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# Middle East water crisis worsens

by Nicholas F. Benton

The greatest flashpoint for the conflict in the Middle East is the chronic shortage of water, which is converging on critical proportions in every country of the region.

The U.S. government has contributed to the problem by shifting its Agency for International Development (AID) funding priorities for water-related projects in the region from dams and irrigation projects to conservation technologies, and demanding that recipients undergo structural economic reforms, such as the institution of user fees for water, as conditions for aid.

Recommendations from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Henry Kissinger's think tank, which has provided a lot of brain power for the new Bush administration, are no better.

In a recent CSIS policy paper, entitled "U.S. Foreign Policy on Water Resources in the Middle East," so-called experts acknowledge the hair-trigger threat to regional stability which the rapid depletion of water is creating in the Middle East, but propose that solutions be restricted to conservation (such as drip irrigation, which has proven fatal to soil because it deposits all impurities from the water into the topsoil without providing enough water to leech them out), expensive desalination methods, recycling and pollution control.

In the face of the growing crisis, these non-solutions are guaranteed to do nothing more than exacerbate the tensions.

Ironically, the CSIS report points out that the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency "monitors regional resource trends." It says, "Specifically, the DIA focuses on three areas: the scarcity of water as grounds for potential conflict, the implications of water scarcity for economic development and political stability, and the implications of water supply for large-scale military operations in arid environments."

However, the report says that the DIA hasn't produced any non-classified material on the Middle East water shortage problem since 1983, and adds that the U.S. State Department's Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern and Southern Asian Affairs "currently maintains no ongoing research capability on water resources."

## The 'peace pipeline' idea

The CSIS report dismisses as "politically unfeasible" the one plan which is on the table now to bring large supplies of new water into the region.

That is the so-called "peace pipeline" plan floated by President Turgut Özal of Turkey. It involves construction of two pipelines to divert water from two small rivers, the Seyhan and Ceyhan, which are now underutilized in their flow through Turkey into the Mediterranean.

An eastern pipeline would bring water to Kuwait, the eastern coast of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. A western pipeline would serve selected cities in Turkey, Syria, Jordan, the West Bank, and the western section of Saudi Arabia.

The government of Turkey has already commissioned a feasibility study of the plan from the Brown and Root engineering firm of Houston, Texas. The estimated cost is \$20 billion.

However, the CSIS report dumps on the idea, saying "raising the required capital would be an arduous process," and adding, "The greatest obstacle, however, is political friction that exists among the participating countries."

The report glosses over the important points made by the Turkish government, namely, "that the economic benefits from the pipeline will outweigh political concessions," and, "that the pipeline could potentially reduce regional conflicts, improve cooperation among nations, and increase prosperity throughout the Middle East."

It is this idea that a regional, large-scale development project could, in itself, be the starting point for a peace negotiation, which is completely lost on the CSIS and, apparently also, the U.S. AID.

Similar grand-scale proposals got a similar treatment in past years. There was the late Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's idea to pipe Nile River water through the Sinai to Israel and the occupied territories. There was the proposal during the height of optimism about development of nuclear power in the first Nixon administration for the U.S. to build a nuclear-powered water desalination plant on Israel's Mediterranean coast.

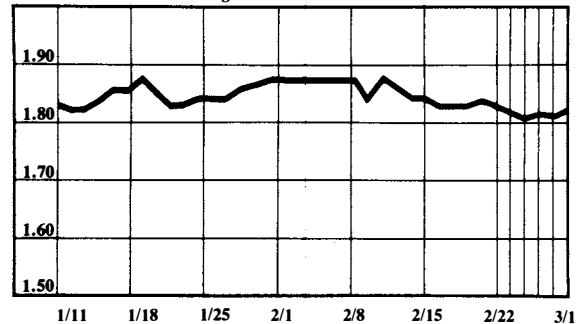
That was suggested the same year, 1972, that Nixon projected there would be 1,000 operating nuclear power plants in the U.S. by the year 2000. It went the way of nuclear power generally, during the mid-1970s, down the tubes.

The fact remains that all the nations in the region are now using up far more water than is being replenished in the ground-water aquifers and river systems they can currently access. Also, political destabilization in Ethiopia threatens virtually every drop of water that comes down the Nile to Egypt, even when droughts don't. Ghastly shortages are projected over the next decade in virtually every nook and cranny of the entire region. Unless a sound solution to this crisis is found soon, nothing will ever bring peace to the area.

## Currency Rates

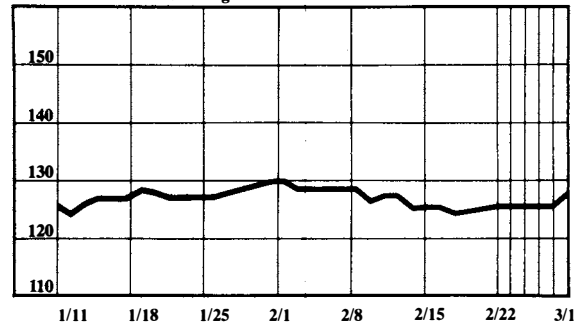
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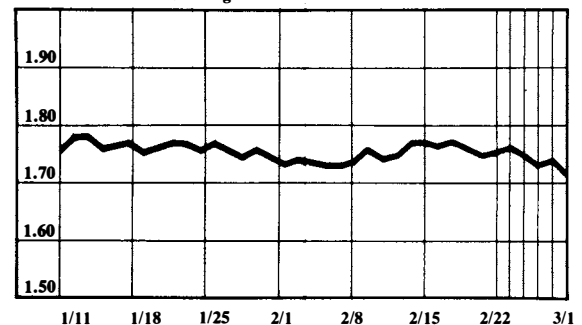
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