

**Conversation with Chairman Talal Abu-
Ghazaleh**

Al-Sharjah Satellite Channel

“The Conflict over Water”

November 1, 1998

Broadcaster: Today's episode is about water, the Arab-Israeli-Turkish conflict, and the conflict with other nations as well on the question of water, as future conflicts will be about water as well.

I'd like to introduce our viewers to our guest, Mr. Talal Abu-Ghazaleh. I'm reading what he has here as far as degrees are concerned, and it says he has 6 certificates one of which is a PhD, so we can proudly call him "Doctor". It is an honorary doctorate, and he is about 60 now, yet looks like he's in his 40's, and he was born in Jaffa.

It is difficult to adequately introduce him, as he has 6 certificates and many awards from all over the world. He occupies 22 positions worldwide and has 34 branches for his company in the Arab region and globally, and about 30-40 studies and researches along with books he's written, and lectures frequently in the USA, Britain and France, where he received a prestigious award.

Chairman: To be concise and accurate, I am an Arab national and I'm proud of my Arab heritage and nationalism and belonging to this nation despite all the worries that this entails. I believe that in spite of all our problems, we have great hopes in the future of the nation, and there is not the least bit of doubt that the end-result will be victory over the enemy.

Broadcaster: "There is not the least bit of doubt that there will be victory over the enemy". What is the reason or secret behind this confidence, and why do you believe in the Arab World and Arab national?

Chairman: I am a researcher and a student. I study the great people of history, all of them. You know that these historic figures took on two dimensions; a historical one and a geographical one. We must put things in perspective both geographically and historically, and using this scale, it is apparent that this nation has a rich history, with values, principles and a civilization. From our geographical perspective and dimension, there cannot be a manufactured entity for the enemy. I always agree to and insist on the fact that we call "Israel" the enemy, because that's all it is and all it can ever be. This manufactured enemy cannot historically or geographically defeat this nation, no matter how weak we appear at the present moment.

Broadcaster: Are you saying we cannot be defeated and just sit around and watch events unfold?

Chairman: Not at all.

Broadcaster: Please elaborate then.

Chairman: I'm not advocating that at all. As a national, I am always calling out our problems and concerns and the issue of our future as the most critical for the Arab nation.

Broadcaster: What's the secret? We know that Israel is our foremost enemy and that it has pillaged our lands and is trying to expand from the Nile River to the Euphrates. In

their studies and conferences, they presuppose that Turkey –a neighboring Muslim nation that we have a long history with that extends over 500 years- either joins them and allies itself with Israel against the Arabs in an effort to prevent water from reaching Arabs in an attempt to control the entire Arab region. It is said that Turkey now holds the largest water reserves in the region, actually up to 80% of it, and can control the flow of water to the entire Middle East region, so why should it join Israel?

Chairman: I'd like to make sure that we keep our eye on the ball here, and the point is that the enemy in particular is Israel. There are countries that may ally themselves with Israel, because Israel can draw them into alliances in order to achieve common benefits with them, such as Turkey. I do not want to say that Turkey is an enemy, but I do say that it allied itself with the enemy and so I appreciate the Syrian position that criticized Turkey for that but doesn't outright call Turkey an enemy, and this is the proper way to phrase the whole thing.

In one of my meetings with former President Carter –which was in Paris- I told him that you were no longer president, so I want you to explain something to me. I'd like you to tell me how you could reconcile your principles – and you are a principled man- or rather how could you reconcile between your faith as a religious person and decisions you took that contradict religion and do not comply with principle? He said that it was easy, as I am a president and therefore an employee for the American people, and my duty is to take decisions that serve the national interest of the American people, regardless of my personal beliefs. This is because I am not running my own private institution but am running an establishment where the employer is the American people. So if I get a file that states that a certain decision is in the interest of the American citizen and the American people, then I will not hesitate to take that decision despite the fact that it doesn't comply with my own personal beliefs.

So I want to say that Israel was able to forge alliances and not only with Turkey. We must not forget that Israel has a phrase that calls out (its state to be) “from the Euphrates to the Nile”. Also, what does the Israeli flag signify? It is a star between two lines, with each line representing a river. So Israel wants all its borders to be rivers, and it wants to control the rivers in this part of the world. This planning isn't new, yet unfortunately we have just been sitting idly by and watching.

Broadcaster: We weren't reading up on this?

Chairman: We were, but we did not recognize the danger of the Israeli planning that was to control the water. Why water? What importance does this have? Water is the source of life. Why did Israel and the flag of Israel focus on water?

Let us address some facts to put this topic in perspective. Only 2.5% of the world's water is potable. 2/3 of the earth is water and 1/3 is land, yet as we said only 2.5% is potable and the rest is salty water. Out of this 2.5% , only 1% is water from rivers and the rest is groundwater and water from snow. So the whole world is competing for and fighting over this 1%. Today, there are 1 billion people that do not have potable water, and the

World Bank estimates that this number will rise to 2.5 billion by the year 2030, which is very scary.

The Arab nation represents 5% of the world's population, and its share is only 1% of the world's water, which means we have only one-fifth of the amount of water that should be available to us.

The American citizen has 800 gallons of water available daily yet someone in Gaza only has 20. We are talking about a severe shortage in water that hasn't even started yet and is only going to get worse. Unfortunately for us, the USA has no problem when it comes to water, and it does not import or export it, which means there is an absence in international organization on this issue for arm-twisting. The world is talking about the oil of the next century, and that is going to be water.

Let us take the water of the Litani River for example. If we consider the market price for 1 liter of water to be 1 dollar, and realize that the Litani has a flow of 580 million cubic meters annually, then this means that the value of this is equivalent to the entire production of all OPEC nations combined.

Broadcaster: So the true oil of the future then is water...

Chairman: And it is even more valuable than oil. Oil has alternatives as opposed to what may be popularly believed, whereas there is no alternative to water. God said (in the Holy Quran): "We made from water every living thing"

Broadcaster: Let us pause here for a moment. Turkey's ex-president said: "We have our water, and they have their oil, so very simply give us your oil and we'll give you our water. You have found oil and we found water." So he is threatening the Gulf nations and others in the region that if oil isn't given to Turkey, and if oil is not exchanged for water, they will withhold water and drive people to thirst.

Chairman: As for the Turkey dimension, Turkey started a project called "GAB" which is related to the Ataturk dam, and 21 other dams. We are talking about a system of dams that when complete will drop the water level in Syria by 60% and Iraq by 80%.

Broadcaster: If this happens, it will take place in 2001.

Chairman: We must ask how was Turkey able to accomplish such a project? We know that the World Bank refused to finance this venture, yet financing came in, from where? Why aren't we asking how was Turkey able to ensure such enormous sums, namely 30 billion, while we fully know that the financial market is controlled by a Jewish decision. There is no doubt that there was a Jewish and Israeli decision behind the financing operation, as a common interest was generated between Israel's desire to control the region's water and Turkey's wish to exploit this water.

In one conference, the Turkish representative said: "We have a social problem, when 12 million people in the south of Turkey need water, and water leaves our land and we are

free". This is the logic that he is dealing with. When we want to set up a dam, everybody objects, and when Jordan tried to create a dam, Israel objected, and there was the 1967 war, and up till now, Israel has not been satisfied with the river's water, yet it has also gone after the groundwater. Israel is exploiting the groundwater in the Golan Heights and the West Bank and there is only 17% of this water in the end left for the Palestinians.

I participated in a seminar in Washington about 3 years ago, and fortunately a particular document fell into my hands. I was asking numerous officials and researchers from various countries to tell me that the information in this document was incorrect. What it included, was a decision issued by a committee in Congress that specializes in allocating funds to different projects. The decision was to allocate a certain amount of money for a study on a lake in the Golan -and this was issued back in 1985. The idea behind this study was transforming the entire Golan area into a lake, where the water would pour in, and which of course would be run by Israel, effectively opening and closing the water-tap from this lake to the region as it pleases, with the entire water reserve for the region being effectively under Israeli control. In their mind, this would end the political problem, because once this area becomes filled with water, there will no longer be the sovereignty over land issue since it is now a lake. I am sure that this project is being planned behind the scenes, in order to impose it as fact via Turkish-Israeli collusion.

Why does this situation exist? And why has the corruption become so prevalent? This is a painful matter, and the viewer and Arab national may not realize that there is no system of convention to date that regulates the issue of water.

Broadcaster: Except for the Helsinki convention and that between France and Salzburg and international treaties on the issue of water. These treaties say that there are international rivers, and the countries that are at the upstream of these rivers must not negatively control the water in a way that harms countries further downstream. Also, if a country wants to set up a project, then it needs to ask for permission from other states that benefit from the water, and only after a period of 6 months, as opposed to what Turkey did in 1990. In 1990, it created the Ataturk dam without consulting anyone and cut off the Euphrates River from Syria and Iraq. Arabs didn't stop studying and research, and held the ESCWA conference for the Western Asian nations in Damascus in 1989, where it became clear that there was an annual decline of about 100 million cubic meters, which resulted in a warning the gave. Also there was a conference in the Gulf in 1993 in Dubai, where there were 500 international experts. They said the same thing, and that if the Gulf does not exploit all the water it has and cannot find a way to obtain water, then desalinated water will not be enough, even if billions were paid for it. So, Arabs tried and studied and warned, but at a practical level, what have we done?

Chairman: We didn't do anything. Reality is even worse. At a time when the abundance of water is lacking, the usage of water is getting worse. Here we must focus on numerous points. There is poor management and guidance on water usage, and there is no rationing of water. Water is not only for drinking, as two thirds of it is also for use in agriculture, which happens to be one of our problems as well. We have a shortage of agriculture, and

have net imports worth 21 billions dollars in this area, which is the deficit in the annual agricultural income.

Broadcaster: It is said that Sudan is the cornucopia of food, and it now complains of hunger, what do we do?

Chairman: Firstly, we need a national project for water security. What we need is something more than just talk or planning or research, since there are many studies out there already. What we need is a national project to primarily evaluate the technology of water desalination, which is not a top priority for the advanced nations of the world. Gulf states are still conducting the desalination process using old methodologies, and did not advance here, even though everything in the world has advanced. If we look at the speed of growth of some fields such as telecommunications or information, or review the vast steps taken in electronics, the internet and other areas, we realize that desalination isn't among the priorities (of advanced nations), yet what concerns them is what serves their external trade. So all the developments mentioned are for serving this external trade and revitalizing it. Also, in relation to the issue of nuclear research, we cannot ask for permission in order to have a nuclear plant related to desalination and its research, or beg for some type of decision that allows us to do so whether it is from a major nation or a neighboring one. It is shameful for us to even consider asking for their approval.

Broadcaster: Mr. Abu-Ghazaleh, we need to get out of this mess, so we must first organize ourselves and create a national project. Arabs must understand that this is a pending disaster that is approaching quickly, and that in the year 2001 there will be the GAB project that they have to deal with. There is another even more dangerous project which is the so-called "peace process".

What is preventing us from moving forward in this national project since we are threatened with thirst?

Chairman: The problem is big, but I'm optimistic, and not at all pessimistic. We are a nation that strives on challenges and our entire history shows this, especially when provoked and the issue is related to our honor.

I would like to focus on another new dimension. The world has dealt with water so far as if it is a political issue. Yet it is not, it is a matter of life, and a trade issue. Water is an essential commodity, and I frequently criticize the world trading system represented in the GAT agreement under the auspices of the WTO, because it excluded oil, although it is a traded commodity, for well-known reasons. Water is even worse. They excluded it, and didn't consider it a traded commodity and water is still viewed as a political issue. You spoke of conventions and treaties, and all this agreements are either bilateral or non-binding. The first international convention in this regard was issued by the UN General Assembly in May 1997 and was called the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Non- Navigational Uses of International Watercourses, (and here non-navigational use means usage for drinking), with 110 votes in favor out of 185, with 3 against it and the rest being abstentions. From the 3 countries that opposed this, Turkey was one. And here we see the political factor at work.

Second, this convention has not been executed to date. Final ratification was left for the year 2000. In the year 2000 by the way, there will be an important conference in March called the Global Water Conference. So if this agreement is non-binding, and to date, only 12 countries have ratified or consented to be bound by the agreement, which happen to be insignificant countries as well, then what does this agreement say exactly?

The agreement includes 2 main principles: What resolves the issue of water is whether or not significant harm is induced. So what determines the rights of nations is: am I for example harmed by your decision to create a dam or redirect a river's path? So if I am the first state that the river flows through, and then it reaches to you, you are not allowed to build a dam. Why not? Because one of the general principles –and not internationally certified principles- is the previous usage rights. This means that if I had a previous right to use a certain amount of water, then you can demand this from me. This is what Turkey is claiming, as it says that while it is true that Iraq and Syria had precedence in water usage and rightfully so, but that did not give them the right to the quantities of water that they were using.

Resolution of disputes: How are disputes resolved? This was also left to the method of arm-twisting. The agreement states that in the case of a dispute, the two parties should agree to negotiate, or the issue is deferred to arbitration or to court.

The funny thing is that there is a defined trade system for trade in commodities such as cups of water let's say, but no trade system for water itself. A defined trade system for water should have been issued by the World Trade Organization (WTO) and not the UN, because the UN has no binding power or authority to enforce penalties. The upcoming conference in March 2000 is an ideal opportunity for the Arab nation to present a civilized humane project. We must not underestimate ourselves. So, I am talking for example about the accounting profession, I am the Chairman of the Arab Society of Certified Accountants (ASCA), and this small society was able during 10 years of struggling to implement an international qualification system that facilitates recognition of accountants' certificates worldwide. This system was accepted globally without changing one word in it. So now, what is required of us as Arabs in the year 2000?

First: We should start by defining the principles that control water usage, and the first principle should not be related to property rights but rather human rights. There is a minimum limit or right that every person is entitled to and that should be accounted for prior to water distribution. As for the other principles, they are social, economic, environmental needs, and trade considerations.

Second: We must present a project to this conference and include the entire developing world in this project we present, because the issue of water is always a problem between North and South. It is a problem of the poor developing and needy world that continues to be persecuted further and get poorer because it does not address issues from a position of strength. We are strong but do not use our stronger hand or cards because we are too polite. On the topic of water, we must approach things from a position of strength, as we are a vast nation, and the civilizations of the world were built upon the riverbanks, and

the Sumerian civilization collapsed because of drought. Here we need to talk about the future.

First: We should present a declaration on human rights related to water.

Second: The WTO is currently talking about the “future agenda” where advanced nations are submitting and discussing many subjects such as the issue of electronic trade, the environment, and others. Accordingly, we must also talk about an agreement to liberalize trade in water, as it should be dealt with as a commodity, because if you transform it into a commodity then you can invest in it commercially and capital from the private sector will flow into the development of its usage, the desalination process, and its trade, so production of it and the quantity of it will increase.

Broadcaster: Let’s go back to the project we need to present to the UN in the year 2000.

Chairman: In the year 2000, we need to present a project on human rights related to water. Experts of the Arab nation can formulate a draft now that we can work on and develop. You won’t find anyone who’ll refuse and say no, I’d like to prevent people whether they be in Asia or Africa or South America in getting the minimum amount of water they are entitled to. You want to give me the right to express my opinion. What is the right to expressing my opinion in comparison with on of speech in relation to the right of drinking? I can live for 30 days solely on water, but I cannot live one day without it and this is a fundamental right.

80% of the Arab nation’s water resources are from abroad, from countries that are considered hostile to us, and only 20% are ours.

As for the issue of groundwater, we are living on a lake of it. Why can’t an investment venture be started up, whether it be by the public or private sector, where attempts to exploit this groundwater for the welfare of citizens is conducted?

Broadcaster: The proposal we are to forward via the plethora of experts in the Arab world: You are calling upon Arab leaders to move swiftly to present this as a collective item to the UN, firstly human rights related to water, and secondly controlling water by the WTO.

Chairman: An agreement by the WTO to liberalize trade in water and subject it to the rules and controls of international trade, should’ve been issued after 30 years of discussions in the UN. This agreement –which was objected to by Turkey- has not been ratified or adopted yet, even though 30 years of discussions in the General Assembly have elapsed and finally a decision was issued yet still not enforced. By going back to the conference and water-related rights, the question is why did Turkey oppose this convention? Because it has texts that allude to these rights, which is something it doesn’t want and neither does Israel.

Broadcaster: Why do we always wait until disaster befalls us? Why do we wait as Arab nations, as Arab leaders, until a calamity takes place, and then start to think and fret to and fro? Why isn’t there an Arab strategy? I’m asking you this because you are a

researcher. Why should we wait until the year 2000 to do something and why wait till thirst hits?

Chairman: I did not say that we should wait. On the contrary, we should start today, because the year 2000 is just around the corner. Turkey and Israel will be the two countries that object to the proposal for human rights related to water.

Broadcaster: Do they have the power to do so? How can we as Arabs gather our strength in spite of any UN decision made?

Chairman: I always say that political differences should not be a cause of economic differences.

Broadcaster: The issue of Turkey and its thinking that it can control the Arab world with Israel vis-à-vis the water issue. There is also the other project of the 'peace pipes' that includes Israel, where the proposal is that water will be delivered from Turkey all the way to Doha and Dubai, and other lines extending to Hams and Hama in Syria, and so on. All this is to be done so that at any moment water can be cut off from us and we'd thirst and beg and ask that whatever they want we'll adhere to. This is a very dangerous enterprise, which is supported by Israel. There are 2 projects; the GAB project that includes 18 dams which is the Ataturk dam system on the Euphrates and 4 other dams on the Tigris River, and the peace pipes project that includes Israel. It is a common idea with Israel, that Israel supports in order to control the Arab world in the near future through water, political control, economic control and control over our lives, which is dangerous.

Chairman: This is worse than political and military control. I can resist military occupation, and can fight the enemy politically, but for it to dominate my source of living and every drop of water, then this is catastrophic and there is no graver threat facing our Arab nation. This threat is that we'll have to start begging for water from our enemy Israel and its alliances, and Turkey is a part of these alliances, that may well surround us. Israel has been planning this for quite some time. I believe that there should be an Arabic website on the issue of water that compiles all relevant information. This is because one of our problems is information or rather the lack thereof, and what cannot be measured, cannot be managed. One of the specialized institutions should have a site that receives all information on this and uploads it, so that we can benefit from it and draw out researches and studies. There are many researchers and many studies out there, but they aren't compiled in one place, and there is no issue of greater importance. I have a website that is specific to my organization, so shouldn't we have a website that we can go back to as researchers, decision-makers, strategists and politicians. This is a topic that we must start with immediately so that we can draw upon it for the Arab media.

Broadcaster: Why don't we have in every Arab nation a ministry or minister that specializes in Arab coordination and we call it the Arab coordination ministry, in order to organize ourselves?

Chairman: In the European Community, there are ministers for the EC affairs. This is an important suggestion, because it will reflect the true dimension of pan-Arab cooperation as there will be a ministry specialized in researching the affairs of multilateral Arab cooperation in particular those aspects related to trade and economic relations and issues such as water and common Arab interests. I would want it to specialize in economic interests and affairs, and this is what we need since this important work represents the future of economic prosperity for every Arab state and for all of us combined, and there is no alternative to this.

Here, I'd like to emphasize that if Arab nationalism comes to an end, I will still remain the last Arab nationalist and will die an Arab nationalist, because I believe that the fate of this nation is to create a unified and free Arab market and create economic unity.

Broadcaster: If an Arab country said that it doesn't want to be a part of the Arab World, that will be impossible to realize, because we are neighbors, we all speak the same language, we require same needs, thus we are bound by same economic and geographical interests. So if an assault occurred against Lebanon, Syria is next door, and if Syria was assaulted Jordan and Iraq are next to it.

Chairman: Yes, and we are talking about water. I wonder if we can afford that Iraq and Syria not come to terms on this important issue especially as we are facing this crucial period. Can we afford not to be in agreement in facing off with Israel and Turkey on this issue of water? Of course we cannot. I always envision that the solution is in multilateral economic cooperation. Millions of people were killed in wars in Europe, and the animosity between France and Britain is unimaginable, yet there is a common European market and differences in politics, traditions, creed and language; in every aspect really but there is a commonality of interests.

I claim that undoubtedly there are political differences that exist and will continue to exist, yet they cannot affect our economic interests because in the end they will be far from our economic considerations.

Arab multilateral trade is only 8% of the overall volume of Arab trade. This is shameful. Why only 8%? I tried to explain my position in the past, but it wasn't highlighted. The content of Arab trade is as follows: 80% of it is oil exports, and we import food, weaponry, equipment, plants and other items that are unavailable.

Broadcaster: Therefore, your opinion, and mine as well, is that there should be a ministry specialized in these matters, and dedicated to these types of studies, correct?

Chairman: Yes. And to reinforce what you said, the USA considers itself a partner for the entire world, and there the only department that is directly affiliated to the White House is the Chief Trade Negotiator whose headquarters is in the White House itself. This position is higher than that of a minister and is specialized in trade with the rest of the world since the rest of the world is considered one big market.

From this perspective, we need to forward a suggestion that we hope will be studied by Arab leaders, which is that in every Arab government there will be a minister for Arab economic cooperation. I swear to God this is in the national benefit of every Arab state.

There is no country that can be harmed by the existence of an Arab minister whose job is to utilize the Arab market.

Broadcaster: Mr. Abu-Ghazaleh, I hear you. I saw in your eyes the tears of sorrow and the tears for happiness and hope. I hope this call reaches all Arabs. We want our nation to unite, and end its division, at least as far as the economic aspect is concerned. I thank you for this warm meeting, and I'm glad to have met a man with so many titles, and in whom I've seen enormous wealth. A national wealth and intellectual wealth that we need and can be optimistic with, for the future of the Arab nation.