
Interview: Munthir Haddadin

The time has come to improve the standard of living in the Mideast

Dr. Haddadin is one of two co-chairmen of the Jordan Rift Valley Development Project, an Israeli-Jordanian project for the industrial development of the Jordan River valley. He has long been responsible for water development projects in Jordan, and was the Jordanian water expert in the Madrid talks in the early 1990s between Jordan, Israel, Syria, Egypt, and the Palestinians. He is also a member of the Region Economic Working Group (Redwig), consisting of Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and the PLO, working on plans for developing the region. He was interviewed in Washington by Bill Jones on Jan. 23.

EIR: Could you discuss the meetings you've had in the past few days, in particular the meeting at the State Department which discussed the proposed Middle East development bank.

Haddadin: We started out our visit with those meetings, which were attended by many participants, countries, and world institutions, and we discussed, over two days, the establishment of a regional development bank. The impressive thing about the meetings was the unanimous, single front by the bilateral parties and the regional parties, including Egypt, which was displayed in respect to the establishment of the bank. They were unanimous in supporting the idea, and they all called for its implementation as soon as practical.

There was a dialogue on whether to start a new institution or rely on existing ones, regional organizations, and the World Bank. The European Union requested that a task force be set up to look into other alternatives. But finally, on the second day, the discussions were so focused that they culminated in the establishment of the task force to look into the details of the establishment of the regional development bank. That task force could look into other alternatives as well, but the establishment of the bank was eventually agreed upon.

EIR: The idea of the regional development bank came up at the Casablanca conference, but it seemed to have had a less concrete existence than after the meeting in Washington.

Haddadin: Obviously, there have been a few months of back and forth, and there was more work.

EIR: What is the purpose of the bank?

Haddadin: The bank is to focus on and pay special attention to the region as it now enters the peace after decades of confrontation and years of war. We thought that the regional bank can better do that than can an international institution. Not that international institutions did not do their job, but the region today is unlike other regions of the world. It is to enter, for the first time, an era of regional cooperation. There is much infrastructure needed to be built. There are also jobs to be created, for instance in mineral resources development, and all that takes infrastructure. There is also the role of the private sector that has to be emphasized today and in the future, and this bank can also open itself to private sector financing and commercial lending. Its role is particular to the region, and it would be proper for that purpose.

EIR: Water supply is probably the most fundamental question in the area. There have been a number of proposals regarding a Mediterranean-Dead Sea canal, a Red Sea-Dead Sea canal, and many variations on a theme. What has been decided, and how soon do you think these projects will get into motion?

Haddadin: Officially, on the canal side, the two governments—the government of Jordan and the government of Israel—have agreed to study the canal between the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aqaba, and the Dead Sea, to look at the feasibility of that route. With it also there would be projects studied at the pre-feasibility level and all sectors of development. This is what we came to agree to call the integrated development of the Jordan Rift Valley. In that, we have proposed draft terms of reference for consulting services to study these projects, and we have talked those over with the Israelis. After three days of joint review of the document that we prepared, we came up with a final draft. Then we invited the World Bank to come in and play a role in the project.

Today, and as a result of this visit to Washington, we succeeded to jointly select a firm to write tender documents for consulting services, to do data collection, and to gather all the information that is around for review by consultants who will come in to study the feasibility of the Med-Dead canal and the other projects associated with the integrated development of the Jordan Rift Valley. This company will be engaged this week. The job will be finished by July. After July, we'll have competition among consulting firms to come

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in and provide the services that we are after, and hopefully, before this year is over, we will have consultants on board to study the feasibility of this canal, and to study the pre-feasibility of many other projects in the Rift Valley. If the project is attractive and feasible from technical, environmental, economic, and social aspects of project evaluation, then, obviously, we have to look for funds to have it built. If it is a "no go," then nobody would want to write anything.

EIR: Is the Med-Dead canal something that is being done solely by the Israelis and the Palestinians? Is it a separate project?

Haddadin: Officially, as I said, the government of Israel and the government of Jordan are heading toward studying the feasibility of the Red-Dead canal. This is not a commitment to have it built. We have to find out whether this project makes sense or not.

As far as the Med-Dead canal, I recognize that this was mentioned in the Oslo Declaration; like other aspects of the Oslo Declaration, Jordan was brought in without being consulted. They said they wanted to make a project between the Mediterranean in Gaza and the Dead Sea. But the Dead Sea, half of it, belongs to Jordan. One-quarter belongs to Israel, and the other quarter belongs to the Palestinians. We are not against a project that makes sense, a project that brings about the best benefits regardless of whom it benefits. If it brings benefits to the Israelis or the Palestinians or us, it will be judged on its own merits, as though there were no boundaries. We look primarily also at the environmental impact of such a project, and see how that would rank.

In Israel, I know, there are parties, I'm not saying in the government, but there are private parties, private companies, studying such grand schemes between the Mediterranean and the Dead Sea. One canal was mentioned in Oslo, and the other proposal is a canal from Haifa through Israel, through the Jordan Valley, and then on to the Dead Sea—we have different routes. But at this time, no funds have been allocated to study the proposal we came up with.

Why is there no commitment to have it built? This step is needed to define a position on the project. Does it fly, or doesn't it? And that is how we will decide whether a project is there for implementation or we forget about it: its feasibility for all aspects—social, economic, technical, financial, environmental.

EIR: At a speech that you gave at the Washington Institute

a week ago, you talked about the power generation that would result from these water projects. During the 1950s, there was discussion of nuclear desalination to create fresh water. Do you see this as an alternative or has that been excluded from the discussion?

Haddadin: The concern over nuclear power being used for desalination, or for any other matter in the region, is the proper control of the technology. Because people who invented the technology proved, at times, to be unable to have it properly controlled. We know that there is technology research on developing units that are much smaller than those in the 1980s, and we reckon that by the beginning of the century there will be units that will generate something like 500 megawatts of nuclear power that can be properly controlled, a higher degree of assurance that accidents like the ones we heard of are very, very unlikely to happen. That's when we will be able to begin to look into it.

The other factor that we have to look at in terms of control of the nuclear fission technology, is the fact that the Jordan Rift Valley, where the projects are meant to be built, is a seismically active region. The tectonic activities of that great rift are known, and there is a likelihood of earthquakes. If it's likely for earthquakes to happen, then the code or the book of nuclear technologies says, do not build a nuclear power plant in this seismically active zone. This does not mean that you can't build them elsewhere off the rift.

The canal, as we think of it today, would be used to desalinate water and to generate power. The power that's generated would be needed to pump the water up to the urban areas to supply them with drinking water and to feed the network that also has to drive the pumps that would take the water up from the Red Sea and on toward the Dead Sea. A lift is envisaged of something like 200 meters from the Red Sea at Aqaba to the divide, toward the highest point in Arava, from where the flow would be by gravity all the way down to the Dead Sea. The difference in elevation would be over 400 meters, over 1,200 feet, and that static-head difference would be used both to desalinate water by reverse osmosis and to generate power. On the way, there would be reservoirs to store water, to store energy, and they can be used to develop agriculture and tourism in that arid region. This, as I said, all depends on the feasibility of the project.

EIR: There has been much concern about the situation of the Palestinians. There was a discussion the other day about the Rift Valley Development Authority which you co-chair.

Jordan proposed that the Palestinians be brought into that, but at this point the Israelis have not agreed to that. How do you see bringing the Palestinians into such a collaboration?

Haddadin: It is a matter that has to be unanimously agreed to. We recognize, and so do the Israelis, that the Palestinians are riparians in the Jordan Rift Valley. They are riparians to the Red Sea; they are riparians to the Jordan River system and, as such, they should be members of the steering committee that is handling this project. The answer is that, when the final status is determined, then. . . .

The answer we heard from the Israelis is that there is no doubt that they will join. The question is, how and when? Which to us translates into, what would happen in the final status? What kind of territory would be under Israeli, or Palestinian, physical control? What kind of sovereignty is going to be exercised over resources and the like, because decisions that are made in the development of the Jordan Rift Valley are decisions that touch on sovereignty over resources, be it land, water, and other natural resources.

EIR: In the context of the discussions going on, there has been reconsideration of the boycott against Iraq. It is my understanding that most of the parties in the area were prepared to lift the boycott to broaden the peace process to the larger region, and it's just a question now at what point the United States will agree to that. The European nations are moving in that direction. Your country has a lot of relations with Iraq. There are water projects in the works. Do you see the Middle East peace process opening the door for re-creating relationships with Iraq?

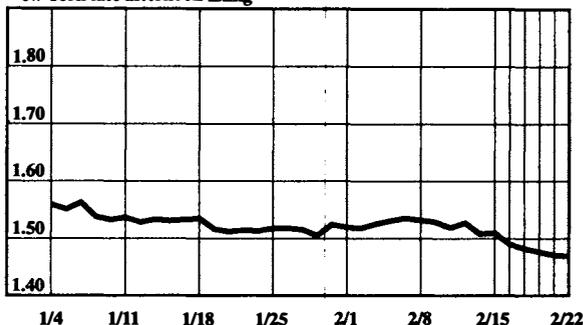
Haddadin: This, I'm afraid, is out of the hands of countries like Jordan. We, our king, tried at the beginning to have these matters and the differences resolved in a pan-Arab round. They tried for that and there was no success. Then it got out of the hands of the regional parties and the Arab countries as such. It became a matter for the United States and members of the U.N. Security Council. We warned against such solutions, and we can see that they are sad. But we look forward to the time when our region can competently pick up the pieces and move toward peace, and this applies not only to Iraq, but to all the countries with turbulence with their neighbors, and domestic turbulence.

My whole lifetime has been spent, and as I was watching what was happening since the early 1940s, there's hardly anything that I can look back on and be happy about. I think there has been lost time, lost resources, lost energy, and we feel that the time has now come for the improvement of the standard of living of people, including the Iraqis and all the other regional parties. If we are to decide, we would definitely look forward to normalization of relations between the countries of the region and between these countries and the world at large. There is no sense in pursuing policies that are so visibly contrary to what human beings would admire, or what history would talk about with pride.

Currency Rates

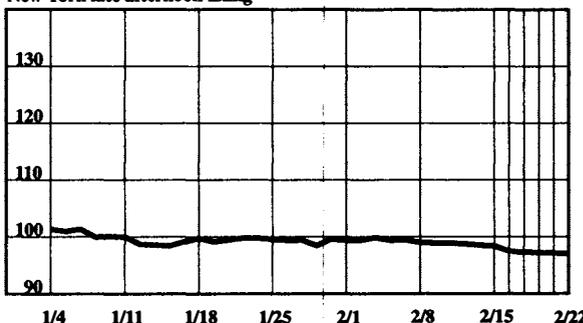
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New York late afternoon fixing



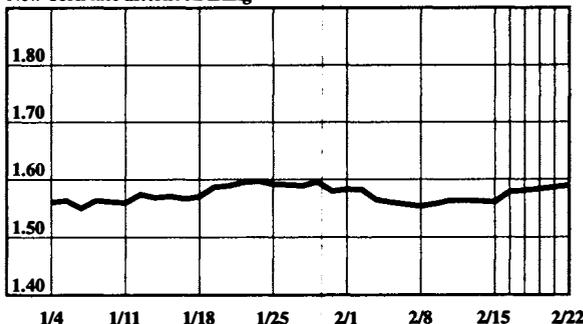
The dollar in yen

New York late afternoon fixing



The British pound in dollars

New York late afternoon fixing



The dollar in Swiss francs

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