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**Swiss Agency for Development  
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# Water and Sanitation

# Swiss Cooperation Programme Middle East

Switzerland contributes to  
efforts to turn water into a  
pathway for peace, not conflict

## Swiss Cooperation Programme Middle East

- Protection and Migration;
- Education and Income
- Conflict prevention and Peace promotion
- **Water and Sanitation**

### Yarmouk Futures Programme

The Programme seeks to facilitate the emergence of law-based, equitable and sustainable transboundary water arrangements with a focus on the Yarmouk tributary of the Jordan River.

It aims to generate knowledge, build capacity, and develop common understanding of the most pressing issues surrounding water use in and around the basin. This is accomplished through research projects, technical, legal and negotiations training, infographics, videos, public lectures and media pieces. Communications activities reach the general public to create a much greater awareness of Yarmouk issues as a case study.

The centre-piece of the Yarmouk Futures Programme is the establishment of the Centre for Water Diplomacy, at the Jordan University of Science and Technology. The Yarmouk Futures Programme is jointly supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, the Jordan University of Science and Technology and the University of East Anglia.

Water is life and a vital component for growth, prosperity and civilisation. It does not stop at borders and thus requires a good relationship between the countries that share it. According to the Global Water Partnership (GWP), transboundary basins account for about 60 percent of the global freshwater resources, while 153 countries share 310 rivers and lakes and 592 aquifers serving 42 percent of the world's population. The United Nations 2020 World Water Report states that more than two billion people live in countries with a high "water stress", and nearly four billion people reside in areas that are faced with serious water shortages for at least one month per year. These numbers are mind-blowing, thus it is not surprising that water has been a bone of contention between nations for centuries.

Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Turkey are part of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region which covers an area of 433,970 square kilometres and stretches across 12 countries faced with acute water problems. However, the plight of the people cannot simply be attributed to the unavailability or scarcity of water, it is also due to the insufficient management and politicisation of this precious commodity. "Even though some of the countries in the Middle East such as Lebanon have sufficient water, the quality is often far below drinking quality which has to be improved," says Dr Mark Zeitoun, Professor of Water Security and Policy at the University of East Anglia in the United Kingdom. "Countries have to share this common resource more fairly which takes a lot of negotiating between governments. For this reason, it is important that the stakeholders are well-informed and have refined negotiation skills," Zeitoun continues.

In order to fill these gaps, the Swiss Agency for



Development and Cooperation (SDC) supports the Water Diplomacy Centre (WDC), which was established at the end of 2019. The centre is part of the Yarmouk Future Project and aims at coordinating research and providing training for cooperation and negotiation skills in the field of water and diplomacy across the Middle East and North Africa. "It is essential to share information and provide the decision-makers with correct data and tools for transboundary water management," explains Mufleh Alalaween, the SDC's regional advisor and liaison officer on water cooperation in Amman. "The centre is the first of its kind in the MENA region and is a flagship for Switzerland."

The WDC also aspires to equip decision-makers in the region with expertise and knowledge in transboundary water issues with a focus on legal, negotiating, and technical aspects. "Our main aim is to train professionals from various local and national institutions, international organisations, university professors, researchers and students who are working in the water sector," says WDC director Professor Suhil Kiwan who also lectures at the Jordan University

of Science and Technology where the centre is physically based. "As many of the participating students are likely to be decision-makers in the future, we eventually want to integrate the training into the university's curriculum and equip them with the right information about the basin."

### **The benefits of virtual workshops**

By the beginning of 2021, the WDC had conducted three training sessions, two of them online due to COVID-19-related restrictions. "During our first physical session before the pandemic, we hosted 20 participants in Jordan which was a great success," the SDC's regional water advisor Mufleh Alalaween explains emphasising that even though meeting in person was important for future discussions, the online sessions also had some benefits. "The courses became very popular and from the approximately 300 people applying to join, we were able to host 80 in our second session which was done online,"

he continued. Most of the participants were from Jordan, Lebanon and Syria but interest reached as far as Morocco, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates . "I got a lot of useful information through the WDC which I am sure I can apply in my future negotiations," said environmental lawyer Ms. Isra AL Turk from Jordan who participated in the second workshop.

"Our training sessions unite different people from different walks of life and different countries who would otherwise never meet," says Muna Dajani, who is in charge of the WDC's communications. "The courses are not only open to people who work in the ministries and are in charge of the planning and designing. We also want to engage and empower those, who may not have the technical know-how, but have experience. They know the context, they



live in the communities and they understand the needs," Muna continues. .

### **Broad knowledge is essential**

Other than equipping the participants with the necessary negotiation and diplomatic skills, the WDC's main purpose is to provide them with a broad knowledge of all water-related issues and raise awareness of the current crisis facing the water sector. According to Muna Dajani, the fact that water remains confined to the realm of international relations and engineering is a major problem in the region which requires reframing social, cultural and political values and meanings of water. "We need to be able to see and engage with our water sources to understand what it's all about," she says. "In Palestine, for example, people cannot even reach the Jordan River. So, how could they possibly understand that it is a depleted river when they cannot see or touch it." For this purpose, Muna and her team have produced a series of short videos explaining the water situation in the Yamouk basin. "Our concept is to go 'inward' and



engage with conversations with the basin communities in order to be able to tell the water stories of those communities,” Muna explains. “The videos show how people access and value water, how they cope when they don’t have access and are detached from it, and how this ultimately changes their relationship and engagement with the resource.”

Professor Kiwan points out that the WDC is to become a regional centre to promote and facilitate transboundary cooperation on water and related topics. “It shall serve to offer an information base that provides scientific knowledge, support for research and applied studies related to the water sector focussing on conducting training courses that raise knowledge and build capacity in terms of water management, international water law and the science of negotiations,” he emphasises.

A profound knowledge on international water laws and water rights of each transboundary country in the region is another important aspect for fruitful negotiations. “As a negotiator, your success depends on your knowledge on the topic. You have to know international water law as well as the obligatory and consensus laws in your country,” says Mufleh. “All negotiation teams should know this before they enter negotiations.”

### **Better cooperation between the ministries**

One of the reasons why it is challenging to reach good international agreements on water is that politicians sometimes lack knowledge about water management and water experts do not know enough about

international laws and international relations. “We need more politicians who know more about water and more water experts with better negotiation skills,” says Dr Mark Zeitoun, who is the project manager of Yarmouk Future Project. The information gap among politicians, however, can also be filled by well-informed water experts. “You need a strong water team to convince politicians as experts are often the catalysis to convince them,” Mufleh adds.

If tackled correctly, water is a greater pathway to peace than conflict in the world’s river basins. International cooperation around water has a long and successful history, and according to UNESCO some of the world’s most vociferous enemies have negotiated water agreements or are in the process of doing so. The Mekong Committee, for example, established by the governments of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam as an intergovernmental agency in 1957, exchanged data and information on water resources development throughout the Vietnam War while the Indus River Commission set up under the Indus Waters Treaty between India and Pakistan in 1960 survived two major Indo-Pakistani wars in 1965 and 1971.

“I think there is hope for the water situation in our region,” says Mufleh. “Several other countries have managed, and we are all human beings. We need to make an effort, be optimistic and work together. It will not be achieved tomorrow, however, I am sure we will be successful in the future.”

Mufleh started working at SDC in October 2016, working as a Regional Advisor and Liaison Officer on Water Cooperation. Before joining SDC, Mufleh has worked for both governmental and non-governmental sectors. This includes the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Care International.

Mufleh holds M.Sc. on Environmental Science (Water and Climate change). He has more than 20 years of diverse work experience, including projects design, water transboundary, development, implementation and evaluation in the environmental field, specifically on water, climate change and energy management .

He also contributed in the development of several publications such as training materials and guidelines on water governance and climate change management and planning and ecological restoration.

In addition, he led several regional projects in MENA region on water, climate change and energy management by working with NGOs, governmental organizations and civil society.



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