

# **Kidron Valley/ Wadi Nar International Master Plan**

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## **1 Introduction**

The Kidron Valley/Wadi Nar runs from the city of Jerusalem through the Judean Desert to the Dead Sea. For thousands of years, the valley has supplied local peoples with water, prompting the growth of several civilisations in this area. Many of the Middle East's most famous cultural and historic sites can be found here, including religious sites, ancient tombs, underground watercourses, monasteries and beautiful desert landscapes.

But pollution and neglect, together with an increase in population, has had major health, environmental, and economic consequences. Today one of the great centres of civilisation serves as a conduit for raw sewage. Water and drainage infrastructure is primitive at best. Historic sites are neglected; their cultural value depreciated by poor environmental practices and strife in the region. Endemic species are disappearing. Much of the fertile land in the valley is not being farmed and landowners have been forced to find other ways to make a living. The resulting pollution of the groundwater in the area endangers existing water sources. The polluted surface water constitutes a health hazard to Dead sea bathers and local residents.

For the past thirty years, Israelis and Palestinians have deliberated solutions to the rehabilitation and beautification of the Kidron/Wadi Nar area, including building and operating a joint sewage purification plant. There have been a number of "historic meetings" such as the one between Teddy Kollek, the Mayor of Jerusalem and Elias Freig, the Mayor of Bethlehem in 1991. Contracts have been drafted and signatures appended but no solution has been reached. As decided in the Oslo Accords of 1995, Israel and the Palestinian Authority set up a Joint Water Committee (JWC) to resolve water issues in a formal setting. Suggestions have been made to the JWC for a solution to the sewage problem in the valley, but a decision has yet to be made. In addition, unlike Europe where borders are coming down, here borders are going up, making basin planning even more difficult.

## **2 Development of the Master Plan**

Things are changing, however. During the last few years, scholars who have studied the entire basin have met with professionals and politicians from both sides of the border to discuss the problems of the valley and to present the idea of a Master Plan. A joint Master Plan steering committee has been set up, comprised of Palestinian representatives from the Palestine Hydrology Group (PHG), Bethlehem University and Al-Quds University, and Israeli representatives from the Peres Centre for Peace, the Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, the Milken Institute, the City of Jerusalem and the Dead Sea Drainage Authority.

The proposed collaborative work between Israeli and Palestinian experts in the Kidron Valley/Wadi Nar represents an unprecedented opportunity for setting up a framework for collaborative integrated basin management between the two parties for a shared water resource in a place of enormous historical, cultural, and ecological importance and beauty. There is no alternative to collective action when managing a shared international basin. This was recently recognised by the EU Water Framework Directive, which requires water management on the basin scale regardless of political borders. Nature, ecosystems and the intricate interaction between water, climate, soil, flora and fauna can only be protected by collective action.

This is not theoretical research, but an actual planning process, based on the successful model of the Yarqon River Master Plan in the Tel Aviv region, which converted the Yarqon river and its environs from an environmental nuisance into a beautiful recreational area. The steering committees will create and guide a team of Israeli and Palestinian professionals, who will act in

concert to develop the Master Plan. The team will consist of a plan coordinator, planners, hydrologists, engineers, archaeologists, ecologists, economists, jurists, sociologists, agronomists and public awareness specialists. Additional experts will be brought in as needs change. The selection of the team members will be done jointly by the steering committee in order to create a balanced, realistic and useable Plan.

The major beneficiaries of the Master Plan are the valley residents themselves. Improved planning, land usage and infrastructure will make the Kidron Valley/Wadi Nar a better place to live and visit. When implemented, local farmers will benefit from effluent which, when treated sufficiently, can provide irrigation for crops and animals in an area with little freshwater resources and limited jobs. Tourists, hikers and other visitors will benefit from the restoration of the natural beauty of the region, its cultural and historic sites, and from increased access. Increased tourism will in turn create additional employment opportunities.

### **3 Descriptions of the Master Plan and its Effectiveness**

The Master Plan will present a number of possible scenarios based on current and expected land and water use and will detail how best to utilise the resources of the valley while preserving its historic value. In addition, these discussions will bring together local and regional stakeholders, as well as planners and local authorities, to discuss their visions of the valley. This joint effort will exemplify the ability of both parties to coexist and work together to solve mutual problems.

Like most things in the Middle East, solving problems always has political undertones. Creating a master plan for the valley is interpreted by some people on both sides as recognition of Israeli or Palestinian sovereignty. For forty years, a temporary political situation has been in place in the region, and deterioration of the Kidron/Wadi Nar is just one result. The researchers, both Israeli and Palestinian, recognise that a master plan based on ecological, historical, physical, economic and geographical terms agreed upon by both sides will serve the best interests of the valley, regardless of present or future political sovereignty. The creation of the first master plan for a joint Israeli-Palestinian water source will be a breakthrough in Palestinian-Israeli cooperation. Once completed, it can serve as a blueprint for similar plans for the other 15 cross-boundary waterways which are desperately in need of rehabilitation.

As a starting point for reclamation, a survey of the Israeli and Palestinian stakeholders involved is of vital importance. The survey will identify the issues, interests, priorities and characteristics of the various stakeholders and stakeholder representatives, and the relationships between the different stakeholders and stakeholder groups. The information gathered by this research will inform the planners as to the needs of the stakeholders.

A comprehensive study of the valley's geography, history and ecology will be carried out. Every portion of the valley will be studied, from drainage and runoff to sewage and solid waste disposal. A study will be made of the endemic species of fauna and flora in the valley; agricultural methods and crops, industry and arts and crafts. A study is also needed of the potential economic benefits of a properly managed basin, showcasing the area's cultural, scientific, and ecological heritage to the world. All this information will be compiled into an Outline Plan that includes the region's historical, archaeological, ecological, tourist and agricultural aspects and identifies the issues, concerns and problems of the Kidron Valley/Wadi Nar that need to be addressed by the Master Plan.

One of the major problems to be tackled is sewage treatment. Without purifying the effluent flowing in the valley there can be little environmental enhancement. For years, Israel and the Palestinian Authority have debated the creation of sewage treatment plants in the valley. In the past, several plans for sewage treatment were developed under the auspices of different government authorities. These plans will be collected and brought to the attention of the stakeholders for their evaluation. The team will work towards achieving agreement on a workable plan.

A subsequent plan for proper distribution of the treated water to the various riparians in the valley will then be developed. This includes the issue of a "dry" or "wet" wadi; should water

continue to flow year-round, or should the Kidron/Wadi Nar return to its previous state as an intermittent stream?

The planners will then work to coordinate a Master Plan that takes into consideration future land use planning. The Master Plan will consider reduction of environmental degradation; water quality and effluent treatment; use of the water that flows in the stream; rehabilitation of the river's ecosystem including flora and fauna; development of parks and pathways for leisure and recreation; reconstruction and rehabilitation of historic sites; designating land usage including protected areas, farmland, open spaces, parks, business and residential areas; and the establishment of a visitors' centre.

It will detail investment opportunities as well as the roles and responsibilities of the various agencies which will be involved in the implementation of the plan and the management of the resources of the valley. One major focus will be the recognition of the Kidron Valley/Wadi Nar as a U.N. World Heritage Site.

The Master Plan will introduce integrated water resource management (IWRM) to regional planning, whereby land use, water use and the environment will be managed holistically, social and economic needs will be balanced with the needs of the environment, and decision-making will be coordinated between the local, regional and national levels.

Our goal is to not only to develop a Master Plan, but to do so while incorporating the principles of basin management, including transparency, dialogue and public involvement at and between all levels. This is not something to be taken for granted in an area of conflict without much experience in using these principles. Suspicion and resistance may arise at different levels, and frustration and disappointment when expectations and reality collide. The Master Plan is a blueprint for the common future of the Kidron Valley/Wadi Nar developed together by Israelis and Palestinians in coordination and in consultation with stakeholders from both entities and from all levels. It reflects a common vision that will improve the quality of life for the residents of the valley and visitors, both environmentally and economically.

This will be the first Master Plan for a transboundary stream in the region. When completed, the Kidron Valley/Wadi Nar Master Plan will serve as a model for other Palestinian-Israeli transboundary streams and rivers, as well as being a starting point for continued cooperation within the basin itself.

#### **4 Conclusions**

When process supersedes action, glaciers move faster than people. In the Middle East, the amount of coffee drunk during the negotiation processes could replenish the depleted rivers and streams that cross between Israel and the Palestine Authority. Sometimes it seems that the parties enjoy meeting each other over coffee so much, preferably in some lovely spot in Europe, that it would be a pity to conclude the negotiations. At the same time, serious environmental degradation continues apace, as if by slowing down the process, one can reduce man's impact on nature. The Kidron valley serves as an example of how prolonged negotiations reduce the value of a historical site, impact on the lives of thousands of people, reduce the amount of reusable water available for a parched area and demonstrate how the peace process delays environmental rehabilitation. In order to break this impasse, without resorting to a resolution of all disagreements between the parties, several scholars joined together to develop a Master Plan for the Kidron valley.

In December of 2009 a steering committee was created comprised of six institutions; the Dead Sea Drainage Authority, the City of Jerusalem, the Peres Centre for Peace, the Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, the Israel Environment Ministry and the Milken Institute. The Chair of the Steering Committee has met with the Director General of a Palestinian environmental NGO, who has expressed an interest in serving on the steering committee, once funds are available, for a study of all transboundary streams in Israel and the Palestinian Authority. The steering committee has appointed an interdisciplinary team, headed by an architect and composed of experts in the fields of planning, water and drainage, environment, history, archaeology,

economics, transportation, and law. In January 2011 the Master Plan will be presented to interested stakeholders and government officials from both Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

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### **Further reading**

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