

Middle East Water and Regional Relations

Peter J. Stoett

Volume 15, Number 2, Fall 1995

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs15_02re04

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-5673 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Stoett, P. J. (1995). Middle East Water and Regional Relations. *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 15(2), 150–143.

Middle East Water and Regional Relations

Garfinkle, Adam. *War, Water, and Negotiation in the Middle East: The Case of the Palestine-Syria Border, 1916-1923*. Occasional Paper No. 115. Tel Aviv, Israel: Tel Aviv University, The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies. 1994.

Lowi, Miriam. *Water and Power: The Politics of a Scarce Resource in the Jordan River Basin*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

The importance of water in conflict and cooperation is finally receiving the academic recognition it has always deserved. There are two main currents of related conceptualization running through what would appear to be the mainstream of related literature. The first deals with the question of security: how do shared water resources both cause insecurity and provide opportunities to pursue it? This question spills over (pun fully intended) into the second current, the debate over whether increased concern over such environmental factors justifies a revival of neofunctionalist thinking within a loose liberal institutionalist framework, or whether it simply makes more sophisticated modern state-centric analysis or, even, continues an older geopolitical tradition.

International water basins provide fertile ground for both sets of questions: their contemporary importance is simply undeniable, especially in an arid region such as the Middle East, and as such they encourage the notion that water is as important as, for example, oil deposits or foreign currency reserves. At the same time, the very formation of formal nation-states within water basins created an automatic condition of vulnerability for downstream states, and the need for international institutions to limit the potential conflict over the resource is obvious, if less easily realized.

Two recent contributions to the literature on water and international relations expand the library on the complex and often frustrating politics of the Jordan River system. Those seeking historical depth on the matter can look to Adam Garfinkle's *War, Water, and Negotiation in the Middle East* as an authoritative treatment that focuses primarily on the British-Zionist-Hashemite-French dispute over borders in the immediate post-Ottoman era. The Sykes-Picot plan would affect such directly commercial issues as railway rights, but water questions inevitably surfaced as well: for example, the Zionist movement, in a 1919 presentation to the Versailles Peace conference, "emphasized the importance of water to the future development of the Jewish National Home." (p. 31) Garfinkle suggests it made "perfect sense, historically speaking, that Zionist conceptions of borders would be based more on engineering considerations than on ancient history." (p. 39)

Hydroelectric potential, economic security through access to water resources, and the struggle for high ground helped define the border wrangling that characterized this formative period in contemporary Middle East history. Garfinkle's work is rich in detail and well written, though one might find it presumptuous regarding the extent of most readers' knowledge base in such a limited area. As with most (if not all) diplomatic histories, the treatment is rather parochial, concerned primarily with Anglo-French relations and largely devoid of social or cultural considerations: it is also written in a "pure" historical style, avoiding any trace of polemics. (Garfinkle adds a strong argument against the historical/legal claim that "Jordan is Palestine" at the end of the book.)

Water fits in, but it is not the central theme of the book, as the title might suggest. Although we are given important data and chronological background to the present Middle Eastern conflict, especially with regard to its often ignored colonial roots. Garfinkle himself warns us that "[t]he story of the fixing of the border between French Syria and British Palestine between 1916 and 1923 is by most measures historical esoterica." (p. 11) A more detailed analysis of Garfinkle's work is thus best left to an historian whose speciality is that era and region. We can look forward, however, to the same attention to detail and careful analysis in his forthcoming book. *Deep and Wide: Water, War, and Negotiation in the Jordan Basin, 1916-1993*, of which this Occasional Paper is a part.

A much more relevant book for readers of this journal is Miriam Lowi's *Water and Power: The Politics of a Scarce Resource in the Jordan River Basin*. Lowi is also a contributor to the "Environmental

Change and Acute Conflict" project undertaken by the University of Toronto and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (others include Peter Gleick and Thomas Homer-Dixon). She believes four main variables shape riparian relations: resource need, relative power, the character of riparian relations, and efforts at conflict resolution. Lowi aims with this book to present a detailed realist account of conflict over the Jordan River, and to refute the liberal institutionalist argument that cooperation over shared resources is as possible as it is necessary. She is particularly concerned to admonish functionalists for apparent naivety, since this case demonstrates that cooperation on specific issues need not lead to political integration.

One might raise concerns over whether the Jordan is a valuable case study for the purpose of generalization. Management of the Jordan can only be viewed as a functionalist failure in a light which forces functionalism into predictive caricature (the nation-state must wither, and relatively soon). Despite the inclusion of an excellent comparative chapter which also introduces the Euphrates, Indus, and Nile River basins (which may have been better placed at the end of the book instead of near the beginning), the book reads as a case study, not a general statement on intergovernmental riparian conflict, and theoretical conclusions cannot exceed this.

As both Garfinkle and Lowi's work emphasize, regional policy calculations over the future population of areas, intended as vital steps in nation-building, have always had water availability in mind. Water is also, as Jordan's chief negotiator on water rights told *The New York Times* in 1993, a "zero-sum game . . . what is taken by Israel is taken away from other people." (10 October 1993, p. 1) Not ever)' case is perceived in this manner, so convenient for classical realism; and in fact a transnational regional political economy might be an informative additional perspective given the discrepancies in living standards created at least partially by differentiated access to water. By framing the debate in terms of a classical realist/liberal institutionalist dichotomy, Lowi limits our perspective.

Lowi does, however, use a sufficiently wide brush to introduce many diverse factors, from the hydro-technical to the cultural. The link between water, survival, and political identity emerges as one of the more pronounced themes of Lowi's work, suggesting the importance of culture as a variable in international relations at the nexus with environmental scarcity. And the argument in favor of realism does fit in well with the analysis, supported with reference to the tendency of the Arab nations to abandon solidarity when national interest becomes an issue. Focusing on issues — such as water disputes — which were often previously considered peripheral in international relations literature, may not provoke the new theories one might expect; it may instead reinforce older perspectives, and this will come as no surprise to students of geopolitics.

Predictably enough, neither author is optimistic about the future of Jordan River system cooperation, which, despite the recent Washington Declaration (Israel-Jordan pact) and Israel-PLO arrangements, will prove even more trying as both population and water scarcity increases. Many more Russian Jewish immigrants are coming to Israel: promises of development in Palestine will have the same effect, if realized; Jordan has recently absorbed almost a half-million Palestinians expelled from Kuwait, and many more Palestinians are registered worldwide as refugees and, quite understandably, will seek to return if the peace process is durable. Syrian dam construction along the Euphrates and Yarmuk Rivers continues to cause ongoing tension in downstream states.

In other words, multiple demands for water will only increase, supply will become even more precious, and questions of unjust distribution will continue to fuel debate, especially with regard to Israel's use of the West Bank aquifer system. This is why Lowi's book is such an important contribution, since it encapsulates the main issues and historical developments between its covers and stresses the real diplomatic difficulties inherent in such complex situations. She does not, however, sufficiently explore avenues toward drastically increasing water efficiency in the region, surely the first necessary step, or instituting fiscal policies designed to reflect the true price of water, or the important future of desalting plants in the region.

From an environmentalist perspective, both books prove disappointing. Little is said on behalf of the environment itself, though Lowi mentions briefly the pollution problems associated with Israel's rapid industrial development. Cooperation over the use of major resource systems can also spell ecological disaster, and irrigation and damming schemes are of course the most forbidding of such projects. Institutions that mitigate conflict are, of course, welcomed; but what is needed also are ones that have significant influence and can contribute to species conservation, monitor water purity, preserve watershed

integrity, and address other ecological imperatives, and within the context of an evolving international law on shared water resources.

Lowi is right: given power discrepancies between upstream and downstream states, foreign policy designs predicated upon the threat of extinction, and fundamental cross-societal acrimony, the functionalist idea may even seem absurd. But the relevant question may be when, exactly, institutions can begin to make sense. The answer may be related to the progression from arrangements made in the context of assumed conflict to institutions developed for the explicit purpose of environmental preservation. However, again, we should be aware that such bodies do more to facilitate resource exploitation than anything else; and that, if water is not conserved in the Middle East now, the future of cooperation based on any resource is a purely academic discussion.

Peter J. Stoett
The University of British Columbia