature reserves.

While Israel plans to build a canal from the Mediterranean across the Negev to the Dead Sea, the route proposed in the Jordanian scheme is from the Gulf of Elat to Sedom. Bar-Gur said that although the Jordanian route is longer--190 kilometres instead of 80--it involves much less tunnelling than its Israeli counterpart. On the other hand, more precautions against earthquakes would have to be taken on the Jordanian route, which passes through the Syrio-African rift, he said.

He pointed out that a committee headed by MK Prof Yuval Ne'eman had checked the 'Arava route, as well as other alternatives, before recommending the Gaza Strip-Negev-'Arad route, which was accepted by the government.

"But I don't think there's much difference between the cost of the two routes," Bar-Gur said. He added that, in principle, there should be no objection to adopting the 'Arava route if by this means cooperation with Jordan could be won.

According to Jordanian estimates, their scheme would cost \$850m. And would generate about 330,000 kilowatts of electricity. The Israeli scheme envisages the generation of up to 700,000 kilowatts.

Bar-Gur said that although Jordan's current peak demand for electricity is small--apparently less than one percent of Israel's--rapid growth is forecast. This could still make worthwhile a long-term electricity project which would come to fruition only in the next decade.

But there were no hints of possible cooperation at the Nairobi conference. The Jordanian delegates refused to speak to their Israeli counterparts, and, with the other Arab states, forced through a resolution condemning the Israeli scheme.

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