CRISNO 203

JORDAN WATERS

Background:

The crisis for the five actors, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, and Israel, started on 11 December 1963 and ended on 5 May 1964.

Background and Pre-crisis The dispute between Israel and the neighboring Arab states concerning the utilization of the Jordan waters was long-standing (see Case #134--Hula Drainage, in 1951). Since the mid-1940s several plans had been drawn up for its resolution, but only one, the "Revised" Unified Johnston Plan of 1955, was approved and agreed upon at the technical level by both Israel and the Arab states. However, at a meeting of the Arab League Political Committee, it was rejected in principle because of its supposed bias toward Israel. After Israel's Sinai Campaign in 1956 (see Case #152) all further hopes of Arab/Israeli acceptance of any regional water proposal were destroyed, and both sides felt free to proceed in developing their own unilateral water projects.

In 1958 Jordan started working on a water scheme, and in 1959 Israel began the National Water Carrier plan for carrying water to the Negev by pumping it from Lake Tiberias. During the early months of 1960 concern by the Arab states, particularly Syria, deepened, with the Arabs claiming that Israel's water scheme would endanger Arab security because Israel could now settle larger numbers of immigrants, thereby increasing its potential military power.

Under Syrian pressure a conference of Arab military chiefs of staff was held in Cairo from 7 to 10 December 1963 in order to draw up a common Arab strategy against the Israeli diversion plan, due to be completed at the end of 1963. The conference also agreed to prepare an agenda for the forthcoming December meeting of the Supreme Arab Defense Council.

Summary:

A crisis for all four Arab states (Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt) was triggered on 11 December, the day after the Arab chiefs of staff conference, when Israel's minister of labor stated that the National Water Carrier would be operated despite pressure from the Arab states or any other country. Nasir responded on 23 December 1963 by proposing a meeting of all Arab heads of state to consider Israel's plan to divert the Jordan waters. Realizing the Arab armies were not capable of defeating Israel, Nasir hoped to check the trend toward war that was being proposed by Syria. A Summit Conference was held on 13-16 January 1964 in Cairo under the auspices of the Arab League and attended by all 13 members of the League. At the conference it was decided unanimously not to go to war with Israel but to divert the three tributaries of the Jordan River and to set up a joint (unified) military command to protect the Arab states. An official communiqué at the end of the conference, on 16 January, represented the major response to the crisis by Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon.

The announcement of the Arab Summit Conference decisions on 16 January triggered a crisis for Israel, which perceived a grave threat to its vital water supplies. On 19 January Israel responded by an official cabinet statement repeating its determination to carry out the plans for using the waters of the Jordan River.

Both superpowers, as well as the United Nations, issued strong warnings to Israel and the Arabs against using armed force.

The crisis ended on 5 May 1964 when it was officially announced by Israel that the project was completed and that it would go into operation in the summer of 1964. The announcement set off an outburst of indignation in the Arab press at the failure of the Arab governments to stop the project, but no further action was taken by them.

References:

Alexander and Kitrie 1973; Brecher 1974; Jansen 1964; Kadi 1966; Kerr 1970; Khouri 1985; Lowi 1993; Mehdi 1964; MEJ Chronology 1963, 1964; Nimrod 1965a, 1965b, 1965c; Saliba 1968; Stevens 1965.

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