

UNFORGETTABLE LITANI  
THE LITANI RIVER IN ZIONIST AND  
ISRAELI WATER STRATEGY 1881-1956

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MA THESIS IN HISTORY  
DEPARTMENT OF ARCHAEOLOGY, CONSERVATION AND HISTORY  
UNIVERSITY OF OSLO  
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**Cover Picture:**

The Litani River

Source: the Litani River Authority Official Website, <http://www.litani.gov.lb/mainE.html>.

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# Acknowledgments

Life is often decided by coincidences. Six years ago, I made my first acquaintance with water politics. I was considering various topics for my final, and decisive, paper in social studies in upper secondary school, and my father suggested adding water politics in the Middle East to the potential candidates. This immediately caught my attention and woke the interest that would eventually lead up to this very thesis.

But it would take more than two years before I was to study the subject again. This time, I found myself under the excellent supervision of Professor Joachim Schlör. Of his many valuable lessons, I am especially grateful for showing me some of the many colours that make up what is often conceived as a black and white picture. The history of Israel is more than one of conflict and bloodshed and recognising some of the other factors, like hope and creativity, is essential to begin to grasp this intriguing entity.

The currently last stop on my journey has been the University of Oslo, where Professor Hilde Henriksen Waage has guided me through the many hardships of an MA student. She has a unique way of keeping her own and other's spirits up, and she knows exactly how to bring the best out of her students. No matter the circumstances, Hilde would always take the time, and much of it, to give her opinion on the latest draft or idea. I could not have wished for a better supervisor; and I am, eternally grateful.

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Finally I would like to express my gratitude to my parents. They have done everything you could to give me the best possible starting point in life. I am never in doubt as to where mom, Mai Britt Grini Hamre, stands. She is like an anchor and no matter what,

I know she is proud of, what still remains, her little boy. If mom represents safety, dad, Carl Hamre, stands for inspiration. He is always urging me to face up to new challenges, and eager to point out new paths to explore. He is undoubtedly the main reason for my interest in history.

Every single person mentioned above has been part in the process of realising this thesis, and they deserve their share of what credit that may come with it. For any shortcomings, however, I am the only one to blame.



# 1. Introduction

Water is the source of life. No human being can sustain an existence without water. Humans are directly dependent on water, as they need to drink, and indirectly to produce food and energy. At the same time, the resource is more than a means for fulfilment of basic needs; it fills roles as social symbols and is also given meaning by culture and religion. Just as no human can survive without water, no state can survive without supplying its population with water. A state which fails at this would soon find itself short of both subjects and legitimacy. At the same time, water is needed for energy and therefore essential for economic development and prosperity.

In the arid and semi-arid Middle East several peoples are forced to share water; this limited and valuable resource. There, the potential for water conflict is amplified as most rivers and aquifers are shared between two or more states.

The Litani River is an exception, as its sources and path are completely within the borders of one country – Lebanon. Nonetheless, the Litani wakened the interest of the neighbours of Lebanon. In particular the Zionists, and later Israelis, have made several demands for Litani water, and the river has repeatedly been a topic in their relations with the Lebanese.

## **Questions to be Answered and Fields of Study**

In a discussion on the role of the Litani River in Zionist, and Israeli, water strategy, an obvious start is to map out the role of the Litani in Zionist ideology, and then investigate how this has been expressed in practical politics. Why did the Litani River hold such a strong position in Zionist ideology? How did the Zionists argue for the right to the Litani River, and how were these claims received? Did the arguments for the right to the Litani River change with the establishment of a state? Why has the Litani River been a part of Israeli water schemes? How did the Zionist interest in the Litani River influence Israeli politics?

Water in the Middle East is a comprehensive and multifaceted topic. No basin or aquifer can be considered solely, as they are, directly or indirectly, connected with other water sources. To give a relevant, yet theoretical, example: The Litani River is within

Lebanese borders, yet it could relatively easily be diverted to increase the water flow of the Jordan River. This could in turn allow a decrease of the over-usage of the aquifers – thereby Israelis, Palestinians and Jordanians could receive more water, and that of a higher quality. This illustrates the complexity of the situation, as well as the necessity for a consideration of water needs and politics in a wider context. At the same time, it is necessary to cover a relative extensive period of time, as the aim is to investigate how the claim to Litani water has been expressed both by Zionists and Israelis. The period stretches from the end of the nineteenth century with the first immigration wave and the rise of Zionism. Zionist work for, and the establishing phase of, the State of Israel, will also be of interest. This will be traced up until 1956 when Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion reoriented Israel's foreign and security policy.<sup>1</sup> Ben-Gurion was a key figure in the founding phase of the State of Israel, and Prime Minister for almost all 15 of the state's first years. Furthermore, he had an expressed interest in the Litani River and South Lebanon and is therefore important to include in this discussion.

### **Presentation**

The Litani River rises in the Beqaa Valley, in Lebanon, from where it flows southwest towards Israel. A few kilometres from the border between Israel and Lebanon the river makes a sharp turn westwards, this is often referred to as 'the bend', before following the border all the way to the Mediterranean Sea just north of Tyre. The river does not leave Lebanese territory, but it runs close to the Israeli border and the river Hasbani.<sup>2</sup>

The Hasbani River has its source in the south of Lebanon, runs into Israel, and is a tributary of the Jordan River. The Jordan River is the main river in a larger basin bearing its name. The basin has sources in Lebanon, Israel, Syria and Jordan. The river runs southwards, into the Sea of Galilee, through the Jordan Valley and down to the Dead Sea.<sup>3</sup> The Jordan River Basin is thus a vital source of life for Israelis, Palestinians, Jordanians, Syrians and Lebanese.

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1 Avi Shlaim, *The Iron wall: Israel and the Arab world* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 187-192.

2 Gabrielle Østern, 'Water scarcity in the Middle East: possibilities and constraints in using regional water management mechanisms' (University of Oslo, 1996), 67.

3 The Sea of Galilee has many names, some of the other are: Lake of Gennesaret, Lake Kinneret and Sea of Tiberias.

As the Zionists looked to the Middle East they recognised that water, or rather the lack of such, would constrain economic development in the region.<sup>4</sup> They did, however, also see relief. In the north flowed the Litani River, this precious resource had the potential to play an integral role in the Zionist endeavour.

Zionist, and Israeli, interest in and claims for the Litani are generally acknowledged. The first claim was made in 1916 following the British and French Sykes-Picot Agreement mapping out the borders of the Middle East. As the Litani River, and some Jewish settlements, were agreed to fall under French influence after the war, a series of attempts were made by Zionists to undo this decision.<sup>5</sup> Among those expressing their concern over the Litani River was the future Prime Minister of Israel, David Ben-Gurion.<sup>6</sup> The Litani River remained an important part of Ben-Gurion's strategic thinking, and he repeatedly hoped and worked for a Jewish state stretching all the way to the Litani.<sup>7</sup>

In Zionist strategic thinking, water was an obvious prerequisite for the development of a 'Jewish Homeland'. Large scale irrigation projects were considered vital for expanding the economic capacity and directly linked with the level of immigration possible. Furthermore, water power could provide electricity in a land lacking fossil fuels.<sup>8</sup> In support for their case, the Zionists commissioned several geographical studies of Palestine.<sup>9</sup> The first study concluded that water from the Litani was needed to irrigate the north of Palestine. The next commissioned study supported this view, and went further in arguing that the people north of the Litani River had no need for the water. Both studies were used in attempts to have the borders of the Sykes-Picot agreement redrawn. The Zionist Organisation did, however, argue that the Litani could benefit people both north and south of the river. The British and French discussed the borders, but concluded not to change them.<sup>10</sup> The Zionists, and later the State of Israel, commissioned more surveys, and

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4 Sharif S. Elmusa, 'The Land-Water Nexus in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,' *Journal of Palestine Studies* 25, no. 3 (1996): 70.

5 Laura Zittrain Eisenberg, *My enemy's enemy: Lebanon in the early Zionist imagination, 1900-1948* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 40-41.

6 Ibid.

7 Shlaim 2001, 106, 133-134.

8 Elmusa 1996.

9 Unless other is specified, 'Palestine' refers to the geographical unit of the British mandate era.

10 Eisenberg 1994, 41-42.

these tended to consider the Litani River part of the Jordan River Basin. This was the official policy of Israel; and when developing water schemes, the Litani was included.<sup>11</sup>

Also in international negotiations Israeli officials made claims for the Litani, most importantly during the Johnston negotiations of 1953-1955. These negotiations were an American attempt to negotiate a comprehensive water agreement between the riparians of the Jordan River Basin. The Israelis insisted that the Litani had to be considered a part of the Jordan River Basin scheme, and that Israel thus was entitled to a share of Litani water. During the negotiations, these claims were dropped in exchange for the right to transfer water out of the basin. Giving up on inclusion of the Litani is considered one of the main sacrifices made by Israel in these negotiations.<sup>12</sup>

But the Litani River was neither forgotten nor given up. In 1955, David Ben-Gurion embarked on his second period as Prime Minister of Israel. He had a plan for securing Israel's future in the Middle East, and the Litani River and South Lebanon were assigned to play the lead.<sup>13</sup>

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11 Thomas Naff and Ruth C. Matson, *Water in the Middle East: conflict or cooperation?* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1984), 68.

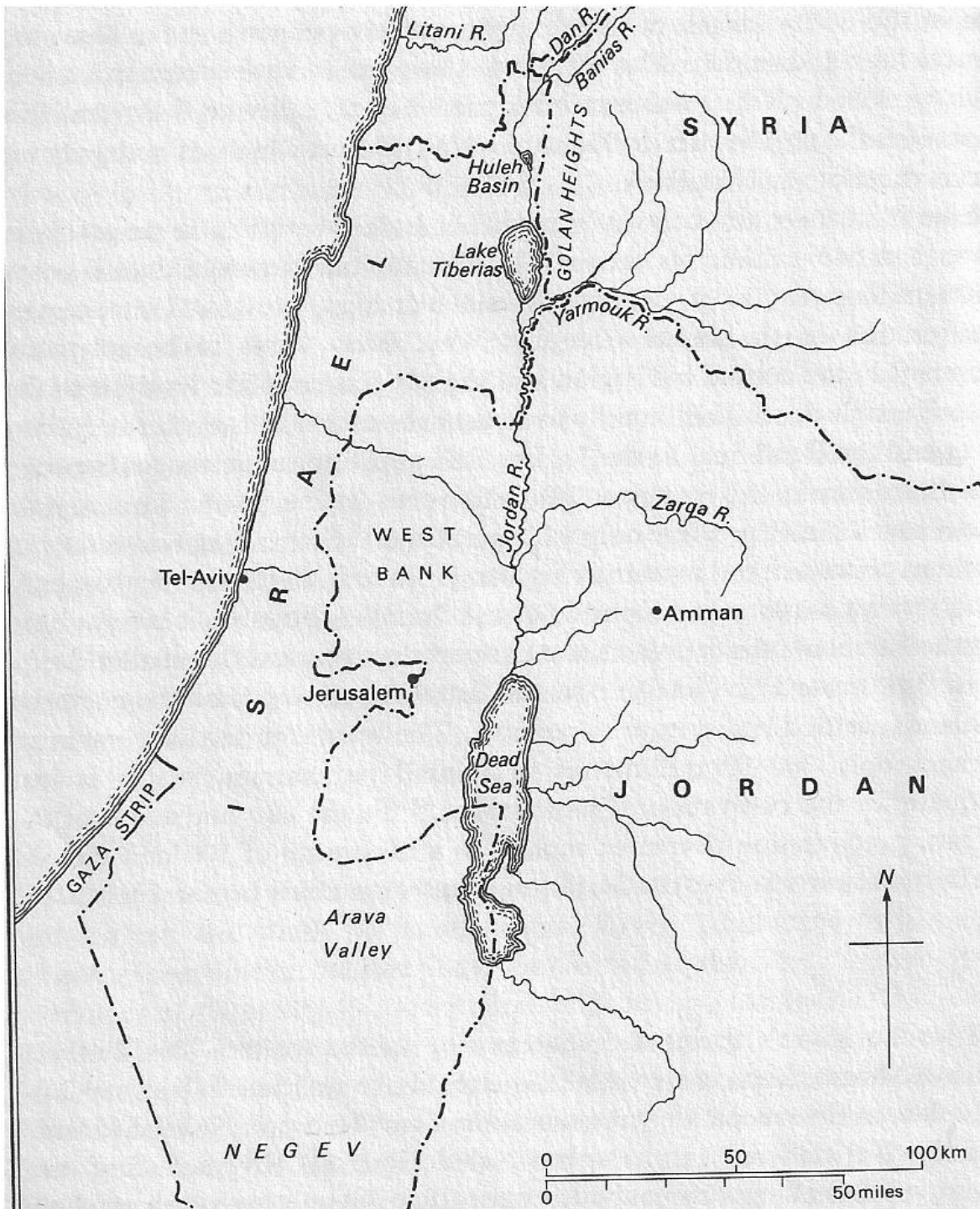
12 Aaron T. Wolf, "'Hydrostrategic' Territory in the Jordan Basin: Water, War and Arab-Israeli Peace Negotiations,' in *Water in the Middle East: a geography of peace*, ed. Hussein A. Amery and Aaron T. Wolf (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 85-87.

<sup>13</sup> Shlaim 2001, 104-110; Benny Morris, *Righteous victims: a history of the Zionist-Arab conflict, 1881-1999* (London: John Murray, 2000), 494-498.



The Litani River<sup>14</sup>

14 James Hudson, 'The Litani River of Lebanon: An Example of Middle Eastern Water Development,' Middle East Journal 25, no. 1 (1971): 3. A development project undertaken in the 1950s has been edited out of the map.



The Jordan River System<sup>15</sup>

15 Miriam R. Lowi, *Water and power: the politics of a scarce resource in the Jordan River basin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 24.

## Literature and Sources

Much research has been conducted in the field of water politics. The Litani River, however, is seldom spared more than a few sentences, and these are often a part of a wider discussion on the Jordan River Basin. Examples of this are the works done by the political scientist Miriam R. Lowi and the geographer Aaron T. Wolf.<sup>16</sup>

Some attention has also been devoted to the Anglo-French mandate negotiations following the First World War. In this respect the Zionist lobbying for the inclusion of the Litani in Palestine was essential and is often treated as such, yet the details of the lobbying and negotiations concerning the river are seldom discussed thoroughly.<sup>17</sup>

There are also a few scholars who have concerned themselves with the Lebanese fear of the Israeli interest in South Lebanon and the Litani River. Particularly after Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, there erupted a discussion on whether the Litani was secretly being diverted into the Jordan River Basin. The articles on this issue typically included a relatively limited section discussing the roots of the Zionist/Israeli interest in Litani. Again the topic served as background information, rather than being the focal point of the scholarly work.<sup>18</sup>

A book providing some valuable insight for this thesis is *My Enemy's Enemy: Lebanon in the Early Zionist Imagination*, by the historian Laura Zittrain Eisenberg.<sup>19</sup> Eisenberg's primary concern is the connection between the Zionists and the Christians (Maronites) of Lebanon. This and her discussion on Zionist claims for (what was to become) Lebanese land has been of value for this work. Eisenberg is, however, not too concerned with the Litani, and to the extent she discusses the river it is primarily as a boundary rather than a valuable resource. Although she does discuss how the Zionists

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16 Ibid; 'Hydrostrategic' Territory in the Jordan Basin: Water, War and Arab-Israeli Peace Negotiations.

17 See e.g. John J. Jr McTague, 'Anglo-French Negotiations over the Boundaries of Palestine, 1919-1920,' *Journal of Palestine Studies* 11, no. 2 (1982); Hussein A. Amery, 'The role of water resources in the evolution of the Israeli-Lebanese border,' *GeoJournal* 44, no. 1 (1998); Paul C. Helmreich, *From Paris to Sevres: the partition of the Ottoman Empire at the Peace Conference of 1919-1920* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1974).

18 See e.g. Hussein A. Amery, 'The Litani River of Lebanon,' *Geographical Review* 83, no. 3 (1993); Naff and Matson 1984.

19 Eisenberg 1994.

argued that the development of Palestine depended on vast quantities of water, and how their schemes included the Litani River.<sup>20</sup>

A large number of Zionist statements and documents (as well as a helpful biographical index) have been available from the *Jewish Virtual Library* and other online resource centres. Books by Theodor Herzl, and other influential Zionists, have been obtainable. In addition the value of digitalised newspaper archives should not be underestimated. Various periodicals have been examined; in particular the databases *Compact Memory* and *Historical Jewish Press* provided interesting source material. These collections of sources covered ideological writings, contemporary conceptions, as well as the attempts to put Zionism into practise.

Furthermore, the leading Zionist Chaim Weizmann, David Ben-Gurion and other Zionists and Israeli statesmen produced a large number of books during their lifetime. *The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann* provided much detail about the personal thoughts as well as official undertakings of this history shaping Zionist. Whereas the numerous memoirs and diaries of Ben-Gurion and others helped both form and complete the picture. These books, some in their English translation, have been subject to thorough investigation. However, the writer (particularly of memoirs or a diary) will often have an agenda when writing their work, and this can often be edited or written after the events occurred and be influenced by hindsight. Therefore the information has to be compared with other sources and relevant literature. It is also important to remember that the personal thoughts of a diary or letter will not necessarily match the official policy and actions of the writer, and that one person is not solely responsible for the acts of an organisation or state. This material does nonetheless demand considerable attention, as the writers have had a tremendous and direct impact on the historical events. Personal thoughts and considerations can help explain official action, but the two will have to be separated.

Official state sources have also been of great importance. Primarily *Documents on the Foreign Policy of Israel*, but also documents from Israeli dealings with American officials or the United Nations, proved to be valuable sources. In addition the American counterpart, *Foreign Relations of the U.S.*, and various British documents helped complete the picture. Several of the Israeli documents are in Hebrew, but these are available in a translated, but often summarised, version. All the collections have that in common that

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 40-41.



they contain a selection of documents, but still provide a considerable amount of valuable information.

### **Theory**

There are primarily two schools of thought concerning water politics. The *realists* argue that water shortages will inevitably lead to arguments and war. Whereas the *liberalists* counter that the lack of such a life necessity will force opposites to cooperate.

In his book, *Rivers of Fire*, geographer Arnon Soffer places himself well within the realist tradition. He gives a thorough discussion on what could be achieved if the states of the Middle East could cooperate on water development. He argues that first of all, there has to be a change in the states' economic pattern, shifting from agriculture to industry and services. Furthermore, technology has to be utilised to make the most of the scarce resource. And if, theoretically speaking, on top of the mentioned revolutionary transitions, the water sharing parties could cooperate with and trust each other much will be done. According to Soffer, if all these theoretical achievements could be reached, we would still witness mere postponements of war(s). He argues that it is impossible for the small quantities of water available to be sufficient for the rapidly increasing Middle Eastern population, and hence wars will eventually break out.<sup>21</sup>

Liberalists are quick to point out that water scarcity is bound to force adversaries to cooperate, and the Jordanian-Israeli agreements regarding water are often mentioned. Thus, water can even be considered one of the first steps towards a more comprehensive cooperative framework.<sup>22</sup> As mentioned, most water sources in the Middle East are shared by several parties, resulting in *hydrological interdependence*. It is argued that this interdependence brings opposites together, as the water shortage can not be solved unilaterally.<sup>23</sup> In essence, the liberalist line stands in direct opposition to the realist line, in that it is claimed that water will force the parties to cooperate and make peace, not war.

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21 Arnon Soffer, *Rivers of fire: the conflict over water in the Middle East* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 261-273.

22 Munther J. Haddadin, 'Water in the Middle East Peace Process,' *The Geographical Journal* 168, no. 4 (2002).

23 Anders Jägerskog, 'Why states cooperate over shared water: the water negotiations in the Jordan River Basin' (Department of Water and Environmental Studies, Linköping University, 2004), 15-20.

Lowi could be said to belong to the realist school, yet she acknowledges that there are cases of cooperation. She argues that cooperation may occur only under special circumstances, but that it is still not to be considered the start of a comprehensive peace. Lowi found that in her cases, the Jordan River Basin being the one most thoroughly examined, cooperation prerequisites the dominant power to be downstream and in critical need of water. In other words, it is dependent on goodwill from the upstream power. Smaller powers will seek cooperation out of pure necessity and lack of other solutions, whereas the hegemonic party has to be forced (by need or an outside power) to come to an agreement. Lowi also found that in these cases the reached agreement is *ad hoc*, and will not necessarily lead to any further acts of good will.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, it is necessary to warn of the danger of hydro fixation. Water is not the only element of history; there are always a number of factors, and water is likely to be just one of many important pieces of the mosaic. The highlighting of a single river's role in history does necessitate a consideration of contemporary events, but can also shed new light on these very events.

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<sup>24</sup> Lowi 1993, 203-204.

## 2. Litani Envisioned

### **Zionism: an Ideology in the Making**

*Zion*, a Hebrew name for a mountain in (and) Jerusalem, had since the sixth century BC referred to a vaguely defined Jewish homeland. Existence outside Zion, in the Diaspora, was to some extent considered as temporary. A return to the homeland had, however, strong religious connotations, at least until the development of political Zionism.<sup>1</sup>

To many Jews the increasing number of nationalisms of nineteenth century Europe led them to question and look for their own identity. Torn between a Jewish and one or more national identities, the former was often found predominant. As the century evolved so did the interest for Jewish history and Hebrew, yet from a secular point of view. So among the various national schools that were established were Jewish educational institutions. These schools were secular, but Jewish, teaching Jewish history and Hebrew literature – thereby supporting the undergoing language and history revival. These three factors, language, education and history, were intertwined and integral for the development of the modern Jewish nationalism. Zionists defined their nation through Jewish heritage and history; yet, their movement remained secular, and far from all Jews would embrace their nationalism.<sup>2</sup>

Those Jews who became Zionists developed a special interest in land and wanted Jewish soil to be tilled by Jewish labour. The problem was that there were hardly any Jews in a position to become farmers, at least not in Europe. This could, on the other hand, be achieved in the Jewish homeland – in Zion. At this point the majority of the world's Jews lived in Russia and suffered under strict repression. There were a few who had appealed to a Jewish nation from the middle of the century, but these made little impact until the Pogroms of 1881-84. The persecution of Jews in Russia caused a mass emigration; the

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1 Following the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, Zionists have sought strengthening of the state, and Jewish renewal. 'Zionism', Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/zionism>. Accessed on: 30.03.10; 'Glossary Z', Jewish Virtual Library, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/glossZ.html>. Accessed on: 30.03.10; Morris 2000, 14.

2 Shlomo Avineri, 'The Roots of Zionism,' *The Wilson Quarterly* (1976-) 7, no. 1 (1983).

majority travelled to America, but a tiny fraction of the emigrants, inspired by the new thoughts, sought a future in Palestine. These immigrants are considered a part of the *First Aliyah* or immigration wave (1881-1903).<sup>3</sup>

As the century neared its end, largely assimilated Central and Western European Jews experienced how the rise of nationalisms brought with it an increased anti-Semitism. The situation in Russia was of concern, but also Jews living in the Habsburg Empire and Germany were beginning to fear their gentile neighbours. A major turning point was the election of the anti-Semitic Karl Lueger to the position of Mayor of Vienna in May 1895, and the situation became even tenser in the year the Emperor took to appoint him. In addition, the presumed liberal French society was beginning to display its deeply rooted anti-Semitism. In Paris, the Jewish Captain Alfred Dreyfus was degraded and wrongly convicted of treason, while the crowd was bursting with anti-Semitic cries for blood. These were shocking experiences for the Jews of Western and Central Europe, many of whom were to turn to Zionism for answers. The idea of being assimilated into the nations of Europe suddenly seemed impossible, and the solution, some thought, was the establishment of a nation for the Jews.<sup>4</sup>

One of the journalists covering the Dreyfus Affair was Theodor Herzl, and it made a great impression on him. This secular and bourgeois intellectual from Budapest was in Paris working as a correspondent for a Viennese newspaper; he was more than aware of the situation in Europe as a whole and Austria-Hungary in particular. The growing anti-Semitism, the election of Lueger and the Dreyfus affair led Herzl to experience a sudden interest in solving the Jewish question. Like so many others he found the solution in Zionism – an ideology in the making. So when the Zionist Organization was founded in 1897, Herzl played a key role. This organisation soon became by far the most dominant group of the many that made up the Zionist movement. With Herzl at the helm, the Zionists developed their ideology and a well organised, strategic movement which soon presented its case to the rulers and peoples of Europe.<sup>5</sup>

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3 Morris 2000, 14-20; Avineri 1983.

4 Jan Palmowski, *A Dictionary of Contemporary World History, From 1900 to the present day, third edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), Dreyfus Affair, 196; Morris 2000, 20-21; Henry J. Cohn, 'Theodor Herzl's Conversion to Zionism,' *Jewish Social Studies* 32, no. 2 (1970).

5 Morris 2000, 20-26; 'Glossary H', Jewish Virtual Library, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/glossH.html>. Accessed on: 02.04.10; Cohn 1970; Avineri 1983.

### **Hydro Strategy: an Important Facet**

By the time of the establishment of the Zionist Organization the First Aliyah was well underway in Palestine. The relatively limited immigration from Russia was not to Herzl's liking; there was not sufficient support from the Great Powers, and the Jews that immigrated were too few to establish a state - so he reckoned they would go under or steer up anti-Semitism. Herzl changed his opinion, however, as the situation in Russia became increasingly worse, especially with a new wave of prosecutions in 1903-06. The pogroms fell at the same time as the British offered the Zionists land in East Africa. This caused a split in the movement; it was argued that the situation was of such a grave character that the only solution was to accept the offer and start building a Jewish home in Africa in the immediate future. The majority however, including the Russian Jews, rejected this idea and maintained that Palestine was the only home for the Jews – even if this would take considerably more time and offer a less fertile soil.<sup>6</sup>

It was soon recognised that a prerequisite for a successful Jewish undertaking in Palestine was water. The dominant idea in Zionism was for agriculture to serve as the economic backbone of the Jewish society. Later, during the British Mandate, agricultural output was to be directly linked with the *absorptive capacity* of Palestine, meaning the level of immigration possible. The agricultural sector was important both on an ideological level and in practical terms, and the key to development laid in irrigation.<sup>7</sup>

Water was also deemed vital for any industrial development as hydropower would have to be the main source for generating electricity. There were no known sources of fossil fuels, so the topography of the land and its waters had to be exploited.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, it has been made a point out of how the first European Jews upon arrival in Palestine 'must have been struck by the relative dryness of the country'.<sup>9</sup> The area might have been perceived as dry, but more importantly primitive and lacking what was considered the merest necessities of civilised life. Upon visiting the Middle East in the autumn of 1907, Dr. Chaim Weizmann - a leading Zionist and later the first President of Israel, wrote several letters to his wife and friends with impressions from his first visit to

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6 Morris 2000, 20-26.

7 Elmusa 1996, 70.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

the region. His first stop was Egypt, which albeit interesting, was ‘extremely repulsive’, apparently primarily due to the people and their behaviour.<sup>10</sup> The descriptions from Palestine and places in today’s Lebanon were quite similar; Weizmann was frustrated with the means of communication, the ways of the people living there and the heat. On the other hand, he found the landscape beautiful, and was very excited after visiting some Jewish colonies and having witnessed what they had achieved.<sup>11</sup> Weizmann mentioned the heat and dryness; however, he was more concerned with the feeling of being cut off from the rest of the world, and not being able to move comfortably and as scheduled through the region. This, and the level of despise expressed for most of the locals and their way of life, indicate an unwillingness to compromise on the standard of living. For someone used to the comforts of the European bourgeoisie, like Weizmann, the transition to rural Palestine must have been astonishing. This is an important factor in understanding the Zionist need for and interest in water: water was needed for satisfying (European) living conditions and the economic means to pay for them.

### **Defining the Borders**

The exact boundaries of the Jewish Homeland remained unclear. It was an aim to claim *Eretz Yisrael*, meaning the biblical, God-promised, land, but this was not a clearly defined entity. The term was vague, and it could refer to merely Palestine or Palestine and various neighbouring areas. To complicate matters further, the geographical term Palestine could also vary greatly. For example in the English edition of *The Jewish Encyclopaedia* the northern frontier was the Litani River; whereas the Russian and Hebrew versions included the town of Sidon – thereby drawing the boundary north of the Litani. Various national encyclopaedias also differed considerably on the topic of Palestine’s boundaries, but the lower part of Litani was part of the common denominator. The topic was cause of some discussion among the Zionists, but it was generally accepted, although not stated, that the area up to the Litani River was a part of both Palestine and Eretz Yisrael.<sup>12</sup>

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10 The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann: January 1907 - February 1913, vol. 5, Series A: Letters (Jerusalem: Israel University Press, 1974), 50.

11 Ibid., 50-62.

12 Gideon Biger, ‘Where Was Palestine? Pre-World War I Perception,’ *Area* 13, no. 2 (1981); Eisenberg 1994, 38-40.

Herzl saw beyond Litani, for example in the utopian novel *Old New Land* he included the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon Mountains in his envisioned state.<sup>13</sup> The novel was not a political manifesto, so inclusion of this area in *Old New Land* can hardly be described as a demand. It should rather be understood as an impression or hope Herzl might have had; and this impression would by his writings support similar conceptions among other Zionists.

Another key figure who would shape Zionism was Weizmann, and like Herzl he would not limit his scope to the frontiers of Palestine. In 1903, as he was working for the Zionist Congress to dispatch a scientific investigation to the future homeland, he repeatedly referred to 'Palestine and the neighbouring countries.'<sup>14</sup> A similar phrase was also used in the German-Jewish press and in discussions regarding other matters; as the establishment of bank and national fund supplying means for Jewish colonisation, where Weizmann wanted to change the statutes to explicitly be for colonising 'Palestine and its neighbour countries'.<sup>15</sup>

In 1907, when Weizmann first visited the Middle East, he spent much time in Lebanon. Mapping places of economic potential, Weizmann found Sidon of great interest; he suggested expanding a lemon industry producing citric acid and essence, and the development of an olive industry for the production of oil and soap. Plans were drawn up, and estimates made because: 'Saida [Sidon] is a good place in every respect. The raw material is available, there is a harbour, it is favourably situated, capable of development and has a Jewish population.'<sup>16</sup> Already five years earlier the readers of *Palästina*, a German-Jewish periodical, would have heard about Sidon and the possibilities there as a society dealing with the agrarian potential of Palestine published a commissioned report on the city and its surroundings. The report dealt primarily with agriculture and economy

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13 Theodor Herzl, *Old new land* (New York: Wiener Publ. and Herzl Press, 1987), 129-130.

14 *The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann: November 1902 - August 1903*, vol. 2, Series A: Letters (Jerusalem: Israel University Press, 1971), 319, 415, 301-322, 414-416.

15 The phrase used was 'Palästina und seinen Nachbarländern'. Komitee zur wirtschaftlichen Erforschung Palästinas. 'Das Komitee zur wirtschaftlichen Erforschung Palästinas' *Palästina* Heft 1 1902, [www.compactmemory.de](http://www.compactmemory.de), 10; Komitee zur wirtschaftlichen Erforschung Palästinas. 'Mitteilung II des Komitees zur wirtschaftlichen Erforschung Palästinas' *Palästina* Heft 3/4 1902, [www.compactmemory.de](http://www.compactmemory.de), 91-92; *The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann: September 1903 - December 1904*, vol. 3, Series A: Letters (Jerusalem: Israel University Press, 1972), 83.

16 *The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann: January 1907 - February 1913* 1974, 60, 50-62.

before turning to the question of land purchase. It was recommended to buy land south of Sidon, where the prices were lower, as means to help the Jews already living in the town.<sup>17</sup>

There were also those who turned to the Bible, and the promises to Moses, for arguments in the debate, but the borders outlined there varied greatly and were given relatively little weight.<sup>18</sup> In the German-Jewish press there were numerous articles concerning areas well beyond Palestine, and although they rarely were as maximalist as in the schemes with Bible quotations, they normally included the Litani River.<sup>19</sup>

Herzl's writings, the reports from the neighbouring countries, Weizmann's emphasis on Sidon and there already being Jews living there, all indicate a Zionist notion of parts of Lebanon belonging to *Eretz Yisrael*. Furthermore, investigations and publications like these can have done nothing but add to a conception where the Litani River was an obvious part of the Jewish homeland and Palestine. This would remain a conception in a relatively theoretical debate. Before discussing the borders of a Jewish home, such an entity had to be established, and that was the primary aim of the Zionists.<sup>20</sup>

The homeland, however it was defined, was under Ottoman rule in the first decades following the First Aliyah and the establishment of the Zionist Organization. To the Ottomans Zionists were seen as offering little but trouble, and any attempts at securing support for the Zionist cause from Istanbul were largely futile. The Ottoman officials and Arab subjects in Palestine had greater success when raising their concerns over the Jewish influx. So the Jews of Palestine were met with numerous sanctions and restrictions, which were, to a large extent successfully, countered with bribery. On the international scene the good will of the other Great Powers of Europe had to be relied upon. Support from one or more of these could prove sufficient to establish a Jewish homeland; and there was some interest in assisting the Zionists, as they could be a useful tool to undermine the already weakened Ottoman Empire.<sup>21</sup>

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17 The society was called Agronomisch-Kulturtechnisches Bureau für Palästina. S. Soskin. 'Bericht über eine Informationsreise nach Saida' *Palästina* Heft 5/6 1902, [www.compactmemory.de](http://www.compactmemory.de), 203-210.

18 'Die Grenzen Palästinas'. *Palästina* Heft 3-6 1903, [www.compactmemory.de](http://www.compactmemory.de), 246; Biger 1981, 155-158.

19 E.g.: M. Blanckenhorn. 'Abriss der Geologie Syriens' *Altneuland* No. 5 1905, [www.compactmemory.de](http://www.compactmemory.de), 130-135; O. Warburg. 'Syrien als Wirtschafts- und Kolonisationsgebiet' *Altneuland* No. 2 1906, [www.compactmemory.de](http://www.compactmemory.de), 34-43; J. L. 'Sidon' *Palästina* Heft 11/12 1912, [www.compactmemory.de](http://www.compactmemory.de), 238-240.

20 Morris 2000, 20-26.

21 *Ibid.*, 20-26, 39-42.



## **World War I: Preparing for the Peace Conference**

In the course of World War I the United Kingdom (UK) and France found themselves at war with the Ottoman Empire and sought to strengthen their position in the Middle East. The British manoeuvred between the demands of Arab nationalists and the French. Being promised some form of independence under British supervision, the Arabs were to revolt against the Ottomans. Palestine, however, was not mentioned in these arrangements – thus both parties assumed they had made claim to it. As the Arabs were on board, the British then turned to the French. The two allies divided the Middle East into zones that were to be assigned their direct and indirect control following the victory, this was formalised with the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916. The British scheming left the status of Palestine in the balance. The Arab nationalists thought Palestine was to become part of their independent territory; whereas the French had agreed to establish a shared mandate or even international rule over the land.<sup>22</sup>

The French and British kept their agreement secret. The Zionists, however, learned of the internationalisation plans for Palestine in late 1916. To them, joint or international rule would provide a number of complications; as they considered the French as less favourable to their cause than the British, and also less of colonisers, they had a clear opinion on which power they preferred to mandate their future home. Already the following January, the Zionists were arguing publicly in support for a solely British protectorate. This was followed up with meetings and correspondence with British, and in turn French, officials. The primary aim of the Zionists, and in particular the new President of the English Zionist Federation - Chaim Weizmann, was for the UK to control Palestine.<sup>23</sup>

The French and British had also drawn the future borders of the Middle East; in the Sykes-Picot Agreement, Palestine was defined as running east from the Jordan River, south to Gaza and north to Acre. The area north of Acre, including the Litani River, was assigned to Syria-Lebanon and was to be subject to direct French rule. Weizmann heard of this in

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 67-73; Chaim Weizmann and Barnet Litvinoff, *The letters and papers of Chaim Weizmann*, Series B (Jerusalem: Israel Universities Press, 1983), head note 143-144.

<sup>23</sup> Weizmann and Litvinoff 1983, head note 143-144; *The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann: August 1914 - November 1917*, vol. 7, Series A: Letters (Jerusalem: Israel University Press, 1975), 375-378.

April 1917 and the planned borders were not to his liking. To him, this would cut Palestine in half, as the planned northern border would leave out not only the Litani but also a large part of Galilee. The Zionists therefore pursued a redrawing of the future Palestinian map and encouraged British control over the area.<sup>24</sup> The two cases were connected, and the British were more than willing to hear Weizmann out. The Sykes-Picot Agreement had been concluded at the beginning of the Middle Eastern campaign and in retrospect, as the British stood on the brink of conquering the Ottoman Middle East more or less on their own, they found the deal rather unfavourable. The British and Zionists had a common interest in opposition to the French; so in the spring of 1917 the British made arrangements for Weizmann to travel to Egypt, Palestine and Syria (including Lebanon) with the expressed aim to work for a British Protectorate over Palestine. Due to unforeseen Ottoman success on the battlefield, the trip had to be postponed.<sup>25</sup>

Weizmann might have been unable to leave Europe, but there were other Zionists present in the Middle East; some of them concerned themselves with working out the ideal northern border of their future homeland. There were a couple of plans which suggested a border running from beyond Sidon; their main considerations were strategic and political. The agricultural, or economic, perspective of Aaron Aaronsohn, however, was to become more important in shaping the Zionist demands. His work as an agronomist, and especially the discovery of wild wheat, had made him quite renowned in the early twentieth century. During World War I, Aaronsohn was among the founders of a spy-ring and provided the British with intelligence and strategic advice. So when Weizmann stayed behind in Europe, Aaronsohn took over his project for the British. His efforts provided him with great influence, and the Zionist Organization benefitted from his diplomatic skills. Having toured the area in question, Aaronsohn had come to the conclusion that the Litani was needed for irrigating the Galilee.<sup>26</sup>

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24 Chaim Weizmann, *Trial and error* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1949), 185-194.

25 The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann: August 1914 - November 1917 1975, 375-382, 397, 407; Weizmann 1949, 185-194; Morris 2000, 67-73, 76-82.

26 *The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann: October 1918 - July 1920*, vol. 9, Series A: Letters (Jerusalem: Israel University Press, 1977), 215-216; The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann: August 1914 - November 1917 1975, 397, 407, (Biography) 545; Avner Yaniv, *Dilemmas of security: politics, strategy, and the Israeli experience in Lebanon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 28; 'Aaron Aaronsohn', Jewish Virtual Library, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/Aaronsohn.html>. Accessed on: 02.04.2011.

Parallel to the Zionist map making and lobbying for a revision of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, both the French and British sought Jewish support for the Triple Entente. They reckoned this could help pressure the United States into joining the war, and it was of interest to the British to use the Zionists to legitimise their presence in the Middle East. As a result, both the United Kingdom and France issued statements favouring the Zionist enterprise during 1917. The British Balfour Declaration was by far the most important, and promised support for a ‘national home for the Jewish people’ in Palestine.<sup>27</sup> This declaration, taking the form of a letter from the British foreign secretary to the leader of Britain’s Zionist Federation, was a great victory for the Zionists. Who soon (internally) spoke of the establishment of a Jewish state. This was made official policy by the end of 1918. The borders of the envisioned state, however, were seldom discussed officially. One interesting exception, although in Yiddish and meant for Jewish readers, was made by David Ben-Gurion and Yitzhak Ben-Zvi. They had been expelled from Palestine by the Ottomans in an effort to clampdown on the Zionists in Palestine, but continued their work from the United States. They were later to be key Zionist and Israeli figures: Ben-Gurion was the first Prime Minister of Israel (1948-53) and Ben-Zvi its second President (1952-63). In 1918, they published a book where the borders of ‘our country’ were defined, where in this respect the most interesting being the northern border – which was to be the Litani River. The many deep gorges made by the river, rather than the river itself, were of particular interest, so they were within the military strategic camp.<sup>28</sup> Despite not being primarily concerned with acquisition of water, the proposal of using the river as a border would imply riparian rights to the entities of both sides of the Litani.

### **The Paris Peace Conference**

As the British fought their way through the Ottoman Empire, the need for and interest in French interference continued to fall. The Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, David Lloyd George, repeatedly pointed out how the Ottomans had been beaten with little assistance from UK’s allies and argued that this called for a revision of the Sykes-Picot

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<sup>27</sup> Balfour Declaration in: Morris 2000, 75.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 73-76; ‘Yitzhak Ben Zvi’, Jewish Virtual Library, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/ben-zvi.html>. Accessed on: 11.04.10; ‘David Ben-Gurion’, Jewish Virtual Library, [http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/ben\\_gurion.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/ben_gurion.html). Accessed on: 26.11.2010.

Agreement. The fact that British troops stood as far north as Damascus, well within the envisioned French area, did nothing but strengthen the argument. Therefore, by the time of the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 the French had reluctantly given up the plan for joint rule of Palestine, and it was to become part of the British Mandate Area.<sup>29</sup> Before meeting in Paris, the British had already decided inter alia to make '[e]very effort ... at the Peace Conference to secure an equitable re-adjustment of the boundaries of Palestine'.<sup>30</sup> Discussing the matter in December 1918, the Eastern Committee (formerly known as the Middle East(ern) Committee, set up by the War Cabinet and responsible for the policy on Palestine) quickly concluded that Palestine ought to have its 'old boundaries', as in the biblical phrase 'Dan to Beersheba'. In the north, this was considered to mean the lower part of the Litani River, from where the border would cross (southwards) to the river Baniyas (thought to be Dan) or Lake Huleh.<sup>31</sup> The phrase 'Dan to Beersheba', and how it was understood, would prove to have much to say for the outcome of the border negotiations.

Among the many interest groups that were to be heard at the conference in Paris were representatives of the Zionist Organization led by Chaim Weizmann. On 29 January 1919 he met with an old acquaintance, Colonel Richard Meinertzhagen. He had served in Palestine during the war, was part of the British delegation to the Peace Conference, and it is fair to say the colonel was an eager supporter of Zionism and maintained close relations with Weizmann.<sup>32</sup> Meinertzhagen's diaries could prove a valuable source, but unfortunately it appears the Colonel was prone to spicing up his tales. Although a good read, his Middle East Diary has been proven to contain a considerable number of lies (probably written many years later), and is by itself untrustworthy as a historical source.<sup>33</sup> But the man played a significant role in the Anglo-Zionists relations and if read with

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29 McTague 1982, 100-103; Morris 2000, 76-82.

30 Doreen Ingrams, *Palestine papers, 1917-1922: seeds of conflict* (London: J. Murray, 1972), 51.

31 Ibid., 20, 48-51.

32 The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann: October 1918 - July 1920 1977, 281-283, 404-405; R. Meinertzhagen, *Middle East diary: 1917-1956* (London: Cresset Press, 1959), 43, 49-53, 65-67; 'Chaim Weizmann', Jewish Virtual Library, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/weizmann.html>. Accessed on: 02.04.2011.

33 Storrs L. Olson, 'The Meinertzhagen Mystery: The Life and Legend of a Colossal Fraud,' *The Wilson Journal of Ornithology* December 2008 (2008).

scepticism and other sources at hand his memoirs (which is a more correct term) can still be of interest.

As Meinertzhagen met with Weizmann in Paris shortly before the Peace Conference, the latter explained that his aim was a national home which included Sidon.<sup>34</sup> This was, however, not to become the official line of the Zionist Organization. Among the Zionists, there were different opinions on what should be demanded; as the British had given clear signals that too high demands would be turned down, the more moderate camp of the organisation controlled the final revisions of the proposal. The borders suggested in the final document were then modified in the last minute by Aaronsohn (his line was later criticised for being too moderate).<sup>35</sup> So in the official statement on Palestine by the Zionist Organization, presented to the Paris Peace Conference on 3 February 1919, the claim to the town of Sidon had been given up – or at least put on hold. On the northern boundary the statement read: ‘Starting ... in the vicinity south of Sidon and following the watersheds of the foothills of the Lebanon’.<sup>36</sup> It should be noted that the suggestion states ‘watersheds’. A watershed is the high ground between two rivers which divides the streams of a land between them.<sup>37</sup> If the northern watershed of the Litani had become the boundary, not only the lower part of the river itself but also nearby land and some of the river’s tributaries would have been included in Palestine. This would have helped secure the control over of the water resource.<sup>38</sup>

Sidon might have been left out to establish a realistic and tactical bargaining position, but the influx of the agricultural and economic view point of Aaronsohn should not be underestimated. His work of defining the borders for the Jewish homeland has been considered integral for the basis of the Zionist claims to the Peace Conference, and he was allowed his last minute alterations.<sup>39</sup> Also his contemporary Weizmann, who up until the conference worked for a Jewish homeland including Sidon, expressed his support for the

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34 Meinertzhagen 1959, 13-14.

35 The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann: October 1918 - July 1920 1977, xviii-xix.

36 ‘Zionist Organization Statement on Palestine, Paris Peace Conference’, Jewish Virtual Library, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/zoparis.html>. Accessed on: 27.05.2010.

37 ‘Watershed’, Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, <http://www.oxfordadvancedlearnersdictionary.com/dictionary/watershed>. Accessed on: 17.07.2010.

38 For a map over the various border proposals, see p. 24.

39 ‘Hydrostrategic’ Territory in the Jordan Basin: Water, War and Arab-Israeli Peace Negotiations, 70; Eisenberg 1994, 41.

Aaronsohn line. In a letter to a British official dated 18 September 1919, Weizmann sent, and commented on, the boundaries proposal from February. The northern boundary was given extra attention, and Weizmann was quite clear: ‘The guiding consideration with us has been economic, and “economic” in this connection means “water supply.”’<sup>40</sup>

According to the statement given to the Paris Peace Conference in February, the Zionist Organization considered it ‘of vital importance not only to secure all water resources already feeding the country, but also to be able to conserve and control them at their sources.’<sup>41</sup> Therefore, the suggested boundaries would secure most of the headwaters of the rivers in Palestine; the lower part of the Litani would also have been included, but its headwaters would still be well within the Lebanon-Syria area.<sup>42</sup> This could imply that the Litani was of secondary interest to the Zionists, however, they could have had no hope of gaining control of the Beqaa Valley as this was too remote from Palestine. Instead, it was stated that: ‘Some international arrangement must be made whereby the riparian rights of the people dwelling south of the Litani River may be fully protected.’<sup>43</sup> This was a request for international guarantees to make up for the downstream position Palestine would have had on the Litani River. Combined with control over the lower watershed, this was presumably the best possible way of securing the resource for the Zionist enterprise. With the final sentence concerning the Litani River the Zionists Organization declared its goodwill and invited to cooperation: ‘Properly cared for, these headwaters can be made to serve in the development of the Lebanon as well as of Palestine.’<sup>44</sup>

The British were also in favour of expanding Palestine beyond what Sykes and Picot had agreed and promoted such alterations in the negotiations with the French. It is likely, albeit not verified, that the Zionist proposals were more or less adopted as British in a new round of talks in June 1919. The French, however, were not willing to give in to these demands, as they saw nothing to gain from backing down. The talks ended in a stalemate, and there was no solution in sight.<sup>45</sup>

Unfortunately for the French, the facts on the ground were against them; as the British were to withdraw from Syria and Lebanon in the autumn of 1919, they informed

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40 The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann: October 1918 - July 1920 1977, 215-216.

41 Zionist Organization Statement on Palestine, Paris Peace Conference. Accessed on: 27.05.2010.

42 Lowi 1993, 40.

43 Zionist Organization Statement on Palestine, Paris Peace Conference. Accessed on: 27.05.2010.

44 Ibid.

45 McTague 1982, 100-104.

Paris that Palestine stretched from Dan to Beersheba, as in ancient times. The Sykes-Picot Agreement was thus sidestepped. The exact boundaries were to be negotiated and, if disputed, settled by the American President Woodrow Wilson. The French protested on everything but withdrawal and continued to insist upon the previous agreement. Three days later, on 18 September, the British War Cabinet and Lloyd George met back in London; under discussion were, inter alia, the orders for British withdrawal drafted by the War Office. Stressing the arrangement was strictly provisional, the army was to occupy Palestine from 'Dan to Beersheba' and remain the right to 'occupy outpost as may be necessitated by the military situation'.<sup>46</sup> All the named outposts were water sources, and first among them was the Litani River.<sup>47</sup> When the War Cabinet met again on 22 September its members quickly came to agree that they held the upper hand, a fact which the French would have to accept. Lloyd George had already made it clear to his French counterpart that his forces remained the right to occupy the land claimed by his government. The British were quite concerned with maintaining good relations with their allies, but were also eager to secure the valuable water resources; of the means suggested was quite simply to avoid mentioning the Sykes-Picot Agreement or the Litani in the telegrams sent to Paris. In the orders going out to the forces in the field, however, both were mentioned and the army withdrew no further than the bend of Litani. The French were given assurances this was purely provisional, awaiting the final border demarcation, but they still protested. The British gave in and continued further south, establishing their lines north of what had been laid down by Sykes and Picot, but south of the Litani River. This boundary, called the Deauville Line, was to be temporary, but significant.<sup>48</sup>

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46 CAB/23/12, 'Conclusions of a Meeting of the War Cabinet, held at 10, Downing Street, S.W., on Thursday, September 18, 1919 at 4 P.M.' The National Archives, [http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline/details-result.asp?queryType=1&resultcount=1&Edoc\\_Id=7967996](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline/details-result.asp?queryType=1&resultcount=1&Edoc_Id=7967996). Accessed on: 29.04.2011.

47 Ibid; McTague 1982, 100-104.

48 CAB23/44B, 'Secretary's notes of a Cabinet Committee Meeting held in the Secretary of State's Room, Foreign Office, on Monday, 22nd September 1919 at 11.30 a.m. appointed to consider the question of the temporary and provisional line in Palestine and Mesopotamia behind which the British Troops are to be withdrawn.' The National Archives, [http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline/details-result.asp?Edoc\\_Id=7968775&queryType=1&resultcount=8](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline/details-result.asp?Edoc_Id=7968775&queryType=1&resultcount=8). Accessed on: 29.04.2011; McTague 1982, 100-104.



The Border Proposals<sup>49</sup>

### Few Surveys, Many Plans

In September 1919, Weizmann admitted Palestine had never been comprehensively surveyed from a hydrographical perspective, and this explained the uncertainty and slight differences in the expert estimates. The Zionists had recently been able to fund a hydrological survey of Palestine, but were still waiting for the results; hence, (the by then late) Aaronsohn's work was still an important point of reference. Despite the lack of investigations, there was no shortage of opinion and plans; the latest idea came from Sir Louis Dane, former Lieutenant-Governor of the Punjab, and Sir John Benton, former Inspector-General of Irrigation in India. These two (presumably retired) British officials had come to the conclusion that Palestine was dependent on the border being a few miles north of what had been proposed by the Zionist Organization to the Peace Conference. Therefore, Weizmann informed the British Foreign Office that he assumed the Anglo-French border committee would be able to make such adjustments.<sup>50</sup>

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49 The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann: July 1920 - December 1921, vol. 10, Series A: Letters (Jerusalem: Israel University Press, 1977), xxxix.

50 The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann: October 1918 - July 1920 1977, 215-216, 281-283, 404-405.



British and French representatives met for a new round of talks on Syria-Palestine in December 1919. The latter were still insistent on the Sykes-Picot Agreement, whereas the British made the point that the public expected Lloyd George to live up to his commitment to Dan-Beersheba. They also brought with them a new suggestion, developed by Colonel Richard Meinertzhagen, who thanks to Zionist pressure had risen to the rank of Political Officer for Palestine, Syria and Transjordan. Inspired by the works of a geographer who had made his concerns for the future of Palestine known to the government a few months earlier, Meinertzhagen gave his name to a border proposal which Weizmann deemed well received by the Foreign Secretary and the War Office.<sup>51</sup> If adopted, the Meinertzhagen Line would have resulted in a Palestine which included the entire Jordan basin and a large part, but not the whole, of the Litani River. Considering the other boundaries as well, the plan was not as grand as the Zionists had asked for in February, but considerably more generous than the Sykes-Picot Agreement or the Deauville Line. According to Meinertzhagen, the economy of Palestine was dependent on extensive irrigation, the necessary water could only be found in the north – with the Jordan and the Litani. Therefore, the Colonel reckoned that: ‘[s]hould Palestine be deprived of means of irrigation and water power on a most generous scale, its whole fabric is economically crippled from the outset. The loss of waters to the Power occupying Syria is small in comparison.’<sup>52</sup> He also refuted sharing of water resources, as this would lead to conflicts. The proposal was completely unacceptable to the French, who immediately rejected it. They offered, however, to give Palestine access to 33 percent of the water power generated from the rivers south of Mt. Hermon, but the parties were unable to reach an agreement.<sup>53</sup>

In the course of 1919, the funds for an extensive survey of the economic possibilities of Palestine were raised by the Zionists. The engineering company Sir Douglas Fox and Partners was commissioned for the project and sent Ralph Freeman to lead the investigations. He met with Weizmann, and a British industrialist friendly to the Zionist cause, in the summer of 1919 to plan the undertaking and then spent September and

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51 Ibid., xxxi-xxxii, 281-283, 404-405; Meinertzhagen 1959, 43, 49-53, 65-67.

52 Meinertzhagen 1959, 62.

53 Ibid., 61-65; The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann: October 1918 - July 1920 1977, 281-283; McTague 1982, 104-105.

October in the field.<sup>54</sup> The result was a report, the conclusions of which Weizmann sent to Lloyd George on 29 December. It concluded that Palestine was a poor country, lacking fossil fuels and suffering from little rainfall. The suggested path to wealth laid in utilising the soil and climate by exploiting the water resources – among them the Litani River. It was recommended to use the river for irrigation, or to divert it into the Jordan to provide electricity before being used for agricultural purposes; the Valley of the Litani was also suggested for storing water. The immediate execution of these projects were not needed, but ‘their use for irrigation and power when required must be secured, if the economic future of Palestine is not to be prejudiced.’<sup>55</sup> The only place the resource could be used with advantage was far south; the people living north of the river had no use for it (or underground water for that matter). The final sentence of the report passed on to Lloyd George, therefore concluded that the northern boundary of Palestine had to be drawn to include the Valley of the Litani, which had been left out in the Zionist suggestion to the Peace Conference.<sup>56</sup> A few days later, Weizmann sent a new letter to the Prime Minister passing on more information from the engineers; this time a detailed argumentation on why the Litani River was of no need to the people living in its immediate vicinity. The Litani had several potential uses, but was superfluous in the north. The river was not needed for irrigation or irrigational pumping because the land it passed through already benefitted from a sufficient number of streams. Electric power could also be developed from several other streams in the area, and it was added that with one exception this was not being done. Yet again it was concluded that the Litani would be of no use in the north, whereas it would be needed for Palestine.<sup>57</sup>

The report written by Freeman and his colleagues came as the Paris Peace Conference drew to a close and gave weight to the arguments used by the Zionists. Throughout the year, lobbying for the cause had been directed at the British Foreign Office and the American delegation to the conference, and as the end neared pressure was also put on David Lloyd George directly. In Weizmann’s letters to him much emphasis was put on the need for water from the Litani River for the development of Palestine, it was argued

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54 The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann: October 1918 - July 1920 1977, 84-85, 158-159, 208-209, Biography 405.

55 Metcalfe and Freeman in: *ibid.*, 266-267.

56 *Ibid.*, 265-267.

57 *Ibid.*, 267-268. Weizmann was quoting the report, but the end of the quote is not marked, luckily this is quite clear from the context.

that the Sykes-Picot Line jeopardised the entire Jewish National Home and that: '[t]he whole economic future of Palestine is dependent upon its water supply ..., and the water supply must mainly be derived from the slopes of Mount Hermon, from the headwaters of the Jordan and from the Litani river.'<sup>58</sup> These demands were also supported with reference to historical and biblical Palestine; the Balfour Declaration and its French equivalent were meant to give the Jews a home, but by cutting of the water of this home the two great powers in effect went back on their promises.<sup>59</sup> Lloyd George was also under pressure from the British public where the Zionist claim to Litani gained increased support. In *The Times* there were articles and letters to the editor discussing the issue. And in their editorials, the newspaper repeatedly, although with differences in the argumentation, called for the inclusion of the river in Palestine. The right to, and need for, water and power was a constant; it was also made a point of how the Galilee stretched up to the Litani, and that the future Palestine needed this landscape from a military point of view. Later it was stressed that the Litani was not part of the historic Galilee; hence Palestine did not have to include the river itself, but should be guaranteed access to its waters. Perhaps inspired by Freeman's report, the paper claimed the water of Litani was not needed in Syria (including Lebanon); so the only possible way the river might be utilised was for water storage, not drainage, for Palestine.<sup>60</sup>

### **Beyond Deauville**

Lloyd George had been convinced by the Zionists, but the 'Dan to Beersheba' argument used earlier caused difficulties. The Prime Minister thought the northern boundary of Palestine could run from the Litani and then southeast to Dan, but Dan was still too far

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58 Ibid., 265-267.

59 Ibid., 84-85, 158-159, 208-209, 215-216, 231-233, 265-268, 274.

60 Editorials/Leaders. 'The Settlement in Syria' *The Times* 19.09.1919, <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/default>, 11; From our Correspondent on War. 'The Future of the Army' *The Times* 17.01.1920, <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/default>, 11; Letters to the Editor. 'England And Palestine: A Jewish Buffer State' *The Times* 07.04.1920, <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/default>, 6; Editorials/Leaders. 'The Boundaries of Palestine' *The Times* 25.10.1920, <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/default>, 11; Editorials/Leaders. 'The Palestine Mandate' *The Times* 27.11.1920, <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/default>, 11.

south to provide the ideal boundary.<sup>61</sup> The result was quite far from what the Zionists had envisaged, but the Prime Minister felt tied to the mast. The French maintained their position and used the Sykes-Picot Agreement as well as Lloyd George's statement to secure their interests. These were applied as a carrot and stick: Dan-Beersheba was not quite large enough for the British and Zionist appetite, but it was preferred to the Sykes-Picot – which the French threatened to insist on. Weizmann tried to counter this by using his connections to pressure both the British and French; he had to convince the latter that the Zionists were not running errands for the former, and that neither the UK nor France could have any real interest in the Litani River. So in January 1920, Weizmann telegraphed the United States Supreme Court judge and Zionist Louis D. Brandeis, calling for American pressure on the French and British. A similar tactic had been used in 1917, to help bring about the Balfour Declaration.<sup>62</sup> Apparently the round of telegrams organised by Brandeis to various European officials helped, but not sufficiently, so in February Weizmann urged for more pressure directed at Lloyd George and Brandeis delivered. He also contacted President Woodrow Wilson, and urged him to intervene. According to the Supreme Court judge, the fate of the Zionist enterprise was at stake: 'Palestine must include the Litany River ... [l]ess than this would produce the mutilation of the Jewish Homeland.'<sup>63</sup> Brandeis might have been able to influence his President, but apparently the French were more than aware of this connection and considered Wilson 'entirely guided by Mr. Brandeis, who held very decided views'; therefore they were not eager to involve him too much in the negotiations concerning Palestine.<sup>64</sup> The telegrams from Brandeis, even

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61 The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann: October 1918 - July 1920 1977, 281-282; David Lloyd George, *The Truth about the Peace Treaties*, vol. 2 (London: Victor Gallancz LTD, 1938), 1144-1145; Morris 2000, 82.

62 Donald Neff, *Fallen pillars: U.S. policy towards Palestine and Israel since 1945* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2002), 11-16.

63 Melvin I. Urofsky and David W. Levy, eds., *Letters of Louis D. Brandeis: Volume IV (1916-1921): Mr. Justice Brandeis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975), 446-447; The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann: October 1918 - July 1920 1977, 231-233, 281-283, 286-287, 296-310, 312-314, 318, 383; The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann: July 1920 - December 1921 1977, 56-57, 59-63, 66-68, 74-78, 111; 'Louis D. Brandeis', Jewish Virtual Library,

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/Brandeis.html>. Accessed on: 27.09.10.

64 Lloyd George 1938, 1178-1179.

when read aloud by Weizmann during the talks, were not sufficient to turn the French around.<sup>65</sup>

The argumentation of the Zionists was adopted by the British and it was added how troublesome it would be to administer a country as poor as Palestine. The French readily admitted Palestine would prove expensive to the UK, but had little sympathy for self-chosen burdens. Having already made several sacrifices, the French were unwilling to continue breaking the Sykes-Picot Agreement before seeing it broken in their favour or receiving something in return. The granting of oil rights in Mesopotamia appears to have made 'Dan to Beersheba' acceptable to the French, but the Zionists and Lloyd George wanted more. Against the advice of his Foreign Office, the Prime Minister made yet another attempt at expanding the borders; the result was a hardened French position. Loosing hope of further admittances from France, the British decided to go forward with the deal. At San Remo in April 1920 the United Kingdom and France formally became mandate powers of the Middle East. At the last minute, however, the British chose to postpone the border issue. Throughout the year, various deals were then attempted as the British tried to manoeuvre between Zionist and French aims while preserving their own. In the end, fear of the French backing out of 'Dan to Beersheba' and returning to Sykes-Picot, made the British agree to the biblical phrase. The two powers agreed to the outline of borders of their mandates in December 1920. Palestine was granted rights to surplus water from Jordan and Yarmuk, but not the Litani; the exact demarcation was conducted by a joint committee in the field. The committee, having made only minor adjustments, concluded its work in 1923.<sup>66</sup>

While the details were yet to be worked out, the Zionists saw new hope; the French had signalled to a representative of the Zionists Organization that they might be willing to review their position. What they wanted in return was to get the presidency of a newly proposed international commission, which was to look after the interest of the religious communities of Palestine. A changed northern border was not in question, but the French could agree to cede water from the Litani and redraw the eastern border. The President of

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65 Ibid., 1179-1181.

66 McTague 1982, 100-112; Lloyd George 1938, 1177-1179; Aaron T. Wolf, 'Hydro strategic Decisionmaking and the Arab-Israeli Conflict,' in *Transformations of Middle Eastern Natural Environments: Legacies and Lessons*, ed. M. Bernhardsson Albert J., and R. Kenna (Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies Bulletin Series, 1998).

the commission had to be Roman Catholic (in effect French or Italian) and Italy had little to offer so it was an easy choice for the Zionists. But as the commission never was established, the deal came to nought.<sup>67</sup>

Despite the combined efforts of the Zionist movement and those who supported their cause, the Litani River ended up in Lebanon. The Zionists suffered setbacks on other fronts as well. In 1921, the British separated Transjordan from the Palestinian mandate. Transjordan was not to become part of the Jewish Homeland after all, although it remained in expansionists' dreams for decades thereafter. As the severance became known, Weizmann sought to secure favourable borders in the south and east. Interestingly, one of his chief arguments was the failure to include the Litani River in Palestine.<sup>68</sup>

The northern border appears to have been considered more important than the others by the Zionists, and failure to get Litani was used in an attempt to get something else. There was of course more than pure hydro strategy encouraging the Zionist requests for the Litani River. The boundaries of Eretz Yisrael and Palestine were unclear, and there were Jewish settlements as far north as Sidon in Lebanon receiving support from the Zionist Organization. Sidon had also been considered very promising by Weizmann back in 1907 and an aim up until the Peace Conference, but in the official statement the town had been dropped from the agenda. This was perhaps a result of a changed situation. Despite the protests, France and the UK made only minor adjustments to the boundaries, in the end leaving the Litani River in French mandated Lebanon.<sup>69</sup>

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67 Weizmann and Litvinoff 1983, 304; Helmreich 1974, 302-304.

68 The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann: July 1920 - December 1921 1977, 159-162.  
Morris 2000, 88-106.

69 Eisenberg 1994, 38-43.

### 3. In the Balance

#### Friends and Foes

The Balfour Declaration, which had been so well received by the Zionists, was not popular among the Arabs. At the time of its publication the war against the Ottomans was still raging, and the first protests were quite moderate. In the autumn of 1918, the First World War drew to an end, and the Muslims and Christians of Palestine united to raise their concerns over Jewish dominance of what they considered was their land. With few exceptions the protests were kept peaceful, although the rhetoric grew steadily harsher. Among Zionists and Arabs alike there began to develop a conception of there being no possible joint future which could satisfy both parties, and sooner or later one of them would have to give way for the other, thus making the issue a question of one's survival.<sup>1</sup>

The British tried to control the situation. The north of Palestine, however, was beyond their reach. In the autumn of 1919, the British had withdrawn to the Deauville Line, thus the south of Lebanon and the land north of Lake Hula (today's Galilee Panhandle in Israel) was not under the jurisdiction of the mandate. The political future of the area was uncertain; the British and French had yet to conclude the work on the final border demarcation, and it was unknown how far north the future Jewish homeland would or could run. The British had withdrawn and were denied re-entry by the French, who in turn met strong resistance from local Bedouins. The latter soon added the four Jewish settlements of the area to the list of their enemies.<sup>2</sup>

The British and French were unable to protect the Zionists from the Bedouins; the Jewish settlers, fearing for both life and property, had to risk fighting or evacuate. These four settlements, all situated in the Panhandle, were the northernmost outposts of the Zionists. It was uncertain whether they would end up in the future Homeland or in the French zone. Officially, the Zionists maintained the case they had made to the Paris Peace Conference, insisting the border had to follow the watershed north of the Litani. The French had already proven their determination to push the border further south, so the

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1 Morris 2000, 88-106.

2 Ibid; Yaniv 1987, 28.

hard-liners among the Zionists argued that the colonies had to be held to make it clear to everyone that they were part of the future Jewish homeland. Giving up on the outposts could have dire consequences for the northern border. However, there was also the risk of investing sparse resources in protecting the settlements only to see them end up outside the Homeland. In the end, three of the outposts were defended with support from volunteers, but the Bedouins proved too powerful and the Zionists had to withdraw. The setback was temporary, after the French gained control of the area in October 1920 the colonists returned. By December the British and French had agreed to include the Galilee Panhandle (and thereby also the largest of the three rivers feeding the Upper Jordan) in the British mandate area; Litani was to be excluded. These boundaries were meant to be provisional, but it was quite obvious that they would have long-lasting, permanent, effects.<sup>3</sup>

The people living in what had become South Lebanon and North Palestine found the new border quite impractical and therefore tended to ignore its existence. The mutual dependence of South Lebanese and North Palestinians forced the British and French to allow relatively unrestricted border crossings, and in effect South Lebanon became part of the North Palestinian economic zone and was heavily influenced by the neighbouring Zionists. Jews, Christians and Muslims in the area actually got along quite well and conducted business with one another, also as Arabs and Jews to the south of them were involved in bitter struggles.<sup>4</sup>

### **The British Mandate**

For the time being the Litani was lost to the Zionists, and there were other pressing matters at hand. The relations with the Arabs remained tense, albeit relative calm, through the 1920s. The main concern of the Zionists was to continue building up the Jewish society in Palestine, the Yishuv, primarily by increasing its numbers and buying more land. Two new Aliyahs brought considerable Jewish immigration to the region and strengthened the development in Palestine, and an extensive network of infrastructure providing Jewish institutions was established. The development was supervised by the Jewish Agency, which functioned as a government for the Yishuv. The British were repeatedly urged to

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<sup>3</sup> The last boundary changes were made in 1923. Eisenberg 1994, 38-46; Morris 2000, 88-106; Yaniv 1987, 28; Helmreich 1974, 72-79, 272-273; Lowi 1993, 23-28.

<sup>4</sup> Eisenberg 1994, 38-46, 112-114.



allow increased immigration quotas by the Zionists, and similarly the Arabs insisted on limitation, although the main constraint on immigration appears to have been the economic capacity of the Jewish Agency. Balancing between the two communities, the mandate power sought a level of immigration in accordance with Palestine's absorptive capacity; this was an estimated maximum number of inhabitants determined by the agricultural and economic potential of the country. Therefore, the British initiated several surveys to determine and expand the absorptive capacity of Palestine; they also granted a 70 year concession giving the Zionists control over the Jordan and the Yarmuk for generating electricity.<sup>5</sup> The Litani River was well within the French mandate, and the British offered it little – if any – attention.

In 1929 the relative calm in the Palestine Mandate came to a halt; in what was conceived as a zero-sum game, the rapid growth of the Yishuv could only mean one thing: the Arabs were being pressed out of Palestine. The tension, which had been building up for almost a decade, spiralled out of control, and there were clashes all over Palestine. The riots were of such a character that the unprepared British Army struggled to repress them and were forced to send military reinforcements from the mother country as well as Egypt. The British tried to handle and understand their troubled mandate area by holding enquiry commissions and trials and issuing several papers stating changes in their policy. This was a well-trying strategy. There had already been conducted several investigations into the Arab-Jewish relations of Palestine – and there were more to come. As part of the investigations into the reasons for the turmoil of 1929, Sir John Hope-Simpson was sent to Palestine. The former colonial official was tasked with examining '[i]mmigration, land settlement and development'.<sup>6</sup> In his report, Sir Hope-Simpson discussed, inter alia, the current and potential agricultural production of Palestine. He was quite clear on the

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5 Morris 2000, 106-111; 'The Third Aliyah', Jewish Virtual Library, [http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Immigration/Third\\_Aliyah.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Immigration/Third_Aliyah.html). Accessed on: 24.04.2010; 'The Fourth Aliyah', Jewish Virtual Library, [http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Immigration/Fourth\\_Aliyah.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Immigration/Fourth_Aliyah.html). Accessed on: 25.04.2010; Shaddad Attili, David Phillips, and Adla Khalaf, 'Historical Developmental Plans of the Jordan River Basin' Palestinian Negotiations Support Unit, [www.nad-plo.org/nego/permanent/water/related/Howb.pdf](http://www.nad-plo.org/nego/permanent/water/related/Howb.pdf). Accessed on: 27.04.2011; Lowi 1993, 40-51.

6 'Hope-Simpson Report', Jewish Virtual Library, [http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/Hope\\_Simpson.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/Hope_Simpson.html). Accessed on: 13.04.2010.

dependence on irrigation for any development to take place.<sup>7</sup> However, he did not mention the Litani; presumably because the river was beyond the boundaries of the mandate, and hence not to be considered as part of the picture.

A similar conclusion can be drawn from the Peel Commission Report of 1937. Again the Parliament of the Mandate power was presented a report on the Palestine situation following the ‘disturbances’ the previous year.<sup>8</sup> The Peel Commission’s primary concerns were the causes for the recent troubles and to outline a solution for these. On matters concerning water, the commission expressed its hope that it would be possible to initiate vast irrigation projects to support the re-settlement of Palestinian Arabs. The potential problem of water shortage was not discussed, and the Litani River was not mentioned.<sup>9</sup> A more technical survey on the water resources in Palestine, and whether it was necessary with additional water supplies to develop the envisioned irrigation projects, was perhaps meant to be conducted at a later stage.

The Peel Commission recommended that the recurring troubles in Palestine could be solved by dividing the country in an Arab and a Jewish state, and by establishing a permanent mandate to administer the holy places. The Jewish state was suggested to be in the north of the country, bordering Lebanon, but it was not suggested for the future state to exceed the boundaries of Palestine and gain control over the Litani. In these years the Zionists had more to fear than to hope for in the north. Due to the Muslim majority in the area, French officials were considering ceding southern Lebanon to Syria; whereas the Peel Commission was considering recommending for Galilee to be included in the Arab part of Palestine. Both of these possibilities would have created a Muslim entity separating the future Jewish state and Christian dominated Lebanon, so to prevent this, the Zionists launched campaigns of lobbying officials and increasing settlements in the north. As the publication of the Peel Report was imminent Ben-Gurion, by then Chairman of the World Zionist Organization and the Jewish Agency, saw some hope.<sup>10</sup> Writing his wife, he explained that ‘[i]f we get the whole of Galilee – and there is some hope of this – we will be able to settle in the area belonging to Lebanon’.<sup>11</sup> So the dream of crossing the border

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7 Morris 2000, 111-120; Lowi 1993, 40-51; Hope-Simpson Report. Accessed on: 13.04.2010.

8 ‘The Peel Commission Report’, Jewish Virtual Library, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/peel1.html>. Accessed on: 17.04.2010.

9 Ibid.

10 David Ben-Gurion. Accessed on: 26.11.2010.

11 David Ben-Gurion, *Letters to Paula* (London: Vallentine, Mitchell & Co., 1971), 118-119.

was by no means dead in Zionist circles. In the end, however, the suggestions from the Peel Commission were not followed up by the British Government.<sup>12</sup>

The British governments of the mandate period do not seem to have been urged much by the Zionist movement to consider the Litani question. The diplomacy directed towards Britain was primarily aimed at being allowed increased immigration to Palestine and securing a piece of the land, of what size possible, for the establishment of a state or a commonwealth.<sup>13</sup> This does not necessarily imply the Litani River disappeared from Zionist strategy any more than Palestine as a whole did – as was so clearly expressed in Ben-Gurion's letter. Both Weizmann and Ben-Gurion, two of the most prominent leaders of Zionist and Israeli history, followed a policy termed 'gradualism': reaching compromises, only to use the compromise to achieve a higher aim. The size of the future Jewish state was relatively indifferent, as it could always be expanded.<sup>14</sup> Within this perspective, insisting on issues that are long settled, like the Palestinian-Lebanese border, cannot be considered anything but strategic liabilities that are better resolved at a later, more opportune, stage.

### **Hydro Strategy**

Throughout the mandate period much effort was put into expanding the absorptive capacity of Palestine as this was essential to achieve higher levels of Jewish immigration. The Litani River had been included in the French mandated zone and was not part of the future Jewish Homeland; nonetheless, the river was merely beyond the Zionists' border, not their drawing boards.

One interesting example of how the loss of the Litani could be dealt with is found in an edition of the periodical *Palästina* from 1927. There the agronomist Herman Hirsch presented the readers with a report on the fertiliser situation in Palestine and mentioned the possibility of developing means for producing saltpetre there. The process would demand much electricity, but 'perhaps would the Litani in North Palestine be suitable for this

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12 The Peel Commission Report. Accessed on: 17.04.2010; Eisenberg 1994, 98-102.

13 Alan R. Taylor, *Prelude to Israel: an analysis of Zionist diplomacy 1897-1947* (New York: 1959), 26-39, 49-55, 66-77.

14 Ibid., 108-111; Morris 2000, 135-144.

purpose'.<sup>15</sup> The article might have been written some years before its printing, thus explaining the references to resources beyond the borders of the Jewish Homeland. In that case the article would have been more than seven years old (or four if counting from the last revisions were made) – a considerable age for a technical paper. The primarily technical, rather than political, nature of the article could, however, imply that the reference was merely a mistake. But why should both the author and the editors have allowed or overlooked such a blunder? Whether the geographical facts were ignored or forgotten, one should take note of the strong position the Litani River held in Zionist thinking.

The Litani was definitely not forgotten by the Zionist leadership. Addressing an extraordinary Zionist conference in 1942, David Ben-Gurion, by then chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive (i.e. its cabinet), presented his views on Palestine's future after the Second World War. Among the topics covered was agricultural output, and according to Ben-Gurion the greatest potential laid in the Negev desert in the south of Palestine. Being a desert, the Negev was dependent on vast irrigation to be settled and cultivated, but there were several places the water could come from; among them 'the rivers of the north (Yarkon, Jordan, Yarmouk, Litani).'<sup>16</sup> The subject was touched on briefly, but the dominant figure of the Zionists was quite open to acquiring water from outside the Jewish Homeland.

The Zionists also invited Walter Clay Lowdermilk, an American soil conservationist, to help with the development of the land. His report *Palestine: Land of Promise* was published in 1944 and was to play a significant role in subsequent water schemes. Lowdermilk dedicated the majority of the pages to a historical presentation of Palestine's soil and agricultural development. The pages where Lowdermilk outlined his suggestions for the improvement of Palestine's absorptive capacity, however, tend to be given the most attention.<sup>17</sup> Strongly inspired by an American project (The Tennessee Valley Authority) Lowdermilk suggested establishing a Jordan Valley Authority; the idea being to consider the watershed as a whole, and find comprehensive solutions for all uses

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15 Hermann Hirsch. 'Palästinensische Düngungsfragen' *Palästina* Heft 12 1927, [www.compactmemory.de](http://www.compactmemory.de), 572-581. 'Vielleicht wäre dafür der Litani im Norden Palästinas geeignet'.

16 David Ben-Gurion, *Palestine in the post-war world: address* (London: The Jewish Agency for Palestine, 1942), 5-7; Morris 2000, 106-111, 167-173.

17 See e.g.: Lowi 1993, 45-47; 'Hydrostrategic' Territory in the Jordan Basin: Water, War and Arab-Israeli Peace Negotiations, 75-76.

of the resource. The Jordan Valley Authority would supervise irrigation, provide electricity with the help of a canal from the Mediterranean to the Dead Sea and encourage soil conservation. Lowdermilk suggested for the tributaries of the Jordan to be placed under control by the Jordan Valley Authority, and also to divert water for the irrigation of the Negev Desert in the south of Palestine. In effect, Lowdermilk suggested the Yishuv should gain access to water beyond the borders of Palestine, but the Litani was left out (as it is not part of the Jordan River watershed). Repeatedly it was pointed out how the borders of Mandate Palestine fell short of those of historic Palestine, but apparently Lowdermilk was not in favour of letting the Zionists have access to the Litani River. It was not even named on the accompanying map.<sup>18</sup> *Palestine: Land of Promise* proved to have a tremendous impact on Zionist and Israeli development projects, and the idea of considering the whole watershed as one unit, without taking political considerations into account, would soon become an Israeli mantra. As the engineers looked to Lowdermilk for inspiration, they could also very well add the Litani River to his vision – as the river could relatively easily be diverted into the Jordan River Watershed.

At the time of the report from Lowdermilk, the Yishuv's (and later Israel's) water company, Mekorot, presented their views. The aim was increased irrigation and electricity, and among the means to achieve this were border revisions. The main focus was on the Jordan tributaries, just as Lowdermilk had recommended. The Litani, however, was also included, albeit in a second category. Litani could be diverted to increase the flow of the Jordan Watershed, and the plans were there. Mekorot noted, however, that an agreement would have to be reached with the Lebanese government and did not suggest redrawing the borders to have the river included in Palestine.<sup>19</sup>

Experts claiming objectivity would also consider the Litani River when discussing Palestine. In 1946, the American Palestine Institute, 'a non-partisan research organization', published an economic study of the area.<sup>20</sup> The report gave a thorough presentation of the country and its possibilities. The Litani River was included in the equation, although it was stressed that the governments of Lebanon and Palestine would have to come to an

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18 Walter Clay Lowdermilk, *Palestine, Land of Promise* (London: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1944); Lowi 1993, 45.

19 'Hydrostrategic' Territory in the Jordan Basin: Water, War and Arab-Israeli Peace Negotiations, 75-76.

20 Robert R. Nathan, Oscar Gass, and Daniel Creamer, *Palestine: Problem and Promise: an Economic Study* (Washington: Public Affairs Press, 1946), v-vi.

agreement before this resource could benefit the latter. According to the researchers, the potential Palestinian exploitable water supply would increase with nearly 20 percent merely with the inclusion of Litani waste water.<sup>21</sup>

The study also criticised the British Mandate power quite heavily for taking too little interest in examining and developing the hydrological potential of Palestine. Apparently the Jewish Agency had not been able to fund comprehensive hydrological research of Palestine until 1940, and by 1946 the Jewish Agency still relied on plans where the Litani River played an integral part. According to the American Palestine Institute report, every Zionist water scheme to that day was dependent on access to the Litani.<sup>22</sup> Evidently, the Lowdermilk scheme was kept out of the equation.<sup>23</sup>

### **Allies in the North**

The Zionists had no reason to consider the Litani question settled, with time the river might very well fall within, or at least benefit, the Jewish state to be. So an array of attempts were made to expand the sphere of influence into South Lebanon. The prospect was kept alive with Lebanese help, primarily from the Maronites. The members of this Catholic sect held a political and economic hegemony in Lebanon, and some of them considered the Jews to be a positive influx, and potential allies, in a largely Muslim region. The supporters of Maronite-Zionist relations typically favoured a *Smaller Lebanon*: by giving up territory, and securing a demographical hegemony, Lebanon would be a safe haven for the Maronites. Their counterparts, in the *Greater Lebanon* camp, believed Maronite interests would be best preserved with cooperation with the Arabs and feared the Zionists could topple the delicate Maronite-Arab balance. From the 1920s, these two camps, which also found themselves separated by other patterns of conflict, struggled for the leadership of the Maronites and over Lebanon.<sup>24</sup>

The *Smaller Lebanon* Maronites and the Zionists explored various possibilities for cooperation and exchanged favours. In addition, there were Maronites on Zionist payroll that could supply Zionist friendly articles to Lebanese newspapers or aid in the purchase of

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21 Ibid., 163-166.

22 Ibid.

23 Lowdermilk 1944.

24 Eisenberg 1994, 9-10, 13-15, 46-51; Eyal Zisser, 'The Maronites, Lebanon and the State of Israel: Early Contacts,' *Middle Eastern Studies* 31, no. 4 (1995).

lands. For example in the autumn of 1935, Weizmann held talks and corresponded with a French industrialist, Gabriel Arnou, who was interested in establishing a Jewish settlement company in Syria and Lebanon. According to Weizmann, the problem was the French and Lebanese, so pending their consent; he suggested buying land near the coast between Beirut and the Palestinian border. In the following winter, Weizmann exchanged letters with a Lebanese journalist, Alfred Tueni, who assisted him by finding land that could be purchased. The efforts turned out to be futile, as the French High Commissioner of Syria rejected any Jewish undertakings in his domain.<sup>25</sup>

The Zionists had more luck in Paris, from where the French Prime Minister, Léon Blum, reached out to them. By the autumn of 1936, French and Lebanese representatives were engaged in negotiating a replacement of the French Mandate, and Blum suggested formalising Zionist-Lebanese relations in this treaty – and thereby having the French signature to give weight to the arrangements. The undertaking stranded, however, as the French High Commissioner of Lebanon considered a Jewish influx certain to stir up unrest and pressed the Maronites to back down.<sup>26</sup>

The contact with Blum was also used with the hope of making the French allow Jews to settle in South Lebanon. From the 1930s, Europe had witnessed renewed anti-Semitism, and the Jews were emigrating in large numbers. The United States had imposed restrictions on immigration, and the Jews were in need of other options. France was involved in finding a solution, and one idea was to allow free immigration to Madagascar, which was under French control. The Zionists strongly opposed this; they were in favour of settling German and Polish emigrants in the French mandated zone. So in a letter to Blum Weizmann argued that it would be better if France would allow the Polish Jews to settle in Lebanon, where they could draw on the experiences made in Palestine and count on support from the Jewish community there.<sup>27</sup> He also pointed out that

in the last few years, my colleagues and I have been in touch with several representatives from Lebanon, and in particular the Maronites. The Lebanese want to cooperate with the Jewish National Home because Lebanon, just like the National Home, is threatened by the Fanatical Moslem masses,

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25 *The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann: August 1935 - December 1936*, vol. 17, Series A: Letters (Jerusalem: Israel University Press, 1979), 18-19, 83, 113, 172, 265.

26 *Ibid.*, 335-338; Eisenberg 1994, 88-94.

27 *The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann: August 1935 - December 1936* 1979, 335-337, 361-368; Eisenberg 1994, 76-81, 88-94.

so that the idea of cooperation between the National Home and Lebanon is very attractive to the better educated and more intelligent among the Lebanese.<sup>28</sup>

Weizmann maintained good relations with the Maronites; among them the Lebanese president, Emil Edde, who supported Zionist-Lebanese cooperation – also when dealing with the French.<sup>29</sup> Another close contact was Monsignor Arida, the Maronite Patriarch; Weizmann even assisted in an attempt to find a job for a relative of his. The attempt came to nought, but this did not spoil the relationship. So when a Lebanese hotel owner sought Jewish investors, Arida approved but the French mandate power prevented the deal.<sup>30</sup> This pattern repeated itself. In April 1934, Weizmann gave an overview of how he saw the situation: the Lebanese were eager for Jewish investment, and had (too) great hopes for what this would bring; whereas the French were hesitant as they feared German influence, that the borders would be redrawn and altogether preferred *status quo*. Arida, presumably among those encouraging Jewish undertakings in Lebanon, promised to exert his influence on the mandate power, and Weizmann also asked his advice on how to deal with the French. Despite sporadic encouragements, the French ended up blocking every attempt made by the Zionists.<sup>31</sup>

In the mid 1920s, the French High Commissioner had in fact welcomed Zionist endowers within his zone, although further north than the Zionists preferred, South Lebanon was completely out of bounds. Various suggestions were put forth to the French, all of which were rejected. Furthermore, Baron Edmond de Rothschild, a French key Zionist financier, turned down the idea of expanding into the French mandate. It was nonetheless sought to gain entry into Lebanon for a professor to map out the part of historic Palestine which was assumed to lie there, but this was flat out rejected by the French. In the 1930s, the French became more open to Jewish immigration to South Lebanon. This did not help the Zionists, as it was stressed that the settlers would have to orient themselves towards France, Syria or Lebanon – not the Jewish Homeland in the south.<sup>32</sup>

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28 *The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann: August 1935 - December 1936* 1979, 365-368.

29 *Ibid.*, 361-368.

30 *Ibid.*, 56, 110-111.

31 *The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann: June 1933 - August 1935*, vol. 16, Series A: Letters (Jerusalem: Israel University Press, 1978), 142-145, 291-293, 305-306.

32 Eisenberg 1994, 38-46.



Despite finding the attempts at expanding their influence over southern Lebanon continuously obstructed by the French, the Zionists continued to nurture their Maronite connection. The two groups saw several areas where they would benefit from combining forces. Among the joint ventures the French had to consider was a Maronite suggestion for developing the Litani River together with the Zionists. The idea was to use the river for irrigation and to supply electricity. The Zionists had the project inspected by an engineer and were quite interested in pursuing it, but the French mandatory power put its foot down. The French feared that Maronite-Zionist cooperation could cause Arab rebellions and increase British influence in their mandate area. The idea resurfaced as soon as South Lebanon fell to the British and Allied forces fighting the Vichy regime in 1941, but this time the project was halted due to the war. It was to be implemented as soon as the war ended, but the scheme stranded due to the situation in Palestine and changes within the Maronite hegemony.<sup>33</sup>

In the course of the war, numerous Zionist friendly Maronites lost power and influence to brethren who saw a future in cooperation with the Muslims. The suggestions from the fallen, in the *Smaller Lebanon* camp, became increasingly radical. Fear of Muslim domination and Lebanon being absorbed by a larger, Arab, state made them into Maronite separatists; by 1944/45 they were offering to cede land to secure a Christian majority. Southern Lebanon, with its large Muslim population, was suggested to become part of Syria, or to be handed over to the Zionists. Apparently the suggestion was received with controlled enthusiasm by Weizmann, who had little interest in an area with 100,000 Muslims. In fear of the British wanting to increase Lebanon with parts of northern Palestine, the separatists presented their idea to the mandate power in 1946. The British were given a fairly precise suggestion: ‘detach instead a part of south Lebanon-up to the Litani river, for example, and reunite it with Palestine’.<sup>34</sup>

The suggestion was not followed up by the Zionists, primarily due to the weak position of the *Smaller Lebanon* group. Its supporters no longer possessed the influence necessary to follow through such schemes, and their role in Zionist strategy had been reduced accordingly. In addition, the situation in Palestine occupied too much of the Zionists’ agenda.<sup>35</sup>

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33 Ibid., 67-76, 118-119, 154, 180.

34 Mubarak in: *ibid.*, 129-130; *ibid.*, 118-119, 126-134.

35 *Ibid.*, 126-134.

Again the time was not ripe to solve the Litani question, so in 1946 the Jewish Agency concluded a treaty with the Maronite Patriarch, representing the Maronite Church. The latter signatory gave its support to free Jewish immigration to Palestine and the establishment of a Jewish state, whereas the Jewish Agency guaranteed that it had no interest in Lebanese land; the parties also promised each other international support. The Jewish Agency's signatory, Bernard Joseph, acted on behalf of Weizmann, who was Acting Director of the agency's Political Department. Its chairman, however, was David Ben-Gurion. Not much came of the treaty, and it was never published by either of the parties. In fact, so little came of it that during the war of 1948 Ben-Gurion, by then with the rank of Prime Minister of Israel, maintained in private that Lebanon should be Christian, and its southern border the Litani River.<sup>36</sup> Guarantees or not, the northern border question was not solved to Ben-Gurion's satisfaction, and he would pursue the issue throughout the years to come.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 138; Morris 2000, 193, 494-499; Zisser 1995; David Ben-Gurion. Accessed on: 26.11.2010.

## 4. Hydro Scheming

### Foundation of a State, Israel in Conflict

David Ben-Gurion proclaimed the State of Israel on 14th of May 1948. Taking on the posts of Prime Minister and Defence Minister, he would prove to be a dominant figure in Israeli politics for years to come and a point of reference for future statesmen and generations.<sup>1</sup> Among Ben-Gurion's favourite visions for Israel was one of having Lebanon as a Christian neighbour with the Litani River serving as the border. The Maronites represented prospective partners and efficient means to break the hostile Arab chain surrounding the Jewish community. The major advantage of the scheme was military strategic, but in addition it provided water and land. The Litani was relatively easily defensible, as Ben-Gurion had noted back in 1918, and having Lebanon as an ally would limit the manoeuvrability of Syria. Ben-Gurion's colleagues and staff were divided in their view on the issue, but he would retain the dream and viewed it as a strategic aim which would be of benefit for Israel.<sup>2</sup>

In the course of 1947 it became evident that the British had had enough of their troublesome mandate and were on the brink of leaving Palestine. The United Nations (UN) stepped in and, after effective pressure from the Zionists and the United States, proposed a partition of Palestine. The Jews were allotted 55 percent of the country, Jerusalem was to be an international zone, and the rest of Palestine (including the bulk of the Galilee, but excluding the Panhandle) would make up an Arab state. This proposal was completely unacceptable to the Arabs, who were infuriated and began preparations for war.<sup>3</sup>

By 1948, the Yishuv had been involved in an armed conflict with the Palestinians for some time; and as Israel declared its independence the country found itself at war with several Arab states, including Lebanon.<sup>4</sup> The Lebanese army, however, was far from ready for war and suffered from out-dated equipment and internal problems. In addition, several

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1 See e.g.: Shlaim 2001, 16-17, 28-34, 50-51.

2 Morris 2000, 494-498; Yaniv 1987, 28-36; Amery 1998, 28-29; Shlaim 2001, 104-110.

3 Morris 2000, 180-189.

4 Ibid., 191.

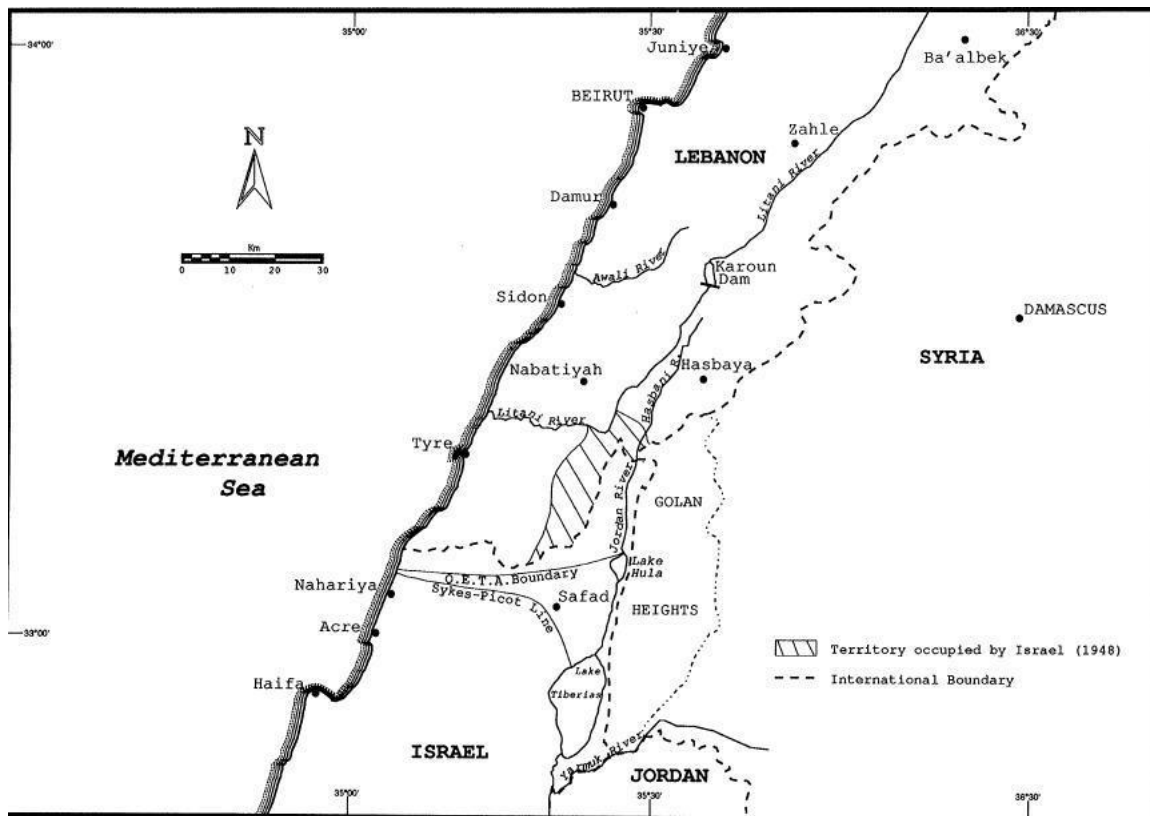
groups within Lebanon, the Maronites in particular (who dominated the political scene as well as the officer corps), had little interest in a conflict with Israel. Therefore, when Lebanon finally attacked it was on a small scale and clearly due to internal and external pressure. A token attack was made, and two villages (Malikiyya and Qadas), of little strategic value, were taken. Within a few days the Lebanese had withdrawn, leaving the defence of the conquests to the Arab Liberation Army – consisting of Arab League irregulars.<sup>5</sup>

The well-prepared Israelis' primary aim for their northern front was to conquer the parts of Palestine which the United Nations had proposed to become part of an Arab state. The move into Lebanon, and towards the Litani River, came after this was achieved. The Israel Defence Force (IDF) met little opposition, the Lebanese fell back, and the advance was ordered to a halt as the army reached the Litani. The whole of South Lebanon was not conquered, but by expanding the Galilee Panhandle northwards and westwards the Israelis held the bend of the river.<sup>6</sup>

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5 Matthew Hughes, 'Collusion Across the Litani? Lebanon and the 1948 War,' in *The War for Palestine*, ed. Eugene L. Rogan and Avi Shlaim (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 204-227.

6 Ibid; Amery 1998, 22.



Lebanese territory occupied by Israel in 1948<sup>7</sup>

Ben-Gurion's officers on the northern front pushed for a continued offensive, with Beirut as final destination, but this was turned down by the Prime Minister. Israel held on to the conquered Lebanese land, and used it in negotiations with Syria, until signing an armistice agreement with Lebanon on 23 of March 1949.<sup>8</sup> The discussion on why the offensive was halted, just as Ben-Gurion stood on the brink of fulfilling one of his dreams, has been relatively limited; some points, however, have been made. There are those who argue that Israel believed an agreement on peace and water sharing could be worked out with Lebanon, and this alone explains the withdrawal.<sup>9</sup> It is also worthwhile to consider the wider context, as the halt in the north is more understandable when not considered solely. The international community followed the conflict closely, and as the IDF began crossing the international borders of Palestine Israel came under pressure to halt. In this respect, the Egyptian border was far more important than the Lebanese; primarily because Egypt, and

7 Amery 1998, 22.

8 Collusion Across the Litani? Lebanon and the 1948 War, 204-227.

9 'Hydrostrategic' Territory in the Jordan Basin: Water, War and Arab-Israeli Peace Negotiations, 83; Amery 1998, 28-29.

the Suez Canal, was within the British sphere of interest and the two had a defensive pact. It should be noted that the Lebanese border was violated almost two months before the Egyptian, and that the outcry came as the latter was crossed.<sup>10</sup> International frontiers were nonetheless not to be ignored; and, just like Egypt, Lebanon was followed closely by a European Power - France. Ben-Gurion ran the risk of provoking the United Nations and the Great Powers; a strain on these relations could have proven all too costly. In addition, there was the fear of ending up as a minority. Conquering too vast territories would have provided Israel with a considerable enemy population - merely four years earlier Southern Lebanon's demography was a chief reason for the Zionists' lack of interest in attempting to obtain the area. There was also the risk of advancing further than the newly established state could afford. The Israeli army had expanded far beyond what had been hoped for; now the new areas had to be settled and the vast numbers of immigrants arriving had to be taken care of.<sup>11</sup>

In the aftermath of the war, the idea of occupying the Litani and force a governmental change in Lebanon appears to have been generally disapproved of. There even arose an internal dispute over why the Lebanese border had been violated at all. The General Staff claimed they had been advised to move into Lebanon and to conquer the land south of Litani by the Middle East Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; this had been considered, but not followed up. Upon hearing of the accusations, the Deputy and Acting Director of the Middle East Division contacted the Director, Eliahu Sasson (who was in Paris for the peace talks), and insisted on having made no such suggestion. Sasson, in his answer, washed his hands of the affair, giving his reasons for not being in favour of the endeavour. He did not consider the potential Christian (Maronite) allies strong enough, and he refuted the idea of using force to achieve peace. Then Sasson moved on to instruct the Middle East Division to stay in its place, not to mingle in the affairs of the IDF, follow the instructions given from the political leadership and assist with the peace process.<sup>12</sup> Looking back many years later, in 1964, Ben-Gurion commented that Israel ought to have

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10 Morris 2000, 243-252.

11 Michael Bar-Zohar and David Ben-Gurion, *Ben-Gurion* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1978), 187; Moshe Dayan, *Story of my life* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976), 118; 'Hydrostrategic' Territory in the Jordan Basin: Water, War and Arab-Israeli Peace Negotiations, 83; Amery 1998, 28-29.

12 E. Sasson (Paris) to Y. Shimoni, 28.11.1948 no. 201 in Yehoshua Freundlich (Ed.), *Documents on the Foreign Policy of Israel (DFPI), October 1948 - April 1949* vol. 2 (Jerusalem: 1984), Companion Volume, 52-53, 151-152.

won more territory in 1948. He blamed the generals, who in their answer put the responsibility on the politicians' shoulders.<sup>13</sup>

For the time being, however, Ben-Gurion had clearly put his Litani plan on ice and was not in favour of expanding northwards. He clearly expressed this in 1950, as members of the opposition (from Mapam) called out in the Knesset for a harsh stand in the negotiations with Jordan. Ben-Gurion rhetorically asked how they envisioned the boundaries of Israel, if they stretched all the way to the Litani River in the north, making it quite clear that this expansionist policy was not to be pursued.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Litani River Survey**

Following the war of 1948, the United Nations established the Palestine Conciliation Commission (PCC) in an attempt to negotiate between the Arabs and Israel. The latter was unwilling to cede land or allow the Palestinian refugees to return, hence the discussions led to naught.<sup>15</sup> The Commission then appointed Gordon R. Clapp, Director of the Tennessee Valley Authority, to lead an investigation of the development potential in the troubled region and find means to improve the situation for the refugees. The United Nations Economic Survey Mission for the Middle East presented its final report in December 1949, and it was approved shortly after. Clapp and his colleagues were of the opinion that peace and stability in the Middle East could be achieved by improving the living standards of the peoples living there. Hence, the Palestinian refugees, and other unemployed, should be put to work on ‘‘pilot demonstration’ projects’ in Lebanon, Syria, Arab Palestine and Jordan.<sup>16</sup> These developments would not be too grand, albeit of such a character as to provide the countries with experienced professionals for later developments and make an immediate

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13 From our Correspondent. ‘Dispute Over Size Of Israel: Two Generals Blame Mr. Ben-Gurion’ *The Times* 09.03.1964, <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/default>, 8.

14 ‘Knesset Upholds Government on Foreign Policy’. *Palestine Post* 05.01.1950, <http://www.jpress.org.il>, 1, 3.

15 Morris 2000, 262.

16 *Final Report of the United Nations Survey Mission for the Middle East: An Approach to Economic Development in the Middle East: Part I. The Final Report and Appendices*, (Lake Success, New York: United Nations, 1949), 6-13.

fiscal improvement. The national governments were to lead their own projects, although with the help of foreign expertise and funding.<sup>17</sup>

The Survey Mission recommended for Lebanon to make use of the Litani River. The British military had undertaken a modest irrigation scheme involving the river in 1945, but a more comprehensive study was needed to wholly exploit the river.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, the Lebanese Government was recommended to undertake such an investigation, with the aim of being able to harness the resource. The Litani was considered to have the potential to serve as the backbone of the Lebanese economy; with a careful study undertaken, the river could be developed gradually, at a pace in keeping with the country's economy. Foreign countries were requested to provide monetary and technical support if needed.<sup>19</sup> In the detailed outline, it was also noted that it had been suggested that the Lebanese could gain further income by diverting the waste water from the Litani Project into the Jordan River.<sup>20</sup>

There is little doubt the Israelis still not only maintained a vivid interest in the Litani River but were also encouraged to do so. In June 1949, while the survey was still being conducted and there only were temporary reports available, a new opportunity unfolded. René Busson, Director of the *Bank of Syria and the Lebanon*, enquired whether Israel would be interested in purchasing electricity. Apparently, he was involved in a project with the aim of developing a plan for a comprehensive use of the Litani River (presumably the UN initiated project). According to Busson, the Lebanese Government had made it clear that any comprehensive Litani scheme would be dependent on understanding northern Israel's part in it.<sup>21</sup> It is unknown whether Busson acted as an agent for the Lebanese Government or out of personal interest, and whether it was talk of diverting the Litani into the Jordan Basin or merely exporting electricity. It is clear, however, that the possibility of utilising the Lebanese river for the benefit of Israel

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17 Ibid; From our United Nations Correspondent. 'Development Works In Near East: U.N. 'Pilot' Projects' *The Times* 10.01.1950, <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/default>, 3.

18 CAB/129/39, 'Cabinet: Economic and Social Development in the Middle East (30.03.1950)' The National Archives, [http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline/details-result.asp?queryType=1&resultcount=1&Edoc\\_Id=7971537](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline/details-result.asp?queryType=1&resultcount=1&Edoc_Id=7971537). Accessed on: 29.04.2011.

19 Final Report of the United Nations Survey Mission for the Middle East, 6-13.

20 Ibid., appendix IV 86.

21 Meeting: M. Fischer – R. Busson (Paris), 03.06.1949 no. 54 in Yemima Rosenthal (Ed.), *Documents on the Foreign Policy of Israel (DFPI), May - December 1949* vol. 4 (Jerusalem: 1986), 91-92; Companion Volume, 36.



remained a viable option, despite the unfriendly political climate between the two countries.

In January 1950, Israel wanted to reschedule the upcoming peace talks, orchestrated by the Palestine Conciliation Commission, for a later date. Eliahu Elath, the Ambassador to the United States, made it clear that rather than following up with the multilateral talks, which had utterly failed the previous year, the Israelis wanted to continue their bilateral negotiations. The Americans were informed that a deal had nearly been reached with the Jordanians, and if the other Arab countries were to be involved the efforts could very well prove futile. The previous round of the PCC talks had made it clear to the Israelis that the Arabs were uncompromising when dealt with as a single bloc; whereas separate, secret, talks had a higher chance of providing results. After presenting his case, Elath added that the next country in line would probably be Lebanon. The Lebanese dared not be the first to sign a treaty with Israel, but apparently they were eager to cooperate – especially on developing the Litani Valley.<sup>22</sup> It is uncertain where Elath had found the basis for his claims concerning the Litani. He did, however, possess considerable insight into Lebanese affairs and had developed a vast network of contacts there in the 1930's.<sup>23</sup> Whether the idea had come from an old Lebanese contact or Elath was referring to the suggestions from Busson, Israel's role had apparently increased from purchasing electricity to assisting in the pilot demonstration project or embarking on a joint venture with Lebanon.

Publicly, the discussion was more moderate. The Israeli newspaper the *Palestine Post* published an article discussing the Economic Survey Mission; an anonymous government official commented that there was some disappointment as Israel had not been recommended for a project, but one hoped to benefit indirectly from an improvement in the regional economic and political situation.<sup>24</sup>

Behind the scene, however, the Economic Survey was followed up more closely. Elath and some of his advisers met with Clapp and another member of the commission in mid-January 1950. According to the report sent back to Israel, Clapp was certain the Arabs were in no position to follow up on his proposals. At the same time, he reckoned it was

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22 Memorandum of Conversation, by the Director of the Office of African and Near Eastern Affairs (Berry), 09.01.1950 in *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1950, vol. 5* (Washington: 1978), 674-676.

23 Kirsen E. Schulze, *Israel's Covert Diplomacy in Lebanon* (New York: St. Martin's Press INC, 1998), 11-25.

24 'State Dept. Sees Israel's Hope In Trade With Arab States'. *The Palestine Post* 11.01.1950, <http://www.jpress.org.il>, 4.

politically impossible for the United States to take matters into their own hands; leaving it necessary for the UN to go through with the projects, but Clapp doubted the organisation possessed the necessary funds.<sup>25</sup> The outlook was indeed quite grim; throughout the year the development of Lebanon, Syria and Jordan remained in the balance, but despite the economic situation all three governments applied for support to go through with the proposed projects. Lebanon had hope of financing the survey through the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), and the scheme had also caught the attention of French investors.<sup>26</sup>

More importantly, and despite Clapp's doubts, the Litani River Project was followed up by the United States. President Harry S. Truman had in his 1949 inaugural speech, as the fourth point concerning foreign policy, launched a programme of technical assistance. The Point Four program was meant to provide American expertise to poor areas around the world, with the purpose of promoting peace and stability and to counter the spread of Soviet influence. It took some time to develop the project beyond the mere idea it had been as Truman announced it, and there were also delays to get the funding approved by Congress, but by the end of 1950 money had been granted and the Point Four program was underway.<sup>27</sup> By mid-April the following year, technical experts were cooperating with colleagues at the American University of Beirut, and a survey of the Litani was about to commence. The Lebanese gave their final acceptance of the foreign assistance in late November.<sup>28</sup>

The Point Four program suffered from setbacks and criticism; it was not comprehensive enough to fulfil all that it should, was disputed in the U.S., and abroad it was accused of being an imperialistic tool. By 1953, both Syria and Egypt had left the

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25 E. Elath to W. Eytan, 18.01.1950 no. 34 in Yehoshua Freundlich (Ed.), *Documents on the Foreign Policy of Israel (DFPI), 1950* vol. 5 (Jerusalem: 1988), 39; Companion Volume, 19.

26 CAB/129/43, 'Cabinet: Economic and Social Development in the Middle East (08.11.1950)' The National Archives, [http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline/details-result.asp?queryType=1&resultcount=1&Edoc\\_Id=7971745](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline/details-result.asp?queryType=1&resultcount=1&Edoc_Id=7971745). Accessed on: 29.04.2011.

27 Thomas G. Paterson, 'Foreign Aid under Wraps: The Point Four Program,' *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 56, no. 2 (1972): 119-124.

28 Memorandum by the Technical Cooperation Administrator (Bennett) to the Under Secretary of State (Webb), 11.04.1951 in *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1951*, vol. 1 (Washington: 1979), 1641-1645; Editorial Note in *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1951*, vol. 5 (Washington: 1982), 1016.

programme, but Lebanon remained.<sup>29</sup> Apparently, the Litani River Survey was the largest hydro development scheme of the Point Four program. Evaluating the progress in Lebanon in 1953, the American experts saw few potential regional development schemes for the country, and of the few possibilities Litani was not mentioned. They said the project would gain Lebanon solely, and there was a 'great fear on the part of the Lebanese that the project would in some way benefit Israel or be vulnerable to Israeli aggression.'<sup>30</sup> The ideas Busson and the Israelis had promoted three years earlier were not acceptable in Beirut. Any joint undertaking with Israel was completely out of the picture, but the Lebanese were still concerned not to step on their neighbour's toes.

The Israelis were not pleased with Lebanon's unilateral development of the river and complained to the American Secretary of State that 'Lebanon has initiated, with United States financial and technical aid, a Litani project which does not take into consideration regional needs'.<sup>31</sup> The Israeli point being that when Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Israel developed their respective rivers on a unilateral basis, it would be impossible to exploit the resources wholly. In the case of Litani, surplus water could benefit the Jordan tributaries, whereas Lebanon would be able to develop more power by a diversion into the Jordan.<sup>32</sup> (At least internally) the Americans recognised the Israeli point, and they were prepared to investigate the possibility of diverting the Litani River into the Jordan Basin.<sup>33</sup> They were later to conclude that it would be politically impossible, as the Lebanese were certain to reject the idea and also in the process of developing the river themselves.<sup>34</sup>

There was also another foreign party with an interest in the Litani scheme: the former mandate power, France. In an interview, the Technical Director of the Point Four program (1952-1953), Stanley Andrews, said he remembered the difficulties pointed out to

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29 Paterson 1972, 121-126.

30 Memorandum of Conversation, by the Country Director of Technical Cooperation Service, Lebanon (Peter), 17.05.1953 no. 30 in *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1952-1954*, vol. 9 (1986), 84-87.

31 Note from the Ambassador of Israel in Washington to the Secretary of State of the United States, 9.07.1953 no. 291 in Yemima Rosenthal (Ed.), *Documents on the Foreign Policy of Israel (DFPI), 1953* vol. 8 (Jerusalem: 1995), 521.

32 Ibid., 520-521; Companion Volume, 247.

33 The Secretary of State to the Embassy in Jordan, 09.06.1953 no. 623 in *FRUS, 1952-1954* vol. 9, 1238-1239.

34 Memorandum by the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern, South Asian, and African Affairs (Jernegan) to the Secretary of State, 10.08.1953 no. 648 in *ibid.*, 1269-1275.

him when visiting Lebanon. Apparently, the French held a power monopoly and the Litani River Project was a threat to their financial interests. The French pressure was sufficient to cause uncertainty as to whether or not the Lebanese could contribute to the financing of the project – a prerequisite for American backing. In the interview, Andrews made no mention of any Lebanese concerns regarding the Israelis.<sup>35</sup>

In the end, the American Bureau of Reclamation concluded the planning, and the development commenced in the late 1950s. The Litani Project proved to be technically difficult, and expensive, but boosted Lebanon's supply of hydroelectric power.<sup>36</sup>

### **The Lowdermilk-Hays Plan**

The United Nations Economic Survey Mission for the Middle East had not recommended a pilot demonstration project for Israel; the country's hydrological development was well underway, and compared to its neighbours Israel was not lacking expertise or means.<sup>37</sup> By the time of the Economic Survey Mission an American engineer, James B. Hays, had already presented his views on how Lowdermilk's proposals from the mandate period could be realised. The Israelis were eager to begin the implementation of the Jordan Valley Authority which Lowdermilk had suggested and Hays had continued to develop. The authority would encompass the whole of the Jordan Basin, and therefore involve Syria, Lebanon, Arab Palestine, Jordan and Israel. Hays, like his predecessor, focused on vast irrigation from the Jordan and a canal from the Mediterranean to the Dead Sea; the Litani was of no interest except for comparison. The scheme, offering a comprehensive solution for the distribution of the Jordan Basin, was dependent on cooperation with the other riparian states, and therein laid the problem.<sup>38</sup>

The other riparians were pursuing their own paths. The most important of them for any cooperation to take place, Jordan, had already hired some British experts in 1949.

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35 Richard D. McKinzie, 'Oral History interview with Stanley Andrews' Harry S. Truman Library & Museum <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/oralhist/andrewss.htm>. Accessed on: 27.04.2011.

36 Hudson 1971, 7-12.

37 Final Report of the United Nations Survey Mission for the Middle East, 6.

38 Rory Miller, 'Bible and Soil: Walter Clay Lowdermilk, the Jordan Valley Project and the Palestine Debate,' *Middle Eastern Studies* 39, no. 2 (2003): 74-75; James B. Hays, 'T.V.A. on the Jordan: Proposals for Irrigation and Hydro-Electric Development in Palestine'. (Washington: Public Affairs Press, 1948), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015005533313>. Accessed on: 10.02.2011, 54-55, 108, 149, 151.

Their task was to develop an irrigation scheme for the country, but they were also asked to comment on the Israeli Lowdermilk-Hays Plan. They were not opposed to the idea of an international body governing the basin, but found a number of drawbacks with the scheme in question. The Lowdermilk-Hays plan would primarily benefit Israel, and the experts also wanted Syria and Lebanon to be more included.<sup>39</sup> The *Palestine Post* brought a summary of the report, and also quoted its final comment: '[w]e understand there is a proposal to divert the River Litani ... into the Jordan Basin. We consider that this seems a most reasonable proposal ... it would make the scheme even more truly one of international authority.'<sup>40</sup> A follow up article with a similar summary, and an equivalent quotation, was published a month later; it was added that the report had been approved by the Jordanian Foreign Office, and also expressed the position of the United Kingdom.<sup>41</sup> A diversion of the Litani River had not been proposed by Hays, rather the experts (and by extension Jordan and the United Kingdom) had picked up on the older Israeli and Zionist schemes, and saw the potential to increase the flow of the Jordan Basin.

Jordan was not willing to cooperate with Israel along the lines of the Lowdermilk-Hays scheme, and there were also considerable costs involved, hence the project stranded. Instead, the Israelis adopted parts of the project in a hydrological scheme confined to their borders (the Seven Year Plan). The scheme was not dependent on cooperation with the unfriendly neighbour countries. The Litani, being in one of them, was unavailable and unmentioned. Despite being limited to Israel alone, the plan would still affect the other riparians of the Jordan. There was not enough water to fulfil both the Israeli scheme and the developments the Jordanians were planning. Furthermore, the Israelis were eager to divert water out of the basin, whereas the Arabs, and in particular the Jordanians, would argue that the resource should primarily benefit the people living in its immediate vicinity. The question of out-of-basin diversion would remain at the core of Arab-Israeli water negotiations.<sup>42</sup>

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39 Lowi 1993, 40-51.

40 'British Firm Advises Abdullah To Reject Lowdermilk-Hays Plan'. *The Palestine Post* 28.09.1949, <http://www.jpress.org.il>, 3.

41 'Trans-Jordan Indicate Willingness To Cooperate in Jordan Valley Plan'. *Palestine Post* 20.10.1949, <http://www.jpress.org.il>, 1.

42 Lowi 1993, 40-51; Miller 2003, 74-75; 'Israel Seven-Year Plan- from Data and Plans- submitted to the Jerusalem Conference- October 1953', Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs,

In the early 1950s there were water disputes between Israel and both Syria and Jordan. Israel undertook diversion work on Arab owned land in the demilitarised zone shared with Syria (The Lake Huleh Project), and the results were intensified border clashes and international complaints. The issue was resolved, but affected also the Jordanians downstream. The work and occasional damming of the Jordan River effectively threatened the agricultural potential of the Jordan Valley.<sup>43</sup>

The water disputes between Israel and the other riparians came in addition to the overall Arab-Israeli conflict, and this political situation made regional cooperation, or even agreement, on water exploitation impossible – at least if they involved Israel.<sup>44</sup> Syria and Jordan on the other hand, began development of a joint scheme on the Yarmuk River; this would affect the flow of the Jordan River and thus the Israelis. They protested vigorously and argued for their right to the water, as well as the mutual benefit from cooperation on a regional scheme - they also made the point that the Litani ought to be part of this joint venture. While arguing for multilateral development of the Jordan River Basin, Israel initiated yet another scheme unilaterally; again this involved work in the demilitarised zone and there was a new round of protests. The Americans, fearing Soviet influence in the Middle East, wanted stability and development in the region and therefore wanted to resolve the Arab-Israeli dispute. As water was an essential part of the conflict, Washington launched a diplomatic campaign to encourage regional cooperation on the development of the Jordan River Basin.<sup>45</sup>

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<http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Foreign+Relations/Israels+Foreign+Relations+since+1947/1947-1974/1+Israel+Seven-Year+Plan-+from+Data+and+Plans-+sub.htm>. Accessed on: 29.04.2011.

43 Lowi 1993, 79-86.

44 Ibid., 40-51.

45 Ibid., 79-86.

## 5. Tidying up the Middle East

### Hawks and Doves

In the years that followed the war of 1948 there was much harsh rhetoric directed at Israel from the Arab states, and the Israeli public feared a new attack from its neighbours.

Lebanon remained in the hostile camp providing neither water nor security for Israel – merely an armistice. Formally, Lebanon and Israel were at war, although neither made claim to the other's land. But in Israel, several high ranking officials began looking for opportunities to expand the boundaries; among them were Ben-Gurion and IDF General Moshe Dayan. Contrasting views on foreign and security policy cut through the traditional political lines of Israel; opposition parties both to the right and left called out for a hard line against the enemies of Israel and, in some instances, military conquest to provide the people with security and its 'rightful land': *Eretz Yisrael*. There were primarily two approaches to the question of foreign and security policy: Ben-Gurion and Dayan (among others) preferred the hawkish line and believed Israel had to retaliate and show strength to secure its existence. Whereas the followers of the dovish line, led by the important Zionist and first Foreign Minister of Israel Moshe Sharett, were more concerned with achieving international goodwill and using diplomatic approaches to secure peace for Israel.

Throughout the early 1950s, the Israeli Government was divided between these two camps, with Ben-Gurion and Sharett (both representing the ruling Mapai) as their respective leaders. The result was several rounds of intrigues and political (in)fight. Within the hawks' nest there were still those who maintained that the whole of *Eretz Yisrael* had yet to be in its rightful hands and looked for ways to correct this. Lebanon, and the Litani, played only a minor role in these strategies, although the river was not forgotten and could be mentioned alongside other potential aims for the future.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Morris 2000, 259-300, 494-498; Dayan 1976, 174-194; Avi Shlaim, 'Conflicting Approaches to Israel's Relations with the Arabs: Ben-Gurion and Sharett, 1953-1956,' *Middle East Journal* 37, no. 2 (1983); Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov, 'Ben-Gurion and Sharett: Conflict Management and Great Power Constraints in Israeli Foreign Policy,' *Middle Eastern Studies* 24, no. 3 (1988); Frederic C. Hof, 'A Practical Line: The Line

Ben-Gurion had already a long career behind him, and with five years as Prime and Defence Minister under his belt he was in need of a break. After a few months temporary leave to review the army, he formally stepped down in December 1953. Against the recommendation of the outgoing Prime Minister, Mapai appointed Sharett as his successor. He had already served as acting Prime Minister during Ben-Gurion's leave, but now he could formally add the premiership to the position of Foreign Minister. A dove held the reins of Government, but Ben-Gurion was not willing to make it easy for his old colleague. Upon leaving office he appointed trusted hawks to several key positions, including Moshe Dayan to IDF Chief of Staff. These would make trouble for Sharett and repeatedly act in direct opposition to their new Prime Minister. A greater loyalty was in fact shown to Ben-Gurion, who was still very much in the loop. Although retired, he was visited on a regular basis, kept updated and asked for advice by his followers. Sharett was Foreign and Prime Minister, but had his hands full with criticism of his policies from his own Cabinet, the Knesset, the IDF and the people.<sup>2</sup>

### **Johnston Cometh**

The war of 1948 had caused a humanitarian crisis. Approximately 800.000 Palestinians, almost 75 percent of the community, had fled their homes and homeland. The neighbouring countries were by no means able, nor willing, to absorb the refugees, and Israel was equally unwilling to allow their return. Hence, the refugees faced a tragic outlook. The refugee problem soon rose to the top of the agenda in the Arab-Israeli negotiations, and it was obvious to the U.S. and the UN that a solution had to be found. As the preliminary attempt by the PCC failed, and the uncompromising line of the Israelis became clear, UNRWA was established to keep the Palestinian refugees alive. The situation was still quite dire, and the refugee problem had to be dealt with. The first attempt to solve the refugee question was the 1953-1956 Johnston Mission.<sup>3</sup>

In Washington, it was reckoned a solution to the refugee problem could go hand in hand with a solution to the water problem of the region. If Israel, Jordan, Syria and

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of Withdrawal from Lebanon and Its Potential Applicability to the Golan Heights,' Middle East Journal 55, no. 1 (2001): 26-28; Shlaim 2001, 81-94.

2 Shlaim 2001, 81-104; Morris 2000, 279-283.

3 Neff 2002, 55-82.



Lebanon were to develop the Jordan River Basin together, the situation of the Palestinians in the area would improve, as would the economies of the countries involved. Hence the Arabs and Israelis would be on the path to peace while enjoying a higher standard of living, which in turn would help keep the oil rich Arab states in the Western Bloc. By the autumn of 1953, a scheme for joint exploitation of the Jordan River had been prepared; Eric Johnston had been appointed Ambassador, given the full backing of President Eisenhower, and sent to the Middle East.<sup>4</sup> As Johnston travelled between the capitals of the riparians of the Jordan, he encountered a series of difficulties. At the core of the problem laid four issues: how the water should be divided, whether or not Israel should be allowed to transport water out of the basin, where the water should be stored and how the project should be supervised. There were also a bundle of various other questions the negotiators had to deal with, among them whether or not the Litani River in Lebanon should be part of the equation.<sup>5</sup>

The Americans saw this coming and discussed the issue while preparing their scheme. During the summer of 1953, Israel had again pointed out how the Lebanese Litani River Survey did not take into account the regional situation, and the Americans were prepared to evaluate the project and the possibilities for diversion. However, they soon reached the conclusion that although water from the Litani would improve the situation for the Jordan riparians, Lebanon was in fact in the process of developing the river for itself and sure to reject sharing it. To underline the case, it was added that '[t]he Litani lies entirely in Lebanon.'<sup>6</sup> This did not mean the issue was settled. While working on a comprehensive scheme for the Jordan Basin, the Americans recognised two major difficulties, one being the necessary border adjustments and the other being Israeli water claims. The proposal offered Israel less water than its own plans called for; in addition Litani waters were to be utilised by Lebanon and could not be included to sweeten the deal.<sup>7</sup> Hence, the Secretary of State gave Johnston explicit orders to try to avoid the Litani issue altogether: '[t]he problem of development of the Litani River should not be considered in the present context. If raised by Israel, you should state that it is not linked to

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4 Lowi 1993, 79-86.

5 Ibid., 87-114.

6 Memorandum by the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern, South Asian, and African Affairs (Jernegan) to the Secretary of State, 10.08.1953 no. 648 in *FRUS, 1952-1954* vol. 9, 1271.

7 Ibid., 1269-1275.

the plan.<sup>8</sup> There was little doubt this could threaten the negotiations as a whole, so the instructions continued: '[i]f absolutely necessary, you may add that in appropriate circumstances the United States would be willing to explore in the future with Lebanon the possibility of developing the Litani for the benefit of the area as a whole.'<sup>9</sup> If the Israelis were to get anything it was not much of a guarantee, but the Americans would not put the lid on the question.

As predicted, the Israelis were quite prepared for to pursue the Lebanese river. On 22 October 1953, Johnston landed in Beirut, the first stop on his first round of talks.<sup>10</sup> The following day Sharett instructed the Israeli foreign missions on the official views on the American proposals. There were a series of objections to the scheme, the first of which was the small quantity of water allocated to Israel. This could be helped, however, if compensated by diverting the Litani 'which flows unused into the Mediterranean'.<sup>11</sup> The policy of Israel was that the river ought not to be 'overlooked'.<sup>12</sup>

Johnston arrived in Tel Aviv the following week, where he met with the Foreign Minister. Judging by the Israeli and American summaries of the talks, a large portion of the meeting was spent on discussing the Litani River. Sharett repeated the Israeli position: the Litani ought to be utilised, Israel had to be compensated for giving up on large quantities of the Jordan River and Johnston's scheme had to include the Lebanese river. Johnston held his stance and argued there were both technical and political arguments against including the Litani. The Americans would not be persuaded into reconsidering this issue.<sup>13</sup>

The parties, both with enlarged delegations, met again the following day. The Israeli group had been bolstered with several ministers and technical experts who gave

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8 The Secretary of State to the Chairman of the Advisory Board for International Development (Johnston), 13.10.1953 no. 686 in *ibid.*, 1349.

9 *Ibid.*, 1348-1353; Lowi 1993, 86; Message from the President of the United States to the Prime Minister of Israel, 13.10.1953 no. 436 in *DFPI 1953*, 760-761; Companion Volume, 363.

10 Lowi 1993, 88.

11 M. Sharett (Jerusalem) to the Israel Missions Abroad (summary), 23.10.1953 no. 463 in *DFPI 1953*, Companion Volume, 382.

12 *Ibid.*

13 United States Division (Jerusalem) to the Israel Embassies in Washington, London and Paris (summary), 23.10.1953 no. 478 in *Ibid.*, Companion Volume, 397-398; The Chargé in Israel (Russell) to the Department of State, 28.10.1953 no. 712 in *FRUS, 1952-1954* vol. 9, 1391-1392.

their counterparts a thorough presentation of their views and arguments. There were objections to a number of issues in the plan and among them the exclusion of the Litani River. Although the river was not an absolute demand for Israeli willingness to carry on with the negotiations, it was attached considerable importance. It was also argued that this was the right moment for including the Litani and the Americans ought not to let this chance pass. Sharett asked especially for this to be put before the President and the Secretary of State. Again Johnston resorted to the political and technical arguments from the previous meeting, before ensuring the Israelis the issue had been thoroughly considered and urged them to respect the American analysis and conclusion.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Interval**

Johnston left Tel Aviv with slight optimism; all in all, the Israeli position was not as harsh as he had feared.<sup>15</sup> After the first round of talks, the Arab and Israeli Governments went to work on their counterproposals. Lebanon, Syria and Jordan appointed a commission through the Arab League and relied heavily on Egyptian expertise. The commission concluded, inter alia, to suggest that Lebanon should be excluded from the scheme. The country saw little to be gained from the negotiations, as the Jordan tributary in question (the Hasbani River) rose in Lebanese territory.<sup>16</sup> Lebanon held a pure upstream position on the Jordan River Basin, and entering into talks on sharing this water would probably result in little but limitations on usage. Therefore, they would prefer to withdraw altogether, but had still not done so. Evidently, the Lebanese were more concerned with other projects, and when visited by Johnston they seized the opportunity to request (more) aid for their own unilateral development of the Litani River.<sup>17</sup>

The Israelis were not prepared to respect the American conclusion on the Litani issue. Johnston's plan was passed on to the *Board of Consultants on Water Development*

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14 The Chargé in Israel (Russell) to the Department of State, 29.10.1953 no. 715 in *FRUS, 1952-1954* vol. 9, 1394-1395; United States Division (Jerusalem) to the Israel Embassies in Washington (Summary), London and Paris, 28 October 1953 no. 478 in *DFPI 1953, Companion Volume*, 397-398.

15 The Chargé in Israel (Russell) to the Department of State, 29.10.1953 no. 715 in *FRUS, 1952-1954* vol. 9, 1394-1395.

16 Lowi 1993, 87-91.

17 The Ambassador in Lebanon (Hare) to the Department of State, 03.11.1953 no. 721 in *FRUS, 1952-1954* vol. 9, 1401-1402.

for Israel; who in turn reported back with their initial objections to the Prime Minister. The experts saw two major flaws: the exclusion of Litani and the limitations on out of basin use of Jordan waters. Johnston had argued that water extracted from the Jordan River had to be used within the river's watershed, whereas the Israelis wanted to transport the water out of the basin to irrigate the more favourable soil of the Negev Desert. As for the Litani, the experts pointed out that '[t]his river has long been studied by us' and argued that a regional scheme had to take the river into consideration, especially as large quantities of water were simply going to waste.<sup>18</sup> From the Israeli point of view, there were a number of drawbacks with the American proposal, whereof the exclusion of the Litani River was among the largest. There was, however, still interest for reaching an agreement on the Jordan Basin. The Israelis therefore commissioned the American engineer John S. Cotton to develop a counterproposal.<sup>19</sup>

Before Johnston's second visit to the Middle East he continually received information on the Israeli position, and the development of (what would be called) the Cotton Plan. Already in January 1954, there were American-Israeli meetings to keep the process in motion. Johnston had his hands full persuading the Syrians and Lebanese not to withdraw from the talks, and the Jordanians not to start work on any diversion projects. Meeting with the Israelis, Johnston tried to gain a concession to please the Arabs (in the form of agreement to an external body governing the water project or ceding of land), but with little luck. His counterparts were primarily interested in pointing out the flaw of leaving out the Litani. The Israelis also argued, with some success, for the right to transport water out of the basin.<sup>20</sup>

Throughout the spring, Israeli representatives repeatedly made it clear that Johnston was about to stand before new claims to the Litani River. By the end of May, the Israelis were ready to present the Cotton Plan, and Sharett instructed his Ambassador that 'Israel cannot accept his [Johnston's] refusal to include the Litani River in the water plans as

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18 'Israel-s Consultants- Views on Johnston-s Proposals- Comments on the Main Plan by Board of Consultants on Water Development for Israel- 4 November 1953', Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Foreign+Relations/Israels+Foreign+Relations+since+1947/1947-1974/7+Israel-s+Consultants+-+Views+on+Johnston-s+Propos.htm?WBCMODE=Presen?> Accessed on: 29.04.2011.

19 United States Division (Jerusalem) to the Israel Embassy in Washinton (summary), 12.01.1954 no. 17 in Naomi Barzilai (Ed.), *Documents on the Foreign Policy of Israel (DFPI), 1954* vol. 9 (Jerusalem: 2004), Companion Volume, 19-20.

20 R. Shiloah (Washington) to G. Rafael (summary), 25.01.1954 no. 37 in *ibid.*, Companion Volume, 38-40.

final.<sup>21</sup> It was also important to point out that in the alternative plan, Litani waters would be passed on through Israel to other Arabs and that the Israelis had nothing to gain from this.<sup>22</sup>

In his plan, Cotton suggested many revisions from the scheme promoted by Johnston, among them the use of waters from the Jordan River to irrigate the Negev and the inclusion of the Litani River. Diverting the Litani into the Jordan Basin would lower the salinity level of the latter and allow diversion upstream; hence it was argued that all of Jordan's riparians would benefit from the proposal. Lebanon's main incentive would be an increased production of electricity. Cotton argued that '[s]uch a development must not be considered as a diversion of a natural resource of an Arab state for the benefit of Israel ; it should rather be defined as the conveyance of this resource, through Israel territory, for the common benefit of the Arab basin states and Israel.'<sup>23</sup>

On 31 May 1954, as the second round drew nearer, Israeli representatives under the leadership of Ambassador Abba Eban, met with Johnston in Washington to present the Cotton Plan. The American and Arab schemes were clearly beyond what the Israelis could accept, and they warned that 'the American plan ... could become the focus of a serious conflict.'<sup>24</sup> Upon hearing this Johnston 'grew very angry', and threatened to call off his second visit to the Middle East altogether.<sup>25</sup> He was unwilling to continue the talks if the Israelis would not budge on the Litani question. After Eban had elaborated on the argument, however, Johnston became more open to discuss a diversion of Litani waters. Although he pointed out that if the Litani were to be diverted it had to be at a later stage, and the negotiations had to move forward with this question unsettled.<sup>26</sup> A couple of days

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21 M. Sharett (Jerusalem) to A. Eban (Washington) (summary), 25.05.1954 no. 223 in *ibid.*, Companion Volume, 207.

22 R. Shiloah (Washington) to the United States Division (summary), 30.04.1954 no. 196; Y. Tekoah (Jerusalem) to the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Director-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (summary), 24.05.1954 no. 222; M. Sharett (Jerusalem) to A. Eban (Washington) (summary), 25.05.1954 no. 223 in *ibid.*, Companion Volume, 178-179, 206-208.

23 Summary of the Cotton Plan in Lowi 1993, appendix 4 p. 211; *ibid.*, 87-91.

24 Israel Embassy in Washington to the Minister of Foreign Affairs (summary), 31.05.1954 no. 232 in *Documents on the Foreign Policy of Israel (DFPI), 1954*, Companion Volume, 218.

25 *Ibid.*

26 *Ibid.*, Companion Volume, 217-218.

later, Johnston gave an account of the meeting and pointed out that the Israeli Ambassador had conveyed that there was hope that the Israelis could give in on the Litani question.<sup>27</sup>

If so, Eban had his Prime Minister with him, but Sharett lacked the necessary support. As the meeting with Johnston was discussed on ministerial level, Sharett argued the Litani was worth giving up in an attempt at easing the refugee question. The majority of the Cabinet members were of the opinion that the Americans were merely making vague promises while allotting Israel less than its fair share of the water. (Apparently Johnston had also hinted at the possibility of backing various large scale development projects.) This was not satisfactory, and it was concluded that the Litani would not be surrendered to save the Johnston Mission – even if this meant giving up on a regional water scheme as well as technical assistance. Commenting on the conclusion, Eban noted that Johnston would not succeed – if not because of the Litani question then due to the Arab position. He therefore suggested putting forth a proposal for a step by step development of various schemes, while leaving the larger issues unsettled for the time being – the, ongoing, U.S. backed, Litani River project was among them and would have to be halted.<sup>28</sup>

### **The Return of Johnston**

Israel was quite bent on the Litani issue. The Ministers had rejected the compromising tone of their chief, and various officials kept calling for a firm stand and suggested negotiation strategies to secure inclusion of Litani waters.<sup>29</sup> With the Israelis insistent on inclusion, and Johnston and the Arabs equally insistent on exclusion, the upcoming talks looked to be difficult.

And indeed they were. At the first official meeting on 20 June 1954, the Americans called for the talks to be limited to the Jordan waters; they considered Litani completely

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27 Memorandum of Conversation, by the Politico-Economic Adviser in the Bureau of Near Eastern, South Asian and African Affairs (Gardiner), 02.06.1954 no. 829 in *FRUS, 1952-1954* vol. 9, 1567-1571; R. Shiloah (Washington) to G. Rafael (summary), 25.01.1954 no. 37 in *Documents on the Foreign Policy of Israel (DFPI), 1954*, Companion Volume, 38-40.

28 M. Sharett (Jerusalem) to the Israeli Embassy in Washington (summary), 11.06.1954 no. 244 in *Documents on the Foreign Policy of Israel (DFPI), 1954*, Companion Volume, 234-235.

29 Political Consultation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (summary), 30.05.1954 no. 230; Y Tekoah (Jerusalem) to the Minister of Foreign Affairs (summary), 14.06.1954 no. 247 in *ibid.*, Companion Volume, 214-215, 237-238.

Lebanese and were not prepared to risk the whole mission by urging Beirut to abstain this national resource. Israel was urged to cooperate and it was made clear that results, or lack of such, could have a direct effect on the future level of aid. Evidently, the Arabs had become more willing to cooperate and admit Israel larger quantities of water, but the Litani and out of basin use were still out of the question. The Israelis countered that the Litani could not be excluded if the scheme were to be regional; they were not prepared to cede water to Jordan when the Litani could be used to satisfy the Jordanians, water was a matter of life and death. Johnston was also informed that the claims to the Litani stretched back to the Paris Peace Conference and the Mandate border question, and was yet again asked to 'influence' the Lebanese.<sup>30</sup> The sides were too far apart to make any progress, and the first meeting resulted in little more than agreement to allow for more technical issues to be discussed the following day. Based on the meeting and informal talks, the Israelis concluded there was little hope of the Americans giving in on the Litani issue; the outlook, however, was far better on other aspects of the negotiations.<sup>31</sup>

In the following meetings the Litani issue was laid to rest. The Israelis agreed to temporarily abstain from Litani waters, rather than withdraw from the talks. It was, yet again, pointed out that the exclusion of the river meant that it would be impossible to reach a truly regional scheme. Nonetheless, the negotiations moved forward, before halting on the question of the size of the quantities of water assigned to each state. Israel adopted more moderate claims than put forth in the Cotton Plan.<sup>32</sup> The country was, however, 'not prepared to accept the final allocation of waters from the other two rivers, which could be to its detriment without those of the Litani.'<sup>33</sup> As the talks stranded on this issue the Israelis put forth a proposal quite similar to the one Eban had presented, they suggested development in the areas where there was agreement. If this proved successful the Lebanese would be more willing to share the Litani, and with a larger quantity of water to share an overall agreement would be within reach. This was flat out rejected by the

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30 United States Division to the Israel Embassy in Washington, 21.06.1954 no 258 in *ibid.*, 409.

31 *Ibid.*, 408-410; Companion Volume, 248.

32 Lowi 1993, 92-93, 99.

33 Minister of Foreign Affairs (Jerusalem) to the Ambassador and the Minister in Washington (summary), 07.07.1954 no. 280 in *Documents on the Foreign Policy of Israel (DFPI), 1954*, Companion Volume, 272.

Americans. Despite the many difficulties of the talks, some progress was achieved on the allocation issue.<sup>34</sup>

During the second round of talks, Johnston rejected the Israeli claim to Litani, but agreed to another key point in the negotiations – that the Israelis should be allowed to divert Jordan waters out of the basin to irrigate the Negev Desert. This was destined to cause protests from the Arabs.<sup>35</sup> Neither the question of Litani nor that of out of basin use arose again in the following rounds of talks. The Johnston Negotiations did not lead to any formal agreement, but became an important point of reference on how the Jordan River Basin could be shared between the riparians.<sup>36</sup>

### **In the Aftermath of Johnston**

The political scientist Miriam R. Lowi, drawing on American and Israeli sources, has pointed out that the Litani issue was dropped in the second round of talks.<sup>37</sup> The Documents on the Foreign Policy of Israel reveal, however, that the Litani was not completely out of Israeli or American minds. Johnston had hardly left Israel for the second time before the Litani reappeared in the negotiations. This time, however, the American delegation used the river as an incentive for Israeli acceptance of an allocation plan under discussion. The Israelis claimed that they could not agree to any smaller quantities of water, but the Americans wanted them to accept some cuts in order to reach a deal. They presented a number of advantages for settling the issue at this juncture and first among them was ‘the possibility of obtaining the Litani River waters at some later date’.<sup>38</sup> This was to be the American mantra. When asked a few months later, Johnston did not reject the claim, but said it had to be discussed later.<sup>39</sup> Washington would not give the Israelis a firm

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34 J. Herzog (Jerusalem) to the Israel Minister in Washington (summary), 29.06.1954 no. 264; Minister of Foreign Affairs (Jerusalem) to the Ambassador and the Minister in Washington (summary), 07.07.1954 no. 280 in *ibid.*, Companion Volume, 272-275, 256-258; The Chargé in Israel (Russell) to the Department of State, 24.06.1954 no. 838 in *FRUS, 1952-1954* vol. 9, 1585-1586.

35 Lowi 1993, 92-93.

36 *Ibid.*, 93-114.

37 *Ibid.*, 92-93, 244.

38 Meeting: P. Sapir – G. Barnes and O. Troxell (Washington) (summary), 23.07.1954 no. 298 in *Documents on the Foreign Policy of Israel (DFPI), 1954*, Companion Volume, 292-293.

39 R. Shiloah (Washington) to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (summary), 22.12.1954 no. 566 in *ibid.*, Companion Volume, 546.



rejection of the Litani issue; merely ask for its postponement. Whereas Israeli representatives, arguing for larger allocations, would again point out that waters were going to waste in one Arab country, while they had to give up on water to the benefit of another Arab country.<sup>40</sup>

Despite putting off Israeli claims and being involved in the Litani River project, the U.S. was still open to consider a diversion of the Litani, and in February 1955 the American Embassy in Israel pointed out that Litani waters could improve the situation on the Gaza strip. The prospects for this area were quite grim, and, according to the report, the only solution for economic development and permanent settlement of refugees there would be to utilise the Lebanese river. It was noted that the suggestion had been made possible by Israeli willingness to allow the water to be passed on and Lebanese willingness to share its waters with the other Arabs. The final sentence on the issue noted that the undertaking would prove expensive, but 'might not be much more so than Jordan waters which will be applied by Israel to contiguous Negev area.'<sup>41</sup>

### **A Government in Turmoil**

On the domestic scene, Sharett had to sustain a constant pressure from hawks in both governmental and army circles. Ben-Gurion had left behind a Cabinet prone to crisis, whereas Sharett was forced to keep a lid on the situation in order to keep his predecessor out of the political scene. The perhaps most destabilising element proved to be the Ben-Gurion appointed Defence Minister Pinhas Lavon. He was constantly challenging the authority of Sharett and urging for a more activist approach. In the end, he would prepare the way for Ben-Gurion's return. There were a series of issues causing a rise in the tension level both in domestic and foreign affairs, and at the core laid the conflict lines between the hawks and doves. The peak of the tension was reached as an Israeli spy ring in Cairo was activated without (sufficient) political authorisation. The Egyptians managed to catch the spies, and the affair caused a major crisis for and in Israel. Found neither guilty nor innocent Lavon was made to bear the responsibility for the scandal, and resigned in February 1955.<sup>42</sup>

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40 Telegram From the Embassy in Israel to the Department of State, 17.02.1955 no. 25 in *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1955-1957*, vol. 14 (1989), 63-65.

41 Telegram From the Embassy in Israel to the Department of State, 14.02.1955 no. 23 in *ibid.*, 56-58.

42 Shlaim 2001, 104-123.

In Mapai, there was a strong wish for the return of Ben-Gurion, and by the end of the month the grand old man had come out of retirement to replace Lavon and resume control of the Ministry of Defence. Within a week he launched a raid on the Egyptian controlled Gaza strip; this was the most severe clash since the war and set the tune for Ben-Gurion's relationship with Sharett as well as the Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser. The Egyptian-Israeli tension rose and Ben-Gurion and his followers kept calling for action, thus placing Sharett under constant pressure. The two Israeli leaders were too far apart, and before the general election of July 1955 Ben-Gurion decided to protest publicly about the foreign policy adopted by the government. Sharett clung on to the premiership following the election, but in November Ben-Gurion resumed power. Sharett had to settle with control over the Foreign Ministry.<sup>43</sup>

### **The Fantastic Plan**

Whilst in retirement Ben-Gurion had the opportunity to revive, to use historian Avi Shlaim's phrase, 'a pet scheme of his'.<sup>44</sup> This was the old plan which had not been followed up in the war of 1948. The plan consisted of two parts: to include (what had become) southern Lebanon in the Jewish Homeland and redraw the Lebanese border to follow the Litani River; and to establish a loyal, Maronite government in the neighbouring state. This would serve as the first step in reorganising the Middle East, breaking the Muslim dominance and providing a better position for Israel.<sup>45</sup>

The main source for Ben-Gurion's attempts at initiating the plan is Moshe Sharett's personal diaries. These have yet to be translated from Hebrew to English, but luckily they have been examined by Shlaim and lecturer in international history Kirsten E. Schulze.<sup>46</sup> In addition, the Association of Arab-American University Graduates has published a selection of translated excerpts from the diaries – where the Lebanon plan is included. Although the publishers readily admit their agenda, they also claim to provide precise translations and

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43 Ibid., 123-142.

44 Ibid., 106.

45 Ibid., 104-110; Morris 2000, 494-498.

46 Shlaim 2001; Schulze 1998.

that the excerpts are in line with the diaries as a whole.<sup>47</sup> When compared to the investigations of Shlaim and Schulze this appears to be true. As the excerpts do not in any way contradict their findings, but do add to the picture and provide additional details, it is relevant and worthwhile to consider this publication.

In February 1954, whilst still in retirement, Ben-Gurion was asked to meet with Sharett, Lavon and Dayan to discuss how Israel ought to react to the coups taking place in Egypt and Syria. Both countries were in a state of disarray, and Lavon and Ben-Gurion wanted to exploit the situation for military advances. Lavon suggested seizing the Gaza Strip, at the expense of Egypt, and the demilitarised zone between Israel and Syria. Ben-Gurion disapproved of the Gaza suggestion, but was in favour of a move into the demilitarised zone. But at the time, Sharett had the upper hand and refused to exploit the situation for military advances against either of the two neighbours. Ben-Gurion then put forth his plan for Lebanon. He wanted to initiate a Maronite takeover of the country, and for them to establish a Christian state. Upon hearing the plan, Sharett pointed out the weakness of the Maronites and argued that such a scheme could lead to nothing but chaos. Ben-Gurion then countered that the borders of Lebanon could be adjusted to ensure a Maronite majority. Sharett was certain this would force the Lebanese Muslims into the Syrian fold, and he reckoned the scheme would cause considerable international difficulties for Israel. Despite the strong pressure, Sharett told them there would be no mingling in Lebanese affairs at that juncture.<sup>48</sup>

Ben-Gurion followed up on his idea the day after the meeting and sent a letter to Sharett explaining the natural and historic rightfulness in adjusting Lebanon's borders and establishing a Christian state there. Judging from the material, it appears the main consideration was using the Christians (i.e. Maronites) to break the Arab chain. The border adjustments were merely necessary to achieve this, and the Litani River was not mentioned. In his answer, Sharett agreed in principle, but maintained that Ben-Gurion had misunderstood the situation completely and that there was no way to establish such a state or for it to survive.<sup>49</sup>

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47 Livia Rokach and Moshe Sharett, *Israel's sacred terrorism: a study based on Moshe Sharett's Personal diary and other documents* (Belmont, Massachusetts: Association of Arab-American University Graduates, 1982), vii-xi.

48 Shlaim 2001, 104-110; Rokach and Sharett 1982, 24; Schulze 1998, 37.

49 Rokach and Sharett 1982, 24-28.

The issue, however, was not settled, and in May the following year Minister of Defence David Ben-Gurion saw new hope for his plan. Syria was still suffering from an unstable domestic situation and hostile relations with Iraq. Ben-Gurion put forth that if an Iraqi invasion of Syria were to occur, it could be serve as the required pretext for an intervention in Lebanon. Sharett responded with yet another firm rejection and saw little point in discussing the matter. Dayan, on the other hand, saw little point in waiting for the Iraqis to invade; he argued that a Maronite officer could simply be bribed into creating the spark required for the IDF to advance up to the Litani River. Sharett pointed out that the issue was slightly more complex than Dayan and Ben-Gurion suggested and argued that an invasion of Lebanon could mean war with Syria.<sup>50</sup> He did, however, agree to establish a committee to follow the situation in Lebanon.<sup>51</sup>

By the autumn of 1956, Sharett was no longer an obstacle for Ben-Gurion's grand vision and the plan was resuscitated. The French and Israelis had come a long way in reaching an agreement on how to deal with Egypt. Nasser had nationalised the Suez Canal, and the British were also willing to resort to violence to secure their interests. In late October the three countries met on ministerial level in the outskirts of Paris to unite against their common enemy. At this meeting the French, Israeli and British representatives hatched the scheme which was termed the 'Sinai Campaign', or the 'Suez Crisis' in retrospect outside Israel. To the Israelis there was high esteem in entering into an alliance with France and the United Kingdom; this was no small breakthrough in their foreign relations. At the first meeting, before the arrival of the British, Ben-Gurion suggested that the situation could be seized to bring about a reorganisation of the Middle East. The canal would be placed under international rule, the West Bank annexed to Israel, Jordan would go to a British dominated Iraq, and France would secure their interests in Lebanon – which would not run further south than the Litani River. Ben-Gurion told them the United States would appreciate the arrangement as it brought stability and kept the Russians out of the region. There was no Israeli dove around to ruin the mood, but the French were not eager to enter in on such an endeavour. Although not unwilling to go along with Ben-Gurion's proposal, they pointed out that time was of the essence, that there were small odds for getting the British to join in and labelled the plan as rather ambitious. Therefore, for the

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50 Shlaim 2001, 129-136; Morris 2000, 494-498; Schulze 1998, 39.

51 Rokach and Sharett 1982, 28-29.

time being, it would have to do with a mere toppling of the Egyptian government and a denationalisation of the Suez Canal.<sup>52</sup>

Despite the combined efforts of Israel, France and the UK, Nasser was not toppled. Although a military success, the massive political pressure from the U.S. and the Soviet Union forced the three allies to back down.<sup>53</sup> Ben-Gurion stayed on as Prime Minister for seven more years, but, according to Shlaim, he reoriented Israel's course following 1956. The borders were accepted and Ben-Gurion became less bent on expanding them; the safety of Israel should rather be based on the strength of the IDF, which would deter the enemies.<sup>54</sup> There was nonetheless still an interest in South Lebanon and maintaining the Maronite connection. There were even a few calls for advancement towards the Litani, as was seen during the Lebanese civil war of 1958.<sup>55</sup> As an overall, strategic aim for Israel or its leaders, however, the river seems to have disappeared – perhaps as a result of the reorientation. After he stepped down, Ben-Gurion could refer to the Litani River and South Lebanon as aims which could have been reached in 1948 or before, but this idea was dropped from his agenda after 1956.

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52 Shlaim 2001, 162-185; Mordechai Bar-On, *The gates of Gaza: Israel's road to Suez and back, 1955-1957* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1995), 233-247; Bar-Zohar and Ben-Gurion 1978, 236-237; Dayan 1976, 177-179; Morris 2000, 289-290.

53 Shlaim 2001, 162-185.

54 Ibid., 187-192, 216-217.

55 Morris 2000, 494-498; Schulze 1998, 55-65.

## 6. Conclusion

‘I have seen the whole of Palestine up to the Litani’<sup>1</sup> – Chaim Weizmann

### **The Zionist Perception**

The Zionists held a special interest in the Litani River and went to considerable lengths to have it included in Palestine. Later this influenced Israeli politics, where the river would reappear on the agenda. But what was the root of this? – Why did the Litani River hold such a strong position in Zionist ideology?

The Litani River was of interest from the outset of Zionism. The aim of Jewish nationalism was to build a homeland in Palestine – this was where the Jews belonged. Even while suffering under the Russian pogroms, the Zionists turned down the British offer of land in Africa: they would not settle for anything but the ‘promised land’.

They were well aware of the many hardships that awaited anyone who would set out on tilling the soil of Palestine. Numerous reports had given descriptions of the difficult situation, but also on how it might change. Water was the key to success, and the whole Zionist endeavour depended on it.

Despite of neither Palestine nor Eretz Yisrael having precisely defined borders, the Litani River was generally perceived as a part of both. As the Zionists embarked on their quest, they considered the Litani as an obvious and important composite of their future Jewish Homeland. Herein lays the very core of the Zionists’ interest in, and claims for, the river: in their perception, the Litani River was not merely an important resource, it was part of their ancestral homeland.

When the necessity for water is seen in the context of the national ethos, it becomes clear that the interest in the Litani was rooted in a feeling of pursuing a legitimate aim which had to be insisted on – for the survival of the future generations.

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<sup>1</sup> Chaim Weizmann in personal correspondence: The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizmann: October 1918 - July 1920 1977, 262-263.

## **The Zionist Argumentation**

As the British conquered Palestine, the realisation of a Jewish National Home was closer than ever. To the Zionists it was obvious that the Litani belonged to the entity to be, but not everyone shared their view. At the stroke of a pen the Foreign Ministers of the United Kingdom and France cut the Litani off from Palestine. As Sykes and Picot concluded their agreement in 1916, the question of Palestine's border was but one of many under discussion and it is fair to assume very little thought was offered any Zionist opinions on the issue. This changed dramatically as the Zionists learned of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, and they made quite the effort to put their case across. How did the Zionists argue for the right to the Litani River, and how were these claims received?

The British and Zionists had a common interest against the French and combined forces. Extensive lobbying and close relations with numerous key officials, including the Prime Minister, helped forge the strong bond that would in turn allow the Zionists to feed the diplomatic cannon of the British. In February 1919, at the Paris Peace Conference, the Zionists claimed the Litani River watershed as the northern border of Palestine and argued for the need for water. At this juncture, the argumentation concerning the river was relatively limited, and it appears to have remained so until the round of failed negotiations in June 1919.

As it became clear the French had no intention of giving up the Litani River, both the British and Zionists mobilised. In the autumn of 1919, the British made an attempt to establish their front lines along the Litani, but this failed due to French diplomatic pressure and they were forced further south. Parallel to, and following, this, it was sought to gain a better bargaining position. Weizmann began supplying the British with reports suggesting Palestine needed the border to run further north than what had been asked for in February. Whereas the British tried their luck with a border proposal which offered the French some concessions if giving up on the Litani, but it was all in vain. By the end of 1919, the Zionists began presenting further arguments for the inclusion of the Litani. These were based on an expert survey of Palestine, which had found that due to the poor state of the country, water was needed for it to prosper. The main point was that by removing the Litani from Palestine, the future of the land would be jeopardised. It was also added that the area north of the river had sufficient hydro resources at hand, thus diverting water to the south would not bring harm to anyone.

The Zionists exercised extensive lobbying for their case, but the results were limited. In British and American circles, the Zionists were more or less preaching to the

converted, whereas the French would not accept the argumentation. If the Litani River was to fall to the Zionists, the French wanted something in return. The Zionists themselves had little to offer. The British were willing to give some concessions, and the border ended up north of what Sykes and Picot had laid down, but they would not offer enough to make the French give up the Litani.

After the mandates were settled, the Zionists made no claims to the Litani River, but they did make several attempts to expand their influence in South Lebanon – in particular by attempting to buy land and by requesting permission to settle Jews in the area. These efforts were denied by the French. The same was the case with suggestions for embarking on joint projects with the Lebanese political elite (the Maronites). The French feared Zionist influence in South Lebanon was a threat to their authority and therefore viewed every Zionist endeavour in their zone with great scepticism.

### **The Israeli Argumentation**

The interest in Litani did not die out during the mandate or the first few years following the establishment of the Jewish state, so in the 1950s Israel began requesting water from the river. Did the arguments for the right to the Litani River change with the establishment of a state?

Israel's role in the Johnston negotiations of the mid-1950s was in many respects quite different from the one played by the Zionists at the Paris Peace Conference. First of all in that the Johnston talks dealt primarily with the water question, whereas this had merely been one of many issues in Paris, but the Litani remained a subordinated topic in the discussions. The Israelis could to a larger extent rely on their own participation in the negotiations and the threat of withdrawing from these. Lobbyism could still be a useful tool, but not as predominant as it had been for the Zionists during the mandate negotiations. As Johnston was dependent on Israeli cooperation for his diplomatic attempts to succeed, he could not put a final end to the Litani question without offering concessions. Furthermore, and less favourable for Israel, there was only one great power to negotiate with, and the Americans were not as ready as the British had been to accept the arguments for including the Litani. Nor could the U.S. be played out against the Soviets, Lebanese or Arabs in the same manner as the UK and France could be played out against each other. A final considerable difference between the negotiations was that, unlike the UK following the First World War, the U.S. had no self interest in including the river.



After the war of 1948, Israel had the chance to seize the Litani River, but, unlike the Zionists 30 years earlier, the Israelis were not pursuing border adjustments. They hoped, however, to benefit from the river through cooperation with Lebanon. By the mid-1950s, Israel was seeking the inclusion of Litani waters in a comprehensive hydro scheme for all the countries sharing the Jordan River Basin. And they were not arguing merely for their own interest, Litani was not to be included for the sake of Israel, but for the common good of all the peoples sharing the Jordan River Basin. As the Israelis saw it, the Litani might be within one country, but it could not be exploited by that country alone – the whole region ought to be taken into account. This argumentation was quite different from the one used by the Zionists during the Paris Peace Conference and in its aftermath, they had argued on the basis of the needs of their country to be – although they asserted that their exploitation of the Litani could also benefit the Lebanese.

Like the Zionist before them, the Israelis were eager to point out how the Litani River was utilised, or rather – not utilised. They repeatedly claimed that the river was going to waste, thus implying that most of the water was superfluous in Lebanon – just like the Zionists had argued during the Peace Conference and mandate negotiations.

Hydrological surveys and plans were important in shaping Zionist and Israeli policy alike. Extensive investigations and expert opinion formed the Israeli's claims during the Johnston talks, and they readily passed their information on to the Americans. But, in contrast to the British 35 years before them, the Americans could draw on a relatively wide collection of surveys and their source of information was not limited to one of the participants in the ongoing negotiations. So whereas the Zionists in the first quarter of the century nearly held an information monopoly on the hydrological needs and possibilities of Palestine; the Israelis, in the middle of the century, could find their conclusions contradicted by both Americans and Arabs.

In the second round of the Johnston negotiations, Israel agreed to put the Litani question on hold. In return for this, Johnston agreed to Israel's right to transport water beyond the Jordan watershed. This appears to be rather typical for both the Zionist and Israeli negotiations concerning the Litani River. Like the Zionists attempted when arguing for favourable borders with Transjordan, the Litani issue could be used as a lever. Although a difficult aim to pursue, it was not regarded as totally unreasonable by their un-Arab counterparts. So making a harsh stand on the Litani question could prove to provide some concessions on other issues. Zionists and Israelis alike never benefitted from the Litani directly, but it did make a decent bargaining counter.

## **The Role of Litani in Israeli Water Schemes**

The Litani was clearly beyond the borders of Israel, yet the river could be assigned a role as the country developed its hydro plans. Why has the Litani River been a part of Israeli water schemes?

As the Israeli engineers and experts developed plans for the best utilisation of the country's water resources, they relied on the work already conducted before the state was founded. Despite being beyond the borders of their assigned homeland, the Litani River held a special place in Zionist minds and influenced their work. A clear example of this is how the report written by Lowdermilk was received. This came a few years before the founding of Israel, and Lowdermilk's work became the starting point for the new state's water schemes. The Litani River had been omitted from the grand vision on how to best utilise the Jordan River, but the water company of the Yishuv and Israel suggested it could be included. The Litani was not a tributary of the Jordan River, but could relatively easily become one (and that of a significant size) and was therefore too interesting to be forgotten.

Shortly after Israel was founded, the American engineer Hays was commissioned to develop Lowdermilk's ideas into a true scheme. And again, the Litani was kept out of the equation. The Lowdermilk-Hays plan stranded as there was no climate for cooperation between the Jordan River riparians. So the Israelis used what they could of the scheme, but had to limit their scope to what they could access. Therefore the Litani disappeared from their plans.

The river reappeared, however, in the Cotton Plan of 1954. This was a scheme developed as a counterproposal in the ongoing Johnston negotiations. At the time Lebanon's own development of the Litani was underway, but Cotton argued for the diversion of the river into the Jordan. The Jordan River riparians would enjoy more water and lower levels of salinity, whereas Lebanon would benefit from a higher production of electricity. The Cotton Plan was designed for use in the negotiations, and its purpose was primarily diplomatic rather than technical. It was nonetheless an expression of the logic behind the principle of diversion of Litani waters to the Jordan River Basin.

The Litani River was never assigned a key role in any Israeli hydro scheme. In most of the schemes the river was left out, but the execution of any of these would not prohibit the inclusion of the Litani at a later stage. All the various plans were based on exploitation

of the Jordan River Basin, and the Litani could serve as an extension of this. This was why the Litani River appeared in (some) Israeli water schemes. From a technical point of view, most of the infrastructure would already be in place, all that was needed to benefit from the Litani and improve both the quantity and the quality of Jordan waters was a relatively easy diversion.

### **Two Currents**

Litani held a special position in Zionism and was an aim pursued by both Zionists and Israelis. But is there a pattern? How did the Zionist interest in the Litani River influence Israeli politics?

There appears to be two different Zionist and Israeli perspectives on the Litani River. They were both anchored in the national ethos and often found themselves pursuing the same aims. Their reasons for pursuing these aims, however, could vary, and in some respects the two were profoundly different. Those following what one could call the *water perspective* would work for water from the Litani and tend to have relatively little interest in the lands of South Lebanon. Whereas the *land perspective* camp would be primarily interested in acquiring the land; the river would often be looked upon from a military strategic point of view, and water would merely be a beneficiary by-product and a good alibi for aggression.

These tendencies became apparent already at the time of the Paris Peace Conference. In 1919, the agronomist Aaron Aaronsohn led the way. He had studied Palestine and South Lebanon and was convinced the Litani River was needed to secure the future of the Jewish Homeland. His main consideration was economic, and that meant water supply. Weizmann, who held a high interest in the town of Sidon up to the conference, eventually agreed and supported Aaronsohn in drawing the line south of the town. There were still critics who would have preferred to claim a border running further north, due to political and strategic considerations, but their ideas were not followed up.

During the Mandate Period the split became more apparent, although still in the form of tendencies rather than obvious opposites. There were reports arguing for the utilisation of the Litani as if it ran within Palestine; and attempts of expanding the sphere of interest northwards, into South Lebanon, appears to have been generally approved of within both camps. Nonetheless, as the Zionists began to commission and develop hydro schemes these would either not take the Litani into account or suggest cooperation with

Lebanon for joint benefit of the river. These reports recommended border adjustments to include the Jordan tributaries, but the Litani was of a different entity and it was not suggested to take physical control of the resource. This stands in direct contrast to David Ben-Gurion, who at the very same time talked of diverting the Litani to the Negev Dessert. In his mind, the Jewish Homeland stretched all the way to the Litani, but his interest in the river was primarily for its military strategic value. He made this point already in 1918, and he stuck with it throughout his long political career. In the interval between his two periods as Prime Minister he developed the idea further. The result was a grand plan where occupation of South Lebanon up to the Litani and an alliance with a loyal Maronite government in Beirut would be the first steps in breaking up the Arab unity against Israel.

In the war of 1948, the IDF reached the Litani, but did not attempt to conquer the whole of South Lebanon and withdrew as part of the armistice agreements. In the immediate aftermath, expansions into Lebanon were generally disapproved of in Israel (this view was also expressed by Ben-Gurion). Besides the many difficulties with such an expansion at the time, one factor for the change seems to be the hope of negotiating a deal with Lebanon. Both at the time of the armistice agreement and the first few years thereafter, there were signs of such hope within Israeli circles, and there was expressed belief that Lebanon could be willing to agree to both peace and water cooperation. This could suggest dominance of the water perspective. It is, however, clear that it was impossible to pursue the land perspective. With this in mind, the aftermath of 1948 is perhaps best understood as a period when the two camps were not in opposition.

By the mid-1950s it became increasingly apparent that there would not be any cooperation with Lebanon. Israel could argue for regional, Arab-Israeli, schemes, but this was not politically feasible. Also in the negotiations with Johnston the Israelis argued for the inclusion of the Litani River, but with little success. And as the Litani faded politically out of reach, the tide shifted back towards the land perspective and Ben-Gurion's grand plan rose on the agenda.

The water and land perspectives coincide with other conflicting Israeli lines of policy. The dove Sharett would eagerly pursue the Litani in the Johnston negotiations, but he strongly opposed Ben-Gurion in his calls for use of force. Whereas the hawks, thinking in military strategic terms, would not oppose diplomatic efforts to increase the water available to Israel, but they still remained in favour of taking direct, territorial control over the Litani River and southern Lebanon.

In this respect it is worth bearing in mind the realist and liberalist perspectives on water politics. Although the theories concern themselves primarily with shared resources, they can help illuminate this case as well. Those believing in the water perspective generally appear to have been more ready to abide by agreements and pursue their aims diplomatically and being considerably more interested in cooperation. When the Litani was suggested as a war aim, it was from the land perspective camp with water playing a less significant role. This case can therefore be seen as giving weight to the arguments of the liberalists, although any form of cooperation never materialised. Lowi's points are also worth considering. Israel was by far the stronger party, speaking in military terms, but Lebanon still held the upper hand politically as the Litani River flowed wholly within its borders. Hence, Israel should, in this respect, be seen as the weaker of the two and, just as according to Lowi's theory, the one to argue for cooperation and seeking to influence an outside power to intervene.

### **Unforgettable Litani**

The Litani River flows through the history of Zionism and Israel. But to claim the river has been the driving force behind every strategic decision made by the Zionists and the Israelis would be a gross exaggeration. Rather, the Litani question has been like a Phoenix; it has been laid to rest a number of times, only to rise again – and then to the top of the agenda.

So the dream of Litani rose again from the ashes of 1956. In 1978, the IDF invaded southern Lebanon, in an operation bearing the striking name 'Operation Litani', and in 1982 Israel chose to permanently occupy South Lebanon up to the river.<sup>2</sup> There were a number of factors behind these decisions, but it did not take long before Israel was suspected and accused of having an ulterior motive – the Litani River.<sup>3</sup>

Hopefully, future research will discuss this topic further. For now, it remains clear that the Litani River has been a recurring theme throughout Zionist and Israeli history at least until 1956. The valuable resource in the north was simply too tempting to be forgotten.

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<sup>2</sup> Morris 2000, 494-502.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g.: Amery 1993; Naff and Matson 1984.



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