...water is not merely an economic resource but a means of settling the periphery, protecting state land and a means of conserving farmers and farming.

Ariel Sharon, Israel’s Prime Minister, Ha’aretz Daily Newspaper, April 19, 2001

Abstract: Israeli agricultural and water policy over the last 50 years has been heavily influenced by Zionist ideology. The central aim of Zionism and of the State of Israel is the creation and nurturing of a Jewish presence within the geographical context of Israel/Palestine. In achieving this aim, Zionist and Israeli leaders have striven to increase of the Jewish population through promoting immigration and pro-natality polices, establishing a cooperative and rural mode of life by laying claim to the land and securing peripheral areas through territorial settlement.

Territorial settlement of the land by means of agriculture was considered a national goal for a continued Jewish presence in Israel. This policy might have had relevance during the establishment of the State but today has left a legacy of mismanagement and environmental degradation. Agricultural settlements meant to help disperse the population to peripheral areas provided an economic foundation for the country based on rurality and cooperativeness that served to bond the Jew to his homeland. From this ideological perspective, policies were instituted that favored the expansion of agriculture and by extension, water development for irrigation projects.

All water resources within the country became the property of the State and a highly centralized system of water management, allocation, and development was implemented. Nevertheless, throughout the history of the State, agriculture has never fulfilled its ideological objectives. Today, crisis, conflict and acute water scarcity loom large in the region.

In this paper, I discuss the evolution and persistence of Zionist ideology in Israeli agricultural and water policy. The paper argues for a revision of Zionist thought that is necessary for sustainable management of existing water resources. Data were collected, by means of a survey questionnaire, on local perceptions of the importance of Zionist ideology with respect to water and agriculture. These data were gathered from a representative sample of residents from ten kibbutz settlements in the southern Arava Valley. The data provides a link between local and national perceptions. Results indicate that people still believe Zionist values pertaining to water and agriculture at national, regional, and local levels despite the concomitant ecological risks and minimal economic return. Changing these perceptions will require not only political courage but local attitudinal changes as well.

**Keywords:** water management; Zionist ideology

1. **Introduction**

In a country with naturally scarce water resources, it is astonishing to see that Israel’s water policy does not reflect this natural condition. To fully understand Israel’s water crisis, one must refer to the ideological forces which shaped and continue to shape the country.

Israel’s water resources consist of surface and groundwater. Groundwater is rapidly becoming the primary source of water as demand grows and surface waters diminish. The Sea of Galilee in the north is the country’s only large surface water reservoir. Two aquifer systems are also utilized: the coastal aquifer, stretching from Haifa in the north to the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula in the south, and the mountain aquifer that straddles the central mountainous plateau. All of these water resources are in decline as demand grows.

Signs of distress are also evident. Regions of the coastal aquifer are heavily salinized because of overpumping, thus causing wells to be closed. In the mountain aquifer system, water quality is severely degraded due to pollution from agricultural, industrial, and commercial use. Overpumping from all three resources has caused water levels to steadily decline over the last decade (Gabbay, 2000). Exacerbating the problem is the political dimension in which all of these resources exist. Israel’s water resources are transboundary. Jordan and Syria are riparians to the Sea of Galilee and the Palestinian Authority is a riparian to the coastal and mountain aquifers. As water resources diminish and political tensions continue to rise, the specter of war over water hangs large over the region (Lowi, 1993).