

# **Politics of the Dead Sea Canal: a Historical Review of the Evolving Discourses, Interests, and Plans**

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## **Abstract**

This article explores how the idea of a canal connecting the Dead Sea with either the Red Sea or the Mediterranean Sea has evolved. It analyses the proposals, the official interests, and the undeclared reasons. It provides a critical understanding of the discourses behind the complex hydro-political dynamics in a changing and contested topography within a context of a wider geopolitical conflict. This study sheds lights on the relations between interests, discourses, and the canal project. The key finding is that competing interests, discourses, and actors have emerged supporting or challenging a canal plan.

## **Keywords**

Dead Sea; Jordan; Israel; Palestine; Jordan Valley; hydropolitics

## **Introduction**

The issue of a canal connecting the Dead Sea with either the Mediterranean Sea or the Red Sea has been widely studied. The plan of linking the Dead Sea with either of the other seas goes back at least to 1665, and, this article argues, the discourses backing the plan have changed as the interests behind the plan evolved due to changes in the broader contexts. However, the literature lacks a comprehensive study on the history of these projects – and the interests behind them –, as most attention was on studies of feasibility from engineering or socio-economic studies (Al-Omari, Salman, & Karablieh, 2014; Arad, Beyth, & Vardi, 1990; Beyth, 2007; McPhail & Lintner, 2013; Salem, 2009; Willner et al., 2013). Therefore, this article investigates the history of plans for connecting the Dead Sea with either the Red or Mediterranean Sea, contributing to the literature of water history.

The literature on water history focuses on increasing historical understanding of the relationship between water and humankind. Water history shed lights on the complex processes that have impacted water resources, their management, and use, shaping water resources over time, situating them in the historical broader contexts. By looking at the historical broader context, it is therefore possible to understand why water resources have been imagined and shaped in particular directions, unpacking the contingents reasons of the time influencing these decisions. In this sense, investigating water from a historical perspective allows understanding of the broader context of that time, hence of the evolving economic, political, social, and environmental history.

This work also explores how the plans, the discourses, and the interests behind them fit into the broader contexts, as the highly securitised context of the Lower Jordan River (LJR), the wider Arab-Israeli conflict and security issues cannot be ignored. Recent studies show how discourses are deployed to influence water policies, with several articles discussing the Israeli- Palestinian case in particular (Feitelson, Tamimi, & Rosenthal, 2012; Fischhendler & Katz, 2012; Fröhlich, 2012; Jägerskog, 2001; Mason, 2013; Messerschmid, 2012). It emerges that while discourses are deployed by actors to support their interests and to drive towards certain solutions, discourses need to be situated within the broader context (Hussein & Grandi 2017; Hussein, 2016). Recent literature has also showed that discourses are one among other elements influencing water governance, and therefore they need to be contextualised within the historical period they were suggested (*ibid.*).

The data deployed in this article comes primarily from reports, semi-structured interviews, and documentation collected during fieldwork in the Levantine region

between July 2011 and December 2014, as well as secondary literature and material published online.

## **Analysis of Historical Plans and Discourses**

This article reviews the plans around a canal connecting the Dead Sea, as well as the interests and discourses around these plans. This article investigates the evolving discourses over time, as the plans are suggested in order to solve perceived problems or issues of the period they are suggested. Discourses are central in constructing and defining what the issue is in people's minds, and consequently driving towards what the best solution – in this case plan – to solve the issue is. In other words, discourses represent the issue, they open a range of suitable solutions for the identified issue, and silence others not in line with their representation of the issue (Leach and Mearns, 1996). Dominant discourses are therefore powerful as they drive towards certain solutions in line with the understanding of the issue constructed and reproduced by the dominant discourses.

Hajer (1995), and later Dryzek (1997), argues that discourses frame an issue in a way that policy makers can solve it by identifying appropriate solutions. Hajer (1995, p. 44) defines discourse as “an ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena, and which is produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices.” Discourse coalitions comprise actors that for different interests support a particular framing of an issue, driving towards - albeit for different reasons and interests - the same way of talking and thinking about it, opening similar solutions and policies (Hajer, 1995). This article therefore examines the historical evolving discourses over a project of a Dead Sea Canal, situating the discourses in the historical period and within the broader context of that time.

This section outlines the historical evolution of the ideas of a canal, examining the discourses and interests behind the different plans, as well as the broader contexts that motivated the changes. This section first analyses the period until the nineteenth century; second it looks at the twentieth century until 1973; third it explores the 1970s and 1980s; fourth it investigates the 1990s until 2009; and finally the period from 2009 until the current days.

While the idea of a Dead Sea canal is not a new one, the interests, motivated by changes in the broader context, saw a parallel construction of discourses supporting the plans. As outlined in the table below, the actors behind the plans and discourses evolved: individual explorers backed by their governments in the 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries;

Zionist leaders backed by Zionist discourses in the twentieth century; governments in the second half of the twentieth century; and governments, NGOs, the private sector, and international organisations in the last decades. Also the discourses evolved: transportation in the nineteenth century, Zionism, irrigation, hydropower, and state - building in early twentieth century; hydropower until the 1980s; regional peace and cooperation, stabilise the Dead Sea level, and desalinisation since the 1990s (Fischhendler, Cohen-Blankshtain, Shuali, & Boykoff, 2013, p. 5)..

[Table 1 here]

### **A Shorter Way to India (up to the nineteenth century)**

The idea to link the Dead Sea to the Red Sea goes back to 1665, when the Jesuit scholar Athanasius Kircher mentioned in “Mundus Subterraneus” that the two seas could be linked (Kempe, Naumann, & Dunsch, 2013, p. 3), understood by Glausiusz (2010) as a canal for transportation purposes (Glausiusz, 2010, p. 1119).

Also for transportation purposes, in 1855, the English captain William Allen (Allen, 2013) suggested a network of canals from the Mediterranean Sea (from Haifa) via Tiberias to the Jordan River, the Dead Sea, and down to the Red Sea (to Aqaba) , abandoning the idea of passing through the French - controlled Suez area (Abitbol, 2006, p. 96; Allen, 2013, p. 343; Asmar, 2003, p. 331). Allen describes the benefits of this canal – which are the interests behind this project - as mainly commercial: a shorter way (time- wise) to India “instead of taking the circuitous route of Cape of Good Hope” (Allen, 2013, p. 343) for the Empire, and more revenues for the local Sultan for the transit on the canals (ibid: 344). The canal route would be longer than transiting via land, but it “would be equalised by the time taken by the transit through Egypt” (Allen, 2013, p. 343).

The official discourse about the British Empire backed research on the Mediterranean Sea – Dead Sea – Red Sea (Med-Dead-Red) plan was mainly for opening a convenient route to India (Goren, 2011, p. 22-23). However, the undeclared interest was to maintain the British global naval role, challenged by the French plans of constructing the Suez Canal (Fletcher, 1958, p. 564; Hoskins, 1943, p. 373). Instead, the French discourses were challenging the British global naval hegemony, and supported research in the region on the construction of a Suez Canal (ibid). Among the British discourses against the French project, there was a discourse of “slave labour” forced to work in precarious conditions on the canal. The British Empire has also supported a revolt among the employees on the canal aiming (and then resulting) in the abolition of the *corvée* system (Brown, 1994, p. 122-124;

Quirke, 2009, p. 227-228).

The relevant actors in the region were British business interests (private sector) backed by their governments, and the Ottoman Empire ruling on Palestine until the First World War. Officials of the British Empire, including General Charles Gordon, suggested the plan several times in the following decades. The discourse was mainly constructed through declarations of explorers, influential businessmen, and governmental officials. The discourses were constructed and reproduced by governmental institutions and voiced by national media, and they were situated within the broader context and in line with the governmental interests and geopolitical alliances.

There were also some discourses potentially challenging Allen's idea. However, they are acknowledged by the English captain but simply considered as "sacrifices" (Allen, 2013, p. 343): 2,000 square miles will be submerged, together with the city of Tiberias of some thousands inhabitants, and a few Arab villages. In addition, the "Jews (...) would object strongly to the loss of Tiberias, which is one of the four holy cities" (ibid: 345). However, for Allen, "they are strangers from Russia, Poland, & c., who have no property in it, and come there in the hope of seeing the Messiah rise out of the lake, which is a general expectation among them, though on what authority it is not known" (ibid: 345). These counter-discourses were not prominent at that time and did not make it into the public media domain in England, and were acknowledged as potential discourses by Allen.

### **Hydropower Production, Irrigation, within the Zionist Political Ideology (1902 - 1973)**

As the Suez Canal opened for shipping in 1869, having an impact on the British shipping industry and trade (Fletcher, 1958, p.556), the British Empire interest in a Mediterranean Sea – Dead Sea Canal (MSDSC) for transportation decreased. The shift in trade routes by the opening of the Suez Canal coincided with the rise of Zionism during the late nineteenth century – beginning twentieth century. At that time, nationalist ideologies affected European people - including European Jews - and an increasing anti-Semitism in Europe - culminated in the Dreyfus affair in France and in pogroms in Eastern Europe (including the Russian Empire) - resulted in the Zionist movement calling for a Jewish nation in Palestine (Zoltán, 2010, p. 199). Palestine was under the Ottoman Empire until the end of the First World War, and then a British Mandate until 1948 (year of establishment of Israel). After 1948, the main actors became Israel, Jordan and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO).

This broader context is key to understand the new discourses and interests in relation to the construction of a canal. While first Kremensky and then Bourcart suggested a canal for hydropower generation to Theodor Herzl, founder of political Zionism, in the last years of the nineteenth century, Herzl published in 1902 *Altneuland*, a novel outlining Herzl's vision for a Jewish state. This, together with declarations of Zionist leaders of the time, constructed the new discourse supporting the canal. The main text for the interpretation and construction of this new discourse around the canal is Herzl's novel and following declarations of Zionist leaders. In this novel, he outlines his vision of a Mediterranean Sea Dead Sea Canal (MSDSC) for hydropower and irrigation (Asmar, 2003, p. 331; Beyth, 2007, p. 365). Substantiation of this emerges from the text itself:

“We take great quantities of fresh water from it [the canal], which are pumped into reservoirs and used for irrigation in areas where water is as necessary as it is superfluous here. [...] The water power at source had attracted many industries” (Herzl, 1902, book IV).

The agriculture and hydropower discourses were strategic for the Zionist plans of creating a Jewish state for several reasons (Fröhlich, 2012, p. 129; Zeitoun, 2008, p. 63) as they embedded the following interests: to feed the growing Jewish population (and linked with the absorptive capacity of Palestine); to build a new identity (Fröhlich, 2012, p. 129; Jägerskog, 2001, p. 3-4) - having an important nation-building role (Elmusa, 1996, p. 70; Feitelson, 2002, p. 300; Lowi, 1995, Alatout, 2006); and to produce electricity and hydropower for a future Jewish state (Elmusa, 1996, p. 70). Lipchin (2008) asserts that water was also used as an argument to convince the world that they should "give" Zionists the land, because they managed the land efficiently with advanced technological methods, making the “desert bloom;” it was an argument that fit in well with the productivity and efficiency discourses that were emerging at the time (Lipchin, 2008, p. 77-78).

David Ben-Gurion in 1935 and Weizmann in 1947 reiterated the importance of the conveyance project in order to secure water resources for a future Israeli state. This is a clear instance of what Hajer calls as discourse alliance, meaning different discourses that embed different interests and support and open the same solution, in this case the canal project. This discourse was dominant within the Zionist movement, it was constructed and sanctioned by Zionist leaders, and it was deployed

by Zionists aiming at seeking support from within the movement and from the Western countries for the construction of a canal.

### **Hydropower as the main guiding Discourse (1970s-1980s)**

After Herzl's plan, the idea of taking advantage of the elevation (being the Dead Sea the lowest point on earth being about -400m) was suggested for producing hydropower during the British Mandate by: the engineers Rutenberg in 1920 and Blass in 1943, Ladermilk in 1944, Mekorot (Simcha Blass) in 1941, and the Jewish Agency in 1945 (Stern & Gradus, 1981, p. 265). After the establishment of the state of Israel, in 1948, the government commissioned several studies on the construction of a conveyance project, including: Cotton report in 1955, Batz and Haversham in 1966. However, the project for hydropower was strongly considered by the Israeli government only after the 1973 energy crisis (Beyth, 2007, p. 365-366; Glausiusz, 2010; Stern & Gradus, 1981, p. 265), when the discourse of energy security became dominant.

The broader context allows understanding of this shift: after the Balfour declaration in 1917, the Jewish Agency further sanctioned the discourse of hydropower as vital for enabling the establishment of an Israeli state; only after the 1973 energy crisis the discourse of national energy security became dominant in the public media and domain, linking the energy issue with national security. These discourses were firstly constructed by the Jewish Agency and Zionist leaders, and by the Israeli government after 1948, embedding the interests of the actors constructing and deploying these discourses.

In 1973, a MSDSC Israeli plan was guided by energy interests, but this was not the only reason (Steinberg, 1987, p. 340-342). This article argues that another discourse supporting the project was the technological and scientific symbol of the project itself. On the one hand, the hydropower interest, guided by the energy security discourse informed by the energy crisis of 1973, resulted in the government commissioning different studies on the issue. For instance, in 1974 the government established a committee to explore options for hydropower generation, in 1976 the Tahal Group was commissioned an assessment on the different options found by the committee.

On the other hand, the discourse on the technological advancement, for Steinberg, was also at play. This discourse was constructed and deployed by the Israeli government and is to be seen directed to a Jewish audience and as an

undeclared interest. This symbol of technological and scientific advancement can have symbolic importance for the Jewish worldwide population, “a source of pride that extended beyond rational cost-benefit calculations” (Steinberg, 1987, p. 342). Both these discourses backed the construction of a canal, for different interests. However, due to financial and political reasons, the 1973 MSDSC plan was abandoned in 1985 (Gavrieli, Bein, & Oren, 2005, p. 9).

Nevertheless, counter-discourses were also deployed to oppose the construction of such a canal. The main actors constructing and deploying counter-discourses were NGOs, international organisations, and governments. In fact, the international community strongly opposed the plan for several reasons: human rights, sovereignty, and international law concerns (among others, from China and USSR); ecological, nuclear fears; and potential economic damages to the Jordanian industries (Jordan) (UNGA, 1981, UNEP, 1983). These shows a multiplicity of counter-discourses guided by different interests and a variety of actors, all opposing the Israeli discourse for a canal. These counter-discourses were deployed to shape decisions in the international organisations’ institutions. This resulted in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) passing resolutions demanding the Israeli government to cease planning the MSDSC.

In 1981, as a response to the Israeli MSDSC plan, the Jordanian government briefly considered a Red Sea - Dead Sea Canal (RSDSC), with hydropower as the main driver (Asmar, 2003; Nahhal, 1982). This project would have been politically less controversial, as not raising international concerns linked to issues of human rights, and with marginal interference with groundwater and agricultural activities. However, the discourses against this plan were two: a hydrological discourse as it would have been passing through a seismic area and an economic discourse as it was more expensive than the MSDSC plan because longer (Asmar, 2003, p. 332). Nevertheless, this would have been more feasible considering the broader context in which it was situated.

The energy security and hydropower discourse and interest were at play also in the plans suggested in the 1990s, but this article argues in the section below that they were not the main dominant drivers of the suggested plans, but minor discourses.

## Fresh Water? (1990s – 2009)

The Oslo agreement signed in 1993 between the Israeli government and the PLO included a declaration calling for inter-regional economic development plans, while the peace agreement signed between the Israeli and Jordanian governments in 1994 called for regional watershed development and cooperation (Murakami, 1995b). Hence, only after 1994, a regional cooperation could be politically viable and the momentum for transboundary water cooperation was created (Murakami, 1995a, 1995b). After the Oslo agreements, the main actors became the Israeli, Jordanian governments and the Palestinian Authority (officially known as Palestine as of 2012).

The role of the broader context is strategic in shaping interests, plans, and discourses around the canal project. In fact, these bilateral agreements had a strong impact on the regional context, “animating” the discourses surrounding. While in the past the Israeli and Jordanian governments saw each other as enemies, now they consider themselves as neighbours and potential partners for the economic development of the Jordan Valley (Brand, 1999, p. 60). The agreements resulted in a change of interests and discourses guiding the canal plan. This article argues that while before the agreements the political conflict was between the governments, now it is between pro and anti-project sides.

The World Bank had a key role in promoting regional cooperation for a RSDSC. A regional feasibility study in 1996 had as goals mainly desalinisation and the stabilisation of the level of the Dead Sea. This study, commissioned by the World Bank and financed by the Italian government, was produced by the Harza Group. The Harza Group conducted an extensive pre-feasibility study for the RSDSC project, considering five different alignments from a technical, environmental, and economic perspectives, and concluded that the most appropriate alignment was the one entirely within Jordanian territory and 203 km long (Asmar, 2003, p. 332; Gavrieli et al., 2005, p. 10). The main goal of the proposed project was to create potable water through desalinisation. Other additional goals that were identified were: the stabilisation of the level of the Dead Sea, the production of hydropower, developing the area, and strengthening the Israeli-Jordanian relations (ibid).

The supporting discourses constructed at that time mainly by governmental officials and World Bank personnel included: the need for water sources to combat water scarcity, saving the dying Dead Sea, and foster regional cooperation (Asmar, 2003, p. 332; Gavrieli et al., 2005, p. 10). These discourses were deployed in donors’ arenas, public meetings, and conferences, and were reproduced by local and international media. Nevertheless, the study also identified potential negative

impacts: on the environment, on the health thermal tourism sector, and the local industries. In addition, the risks for terroristic attacks and the seismic area were identified as negative aspects (Asmar, 2003, p.332-333).

In 2002 the Israeli and Jordanian governments publicly committed to a project to save the shrinking Dead Sea (Gavrieli et al. 2005: 10) backing it with the peace and regional cooperation discourse. These discourses were clearly situated in the broader context, as they were a product of the Peace Treaty signed by the two governments in 1994, and in line with the efforts of international donors of strengthening the political economy relations between Israel and Jordan. However, also the delay in agreeing on a feasibility study of the project is explainable by consideration of the broader context.

In fact, only in 2005, after the end of the *intifada*, Israelis, Jordanians, and Palestinians agreed to conduct a feasibility study for a RSDSC plan, coordinated by the World Bank (WB, 2013). The Palestinians were not members of the project in 2002, as the *intifada* was starting. In 2005, also the Palestinians agreed to support this project. While the main goal of this project is the stabilisation of the level of the Dead Sea, minor goals were “Desalinate water / generate energy at affordable prices for Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinian Authority; [and] Build a symbol of peace and cooperation in the Middle East” (ToR WB, 2005: 8).

However, there are official discourses and interests, and undeclared ones, as summarised by Yaakov Garb, a professor at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev who participated in the World Bank study: “it’s basically a ‘drinking water for Amman’ project that is disguised as a ‘saving the Dead Sea’ project” (Levitan, 2012). Discourses against the plan were developed and backed on environmental basis from local NGOs, especially during the publication of ToR and during the public consultations in the region done by the World Bank. The discourse alliance against the plan is not only environmentalists, but comes also from other sectors: the Israeli Environmental Protection Minister Gilad Ardan fearing a negative impact on the health tourist industry (Orsam, 2013) and a group of twenty NGOs for social justice, demonstrating that environment and society cannot be separated.

### **Jordanian Water Scarcity Discourse as a Driver for the Canal (2009 - Present)**

In 2009, following delays of the RSDSC plan seen by the Jordanian government as mainly due to the Israeli civil society, the Jordanian government announced the intention to proceed with a Jordanian only plan called “Jordan Red Sea Project.” This

project would bring water from the Red Sea to the Dead Sea, having as a priority goal desalination and water supply to Jordan, and as other minor goals stabilising the Dead Sea level, and hydropower production. The project is supported by the Jordanian water scarcity discourse, “the country’s water security is dependent on the desalination of seawater in the future,” as underlined by Mousa Jamani, Water and Irrigation minister of Jordan (Namrouqa, 2012), and by the climate change discourse (Al-Omari et al., 2014; Earle et al., 2015).

The RSDSC project is one of the most prominent solutions opened by the water scarcity discourse in Jordan, and it is seen as a priority for the national water security of the country. For a former minister of the Ministry of Water and Irrigation (MWI), “the national water security in Jordan is related to the RSDSC project”, as the only solution for the water scarcity in Jordan can be desalination (interview 1). Al Hamidi reports in the Jordanian newspaper Al Rai that for Jordanian specialists and governmental officials “the ‘two seas project’ is the only sustainable solution to solve the water scarcity issue” (Al Hamidi, 2012). In addition, it shows that for the Jordanian government the natural solution to water scarcity, often also referred to as the *only solution*, is to be found on the supply side, through mega projects and engineering solutions, and the RSDSC is a key project and an important national priority (Al Hamidi, 2012).

The Jordanian Prime Minister Ensour stated that the RSDSC will be able to solve the water scarcity issue, which is further aggravated by the Syrian refugees (Editor, 2015). This is also the line supported in the Jordanian textbooks, where the construction of dams and of the RSDSC project are strongly supported and never questioned and seen as the solution for the issue of water scarcity. At conferences on water resources in Jordan, Jordanian high level water professionals from the MWI continuously underlined and emphasised the necessity of building the RSDSC as the only long term solution to the issue of water scarcity in Jordan, as water scarcity in Jordan is due to the limited water resources available.

In particular, the arguments deployed to emphasise that this is the only solution are that: water demand is increasing due to population growth, immigration, and refugees, and water resources are limited and decreasing due to aridity and low precipitation, and climate change. When the governmental personnel were asked why this is the main solution, their reasoning was that the only solution is to increase water resources in the country through supply side and engineering solutions, and given that all rivers and tributaries have been dammed, wastewater treatment are in place, and the groundwater resources are being over-exploited, the main solution is

desalination through the RSDSC (interviews with governmental personnel 3, 4, 5, 6, 7). This also shows the dominant supply side mentality in the water sector in Jordan, which backs the hydraulic mission of the state in order to solve the issue of water scarcity through mega projects.

### **The December 2013 Agreement**

The Israeli, Jordanian, and Palestinian water ministers signed a new agreement on the 9<sup>th</sup> of December 2013 (Ministry Foreign Affairs of Israel, 2013). The agreement has been advertised as the first phase of the RSDSC plan aiming at saving the Dead Sea (ibid.). The agreement is about building a desalination plant in Aqaba to provide water to Israel, Jordan will receive water from the Tiberias Lake, and Palestinians will be sold more water from Israel at a price and conditions to be negotiated among the two governments; and a small pipeline will connect Aqaba with the Dead Sea.

A group of Palestinian NGOs sent a letter on the 21<sup>st</sup> of October, 2013 titled "Palestinian NGO statement on the World Bank-sponsored Red-Dead Sea Canal." This letter to the Palestinian Authority and the PLO asked them to stop their support to the RSDSC as they see it as forcing the "Palestinian population to consent to their own dispossession and to compromise on their own rights." The criticism of the environmental NGOs resulted in further studies being done, and a delay of around three years (Glausiusz, 2013, Glausiusz, 2010).

After the announcement of the 2013 agreement, the Palestinian civil society has strongly criticized the 2013 agreement, and as a Palestinian water expert put it, "the deal for Palestinians is, that they will be allowed to discuss even higher rates of dependency from Israel and its desalination surplus (additional 30 mcm/a). In this particular case, it will be extremely difficult for Palestinians to avoid paying the full desalination cost, or the „costs“ that Israel will unilaterally stipulate (for example including cross sector subsidies for Israeli agriculture included in domestic bulk water prices)." In fact, the agreement does not fix set costs for the water to be sold to Palestinians, but the cost it will have to be negotiated and agreed by Palestinians and Israelis. He concluded by stating that in this scenario, "Palestinians are out of the game".

A foreign diplomat based in the region explained that the reason for which the Palestinian minister signed the agreement, was due to the pressure the Palestinian Authority had received from the highest Jordanian and US officials (interview 11). Nevertheless, the official position of the Palestinian Authority is in support of the agreement signed, as underlined by the Palestinian Water Minister Mazen Ghunaim,

when speaking in 2017 at the Fourth Arab Water Week: “We reassure that Palestine is committed towards pressing ahead with the Red Dead project until it is fully implemented... we remain involved in ongoing hectic negotiations with Israel based on the memorandum of understanding which was signed in December 2013 in Washington,” aiming at saving the Dead Sea and the investments in the Dead Sea area (Namrouqa, 2017).

Instead, for the Israeli Minister Shalom "this is a historic agreement that realizes a dream of many years and the dream of Herzl" (Israeli Ministry Foreign Affairs, 2013). This article asserts that while there is a return to Zionism as an official discourse, Herzl's Zionism is essentially complete; hence, this discourse could be hiding other interests. This article asserts that this is a water exchange plan, with a regional perspective, opened and backed by the Jordanian dominant discourse of water scarcity.

Also for a representative of the NGO Eco Peace (former Friends of the Earth Middle East) and a senior researcher at the University of Jordan, Jordan's priority is to increase the water supply, also fearing further reduction of the water scarce resources due to the impacts of climate change, and the population would never accept to rely on Israel for its water supply. For this reason, they could not sign an agreement of water exchange with Israel, but only an agreement to save the Dead Sea with an element of water saving (Interviews 8 and 9). This shows that different discourses open the same policy-solution of a RSDSC, discourses embedding different interests.

These discourses are situated in the broader context, which provides tools to explain the evolving dynamics, discourses, and interests. In fact, the Israeli interest is to support the Jordanian political stability, given the geopolitical Israeli priority of supporting the stability of its Jordanian ally. Looking at the broader context and at the Israeli interests, it is possible to capture the reasons why the Israeli government supports the Jordanian government by supplying more water or by supporting the RSDSC project, strongly wanted by the Jordanian government.

Firstly, Israel and Jordan share their longest border. Second, Israel has diplomatic relations with Jordan, with which has strong military and security ties. For this reason, for Israel the Jordanian border is safe and well protected by the military and security cooperation with the Jordanian government. Third, Jordan is one of the two Arab countries that recognises Israel, contributing to providing Israel with political legitimisation. Fourth, the Israeli government sees Jordan as a buffer zone, a safe and stable political territory that divides them from Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Especially nowadays, Jordan separates and protects Israel from the Islamic State forces deployed in parts of Iraq and Syria. Fifth, Jordan absorbed several waves of Palestinian refugees,

and is seen from the Israeli government as a territory for the absorption of even more Palestinians in the next decades. Finally, both Israel and Jordan are close allies of the US.

For all these reasons captured by looking at the broader context, the Israeli government has as a top priority maintaining and supporting the political stability of Jordan, and it does so also by strengthening the cooperation over water resources, as this is seen as vital by the Jordanian government (Barari, 2014, p. 69-71; Barari, 2004, p. 7; Solomon, 2014; Welsh, 2014).

## **Discussion**

It emerges that the voices against the canal, while in the nineteenth century were only mentioned as potential, they became more effective and visible in the 1970s and 1980s with the discourse of the international community within the UN and since the 1990s with the environmental and human rights NGOs as well as some ministries within the same government supporting the plan.

From a scale perspective, this article showed that while in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the proposals for a canal were linked to governmental scale interests and discourses were constructed and voiced by the governments, in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, counter-discourses were constructed and deployed by non-governmental actors, local communities, and international organisations. In other words, while in the nineteenth century the discourses were produced and backed by the government and the approach was mainly a top down one, in the twentieth and twenty-first century this was enriched also by counter-discourses mainly bottom-up, challenging the top-down governmental sanctioned discourses. Consequently, this resulted in a flourishing of discourses and counter-discourses constructed on different scales following and embedding different and competing interests. Nevertheless, discourse alliances of different interests supported and challenged the different proposals for a canal.

The RSDSC plan and in particular the 2013 Agreement shows a discursive alliance of the three governments in support of the plan, which is somehow challenged by some NGOs and academics. The article showed how the three governments have deployed different discourses to publicly support the canal plan.

The Israeli government used Zionist discourses to support the agreement, de-emphasizing aspects of regional cooperation while emphasizing completing the Zionist dream narrative. Instead, the Jordanian government focused on the discourse of water scarcity in the country and portrayed the canal and desalination as the only solution for Jordanian water security. The Palestinian government, instead, given the

few gains from the canal project, put at the centre the environmental discourse of saving the Dead Sea to try to find some support from its public opinion and to justify signing the agreement. This shows that the discourses developed over the last century are still very current and they are used still by the governments to justify their support (or lack of) to the new plans, to move the debate towards the environment, nationalism, or water security rather than discussing more politically contentious issues such as regional cooperation.

In a nutshell, this article suggests that compared to the nineteenth and early twentieth century, in the last decades there have been more discourses constructed to support and to challenge the proposals, discourses constructed by actors on multiple scales and aiming at shaping the plans, as for the role played by environmental and human rights NGO, the World Bank, and the UN.

Especially since the peace agreements and the regional canal plans, it emerges a richness in the quantity and quality of discourses backing and challenging the RSDSC, with more actors involved at different scales, more goals, undeclared interests, and unofficial discourses at play than in the past. Further research could investigate the evolvement in the relation between the relevance of the public opinion in shaping policy and decision-making, to understand whether the increased deployment of discourses and structural power is targeted to the internal audience for domestic politics purposes.

The political conflict here between the discourses is strongly influenced and guided by the broader context, in which the discourses are situated. By consideration of the broader context, this article identified the evolving interests and discourses. For instance, before the peace agreements of the 1990s, the political conflict was between the various governments, which had competing interests and generated discourses supporting different proposal for a canal. After the mid-1990s, this article argues that the evolving context has influenced the interests of the governments and stakeholders, and consequently it has animated and enriched a variety of discourses supporting and opposing the plan by actors on different scales. Consequently, the political conflict between the discourses becomes between pro and anti-project sides rather than between governments.

## **Conclusion**

This article analysed the main plans for connecting the Dead Sea to either the Mediterranean or the Red Sea. In particular, it has examined the interests behind these plans and discourses supporting or challenging them, situating them within the broader

context. This article is situated within the literature of water history, and its original finding is that the discourses backing the plan of a canal have changed as the interests behind the plan evolved over time due to changes in the broader contexts. It has also showed that old discourses are still deployed today by the three governments to justify their cooperation, to find support from their public opinion, and to move the debate from regional cooperation – which is quite contentious – to issue of national security such as water security for Jordan; completing the Zionist dream for Israel; and saving the Dead Sea for Palestine.

This article suffered from a general limitation of the data for the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This emerges from the availability of only dominant discourses and mainly at the state-governmental scale. It appeared difficult to find discourses, which may have existed, against the proposed plans and from the local communities living in the area. In addition, research for that period has been mainly based on critical review, without the possibility of semi-structured interview to who was involved in suggesting those plans and promoting the discourses of that time. Semi-structured interview and critical discourse analysis result to be key for this study.

Further research could explore the contexts where discourses are deployed by the different actors in different arenas in the last decades: a peace discourse and to save the Dead Sea discourse at the World Economic Forum and World Bank in Washington D.C., and to desalinise water discourse promoted in other forum. Finally, further research could also analyse how the evolving regional context after the so-called “Arab Spring” is shaping interests and discourses in relation to the proposal of a canal.

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Table 1

<b>When</b>	<b>Who</b>	<b>Project</b>	<b>Discourses</b>	<b>Official interests</b>	<b>Hidden interests</b>	<b>Geopolitical context, what has changed</b>
1855	English Captain William Allen	Mediterranean Sea - Jordan River- Dead Sea- Red Sea	Pro: Shorter way to India; Against: local population and Jews	Convenient route to India	Global naval role	Suez occupied by France
1902 - 1973	Theodor Herzl, Zionist movement	Mediterranean Sea – Dead Sea Canal (MSDSC)	Pro: Irrigation and hydropower (Zionism)	Irrigation and hydropower production	Convince the world that they should "give" Zionists the land, because they managed the land efficiently; Symbol of proud	Nationalisms, anti-Semitism, Zionism for a Jewish nation in Palestine
1973-1985	Israel	MSDSC	Pro: Hydropower, Zionism; Against: Human rights	Hydropower	Symbol for Jewish of the world	Energy crisis
1981	Jordan	Red Sea – Dead Sea Canal (RSDSC)	Pro: Hydropower; Against: expensive, geological	Hydropower	-	Energy crisis
1990s-2009	Jordan, Israel, and Palestine (since 2005), NGOs, academics, private sector, and WB	RSDSC	Pro: Peace, Save the Dead Sea, hydropower, desalination Against: environmental, sovereignty, impact on industries and health tourism	Save the Dead Sea, desalination, enhance regional cooperation	Mainly a desalination project	Peace treaties
2009-2013	Jordan	RSDSC	Water scarcity, CCDs	Desalination, save the Dead Sea, and hydropower	-	Delay in the WB study due to civil society's concerns (mainly Israeli)
9 Dec. 2013-present	Jordan, Israel, and Palestine, NGOs, academics, private sector, and WB	RSDSC	Save the Dead Sea, CCDs, water scarcity	Save the Dead Sea	Desalination	Syrian refugees in Jordan, and regional political instability since 2011