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ASCE Meets with Iraqi Minister of Water Resources To Discuss Cooperation

By Mark Fitzgerald

For nearly two years now ASCE's Environmental and Water Resources Institute (EWRI) and International Activities Committee (IAC) have been seeking to develop a strategy to assist the engineering communities in the countries sharing the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers—namely, Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and Iran—bolster their technical capacity to better meet the present and future challenges of managing these water resources. Two months ago, shortly after Iraq's minister of water resources, H.E. Rashid Latif, requested that ASCE and several other organizations help in efforts to promote “sustainable development in the Euphrates-Tigris region,” ASCE's president, Dennis R. Martenson, P.E., DEE, F.ASCE, wrote to the minister commending his initiative and promising that the Society would “stand ready” to support it.

On December 1 members of the IAC and EWRI, together with representatives from the Euphrates-Tigris Initiative for Cooperation (etic—an initiative launched by scholars in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey), the Global Environment Facility, the World Bank, and other groups, met with the Iraqi minister at ASCE's office in Washington, D.C., and asked for his support in establishing a basis for cooperation in the Tigris and Euphrates system. “This will be a professional and nongovernmental effort, building on the basis of where ASCE has members and good reputation in all of the riparian countries,” said Olcay Unver, Ph.D., P.E., M.ASCE, a founding member of the etic, at the outset of the meeting. “While this initiative will seek to mobilize the engineering and environmental communities,” he said, “the process will be flexible and accommodative rather than prescriptive.”

Establishing initial contacts, conducting meetings, and developing terms of reference are among the activities that ASCE and other participating organizations see as the first steps in drafting a plan for cooperation in the Tigris and Euphrates region. “Iraq is ready to contribute and participate in discussions on any level,” said the minister after noting that the past year had been particularly arid in Iraq and the country’s reservoirs were quite low. “It’s extremely important for the future development of Iraq to emphasize strategic projects, such as building dams and expanding agriculturally. The reason, of course, is that Iraq could eventually face a shortage of water because the flows in the Euphrates have diminished significantly while population continues to grow. So we’ll have to store much more freshwater, and this will require a large amount of commitment and cooperation.”

The minister went on to point out that there was widespread support in Iraq for building a dam. “I have the support from the entire cabinet and the entire government,” noted Latif, who also stressed the importance of communicating with other riparian nations in the region. “I have been in touch with all of our neighboring countries and we’ve exchanged information, but I have received no indication about their future activities. We must know their plans and their procedures. I’m very hopeful that we can establish a technical dialogue, but every country has its own conditions. In Syria, for instance, there seems to be very little separation between technical discussions and political ones.”

ASCE is in the process of securing financial support from the World Bank for preparatory activities that could set a cooperative project in motion. These activities include a planning session during the EWRI’s World Environmental and Water Resources Congress, which will be held in May in Omaha, Nebraska, and a special session at an EWRI conference scheduled for New Delhi, India, in December.