



Water: Israel and Turkey strike 20-year water deal

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JERUSALEM -- Israel has agreed to buy 1.75 billion cubic feet of water from Turkey every year for the next 20 years to try to solve its water shortage and ensure the success of an arms deal, Israeli officials said.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Turkey's Energy Minister Zeki Cakan reached the deal at a meeting in Jerusalem. The final price hasn't been reached, but a joint committee was set up "to discuss and finalize the issue of water transportation from Turkey to Israel," said a joint statement released after the talks.

Transporting the water and payment have been sticking points in the negotiations, said Raanan Gissin, an official in Sharon's office. An arms deal with Turkey, in which it agreed to buy Israeli tanks and air force technology, was also an issue, he added.

Israel's relationship with the large Islamic country is important to the Jewish state, especially amid 22 months of fighting with the Palestinians, which has caused tension in the Middle East and strained Israel's ties with Egypt and Jordan, with which it has signed peace treaties.

In the barren Middle East, water is a strategic issue as well as one of survival. Turkey is one of the few countries in the area with water reserves, and sales of the precious commodity could boost its position as a regional power and bring in tens of millions of dollars in badly needed hard currency.

Turkey tied the arms deal to the water agreement, Gissin said, but denied media reports it had threatened to cancel the military treaty if Israel did not go through with its promise to purchase water. He refused to detail the size of the arms deal.

Israel and Turkey have a "very large, complex strategic and commercial relationship" so both were interested in reaching an agreement, Gissin said. "Turkey is an important part of our overall regional policy," he added.

In the end, Israel agreed to buy water at a higher price than it would have cost to desalinate, Gissin said, adding that Israel will not have desalination facilities for at least another five years.

"There's costs and benefits on both sides of this. Water, additional water, will never hurt Israel because we are at a very grave shortage," Gissin said. "Water is like money in the bank. You can use it in the future."