

Rivers of Fire: The Conflict over Water in the Middle East

*Arnon Soffer. Translated by Murray Rosovsky and Nina Copaken.
Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999. 320 pages.*

Addressing the UN's Second World Water Forum (May 2000), Dr. Kalus Toepfer, executive director of the United Nations Environment Program, took note of the critical importance of water in the search for world peace and prosperity. He noted, "water is an indicator of poverty [and] an indicator of environmental stability."

While Toepfer's speech reflects the growing concern over water, Arnon Soffer's *Rivers of Fire* focuses more closely on the socio-political ramifications of the scarcity of water in the Middle East, and highlights the urgency of "international cooperation" regarding the global scarcity of water. In his conclusion, he points out US strategic interests in suggesting more involvement of great powers in the problem.

Written at the behest of the Israeli government, Soffer's introduction immediately raises serious questions for the reader to consider regarding the growing conflicts over water rights. Whether he answers these questions fully in the chapters that follow remains an open question for those who contemplate *Rivers of Fire*. Soffer asks: Do the region's leaders really perceive that reality has changed and that a transition to a New Middle East is in order? May we truly allow ourselves to be misled with illusions of optimism that sweep all before them? Or should we call out "Wait! Nothing has changed."

Rivers of Fire was originally published in Hebrew (1992) and appears to shift major blame for the growing conflict over water rights to the Arab

states. Soffer's extensive reliance upon massive statistical data, however, tends to obscure his pro-Israeli political slant. Soffer goes far afield in touching upon disciplines ranging from history, geography, ecology, law, economics, anthropology, and politics to civil and hydraulic engineering. Lay students in the field must thus wade through a statistical maze to detect the author's central theme reflected in the title.

The author's ground-breaking work covers 320 pages and begins and concludes with emphasis upon "International Rivers" and the consequences of a global water shortage. Focusing upon the Middle East, he labels chapters respectively: "International rivers;" "The Nile Basin;" "Geopolitics (Euphrates, Tigris);" "The Jordan-Yarmuke Basin;" "The Orient's River;" "The 'Internationalized' Water Sources: The Litani River;" "International Groundwater Conflicts;" and "Non-conventional Solutions to the Problem of Water Shortages in the Middle East." The work is replete with approximately 50 tables showing figures of water levels among the diverse basins, and lengths and extent of usage by the states sharing these international rivers. It also has sufficient maps detailing scores of national and local water-saving projects.

However, amid the plethora of technical facts and figures, Soffer brings to light, among other things, one of the most overlooked political facts of the so-called "Six-Day War" between Israel and the neighboring Arab states. He suggests that it was the conflict over water usage that indirectly "set off" the "Six-Day War." He recalls that the war flared openly after Israel's military attack on water-saving projects undertaken by Arab states. He said it was an attempt to halt these states from acquiring greater usage of water from the Jordan-Yarmuk river basin.

Offering support for Israel regarding this conflict (the "Six Day War") Soffer noted Nurit Kliot's contention in his book, *Water Sources and Conflict in the Middle East*, that the Arabs' plan to divert half of Jordan's sources of water reflects, more than any other scheme, the force of the Jewish-Arab conflict in general, and its concerns in particular. Soffer argues, "The Arab world could not view with equanimity Israel's successful realization of its Jordan project." Israel, he said, "took all the Jordan sources for itself, ignored the water needs of the neighboring states, and in consequence increased its overall power. In vindication of its unilateral action, Israel argued that it could find no negotiating partners because the Arabs, who did not recognize Israel's right to exist, were unwilling to enter discussions."

With respect to this, Soffer refers to a 1964 Damascus Radio broadcast, which concluded: "the diversion of Jordan River waters to the Negev is the

greatest and most important event in the life of the enemy state. It is an action, which is no less dangerous than the establishment of Israel in 1948. If Israel could implement its aggressive plan to divert the Jordan River to the Negev, it would be able to exploit an area of land which is equivalent to two-thirds of its present area."

Supporting his contentions, however, Soffer claims that the idea of diverting half of the Jordan's water was begun by Lebanon in 1959 when the diversion of the Hasbani and Baniyas to the Litani was being considered. Soffer says that the United States opposed the plan and explained to the initiators that it would assist Israel in preventing the plan's implementation; therefore the Arab countries delayed its implementation until 1964. This plan, Soffer states, "was intended to provide water for irrigation in Lebanon, Syria and mainly Jordan." He said that the work began in earnest in 1964, but that "Israel attacked the earth-moving machinery at the diversion site in Syria, and thus prevented implementation." The "water war," he contends, "led indirectly to the Six Day War."

Soffer argues that Israel's position was that the Arab's attempted diversion broke clauses 6 and 7 of the Helsinki Accords, which stated that international river water, "should not be wasted," and that "it should not cause harm to other riparians." The Arab's rational counter, he acknowledges, was that Israel actually broke the accord by constructing the National Water Carrier transferring Jordanian water to another drainage basin. Soffer, nevertheless, defended this action by citing a transfer of the Colorado water from its basin of California that was upheld by the US Supreme Court.

Regarding varied solutions to international water shortages and attendant conflicts in the Middle East, Soffer suggests some traditional and innovative prospects. He states: "among the former are trappings of flood water, economical irrigation methods, and saving water through choice of crops. This group may also include war and destruction of water-holding devices in neighboring countries as a way of acquiring sources of water." This latter suggestion of belligerent actions against neighboring states as a solution to the water crisis again reflects his subtle support for Israel's alleged aggressive policies noted earlier. With respect to the "innovative prospects," he listed "cloud seeding, desalination, transfer of water to remote places (even hundreds of miles distant), and transportation of water in large containers, as is done with oil. Recycling of sewage water for irrigation of crops is also a new way of obtaining water, as well as preventing pollution of groundwater."

In the conclusion, he offers Tony Allan's classification of the regions' states. He quotes: "Group A is the oil states: these have the means to pur-

chase food even though they do not have water. Such are Saudi Arabia, Iran, Kuwait, Iraq and Libya. These states will overcome the water shortage by means of their money. Group B states will not suffer a shortage because of the abundance of their water or because of their high level of technology. These include Turkey, Lebanon and Israel. Group C consists of Third World states, poor in resources and water (some of them are already suffering from water shortage and some will suffer from it in the near future). These states are divided into two subgroups. The first includes Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, Eritrea, Egypt and the Palestinian entity.” The second subgroup includes Syria, Ethiopia, Sudan and Yemen. Soffer notes that the American interest in this latter group is smaller “so they may expect hardships. However, it is possible that the United States will be willing to provide these states with food without charge in return for political quiet.” He states: “The region is running out of water. The rivers are liable to become ‘rivers of fire.’”

Despite his bias toward his Israeli patrons, Soffer’s work still remains one of the most extensive examinations of the crisis of water in the Middle East. Some criticism of the literary effort, however, is, of course, in order. For instance, it should be noted that this work, updated from the original 1992 Hebrew version, makes few real “updates” in current “language-style,” identification of nation-states and date-related entries. For instance, words such as “Zaire” remain in the text, and inaccurate forecasts pointing to the year 2000 have little relevance at present.

It should also be noted that Soffer rarely speaks of the Palestinian Authority or the Palestine Liberation Organization when speaking of negotiations. Perhaps this was done to satisfy the Israeli authorities that financed the publication. There are several other minor mistakes such as incorrect dates of documented agreements and treaties. Given the global environmental concerns, most recently highlighted by the issues of global warming and water shortages, Soffer’s statistical approach may well serve as a basis for a fair distribution of this vital life-source for mankind. Perhaps there need not be any “rivers of fire.”

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