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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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16.01.2025



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Stealing water:

Israel's covert war on Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan

Taking advantage of the chaos following Damascus's fall, Israel's seizure of Syria's Al-Mantara Dam showcases the long-standing Zionist strategy to secure regional water dominance, exacerbating tensions across an already parched West Asia.

JAN 14, 2025

At the beginning of January, less than a month after rebel forces seized Damascus and toppled the Syrian government, Israeli occupation forces launched an unchallenged advance extending to the vicinity of the [Al-Mantara Dam](#) – a critical water source for Deraa and the largest dam in the region, located in the western countryside of Quneitra.

[Reports](#) indicate that Israeli tanks and troops established military outposts, erected earth mounds, and imposed stringent restrictions on local movement, allowing access only during specific, pre-determined times.

Geopolitics of water

Natural resources have always played a pivotal role in shaping geopolitics, and among them, [freshwater](#) sources have become increasingly contested. While oil and gas dominate global headlines, the indispensable role of water in agriculture, industry, and daily life makes it an equally critical factor in global stability.

As freshwater resources grow scarcer, the risk of conflict over this precious resource escalates, threatening economic development and social stability.

Historically, nations have vied for control over water-rich territories to secure trade routes, forge alliances, and drive technological advances. Ancient civilizations in the Cradle of Civilization, like the Sumerians and Babylonians, flourished by harnessing the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. In contrast, resource-poor regions often lagged in development, limiting their political and technological progress.

Today, water scarcity continues to shape regional political strategies. The Nile River Basin serves as a notable example, where Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia are locked in a dispute over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD).

This project, Africa's largest hydropower initiative, has heightened diplomatic tensions with Egypt, which relies on the Nile for [90 percent](#) of its fresh water.

The West Asia and North Africa (WANA) region faces unparalleled water scarcity, with [83 percent](#) of its population under extreme water stress. According to the [World Resources Institute](#), 12 of the 17 most water-stressed countries globally are located in this region, with Qatar, Israel, and Lebanon ranking as the top three.

Additionally, about [40 percent](#) of the global population depends on rivers that cross international borders, making transboundary water management a critical geopolitical challenge. The recent Israeli incursion at the Al-Mantara Dam starkly illustrates this reality.

Global water demand is projected to rise by [20–25 percent by 2050](#), placing immense pressure on regions like WANA. By mid-century, 100 percent of the region's population could face extreme water stress, further destabilizing political relationships and heightening the risk of inter-state conflicts over shared water resources.

Such tensions are already apparent in Israel and Syria, where control over vital water sources has become a flashpoint.

Israel's water realities and ambitions

Palestine's arid climate and limited natural water resources have long shaped the occupation state's approach to water management, as deserts constitute more than half of its territory. The country's key freshwater sources include the Sea of Galilee, the Jordan River, and aquifers along the coast and mountains.

However, technological advancements in [desalination](#) and wastewater reuse have helped Israel reduce its dependence on natural water sources. By 2018, Israel was reusing 87 percent of its treated wastewater, primarily for agricultural purposes.

Yet, these innovations come with limitations. Desalination and wastewater treatment are costly and cannot entirely offset the effects of [climate change](#). Rising temperatures, declining rainfall, and shrinking aquifer recharge rates are exacerbating Israel's water scarcity, as are the declining water levels and increasing salinity of Lake Kinneret and further desertification in the south of the country.

To address these challenges, Israel has worked on [collecting and treating](#) about 94 percent of wastewater, 87 percent of which is reused, primarily for agriculture. Overall, between 2000 and 2018, agriculture's share of freshwater withdrawals declined from 64 to 35 percent of total water withdrawals.

These challenges have compelled Israel to turn to regional water sources, such as the Yarmouk River in Jordan and the Litani River in Lebanon, to supplement its needs.

Water has been a cornerstone of Israel's strategy since the early days of the Zionist ideological movement. Since the state was founded through wars, occupations, and negotiations with neighboring Arab states, access to water has been a strategic priority for Israel. This strategy revolved around maximizing the use of water within and beyond its borders, even at the expense of the water security of neighboring countries.

Early Zionist leaders, such as [Chaim Weizmann](#), highlighted the importance of water from areas such as the recently occupied Mount Hermon in Syria and Lebanon's Litani River for irrigation and economic development.

The founder of modern Zionism, Theodor Herzl, stressed from the outset the need for the Jewish state to include southern Lebanon, in part because of its containment of vital water sources. The Zionist movement exerted tremendous pressure during the 1919 peace conference in Paris, seeking to annex the sources of the Jordan River, the Litani River, and the Hauran Plain in Syria to Palestine. However, these demands were rejected by the French side, which had the mandate over Syria and Lebanon under the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement. In 1941, [David Ben-Gurion](#), who later became Israel's first prime minister, clearly revealed that the future Israeli state coveted the Litani River, saying: "We must remember that the Litani River must be within the borders of the Jewish state to ensure its viability."

Post-1948, Israel nationalized its water resources and launched ambitious projects, such as the National Water Carrier, to transport water from the north to the arid south.

Water studies conducted during the 1930s and 1940s indicate that Israel's 1953 Johnston Project ignored the political boundaries of the Jordan River Basin countries, considering the Sea of Galilee a natural reservoir of river water. Tel Aviv has planned to divert the course of

the Jordan River waters to its advantage, and has actually begun implementing these plans through the Israeli company Mekorot since 1953.

These efforts consisted of diverting the waters of the Jordan River and its tributaries to the Sea of Galilee, which led to a decrease in the Dead Sea's water levels and shrinkage of its areas as it dried up due to the diversion of tributary streams for irrigation uses and agricultural expansion.

In addition, the high rate of evaporation resulting from high temperatures in the Jordan Valley region contributed to accelerating the decline in the water level. By the early 1990s, the water level of the Dead Sea had reached [less than 410 meters below sea level](#), which seriously threatens its existence as a unique natural resource.

The 1967 war marked a turning point, as Israel gained control over water-rich territories like the [West Bank](#), Gaza, and the Golan Heights. These areas now provide a significant portion of Israel's water supply.

However, this control has come at the expense of neighboring states and Palestinians, who face severe restrictions on water access. For example, Palestinian [per capita water consumption](#) averages just 20 cubic meters annually, compared to Israel's 60 cubic meters.

The Israeli government strictly regulates Palestinian water use, prohibiting the drilling of new wells and imposing fines for exceeding quotas, while Israeli settlements face no such restrictions. The result is a terrible inequality in access to water, as Palestinian agriculture remains backward and inefficient, while Jewish settlements in Palestinian territories enjoy modern irrigation systems.



Map of Israel's water sources and Israeli expansion in Syria.

The alarming reality in southern Syria

Israel's incursion into southern Syria highlights its ongoing water ambitions. Reports indicate that Tel Aviv now controls 40 percent of Syria and Jordan's shared water resources. Following its takeover of the Al-Wehda Dam in the Yarmouk Basin in December, Israeli forces then advanced to the Al-Mantara Dam.

The Yarmouk Basin is a strategically critical area, forming part of the natural border between Syria and Jordan. The basin's primary water source, the Yarmouk River, supports agricultural lands and [provides drinking water](#) to communities in Syria's Deraa and Suwayda regions, as well as northern Jordan.

The river covers a distance of 57 kilometers, 47 kilometers of which are within Syrian territory, while the remainder forms part of the Syrian–Jordanian border. On its banks, Syria has built a number of dams, most notably the Yarmouk Dam, in addition to the larger Al-Wahda Dam, which has a storage capacity of 225 million cubic meters.

These dams are used to irrigate vast areas of agricultural land, estimated at approximately 13,640 hectares, in addition to supplying the surrounding villages with drinking water through major pumping networks such as the “Thawra Line,” which extends from the basin to the city of Deraa and its countryside, all the way to Suwayda's countryside.

This vital waterway, however, has become a casualty of Tel Aviv’s broader strategy to secure regional water dominance.

Despite these challenges, Israel’s recent actions in southern Syria exemplify a consistent strategy of addressing its water shortages through [regional expansion](#). The political turmoil in Syria provided a historic opening for the occupation state to advance these ambitions.

Notably, the events unfolding in West Asia only go to show that the primary deterrent against Israel’s exploitation of Lebanese water resources has always been effective resistance. Until the major strategic setbacks faced by the Axis of Resistance, this resistance managed to prevent Israel from replicating its territorial water gains in the region.

Today, by seizing control of critical water infrastructure, Israel’s ambitions pose direct threats to Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon. Yet, as the region faces accelerating crises, the severity of this water-driven strategy risks being overshadowed by broader geopolitical concerns. It is increasingly evident that Israel’s thirst for water resources knows no bounds.