

The Marker

ANCHORING ISRAEL-JORDAN COOPERATION

A recent report by the World Bank examines the feasibility of the Red Sea–Dead Sea Conduit project, based on cooperation between Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority.

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By Eitan Yudilevich.

After years of examinations, numerous reports and opinions for and against, the World Bank has recently published a report on the feasibility of the Red Sea–Dead Sea Conduit project, based on cooperation between Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority. The report shows that the project - the main goal of which is saving the Dead Sea, combined with water desalination and electricity production – is technically feasible, but environmental concerns still remain.

The support for the project on the part of Israel, as reflected in the media, is not a given. When the World Bank began working on the report, Israeli experts were very skeptical, and some even offered alternatives for saving the Dead Sea. Some of those alternatives did not require cooperation with Jordan, which apparently regards the project as critical to its water-supply needs and to the fate of the Dead Sea.

Another aim of the project is “creating a symbol of peace in the Middle East”. The report by the World Bank discusses this point as well, and lists a number of conditions under which the project can actually contribute to peace in the region: participation by all the interested parties in all stages of the project, sharing of information and scientific data among all participants, and the prevention of an environmental disaster.

While the publication of the report received wide coverage in the Israeli media, it was not the case in Jordan – which, like Israel, was preoccupied with its own elections. Jordan is going through a difficult period, and issues like the economy, healthcare and other socioeconomic concerns are the ones about which Jordanians worry right now. All this makes the raising of billions needed for the project rather challenging. Even though Jordan is entitled to aid from the World Bank, its fiscal problems suggest that such aid is more likely to be directed at issues such as healthcare and education.

The willingness on the part of Israel to advance the project may serve as an anchor to increasing the otherwise weak cooperation between the two countries. Notably, the very intensive joint effort put toward analyzing the report and issuing recommendations, is in itself a bright spot worthy of praise. Still, while this enormous project is materializing, other, less ambitious cooperative steps should be encouraged - as they can have great importance in “warming up” the relationship between the participants towards the actual implementation of the project. Such steps should include the encouragement of tourism from Jordan to Israel, and making it easier for Jordanian businesspeople to visit Israel.

Two-way travel is essential for the cooperation between the two countries. Jordanians should be able to visit Israel as easily as Israelis can now visit Jordan. According to the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, there is a declining trend in the visits from Israel to Jordan, and this trend is apparent on the ground at the Jordan River Crossing. This is not a good sign, and contacts should be increased and strengthened. Recently the Israel-Jordan Chamber of Commerce began to revive its activity, with the hope of renewing the past practice of meetings between businesspeople of both countries.

Naturally, all this greatly depends on the political climate – this is true for tourism, as well as for a \$10-billion project. One hopes for the establishment of a more positive atmosphere which may enable the creation of the “symbol of peace in the Middle East”.

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