'And Lot lifted up his eyes, and beheld all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere' (Genesis 13:10)

"DANGER: Forbidden to drink or bathe in water," reads the sign that hangs near the Jordan River bridge crossing. But under the bridge only weeds litter the dry riverbed, a sharp contrast to the surrounding rain-soaked green hills of early March.

The legendary Jordan River is only a trickle of its former glory. Today what keeps it flowing is the sewage dumped inside.

"The Jordan River is in danger of disappearing altogether if governments in the region do not take action immediately," said Gidon Bromberg, Israeli director of Friends of the Earth Middle East (FOEME), a joint Israeli-Jordanian-Palestinian environmental organization with offices in Tel Aviv, Bethlehem and Amman.

Dams, canals and pumping stations have left the river with only 10 percent of its original flow. Decades of competition, mainly between Jordan and Israel, have sucked dry the lower Jordan River, which flows from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea.

Capitalizing on the renewed Middle East peace negotiations, FOEME organized a conference earlier this month inviting Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian officials, environmentalists and farmers. But what became clear was that the decision-makers have no intention of letting the water flow back into the river.

"Unfortunately, environmental policies are governed by politics," said Jordan's Prince Hassan Bin Talal, under whose patronage the event took place. "We don't have a comprehensive peace, but I don't see why we have to continue with the policy of mutually assured destruction of the environment and resources."

FOEME realizes that to save the fabled river, all the peoples and governments who use it must cooperate. Prince Hassan goes further. He argues that environmental matters should be dealt with by a higher regional body with delegates from the different states.

But while the second intifada raged for the past four and a half years, such a meeting was impossible to arrange, which is why, shortly after the Israelis and Palestinians resumed negotiations at the Sharm el-Sheikh Summit in February, FOEME quickly set a date for the conference that they had been preparing for over a year.

About 200 participants from Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian Territories attended the Jordan Valley Symposium, which its organizers hoped would raise awareness about the impending ecological disaster. The participants disagreed, however, about what should be done.
As the day wore on and the speakers took turns telling of their commitment to helping save the river, it became increasingly clear that the most obvious solution – letting the water flow – was not an option.

The location at Baqoora was meant to remind the participants of earlier commitments to the river. Annex Four of the 1994 Israel-Jordan peace treaty states that the two governments agree to cooperate on ecological rehabilitation of the river.

"Sadly, nothing has been done since the treaty was signed. On the contrary – the situation has worsened," said Bromberg.

"Is it a competition: who can damage the river more than the other?" asked Munqeth Mehyar, director of FoOAM in Amman. "This could be understood in a state of war, but not now. Did we have to take all the water?"

While the environmentalists agreed with him, the politicians and the farmers did not. Professional interests and not nationality were what directed people's views on what to do with the river. Israeli and Jordanian politicians agreed that they wanted the water to be free of sewage, polluted fish pond water and salinated water from diverted springs.

Environment Minister Shalom Simhon promised to stop the dirty dumping.

But neither the Israeli nor the Jordanian officials promised to restore water to the river.

"The problem is that in Israel, in Jordan and in the region, fresh clean water running naturally is seen as a waste of water," explained Bromberg. "That is despite a new correction of the water law passed by the Knesset in 2004 that nature has the right to water and is a legitimate user."

Already parts of the river are dry in summer because all the flowing waters are captured by Israel, Jordan and Syria.

"The irony is that the sewage is keeping the Jordan river alive," said Bromberg.

Agriculture is the biggest consumer of the Jordan River's water and in Israel the farmer's lobby remains strong, said Bromberg, resisting cuts in water allocation or rises in water prices. Seventy-five percent of the river's water goes to farming, said Bromberg, but that only contributes to 8% of the GDP. "It doesn't make environmentalist or economic sense."

Israeli and Jordanian farmers and politicians insist that the farmers should not have to change professions or even change crops. One of the main crops irrigated in the Jordan River Valley is bananas, which consumes great amounts of water.

Yossi Vardi, the mayor of the Jezreel Valley region which begins at the bottom of the Sea of Galilee and continues to the Dead Sea, told the conference he wants to develop tourism and industry in his region.

But after the conference he told the Post his region had no plans to cut down on farming.

"I'm not willing to have land that is not farmed," he said. "I'm not going to exchange agriculture for other industries. I do research to learn how to use less water."

Munther Haddadin, the former Jordanian minister of water and irrigation, explained that even if
agriculture does not provide much of the GDP, it does provide work in outlying areas of the country.

"There are social gains," Haddadin told the conference. "How else can you distribute population across the country when there is not enough industry?"

Only Palestinian farmers complain they get very little water and have no say in its distribution. Since 1967, when Israel captured the West Bank through which part of the Jordan River flows, water access came under Israeli control. According to agreements, the Palestinians are supposed to receive from Israel 250 cubic meters of water from the basin. But in actuality they receive far less.

"This is not a charity right," said Nader al-Khateeb, FOEME's Palestinian director in Bethlehem. "As Palestinians, we need to be considered as partners and not only consumers."

Bromberg hoped to impress upon the participants that the river must be preserved partly because of its religious, cultural and historic image. FOEME hopes to encourage environmental tourism to replace the agriculture which uses most of the water.

The river is popular with Christian pilgrims, who, for hundreds of years, come to dunk themselves in the holy waters because it is where Jesus came to be baptized by John. UNESCO may make it a world heritage site.

But if drastic changes are not made and more water is not allowed to flow, the river could dry up completely within two years, said Bromberg.

Decades of conflict between the principal users of the river – the Israelis, the Jordanians and the Syrians – have led to the crisis. The 200-km long river drains an area of 1,100 km square, but much of the water is diverted by Israel's National Water Carrier, Jordan's King Abdullah Canal and dams across tributaries into the river in Israel, Jordan and Syria.

"Each side tried to grab as much of the resources as it could without any consideration of the consequences," said Bromberg.

"It started in the Sixties with Israel stopping the flow of the upper Jordan into the lower Jordan. Syria tried to build a dam at the same time to stop water coming down the Jordan River. Jordan in the Seventies built a canal to capture the main tributary into the river. It escalated from there."

The existing problems are worsened by Amman's construction of a new dam on the Yarmuk River, the river's largest tributary.

In the past, the river's annual flow was 1.3 billion cubic meters. Today it is less than 100 million cubic meters, of which some 20% is untreated sewage. The polluted water flows into the Dead Sea, which consequently is under threat of extinction. It has already shrunk by 30%.

Prince Hassan believes that a "green" Middle East can be achieved by creating Middle East "Marshall Plan" – from Morocco to Oman – similar to how the Western European countries helped each other after World War II.

We sit on the grassy bank of Peace Island, the small raised plateau south of Tiberias and north of Beit Shean which divides the river in two and provides a breathtaking view of the Jordan valley. Several years ago, the island was also the site of a gruesome attack by a Jordanian soldier who shot dead seven visiting young Israeli girls. A marble monument memorializes the site.
Prince Hassan explains his vision of how to achieve a green Middle East.

"Between governments and civil society, there is a huge wealth of experience," he says. "So, I do think that a regional energy and water commission – supra-national, supra-state – is the only way to take this all-important common resource out of the hands of the politicians."

According to Prince Hassan, the plan does not require peace between the countries because those involved would have regional interests in mind, not just their own country's. The plan would also help solve common problems from unemployment and poverty to energy use and farming.

"I think we have to rise above politics to address anthropolitics – the human issues," says the prince, coining a term for a new concept of politics that supersedes political differences. "Let us think globally, and act globally."