

Aquifer moves flow of discussions on water diplomacy in Middle East

# Water as a window of opportunity?

What seemed to fly under the radar of national media attention in October was a meeting of the Israeli and Palestine ambassadors at a two-day IGS-Sense conference.

TEXT: ROBBIN ENGELS >

Assistant Professor Irna van der Molen is no stranger to conducting research projects in conflict areas. Her aspirations: to explore how scientific knowledge and technological innovation can make a contribution to reduce tensions—no matter how small of a contribution—to resolve conflict. And in the heated case of the drought-ridden Middle East, two states are divided over many issues, including their scarce water resources. Both sides, Palestine and Israeli, are trying to reach equitable agree-

ments on shared water and maybe science can help guide the process.

Engineer Saul Arlosoroff, who retired director and chairperson of the Finance and Economic Committee of Mekorot, the National Water Corporation of Israel believes in the need for further talks: 'Since the 1993 Oslo agreements, there have been at least 100 conferences, workshops or meetings and not once were the two ambassadors present together.' The IGS Conference was a milestone for the UT as both the Israeli and Palestine ambassadors took part in productive sessions on diplomacy, despite the presence of underlying tensions.

Several years ago, Van Der Molen went on a tour of some of Israel's water infrastructure, and was impressed, 'During my visit to Tel Aviv, I was taken on a field trip by the chief hydrologist of Mekorot. The company plays a leading role — at national and international level — in water resources management.' During recent



Irna van der Molen. Photo: Gijs van Ouwkerk

years of drought, the water levels from the lake and aquifers have dropped below the red line, causing a stop to water pumping.'

One of the largest infrastructural projects that Mekorot constructed in the 1950s-1960s was the National Water Carrier system that brings

## A symbolic story?

'The Mountain Aquifer is shared between Israel and Palestine. It doesn't require much imagination to realize that (over) pumping of water from the aquifer on one side can have an impact on the water available on the other side of the borders between Israel and the Palestinian Territories. The pumping station and control center of the National Water Carrier are located at Lake Tiberius, next to the location which is visited by tourists for the Bible story referring to the miracle of the multiplication of five loaves and two fishes that fed thousands of people. If the amount of water could only be multiplied, as in the story of the loaves of bread and fishes, then tensions might be reduced over water issues between both countries. Yet, miracles don't happen that easily, and certainly not in the highly politicized context of the Middle East' Assistant Professor, Irna van der Molen chatting in her Ravelijn office on alternative solutions in the context of shared water.





## Palestine Ambassador

**Name:** Dr Nabil Abuznaid

**Born:** 1 January 1954

**Place of birth:** Hebron, Palestine

**Education:** Master of Arts in International Relations  
Howard University, Washington, DC

**PhD International Relations**

**Warsaw University, Poland**

**Ambassador Nabil was appointed to the head of the Palestinian Delegation to the Kingdom of the Netherlands in September 2009. Prior to his appointment, he served as Chargé d'Affairs in the PLO Mission to the United States beginning in 2008. During the Oslo Peace Negotiations, he was advisor to the late Chairman and President of the PLO, Yasser Arafat.**

**The ambassador participated in peace talks in Annapolis in November 2007 and participated in many international conferences on Palestine. He is author of numerous articles and books and has been interviewed by CNN, Al Jazeera and Time magazine. Ambassador Abuznaid's dissertation was written on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and is entitled, 'From Confrontation to Negotiations.'**

water from the Sea of Galilee (Lake Tiberias), the Mountain aquifer and the Coastal aquifer to Israel's arid southern region. Annually, four hundred million cubic meter of water is pumped from the catchment basin of the Sea of Galilee into the National Water Carrier.

### Increase the pie

When Van der Molen gives lectures to her students at the university, she tells them there are many ways to look at a situation. If you have a bowl of oranges, for example, and two people want them then how do you divide them? Do you give  $\frac{3}{4}$  to one person and  $\frac{1}{4}$  to the other? Or does one person perhaps only want the peel? How can you 'increase the pie?' She tells about her lesson to parallel one growing problem which is water losses. 'Water is seeping away due to leakages because of lack of maintenance and unaccounted water losses. To build wells, the Palestinians need to get permits from the Joint Water Committee, in which both are represented, but which is not perceived to operate to the equal benefit of both.' In turn, cooperation is necessary as water has no boundaries; yet this cooperation proves difficult in reality.

To add to the mix, infrastructural problems in

Palestine territories cause 35% water losses in Palestinian areas. Israeli has less of a loss at 15 percent, partly due to more advanced technologies that are in place and self-sufficiency which allows them to make changes independently. In terms of organization, the water sector in Palestine is more fragmented. 'Palestinians have to get permission from the Israeli Joint Water Committee in order to change something in the three western bank areas labeled A, B and C that were created with the Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement of 1995. 'While there is some information sharing on the use and extraction of ground water, not all data is shared due to the political nature of the distribution of water,' says Van Der Molen. But the question begs asking: 'How can you plan sustainably if you don't have updated scientific information?'

### Needs-based versus rights- based

What is the minimum quantity of water that people need in order to live and survive? At the national level, the final negotiations on water issues will take a long time to be realized. 'Water plays a crucial role and there are two ways to examine the problem: one is a needs-based approach and the other a rights-based approach or a combination of the two,' she

reflects, while her palms are facing upward, making a weighing-scale motion. Every year, the World Health Organization (WHO) sets minimum standards. ' >



## Israeli Ambassador

**Name:** Dr Haim E. Divon

**Born:** 20 October 1950

**Place of birth:** Jerusalem, Israel

**Education:** Legum Baccalureus (Bachelor of Law)

Hebrew University of Jerusalem Law Faculty in 1975

Ambassador Divon joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1975 and served in the Israeli consulates in Bombay and Toronto, headed the Israeli Mission in Sri Lanka, and has served as Ambassador to Ethiopia and to Canada.

Back in 1990-91, as Director of the Ethiopian Affairs Desk, he coordinated the inter-ministerial team responsible for the planning and implementation of Operation Solomon, the airlift of Ethiopian Jews to Israel.

The ambassador is married to his wife Linda and has three children. As Head of Israel's National Agency for International Cooperation (MASHAV), Ambassador Divon was the initiator and signatory to the Memorandum of Understanding with the World Bank Institute.

The rights-based approach is what is fair and represents a completely different point of view. As a fictitious example, she offers, 'What if you estimate that one side needs a minimum of

100 liter water capita per day while the other side uses 200-250 liter capita per day. Is this perceived as fair? Future possible demographic changes also play a role. What if the population doubles?' According to the peace agreement, there were also targets set and agreed upon that the Israelis should supply the Palestinians with a certain amount of water per year and – while they do comply – it is not sufficient, and comes at a price. 'The further development of independent water infrastructure by the Palestinians is constrained, especially in area B and C; keeping Palestinians dependent on Israeli water supply.'

### Scenarios, solutions and trust

How then can negotiators who hold divided interest make concrete decisions? Can science help collective negotiation sessions visualize future outcomes? According to Van der Molen, whose calm, almost-swan-like presence soothes most anyone around her, the long-term perspective is shaded with tints of optimism by building trust, finding scientific solutions and

showing through scenarios how the changing landscape will be affected by various choices. In the near future, she's exploring follow-up activities with the Technical University of Delft and the ITC Faculty. She has also invited both ambassadors to return to the University of Twente for guest lectures, offering students a glance at the problems in the area.

Not to be ignored, she acknowledges the realities on the ground, 'The ongoing struggle for power between Hamas and Fatah makes for a venerable and delicate two-state relationship. There is the "fear of normalization" by some Palestinians. Some are not happy about transboundary cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian Authorities if this only aims to solve urgent water-related problems in a particular area. They argue that one needs to find agreements at national level otherwise existing inequalities will never be solved. On the one hand, water is a "window of opportunity," yet on the other hand, if we don't acknowledge how politically-charged it is, then one might only reinforce the current situation.' |