

Israel is in real danger of drying up. The Kinneret is way below its normal levels, most of our rivers are polluted, our aquifers are becoming alarmingly saline, thousands of cubic meters of rainwater go to waste each year because we haven't devised ways to trap it, and sewage recycling is vastly underexploited.

At the same time, we continue to grow cotton, a water-guzzling crop that produces little revenue and faces stiff competition from Third World producers with lower labor costs. One could say "ditto" for most other crops traditionally grown here. We are building more homes with gardens and swimming pools, the population is growing, virtually no water-usage policies have been enacted in response to the situation, and little is being invested in water-conserving infrastructure. We may be world experts in irrigation techniques and arid-zone agriculture, but when it comes to dealing with water, our most elementary resource, we are guilty of gross national irresponsibility.

There is an idea to resolve the problem by purchasing water from Turkey in vast amounts. Apparently all the relevant studies have been done to prove the idea feasible and even economically justifiable. There are several problems with the proposal, however. The first is independence. What if the Islamic fundamentalists or other anti-Israel forces take control of Turkey (which is not beyond the realm of possibility) and decide to turn off the tap? What if the pipeline, no matter how well protected, is subject to ongoing sabotage by hostile elements? How does one protect such a vital, and vulnerable, strategic asset spread over so large an area in time of war? What if a cash-strapped Turkey decides to suddenly double the price?

The second problem is that it is almost axiomatic to assume, no matter what is said to the contrary, that investment in the Turkish project will come at the expense of investment in Israel's own resources. There is not enough cash for both, and, given the size of our national debt, no responsible government should seek more international loans, especially not for a project that does not enrich Israel's infrastructure. The project could be financed through bonds or given to an outside turnkey contractor who over many years could re-coup the investment from revenues.

But at the end of the day, no matter how the project is financed, it amounts to a fortune being spent on the wrong thing for the wrong reasons. The investment has to be made at home. Israel needs to be the master of its own water supplies. It has to urgently apply the scientific ingenuity we see in so many other fields to the water problem, both in terms of conservation and production. It has to radically change its crop-planting patterns and look at the possibility of desalination projects with the same determination that it employs in finding solutions to defense issues. We need to restore the national water projects that captivated and saved this country in the Fifties and Sixties, when water infrastructure was one of our top national priorities.

When I asked recently why kibbutzim still grow cotton, I was astounded by the answer: So much has been invested in cotton-planting and -picking machinery that not to plant the crop would render the investment useless. By continuing to plant the crop, at least they are earning some return. To let the machines rust would cost more than the loss incurred in growing cotton, this thanks to generous government water subsidies - another twist of logic that makes absolutely no sense in today's reality.

Instead of providing agriculturists with cheap water, the government should tax water that's used on nonproductive and harmful crops. Today's subsidies should be used on tomorrow's infrastructure. Ideas, such as a pipeline from Turkey, should be placed in the same drawer as plans to purchase new equipment for cotton growers. The crop, and others like it, has to disappear from Israel's landscape, no matter how picturesque. A responsible water authority has to be established at cabinet level, and the situation has to be



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perceived as a national crisis requiring urgent attention.

It is unfortunate that it takes warnings of doom and gloom on the nightly news to make us think about the water problem. One wonders what it will take before we act. Judging from the radio talk-shows, Israel seems to have more water experts per capita than any other country. The problem is that nobody seems to be listening to them. At least, not until now. And one can only wonder how much more wasted water will flow before they are taken seriously.

This country's strategic alliance with Turkey is strong and sensible. Purchasing supplemental water from Turkey is probably a good idea and makes sense. But doing so instead of taking our own problems in hand is short-sighted and potentially suicidal. Convenience is not always the easiest solution, certainly not when it comes to a fundamental element of national independence.