

# Collapse of Mideast water summit dampens peace talk hopes

By JAMES DAVID BESSER

WASHINGTON — The maddening thing about the Middle East is the way even pure intentions and sound logic tend to succumb to the virulent passions of the region.

That is a lesson Secretary of State James Baker may be in the process of learning as the U.S.-sponsored Middle East peace conference approaches. It is a lesson Joyce Starr has already learned in a particularly painful way.

Starr, a well-known Middle East expert and former adviser to President Jimmy Carter, had a vision: If all the countries in the region could get together to work on a common and urgent problem, it might be a first step in transcending the political enmities that keep Arab nations and Israel on the brink of war.

For Starr, the common problem was obvious: water.

Arabs and Jews alike will face critical water shortages in the near future — a problem that makes the ideological differences between the countries pall by comparison.

In the past, Middle East wars have been fought over water; the next war, she said, could well break out over the accelerating problem of water scarcity.

Only swift, direct action on a regional basis offers any hope for averting this kind of disaster.

Starr's response was to set up a mechanism for a regional water summit — an effort to move beyond the endless debates over territory and tribal hatreds, and deal with a real-world problem that all countries in the region share.

"The water question is life and death for the Israelis," she said in an interview last year. "There can be no solution with the Palestinians unless there's a resolution of the water scarcity they both face. There can be no overall political settlements until countries begin to come to terms with the water problem. It has to be the first thing on the agenda."

Her group, Global Water Summit Initiative, worked energetically to pull together a meeting in Turkey, scheduled for this fall. Turkey's President Turgut Ozal was a vital



Joyce Starr

## News analysis

part of the planning process. Ozal used his prestige in the area to bring together political leaders and an impressive array of water experts.

The goal, Starr said, was to develop the framework for a long-term, multi-national approach to the area's water crisis. And that framework could provide an important boost for the slow-moving peace process.

But Middle East politics — and apparent American indifference to the concept — have threatened to scuttle the water summit.

Despite the decision by Syria's President Hafez al-Assad to participate in a Middle East peace conference under joint American and Soviet sponsorship, Syria recently demanded that Israel not be included in the upcoming summit in

Turkey.

The Syrian position will apparently be supported by other Arab states scheduled to participate in the conference.

The Bush administration has signaled that it will pull out of the meetings unless Israel is included, something that would severely damage the international standing of the summit.

And a water summit that fails to bring together all the major countries of the region, observers here agree, would render the exercise meaningless. Solutions to the water problem have to be regional in scope; any effort to solve the water problem that excludes some countries for political reasons is doomed to failure.

So Starr's plan for a Middle East water summit has run afoul of a more traditional kind of Middle East thinking. And the Bush administration, with its pinpoint focus on the upcoming Middle East peace conference, has contributed to the plan's troubles.

Despite the American announcement that it would not participate in a water summit without Israel, officials here have decided not to lean on the Syrians because of their fears that any new pressure on the Assad government might disrupt the delicate arrangements for the upcoming peace conference.

But even before the recent Syrian action, Washington showed only lukewarm interest in Starr's plan and little awareness of the critical nature of the Middle East water problem.

Some observers here suggest that the Syrians would not have raised objections to Israeli participation in the first place if the administration had indicated any kind of firm com-

And any meeting arranged by the State Department would likely include a much more limited range of Middle Eastern nations.

There are a number of disturbing messages in all this.

The most obvious is that Arab nations, despite their willingness to participate in the American led peace process, seem unable to abandon their traditional hatred of Israel even when Arab and Israeli interests coincide.

Even Hafez al-Assad is aware that water is potentially the region's most explosive problem — and that Middle Eastern nations must find a way to cooperate to solve the water crisis, or face disaster.

But Assad was seemingly unable to move beyond traditional modes of thinking in the Arab world — something that augers poorly for Baker's peace plan.

The administration's ambivalent response to the water summit also suggests that foreign policy planners here are taking the narrowest possible view of the Middle East's deep and dangerous problems.

Tremendous energy has been expended to get Israel and several Arab neighbors together at the peace table. But the administration seems to have very little idea of where the peace process is likely to go after that, or of how the various parties to these negotiations are likely to react if the October conference does not produce immediate results.

The administration's lack of interest in the water summit, and its unwillingness to use even a fraction of the international clout it used to get Syria to the peace table to help together Starr's conference, is a disturbing indication of the shallowness of its Middle East focus.

Starr and her associates are pr-

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and little awareness of the critical nature of the Middle East water problem.

Some observers here suggest that the Syrians would not have raised objections to Israeli participation in the first place if the administration had indicated any kind of firm commitment to the water summit process.

The administration apparently wants the water summit postponed until it can hold its own meeting on water as a kind of appendix to the peace process.

But officials here have not indicated any agenda for such a meeting.

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Starr and her associates are proceeding ahead with their water sun plans. But unless the Syrians change their tune — and unless the administration decides to take a more active role — those plans will join ranks of dozens of other schemes Arab-Israeli cooperation that has been consumed by the region's irrational passions.

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