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The Jordan River is Drying up

It's been 11 years since Israel and Jordan signed a peace treaty that included a commitment to jointly rehabilitate the Jordan River. Since little has been done to implement that commitment, the situation has steadily deteriorated.

Some environmentalists have even predicted that the most famous river in the world could dry up completely. For decades, Jordan and Israel have competed for the river's resources, building dams, rerouting the water to canals, and siphoning it through pumping stations. Today, the river begs 10 percent of its original flow capacity, and the lower Jordan, which flowed into the Dead Sea, is nothing but a dry riverbed.

Gideon Bromberg, Israeli director of *Friends of the Earth Middle East* (FOEME), believes that the entire river may suffer the same fate. "The Jordan River is in danger of disappearing altogether if governments in the region do not take action immediately," said Bromberg. During the four years of the Palestinian terror war, bringing Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority (PA) together was outside the realm of possibility. But with some movement toward peace since the death of Yasser Arafat, FOEME organized the Jordan Valley Symposium, a conference attracting 200 participants from Israel, Jordan and the PA.

Without the cooperation of all the people who use the river, its future is dim. But during the symposium, it became increasingly clear that aside from the environmentalists, there was little agreement among politicians and farmers. "Is it a competition: who can damage the river more than the other?" asked **Munqeth Mehyar**, director of FOEME in Amman. "This could be understood in a state of war, but not now. Did we have to take all the water?"

The simplicity and complexity of the situation mirror one another. Allowing the river's water simply to flow would solve the lion's share of the problems, but that possibility isn't in the decision makers' repertoire. "The problem is that in Israel, in Jordan and in the region, fresh, clean water running naturally is seen as a waste of water," said Bromberg. "That is despite a new correction of the water law passed by the Knesset [parliament] in 2004 that nature has the right to water and is a legitimate user," he said, adding, "The irony is that sewage is keeping the Jordan River alive."

Agriculture is by far the major consumer of the river and with very limited options for watering their crops, farmers are not willing to budge. They are less concerned with the river's future than they are with their harvest, which feeds their families. Palestinian farmers insist that they don't get enough water or have any input as to its distribution. Israel is building desalination plants and importing water from Turkey to ease the water crisis, but that won't help the Jordan River. There are no simple solutions other than letting the river flow, and in the arid Middle East, that's not going to happen any time soon.