

Conflict over water: the quality and quantity of the resource

[Science](#), [Geography](#)



In 1995, the then Vice President of the World Bank, Dr. Ismail Serageldin in an interview with Newsweek d, "...many of the wars of this century were about oil...wars of the next century will be over water" (Krishnakumar, 1999). Later in 2010, when the UN General Assembly and the UN Human Rights Council passed a historic judgment and declared water as a human right, in the favor of almost 900 million people in the world who do not have access to clean drinking water; the war was officially announced (General Assembly declares access to clean water and sanitation is a human right, 2010).

While water scarcity has always been a source of concern around the world, it had never got so much attention from the governments. But today, economies have begun preparing themselves for a water crisis and the Middle East which is one of the most poorly endowed regions in terms of water is faced with formidable task of providing clean and safe drinking water to its growing populations. What is challenging about the water scenario in the Middle East is the power it holds on economies and governments. In fact, countries here are divided and ranked on the basis of those who can manage to pay for access to or the creation of new sources of water and those who do not have the pecuniary prowess to do so. Conflict here is invoked not because water is not accessible but because it is not equally accessible.

Water is extremely important for human survival but given its inequitable distribution in the Middle East, there is a mad scramble by governments to control and possess whatever they can get their hands on. For example, in the Upper Nile Basin, the Ethiopian government planned to build dams to

secure its water supply for irrigation which was strongly opposed by the Sudanese and Egyptian governments because once a dam is constructed on a river it not only reduces the flow of water to downstream users but can also cause harm by affecting soil and water qualities downstream. Similarly, in the Euphrates Basin, the Southeast Anatolia Development Project (Dam) is causing much tension by benefiting Turkey but exhausting the water supply to Syria and Iraq and polluting the soil there.

Conflict over water is not just about possession, it also has a lot to do with the modifications to the quality and quantity of the resource. Like Abu Saeed of Jiftlick Popular Committee points out in the Documentary, Jordan Valley Blues, “ The Israeli side has done a good job stealing water by drilling deep into the aquifers specifically in many areas of the Jordan valley, affecting our existing wells. Wells dug by the Israeli side are deeper, reaching the underlying layer of clean and fresh water. Palestinians, on the other hand, do have some wells that were drilled during the Jordanian administration at a depth of 100-150 meters. But most of these wells, if not all, contain salty water, which is even unsuitable for agriculture sometimes. Israel’s drilling of wells has caused so many springs and wells to dry up or produce significantly less quantities of water” (LifeSource, 2010)

If we look closely at the Israel-Palestinian conflict, one finds that the entire clash is centered around the power Israel currently holds and wishes to sustain on the Jordan River Basin. While Israel controls the bulk of water supply in this region, its greed to occupy Palestine drives from the fact that almost one quarter of the water it relies on originates from there, thus giving rise to extended hostilities.

With quick population growths and looming climate change effects, the demand for water is only going to rise. This demand in the Middle Eastern context can have extremely unstable results. The current basin-wide cooperation and mutual agreements between governments that exist may come under serious threat unless the intimidating pressure of water scarcity is urgently met.

References

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