

Water Wars in the Middle East: Reality or Fiction?

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Water shortage has been identified as the greatest threat in the Middle East, where more than 60 per cent of the people live in lands with high and very water scarcity situations (World Bank, 2017). The continuity and severity of water stress in the Middle East are significant factors affecting societies. According to the World Resource Institute (2015), fourteen of the thirty-three countries projected to be the most water-stressed in 2040 are in the Middle East. This highlights the urgency of addressing water scarcity in the region.

Water shortage has also been linked to social and political unrest. De Châtel (2014) and Gleick (2014) argue that water shortage drives conflict in Syria. The inaccessibility of water in rural areas has prompted widespread migration to urban areas, leading to increased social discontent and heightened political tensions against the regime. The refugee crisis further illustrates this connection, as displaced people from Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya often face acute water scarcity in their regions (World Bank, 2017; UNHCR, 2015; IDMC & NRC, 2016). Gleick (2014) notes that displacement, food supply crises, and unemployment significantly affect political stability in Syria.

Water dependency ratios also demonstrate the region's vulnerability. Countries like Iraq and Syria have high dependency rates on external water resources, with Iraq's ratio at 60.8% and Syria's at 72.4% (Water Dependency Ratio, 2017). This reliance on transboundary water resources, coupled with population growth from 104 million in 1950 to an estimated 692 million by 2050 (UN Population Division, 2007), increases the likelihood of water tensions in the region (Wolf & Hammer, 2000; Tropp & Jägerskog, 2006).

Water scarcity is often cited as a source of social and political change. The literature on the Middle East's water crisis presents water as a key factor in political and security conflicts at both national and regional levels (Smirnov et al., 2016; Gleick, 2014; Theisen et al., 2012). However, an alternative perspective focuses on how water scarcity drives social and environmental movements, with domestic and local issues playing a pivotal role. This approach shifts the focus from inter-state water conflicts to the internal impacts of water scarcity on livelihoods and regional economies.

The dominant narratives in Middle Eastern water discourse focus on water as a source of inter-state and sub-state conflict and war. The water war perspective argues that competition over scarce resources triggers state conflicts. Specifically, when looking at the origin of the idea of water wars in the Middle East, it can be observed that the initial claims have come from journalists and politicians such as John Bulloch and Adel Darwish (1993) who wrote a book entitled "Water Wars: Coming Conflicts in the Middle East," or politicians like Boutros Boutros Ghali, an Egyptian politician and the sixth Secretary-General of the UN, who stated that "the next war in the Middle East will be fought over water, not politics" (1985).

On the other hand, the idea of emphasizing local and domestic impacts of water scarcity is supported by Selby (2005) and Fröhlich (2012), arguing that the context of water wars is not an authentic argument and comes from the neo-Malthusian assumption. This viewpoint assumes that an increase in population is in line with a decrease in water resources, which increases conflicts and violence. However, there is no strong factual and historical support and empirical and scientific framework for the current assumption of water wars, and we cannot see any formal announcements of war over water during the last half-century (Barnaby, 2009).

Selby (2005) argues that water scarcity's impact on domestic and sub-state economies is significant, especially for

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communities reliant on agriculture and local economies. Water scarcity disrupts social life, livelihoods, and the well-being of local communities. Fröhlich (2012) similarly highlights the importance of local water conflicts, suggesting that sub-state water conflicts pose significant risks to social stability. These local-level conflicts are seen as a more pressing concern than the broader notion of inter-state water wars.

Moreover, there is a history of cooperation among countries in the Middle East over water access and their transboundary water resources. Dolatyar and Gray (2000) believe that water wars in the Middle East will not happen in the future, and there is no support for this claim in the region. Apart from using water diplomacy between nations in the past, the study of water politics over the Jordan River basin, the Euphrates-Tigris basin, and the Arabian Peninsula shows that water scarcity in the Middle East has functioned more to practice peace than provoking water war among the governments and this will be continued in the future (Dolatyar & Gray, 2000).

Syria serves as a case study that challenges the water war narrative. While some studies link the Syrian civil war to drought and water scarcity, Selby et al. (2017) and Tobias Ide (2018) argue that these claims lack substantial scientific evidence. They note that, although water scarcity may have exacerbated existing vulnerabilities, the primary drivers of the conflict were political, social, and economic grievances (Selby et al. 2017)

A more nuanced perspective moves beyond the water war versus water cooperation binary to focus on the local impacts of water scarcity. The effects of water scarcity on local and sub-state economies are profound. Domestic water scarcity disrupts livelihoods, affects health, and impacts food security. The movement of rural populations to cities, particularly in Syria, highlights how localized water stress can strain urban infrastructures and exacerbate socio-political instability (Gleick, 2014). These impacts underscore the need to address water scarcity locally, emphasizing multi-dimensional solutions that account for social, political, environmental, and economic factors.

The debate surrounding water scarcity in the Middle East is multi-dimensional. Promoters of the “water war” narrative argue that the depletion of water resources intensifies socio-political vulnerabilities, citing Syria as a prime example. However, critics emphasize that the evidence for inter-state wars over water is not strong, emphasizing the previous agreements accomplished on water between some neighbouring countries in the Middle East. Empirical studies suggest that cooperation has been a more frequent outcome than war. The cases of the Jordan River and the Euphrates-Tigris basins highlight the potential for shared water resources to foster negotiation and collective problem-solving (Dolatyar & Gray, 2000).

Evidently, the concept of water wars among Middle Eastern countries is unreliable as water issues are more effectively analyzed at the local and sub-state levels rather than through inter-state frameworks (Selby, 2005; Fröhlich, 2012). Local and sub-state tensions related to water scarcity directly and significantly impact human social life, highlighting the need for a focus on these dimensions (Fröhlich, 2012). The effects of limited water resources are observable in the daily lives of affected communities, necessitating policies and strategies to reduce social insecurities among vulnerable populations. The notion that water scarcity triggers inter-state wars has been challenged, with evidence suggesting that such claims lack historical precedent (Selby, 2005). Instead, water scarcity’s impacts are more acutely felt at local levels, where the disruption to livelihoods and community well-being is most profound (Fröhlich, 2012; Selby, 2005). Tackling water scarcity needs strengthening local water management systems, fostering cooperative water-sharing agreements, and mitigating the socio-economic vulnerabilities of local water scarcity. A multi-level, multi-dimensional approach is fundamental for reducing the risks related to water scarcity in the Middle East.

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Water Wars in the Middle East: Reality or Fiction?

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About the author:

Reza Sohrabi is a Ph.D. candidate in Sociology at Carleton University, focusing on environmental sociology and political sociology. He holds master's degrees in Social Science Research and Sociology from the University of Berlin and Memorial University. Using qualitative methods, he studies a wide range of sociological issues, including the political economy of natural resources and social movements. During his Ph.D., he aims to investigate the social, political, and economic effects of water scarcity in the MENA region, particularly in Iran.