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ARTICLES
4 Speaking of Water
George R. Trumbull IV
6 Waking the Red-Dead
Lizabeth Zack
14 Turkey’s Rivers of Dispute
Hilal Elver
19 Iraq’s Water Woes: A Primer
24 Saudi Alchemy: Water Into Oil, Oil Into Water
Toby Jones
30 Water Conflict and Cooperation in Yemen
Gerhard Lichtenthaeler

SPECIAL REPORTS
36 The Politics of Subsidy Reform in Iran
Kevan Harris
40 What Does the Gama’a Islamiyya Want Now?
Ewan Stein

REVIEWS
45 Pitching the Princes
Robert Vitalis
Yaron Peleg, Israeli Culture Between the Two Intifadas: A Brief Romance
Rebecca L. Stein

IN MEMORIAM
48 Mohamed el-Sayed Said

EDITOR’S PICKS
48 New and Recommended Reading
PHOTOS/GRAPHICS

COVER Tapped out. (Frederic Cirou/Getty Images/PhotoAlto)
The Middle East is running out of water.

It is a statement that may seem both banal and unduly apocalyptic. Most of the land in this arid region is desert. Large oil-exporting states like Saudi Arabia and Libya exhausted their indigenous renewable water supply decades ago. The desalination plants of the Gulf are well known; the Great Manmade River constructed by Libya is notorious. At the same time, water runs freely from the tap in most heavily populated areas of the region. Though it has endured more than its fair share of war, the Middle East has mostly been spared the murderous drought and famine that has accompanied civil strife in the Horn of Africa. The inter-state “water wars” that have been predicted for some time have never been fought and, though the predictions keep coming, these conflicts are not on the horizon.

But the Middle East has entered a new water era, one in which its relative lack of fresh water supply will bump up against growth in demand. The total population of the region—defined as North Africa, Sudan, Somalia, the Levant, the Arabian Peninsula, Iraq and Iran—is expected to climb from 309 million in 2000 to about 651 million in 2030. Rising living standards, attained by at least portions of these populations, translate into more water consumption per capita. During the same period the absolute supply of water is projected to decrease, due to drops in precipitation and river flows induced by climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the most prestigious body examining the matter, has forecast that “annual rainfall is likely to decrease in much of Mediterranean Africa and northern Sahara, with the likelihood of a decrease in rainfall increasing as the Mediterranean coast is approached.” An independent study published in Nature magazine likewise estimated that regional rainfall could decrease by 10–30 percent by the year 2050.

The combined impact of climate change and population growth will add to the number of countries confronting “water stress”—the point when demand occasionally exceeds supply or the available water is too brackish or polluted to be used. The Middle East is already the most water-stressed region in the world. In 2000, 15 of its 21 countries fell below the global standard for adequate supply—1,000 cubic meters (about 35 cubic feet) of water per capita per year. (The non-stressed six were Lebanon, Iraq, Mauritania, Oman, Sudan and Syria. Oman and Syria are projected to face stress by 2025.) According to the UN Development Program, Gaza is one of the most water-stressed places on earth, with about 320 cubic meters annually per person.

What will water stress look like on the ground? At the very least, more states will shift the water burden onto the household, as the authorities have already done, for all intents and purposes, in Jordan, Palestine and Yemen. As many people in those countries already must, households will need to arrange for expensive private water delivery, endure water rationing and store water in tanks on the roof. The poor will increasingly be forced to obtain water informally, by dipping a few jugs in irrigation ditches each day or paying prices much higher than those of conventional water delivery systems. As in Iraq, where sanctions and war have severely degraded the water supply system, and the poor have long siphoned off their drinking water in such ways, the public health consequences are dire. Children are the most vulnerable to waterborne disease and contaminants. Although Middle Eastern states have made major strides in ensuring potable water and sanitation, water is not safe everywhere.
How have Middle Eastern states coped with actual and emerging water scarcity? Long ago the region consumed the water resources necessary to supply the population with food. The highest-profile strategy pursued by states has been construction of massive waterworks—dams for the water-rich, desalination plants for the water-poor—to expand arable land and supply burgeoning populations with water. But as Tony Allan famously argues, the real solution to aridity has been trading in “virtual water,” embedded not only in food but also industrial products that require water in their manufacture. The import of virtual water, enabled in part by oil revenues, allowed regimes to foster a myth of wise water management and plentiful supply.

This myth is unlikely to survive the stresses of the new water era. Instead, authorities will cope with growing water scarcity by shifting water out of agriculture. On average, agriculture accounts for approximately 80 percent of centrally allocated state water budgets. If trends associated with climate change continue—declining precipitation, higher temperatures and lower surface water flows—farmers will require more water to irrigate at the same time that governments will find it necessary to reroute supply to sprawling cities. Much of the Great Manmade River water intended for farms has already been diverted for industrial and household use.

Thus far, agricultural planning has not really accounted for water scarcity. Instead, the myth of food security through state management has persisted. In Egypt, the Ministry of Irrigation’s biggest investments in the late 1990s were in large-scale land reclamation. Designed to increase Egypt’s habitable area from 4 to 25 percent, such projects included the al-Salam Canal from the Nile to northern Sinai and the diversion of Nile water to parts of the Toshka depression in southwestern Egypt. Egypt built the world’s largest pumping station—named after President Husni Mubarak—to irrigate the fields they hoped agribusiness would till. Toshka, by most accounts, has been a flop. The pumping station uses only a fraction of its capacity, due to lack of demand. Ironically, Libya’s Great Manmade River at least fulfills its initial intent: to transport fossil water hundreds of miles from underneath the barren interior to the populated coastline through a network of pipes. Though costly and fraught with engineering and administrative problems, this “solution” to water scarcity has been considered cheaper than building desalination plants.

Perhaps the strangest story is that of Saudi Arabia. As Toby Jones details in this issue, in the 1970s the regime largely drained the water-richest area of the kingdom, the Eastern Province, in pursuit of the oil underground. Saudi Arabia drew on fossil aquifers to irrigate vast circles of desert near the Empty Quarter, one of the most desolate environments on the planet, to raise wheat and other crops. Simultaneously, the regime began subsidizing wheat growers, to the extent that by the mid-1990s the country had huge wheat surpluses. The amber waves of grain among the sand dunes were guzzling water, however, and the regime was forced to slash the subsidies in 1993. Saudi Arabia reportedly plans to phase out wheat production by 2016, but it remains likely that agribusiness has shifted to other water-intensive crops.

While overbuilding of infrastructure and production subsidies created unsustainable agricultural sectors, neoliberal economic reform in agriculture has also contributed to rising demand for water. In the 1980s and 1990s, under the influence of the World
Bank and International Monetary Fund, governments across the region withdrew from setting crop prices and quotas, allowing prices of most foodstuffs to reach world market levels, with exceptions for some crops that the state continued to price administratively. Demand for water jumped as farming proved more lucrative. Better prices for crops combined with new technologies and cheap fuel to produce a groundwater revolution. Farmers throughout the region, as elsewhere in the developing world, used mobile diesel pumps to tap into shallow aquifers. The next frontier in water scarcity is emerging as aquifer levels decline and pollution increases in the region’s groundwater resources.

Neoliberal economic reform also has facilitated the growth of agribusiness firms in the region. This change in ownership, from small-scale, labor-intensive farming to large-scale, mechanized farming, has accompanied a shift to growing fodder for livestock and dairy cows. Tim Mitchell and others have questioned these priorities: Why lavish water on meat and dairy operations, some of which target the export market, rather than cultivating cereals, vegetables and other food for local consumption?

The latest scheme of Saudi Arabia and other wealthy states to deal with water scarcity is to buy virtual water in the form of arable land abroad. According to the Economist, Saudi Arabia is considering the creation of a holding company to purchase rice farms in Thailand and Indonesia. Kuwait offered Cambodia $3.46 million in development loans to finance a dam and build a road, in return for a long-term lease on 50,000 hectares of rice-producing land or guaranteed purchase of the rice crop. Many of these deals will likely be struck by public-private partnerships. The Economist later reported that an Abu Dhabi-based firm, al-Qudra, had acquired farmland in Morocco and Algeria, and was seeking acquisitions in Syria, Vietnam, Thailand, Sudan, India and Pakistan.

Most Middle Eastern states do not have this luxury. Given population growth rates, they will need additional supply. But water ministries will not be able to fill the gap through more and more spectacular feats of civil engineering. To balance the competing demands of rural and urban water users, they will have to manage the allocation of available high-quality water more efficiently and equitably. The single greatest source of potential water savings is repair of damaged infrastructure, particularly in Gaza, Algeria and Iraq, places dealing with the ravages of war and/or sanctions. Irrigation and drainage networks are everywhere poorly maintained, wasting more water than what is “lost” through excessive application to crops. The necessary improvements are costly, however.

The World Bank would like Middle Eastern states to put a price on the water used in agriculture. In much of the region, this measure is impractical. Take the Nile Delta: As Alan Richards has argued, irrigation water is already indirectly priced in the relatively high cost of agrarian land. Farmers also pay to lift water from state-owned canals to privately owned tertiary channels using diesel pumps, a deliberate choice on the part of the Irrigation Ministry to limit excess water consumption. Pricing

Continued on page 13.
Life After People,” the History Channel’s plangent alarmist imagined documentary series on the vestiges of civilization after an unspecified catastrophe, forecasts an end for Dubai’s infamous Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world at 2,625 feet. The desert location of Dubai, coupled with the persistent engineering challenges of building there, proves the undoing of Burj Khalifa in the History Channel’s scenario: Desiccation of cables, pulleys and other such quotidian technologies causes the failure of the tower’s automated window-washing equipment, which, in the imagination of cable television, swings free, damaging the building and plunging to the ground below.

The metaphor in the History Channel’s vision for Burj Khalifa, once a symbol of Gulf wealth and economic mastery, and now of overreach and architectural hubris, comes from the plunging to earth of Dubai World, the emirate’s sovereign wealth fund, amid the global recession beginning in late 2008. Dubai’s debt crisis was both of its own making and a result of general financial drought, the drying-up of wells of cash and income in a fundamentally altered world landscape. Nevertheless, the global financial media told their audiences that Dubai could tap another source of wealth, another well, through its connections to oil-rich Abu Dhabi, the federal seat of the United Arab Emirates.

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**Speaking of Water**

George R. Trumbull IV

A desalination plant in Dubai.

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immediate one. But, back in the real world, the blithe reassurances of Dubai’s recovery reflected an assumed tie between oil and water: Oil wealth can compensate for the hubris of building a self-cleaning “superscraper” in one of the driest regions on earth. At a deeper level, water poverty and oil wealth are assumed to be divorced, incompatible, yet nevertheless locked in to a peculiar relationship in which abundance of one resource can make up for profligacy with the other. The assumption is ill founded. At some point, the oil or the water will run out.

The definition of entire states, and indeed entire regions, as “oil economies” implies that hydrocarbon exports alone keep the economies afloat. But the oil industry—its machinery, laborers and managers—relies as much upon the steady supply of water as global industry, commerce and consumers do upon oil. Building on Miriam Lowy’s 1993 *Water and Power*, scholars, public intellectuals and media commentators have developed a large body of literature on water scarcity in the Middle East. These texts largely center on flowing water, namely the Jordan, Tigris, Euphrates, Nile and other rivers, to the exclusion of oil economies. To understand oil economics or water scarcity, one has to know that the two are closely intertwined, yet the resource debates about the Middle East and North Africa seem designed to prevent such awareness.

**Virtual Water**

The term “virtual water” has risen to prominence as a way of referring to the hidden water cost of food and other goods. Growing food obviously requires continual streams of water, an investment many Middle Eastern and North African countries are unwilling or unable to make. Most oil-producing countries, not at all irrationally, simply import tons of food—thus sparing themselves the need to invest their own water in feeding the population. Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and, to a lesser extent, other states have relied on income from the petrochemical industry to outsource the production of food to places with more water in lieu of expensive and environmentally dangerous desalinization or irrigation projects.

Virtual water, however, does not mean that oil economies are any less dependent on water. Rather, virtual water poses
Waking the Red-Dead

Lizabeth Zack

“Look at that!” said Muhammad ‘Asfour, an environmentalist and avid nature photographer, pointing to a picture of a boat and wooden staircase perched well above the Jordanian shore of the Dead Sea. “Do you see how far they are from the waterline?”

The slow death of the Dead Sea is hard to appreciate for the one-time visitors who come for the strange sensations of floating in the briny water, among the most saline in the world, and slathering on the dark mud of the seabed. But the evidence keeps piling up. Experts say that the water level has fallen over 80 feet in the last 50 years and recently has been dropping by one meter, or 3.2 feet, per year. Comparisons of aerial photos from the 1960s and the present highlight the sea’s decreased surface area. These dramatic changes endanger the unique ecosystem of the Dead Sea basin. They pose a serious threat to the established tourism industry on the Israeli side and the newer one on the Jordanian shore. Also, dangerous sinkholes, created when an influx of fresh groundwater, triggered by the declining sea level, eats away at the surface, now dot the landscape around the Dead Sea. According to scientists and residents, these sinkholes have swallowed up farmland and livestock and caused damage to the nearby potash industry, producer of one of Jordan's biggest exports.

Serious efforts to save the Dead Sea started in the latter half of the 1990s, once the Israeli–Palestinian and Israeli–Jordanian peace agreements made it possible to consider cooperative projects around shared natural resources. Environmentalists raised awareness of the problem, while Jordanian and Israeli government officials pledged to rehabilitate the water basin. Quickly, one plan came to dominate the “Save the Dead Sea” agenda: the Red-Sea-Dead Sea Water Conveyance Project, a proposal to transfer millions of cubic feet of water northward from the Red Sea via a channel or canal through Jordan into the Dead Sea. In 2005, the Israeli and Jordanian governments, along with the Palestinian Authority, announced their support for the project and the World Bank’s willingness to coordinate the feasibility study and the environmental and social impact assessment. The project seemed ready to launch.

Many officials tout the Red-Dead as necessary to protect tourism investments on the Dead Sea shores and argue that it will spur economic development in the Wadi ‘Araba area, where the water conveyance structure will be built. Some officials go so far as to promise that the Red-Dead will help Jordan erase its serious water deficit. Jordan is one of the most water-poor countries in the world. Perhaps under pressure to close the water gap, the Jordanian government has moved ahead on two other mega-projects. In May 2009, it announced the Jordan National Red Sea Water Development Project, a strictly Jordanian venture undertaken by the Ministry of Water and Irrigation and the Jordanian Atomic Energy Commission. The aim of the project is to pump Red Sea water into a nuclear-powered desalination plant, sending drinking water to the southern city of ‘Aqaba and the brine into the Dead Sea. It is an obvious imitation of the Red-Dead, or “Phase I” of the project, as the Water Ministry has claimed.

But the fate of the Red-Dead, as the project is often called, is still unclear. According to World Bank officials, the study phase was delayed due to difficulties in securing funding and the inclusion of two additional studies, one of which is designed to explore alternatives. By late 2009, most of the contracts were awarded and firms and panels designated to carry out the different study assignments. The World Bank says the study phase—including the feasibility study, assessment and two additional studies—should be completed by the end of June 2011.

Meanwhile, Jordanian, Israeli and Palestinian officials remain committed to the project. The Red-Dead, they emphasize, is the best hope for saving the treasured hyper-saline lake. But regional pride and environmentalism are not the only reasons for their support. They look forward to the large volume of fresh water that is projected to come from the Red-Dead’s desalination components and the electricity that will be generated at its hydropower stations. In Jordan, officials tout the Red-Dead as necessary to protect tourism investments on the Dead Sea shores and argue that it will spur economic development in the Wadi ‘Araba area, where the water conveyance structure will be built. Some officials go so far as to promise that the Red-Dead will help Jordan erase its serious water deficit. Jordan is one of the most water-poor countries in the world.

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a conceptual challenge for rethinking the so-called oil states of the Middle East. The wealth of these states can be easily measured in oil prices, commodity markets and investment flows, or on a smaller scale, through projects such as Burj Khalifa or Dubai’s equally infamous palm tree-shaped islands. But economists and political scientists, and still less journalists and governments, have not adequately accounted for virtual water. The structures of the virtual water economy are well known; trade statistics easily trace the basic market dynamics of who supplies food to whom. Nevertheless, the oil economy and the world of virtual water remain largely divorced in scholarly and technocratic studies. “Oil economies” are understood in terms of their petrochemical, industrial production, and not in terms of their less visible, but no less important, water and food consumption. Reliance on virtual water, purchased through petrochemical revenues, does not mean that oil economies are not also water economies; it means that water economies with access to significant funds have the power to determine the use of natural resources outside the geographic boundaries of the state.
The government has also started to implement the long-awaited Disi Water Conveyance Project, the plan to pump groundwater from the large Disi aquifer in the south of Jordan and pipe it as drinking water to the capital. The project seemed ready to go in 2008, with a Turkish company on board to build and operate it, when a scientific study was released through the international press in early 2009 showing elevated levels of radioactive isotopes in the underground water reserves. A storm of controversy erupted over the findings, with some Jordanian officials dismissing the research as an Israeli conspiracy. As of early 2010, the project at least appears to be going into effect. The inauguration ceremony was held in December and trucks started arriving in January loaded with thousands of massive pipes, some of which were prominently lined up along the road from the airport into Amman.

The Red-Dead has plenty of skeptics. Environmentalists, scientists and tourism operators are concerned about the potential damage to the affected wilderness. Connecting the two bodies of water will require the construction of a conveyance structure 112 miles long, either a surface channel or a tunnel, along the eastern side of the Jordanian-Israeli border. The structure would pass directly through ecologically sensitive areas in the Wadi ‘Araba mountains, the range seen from the high point in Petra, which are home to endangered species and coveted hiking trails. They worry as well about the impact of so much pumping on the Gulf of ‘Aqaba, Israel’s only opening onto the Red Sea and Jordan’s only outlet to the oceans at all. The Gulf offers nearly year-round beaches and a fragile coral reef, making it an attractive destination for local and international divers and vacationers. The Dead Sea may not fare well either, when its waters are mixed with those of the Red Sea. Critics contend that changes to the unique chemistry of the Dead Sea could lead to algae growth, alteration of water color and separation of the waters.

More importantly, critics say, the Red-Dead project does not address the root problem: the depletion of the Jordan River, the main feeder of the Dead Sea. Everyone agrees that the Jordan River’s flow has shrunk markedly over the decades due to overuse, though hot disputes remain over who is most responsible for drawing off the water—the Israelis, the Syrians or farmers in the Jordan Valley. Regardless, saving the Dead Sea, according to Munqidh Munayyar, director of the Jordan office of Eco-Peace, will require saving the river as well. “You have to adopt a multi-pronged approach that involves rehabilitation of the Jordan River basin, reforms in the agricultural sector and a reopening of the water file in the Jordan-Israel peace agreement.” None of these prongs, he admits, is politically popular.

For Jordanian critics, the government’s support for the Red-Dead and other mega-projects is indicative of the flaws in its broader water strategy. “The Red-Dead has become the backbone of the water strategy,” Munayyar says, “and it’s a mistake.” Government officials and aid agencies typically present the water deficit in Jordan as a simple equation: As water-poor Jordan’s population grows and concentrates in the cities, the demand outstrips the country’s supply. The Red-Dead and other projects, critics point out, are short-sighted boosts to the supply side of the equation and relieve the government of taking on the complicated mix of political, economic and cultural conditions affecting demand.

For example, the agriculture sector consumes the largest portion of the water supply in Jordan, while generating a very small percentage of gross domestic product. The more sustainable farms use minimal irrigation and cultivate dry-climate crops such as dates and olives, but plenty of farms grow water-intensive crops, such as bananas and watermelons, for the high profit margins while depending on water subsidies and protections against imports to do so. The farmers’ unions and their government backers reject changes on the grounds that Jordan needs to produce its own food and that farm work supports thousands of Jordanian families. Maintaining the status quo, Munayyar argues, also serves the economic interests of the large farm owners. An even clearer case is the thirsty cut flowers that Jordan grows for export.

A fair amount of water in Jordan is also lost, stolen or wasted. Water is tapped illegally through unauthorized wells. It leaks out of the pipes in the aged infrastructure. There is little awareness among ordinary citizens and businesses, especially in the larger cities, of the need to conserve and even less incentive to do so since subsidies keep prices low. New development occurs without consideration of water use and conservation measures. And many of these issues are compounded, former Minister of Water and Irrigation Hazim Nasir says, by the lack of integrated planning among the relevant ministries.

For now, the Jordanian regime stands firm behind the Red-Dead and Disi projects as the pillars of the country’s water strategy. In May 2009, the king gave the go-ahead for this vision and reaffirmed it in his letter of designation to the new prime minister after the government shakeup in December. Meanwhile, the staircase in Muhammad ‘Asfour’s picture stands ever further from the water’s edge.

Press reports have focused on the purchase by petrochemical powers of agricultural lands abroad, particularly in Africa. Many have correctly remarked that such investments show that, as in the classic imperial age, state authority is not limited to particular territories. But there is more to the story than that. In sinking so many petrodollars into African lands, the “oil states” are effectively concealing their participation in an economic system of water rent, disguising their dependence on African “virtual water” with their nominal source of independence—their fabulous oil wealth. Meanwhile, neither these states nor other observers have taken much note of these land purchases’ potential for introducing new forms of economic domination and instability.

**Power Politics**

“Water,” goes the bromide, “is the new oil.” The apparent equivalence of the two resources—both are relatively scarce—masks a curious misunderstanding of their relationship. The analogy ignores structural inequalities. For now, after all, the “old oil”
Aids greatly in finding and purchasing the new. As long as the global industrial and consumer economy remains dependent on oil, “oil economies” will continue to accommodate their own water demands through recourse to the energy demands of others. Wealthy countries can more easily afford to buy water, virtually or literally, than to go to war over it.

Ismail Serageldin, erstwhile chair of the Global Water Partnership and vice president of the World Bank for environmental sustainability, has contended that “for a lot of people, access to water is going to be as important as the access to oil is in more advanced economies.” Serageldin in essence divides the world into two moieties, an “advanced” petrochemical half, and a less economically sophisticated, drought-stricken, water-centered half. No “advanced economies” depend on oil so greatly as do the oil-producing states of the Middle East. But redefining the Persian Gulf states as participants in a complex economy of virtual water quickly reveals the centrality of water not only to less “advanced” economies, but also to the producers of oil themselves. Acquisitive, wealthy and in dire need of food imports, oil producers represent, too, virtual water consumers and, as seen in their land purchases in Uganda, Tanzania and elsewhere, sometimes their role as consumers takes precedence. There may never be an Organization of Virtual Water Importing Countries, but environmental activists and Middle Eastern policymakers can no longer afford to avoid economic systems—even “virtual” ones—intimately linked yet in no way subordinate to the petrochemical economy.

The politics of water, however, has demonstrated a tenacious tendency to devolve into simplistic opposing camps that largely decline to reframe fundamental questions of success and failure. Optimistic portrayals put great hope in the technological resolution of environmental problems, while pessimists, particularly in relation to water in the Middle East, North Africa and other parts of the global south, not ungleefully depict a world of water wars and desert wastes. Jan Selby identifies three discourses regarding water, each of which claims specific outcomes: the ecological (water wars), technical (the emergence of new mechanical solutions) and political
(the allocation of water to some and not others). 2 “The final constraint for states,” Selby argues, “is not the natural availability of their water resources, but their political-economic capacity to reuse, recycle, import, desalinate…their ability to marshal water resources across time and space.” 3 This constraint, however, may not differ functionally from physical water scarcity: If Sudan, for instance, cannot provide water to its citizens because the canals have silted up, the Sudanese people will experience the shortage as if it were a drought.

Nor will states necessarily be able (or willing) to “marshal water resources” equally across space. In short, the pessimists may be right, but for the wrong reasons. Water wars in the Middle East may emerge not out of large-scale conflicts between nations, but organized actions by majorities or elites within nations to take the water of minorities or the marginalized. Discourses on water scarcity have focused almost exclusively on scarcity as a natural phenomenon threatening to sow international discord, rather than as an engineered weapon utilized in destabilized states as part of wars of dispossession.

Here again Sudan may prove a grim augury. Ethno-religious conflict, untapped oil reserves, plentiful but coveted water, readily available weapons, neighbors posed to intervene—the elements of an internecine “resource war” are all in place.

Indeed, the mere threat of dispossession may prove enough to alter political landscapes in profound ways, even internationally. In politically charged environments, water reflects the preoccupations and anxieties of adversaries. No site better exemplifies this tendency than southern Lebanon’s Litani River. Running through eastern Lebanon until a turn, in the south, toward the sea, the Litani’s lower course has come under Israeli domination at various points in Israel’s intervention in southern Lebanon, most recently until 2000. The Litani River’s water could prove highly useful to those living in the Jordan River catchment, and diverting its water would not prove difficult. Moreover, Israel has not concealed its awareness of the potential utility of Lebanese water sources. 4 At least as of 2000, however, no substantial Israeli diversions from the Litani River had actually occurred. From the perspective of environmental science, the actual quantification
of water flow in the Litani matters greatly, as it no doubt does to those who depend on it in their daily lives. Politically, however, the actual existence or non-existence of Litani River diversion proves of little import. “The meager evidence against the theory [of Israeli use of the Litani] is less than convincing to a justifiably skeptical public in Lebanon.” Residents of southern Lebanon, with good historical reason, question Israeli interests in their homeland. The actual use of water matters less than its potential use, which stokes popular anxiety about future interventions that would steal their livelihoods and drinking water.

**A Human Right?**

Such concerns have catalyzed new conceptions of how to address water legally. Some writers have claimed access to water as a human right, while others have simply opened a debate about whether it is a human right or just a necessity of life—and what the difference means. But such writings miss the point. The mere discursive reformulation of access to clean or even sufficient water as a human right promises no alteration in water policy anywhere. States violate human
human rights demands. So to state, as one scholar does, that “the concern of some of the countries that are not in favor of promulgating the concept that water is a human right stem[s] from the fact that they are unsure of the legal implications if they approve the overall philosophy” is to ignore the actual ramifications of human rights discourse for authoritarian states. What legal penalty would a state incur for failing to cast water as a human right in national legislation? Absolutely none. Proponents of the human rights understanding of water access rejoin, correctly, that it is nonetheless important to speak of rights so that people are not left out of the discussion.

Though this stripped-down goal seems modest, it too carries with it a very real menace. Casting water as a human right courts the danger of cynical transmogrification of the language of human rights into a language of entitlement. Humans have a right to how much water? For what purposes? The human rights discourse also seems vulnerable to cooptation in security terms; a state might claim that an entire nation’s human rights are compromised by “inadequate” access to water. It is not difficult to imagine Israel, for example, casting the Litani River or, should a Palestinian state come into being, West Bank aquifers, in such terms. Egypt might do the same with the waters of the Nile. One state claiming waters as a “human right” might camouflage the deprivation of another state’s people or a stateless people. Lacking both a mechanism of enforcement and a coherent definition and providing a convenient excuse for dispossession, discourses of water as a human right represent, at best, persiflage and, at worst, function as yet another site for the violent intervention of states.

Indeed, authoritarian states have a vested interest in expropriating the water of marginalized groups. Palestinians do not benefit from the same water-centered agricultural policies as kibbutzes. More broadly, casting water as a human right will not provide clean water to refugees, internally displaced persons, nomads or any subgroup that questions hegemonic narratives of the nation, because states have little to gain in return. Legislating a new human right will not guarantee, or even encourage, that states will respect that right, extend it equally to all residents or refrain from using it as leverage. This is not to argue that no one should call attention to the resource deprivation of vulnerable populations. In the Middle East, however, with its distant and recent past of interventions represented in humanitarian terms, the introduction of new and “universal,” but poorly defined, human rights has consequences that extend beyond the realm of discourse. Is it the use of water, or the consumption of water, that forms the locus of such a “human right”?

From the Ground Up

Water also has a cultural and symbolic importance. Any attempt at building consensus around water use or “rights”
will have to come to terms with local communities’ attachments to space, including the water sources that they may hold dear. Mandana Limbert’s ethnography of water use in a community in Oman indicates that most people view water first as a domestic issue, one close to home, and only secondarily as a global problem mediated through the state. Pipes and delivery systems paid for by oil wealth exist alongside nostalgia for old ways of retrieving water. One informant of Limbert’s drew water from state-dug wells to irrigate his crops and tend his draft animals, but played for her a recording of the noises of the old water system in the car on the way back from the new installations. If those seeking to redefine access to water as a human right do not address the symbolic, individual and small-scale interactions that determine use of water, the decision-makers they advise will, so to speak, miss the boat. Decisions about water must proceed from the ground up.

But not too far up. Burj Khalifa is still standing tall, offering unobstructed and spectacular views of city, desert and ocean, though it has proven a hard sell to prospective inhabitants. Abu Dhabi’s oil wealth did, in the end, contribute to the amelioration of Dubai’s debt crisis. Even the riches of Abu Dhabi, however, may not prove enough to replenish the water supplies, virtual or otherwise, of the United Arab Emirates as a whole. Even if “peak oil” theories are premature, even if the world economy unexpectedly weans itself off of fossil fuels, interactions between the oil economy and the water economy in the Middle East and North Africa will surely become more, not less, vexed. The first step toward accounting for the environmental and economic costs of this oil-water complex lies in making transparent their connections. Discourses of “oil states” conceal their primary dependence on water, most of it imported in some guise or another. Burj Khalifa’s window-washing machines have not yet plummeted to the ground, and oil money has staved off that particular collapse, at least for the time being. Nevertheless, as Jim Krane, an Associated Press reporter who covered the tower’s construction, noted on CNN, “It’s a really bad idea…. Every time the toilet is flushed they’ve got to pump water half a mile into the sky.”

Endnotes

3 Ibid., p. 62.
5 Ibid., p. 123 (italics in the original).
8 Mandana E. Limbert, “The Sense of Water in an Omani Town,” Social Text 19/3 (Fall 2004).
“Rich in interview material gathered through fieldwork, and ably situated in historical and legal context, Unprotected is now the definitive work on this largely impoverished, fractionalized, and marginalized segment of the Palestinian diaspora.”
— Laurie Brand, professor and director of School of International Relations, University of Southern California; author of Palestinians in the Arab World

“…the seminal work on Palestinian refugees in Egypt…casts new light on a rarely-studied segment of the Palestinian diaspora.”
— Rex Brynen, professor of political science, McGill University, coordinator of Palestinian Refugee Research/Net

“…skillfully combines solid survey research techniques with historical and ethnographic analysis…This original research on a forgotten and neglected community will become a standard reference.”
— Salim Tamari, director, Institute of Jerusalem Studies, formerly coordinator of the Refugee Working Group to the Multilateral Peace Negotiations

“This broad portrait of the Palestinian community(ies) in Egypt will be of interest to anyone concerned with Palestine and the Palestinians, refugees and human rights issues, and Egypt’s long engagement with the Palestine question.”
— Ann M. Lesch, dean of humanities, American University in Cairo

Continued from page 3.

water based on consumption would require up-front, lump investments in technology that are out of reach for the Egyptian government. It is not obvious, as the World Bank assumes, that pricing would induce small farmers to use less water, as most cannot afford drip irrigation systems that would allow them to sustain reasonable yields with less water. Furthermore, farmers use water not simply to grow crops, but to rinse soils of excess salts and contaminants. Nor is it clear that monies raised by pricing water would be returned to farmers in improved irrigation by the state. That would be a political choice by the states, not one pressed upon them by the invisible hand of the market. Meanwhile, hardly anyone has suggested that states like Egypt accurately price water for large agribusinesses.

All of this points to some of the most significant obstacles to sustainable and equitable water management. The causes of water efficiency and equity have no organized social constituency or political representation within the authoritarian and quasi-democratic states that dominate the Middle East. Agribusiness and collectives of small farmers with ties to provincial officials and parliamentarians agitate for more investment in irrigation, often with little regard to water scarcity. Reform-minded technocrats in the irrigation ministries have found it difficult to promote innovation within their own bureaucracies, let alone in the ministries of agriculture, planning and investment. And, outside government, their mission is arduous indeed: The blueprints of technocrats for sustainable use often encounter popular resistance, due to widespread mistrust of government agencies grounded in histories of repression in this and other realms. Wary of the state, ordinary people avoid entanglement with its rules and find their own water to drink.

While not widely reported, the number of environmental groups is on the rise, including on the local level. Citizen activists in Damietta at the head of the Nile Delta faced down a government plan to locate a fertilizer plant in their city in part by publicizing the peril to water resources. But, regimes permit such organizing only as long as it seeks solutions in self-help. When activists begin to press demands for rights or accountability, they quickly encounter the array of legal restrictions and outright coercive tactics that are used to contain civil society as a whole. Ironically, regimes are undercutting their own technocrats’ ideas for better management of water resources, robbing them of popular assistance against those in the bureaucracy who prefer simply to erect more dams and make more deserts bloom.

The increasingly acute water stress of the Middle East is a multi-faceted crisis that this magazine will revisit. It is vital, for the time being, that the states of the region and their international backers forget the grandiosity of decades past and focus on the more modest tasks of repairing pipes, reducing waste and redressing imbalances in water use and distribution. “Water wars” are not around the corner, but the havoc wrought by climate change and poor water management upon the ordinary people of the Middle East could be no less tragic.

— Jeannie Sowers and Chris Toensing
In the waning years of the twentieth century, it was common to hear predictions that water would be the oil of the twenty-first. A report prepared for the center-right Washington think tank, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, forecast that water, not oil, would be the dominant source of conflict in the Middle East by the year 2000. This prognosis rested in part upon the estimate of US intelligence agencies that by that time “there will be at least ten places in the world where war could break out over dwindling shared water, the majority in the Middle East.”

The sprawling watershed of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers is one area where water wars have long been expected. The twin rivers rise in the high mountains of northeastern Anatolia and flow through Turkey, Syria and Iraq before eventually merging to form the Shatt al-‘Arab, which empties into the Gulf. Turkey, the upstream country, has a powerful military and has not traditionally enjoyed warm relations with the Arab countries downstream. Add to this backdrop the Turkish army’s running battles with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), the Kurdish separatist movement based in the Euphrates and Tigris basins, and it seems that an inter-state shooting war is indeed possible there. Turkey is usually the pivotal state in such scenarios.

There is a false perception that Turkey is water-rich by world standards. Turkey has approximately 1,600 cubic meters (about 422,600 gallons) of consumable water per person per year. On the global scale, countries classified as water-rich have 8,000–10,000 cubic meters per capita per year. With its population of 71 million, Turkey has about one fifth the quantity of water per capita as water-rich countries. Turkish government experts believe, furthermore, that the available water will decline to 1,000 cubic meters per capita annually by
By regional standards, however, Turkey is blessed. The average fresh water supply in the Middle East is 900 cubic meters per capita annually. In the past, Turkey has sought to take advantage of its natural endowments, advertising its willingness to sell water in bulk to its neighbors. This attitude has contributed to Turkey’s history of conflicts over water, particularly in the Euphrates and Tigris basins, and needs to be revised if Turkey is to avoid such conflicts in the future.

**Dam That River**

In 1953, the fast-growing state of Ankara established a powerful institution to govern supply and distribution of water, the General Directorate of State Hydraulic Works (or DSI, by the Turkish acronym). DSI is central to Turkish political culture. Two of its water engineers and eventual directors, Süleyman Demirel and Turgut Özal, went on to become prime minister and president of the country.

Not surprisingly, Turkey’s successes in water management are a source of national pride. Eighty-five percent of Turks have running water in their homes, a figure that compares poorly with advanced economies (99 percent) but well with the average among Middle Eastern countries (75 percent). Unlike most Middle Eastern countries, which consume almost all of their water resources, Turkey uses only 41 percent of its water flow. Turkey, therefore, has had the luxury of investing in water development projects for power generation, flood control and expanded irrigation, as well as household use. Agriculture has long been the largest sector in terms of employment and a major contributor to the gross domestic product. And Turkey uses only 35 percent of the hydraulic energy it produces.

Most of these achievements were made possible by dams in the country’s 25 hydrological basins. Starting in 1954, DSI has supervised the construction of 673 large dams and 657 smaller ones across the country. At the time of DSI’s founding, the erection of such massive infrastructure was the basis of water policy worldwide, modeled on the Tennessee Valley Authority established under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1933. The Aswan Dam in Egypt, the Kebar Dam in Turkey and counterparts in India and Bangladesh were among the legacies of what is called the “hydraulic mission” emanating from the United States in this period. The “hydraulic mission” is now seen as inspiring a series of hydrological mistakes (among them, ironically, many projects of the Tennessee Valley Authority), and the US itself has abandoned such ventures, yet the impact on Turkey and other countries has been lasting.

The *pièce de résistance* of the “hydraulic mission” in Turkey was the gigantic Southern Anatolian Project (known by its Turkish acronym, GAP), which commenced in the 1970s and encompasses 22 dams, 19 hydroelectric power plants and several irrigation networks. GAP remains the second biggest integrated water development project in the world, covering approximately 10 percent of Turkey’s population and an equivalent surface area. The total cost of the project is estimated at $22 billion and 57 percent of these monies have already been invested. With GAP, Ankara sought to harness its rivers to produce electricity and irrigate land, but also to create job opportunities for the predominantly Kurdish citizens living in southeastern Turkey, known historically as upper Mesopotamia. If GAP is completed, Turkey’s arable land will be greatly expanded, allowing the country to become a major food and energy producer in the Middle East.

Most of the Turkish political spectrum—from social democrats to liberals to right-wing Kemalists—has been strongly nationalist about the country’s water resources and enthusiastically supportive of GAP. Özal and Demirel, both of right-leaning parties, were big GAP boosters who had grand visions of Turkish water enhancing Ankara’s regional clout. When he was prime minister, Özal was known for advocating a $20 billion “peace pipeline” to transport water from two of Turkey’s smaller rivers to 15 million consumers in Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies.

**“Good Neighborliness”**

Dam construction slowed significantly in the 1980s, in the southeast and elsewhere, in part because of environmental concerns, which had gained prominence in international forums. Various UN organizations and think tanks were established to promote a new approach of “integrated water resources management,” based on hydrological realities rather than political boundaries, and aimed at protecting ecosystems as well as generating electricity. Countries with major transboundary water resources had jealously guarded their sovereignty over shared rivers and lakes, and so were wary of integrated water resources management. Upstream countries were particularly worried by the UN’s advocacy of international river committees that would replace sovereign decisions.

Forty percent of Turkey’s water resources are transboundary waters—the Euphrates, Tigris, Coruh, Kura and Aras Rivers, which originate in Turkey, and the Meric and Orontes, whose headwaters are in neighboring countries. In the 1920s, the fledgling republic established the status of the Meric, Kura and Aras in bilateral agreements with Greece, Bulgaria and the countries of the south Caucasus. Regular technical meetings are held with Georgian experts concerning the construction of dams in Turkey to regulate the erratic flow of the Coruh. The status of the Orontes, shared with Syria, is unresolved because the river flows through the Hatay district, which Damascus still considers part of Syria.

But it is the mighty Euphrates and Tigris that have been a major preoccupation of Turkish foreign policy. These rivers are a crucial resource for Turkey, supplying 31 percent of its water. Add the fact that springs, runoff and tributaries on Turkish territory contribute about 89 percent of the annual flow of the Euphrates (the rest comes from Syria) and 52 percent of the Tigris (the rest originates in Iraq), and Ankara’s feelings toward the waters have long been proprietary.
In the 1980s, these sentiments began to run afoul of developments in international water law. UN agencies were keen to curb pollution and environmental degradation through “integrated watershed management.” Moreover, as population increase and climate change began to reduce river flows around the world, international water law began to promote the principle of “equitable use” of shared resources rather than “absolute sovereignty.”

A decade of tortuous diplomatic tussles ensued, pitting the upstream countries against the downstream, the water-rich countries against the water-poor and environmentalists against development experts. Turkey fought hard to maintain the principle of sovereignty in water law because of the Euphrates, the Tigris and, in particular, GAP. But UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, not coincidentally the ex-foreign minister of a prominent downstream country, Egypt, intervened personally to bring negotiations to a close, and in 1997 the Framework Convention of the Non-Navigational Uses of Transboundary Water Resources was presented for signature in the UN General Assembly. “Equitable use” became the operating principle of customary international law. In the end, almost every UN member state, most of which are downstream countries, signed the convention, having either concluded bilateral agreements with its neighbors or having negligible shared water resources. (Many signatories, however, have not ratified the agreement.) Turkey, China and Burundi stood alone in refusing to sign.

Before and after the convention, Turkey has favored bilateral agreements between riparian countries over a global approach or third-party mediation. In that framework, Turkey accepts the “equitable use” principle. Yet Ankara is very sensitive about the term “water sharing,” believing that it “is not a useful approach, as one cannot share a commodity which is constantly changing in quantity and quality in time and space under variable conditions of the hydrological cycle. Instead, the principle of sharing the benefits at basin level should be pursued.”

Declining to be legally bound to a certain degree of water sharing, Turkey professes to be adhering to a transboundary water policy of “good neighborliness,” whereby it releases the greatest possible “sufficient amount of water” downstream. This amount fluctuates a great deal during the dry Middle Eastern summers and periods of drought, but Turkey claims that there would be less water without the GAP installations. The reduced flow of the Euphrates and Tigris is nonetheless a perennial bone of contention with Syria and Iraq, whose governments are reminded by upstream, militarily powerful Turkey of the history of Ottoman domination of the region.

Restraints on Sovereignty

Public investment in GAP has fallen steadily since the 1990s, in part because it is politically charged within Turkey. One domestic issue is the fate of the people who have been and still may be displaced by the dams and waterworks. Resettlement is
not only expensive to the state, but also inflammatory because the region is home to Turks, Kurds and Arabs, as well as ruins of prehistoric civilizations. The provinces of Mardin, Sanliurfa, Sirnak and Siirt, in particular, have a rich cultural heritage that has vocal defenders, as do the birds and fish indigenous to the diverse climate of desert and wetlands.

There are, however, external forces that have constituted more important restraints on Turkey’s water sovereignty than international law or environmental activists. One is money. Reeling from a series of financial crises, the most severe of which hit in 2001–2002, the state treasury has simply been unable to afford the pace of water infrastructure construction that the political establishment would like. The World Bank, for its part, has denied Turkey’s credit demands for GAP financing because Syria and Iraq were not consulted on the project.

Another restraint is the state’s diminished control over all its resources in the era of corporate globalization. In the 1990s, water came to be regarded internationally as a commodity. The first international document to say openly that water was an economic good that should be priced accordingly was the UN Dublin Principles of 1992. Think thanks, meanwhile, rallied behind the public-private partnership as a mechanism for delivering clean, safe water, especially in developing countries where the public sector was said to be dysfunctional. The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, pushed behind closed doors by transnational corporations like Veolia (formerly Vivendi) and Suez, began to promote concepts like “decentralization” and “deregulation” of water resources as a remedy for developing countries’ management ills.

These developments coincided with the increasing subordination of macroeconomic policy in countries like Turkey to the dictates of the IMF. One of the IMF’s signal recommendations for countries wrestling with debt burdens and recurring fiscal crises was to privatize management of natural resources. As an IMF client, Turkey was subject to significant pressure to change its resource management laws, particularly during the severe financial troubles and recession of 2001–2002. Despite civil society opposition, the Turkish legislature relented and gave the right to manage water services to private companies. The government still owns the water, but its private companies now hold long-term leases over delivery.

The global water giants and their associated think tanks have only grown more powerful as climate change, population increase and the resulting water scarcity have made water a more lucrative commodity. At the dawn of the new millennium, more than a billion people lacked access to clean water, and public institutions managed 90 percent of the world’s water resources. The companies that could break the hold of the public sector would make billions. Backed by the World Bank and the IMF, big water companies have launched a massive public relations campaign against “irresponsible water use.” A raft of fancy documentaries and elegant reports, some with the imprimatur of UN bodies, propagate the clear message that if the scarce resource of water is to be conserved, it must be rightly priced.

The World Water Council, the biggest global think tank, organizes large gatherings every three years in countries that either have significant water resources or embrace privatization. In 2009, the council’s Fifth World Water Forum, quietly underwritten by Veolia and its fellow corporation Suez, met in Istanbul under the banner of “bridging divides for water.” The Turkish government was happy to play host, considering the council’s choice of venue an endorsement of Turkey’s importance in the region. While water investors and UN officials, along with the water ministers of 29 nations, met in one of the city’s tonier districts, transnational civil society organizations convened alternative forums in opposition to privatization. These activists are raising public consciousness about the burgeoning water partnership between capital, international financial institutions and the state. The “water barons,” as the Center of Public Integrity aptly dubs them, are arrayed against the civil society groups, who, in the absence of the inter-state conflagrations predicted by intelligence agencies, are the “water warriors” of the twenty-first century.

But the most important outside influence on Turkish water policy is the European Union, which Turkey aspires to join. According to the EU’s Framework Directive on Water, member states should follow integrated water management principles with regard to shared waters, protect the ecosystems of rivers and lakes, promote private-sector participation in delivery and put prices on water services. The European Convention on Transboundary Water Resources, enshrining these precepts, was signed and ratified by member states in 1992. If Turkey joins the EU, it will automatically be bound by these laws. One important implication: Turkey defines the Euphrates and Tigris watersheds as one basin, while the EU considers them to be two. The European interpretation would require Turkey to release a much larger quantity of water to its neighbors. Ankara’s moves in the Euphrates and Tigris basins figure prominently in the various reports and assessments the EU is filing during the ongoing period of Turkish accession to EU membership.

Toward “Zero Problems with Neighbors”

2010 has arrived, and the Middle East is war-torn, but none of the conflicts are primarily about water. Nevertheless, the predictions of water wars continue to appear, if anything with greater frequency, as climate change seems to hasten the day of reckoning in water-stressed areas of the globe. Turkey enters the climate change era with its own water security diminished, but still strong in comparison to its increasingly thirsty neighbors.

The “peace pipelines” of which Özal dreamed were never built, in part because the Gulf countries feared relinquishing a share of their water sovereignty to Ankara. The anxieties of the neighborhood were deepened by the progress of GAP, particularly when Ankara rebuffed the constant complaints of inadequate water supply from Damascus and Baghdad. Much of Turkey’s
policy elite, solicitous of the West, was dismissive of the eastern neighbors’ needs. Demirel, who was nicknamed “the king of dams” for his eagerness to complete GAP, captured the tone when he asked, “Is there any country that shares its oil with us?”

Since 2002, Turkey’s arrogance toward those who share its transboundary waters has softened. The Justice and Development Party (or AKP, by its Turkish acronym) initiated a “zero problems with neighbors” policy under the guidance of Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. As a “soft Islamist” party made up of pious Muslims, the AKP is much more favorably disposed toward its Arab neighbors, in particular, than the “secular” and Western-oriented elite that traditionally composed the Turkish diplomatic corps. The change has been dramatic. In 1998, Turkey reportedly massed thousands of troops on the Syrian border. The trigger was Syria’s decision to harbor Kurdish militant leader Abdullah Öcalan, but tensions over the Euphrates’ waters lurked in the background. Today, the AKP acts as mediator between Syria and Israel and has canceled visa requirements for Syrians.

Then there is Iraq. After Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, and Iraq was placed under comprehensive UN sanctions, it was easy for Turkey to release as little water to Iraq as it pleased. The sanctions, in any case, devastated Iraq’s water infrastructure. US warplanes policed the no-fly zone over northern Iraq from Incirlik air base, reinforcing the decades-old regional stereotype of Turkey as a loyal vassal of Washington.

But in 2003 the AKP-controlled parliament acted contrary to type, deciding not to allow US forces to invade Iraq from Turkish territory. The Bush administration promised that Turkey would pay a price, but the flip side of the deterioration of US-Turkish relations has been much tighter economic ties with the region, including (to the surprise of many) Iraqi Kurdistan. The cooperation with the Iraqi Kurdish parties is connected to the AKP’s attempt at a “Kurdish initiative” to resolve Turkey’s own long-standing Kurdish question, including amnesty for many of the leaders of the PKK militia based in Iraq. It is too soon to say whether this policy will be successful. Should it succeed, southeastern Anatolia would be forever changed, and the fortunes of GAP would likely turn for the better. The water dispute between Turkey and Iraq remains fraught. For some years after the 2003 US-led invasion, Iraq had more serious problems than its water resources, but today the drastically reduced flow from upper to lower Mesopotamia has returned to center stage. Iraq’s water minister, ‘Abd al-Rashid Latif, has traveled to Ankara three times since 2007 to ask for more water. In July 2009, Turkey agreed to increase the flow of the Euphrates as a gesture of good will, since there is no operative water sharing agreement between the two countries. Latif protested that the gesture was not nearly enough. “We all need to get a fair share,” he told the press, back in Ankara to renew his request in September. “Iraq is a downstream country. Our drinking water supplies, agriculture and electricity depend on how the water resources are managed upstream. We need to manage water properly and come to agreements.”

Some in the Middle East interpret the AKP’s Middle Eastern orientation as “neo-Ottomanism,” a play to restore the sway of the Sublime Porte, because the party has revised the Turkish government’s neglected programs to preserve the Ottoman cultural heritage. The Ottoman legacy evokes mixed feelings in the Arab world, at best. The AKP’s “zero problems with neighbors” policy would seem to require that the party forget such aspirations and instead emulate the EU, if it is looking for a model of strong regionalism. Such a strong region could become a community of nations permitting free travel for people, money, goods and natural resources. With regard to water, Turkey could repackage the “peace pipeline” of the 1980s, this time for its immediate neighbors rather than for wealthy Gulf states, and this time with water conceived as a joint resource to be shared among Turks, Kurds and Arabs rather than as a birthright to be sold.

Endnotes

2 Republic of Turkey, General Directorate of State Hydraulic Works, Turkey Water Report 2009. Technical information in this article is taken from this report, accessible online at http://www.dsi.gov.tr.
Iraq’s Water Woes
A Primer

The eastern cusp of the Fertile Crescent is turning barren. Statistically one of the water-richest states in the Middle East, Iraq is nonetheless losing arable land as rainfall lessens, the level of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers drops and saline water creeps northward into the Shatt al-'Arab, the great estuary at the head of the Persian Gulf. Communities that once depended on the rivers for their livelihoods are being forced to pull up stakes. Though not in immediate danger of nationwide water stress, the point at which demand for fresh water exceeds renewable supply, Iraq is facing severe crises in agriculture and public health that impinge upon the political realm.

Since antiquity, the Euphrates and the Tigris have watered Mesopotamia, the historic “land of two rivers,” giving rise to some of the world’s first irrigation systems and, hence, civilizations. Water has always been central to the country’s prosperity and politics. Abbasid caliphs cut canals linking the two rivers to irrigate the alluvial plain in between, helping their empire to grow to its florescence; the despoliation of the irrigation network was a major factor in the empire’s fall. In the nineteenth century, the Ottoman decision to dig more channels to the shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala’ contributed greatly to the conversion of newly settled tribes in the mid-Euphrates region to Shi’ism. The modern Iraqi state was built first on the unification of the river valleys’ agricultural lands—and then on oil revenue.

Uneven Flow

By aggregate numbers, Iraq looks lavishly supplied with water compared to most countries in the region. In 2000, the total available fresh water was estimated at 4,340 cubic meters (141 cubic feet) per capita per year, putting Iraq in the category of “water-rich” nations by international standards. A full 90 percent of this water was used in agriculture. It is projected that the impact of climate change and population growth will reduce the amount of available water to 2,220 cubic meters per capita per year in 2025, but Iraq will still be relatively well-off. But for many reasons, not all of them completely understood, aggregate statistics do not tell the full story.

For one thing, the flow of the two rivers varies considerably from year to year. In the past, the fluctuating flow presented a problem of flooding. Civil engineers in the 1950s took anti-flooding measures to better manage irrigation and protect low-lying urban areas, including Baghdad. In recent decades, however, the flow varies between enough and too little. Part of the problem is simply drought. In every year since 2007, Iraq has gotten about half of its typical rainfall.

Iraqi farmers are most likely to point to another factor—the fact that Iraq does not fully control the headwaters of either of its major rivers. Both the Euphrates and the Tigris originate in the mountains of southeastern Turkey. Ninety percent of the Euphrates’ flow comes from Turkey, with the remainder coming from Syria. The Tigris is 52 percent fed by sources on Turkish soil. Most of the tributaries that bring the other 48 percent originate in Iran, though they join the Tigris on Iraqi territory. Iraqis accuse Iran and especially Turkey of blocking the headwaters so that only a thin stream gets through. Indeed, Turkey has been building major dams on the Euphrates and Tigris since the 1970s, when its Southern Anatolia Project (GAP) was inaugurated. It is unclear if GAP will be completed, but if it is, the dams and reservoirs are expected to consume about 52 percent of the Euphrates’ waters.

Turkey and Syria have signed a protocol on the Euphrates, and Syria and Iraq have a 1996 agreement whereby Syria is to allow 58 percent of the river’s flow to pass into Iraq. But there is no binding agreement between Iraq and Turkey, which does not consider the rivers to be “international rivers” over which Syria and Iraq have “sovereign rights” under customary international law. Turkey is not a signatory to the UN Convention on the Law of Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses. Iraqi officials are increasingly vocal in their protests that Turkey is not releasing enough water from upstream. The water quality of the Euphrates entering Iraq is compromised by return flows from the irrigation projects in Turkey and Syria; similarly, the waters in southern Iraq are degraded by runoff from land irrigated in northern Iraq as well as urban pollutants. By one measure, fields of water-fed cereal crops are producing only 20 percent of attainable yields due to lack of quality water. The 2009 wheat and rice crops were the worst in a decade. This problem is expected to get worse as more lands come under irrigation in the upstream countries.
While the rivers are visibly low along their courses, the most dramatic evidence of the uneven flow is seen in the marshlands of the south, said to be the location of the biblical Garden of Eden. According to the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the marshes’ original area of 6,563 square miles has shrunk to about 1,150 square miles since the massive waterworks were built upstream. Some of this draining of the marshes, of course, was intentional: The regime of Saddam Hussein diverted river waters to punish political opponents among the “marsh Arabs” who have long lived there and others who took refuge there. In 2005, the UN Environmental Program said the marshlands had recovered somewhat after being in danger of disappearing, but the unusually low levels of rainfall since 2007 have drained them all over again.

The post-Saddam devolution of significant autonomy to the three majority-Kurdish provinces may add to the water woes of central and southern Iraq. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has restarted construction on a dam in Bekhme Gorge on the Greater Zab River, a tributary of the Tigris. At a projected 754 feet, this dam would be one of the tallest in the world. Construction of the dam began under the Baathist regime in 1979, but was halted during both the Iran-Iraq war of 1980–1988 and the 1991 Gulf war, and was not resumed until 2009. Now the new central government in Baghdad is complaining to the KRG about the dam on the Greater Zab, wary that downstream farms and cities will see even less of the flow of the Tigris.

In April 2008, Turkey, Syria and Iraq opened the doors of a water research institute at the site of the Ataturk Dam in southeastern Turkey, but the problems between the riparian countries are political, not technocratic.

Sanctions, Saddam and “Security”

It is impossible, however, to judge the extent to which Turkish and Iranian dams are drying out Iraq, because Iraqi water infrastructure is in a dilapidated state after three major wars and 13 years of comprehensive UN sanctions. In addition, the budget priorities of both Saddam Hussein’s regime and the successor governments have been skewed toward weapons and other “security needs,” robbing the country’s irrigation and sanitation networks of necessary investments.

The FAO notes that Iraq does not have an effective countrywide water monitoring network. There is no one cataloguing the leaky pipes, silted-up canal bottoms, crumbling ditch walls, broken pumps and other failing infrastructure that anecdotally are known to litter the countryside. It stands to reason that the amount of water thus “lost” to spillage or evaporation is significant—perhaps more so than the amounts that do not flow into Iraq because of Turkish and Iranian dams. But with no reliable way to identify the causes of reduced water flows, lower water quality and increased pollution, there is no way to plan counter-measures. Rehabilitation of the water infrastructure, in the FAO’s judgment, is urgent.

The effects of war and sanctions on Iraqi waterworks were devastating. An October 2003 study from the World Bank and the UN found that, prior to 1991, 95 percent of urban Iraqis and 75 percent of rural Iraqis had access to potable water thanks to a water and sanitation sector “utilizing then-current technology.” US-led bombing during the 1991 Gulf war targeted four of the five dams in the country, inflicting extensive damage, as well as a number of desalination and water treatment plants. Worse, the sanctions exacerbated the purchasing power of the Iraqi state, which was barred from selling almost all goods on the world market, and so could not repair the damage. The World Bank-UN study recorded that the average annual water budget declined to $8 million from $100 million in 1990. Only the 1996 “Oil for Food” program, which restocked Iraqi government coffers by allowing limited oil sales, averted a freefall in spending on water infrastructure. These revised sanctions, however, continued to prevent Iraq from importing many items it needed for reconstruction, because those items were “dual-use”—they had possible military applications.

As is extensively documented by the UN and independent human rights groups, a great number of the Iraqi “excess deaths” during the sanctions decade can be attributed to the smashed water infrastructure. Children under five, the elderly and the poor were particularly vulnerable to diseases carried by the newly unsafe water coming from the tap. According to UNICEF, mortality among children under five jumped by 160 percent from 1990–2000; a quarter of this increase was due to diarrhea caused by dysentery and other waterborne illnesses. Though many children suffered as well from malnutrition under sanctions, dirty water was the real killer.

The US-led invasion of 2003 caused more damage. In the words of the World Bank-UN report, “in general the plant performance efficiencies of the water facilities had deteriorated by 50 percent” from pre-invasion levels by the time it was safe for UN agencies to investigate. ‘Abd al-Latif Rashid, a water engineer and a member of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, one of the twin Kurdish parties that exercise de facto self-rule in the north, was appointed water minister shortly after the end of “major combat.” His ministry, however, has not received adequate funding to fix the tremendous problems in the country’s water networks. In 2004, facing a tenacious insurgency, the US-dominated Coalition Provisional Authority rerouted to “security” nearly $2 billion in US aid that had been allocated to the Iraqi water and sanitation sector—“cutting this program in half,” said the Government Accountability Office. In October 2009, the special inspector for Iraq reconstruction reported that the US has spent some $2.74 billion on water projects since the invasion. The World Bank, however, believes that $14.4 billion is necessary to rebuild the infrastructure.
Dead palms in the marshes of the Faw peninsula, 2007.
Meanwhile, Rashid has been compelled to travel to Turkey three times since 2007 to ask for increased flow in the Euphrates and the Tigris.

The numbers in his purview remain grim. Water treatment plants still operate at 17 percent capacity, according to the UN, meaning that only 17 percent of Iraq’s wastewater is purified before being dumped back into rivers and lakes. Sixty percent of children still lack reliable access to potable water. Less than 10 percent of households outside Baghdad are hooked up to a proper sewer system. The crisis in sanitation and public health has been exacerbated by the drought beginning in 2007.

**Drying Out**

From ancient Sumerian times to the British mandate, the strength of the state in Mesopotamia was closely tied to the health of the water resources in the “land of two rivers.” The Ottomans solidified their grip on Basra in part by breaking the power of the Muntafiq and Khaza’il tribes over trade on the Shatt al-’Arab and portions of the Euphrates. These tribes collected duties on riverborne commercial traffic in much the same way that the kinship groups known as the “Anbar Awakenings” do on the roadways of the western desert in post-Saddam Iraq.

The discovery of oil gave the Iraqi state a new and more lucrative resource base, but water remains the lifeblood of the country. The drying-out of Iraq is effecting far-reaching transformations in its political economy. It is likely accelerating the trend of in-migration of rural Shi’a to southern towns and the sprawling eastern suburbs of Baghdad. The lush landscape of the south, where 59 varieties of date once grew on the palms lining the approaches to Basra, is increasingly salinated. The desert is encroaching. In 2009, the Iraqi government had to reduce the area of cereal cultivation by half.

Once an agricultural exporter, Iraq must now rely on imports to feed its population. The FAO’s office in Baghdad calculates that Iraq imported 2.5 million tons of wheat in 2007, 3.5 million in 2008 and 4 million tons in 2009, when the state treasury also bought some 1.25 million tons of rice. Though it is water-rich by regional standards, and embarrassed with water riches by the standards of big oil exporters, Iraq now joins Saudi Arabia and its smaller Gulf neighbors in being forced to spend its oil revenue on “virtual water” from abroad. The outlook for this tenuous resource economy is greatly complicated by the continued political instability of the country after the invasion.

Research by Bayann Hamid, Jasmine Lief and Natasha Murtaza. Text by Chris Toensing.
The abundance of oil in Saudi Arabia is staggering. With more than 250 billion barrels, the kingdom possesses one-fifth of the world’s oil reserves, affording it considerable influence on the international stage. At home, oil has secured the fortunes and political primacy of the Al Saud, the country’s ruling family. And it has helped cement the nature of the country’s political system, fueling autocracy and ensuring that the kingdom’s citizens remain, in many ways, subjects. Their exclusion from the political arena has been justified as part of a bargain whereby oil wealth trickles down in exchange for quiescence; patronage has served as a substitute for political and civil rights. The bargain has basically worked, although even during the 1970s oil boom, the royal family faced trenchant criticism and, at times, violent opposition. For the most part, however, disenfranchised Saudi citizens have been content with oil-funded consumption and comfort, confident that they could forever expect their social and economic welfare to be cared for by the state. Oil’s power has often appeared boundless, an engine of such considerable riches that it was capable of anything, at least as long as the political bargain remained in place.

Nowhere has this power been more apparent than in Saudi Arabia’s pursuit of fresh water. Saudi Arabia has no natural lakes or rivers. Rainfall is rare, providing only meager succor in the arid environment. Ancient underground water reserves have been tapped and relied on heavily since the 1950s. Since at least the early 1970s, efforts to provide, manage and even create fresh water, and to do so cheaply, have been important elements of the kingdom’s attempts to redistribute its vast oil wealth. Through massive engineering works and infrastructure development, including the design and construction of dams, irrigation and water management systems, oil wealth has been used to build a

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modern techno-state, one of the principal aims of which has been to provide water for household, agricultural and industrial use. In 1970, a subsidiary of the Coca-Cola Company completed the first massive desalination plant near Jidda on the Red Sea coast, a facility that turned seawater into fresh water. With plenty of oil to fuel the plant’s operation and with skyrocketing revenues from the sale of oil to subsidize the cost, Saudi Arabia has effectively been turning oil into water for the last four decades. Today more than 30 desalination plants are at work, each one costing tens of billions of dollars to build and operate.

In the last few years amid rising food costs and anxieties about depleted aquifers, Saudi Arabia began looking for secure sources of fertile land and water abroad. The government purchased sprawling tracts of farmland in far-flung corners of the developing world, including in places like Sudan, Pakistan, Egypt and Ethiopia. War-torn, impoverished or both, many of the countries that have emerged as objects of investment and development are hardly stable, calling into question just how much security they will be able to provide the Saudis.

The result appears to be the creation of a new kind of imperialism, in which wealthy oil producers are looking beyond their own shores to secure foreign natural resources, supporting and developing partnerships with sometimes murderous regimes, with the effect of disrupting local social and economic relations, all justified through the legal acquisition of property and through the mechanisms of the market. Just as resource scarcity served as a pretext for British imperial expansion in the Middle East in the early twentieth century and US dominance after World War II, water scarcity is being offered as justification for the projection of Saudi influence abroad. The charge of imperialism is tempting in part because of the rich irony of oil producers seeming to act the part of neo-imperialists. But it is more appropriate to see Saudi Arabia’s political and economic behavior as consistent with the rise of neo-liberalism in the late twentieth century; rather than seizing and controlling territory directly, open markets and global institutions have been used to capture resources, shape political systems and establish dominance. Use of such mechanisms enables the Saudis to deny responsibility for the various material and political consequences that their adventures engender.

While the kingdom’s quest for foreign resources seems to mark a new mode of behavior, water and agriculture have long been central to power and empire in Saudi Arabia. A look at Saudi Arabia’s past domestic agricultural and hydrological practices hints at what current ventures may have in store for those countries on the receiving end of Saudi agricultural investment.

**Water’s Imperial Past**

In the early twentieth century, water and agriculture played critical roles in Saudi imperial expansion and the consolidation of the modern Saudi state.

The forces that drove the expansion of Saudi power from central Arabia in the early twentieth century were complex. Best known, and perhaps most overemphasized, was the role of religion and particularly Wahhabism, the interpretation of Islam that encouraged conquest, exhorted violence and came to serve as the official orthodoxy of the Saudi state. The clergy possessed considerable social and cultural power, helped police the public sphere and lent credibly to the ruling family’s claim to temporal political authority. But Saudi Arabia was not only an Islamic power. It was also an environmental power. Capturing natural resources and establishing centralized control over nature was a key political objective for the Saudis over the course of the twentieth century.

The connections between the environment and Saudi political power were established early on. In 1902 ’Abd al-’Aziz ibn Sa‘ud wrested control of Riyadh from a political rival and established the seat of what would become modern Saudi Arabia. Almost immediately Saudi leaders set to work expanding their political and territorial power. Arid and rugged, with only a few small oases, central Arabia was impoverished and isolated. There were, however, lush natural prizes on Arabia’s coasts, particularly in the east, which was home to the two large oases al-Hasa and Qatif. There, millions of date palm trees and sprawling verdant gardens were nourished by some of the largest water resources in the peninsula. Covetous of both the water resources and the revenues generated by the date trade, the Saudis laid siege to the region in 1913, forcibly occupying it and incorporating it into their expanding political realm. Similar calculations went into Saudi conquests across Arabia, including along the Red Sea coast. The treasure was often the rich natural resources available in the targeted lands, keys to commerce and power.

The country’s imperial generation understood that their ability to recruit and maintain what turned out to be an imperial army depended in significant measure on their ability to master and manage Arabia’s scant water resources. Religious zeal went only so far in convincing those who joined the forces of the Ikhwan, the militia that laid siege to much of Arabia and helped forge the Saudi empire, to take up arms on behalf of the rulers in central Arabia. The Saudis enticed the Ikhwan with the promise of permanent and secure access to water, significant booty for the itinerant warriors. Access to water came at a cost as the Saudis dictated that the Ikhwan give up their nomadism and settle in agricultural communities called hujjar. The Ikhwan proved disinterested farmers and the hujjar ultimately failed to keep them in place. Nevertheless, the Saudis’ environmental impulse was already evident. Throughout the twentieth century, leaders in Riyadh would periodically attempt to settle other Bedouins, who through their movements sometimes troubled oil operations and even called into question the sovereignty of the state itself, by enticing them with secure water and subsidized agriculture.

Power over water and agriculture meant power over space and territory, as well as over human bodies, their labor and their movements. Although the country was arid and water-poor, the vast majority of Saudi Arabian citizens derived
their livelihoods from some form of agriculture or herding into the late 1960s. Starting in the 1930s, oil merchants, geologists, mining engineers, social scientists and a network of experts arrived in the kingdom, ostensibly charged with the responsibility of exploring, prospecting, extracting and marketing Saudi oil. They did that and much more. From the Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco) to individual experts to private consulting firms, American and European investors and experts were intimately engaged in not only the oil industry, but also in exploring for water and other natural resources, in the creation of knowledge about the natural environment, its place in local and regional economies, in the social lives of cultivators and in the creation of agricultural markets, and, most importantly, in the construction of the institutions that would be responsible for overseeing and managing all of them. Science, technology, social science, expertise and knowledge of the environment all became important instruments of power, symbols of authority and a means by which to enroll millions of subjects into the orbit of the centralized state.

**Oil, Management and the Destruction of Nature**

Along with capturing and controlling water and agricultural resources, Saudi Arabia’s environmental imperative also involved managing and remaking nature for political ends. Saudi leaders have historically feared the potentially difficult political consequences of being dependent on imported food. In the late 1970s, the government began heavily to subsidize wheat farming—a water-intensive enterprise that made little technical sense in the desert. The Saudis were so committed to the endeavor of agricultural self-sufficiency that, by the end of the 1980s, the country became the sixth largest wheat exporter in the world. In the end, worries over food sovereignty were overwrought, a point of discussion, but little more. The massive influx of petrodollars into the central treasury squelched anxieties about agricultural dependence. In addition, oil wealth changed food consumption habits, which along with a growing population, dictated that the Saudis would continue to rely principally on foreign sources of food. In 2008 the government announced an end to the expensive wheat subsidies. The decision was driven in part because the country’s leaders could no longer justify a program that exacted a heavy toll on the country’s already meager underground resources.

Claims to food security aside, the country’s ambitious water and agricultural programs mostly served domestic political ends. Water and wheat became key components of the patronage system, largesse that was often handed out as a reward to political and social elites in return for their unequivocal support for the royal family.
Thus, throughout their domain, Saudi leaders commissioned the building of massive technical and scientific networks designed to exploit and re-engineer the environment, including dams, research centers and desalination plants. One of the earliest and most important was the al-Hasa Irrigation and Drainage Project (IDP), a 1500-mile complex of concrete canals and pumping stations that was completed in the al-Hasa oasis in 1971. The building of the IDP transformed the oasis' environment and the way in which water was and would be used. The project proved devastating for the local environment. Its political effects were equally grave; the project helped to transform politics in the oasis and throughout the Eastern Province. The IDP’s failures were part of a pattern of environmental mismanagement that helped shape a new generation of radical politics in the Eastern Province. The story of the IDP, particularly in the political purposes it served and the political transformations it helped set in motion, may hint at the potential impact of the kingdom’s pursuit of fertile farmland and new water resources abroad.

Publicly, the construction of the IDP was rationalized as a response to what scientists and social scientists had determined were a series of environmental crises threatening the kingdom’s largest and water-richest oasis. Home to over 2 million date palm trees, al-Hasa’s gardens were nourished by some of the country’s most plentiful water resources. Dozens of springs supplied the oasis with water that had historically coursed through an elaborate irrigation system. The system had proved successful enough over time that the oasis supplied dates and date-derived products to markets throughout the Gulf and South Asia. Al-Hasa’s fate was transformed, however, by the discovery of oil just a few miles to its west and the arrival and operations of Aramco, particularly from the late 1940s, when the oil giant began exporting commercial quantities of oil from the kingdom’s rich reserves, all of which are located in the Eastern Province.

Aramco carried out extensive work in the oasis. Many of its workers, who the company treated savagely, hailed from al-Hasa and the region’s other settled communities. The political scientist Robert Vitalis has documented how starting in the 1940s and through much of the 1950s and early 1960s oil workers proved increasingly restive, resistant to the company’s racist policies, including segregated housing and a race-based wage system. Strikes and work stoppages were common. The company, with the cooperation of local Saudi authorities, responded brutally, arresting, beating and dismissing workers. Aramco also responded by launching intensive investigative efforts in local communities, dispatching scientists, social scientists and other researchers to gather information on disease...
and the environment, as well as social and cultural life. In 1950 Aramco sent Federico Vidal, a Harvard-trained anthropologist, to participate in a mission in al-Hasa that aimed to wipe out malaria. During his time with the anti-malaria program, Vidal undertook wide-ranging ethnographic and other research, cataloguing social relations, religious identities and the political economy of the oasis, as well as taking extensive notes on al-Hasa’s water resources and agricultural practices. His research and the conclusions he drew, particularly about what he determined to be an existential environmental threat facing the oasis, would form the foundation for the construction of the IDP more than a decade later. The oasis, he argued, faced a number of potentially dangerous challenges. Surrounded on all sides by vast sand dunes—which literally traveled tens of feet every year—the oasis’ most fertile lands were being eroded. While desert encroachment was alarming, Vidal was more troubled by what he believed to be the mismanagement of al-Hasa’s precious water resources.

Vidal offered up an inventory of social-scientific and environmental data for Aramco. He remarked in detail on the complexities of the oasis, including extensive commentary on its religiously mixed character. The oasis was roughly split between Sunnis and Shi’a, making it unusual if not unique in Saudi Arabia. Social hierarchies and social power often reflected religious differences. The most powerful landowners were Sunni and most of those who tended the date groves as labor were Shi’a, although some Shi’a did own smaller farms. Vidal noted that existing irrigation technology reflected social power. Water pumped from artesian wells flowed along the ground from farm to farm, passing first through lands owned by more powerful landowners and then on to smaller farms, before it drained out of the oasis. As irrigation water coursed its way through the oasis it gradually leached salt from the soil, decreasing its quality and resulting in lower date yields for smaller cultivators.

The Aramco anthropologist was startled by the rising water salinity, but also by the waste. Given the paucity of water in the rest of the kingdom, and because he believed that al-Hasa could be a breadbasket for Saudi Arabia, a place that might provide dates and other crops for national markets, he called for urgent attention to the oasis. He suggested a technical fix, one that called for improved irrigation techniques and better water management. In spite of his close analysis of the ways that social differences affected the distribution of water, he emphasized that the water shortage was due more to flawed irrigation techniques than to issues of land ownership, class and social power.

Vidal first raised alarms about the fate of al-Hasa to Aramco in the early 1950s, but it took a decade for Saudi leaders in Riyadh to act. In the mid-1960s, when Western consultants and Saudi technocrats began talking about and planning for agricultural self-sufficiency, the impetus to intervene in al-Hasa gained momentum. Saudi leaders also had political reasons for getting more involved in al-Hasa. The labor strikes of the
1950s and support for Arab nationalism concerned leaders in Riyadh. Although the Al Saud had conquered the oasis in 1913, authorities in Riyadh had largely left governance of the region to Aramco and local authorities. That changed in the 1960s, as the Saudis sought to project their power in material, economic and administrative ways so as to enroll citizens across the peninsula into the central state’s bureaucratic orbit. Vidal’s research and, more importantly, his findings served as the foundation for the work that followed. Construction of the al-Hasa IDP began in the mid-1960s, with the work being undertaken by Swiss and West German engineering firms. Riyadh threw hundreds of millions of dollars into the project, dipping into its vast oil reserves to secure the country’s limited water and agricultural resources. Launched in 1971, it was an engineering spectacle. Thousands of miles of concrete canals were built, criss-crossing the oasis.

Although the IDP seemed a remarkable technical achievement, it proved an abject failure. In less than a decade, the once rich water resources had mostly run dry. Many of the vibrant gardens that once populated the oasis were desiccated, dotted with the husks of dead date palms and crumbling concrete canals. What accounted for the failure of the IDP and the sudden decline of the oasis’ water resources? In the end, Aramco’s intervention and its concern about the fate of the oasis’ water was more than just the result of concern about what animated the social and political lives of its labor. It is widely believed today in al-Hasa that Aramco and later the Saudi state had other uses for the water. Local residents, especially Shi’i activists, argue that while some of the oasis’ water was located in wells close to the surface, much of it came from deeper aquifers that stretched across the Eastern Province. As Aramco built facilities and communities, it drew upon some of the same water resources, depleting them more rapidly than otherwise would have occurred.

Over time Aramco also began using the region’s water resources to pressurize local oilfields, pumping water into to force the crude out. The oil company eventually piped water from the Persian Gulf to help with this process, but many in al-Hasa assume that the company first used up much of the valuable underground fresh water that nourished the oasis’ date groves. While the allegation is difficult to prove, in al-Hasa it is widely believed to be true. In addition, many residents in al-Hasa consider the Saudi state to have been complicit in Aramco’s potential duplicity and believe that the IDP was little more than an expensive cover-up.

The social and economic costs for Hasawis were steep, with smaller farmers ending up displaced from land and labor. Because the IDP failed to address the social inequities that existed in the earlier irrigation system, in fact it reproduced and exaggerated gaps between large and small landowners; because those social inequities also corresponded to religious differences, sectarianism became an increasingly important component of local political life. Over the course of the 1970s, Shi’a across the region were increasingly radicalized. While the most radical activism took place in the oasis of Qatif to the north of al-Hasa, some Hasawis joined ranks with what became a revolutionary Shi’i political movement. Environmental destruction, the loss of water resources and the perception that both oil and water were stolen from local communities by Aramco and authorities in Riyadh helped feed revolutionary activism through the 1980s.

Exporting Insecurity

Saudi Arabia’s long struggle to control and remake its environment has come at considerable expense. Politically, the kingdom’s environmental imperative succeeded in helping shore up central authority. But it also produced an array of costly failures, often destroying or depleting the very resources that scientific and technical work was supposed to secure. The al-Hasa IDP was but one dramatic example. There were others. While food security, agricultural self-sufficiency and resource scarcity seemed to offer reasonable justifications for environmental interventions and massive engineering efforts, the reality was that concerns about scarcity and security served more to distract from the political calculations that also went into the planning, design and engineering work.

While the considerations driving Saudi Arabia’s turn to securing farmland and natural resources abroad are different from those that drove the early consolidation of empire and the processes of state building, there are important parallels. Overcoming scarcity and the pursuit of security continue to frame and justify Saudi Arabia’s domestic environmental imperative, even as it has been transformed into a global imperative in the early twenty-first century. Oil wealth continues to make possible the pursuit of and even the creation of other natural resources. It also makes possible a range of potentially devastating political and environmental costs in those places where the kingdom is doing business.

Saudi investment in militarized authoritarian regimes will strengthen them and help secure their own political pathologies. It also threatens to displace local cultivators or bind them to increasingly global networks of investment and expertise that could relegate their personal needs and interests to those of foreign powers, businesses and states. Seen this way, Saudi Arabia has arrived as a neo-liberal power, willing and able to bend the policies of impoverished states and communities to its economic will. Perhaps most worrisome, as efforts to re-engineer the largest and most verdant oasis in the kingdom itself demonstrated, foreign farmland, foreign water and other natural resources, so vital and precious locally, will almost certainly be viewed as disposable assets. They have served and will serve as sites of investment, all justified in the name of the food security of foreigners, to be dispensed with when no longer profitable or desirable. Given the potential for considerable environmental damage like that which occurred in al-Hasa, it should be a source of concern that little will be left when the Saudis decide to leave.
Yemen is one of the oldest irrigation civilizations in the world. For millennia, farmers have practiced sustainable agriculture using available water and land. Through a myriad of mountain terraces, elaborate water harvesting techniques and community-managed flood and spring irrigation systems, the country has been able to support a relatively large population. Until recently, that is. Yemen is now facing a water crisis unprecedented in its history.

The Middle East is an arid, water-stressed region, but Yemen stands out for the scale of its water problem. Yemen is one of the world’s ten most water-scarce countries. In many of its mountainous areas, the available drinking water, usually drawn from a spring or a cistern, is down to less than one quart per person per day. Its aquifers are being mined at such a rate that groundwater levels have been falling by 10 to 20 feet annually, threatening agriculture and leaving major cities without adequate safe drinking water. Sanaa could be the first capital city in the world to run dry. Even today, many wells have to be drilled to depths of 2,600 to 3,900 feet, extremely deep by world standards. Yemen also differs from several Arabian Peninsula countries in that the government lacks legitimacy and the people strongly resist regulations and laws imposed from the top down. For these reasons, the Ministry of Water and Environment, supported by international donors including Germany through the German Technical Cooperation, have adopted a strategy of decentralized water resource management by encouraging stakeholder and community participation.

Water Conflict and Cooperation in Yemen

Gerhard Lichtenthaeler

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Provinces, water basins and villages have acted to conserve local supplies of the life-giving liquid, but it is uncertain how long these efforts can stave off disaster.

Race to the Bottom

Agriculture takes the lion’s share of Yemen’s water resources, sucking up almost 90 percent. Until the early 1970s, traditional practices ensured a balance between supply and demand. Then the introduction of deep tube wells led to a drastic expansion of land under cultivation. In the period from 1970 to 2004, the irrigated area increased tenfold, from 37,000 to 407,000 hectares, 40 percent of which was supplied by deep groundwater aquifers. The thousands of Yemenis working abroad often invested their remittances in irrigation. Other incentives to expand farmland came in the form of agricultural and fuel subsidies. Farmers began growing less of the local, drought-resistant varieties of wheat and more water-intensive cash crops such as citrus and bananas.

The emerging cash economy also led to a dramatic increase in the cultivation of qat—the mild stimulant whose leaves are chewed in Yemen. It is estimated that qat production now accounts for 37 percent of all water used in irrigation. In the water-stressed highland basins of Sanaa, Sa’da, ‘Amran and Dhammar, qat fields now occupy half of the total irrigated area. Groundwater levels in these highlands have fallen so precipitously that only the lucrative returns from qat justify the cost of operating and maintaining a well.

Qat is a major factor in the national economy, with about 15 percent of the population directly or indirectly benefiting from its production, transport and trade. One third of the agricultural gross domestic product and 6 percent of the overall GDP come from the plant, which also composes 10 percent of family expenditures. For these reasons, and because Yemenis enjoy chewing it, qat is a very politically sensitive topic. Even though cultural norms give priority to drinking and other household water needs, the importance of qat and other cash crops to the economy means that cities, in particular, often lose out to agriculture in the competition for resources.

Qat is grown as well in the Sanaa basin, where the capital is located and 10 percent of the Yemeni population lives. A total of 13,500 wells have been inventoried in the basin. The vast majority of them serve farmers, but the water is disappearing. In the mid-1990s, extraction in the catchment area exceeded recharge from rainfall by over 400 percent. Available data give the Sanaa aquifer two decades of life, after which irrigated agriculture in the basin will end.

One third of the 123 wells operated by the state-owned Sanaa Local Corporation for Water Supply and Sanitation for supply of the capital have been drilled down to 2,600 to 3,900 feet. The combined output of all these wells barely meets 35 percent of the growing city’s need. The rest is supplied either by small, privately owned networks or by hundreds of mobile tankers. In recent years, as water quality has deteriorated, privately owned kiosks that use reverse osmosis—a water filtration method—to purify poor-quality groundwater supplies have mushroomed in Sanaa and other towns.

Future supply options include pumping desalinated water from the Red Sea over a distance of 155 miles, over 9,000-foot mountains into the capital, itself located at an altitude of 7,226 feet. The enormous pumping cost would push the price of water up to $10 per cubic meter (roughly 35 cubic feet). Yemen may be willing to pay this price for household demand. For agricultural water, however, the elevated cost is out of the question since the quantity required per capita is at least one hundred times greater. Other options to supply Sanaa from adjacent regions are fraught due to perceived water rights. Islam teaches that water is a gift from God and cannot be owned. Land, however, can. When a person digs or drills a well on his own land, he obtains the right to extract and use as much water as he can draw. The increasing awareness of the country’s water scarcity has resulted in a race to the bottom—every man for himself. Well owners are trying to capture what remains of this valuable resource before the neighbors do.

Top-Down Conservation

Today, there are between 45,000 and 70,000 wells in Yemen, the majority of which are under private control. No one can be certain of the exact number, as almost all were drilled without license.

Only since 2002, when the national water law was promulgated, has it been mandatory to apply for a permit to drill a new well, or even deepen or repair an existing one. Efforts to register wells that were drilled before the legislation came into effect have been unsuccessful. Farmers are suspicious that registration will gradually lead the state to metering how much water they extract. Moreover, they are alarmed at the prospect that extraction rights might eventually be defined by the amount of land they own and historically cultivate. A farmer who has several wells on a small plot of land would have less extensive water rights than one with no wells on a larger plot.

2003 saw the establishment of the Ministry of Water and Environment, which was vested with a mandate to supervise resource management, as well as rural and urban water supply and sanitation. But responsibility for the biggest water consumer—agriculture—has remained with the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation, whose focus has largely been on irrigation efficiency, dams and watershed management. The rate of consumption itself remains unaddressed in the agricultural sector. In February 2007, a draft law was proposed that would, among other things, ban new qat cultivation in the fertile highland plains. Parliamentary debate has been delayed indefinitely, however.

A major step forward was the adoption of a National Water Sector Strategy and Investment Program in 2005. The strategy strongly emphasizes decentralized water management. It transfers a certain degree of authority to local level entities, such as water user associations and basin committees, especially with
respect to the formulation and implementation of local action plans. One important result has been closer cooperation between the Ministries of Water and Agriculture. Through the process of joint annual review, these ministries and their agencies evaluate progress. While the building of dams and improvement of irrigation systems remains in the hands of the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation, the ministry is now required to conduct an impact assessment to prevent any further skewing of the country’s water balance and ensure local participation from the beginning.

‘Amran

The ‘Amran basin is located 30 miles north of Sanaa at an altitude of 6,560 feet. In 2008, the province established the ‘Amran Basin Committee, headed by the governor, to regulate water use. Other members include the directors of the districts that make up the basin, representatives of ministries and authorities concerned with water and agriculture, the local police chief and, importantly, farmers and local interest groups. Meetings are held every two months to discuss water-related issues and consider new applications for drilling wells.

Dwindling water resources are cause for alarm among both basin committee members and area farmers. Over 2,600 pumps now tap the catchment’s meager groundwater deposits. As a result, wells are being drilled to prohibitive depths, as low as 1,200 feet in places. Between 1991 and 2005, most wells had to be deepened by an average of 295 feet. At the same time, well yield—the quantity of water obtained per second—has plummeted. The period between 1991 and 2005 saw the number of wells increase by 120 percent, while the water supply rose by only 26 percent.

Villagers, increasingly aware of the need for collective action, are angered by the discovery that over 100 new wells were drilled in 2009, almost all of them without a permit. The arrival of a drilling rig sows tension between the farmer and the villagers, who raise their concerns with the basin committee. Bakr Ali Bakr, the deputy governor and tribesman who handles the day-to-day operations of the committee, has been a key negotiator defusing water crises in the ‘Amran basin.

Perched on the crest of an inactive volcanic cone is the village of Bani Maymoun. It belongs to the district of Iyal Surayah, home to the Bakil tribe and the watershed between the Sanaa and ‘Amran water basins. The predominantly volcanic
soil is ideal for growing high-value qat, cultivation of which has boomed. Bulldozers can often be seen leveling slopes for new fields, while truckload after truckload of additional soil is then hauled from afar to fill in the reclaimed terraces. With the unpredictable rainfall often not exceeding six inches per year, irrigation water has to be transported over rough tracks by Mercedes tankers. The result has been new water markets just for the cultivation of qat. Early in 2007, the price increase for irrigation water sparked a conflict that tested the community. Well owners from the village were starting to charge 5,000 riyals ($25) for a one-hour share of irrigation water. Up to that point, the commonly accepted rate paid by farmers with no well of their own had been just half that—2,500 riyals. The well owners, however, argued that new demand from water tankers cueing up at their wells justified the increase. They had become water traders adjusting to emerging markets.

The dispute soon reached the ears of Bakr ‘Ali Bakr. He called the tribal elders, who summoned the village men to reach a tribal consensus. It was agreed that well owners from the community were no longer allowed to fill up tankers for qat fields outside their immediate territory. Also, the price for a one-hour share was fixed at its previous level. “Such regulations reached by consensus are usually honored by all community members,” said Bakr. “Later, when one of the well owners tried to breach the decision, men from Bani Maymoun just aimed a couple of bullets at the tires of the water tanker. That put an end to the water business.”

### Bottom-Up Conservation

Bani Maymoun is small and homogeneous, and in its case a verbal agreement on groundwater trade sufficed. In other conflicts over water resources, tribal communities increasingly resort to a written consensus-based form of regulation, known in Arabic as a marqoum. Hijrat al-Muntasir, a village located at an altitude of 9,842 feet at the western watershed of the ‘Amran basin, is one such place where drilling imperiled vital drinking water resources.

The drilling rig was blocking the narrow mountain track when I visited Hijrat al-Muntasir in 2007. Qat farmers had gathered around the heavy equipment as if to protect it. On the escarpment above, more than 50 tribesmen had positioned themselves, several with AK-47 machine guns. It appeared as if
both groups had been awaiting our arrival. The tension eased, and some of the tribesmen climbed down from the ridge to make their views heard. The qat farmers, desperate after yet another of their wells had run dry, were about to drill deep into the limestone. The villagers of Hijrat al-Muntasir feared that more groundwater extraction would wipe out their small spring, the sole drinking water source for the 700 inhabitants. They had mobilized their men to prevent the drilling. They accused the qat farmers and the rig owner of lacking a valid permit.

A short but bumpy drive took us to the village. Women and children with dozens of empty water containers lined the route to the nearby spring, displaying an impressive array of protest banners prepared by the schoolchildren. “We hold you responsible for our future,” one of them read in Arabic.

A quick survey revealed the gravity of the situation. The water from the spring was carefully rationed. Salih al-Muntasiri, a village elder, brought out the document that listed the water allotments for each family—roughly ten quarts per person per day. Each quantity taken from the roofed cistern fed by trickle from the mountain spring was meticulously recorded and monitored by ‘Ali, the gatekeeper of the cistern.

Trouble for the qat irrigators had started when the people of al-Qarin, a village nearby, banned the sale and trade of groundwater from their local wells to outsiders. A marqoum, signed by the village elders, was written to regulate the details of this social contract. Groundwater levels around al-Qarin had fallen noticeably over the previous years, sparking fears about the future. At the same time, influential families from the village had been drilling new wells and were selling water to tanker owners who would then take it to new qat farms in other areas—including the fields near Hijrat al-Muntasir. As the ban came into effect, the qat farmers decided to give drilling one more try. On hearing the news, the men of Hijrat al-Muntasir sent a delegation to Bakr ‘Ali Bakr.

After several weeks of negotiations, both parties finally agreed to accept the outcome and recommendations of a government technical study. The various parties to the dispute met several times at the site of the drilling rig. Gradually, the focus of their discussions shifted from technicalities to sustainable management of the village’s water resources.

In the spring of 2009, I was invited back for the inauguration of a small village project. It was the first visit for the vice governor and other dignitaries. Hijrat al-Muntasir had
slaughtered two oxen for the occasion. Banners leading up to the village welcomed the guests. There was good news—the drilling had been stopped. In addition, each household had built a cesspit to improve overall sanitary conditions. Community organizers working for the Social Fund for Development had paid the village a few visits, reaching the benefits of better hygiene.

But there was also bad news. As ‘Ali, the gatekeeper, unlocked the screechy iron access gate to the cistern, a number of village women came rushing down a steep path, each carrying a number of empty bright yellow containers. “No water today—go back home!” shouted ‘Ali. “Tomorrow morning, inshallah.” The daily flow of the spring had been reduced to a trickle—from ten to just five quarts per person per day. Whether the reduction was due to a temporary lack of rainfall or to permanent climate change, no one can say. “One thing is certain, however,” said Salih al-Muntasiri. “Without your support in preventing the drilling two years ago, we would blame the slow drying-up of our spring on the qat farmers. There would be trouble and strife and God knows what.”

Which Scarcity?

Communities such as Hijrat al-Muntasir are coping admirably with their diminishing spring. In social science terms, they retain a strong adaptive capacity, defined as the sum of social resources available to counter an increasing natural resource scarcity.

Social scientists now make a clear distinction between “first-order” scarcity of a natural resource and “second-order” scarcity of adaptive capacity. The latter, according to Tony Allan of the University of London, one of the world’s leading water experts, is much more determinant of outcomes. Developing coping mechanisms at the community level is a step in the right direction.

Coping mechanisms will not be enough to solve Yemen’s water crisis, however. The structural problems—among them, the draining of aquifers to irrigate fields of cash crops like qat—must be addressed. As has been stressed by Christopher Ward, a long-time analyst of water issues in Yemen, “a decentralization and the partnership approach can only be viewed as elements of a damage limitation exercise aimed at slowing down the rate of resource depletion, to allow Yemen time to develop patterns of economic activity less dependent on water mining.” In other words, Yemen needs to demonstrate adaptive capacity at the national level. A national debate on water is planned for late 2010, involving the president as well as other top opinion and decision makers. This conference will be a crucial test of political will: The Yemeni political class will need to place a high priority on the development of viable alternatives to agriculture in order to prevent the country from slipping into Malthusian catastrophe.
The Politics of Subsidy Reform in Iran

Kevan Harris

Although most Iranians forget it today, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected in 2005 on a platform of technocratic competence. The clique surrounding his rise to mayor of Tehran and beyond once called themselves Abadgaran, "the Developers." In a column four months after Ahmadinejad's election to the Iranian presidency, commentator Saeed Laylaz reminded readers of the sage advice of Deng Xiaoping, arguing that a hard-line conservative government could push through economic reforms where the reformist administration had failed. "The cat is finally catching mice," Laylaz wrote, "and its color no longer matters."1 After the exhaustion of the reform movement’s momentum, Ahmadinejad presented himself to the people as the intrepid engineering professor, the humble, principled and no-nonsense expert who could get things done. "Expert," in fact, is one of the good doctor's favorite words.

What occurred was instead second-rate. The network of clients enveloping the new president set its sights on capturing the money and resources controlled by the ossifying bureaucracy of the Islamic Republic. Abadgaran men and assorted hangers-on replaced the aging first generation of post-revolutionary technocratic cadres. No sweet plum remained unpicked in the state agencies and ministries, not even in provincial offices and the development projects they oversaw. The rebellious tone with which this turnover was presented—"throw the bums out"—resonated with the lower social strata, who have rarely benefited from state largesse. In 2007, the president stuck a pitchfork of his own in the 60-year old Planning and Budget Organization, taking away its independent auditing power. But overall the Ahmadinejad administration has not exactly been distinguished by fiscal discipline and managerial efficiency. Ahmadinejad, for instance, has paid three rounds of handwritten letters asking for small favors—resolving a quarrel with a local official, helping a son lacking sufficient connections to pay an overdue bill. The supplicants received personalized replies, and a few dozen thousand-toman notes (1,000 tomans equal $1) were stuffed into the envelopes for good measure. Ahmadinejad’s political vehicle was nothing less than a new patronage machine. It is an administration charismatic in appearance, but inconsistent in policy and practice.

In the spring of 2010, with the country still in political tumult over the dubious election of the previous June, and in economic pain due to global recession, the reinstalled engineer-president announced a plan that drew out critics of his competence in droves. The government proposed to enact the most sweeping economic policy change in over a decade: a phasing out of price subsidies for nearly all staple commodities—bread, electricity, water and gasoline—starting in March and continuing until 2015, when they would cease entirely. The plan provoked immediate protest and predictions of chaos, prompting parliamentarians to chop half of the cuts out of the budget bill they passed on March 9.

Easy Money No More

Ahmadinejad’s political opponents within the Islamic Republic, from reformists to pragmatic conservatives, and irrespective of their feelings about the Green Movement arising after the June election, were pleased to see the president on the economic hot seat at last. After 15 years of attempting to construct their own versions of a modernization project, they were aghast that this upstart had labeled them as the backward, out-of-touch cronies of an old elite. Whether they had sought to do so through a glasnost-style opening, like former President Mohammad Khatami, or through a top-down economic restructuring, like Khatami’s predecessor Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, they had been equally disparaged. Infuriating them more was that Ahmadinejad liberally stole from their policy playbook, just as President Bill Clinton was etched into the pages of US history though the use of softened Republican Party talking points. Politically, the Islamic Republic’s bêtes noires in the Bush administration gave the Iranian regime easy targets with which to justify their position: a region in conflagration and blatant enforcement of double standards in nuclear geopolitics.

For most of Ahmadinejad’s first term, the money poured in, in the form of oil rents inflated due to the same regional crises. The government rode the heady boom in land prices and resplendent construction projects. In 2006–2007, many Iranians with capital jumped into the housing market, seeing dizzy gains of 100 percent every year. The resulting real estate bubble temporarily concealed the lack of a coherent development policy.2 The benchmarks and proposals of the Fourth Five-Year Plan (2005–2009), passed in Khatami’s era, were discarded in favor of hundreds of bridges to nowhere, and most

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of these were not even completed. The economy entered a liquidity trap, where over-accumulation of capital and a lack of profitable outlets for investment drove down the rate of return while sending prices into an upward spiral. Finally, Iran's central bank reined in the easy money in mid-2008, months before the collapse of global financial markets (with much resistance from the president, who forced the two largest state banks to continue to hand out loans, resulting in the large debt burdens of today, as borrowers default). Each block of every middle-class neighborhood in Tehran is now home to three or four real estate offices, all filled with jacketed agents listlessly huddled together.

The economic hangover allowed political competitors to pin the label of ineptitude on the president's dwindling faction and make it stick. If any theme permeated the televised debates between presidential candidates before the June 2009 election, it was competent governance. The intra-elite bickering was so intense that it arguably burned through the electorate's apathy and ignited mass participation in the balloting.

Into this environment the president introduced his subsidy reform law, whose provisions were as follows: The government spent around 40 percent of its 2006 budget ($40 billion) on such subsidies and even more during 2008's oil price peak. Of the revenue gained from the lessening of subsidy levels, the state would keep 20 percent, ostensibly compensating for increased costs in the public sector. Another 30 percent would be allocated to industries that rely heavily on subsidies and development of more energy-efficient infrastructure. The remaining 50 percent would be given back to Iranians in direct cash transfers or indirect welfare benefits, “targeting” the poorest strata of the population. After five years, the prices of the staples were to be close to regional market levels. The parliament wrote into the law that the government should gain no less than $10 billion and no more than $20 billion during the first year, which would have meant increasing prices for subsidized goods on average between 2.5 and 4 times their current levels.

Debate over the law was heated, even a bit melodramatic, with parties for and against seeming to believe equally in the awesome power of unregulated markets. The president identified this single reform as the solution to the country's many economic, social and perhaps even cultural woes. On March 9, amid reports that Parliament would approve only half of the cuts, state news agencies relayed that Ahmadinejad was praying in the chamber for passage of them all. Critics of the law, including stalwart conservatives in Parliament, predicted hyperinflationary catastrophe and industrial collapse. Green Movement supporters hoped that an intensification of economic grievances would keep middle-class Iranians, some of whom see the plan as a government attack upon their livelihoods, coming into the streets. Labor activists foresaw a new surge of working-class unrest to fuel the Green fire.

The drama of the subsidy debate was all the higher for playing out against the backdrop of the post-election turmoil and the fragmentation of the political elite into so many temporary chiefdoms, with the accompanying fleeting wars and alliances. In this climate, no policy initiative on the scale of subsidy reform would proceed without the express approval of Ahmadinejad's patrons, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guards. Why, given the hubbub, did they permit the president to move forward with the subsidy-cutting plan? Have they gone nuts?

Toward Consensus

Lost in the coverage of the March 9 vote, which was represented as a major defeat for Ahmadinejad, was the fact that Parliament still approved $20 billion in subsidy reductions. Another question should be directed to the president's opponents: If cuts would be so disastrous, why make any at all? Parliamentarians crafted the $20 billion compromise with an eye to the opinion of Ayatollah Khamenei, who had remained conspicuously quiet throughout the raucous debate. His continued silence was interpreted by the Western press as an effective vote of no confidence in the president, but it is more accurately seen as an endorsement of the concept of slashing subsidies. The fact is that, in proposing the cuts, Ahmadinejad and his supporters were not far outside the economic policy consensus within the Islamic Republic.

Over the last 20 years, every political faction in the Islamic Republic has undergone an intellectual transformation. Each by its own route, all of these groups came around to the same economic point of view: The state could not afford the current form of the extensive social safety net woven after the 1979 revolution. Subsidies on staples were but one thread of this web, replacing the ration cards that the Islamic Republic had issued during the 1980–1988 war with Iraq.

Already in the early 1990s, technocrats under Rafsanjani were arguing for a “rationalization” of subsidies, outright removal being impossible, because the subsidies were highly popular. Subsidy reform was held to be the key to an efficient allocation of resources that could jump-start economic development. This view was quietly adopted across the reformist-conservative divide that developed in the later 1990s (though there were dissenters in both camps), and many commodity prices were floated at market rates. But subsidies of essential goods and services were untouched.

A reporter for the reformist daily Etemad was surprised, therefore, when Ali Shams-Ardakani, former secretary-general of the Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Mining and a cousin of Mohammad Khatami, professed unwavering support for Ahmadinejad's subsidy reform law: “Introducing targeted subsidies is a move toward fixing a wrong policy that we have followed for many years…. If something is implemented badly, it does not mean that it was bad to begin with.” Shams-Ardakani added that poverty would likely increase if the bill passed, but held that without it, and indeed a package of economic reforms, Iran would be stuck with lackluster growth.
China" is invoked as a place marker for the Iranian status quo, without political opening is often identified as Iran's self-chosen regime. Historically, the links between economic and political liberalization are rather tenuous, but reformist discourse was now a "nuclear state." "God willing," he intoned, "with the implementation of the targeted subsidies plan, the Fifth Five-Year Plan and the policies of Article 44 [the privatization of Iran's state-owned enterprises], we will be the twelfth-largest economy in the world within five years." 

Many labeled the subsidy reform plan as a long-planned "shock therapy" that would ravage the Iranian economy and solidify a state-linked oligarchy at the expense of all other sectors. This view is inaccurate, if only because Ahmadinejad’s first administration showed few signs of a coherent economic policy beyond the short-term thinking of any political machine: Muscle your friends into power and keep them there. The reality seems to be that Ahmadinejad, having realized his limited economic vision, had no answer of his own when these initial gambits ran their course. So he embraced the set of ideas most available to him at the moment, and spoke of them as if he had come to these conclusions entirely on his own. Parroting such unobjectionable phrases as “getting the prices right” lent the appearance of technical knowledge. Meanwhile, if his government could enact and implement subsidy reform, he could point to a substantial achievement where past administrations had failed, thereby countering the accusations of bumbling that had been turned back against him. The cat would be catching mice.

If short-term political gain spurred Ahmadinejad and his backers to embrace of the market, they will surely be disappointed. Even at the lower levels approved on March 9, for the subsidy reform plan to be effective, it will require a state apparatus akin to the one he attacked upon entering office in 2005. The professionals who could have taken on the task have quit, been fired or been sidelined. Ahmadinejad may be stuck with a white elephant.

See What Sticks

In the lead-up to the parliamentary vote, it was difficult to predict the outcome of subsidy reform because the details were elusive. Indeed, the plan’s gelatinous form changed shape on a weekly basis as the administration reacted to complaints and criticisms from various sectors. The process was eerily similar to the raising of gasoline prices in 2007, when the government would tease the public with a new price and ration structure on economic policy by Western-trained academics. The real models for Iran have continued to be those few economic successes among middle-income states that inspire the fairy tales of development.

After taking up the “targeting” or “rationalizing” of subsidies as an issue in the middle of his first term, Ahmadinejad rarely missed a chance to promote it in a speech, often (accurately) saying that 70 percent of the nation receives only 30 percent of the subsidies, and vice versa. He even brought up the matter in his February 11 oratory at Azadi Square, when he announced that Iran had enriched uranium to 20 percent and was now a “nuclear state.” “God willing,” he intoned, “with the implementation of the targeted subsidies plan, the Fifth Five-Year Plan and the policies of Article 44 [the privatization of Iran’s state-owned enterprises], we will be the twelfth-largest economy in the world within five years.”

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number of these citizens complained to their MPs, who passed the grimpes on to the government, who then denied that the clusters were even to be used.

Confusion reigned. As of late February, government spokesmen were on record saying that 70 percent of Iranians would receive aid and also that 100 percent of Iranians will receive aid. The president had suggested that aid checks would be deposited in private bank accounts each month. In Iran, however, as in most middle-income countries, huge swathes of economic activity are hidden from the government's view. Those millions of Iranians who earn their sustenance in the informal economy, and the petty bourgeoisie and small-time bazaaris who fear the tax man, are unlikely to subject their accounts to government scrutiny. Many people on Tehran's streets professed incredulity that the plan would go forward. According to interviews at Iran's welfare agencies, there barely exists a centralized system of data sharing that could create a reliable gauge of family income and need. Instead, cash payments may be funneled through the various welfare institutions, between which there are notorious bureaucratic turf battles.

Iranian industry, suffering from competition with a flood of imports over the last four years, was vocal in its opposition to the plan. The economic weekly Barnameh released results of a study on the effects of subsidy removal for various industrial sectors, predicting 50 percent inflation of input costs in transportation, 45 percent in chemicals and 25 percent in construction and mining. Iran's Chamber of Commerce demanded industry-specific protection from hikes in prices, and the House of Labor, through its surprisingly vociferous Secretary-General Ali Reza Mahjoub, predicted “three-digit inflation” and waves of layoffs to hit the working class. The president again replied, in pseudo-expert tones, that “tens of committees” were working on the problem and would submit their findings shortly. There are other dilemmas. If inflation, which Ahmadinejad insists will remain manageable, gets out of control, how will the government maintain its loose peg of the highly overvalued rial to the dollar? Given that the subsidy plan already seems like a conspiracy against the Green-sympathetic middle class, a devaluation of the rial would only confirm their suspicions, since it would hurt their purchasing power more than that of the poor, who have very little to begin with. Yet the preservation of the currency peg may require the reimposition of currency and import controls if oil prices move lower, equally anathema to middle-class Iranians who remember the economic strictures of the war with Iraq.

As for waged workers, the utter absence of industrial policy has led to months of non-payment of arrears in segments of the steel, construction and other durable goods sectors. Protests remain sporadic and mostly spontaneous, but unrest is on the rise. Given that wage increases traditionally occur after the Persian New Year, the government will find it hard to blame the usual middlemen—the bazaar merchants who imported their way into the ranks of the wealthy—if the plan goes forward.

Yet economic distress never automatically generates political dissent. Those on the outside who gleefully watch Iran's economy sink forget that there are alternatives to broad social protest in economic crises—reliance upon extended family, xenophobia and avoidance of any and all interaction with the state. Mir-Hossein Mousavi, the titular head of the Green Movement, astutely questioned the plan in his official statements, calling attention to the effect on Iran's poorer families. But it remains to be seen if the cuts, at the lower levels approved by Parliament, will have a galvanizing effect in Iran's highly class-conscious society. Embarrassingly for the government, the details of how big the subsidy payments will be and who will receive them are still unclear, even after passage of the budget on March 9. One thing is certain. The hardline troika of Khamenei, the Revolutionary Guards and Ahmadinejad will be held responsible for whatever subsidy reform may do to Iranians' standard of living. While, at one time or another, all of the Islamic Republic’s political factions have advocated subsidy reform, in the eyes of the population, it is now “owned” by the president who prayed for it.

Now What?

Few doubt that the long-standing subsidy policy has contributed to highly distorted consumption patterns in Iranian society. Keeping gasoline relatively cheap, the 2007 hikes notwithstanding, contributes to Iranian cities’ growing problems with congestion and air pollution. But why, many ask, should the pain of “economic surgery” be borne by consumers first? Commuters who may now find gasoline prohibitively expensive or may want to exercise an environmental consciousness do not have good fallback options in public transportation. Tehran's subway system, for instance, is well behind schedule, again because of bureaucratic turf battles. The subway agency is run by Rafsanjani's son and is under the control of Tehran mayor Mohammad Baquer Qalibaf, a critic of the hardline conservatives. As a result the government has withheld millions of dollars in funding, making it likely that progress in construction will remain sluggish.

Endnotes

1 Sharq, October 15, 2005.
2 See the interview with Kamal Atrahi in Etemad, January 18, 2010.
4 The banking sector’s woes are outlined in Iran Dokht, January 23, 2010.
6 Etemad, February 1, 2010.
8 Evaleila Pesaran details the battle over foreign investment in the Khatami period in her working paper, “Negotiating Iran's Economic Reform: Factional Contestation Over the Foreign Investment Act of 2002.”
9 See Kevan Harris, “Did Iran Lose Its Chance of Catching Up With the West?” in English at kevanharris.com and in Persian at alborznet.ir.
10 Iran Dokht, February 6, 2010.
11 Etemad, February 8, 2010.
12 Mardom Salari, October 17, 2009.
In the early 1990s, the security forces of Egypt were embroiled in a low-grade civil war with the Gama’a Islamiyya (Islamic Group), an uncompromising outfit committed to the violent overthrow of the government. The Gama’a, like the even more radical Egyptian Islamic Jihad and al-Takfir wa al-Hijra, grew out of study circles reading the works of Ibn Taymiyya and Sayyid Qutb, the intellectual godfathers of jihadi groups across the Muslim world, including al-Qaeda. Qutb taught that *jahili* (pagan) governments and social elites had usurped the entire realm of Islam. For his more extreme followers, war was not only permitted, but also mandated, to restore the Muslim world to righteousness. The enemy was everywhere; the Gama’a did not distinguish between the Egyptian regime and its “infidel” US and Israeli allies, or between armed police and camera-toting tourists. The Muslim Brothers, whose ranks had included Qutb, had betrayed their past in the interest of accommodation with the regime.

After much bloodshed, and the killing or jailing of its top echelons, the Gama’a declared a unilateral and permanent ceasefire. A parade of “repentant terrorists” appeared on Egyptian television to admit the error of their ways, and the leadership published more than 20 books detailing the group’s ideological “revisions.” A flurry of commentary has both celebrated and cast doubt upon the international significance

What Does the Gama’a Islamiyya Want Now?

Ewan Stein

Hassan Khalifa of the Gama’a Islamiyya reacts to his death penalty verdict, December 27, 1997.

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of this *volte-face*. Many have touted its role in the subsequent recantations of Osama bin Laden’s former mentor, Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, and the demobilization of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, seeing these events as signposts along the road to al-Qaeda’s demise. Others are more doubtful that the Gama’a Islamiyya experience can be exported.  

What the future holds for the Gama’a within Egypt, however, is an unasked question that is equally important. Egyptian political life is in a fragile transitional phase. The 2011 presidential election is fraying votes, with the prospect that President Husni Mubarak will engineer a hereditary succession to his son Gamal stoking protest from many quarters as early as 2004. The regime continues its capricious, but increasingly firm, ban upon the Muslim Brothers, the largest opposition movement, which is itself undergoing internal turmoil. Poverty and inequality stalk the country. Also politically significant is the deepening malaise of educated urban Egyptians forced to work for longer hours just to afford rent and basic necessities, while the promise of marriage and a modicum of prosperity is endlessly delayed.

Neither the ruling National Democratic Party nor the Muslim Brothers offer solutions to these problems. While new political actors in Egypt have historically struggled to make inroads, groups known for having mass appeal have found it easier to reform after periods of retraction. The Brothers are the main case in point, their rapid rebirth in the 1970s attesting to the restiveness of the urban and provincial lower middle classes. But many now see the Brothers as having forsaken this base in favor of stultifying parliamentary politics and international affairs, in a way that mirrors the decline of the mighty Wafd Party after the 1919 rebellion against British tutelage. The Brothers’ hegemony over the so-called Egyptian street is not unchallenged: A variety of liberals and leftists channel the middle classes’ calls for democracy and against hereditary succession, and, more ambiguously, populist preachers draw significant support from the poorer strata. The reinvented Gama’a Islamiyya faces a new political firmament.

**The Preacher of Bakus**

The historical leaders of the Gama’a, as well as the bulk of its rank and file, have now been released from prison, but they remain under close watch. The official head of the group, Alexandria-based Karam Zuhdi, suffers from severe chronic medical conditions and keeps a low profile in comparison with others, particularly political chief ‘Isam Darbala, who lives in Minya, and Najih Ibrahim.

Now in his fifties, Ibrahim is the author of most Gama’a literature (both pre- and post-revisions) and has emerged as the group’s main spokesman. Ibrahim hails from the province of Asyut in Middle Egypt, but settled in the bustling popular neighborhood of Bakus in Alexandria—his wife’s hometown—after his release from prison. A garrulous, paternal and personable figure, Ibrahim oversees and writes for the Gama’a website (the group’s only officially tolerated outlet) while earning a living as a dermatologist, a profession he continued to pursue throughout his 24 years behind bars. The study in Ibrahim’s comfortable sixteenth-floor apartment commands sweeping views of the Mediterranean Sea and, with the windows flung open and the cool sea breeze blowing in, feels like a hard place in which to think angry thoughts.

Ibrahim’s book collection speaks volumes about his intellectual formation. On the lower shelf sits a neat row of tomes, whose familiar green-and-red binding and gilt calligraphy identify them as collections of Islamic law. Above them is a more haphazard assortment of paperbacks, including many works of Egyptian political and intellectual history. Alongside volumes from his own series *The Correction of Concepts*, the names of major Egyptian secular writers leap out: ‘Abd al-Mun’im Sa’id, Anis Mansour, Muhammad Hasanayn Haykal. Propping up the books on one end is a stack of volumes containing the complete papers of seminal—and ideologically composite—Egyptian nationalists Mustafa Kamil and Muhammad Farid. Does the erstwhile theoretician of jihad now fancy himself a present-day Saad Zaghloul, the revered hero of the Wafd whose statue strides purposefully toward Europe a few miles down the Corniche?

Not quite. But Najih Ibrahim comes across as every inch the Egyptian patriot. An hour into our meeting he disappears to return with a tray of fried sardines, rice and salad, proudly and unequivocally announcing that Egyptian food is the best on the planet. More pertinently, he points out (clearly not for the first time) that the world’s first Islamist movement, the Muslim Brothers of Hasan al-Banna, was Egyptian, and now the first Islamist movement to admit to its mistakes is also Egyptian. Asked whether he thinks Egypt remains the beacon of the Islamic world, he nods slowly: “For the Sunnis you have Egypt and you have Saudi Arabia.” Saudi Arabia is important because of Mecca and Medina, but in Egypt the quality of the preachers sets the country apart: “Egyptian imams can do their sermons by heart, whereas the Saudi ones need to read from notes.”

The conceptual frame of reference for the pre-revisions Gama’a Islamiyya, as with most Islamist groups, transcended the nation-state. As reflected in Ibrahim’s older titles, such as *The Charter for Islamic Action* (1984) and *The Inevitability of Confrontation* (1987), the worldview of the Gama’a was relatively simple: The Islamic caliphate had been carved up and replaced by “statelets” ruled by secular-minded “infidels” in league with Crusaders and Jews. These infidels would never reestablish the caliphate, essential to the revival of Islam, and must therefore be toppled via jihad. At the same time, Muslim societies had to be purged of incorrect and deviant practices via “enjoining good and forbidding evil,” or *hisba*. (The Gama’a did not go so far, as did al-Takfir wa al-Hijra and Egyptian Islamic Jihad, as to declare almost all of society to be infidel.) This direct action on behalf of religion would increase the efficacy
of ceaseless proselytizing (da'wa) to bring society back to the true religion of God.

These three elements of the Gama’a program (jihad, hisba and da’wa) remain at the core of the “revisions” literature, but Najih Ibrahim is keen to stress the following: Jihad is a means to an end and the end does not necessarily justify the means. The duty of violent jihad falls into abeyance if the costs outweigh the benefits. The Islamist movement erred seriously when it tried to overthrow regimes, which, no matter how decadent, cannot be declared infidel. The harming of civilians, Muslim and non-Muslim, is forbidden in Islam. The duty of hisba must be discharged in coordination with the state. Hisba is now more a set of guidelines for neighborly behavior, authorizing, at most, a kind of citizens’ arrest, than the vigilante doctrine of old. Finally, da’wa is the prime concern and raison d’être of the Islamist movement. No step should be taken that may prejudice the goal of guiding humanity to salvation.

The Politics of Religion

After three hours of discussion, Ibrahim has to go to work. He asks his teenage son (conjugal visits were allowed) to show me around Alexandria until it is time for me to catch my train. Looking down from Stanley Bridge at the beach packed with revelers, with the sun setting over the broad expanse of the Mediterranean, it is hard to believe that the city is the epicenter of Egypt’s closed-minded salafi trend, which some believe is the wave of the political future in Egypt and beyond. Owing much to the strictly fundamentalist teachings of Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab and his followers in the Arabian Peninsula, the Egyptian version apparently also has its own momentum. The Gama’a itself was influenced by the austere orthopraxy picked up by the Egyptian multitudes returning from stints of employment in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states.

Although the Gama’a Ismiyya would at one time have appeared near the top of the list of Egyptian (and Arab) salafi groups, Ibrahim now gives the salafi trend a mixed report card. On the plus side, the salafis tenaciously uphold the Islamic creed. And they are right to shun politics, particularly at the level of the state.

Ibrahim’s reasoning here reveals a distinctly realistic (if not realist) view of international relations, as well as cynicism regarding the benefits of ruling Egypt. “Islamists can never take power,” Ibrahim insists, and deluded are those who, like some of the Muslim Brothers, think otherwise. “Whether they try to do so by force or through elections,” Islamists will fail. “Were the Brothers to win power in Egypt,” he predicts firmly, “Israel would immediately reoccupy the Sinai and the United States would impose economic sanctions.” An Islamic state is one of several means to the end of bringing people to their religion, but should never be an end goal. In reality, for Ibrahim, the Islamic state is a misnomer. The state that Islamists really want is a civil state governed by Islamic rules—which has, give or take a law or two, been achieved already in many places, including in Egypt. Rather than aspiring to more, it is much safer and more beneficial for Islamist movements to leave the states in the hands of secularists and be allowed to pursue peaceful da’wa under their protective shield.

Ibrahim now says that refusal to be content with this setup was the Gama’a’s pivotal mistake. Whereas President Anwar al-Sadat had allowed nearly boundless freedom for da’wa, the young activists were greedy. (Ibrahim was 27 when Sadat was assassinated in 1981.) “We also wanted the state. So we killed Sadat and lost the state and the da’wa!” The freedom of the 1970s was intoxicating for these young activists who, filled with a false sense of their own power, thought that anything was possible. For Ibrahim, the “revisions”—writings full of cautious pragmatism and advising against “over-exuberance” in religion—are largely about reclaiming the space for da’wa that he and his brothers squandered in their youth.

A Third Way?

But, for Najih Ibrahim, salafis, in their obsession with emulating every detail of the world of the prophet Muhammad, are useless when it comes to real-world issues. The Gama’a embraces existing customs and social norms so
long as they do not contradict Islamic law (shari’a). In this regard, Ibrahim commends the Muslim Brothers for the excellent connection they enjoy with “life” and the pressing concerns of modern society. But “they put politics before religion, and that’s wrong.” In a sense, the Gama’a has maintained this critique since the 1970s. The armed Gama’a Islamiyya emerged from a much broader peaceful student movement. Most of this movement, including future high-fliers like ‘Iyān and ‘Abd al-Mun’im Abu al-Futouh, merged with the Muslim Brothers, whereas those interested in confrontation rather than accommodation formed the Gama’a. (‘Iyān and Abu al-Futouh revised their ideas to the extent that they are now considered among the most liberal-minded of the Brothers’ spokesmen.) Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the Gama’a maintained a sharply critical stance toward the Brothers’ political dances with the Mubarak regime and shifting alliances with secular political forces, like the Wafā and ‘Tagamu’ parties.

But one gets the sense from talking to Ibrahim that the Gama’a would participate in political life, were it allowed to. The security restrictions on Gama’a’s leaders and members have relaxed since they were released from prison, but they travel only at the pleasure of the security apparatus. They are not allowed to speak in mosques or otherwise organize.

Were the regime to loosen the strings, the Gama’a could present itself as a middle way between morally unimpeachable but defeatist salafi trends and the Muslim Brothers, who have sacrificed their Islamic soul on the altar of secular politics. According to Ibrahim, over 20,000 rank-and-file members have been let out of jail since the beginning of the ceasefire (though, since the vast majority were imprisoned without trial, it is impossible to know the extent of their commitment to the group before, during or after their incarceration). In any case, the group apparently has representatives in every Egyptian town, and the rows of bearded cadres that filled gyms to hear the historical leadership as it toured Egypt’s prisons to promote the revisions in 2001–2002 suggest a buoyant number. Shortly after agreeing to meet me for an interview, Najih Ibrahim dispatched “one of the brothers” from Minufiyya in the Delta to deliver personally to me in Cairo the entire corpus of Gama’a revision literature. The speed and efficiency with which this operation was accomplished suggests that the group’s command and control mechanisms remain well oiled.

So could the Gama’a give the Brothers a run for their money? Less than charitable commentators, such as the journalist (and former Jihad member) ‘Abd al-Mun’im Munib, suggest that the Gama’a has made a deal with the regime, that the regime is grooming the Gama’a as a weapon to wield against the Brothers, that the Gama’a tried to split the Islamist vote in elections for the lawyers’ syndicate and even that the Gama’a supports the principle of hereditary succession and believes Gamal Mubarak will afford them freedom to proselytize in society.7 Ibrahim has, in turn, flatly refuted such accusations.8 The true nature of the Gama’a’s “understanding” with the regime cannot be grasped with certainty, but the new ideological positions seem genuine. The writings stand as authentic, unforced articulations of a coherent intellectual position. Those versed in the intertextuality of Islamic thought, such as the prominent Muslim scholar Sherman Jackson, have vouched for the quality and sophistication of the revisions’ jurisprudential arguments.9 The group’s analyses of al-Qaeda’s motives and mistakes are dispassionate and devoid of hyperbole. They condemn all of al-Qaeda’s violent actions as misguided and counterproductive, but accept that bin Laden and his followers are sincere Muslims who want to do the best for the umma. Ibrahim remarked that Ayman al-Zawahiri, with whom he spent four years in prison, was a “good man” who had gone astray.

At the same time, it is true that as an apolitical (and currently marginal) religious group the Gama’a poses no threat to the regime. It does not challenge state policy on either domestic or foreign issues and criticizes those who do so. It opposes not only the Brothers’ contestation of elections but also the Kifaya opposition movement, which Najih Ibrahim laughingly dismissed as a “cocktail” in reference to its political and ideological heterogeneity. Like the Brothers, the Gama’a is against workers’ protests and strikes at a time when labor unrest has swept the country.

**Be Careful What You Wish For**

If the regime genuinely expects the Gama’a, as with more assuredly anti-political salafi actors, to offer a safer alternative to the Brothers, it will have to allow the ex-militants to recommence their da’wa activities. It is difficult to see how, in this scenario, the Gama’a could remain aloof from politics while also staying connected to the real-life concerns of Egyptians. The massively popular, but scrupulously apolitical evangelist ‘Amr Khalid (whom Ibrahim also described reverently as a “good man”) ran afoul of the regime over an anti-poverty campaign that clashed with the latter’s own initiative in this domain.

Even if not in the regime’s pocket and given latitude to mobilize in society again, however, it is doubtful that the
Gama’a in its present form would adopt a revolutionary course. The “revisions” literature has much in common with the conservative intellectual reactions that followed previous upheavals in Egyptian history. It was after the mass movement in support of the nationalist colonel Ahmad ‘Urabi in 1882 that the gradualism of Muhammad Abduh, Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid and Rashid Rida replaced the more radical exhortations of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani. Similar returns to gradual change, reflections of a bourgeoisie closing its ranks, followed close on the heels of popular uprisings in 1906 and 1919. Nasserism can, in some ways, be interpreted as closing the revolutionary upsurge following World War II via its overbearing influence on the Egyptian masses. The popular discontent manifested in the 1977 bread riots may have contributed to the Gama’a’s belief that mass mobilization could help bring them to power. The dismal failure of the group to conquer Asyut after Sadat’s assassination showed this belief to be a chimera, but it was another decade and a half before the mayhem that spread across Upper Egypt would end.

The Gama’a leaders espouse the same socioeconomic vision as the Muslim Brothers. The group professes a commitment to the free market shared by the Brothers and the “reformers” surrounding Gamal Mubarak in the ruling party. In the rural sphere, the Gama’a supports the unraveling of Nasser-era land reform, in particular the Law on Rents for Agricultural Land that benefited the rural aristocracy and rich property speculators, even though (or, more cynically, because) the Gama’a fed off those forced to leave the land and flock to urban slums because of the liberalization of rents in the 1980s and 1990s. The Gama’a does not offer a progressive social agenda to lift Egyptians out of poverty and adopts a paternalistic attitude toward the Egyptian poor. The group shares with conservatives everywhere the conviction that society’s problems are due mainly to lax morals, not an unjust economic system. In a proper Islamic society, the poor will be taken care of through the benevolence and piety of the rich, who will conscientiously keep up their charitable obligations. State intervention in this and most other realms is, for Ibrahim and many others, totally counter to Islam, a vestige of the communist Nasser years. Social justice consists of eliminating bribery, corruption and “bad management” as the middle classes perform their duties as Muslims.

Back to Basics

Where the Gama’a will likely seek to broaden its populist appeal, again in common with conservatives everywhere, is the issue of crime and social decay. Though it is difficult to find reliable statistics, there is a widespread perception that petty crime is on the increase in Egypt. The Gama’a’s Taliban-style approach to combating crime was a key factor in its rise before being crushed by the Egyptian security forces. As Ibrahim recalls, the Gama’a was attractive because of its energy and goals, but it also offered protection and retribution to victims of theft or assault. Such services were particularly useful for the dislocated laborers and students for whom the traditional tribal structures were unavailable. The police, then as now, were of no use in such situations, especially in rural and slum areas. The Gama’a was about ridding the streets of drug pushers, fornicators, thugs and an ever expanding list of evils that came to include, for some, unveiled women, artists, musicians and Copts. Research by Salwa al-Awa on the Gama’a also suggests that much of the group’s morality policing was met with approval.10 Ibrahim emphasizes—with a vague hand gesture across the rooftops his apartment overlooks—that the problems of petty crime (including muggings) are still very much in evidence.

As Egypt’s poor continue to fall through the cracks, the Gama’a may be around, if allowed, to help clean up the mess. The question then would be how far it can or will go. The group’s new prescriptions on hisba may advocate nothing more than firm advice to the concerned citizen, but the old literature on the same topic was not very explicit about using force, either, and, as with any political organization, there is always scope for the rank and file to interpret written directives. To the extent that the Gama’a wants to offer more than the apartness of the salafis—or, for that matter, the Sufi orders—some elements of the group may end up returning to the more proactive vigilantism of old, particularly in those districts where the state fears (or can be induced not) to tread. But too much security entrepreneurship might anger the authorities, as happened in the 1980s. Could the Gama’a become loosely incorporated into the state as a quasi-official militia, a la the Iranian Basiji? Currently this move seems unlikely, but given the uncertainty of Egypt’s future in the late Mubarak era, the regime’s historical predilection for such cooptation, the growing unmanageability of Egypt’s urban spaces and the political platform that a rejuvenated Gama’a would adopt, the possibility should not be discounted.

Endnotes

5 This article is based on an interview with Najih Ibrahim in Alexandria on June 22, 2009.
6 Interview with Husam Tammam, Sixth of October City, Egypt, June 7, 2009.
Pitching the Princes

Robert Vitalis


Historians love anniversaries. Not only can they serve as grounds for organizing conferences, but they are also perfect for pitching short commentaries to the op-ed page. The *New York Times* op-ed page is 40 years old in September, to be commemorated for giving rise to what one Times insider called the great “op-ed assembly lines across the land” on topics from terrorists and the Struggle for Saudi Arabia to why his earlier *The Kingdom: Arabia and the House of Saud*, about the country’s “dazzling rocketing to modernity,” matters.

“What if?” is a dubious game to play with the past. But on the basis of the evidence, it seems reasonable to suggest that without the historic achievement of the House of Saud, the horrors of 9/11 would never have been inflicted on the United States, since Osama bin Laden’s poisonous hostility to the West was a brew that only Saudi Arabia could have concocted. His attack on the twin towers was a maneuver in an essentially Saudi quarrel—played out with American victims.

It is an argument he wisely forgets for the remainder of the 300-plus pages of the sequel. The third sentence has no logical connection to the second, which could be deleted without consequence. Lacey does not have the tools to explore the sources of bin Laden’s ideas and, more important, compare these to the many other strains of “poisonous hostility to the West” that exist elsewhere. He would need to do this in order to show precisely how only Saudi Arabia could produce such an event (best done by ignoring the first 1993 attack on the same building in which no Saudi-made “concoction,” let alone Saudi passport holders, figured). Most important, from the marketing angle the passage is a real disaster, offering few chances for pitching an op-ed piece. What milestone does one reach for in the case of “the historic achievement of the House of Saud” and the shadow it casts on the space where the Twin Towers once stood?

My suggestion would have been to pitch instead a 30-year perspective on the shadow cast by the tumultuous events of 1979: the fall of the shah of Iran and the beginning of the Khomeini revolution, the seizure of the US embassy in Tehran, the Soviet push into Afghanistan, and the takeover of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by Juhayman al-Utaybi and followers. The story of the two-week siege is where *Inside the Kingdom* actually begins. The one minor problem is working out how that event actually matters to a war launched two decades later by the bad bin Laden, Osama, who back then was a rising if pious construction mogul. An al-Qaeda supporter drawn to “what if?” questions might ask, “If no siege of Mecca, then no planes operation?”

1979 is also the year that Lacey, a Sunday Times reporter and court historian who had scored big with a bestselling biography of Elizabeth II, *Majesty*, quit his day job and moved to Riyadh. Three years later he published *The Kingdom*, which ends where the new book begins, with the story of the siege. In the original, the good bin Ladens, who had done some renovation work at the site, are nowhere to be found. In the new version they are practically the heroes of the whole affair by supplying the maps to the French commandoes who ended the siege.

Scholarship on Saudi Arabia was mostly a wasteland when Lacey published *The Kingdom* in 1982. “Despite the current importance of Saudi Arabia, most of the literature on the country falls into one of two categories—the apologetic and the ignorant,” wrote one young Saudi critic in the left-leaning *Nation* magazine. Only two of the mere half-dozen books published on Saudi politics in the 1970s avoided the romance that oil companies and court historians liked to tell of an all-wise tribal chief and his sons leading their people out of the medieval era into the twentieth century. Fred Halliday’s *Arabia Without Sultans* (1974) and Helen Lackner’s *A House Built on Sand* (1978) focused instead on the effects of capitalist development, the role of the US in bolstering the new oil-based authoritarian order and the emerging class, regional, ethnic and sectarian divisions that characterized contemporary society.

The US political class was then in the midst of one of its periodic debates about the wisdom of deepening the “special relationship” with the House of Saud. The Nixon and Carter administrations had both banked on the royal family, together with the Shah of Iran, to provide for security in the Gulf while assuring the world economy adequate supplies of oil at the new, higher prices necessary for all the arms purchases and base building that protected the budget of a post-Vietnam Pentagon and secured the future of the US engineering and contracting industries. Following the collapse of one of the “twin pillars” in the winter of 1978–1979, the conservative historian and defender of British imperial diplomacy in the Gulf, J. B. Kelly, wrote a scathing postmortem of US policy and the derivative, “tireless campaign” to sell Saudi Arabia as a “dynamic, stable, forward-looking” US ally.

One of the organizations at the forefront of this campaign, the Middle East Institute, created in 1946 to educate Americans about their putative vital interest in the region, had targeted the Lackner, Halliday and Kelly books for assassination. Its stable of international oilmen, State Department Arabists-turned-consultants and adjunct professors did yeomen’s work to deny, deflect, modify, qualify and make go away what all knew to be true, including, to give just two examples, the “personal

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degeneracy and moral corruption among members of the royal family” and the fact that the military that the US was more or less building and arming, together with the second-class Shi’i subjects working in the oilfields, posed a “major security risk.”

The Washington Post’s Pulitzer Prize-winning foreign editor Jim Hoagland welcomed the appearance at a critical juncture of two “fat and gossipy” books on America’s ally in the Gulf, the House of Saud by long-time British Middle East correspondents, David Holden and Richard Johns and The Kingdom by Robert Lacey. According to Hoagland, the coalition of “neoconservatives and Jews” that had helped bring Ronald Reagan to power feared that Reagan was returning to the game of placating untrustworthy clients, when he should have been pressuring the Saudis to accept US bases on their soil as the only sure way to secure “our” vital interests there.

Washington’s tribe of Saudi hands all judged the Holden and Johns book better than Lacey’s. The contest was also a foregone conclusion. While neither book criticized US policy, the authors of House of Saud had clocked decades of experience in the Middle East. By comparison, Lacey was an inspired amateur, and his book a compendium of clichés, Bedouin lore and the like. House of Saud also came with an unbeatable backstory. In December 1977, Holden had been shot at point-blank range and his body dumped in a ditch on the route from the Cairo airport into town. Johns took over the project. The killers were never caught.

What got lost as the sides joined the battle over weapons sales by way of book reviews is that Lacey never pretended (or not much anyway) to be writing a book for specialists. He writes to entertain—a perfectly reasonable goal—and thereby to sell books in numbers beyond most professors’ dreams. Lacey’s book was also pretty good, his interviews melded into a story that is hard to distinguish from the journalists’ version now. In the May 2009 Foreign Affairs, Gulf expert F. Gregory Gause named Lacey’s The Kingdom one of the five key books to read on Saudi Arabia. Asked about the choice, he said Holden and Johns drew more on gossip from Beirut and Cairo and Lacey more on gossip from Riyadh.

While those coming to the study of the kingdom today no longer have to rely quite so heavily on gossip, the Middle East Institute still operates as a kind of outpost of the mutawwa’in, the kingdom’s notorious police of “vice and virtue,” and plenty of books recycle the old clichés. Pascal Ménoret’s The Saudi Enigma, which follows in the critical tradition of Halliday and Lackner, considers the specious reasoning behind many books written in the past decade by journalists who journeyed to Riyadh to discover “the” origin of the September 11 attacks. Complex historical events cannot be “reduced to a single factor,” but those eager to win adherents in the new war or to just sell lots of books have little patience for complexity. In too many of the new tracts, Islamism or Wahhabism has spread outward from Najd, fueled by oil wealth, with bin Laden as its vector. We turn Saudi Arabia into an “enigma,” Ménoret says, by ignoring logic, rigor and related practices of the social sciences.

Saudi Arabia is one of the world’s “enduring enigmas,” Lacey insists at the beginning of Inside the Kingdom. It is a country whose paradoxes proved lethal for Americans, a “modern state fueling violence that spiraled” far beyond its boundaries. Following the senseless “what if” quoted earlier, he tosses out a series of rhetorical questions in place of a rationally persuasive argument with a speed that leaves those foolish enough to stop to work out the logic in the dust. “Think of the new words that we have had to learn in the past 30 years: wabhab, jihadi, Arab-Afghan, Desert Storm, fatwa, al-Qaeda. What do they all have in common?” Wait, you think, as Lacey rushes ahead, is it a trick? Because Desert Storm, the war to reverse Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait, does not belong on a list that seems focused on political Islam, does it? Lacey does not explain. If you stop to think through the logic you find yourself falling behind in Lacey’s lightning quiz. Where were 15 of the 19 hijackers from? Which nation supplied lots of fighters in Afghanistan? Prisoners in Guantánamo Bay? Foreign fighters in Iraq?

Lacey’s new history of the kingdom follows the formula of the old one, mixing gossip, other people’s scholarship, “jokes and folktales” tracing a meandering path from Mecca in 1979 forward, with brief detours to wherever Osama bin Laden and “vacationing jihadi” turned up in the years before the destruction of the Twin Towers. Parts one and two of the book cover some of the same ground as Lawrence Wright’s The Looming Tower and Steve Coll’s Ghost Wars, so readers may already know where Lacey is headed, and those who do not get a chattier, easy-to-follow Saudi Arabian-centered version. Specialists will gripe about the occasionally mangled translation of an Arabic word (naksa does mean “setback,” but not “disaster” or nakbat) or odd rendering of an Arab name (Sayyid Qutb is more common than Qutub, for sure). I liked part three of the book best, because it covers the years since 2001, the first of the popular histories to do so. For instance, he discusses the relatively successful though not foolproof Saudi “terrorist redemption techniques” pioneered by Prince Muhammad bin Nayif, who escaped serious injury at the hands of an al-Qaeda suicide bomber pretending to give himself up. Lacey pulls together reportage, new scholarship and lots of interviews to tell the story of the House of Saud’s defeat of the latest challenge to its rule.

One recent development in the kingdom since September 11 is related only in Lacey’s hidden notes in the back of the book. He has relied on studies underway or recently published by European and American researchers living and working in the kingdom in the last few years. They include Ménot but also David Commins, Thomas Hegghammer, Steffen Hertog, Toby Jones, Stéphane Lacroix and Guido Steinberg. Perhaps the Saudi oligarchy has finally figured out that what professors in the West write about them poses no threat.

All the new research makes Lacey’s book better (even as he ignores the critical edge of nearly all of it), and although the next monographs from Cornell and Harvard University Presses will not put a dent in his sales, they make it less likely that Inside the Kingdom will make it onto reading lists and into the bibliographies of works that matter to those taking up the study of Saudi Arabia ten or 20 years from now.
Yaron Peleg, Israeli Culture Between the Two Intifadas: A Brief Romance (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2008).

“The son of the head of the Mossad didn’t even know that he was the son of the head of the Mossad.” Thus begins a short story by Israeli author Etgar Keret, who bore the label “post-modern” among the Israeli literary circles of the 1990s. What follows is a tale that departs significantly from conventional Zionist storylines in its failure to venerate the state as personified in the figure of the father. Instead, Keret’s portrait of the vaunted intelligence agency tracks its corrupting influence in Israeli lives.

This critique of what Yaron Peleg terms the “grand Zionist story” lies at the core of Israeli Culture Between the Two Intifadas. Peleg provides a “literary map” of Israeli society and culture between 1987 and 2000, a period of profound change within Israel and in its relationship to its occupied territories. Focusing on close readings of literary works and popular media—particularly the writings of Keret, Gadi Taub, Uzi Weil and Gafi Amir—Peleg illustrates the ways Israeli literature of this period crafted a new Israeli voice at a considerable remove from “Jewish identity, Jewish nationality or Jewish history.” Richly evident in this book is the diversity of the “post-national” literary project—one that took shape not only in political critique (or conspicuous refusal thereof) but also in new literary styles, aesthetics and consumer desires.

Chapter two will appeal to readers interested in the Israeli cultural landscape. Here, Peleg examines Tel Aviv’s premier weekly paper Ha’ir, studying the challenge it posed to the mainstream Israeli media establishment through a pointed rejection of state affairs and the Arab-Israeli conflict in favor of both sensational news and the everyday consumer landscape of Tel Aviv. At the core of this chapter is a concern with Ha’ir’s coverage and cultivation of Israel’s growing consumer economy and “the ascendancy of a new bourgeois culture”—manifest in the cornucopia of restaurant and club reviews and the proliferation of mundane detail, the paper’s attention, in the words of one of its writers, to “the sesame seed on every bagel…[artisan] cheese rack after [homemade] pickle rack.” Peleg argues that the substance of Ha’ir’s post-nationalism lay in these seeming trivialities. After “years of strife and conflict,” the paper’s celebration of consumer practices forged an alternative to the dominant Israeli media agenda by allowing everyday pleasure to usurp the sacred place once occupied by the political.

The departure from the classic national agenda took a very different form in the work of Etgar Keret, treated in chapter three. Keret presented an Israel that was not merely politically irreverent but also “confusing, mean and hellish.” In close dialogue with the concurrent Israeli landscape, his writing mediated upon “the dissolution of civil society in Israel because of the Palestinian uprising,” even as it echoed the images and sounds of his generation through frequent recourse to military slang and English syntax. No Israeli sacred cow was left intact in Keret’s work. Service in the Israel Defense Forces was figured as an “amusing diversion” and Israel’s Holocaust memorial rituals, long sutured to the Zionist project, became the grounds for senseless Israeli violence.

But Israeli critique from 1987 to 2000 was also voiced in other terms. The remainder of chapter three and much of chapter four considers a body of literature and mass media that insistently retreats from politics, taking refuge in apathy, intimate interiors, romance and the everyday. Peleg suggests that an investment in the details of “lighting up a cigarette, making coffee, lying in bed” in writings of this period be understood as an effort to forge alternatives to a hegemonic Israeli literature circumscribed by the parameters of conventional politics and the national.

Peleg’s readings are careful and interesting. The text offers an important argument about the polyvalent nature of “post-nationalism” in Israeli literature and popular media—particularly so at moments when conflict and existential angst receded from the headlines. As such, it will be of tremendous interest to scholars interested in this crucial period in Israeli social and political history, bringing to light a domain of counter-nationalism that more traditional stories of the political tend to obscure. Yet what remains a bit less satisfying is Peleg’s relationship to the history that frames his study. As Peleg briefly notes, the literary landscape was closely linked with concurrent social and political processes within Israel—among them, accelerated economic development, the growing influence of the new Israeli historians and sociologists, and the political shifts that resulted from the 1993 Oslo accords. What remains relatively unexplored are the enormous shifts within the Israeli political scene during the years in question—the lurch, for example, from the Peres/Rabin administration’s dreams of a “new Middle East” to the ideology of “peace with security” under the subsequent Netanyahu administration—and how such changes altered the tenor, style or subject matter of the literary realm, particularly as pertains to efforts to think beyond classic Zionist paradigms.

Rather, the period tends to be treated as a singular and somewhat homogenous political field in ways that make it difficult to track the interplay between politics and literature with any precision. It should be noted that despite their appearance in the book’s title, the two Palestinian uprisings are of relatively little concern to Peleg, save their framing of a cultural moment internal to Jewish Israeli society. Peleg is chiefly interested in the vicissitudes of Israeliness that popular literature makes evident.

The literary landscape that Peleg documents had a relatively short life, truncated by the outbreak of the second intifada. After 2000, Israel returns to what Peleg terms the “siege mentality,” and Israeli literature follows suit. Many of the authors that Peleg chronicles stop writing at this juncture—at least temporarily. And what decisively changes is the collective investment in thinking beyond nationalist paradigms; instead, one witnesses a return to “the greater national story,” a phenomenon that intensifies after Israel’s 2006 war in Lebanon. As Peleg muses, it seems that “the time for a post-Zionist or a post-national age has not yet come.” Read from the vantage of the present, one wonders if it ever will.

—Rebecca L. Stein
Mohamed el-Sayed Said
Mohamed el-Sayed Said, a long-time contributing editor of this publication, died at the age of 59 on October 10, 2009. He was buried in his native Port Said. The intellectual elite of Egypt attended his funeral.

On a warm day in May 2005, Mohamed el-Sayed Said welcomed us into the dark, cool salon of his apartment in the Cairo district of Agouza. Speaking slowly, our friend reflected on the state of Egyptian politics days before a national referendum to amend the constitution. His demeanor was amiable but serious. We asked about “the incident” the previous January. In typically mellow tones, he retold the tale of how he had addressed President Husni Mubarak at the Cairo Book Fair.

As Mohamed taught many of us, the most meaningful phenomena defy social science’s crisp borders and partitions. The Book Fair fête-à-fête was no exception; Mohamed stood within both the “opposition” camp of Kitaya, the “Egyptian Movement for Change” that had burst onto the scene in 2004, and the intellectual “élite” that enjoyed an annual audience with Egypt’s chief executive. Had Mohamed maintained the forum’s normal diffidence toward Mubarak, the Book Fair gathering would have been unremarkable—another orchestrated occasion for the powerful to treat silence as paean. Instead, he stood up and implored the president to redress human rights violations in the Sinai, corruption in government ministries and the quotidian degradation of Egyptian citizens. Thanks to Mohamed’s intercession, the forum transformed from a ritualistic homage into a moment of exposure and forced introspection, whose effects were too potent for the president to ignore. As Mubarak received the cultural luminaries after the meeting, he leaned in close to Mohamed and said, “You’re an extremist.”

The president of Egypt was hardly the first person Mohamed had startled through his incisive and gently delivered critique. Whether writing or speaking, Mohamed prompted those friends and colleagues who received his attention to revisit their assumptions, see old problems in new perspectives and delve into literatures of which they previously had no clue. Trained in the discipline of political science at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, where he received his doctorate in 1983, Mohamed intuitively understood what today’s political scientists are still striving to grasp: the significance of transnational processes, the interplay of civil society and state in repressive conditions, and the vicissitudes of political liberalization.

Those who encountered Mohamed—whether at the Book Fair, his home, his office at the al-Ahram Center for Strategic Studies, or, briefly, in the buzzing den of the independent al-Badil newspaper—could not escape being illuminated, even warmed, by his mind and personality. Unpretentious but never reclusive, Mohamed touched countless people who now mourn his passing: the activists he communed with in Kitaya, the Arab students he guided in the CASA III program, the academics and journalists he advised, and the avid fans of his columns in al-Badil and the quasi-official al-Ahram.

Mohamed’s life epitomized the bold self-scrutiny and readiness to challenge power that MERIP champions. While vivid in recent memory, the establishment of al-Badil (in 2007), the exchange with Mubarak (2005) and the co-founding of Kitaya were late chapters in a four-decade commitment to social justice. From participating in the 1968 student demonstrations to going to jail in 1988 alongside protesting steel and iron workers, Mohamed believed in the ability of popular movements to advance human equality and dignity. His writings, which include over a half dozen monographs and collections, enabled a broad community of readers, most of whom would never join in social struggle, to grasp the meaning of those campaigns. Mohamed’s most fortunate legatees are the students, young and old, around the world, who will return to his work and example.

— Jason Brownlee and Joshua Stacher
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