

had at one point worked to solve the underlying causes of this seemingly intractable conflict. This is a role which it absolutely should step into again, adopting a win-win orientation which could pave the way to a solution to this ongoing conflict today.

The ‘Johnston Plan’ for Water Sharing

In the early 1950’s, at the request of the United Nations Refugee Works Administration (UNRWA), experts of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), had designed an equitable water-sharing program for the entire Jordan River Basin involving Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria.

Just as had the original TVA, the program would have used the construction of irrigation canals and dams to expand irrigated farmland and upshift the economy and living standards with energy from hydro-power.

In 1953, President Dwight Eisenhower, pressured by his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, sent Eric Johnston as his envoy to persuade all nations involved to adopt the scheme known as the “Johnston Plan.” Dulles wanted to fight communism without wars. His view was that to avoid countries seeking to escape colonial exploitation joining the Communist or “neutralist bloc,” the United States should offer development programs and keep them on “the right side of history.”

Unfortunately, on March 28, 1956 Eisenhower approved the secret OMEGA Memorandum, whose aim was to effect a reorientation of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser’s policies toward cooperation with the West, while diminishing what were seen as his harmful attempts to influence other Middle East countries. Under Nasser, Egypt was the first, after Nepal, to recognize Communist China. Nasser did this on May 16, 1956, without informing his allies. Pertaining to measures directed at Egypt, the Memorandum had provisions that included a delay by the United States and Britain in concluding negotiations to finance the Aswan Dam on the Nile River in Egypt.

As a result, John Foster Dulles, in cahoots with the British and the U.S. southern cotton lobby, went ahead with suspending U.S. financing—which would have been 90% of the cost—of the Aswan Dam. Nasser needed the dam to irrigate farmland.

On Thursday, July 19, 1956, Secretary Dulles asked the Egyptian Ambassador in Washington, H.E. Ahmed Hussein, to come to his State Department office. When Hussein arrived, Dulles handed him a letter announc-

ing the withdrawal of the United States offer to grant \$56 million toward financing the construction of the High Dam at Aswan.

This decision unleashed a chain of events leading to the famous “Suez Crisis,” which, fortunately, President Eisenhower brought to a halt, once he realized it could end up in a nuclear conflict.

As a result, the most precious aspect of the “Johnston Plan” for the Middle East—that of mutual trust-building around the perspective of a shared, common future, was ruined after the Suez affair. Instead of working together, those nations which should have been partners of one single global plan to share and expand the waters of the Jordan Basin, went each its own way, alone.

Israel went ahead with its own National Water Carrier, tapping fresh water from the Sea of Galilee into a water-conveyance system, bringing water from the northern border with Lebanon to the Negev Desert in the south.

Jordan, with U.S. financing, built the Eastern Ghor water-conveyance system, now called “King Abdullah Canal,” to provide water for Jordan’s agriculture and capital. Syria constructed a dam on the Yarmuk River, one of the tributaries of the Jordan River. This situation, with each struggling over limited water resources, led to war within just a few years.

The Shock of the Six-Day War

In June 1967, following border clashes over water resources and what appeared as a military mobilization of its Arab neighbors, Israel staged a sudden, preemptive war against Egypt, Jordan and Syria.

On June 5, it destroyed more than 90 percent of Egypt’s air force on the tarmac. A similar air assault incapacitated the Syrian air force. Within three days the Israelis had achieved an overwhelming victory on the ground.

On June 7, Israeli forces drove Jordanian forces out of East Jerusalem and most of the West Bank. The UN Security Council called for a cease-fire that was immediately accepted by Israel and Jordan, while Egypt accepted the following day. Syria held out, however, and continued to shell villages in northern Israel.

On June 9, Israel launched an assault on the fortified Golan Heights, capturing it from Syrian forces after a day of heavy fighting. Syria accepted the cease-fire on June 10. Israel’s decisive victory included the capture of the Sinai Peninsula, Gaza Strip, West Bank, Old City

of Jerusalem, and Golan Heights; the status of these territories subsequently became a major point of contention in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The Arab countries' losses in the conflict were disastrous. Egypt's casualties numbered more than 11,000, with 6,000 for Jordan and 1,000 for Syria, compared with 700 for Israel. The conflict created hundreds of thousands of refugees and brought more than one million Palestinians in the occupied territories under Israeli rule. Months after the war, in November 1967, the United Nations passed UN Resolution 242, which called for Israel's withdrawal from the territories it had captured in the war in exchange for lasting peace.

For most western elites, including Jewish elites, the Six-Day War came both as a shock and a reminder that the two main causes of war had been left unsolved: refugees (Palestinians pushed out and Jews arriving) and water sharing.

Nuclear Desalination, the Talk of the Day

Immediately after the Six-Day War, however, the perspective of a massive investment in water and energy to solve the refugee and water issue in the Middle East became the talk of the day. By these dramatic events, thanks to the men and women willing to respond to them, the science, the technology, and many of the plans that had already been elaborated between 1945 and 1967 to use nuclear power for peaceful aims came back onto the table.

Key in this was leading U.S. nuclear physicist Alvin Weinberg, who was the administrator of Oak Ridge National Laboratory (ORNL) during and after the Manhattan Project. Weinberg was appointed in 1960 to the President's Science Advisory Committee in the Eisenhower Administration and later served on it in the Kennedy Administration.

Weinberg inspired and organized his networks to propose projects for the peaceful use of civilian nuclear power. Weinberg's career was brutally terminated when he was fired by President Richard Nixon in 1973 for pleading, just as Edward Teller did before his death, in favor of thorium fueled molten salt reactors (which don't produce plutonium for nuclear bombs).



Courtesy of the U.S. Department of Energy
Dr. Alvin Weinberg, Director of the Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee, briefing Senator John F. Kennedy on specifics of nuclear power in February 1959.

'Water for Peace'

Tragically and sadly, hardly three weeks before the Six-Day War, on May 23-31, 1967, an international conference on "Water for Peace" was held in Washington. President Lyndon Johnson addressed the conference during the opening ceremonies, pledging that the United States would "continue work in every area which holds promise for the world's water needs," and would "share the fruits of this technology [nuclear desalination] with all of those who wish to share it with us."¹

The Department of State's Office of International Scientific and Technological Affairs considered the conference a "complete success," and an internal report noted that "94 countries were represented together with 24 international organizations; 635 official delegates, 61 participants from international organizations, and over 2,000 observers attended."² The proceedings of the conference were published as the "International Conference on Water for Peace," May 23-31, 1967.

One of the technical papers presented at the Water for Peace conference, entitled "Desalted Water for Agriculture" by Weinberg's friend and colleague R. Philip Hammond, hypothesized that, with demonstrat-

1. Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1967, Book I, pages 555-558.

2. Department of State, SCI Files: Lot 69 D 217, The Department during the Administration of Lyndon B. Johnson, November 1963-January 1969, Vol. XI, Science and Technology.

ed methods of agriculture and “virtually demonstrated” methods of nuclear desalting, food could be grown with water costing 3 cents per day per person.

Weinberg was intrigued by these findings but concluded that more research was needed. He began discussing the subject with a number of his associates, including Dr. J. George Harrar at the Rockefeller Foundation, Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) Chairman Glenn T. Seaborg, and AEC Commissioner James T. Ramey, all of whom had expressed interest in such agro-industrial complexes.

By December of 1967, Weinberg had delivered a visionary speech, titled [“The Next Stage of Nuclear Energy,”](#)



An artist's rendition of a nuclear-powered agro-industrial complex, or as Weinberg called it, a “food factory.”

in which he laid out his idea of building “Food factories in the desert”:

One can now visualize a new kind of desert agriculture, conducted in units so highly rationalized as to be designated “food factories” rather than farms. In these food factories, plants would be watered and fertilized at precisely the right time, and in precisely the right amounts.

Weinberg said that these “food factories” would be accompanied by other energy-intensive chemical processes capable of producing valuable industrial and chemical products. These “nuclear powered agro-industrial complexes,” as he called them, would be capable of irrigating 140,000 acres of desert-turned-farmland while at the same time producing ammonia, phosphorus, caustic soda, chlorine, and salt.

The construction of the nuclear-powered agro-industrial complex, complete with a 2,000-MW reactor and a 500-million-gallon/day desalination plant, “may well become an impressively powerful instrument for development,” Weinberg said.

Six months earlier, on June 13, hardly days after the Six-Day War, AEC Chairman Seaborg had written a letter to Johnson’s Secretary of State, Dean Rusk:

The recent developments in the Middle East prompt me to recall to your attention certain projects which have been under consideration for this region for some time in the past. I am referring to the two dual-purpose nuclear desalting projects, one proposed for installation in Israel and the other proposed for installation in the United Arab Republic [Egypt and Syria were one single state between 1958 and 1961—ed.], which were the subject of your memorandum to the President of May 21, 1966.... It occurs to us that the possible usefulness of these projects in the overall settlement of the Middle East dispute may be rather significant....

As you know, both Israel and the UAR have attached considerable importance to their respective projects. The proposed Israeli project, in particular, always had the advantage of providing Israel with a source of water not subject to interruption by neighboring states and not dependent on the allocation of the already inadequate water resources of the Jordan Valley.

Once again, it seems to me that the recent events may well intensify the problem of water allocation in the area rather than ease it. One or more desalting plants would both add significantly to the total volume of water available to the region....

It is interesting to note that at the recent Water for Peace Conference in Washington, UAR and Israeli representatives participated in a collateral meeting of nations interested in nuclear desalting and reaffirmed the strong interest of their governments in these projects.

In the same letter, Seaborg underlined that U.S. assistance for a nuclear desalination program,

could possibly be used to secure Israeli agreement to place its entire nuclear program, including the Dimona project, under IAEA safeguards. It seems to me that the recent events probably increase rather than decrease the danger that one or more of the Middle Eastern countries will feel, however mistakenly, that its best interest in the future would be served by the acquisition of nuclear weapons.

Strauss and Rothschild

Another major player in this was Lewis Strauss, a former investment banker and friend of President Eisenhower, who had later become a member of the AEC. Though a leader in several different Jewish organizations, Strauss was not a Zionist, and opposed the establishment of a Jewish state in Mandatory Palestine. He did not view Jews as belonging to a nation or race; rather, he considered himself an American of Jewish religion, and advocated for the rights of Jews to live as equal and integrated citizens of the nations in which they resided.

On June 23, 1967, Strauss sent Eisenhower a memo encouraging him as a former president to speak out in favor of nuclear desalination as a means of achieving peace in the Middle East. Titled "[A Proposal For Our Time](#)," it states:

Attention to the debates in the United Nations since the end of May must convince the observer that an end to the trouble in the Near East is not in sight. The introduction of a new and dramatic element will be required to establish a climate in which peace can begin to be negotiated. The resources of diplomacy appear exhausted, and the "lie direct" has been exchanged so often that men can hardly be expected to reach agreement by rational discussion in the atmosphere which has been created.

The two fundamental problems in the Near East are (a) water, and (b) displaced populations. It is these issues which have exacerbated international relationships in that area over the years, and they are not to be resolved by political or military measures. By a simple, bold, and imaginative step, it is in our power to solve both problems.... Two of the installations would be lo-



Courtesy of the National Parks Service

Lewis Strauss, left, takes the oath of office as chairman of the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission, July 2, 1953. At center, President Eisenhower.

cated at appropriate points on the Mediterranean coast of Israel and a smaller one at the northern end of the Gulf of Aqaba in either Jordan or Israel, as the most suitable terrain may dictate....

Were the President of the United States to electrify the world by such a proposal, as President Eisenhower did in his Atoms-for-Peace speech to the United Nations in 1953, it would be hailed and welcomed by millions who now can see no way out of the morass in which the powers are presently floundering with its threat of triggering more widespread war. The proposal might well be the beginning of a new life in the lands of the oldest civilizations.

The proposal, of course, does not settle the boundary disputes and other acute issues now confronting the belligerents, but their settlement would be immensely accelerated and facilitated by the pressure from all sides to get ahead with such a project where delay would be counted in human lives and misery. It could be announced that no affirmative steps would be taken until negotiations at least began. In the atmosphere that would immediately follow such a proposal, the leaders of the Near Eastern countries would be invited to come together on the basis of the proposals. They have a common forum in the International Atomic Energy Agency.

The introduction of fresh water from all three plants into the arid and semi-arid areas would

have the effect of opening to settlement many hundred square miles which heretofore have never supported human life (other than on a nomadic basis), and the controversy over the division of the Jordan River would become *de minimis*.

The work of building the great plants, laying the pipe lines, constructing reservoirs, power lines, irrigation ditches, etc., will absorb the unskilled labor of thousands of displaced persons. When the plants are in operation, the labor force could be settled in irrigated areas under conditions far superior to any life that they have ever experienced.

Solely as a measure of magnitude, it might be noted that the completed project will represent substantially less than one year's expenditure on the moon program. It will pay for itself and return income in perpetuity, retiring the borrowings incurred and rewarding the governments and individuals with vision enough to have subscribed to it initially.

Cooperation of the Arab and Israeli governments will be necessary in order to agree upon a *modus vivendi* for allocating water and power, and it will be apparent that any government which simply declined to discuss or participate in such a cooperative arrangement would have to answer to its citizens sooner or later.

Strauss was a staunch anti-communist and as such had even successfully lobbied Truman to develop the hydrogen bomb in 1950. Less than three years later, the U.S. detonated the world's first H-bomb, only to have the Soviets follow suit 10 months later. Despite these earlier Cold War tendencies, Strauss included in his 1967 proposal collaboration with the Soviets in the construction of nuclear desalination facilities in Israel and Palestine.

"Design and construction contracts would be let on bids in the several countries which have had experi-



CC/Jack de Nijs for Anefo-Nationaal Archief

French-Swiss banker Edmond Adolphe de Rothschild. In two letters to the London Times in 1967, he advocated the construction of three nuclear desalination plants, for Israel, Jordan, and the Gaza Strip.

ence in building large nuclear reactors, i.e., the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and the U.S.S.R.," Strauss wrote. Unfortunately, this part of the proposal was never taken up, though, if it had been, it would have implicitly meant using the Middle East desalting proposal as the cornerstone for ending the Cold War!

One month after Strauss sent his memo to Eisenhower, on July 18 U.S. Ambassador to the U.K. David Bruce reported that French-Swiss banker Edmond Adolphe de Rothschild, in two letters to the *London Times*, had advocated for three nuclear desalting plants for Israel, Jordan, and the Gaza Strip to assist in the resettlement of more than 200,000 refugees. Though Rothschild approached the subject from

a business standpoint, including making a proposal for the formation of a government-funded corporation to finance the facilities, it provoked comments and questions in the House of Commons, which generally approved the idea or at least the further exploration of it.

British Prime Minister Wilson was convinced of the technical-economic feasibility of the plan, but the Foreign Office was concerned about the cost. According to Embassy officials in London: "Apart from the obvious political difficulties, it was mainly a question of a very large amount of cheap money, which the UK did not have available." Rothschild's proposal would also have an influence on Eisenhower and the overall tenor of the debate.

Strauss and Eisenhower

Strauss's plan for desalination soon became known as the "Strauss-Eisenhower plan" following Eisenhower's entry into the discussion. Former President Eisenhower, whose "Atoms for Peace" speech at the 1953 UN General Assembly had been widely welcomed by the American public, published an article in the June 1968 edition of *Reader's Digest* (one of the most widely read publications in the U.S., with many foreign-language editions as well) that was largely inspired by the Strauss 1967 memo. In addition, the full text of the

article had already been introduced on May 16 in the Congressional record (p. 13756), by Senator James G. Fulton. Here, Eisenhower laid out an inspiring vision of achieving peace in the Middle East:

There is every reason to suppose that it could be a successful, self-sustaining business enterprise, whose revenues would derive from the sale of its products—water and electricity—to the users. Our government would make an initial investment in some of the corporation’s stock, and the rest would be sold to private investors in the security markets of the world. Additional money would be raised through the international marketing of convertible debentures. We are assured by international bankers that the financial world, under normal conditions, would welcome such an investment opportunity.

Most importantly, Eisenhower made a crucial point, that is very relevant for today:

Most of the professional diplomats seem to think that we must have peace in the Middle East before the plan can be implemented. I contend that the reverse is true: the proposal itself is a way to peace.

Those Days’ Political Parties

While today’s U.S. party platforms are utter lunacy, in 1968, when Nixon was running against Humphrey and Wallace, voters could choose between two parties favoring nuclear desalination!

The [1968 Democratic party platform](#) includes:

To maintain our leadership in the application of energy, we will push forward with research and development to assure a balanced program for the supply of energy for electric power, both public and private. This effort should go hand in hand with development of “breeder” reactors and large-scale nuclear desalting plants that can provide pure water economically from the sea for domestic use and agricultural and industrial development in arid regions, and with broadened medical and biological applications of atomic energy. In addition to the physical sciences, the social sciences will be encouraged

and assisted to identify and deal with the problem areas of society....

Lasting peace in the Middle East depends upon agreed and secured frontiers, respect for the territorial integrity of all states, the guaranteed right of innocent passage through all international waterways, a humane resettlement of the Arab refugees, and the establishment of a non-provocative military balance. To achieve these objectives, we support negotiations among the concerned parties. We strongly support efforts to achieve an agreement among states in the area and those states supplying arms to limit the flow of military equipment to the Middle East. We support efforts to raise the living standards throughout the area, including desalinization and regional irrigation projects which cut across state frontiers.

The [1968 Republican Party Platform](#) included:

We support efforts to increase our total fresh water supply by further research in weather modification, and in better methods of desalination of salt and brackish waters.

On the Middle East, it said:

To replace the ancient rivalries of this region with new hope and opportunity, we vigorously support a well conceived plan of regional development, including the bold nuclear desalination and irrigation proposal of former President Eisenhower.

Conclusion

It was not long ago that Middle East peace, based on the sharing of water and energy obtained by the most advanced technologies (in terms of energy density), was on the agenda in the United States and the West more broadly. At some points, it was even conceptualized as the cornerstone of a potential new international architecture of security and mutual development, capable of ending the geopolitics of the Cold War.

Lyndon LaRouche’s proposed Oasis plan in 1975, and that [currently proposed](#) and promoted by the international Schiller Institute, aim to do exactly that.