



NOT IN THE PIPELINE

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How Syria sabotaged a regional water resources parley

Plans for an international conference on managing the Middle East's limited water resources have been blocked, due to Arab opposition to Israel taking part. The gathering was scheduled for November 3-9 in Istanbul with the participation of 22 Middle East and North African states. The decision to postpone the meeting until at least next spring was made by its sponsor, a Washington-based non-profit organization called the Global Water Summit Initiative. The U.S.

administration requested the postponement, following Arab rejection of its appeal for Israel be allowed to attend.

The initiative had aimed at finding a peaceful, lasting solution to the Middle East water shortage by bringing together all the states concerned. But Turkey had balked from the outset at letting Israel attend, citing anticipated objections by Syria and other Arab states. Jerusalem, in turn, pressed the United States to say it would not attend the con-

For sale: Turkish plans to supply the region with water in a 'peace pipeline' could be thwarted by Syria Sipa

ference if Israel was not invited. Recently, the diplomatic tangle tightened: In September, the Syrians began threatening to boycott the event if Israel came, and to take other Arab participants with them. To back up its threats, Damascus held talks with Yemen, Egypt, Sudan and various Gulf states.

"It was clear from the beginning, with all the lobbying and outside pressures, that the summit would not work out," says one Turkish diplomat.

In fact, there has been mounting concern in the past few months that wrangling over who would attend the water conference could actually endanger the larger prospects for regional peace. In particular, it was feared by all the parties involved that American and Turkish lobbying on Israel's behalf could anger some Arab states enough to jeopardize the upcoming Middle East peace conference.

Sources in Cairo note that the decision to postpone the water parley until the spring was made following Egyptian pressure. Egypt's deputy prime minister for foreign affairs, Butrus Ghali, recently visited the United States, where he expressed his country's view that everything should be done — including dropping the water parley — to smooth the path to Middle East peace talks.

Both Arab and Israeli diplomats in Ankara have agreed that under the circumstances it was wiser to postpone the conference.

Most Arab states believe the water issue cannot be solved until the wider

The law won

"I fought the law and the law won," sighs Joyce Starr, chairwoman of the Global Water Summit Initiative and the moving force behind the Istanbul water conference. She was referring to the fact that the conference had been postponed at the insistence of the United States administration.

In a telephone interview from Washington, Starr expressed her disappointment that the iron rules of Middle East politics had blocked regional progress.

Turkish President Turgut Ozal had been "kind enough and visionary enough" to agree to host the event

when the idea was conceived back in 1989, she recalled. The focus was "resource diplomacy" — to help Middle East governments solve their water problems by encouraging investment in new ways of managing their resources. If ever an event was designed to get around the political barriers, she added, this was it.

According to Starr, 13 of the 22 Middle Eastern and North African countries invited to the summit had officially accepted before it was called off, though she refuses to identify them.

Washington, she acknowledges, was concerned that tensions generated by the Istanbul conference could ruin efforts to convene peace talks this fall, in which water issues will in any case be discussed. But Starr insists the Istanbul

meeting was necessary: "We've been working on this for three years," she says, "and I personally don't think that the political negotiations will usefully solve the water situation."

Starr also dismisses the notion that Turkey was going to use the Istanbul conference to push its own "peace pipeline" proposal for selling water to the rest of the Middle East. "It wasn't even on the agenda," she says, noting that Ankara had other things to gain.

Indeed, selling water may not be so wise. There is a "tremendous misunderstanding" abroad that Turkey itself has plenty of water, Starr asserts, adding that the country will have serious problems of its own by the end of the decade.

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