The geopolitics of water in the Middle East
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**INTRODUCTION**

Yet unlike oil, gas or other valuable minerals, water has not traditionally been considered a catalyst for war or peace. However, with water resources increasingly under unprecedented pressure as a result of the effects of climate change, population growth and pollution, this might no longer be the case.

In May, heavy gunfire was exchanged along the border between Afghanistan and Iran. This outbreak of violence, which resulted in numerous deaths and injuries, and some media coverage of that rare international conflict over shared water resources between the two countries, was the latest development in an almost century-old dispute over access to the Helmand River and its precious water resources. The occupants of 80 settlements, about 16,000 people, in Afghan-controlled territory alone were forced to evacuate, and there were concerns about whether the lack of a reliable water supply might cause issues at a nearby nuclear power station².

However, the spectacular destruction of the dam was not as insidious as the wider reported challenges related to water shortages in Russian-occupied parts of the country, which could result in an even larger displacement of people in the longer term³. Beyond these two examples in the past few months, we find a long history of the ways in which water, the lifeblood of societies, can play a central, often bloody, role in geopolitics.

The eight-year Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, for example, cost hundreds of thousands of lives and billions of dollars. Yet what is often forgotten in the narrative of a war that included the use of chemical weapons and trench warfare is the fact that it was triggered by a dispute over the shared sovereignty of the Shatt Al-Arab river.

If we look further back in history, the spectacular 12th-century Angkor Wat temple complex in Cambodia was the world’s largest religious monument, and the civilization that created it was founded upon its ability to regulate water supplies – a capability that was eventually undone by a combination of prolonged drought followed by intense monsoon rains⁴.

According to UNICEF, across the Middle East nearly 90 percent of children already live in areas of high or extremely high water stress⁵. World Bank research found that climate-related water scarcity could lead to economic losses equivalent to 14 percent of the region’s gross domestic product over the next 30 years.⁶

Put simply, water can make civilizations but it can also easily break them.

**A WATER-STRESSED MIDDLE EAST**

Water has played a fundamental, shaping role throughout human history but what is its future role likely to be? Could we be heading into a new era of more intense and complex water conflicts sparked by wider issues of shortages?¹

In March, the UN published a report on the issue ahead of hosting its first international Water Conference since 1977. It warned that the world is “blindly traveling a dangerous path” of “vampiric overconsumption and overdevelopment” of water resources. It said that the Middle East in particular, which already suffers from acute water shortages, will experience growing scarcity if current trends continue.

Let us not forget that, according to UNICEF, across the Middle East nearly 90 percent of children already live in areas of high or extremely high water stress. World Bank research found that climate-related water scarcity could lead to economic losses equivalent to 14 percent of the region’s gross domestic product over the next 30 years.

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¹. James Denselow is a writer on Middle East politics and security issues. He has worked for for foreign policy think tank Chatham House and international NGOs. Twitter: @jamesdenselow
Of the 17 most water-stressed countries in the world, 11 are in the Middle East and North Africa region, making it one of the worst-affected regions in the world. Countries in the MENA region experience these high levels of water stress despite using only about 4 percent of their water supplies for industrial processes.

In South Asia, by comparison, industrial use of water is high (47 percent) and so are the levels of water stress.

The World Bank estimates that by 2050, an additional 25 billion cubic meters of water will be needed each year to meet the needs of the MENA region. That is equivalent to building an additional 65 desalination plants the size of the Ras Al-Khair plant in Saudi Arabia, which is the largest of its kind in the world.

The UN’s Sustainable Development Goal 6 aims to “ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.” However, the latest national indicator data on water quality reveals a worrying lack of reported data for the whole of South Asia and South-East Asia, China, and large parts of Africa and the Middle East. Taken together, these areas potentially account for the bulk of the global population.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres described water as “humanity’s lifeblood” and warned that it is being drained by “unsustainable water use, pollution and unchecked global warming.”

The report published by UN Water and UNESCO in March ahead of the Water Conference, warned that “scarcity is becoming endemic” because of overconsumption and pollution. It added that global warming will increase seasonal water shortages in areas with abundant water and in those that are already strained.

Richard Connor, the lead author of the report, said that about 10 percent of the global population currently lives in areas with high or critical levels of water stress. Growing scarcity is a particular red flag when it is set against the backdrop of unresolved disputes that are ripe for rapid deterioration into diplomatic, economic or even military conflicts.

Take for example the politics of dams and how control over the water supply in one country can affect availability in another. The vast majority of Egypt’s water, about 85 percent, flows along the Nile from Ethiopia, which is known as the “water tower” of Africa. Egypt therefore views the development of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam as an “existential matter.”

This is because Nile water helps to generate a sizable amount of Egypt’s electricity, and the fact that 95 percent of the country’s 104 million population live along the river’s banks and delta.

In April, Egypt denounced Ethiopian accusations that Cairo was politicizing the row over Nile waters and said it was an attempt to evade legal responsibility for the downstream effects of the dam.

Elsewhere in the region, relations between Türkiye and Syria are in a state of flux.
following the reelection of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Syrian President Bashar Assad’s return to the Arab League fold.

There is a long history of water-related issues between the two countries, with former Turkish President Turgut Ozal famously saying: “We don’t tell the Arabs what to do with their oil, so we don’t accept any suggestion from them about what to do with our water.”

The fact that the regime in Damascus does not currently control large swaths of territory in the north of Syria, as a result of the long-running civil war, has altered traditional state-to-state disputes over water but this does not mean the issue has gone away.

Indeed, in November last year, Human Rights Watch accused Turkish authorities of “exacerbating an acute water crisis that is believed to have given rise to the deadly cholera outbreak spreading across Syria.”

This was reportedly caused by Turkish authorities failing to ensure an adequate amount of water was able to flow downstream into the Syrian-held portion of the Euphrates River.

In Yemen, the UN has warned that “groundwater is being depleted at twice the rate it is being replenished. This means that, for example, all the 13,000 wells used as sources of water in the Sanaa basin will dry up, spelling doom for communities who use the water for domestic, crops and livestock use.”

In Lebanon, water-related issues have been exacerbated by the collapse of the nation’s economy and a corresponding power-supply crisis that has prevented the use of water pumps to fill tanks.

Across the Middle East, the importance of water and its associated logistics is reflected by how often water-related infrastructure is targeted by terrorist groups.

In addition, when explosive weapons with wide-area effects are used during conflicts in heavily populated areas, such as Mosul or Aleppo, they often damage or destroy water infrastructure even if it was not intentionally targeted.

While transboundary water issues can lead to heightened risk of conflict, domestic water crises can forge new paths of cooperation. A New York Times headline recently warned that “Jordan is running out of water.”

A warming climate, increasing population and creaking infrastructure have combined to create a seemingly existential challenge for the country, it said. The scale of the water lost to leakage or illegal use is such that the country’s supposedly ambitious National Water Strategy aims only to reduce it to 25 percent of the country’s total supply by 2040.

Yet Jordan’s crisis is motivating the Kingdom to work more closely with its neighbors to secure sustainable energy supplies and implement desalination programs.

The macro issues of declining water supplies and a changing climate can put pressure on fundamental questions about the livable geography of countries, and the ways in which populations will eventually vote with their feet to secure better futures for themselves and their children elsewhere.

Limited water resources often mean that those who live in rural areas of the region cannot hold back the expansion of the desert into areas that were once fertile farmland. Encroaching desertification is a trend linked to increased urbanization, as people move from less habitable parts of a country to find work and the hope of a better life. By 2050, it is projected a staggering proportion of humanity, about two-thirds, will live in cities.

WATER DIPLOMACY

The importance of water is undoubtedly enormous. However, in and of itself it is historically not enough to generate transnational conflicts; rather, it acts as a catalyst to internal and local social conflicts.

There is a modern trend of viewing water-resource diplomacy as more of a technical issue than one that dominates the political narrative. Indeed, water has often been a source of cooperation rather than conflict.

However, in this era of growing scarcity, much more needs to be done to ensure fair access to water, and more efficient allocation and use. A study by Marshall Burke of Stanford University and others found that an increase of one standard deviation in local temperature raised the risk of intergroup conflict by 11 percent.

In 2015, Jordan hosted a conference titled “Exploring the water-peace nexus.” It championed the UN’s 1997 water convention, which is clear in its assertion that countries have the right to utilize any shared resources in their territories as long as they do not cause significant harm to basin states.

Despite the trend toward water scarcity, the UN Water Conference in March came at a time of general rapprochement in the Middle East region. The easing of tensions between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, and Saudi Arabia and Iran; the 2020 Abraham Accords in which several Arab states, including the UAE and Bahrain, agreed to normalize relations with Israel; and a ceasefire in Yemen are all positive signs that offer hope that water diplomacy might be folded into more comprehensive narratives. The fourth Arab Water Conference took place late last year and the fifth should be a much higher-profile occasion, to demonstrate how seriously regional leaders are taking this issue.