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Israrel's Policy Towards the Litani River

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The largest river in Lebanon, the Litani (100 miles) originates from the ruins of a Baalbek close to Lebanese border with Syria and flows southward through the board Bekaa Valley. Near the frontier with Israel, the water drops to enter a deep Canyon, turn west and cuts through the Southern coastal mountain range and then joining into the Mediterranean Sea near historic Tyre.[1]

The Modern Lebanese State came into existence in 1920. Before 1920, the Lebanese State was geographically a much smaller entity comprising only the mountainous region. Mountain Lebanon was traditionally the home of Maronite Christians. Besides the Maronites, Mount Lebanon was also the home of Druze, a religious sect of Islam. In the early sixteenth century the Ottomans captured Mount Lebanon and Syria from the Mamluks. With the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in First World War, Syria and Lebanon came under the control of France.[2]

Israel has shown interest in the Litani since the time of Theodor Herzl. His diaries reveal that in 1897 the German Chancellor Prince Hohenlohe had asked him whether the Zionists wanted the territory of their State to extend as far north as Beirut or even beyond that.[3]

During the First World War, the Zionist Organisation began to draw up firm plans for the establishment of Jewish national home in Palestine. On 19th September 1918, the allies established the Occupied Enemy Territorial Administrations (OETA) in order to provide military Government to conquered Ottoman territories in the eastern Mediterranean costal region.[4]

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In February 1919 the World Zionist Organisation (WZO) placed before the Supreme Council at the Paris peace talks, a proposal regarding the boundaries of Palestine. The proposed boundary sought to extend the northern frontiers of Palestine upto the foothills of Mt. Hermon. It started from the Mediterranean coast just south of Sidon, running in any easterly direction across the Litani river and included the whole of the Jordan catchments area upto its northern most source in Rashayya before turning south towards Golan Heights.[5] The Zionist proposal was opposed by France which insisted upon the original Sykes-Picot line. The WZO then launched a vigorous campaign aimed at persuading the French to give up Litani but it did not succeed.[6] In 1919, Great Britain put forth the Deauville proposal, which recommended a boundary following the Litani (Qasimiyya) River from the coast, that continues eastward and encompasses the village of Baniyas. According to British statesmen this was the ancient Dan. The Deauville proposal was rejected in February 1920 by the French and Litani remained inside Lebanon.[7] In the same year British Prime Minister met Secretary General of the French Foreign Ministry Berthelot, who said that "all Jews" were unanimously agreed that the sources of the Hermaon and the headwaters of the Jordan played vital role in the existence of Palestine. Berthelot replied, Lioyd George recalled in this memories of the Peace Conference, that the snows of Hermon "Dominated the town of Damascus" and could not be excluded from Syria nor could the waters of the Litani.[8] In June 1920 an agreement was proposed by France, which recommended a line that would leave the coast at Ra'san Naqurah, a few miles north of the Sykes Picot/OETA line, proceed eastward and then turned sharply north, so as to include within Palestine a vertical strip of territory containing the north most Jewish settlement (Metulla) and the Hula Valley.[9]

Weizmann, tried to convince General Gourud, the French High Commission in Beirut, of the importance of the waters of the Litani to Palestine but could not arose any interest.[10]

Finally the agreement between Britain and France was reached in December 1920. From the Zionist perspective the implications of Palestine's northern frontiers were quite serious. In the north the country was deprived of almost all important water resources which the Zionist leaders considered vital for the power and irrigation plans they had in mind. More important, by failing to approximate natural geographic boundaries, the borders left

the country all but indefensible militarily.[11]

The boundary agreement of 1920 cut sharply into the most optimistic Zionist estimates of the amount of water available to support extensive Jewish agricultural colonization in Palestine. Zionist planners wanted to divert part of the flow of Litani River eastwared into the Hasbani River, where the Litani would flow into the Jordan Valley and eventually be piped overland to the Negev desert.[12] In 1921, in the book of Jewish Foundation Fund, Karen Hayesod recorded, pessimistically, "it is, of course much to be regretted that we must abandon for the present all plans concerning the Litani."[13]

In 1923, the British and French agreed on the final boundary lines, to the great disappointment of the Zionist leaders. They had hoped to retain the Litani, the Upper Jordan, Mount Hermon and the Hauran in Syria, They attempted, nevertheless, to achieve changes in the boundaries by settling immigrants in Syria and Lebanon, a move violently opposed by the French. The Anglo French boundary agreement of 1923 was approved by the League of Nations in 1934. And after that the Zionist leaders gradually lost hope of ever achieving a change in the frontier line.[14]

In 1943 the Zionist received a small measure of encouragement when some Maronite leaders appeared to be willing to share the water of the Litani for the agricultural development of the Jewish colony. The Lebanese engineering firm of Alfred Naccache and Jewish engineers of the Palestine Water Cooperative conducted a joint study which concluded that Lebanon could usefully exploit only one seventh of Litani's flow.

The study approved, therefore, that most of the water be diverted from a point where the river takes a westward bend through a tunnel into Palestine. In exchange for water, Lebanon would receive all or part of the power produced by the water drop from the mountains to the Jordan Valley. The study heartened the Zionists, whose dreams of Negev development could not be fully realized without the Litani water. [15]

In 1944, the Jewish Agency utilized the services of Walter Clay Lowdermil, who was the Assistant Chief of the United States Soil Conservation Service, and later the Head of the Department of Agricultural Engineering at Technion, the Israeli Institute of Technology. After three months of fields studies in Palestine and Transjordan he proposed a Jordan

Valley Authority (JVA) on the lines of the Tennesse Valley Authority (JVA). The details of JVA were developed by James Hays, Chief engineer of TVA. Lowdermilk noted the possibility of tapping the Litani and diverting some of the water to the Palestine coast and Negev.[16]

These schemes however, lost relevance because of establishment of the State of Israel in May 1948. The establishment of Israel immediately sparked off the first Arab-Israeli War. Lebanon along with Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Iraq participated in this war. The Israeli Army occupied Southren Lebanon upto the point where the Litani takes a westward bend. When negotiation for a General Armistice Agreement (GAA) started, Israel tried to couple its withdrawal from Lebanese territory with guaranteed access to the water of the Litani.[17] The Lebanese Government, however, refused to give any concessions and several weeks of stalemate followed. It was only after Israel was finally made to withdraw completely in March 1949 that a GAA was signed between the two. Immediately, thereafter, the Lebanese Government begun preparing a proposal for the Litani Project which had triple objective (i) sending the potable Litani water to Beirut (ii)utilizing the water for Irrigating the Biqa and South Lebanon (iii) utilizing the water flow for the generation of hydroelectric power.[18]

Irrigation of the Negev was a venerable Zionist dream and although its failure to acquire the waters of the Litani had wrecked plans for large-scale desert irrigation, Israel decided that even a token Jewish agrarian presence in the Negev would be an important symbol of the vitality of the Jewish State. In July 1953 therefore, the Israeli Cabinet approved a plan to draw water from the Jordan river at the banat Yakub bridge for diversion to the Negev. Work on the canal began in September 1953 but as the diversion point was located in a demilitarized zone created by the 1949 Israeli-Syrian Armistice agreement, Syria immediately protested. The Syrian position was upheld by both the UN and the US. American pressure ultimately forced Israel to suspend work on the project the following month.[19] In October 1953 President Eisenhower dispatched Eric Jonston to the region to undertake the joint development of the Jordan Valley. Johnston carried with him a Charles. T. Main which called Litani angered Israelis, in response to the Main plant they came up with the cotton plan designed by an American engineer John S. Cotton. The Cotton Plan tied the Litani to a regional development scheme and estimated that the surplus water not needed for irrigation in Lebanon (amounted to nearly 50 percent

or 400 MCM of ties Litani's water) be diverted to Israel from a point near Marjuyun. This diversion was to take place through a tunnel at a point seven miles from the Israeli border where the Litani makes a sharp westward turn towards the Mediterranean Sea. The Cotton plant gave sufficient water for all of irrigable land of Lebanon. Lebanon would receive per annum 450.7 MCM water to irrigate, 35,425 ha (350,000 dunams). However, a report prepared by a group of US Bureau of reclamation exports working for the Foreign Operation Administration was of the opinion that Lebanon did use about 80 percent of the Litani waters.[20]

Israeli's attempts to bring the Litani into a regional water development scheme could not find favour with the Americans. As Brecher states, "While a strong case could be made on technical and geo-economic grounds, Israel's legal claim was non-existent; the Litani was a wholly national river of an enemy state.[21] James Hudson point out that, since Israel has no real share of the Litani basin, it has no claim under international law to any Litani waters.

Israel stood better chance of eventually obtaining some Litani water if an acceptable arrangement was first made and executed with the Arab States for Jordan river. In any case water sharing negotiations initiated by the US in the 1950's itself failed amidst proposal and counter proposals and in October the Arab League decided against signing an agreement might deal the case of Litani later on.[22]

Israel remained determined, with or without Arab co-operation, to divert a part of the Jordan river water for irrigation. Consequently in 1956, a national Water carrier Project for irrigating the Negev was approved and work begun in 1958.[23] The construction of Litani Project started in 1957. The major features of the Project were : (i) Hydroelectric production and simultaneous irrigation of parts of the southern Biqa, irrigation of some agricultural lands in the upper Galilean region and some part of the Sidon-Beirut coastal region. On 30 January, 1961, a plan was adopted by the Political Committee of the Arab League which was designed to defeat the Israeli National Water Carrier Project. Though Lebanon was a party to the Arab League plan, Beirut's political leaders felt uncomfortable with the plan as it would drawn Lebanon into direct confrontation with the Jewish State. [24]

In the 1960's a dam was built a lake Qaraoun with a 200 MCM

capacity. A mountain tunnel was built from the lake to carry the Litani waters, four miles south to a hydroelectric power station at Markabi. Two other hydroelectric power stations Awali and Joun were built from there westward before joining with Awali which flows into the Mediterranean Sea just north of Sidon.[25] Lebanon had proposed one more dam to be built at Maifadoun, where the water could be stored and distributed for irrigation purposes. But this plan was never carried out.[26]

In January 1964 the Arab League adopted a plan designed to defeat the Israeli intention of diverting the waters of the Jordan. The Arab Plan amounted to an attempt to reroute the headwater of the Jordan-Hasbani and Baniyas away from Israel. The Hasbani was to be diverted partially into the lower Litani with a smaller quantity going eastwards into Syria's Baniyas river. The Baniyas in turn was to be connected to the Yarmuk river, a tributary of the Jordan.[27] Israel, quite expectedly was severely critical of the Arab league decision. Noting that the Arab League had earmarked part of the flow of the Hasbani for irrigating Southern Lebanon, Israel argued that:

> "All irrigation plans for Southern Lebanon have turned in the first instance, on utilizing the river Litani with its annual flow of 850 MCM of which to this day, most runs to waste into the Mediterranean. Now a good deal of this flow of the Upper Hasbani is to be wasted as well. Lebanon has sufficient water for irrigation, arable land, not water has always been the factor limiting the development of Lebanese agriculture."[28]

Work began on the Arab League's plan and Lebanon decided to proceed with its share of the scheme while at the same time declining to invite forces from other Arab countries to help defend Southern Lebaon from Israeli attacks. Feelings once again ran high in the Arab world as tension mounted between the frontline Arab States and Israel. The June 1967 Arab-Israeli War, put a sudden and final end to the Arab League's diversion plan.

The First Phase of the Litani project was completed before the beginning of June 1967 Arab-Israeli War. With its completion the assumption on which the Cotton Plan and previous Zionist plans for using the Litani had been based were dramatically changed. Although Israel wanted to get 400 MCM of water from the Litani river, after the construction

of the Qirwan dam only 100 MCM water was left for the Lower Litani.

The history of Litani thuse revolves around three issues: (i) Continuing Zionist interest towards South Lebanon's most significant water resource the Litani River; (ii) independent Lebanon has performed a role in Arab efforts to divert the headwaters of the Jordan River away from Israel's Hula Valley; (iii) the climax of water tension before and during the June 1967 Arab-Israel's War. After the 1967 War, Moshe Dayan, defence Minister proclaimed that: "Now Israeli borders are all geographically natural except the northern border with Lebanon" This them was repeated again and again throughout the 1970's. On December 3, 1976, the Israeli daily Hatsoufeh pointed out, "The natural and historic border between the land of Israel and Lebanon is the Litani River, for the Jabeel mountains extend naturally with the three mountains to the Litani River."[29]

In April 1972, the Lebanese Minister of Hydroelectric Resources asked a U.S. delegation to finance a Litani scheme to irrigate 23,000ha. (227,240 dunams) of southern Beqaa Valley and provide a new water network for Beirut, In October, 1974, the President of the Council of the Administration of National office of the Litani concluded an agreement in principle with the World Bank to provide 60 percent of the $130 million cost of the ten year project.[30]

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