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Israel, Jordan and Palestinians to sign regional water agreement

By John Reed in Jerusalem



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[Israel](#), Jordan and the Palestinian Authority were due on Monday to sign a regional water agreement that could later pave the way for a controversial multibillion-dollar project to address sinking water levels in the Dead Sea by pumping water from the Red Sea.

Hazim El-Naser, Jordan's water minister, and Shaddad Atilli, head of the Palestinian Water Authority, were due to join Silvan Shalom, Israel's water minister, in signing a memorandum of understanding on three regional water sharing initiatives at the World Bank's headquarters in Washington.



The agreement – the outcome of talks held since 2005 on the “Red Sea-Dead Sea” project – includes the development of a desalination plant to be built in

Aqaba, Jordan, at the northern tip of the Red Sea, which would provide Jordan and Israel with a new source of drinking water.

Israel will also release some water from Lake Tiberias, farther north, to Jordan, in addition to selling about 20m cubic meters a year of desalinated water produced at the Aqaba to the Palestinian Water Authority for use in the West Bank.

The joint water agreement would be the largest of its kind between Israel, the Palestinians, and Jordan, with which the Israelis signed a peace treaty in 1994. The World Bank said on Monday that the co-operation agreement would be limited for now to the three initiatives agreed in Washington, and not cover the Red Sea-Dead Sea project as Mr Shalom told Israeli media earlier on Monday.

However, a spokesman for the lending institution said that some of the brine discharged from the new plant would be discharged into the Dead Sea on a pilot basis to test the waters for the mooted “Red-Dead” plan.

The Dead Sea, a tourist attraction and heritage site that lies at the lowest point on earth, has been declining by about a meter per year because of climate change and diversion of water from the Jordan River, which feeds into it. Thousands of sinkholes have appeared on its shore, and the receding water levels have been a sore point between the two countries and the Palestinians, who share part of the shoreline, but have been unable to access it since Israel occupied the West Bank after the Six-Day War in 1967.

Jordan in August announced that it was moving forward with an early phase of the “Red-Dead” plan, but civil society groups in the region oppose the project, and doubts have been raised over whether it could ever be financed.

Environmental groups say that pumping brine into the Dead Sea would alter its water quality and could even threaten its distinctive blue colour.

“We don’t like the Red Sea-Dead Sea project,” said Munqeth Mehyar, chairman of Friends of the Earth, Middle East in Amman. It’s not economically viable, you are playing with nature, and you don’t know what the consequences are.”

Friends of the Earth on Monday accused Mr Shalom of “misleading the Israeli public” by announcing the beginning of the Red Dead project.