



Water Scarcity and Political Stability in the Arab World: A Comparative Study of Iraq and Jordan

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ABSTRACT

The thesis examines the multi-dimensional interplay between water scarcity and political stability in two hydrologically and politically different states in the Arab world, namely Iraq and Jordan. Although the water crisis in Iraq is caused by the disintegration of governance during the post-conflict period, upstream hydro-hegemony and environmental deterioration, Jordan helms extensive hydrological stress through adaptive governance, external financial support, and progressive institutional amendments. Based on a qualitative comparative approach and an environmentally based orientation, which outlines theories of environmental security, hydro-hegemony, and state capacity, this research suggests that water is not merely a resource but rather a variable in politics, as it influences regime legitimacy, public trust, and national cohesion. Taking consideration on the case studies of Iraq and Jordan, the thesis illustrates the different ways in which governance systems alter the effects of water stress leading to a varying political result, i.e., mass mobilization and fragile regimes in Iraq and managed scarcity and relative political stability in Jordan. The paper concludes by giving policy recommendations that would be useful on consolidating institutional resilience, facilitating transparent governance, and improving water cooperation in the region

INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest challenges affecting the Arab world in the modern world is water scarcity. The region is mainly arid and semi-arid, and is therefore prone to low water resources. The Arab world, constituting of 22 countries stretching from Atlantic Ocean (in the west) to the Arabian Gulf (in the east), is a region that receives very little rainfall that is not regular; most of the areas receive less than 250 millimeters of rain annually. More than 85 percent of land is either desert or semi-desert and consequently the issue of water availability is always prevalent. There exists only a handful of major rivers, like the Nile, the Euphrates and the Tigris, which are necessary to sustain life and development as well; however, even they are receiving pressure owing to being overused, polluted and affected by interventions in their upstream. In most Arab countries, the amount of water available per capita is much below the world water scarcity threshold and the scenario is getting worse.

There are a number of interdependent factors that have resulted in the aggravating water scarcity in the Arab region. Climate change might be considered the most serious one because the increasing heat and altering rainfall patterns increase drought and decrease the already scarce supply of water. Continued population growth and high rates of urbanization have elevated domestic and industrial requirements of water and agricultural industries, the most inefficient users, take the largest share of the available water. The situation is further compromised by poor water management practices, which include over-pumping of ground water, ageing infrastructure, and a poor irrigation system. In the case of the Gulf region, a large number of Arab Countries depend on non-renewable groundwater and this creates a severe aquifer overdraft situation. Additionally, the geopolitics of shared water resource of the region have also been considered to be regional loci of contention as evidenced by the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance dam by Ethiopia that has triggered the alarm in both Egypt and Sudan.

The realities and the gravity of the seriousness of the problem can be revealed through country-specific examples. Egypt, to offer an example, depends on the Nile River to provide over 90 percent of all available freshwater in the country and at the same time, any decrease in the river flow jeopardizes its agriculture and water security. Jordan is among the most water-starved countries of the world that relies on trans-boundary waters shared with Syria and Israel and has very fast-decreasing aquifers. The same can be said of Iraq, where a combination of upstream damming by Turkey and Iran in the Tigris and Euphrates rivers as well as worsening drought and desertification has caused a severe reduction in the inflows to Iraq. The Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait depend heavily on desalination plants as a means to support their water needs. Although effective, desalination is not only energy-consuming, but also very costly on the environment. North African countries, including Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia have suffered because of irregular rainfall and inadequate infrastructure provision that has limited use and quality of surface water supplies.

The outcome of the water paucity are far-reaching and deep. The agricultural productivity has decreased around the region threatening food security and the livelihood of most people, especially the rural communities. Social and political tensions are also fueled due to water shortages as in some cases where water sources are shared, between nations as well as within nations. Accessibility to clean water and sanitation is very poor posing a threat to the health of the people leading to the high rate of water borne diseases. Water supply is also economically problematic, as such sectors as industry, tourism, and energy production are affected by the uncertainty and inadequacy of supply. Also, scarcity of water would further contribute to pre-existing inequalities, with rich folks in the city enjoying favors more than rural and poor people.

In the end, water scarcity in the Arab world is not only an ecological problem, but a multifaceted crisis that reaches all other spheres of life including security, health, development, and governance. The policies we have today must evolve to reflect the rapid increase in climate change and the growing population, and they must be more comprehensive, more cooperative, and future-oriented than ever before. Sustainability in water management is not only good development work, but it is also a matter of long-term peace and stability in the Arab region.

This paper discusses the relationship between water scarcity, structure of governance and public trust, and how the interactions determine the level of political stability. In Iraq, frequent water laws have played a role in inspiring citizen uprisings, undermining state authorities, and calling into question the tenuous nature of the post-war political system. Jordan, in contrast, provides the example of the survival in the demanding environment, when lack of resources is handled by the technocratic planning and diplomacy. These case studies echo the statement that water scarcity does not exclusively rely on the environmental or hydrological factors to exert a certain level of impact, but it is critical to political institutions and political capacity.

This study aims to unravel the multifaceted connection between water, governance and political stability through a comparative analysis of how two states that have different capacities, institutional arrangements and political histories address similar environmental issues. The analysis of these dynamics will help in an enhanced comprehension of the way ecological stressors are politicized and coped in the Arab world.

1.1 Problem Statement

The Arab World no longer concerns water scarcity as a problem of future but a immediate necessary to be addressed presently which directly affects the stability of the nations and its regional security. In Iraq, water mismanagement, damming of river systems by neighboring countries, and politicization of resources, have brought water to a head of mass protest and failure of governance. Jordan, on the other hand, has no such instability because of strategic planning, foreign aid, and coherence based on institutions. Nevertheless, both nations are under pressure because of the rising climate change as well as the population. The root cause is not the scarcity of physical water but governance

reaction to overcome the problem. In most incidences, the crisis has been worsened by weak institutions, corruption and lack of proper participation of the people.

1.2 Research Questions

1. How does water scarcity contribute to political instability in Iraq and Jordan?
2. What governance strategies have Iraq and Jordan employed to manage water scarcity, and how have these shaped political outcomes?
3. How do transboundary water politics and climate pressures intersect with domestic governance capacities in both countries?
4. What role do international actors play in shaping water governance and political stability in Iraq and Jordan?

1.3 Research Objectives

1. To map the scope and severity of water scarcity in Iraq and Jordan.
2. To analyze the relationship between water insecurity and political outcomes such as protests, legitimacy crises, and regime resilience.
3. To examine the governance mechanisms adopted by Iraq and Jordan in response to water scarcity.
4. To assess the influence of regional hydro-politics and international assistance on national water governance.
5. To offer evidence-based policy recommendations for sustainable and politically stabilizing water management.

1.4 Significance of the Study

Initially, this research bridges the two major domain: environmental science and political studies by discussing water scarcity as a major element in the regime stability and not just as a technical problem. It offers informative insights on how the lack of resources can encourage popular dissatisfaction, weaken the state legitimacy, and increase the prospect of conflict in fragile environments. To policy-makers, the results provide insights on how resilience can be created by reforming institutions, diplomacy in the region, and governance that is inclusive. To the scholars, the thesis is relevant on the expanding program of environmental security field with an intricate, comparative view based on real world politics. Finally, the research points to the imminence of Arab governments and international actors to take water insecurity seriously both as an environmental and political imperative.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The chapter examines the available literature and conceptual models that forms the basis of the interpretation of water scarcity and political stability. In the literature review, a collection of interdisciplinary studies is developed where environmental stress is linked to political dynamics, at least in regions of fragility and resource constrained areas, such as the Middle East.

In the context of the Middle East, the works on water scarcity present a comprehensive arena of interdisciplinary studies, where hydrological assessments, analyses in political science, development, and regional security studies are the dominant features of such works. Researchers and the actual practitioners have come to realize that the issue of water scarcity is not only

environmental and technical but also political and social. There is still debate as to whether water scarcity is a direct cause of armed conflict or a “threat multiplier” making other political, ethnic and socio-economic issues much worse.

Many scholarly works have been done regarding the implications of trans-boundary river basin conflicts especially that of Tigris upheaval and Jordan river basin issues and how the existing upstream-downstream power dynamics have influenced access to water. Some other key themes in the literature are the state capacity in terms of management of the scarce water resources, impact of climate change due to increase in rainfall variability and river flow, and the highly antagonized complexion of environmental degradation and lack of governance legitimacy. Some of the important works on political institutions as middlemen of access to water and scarcity have been done by scholars such as Selby (2005), Allan (2002), and Beaumont (1994).

The literature on water scarcity in Iraq had a bleak picture that was characterized by years of war, internal displacement, poor institutions, and foreign reliance. Researches decipher a history of negligence, infrastructural dilapidation, and political disintegration as some of the critical factors underlying the water insecurity in Iraq. The Turkish and Iranian upstream activities have severely decreased the water intakes into Iraq and the mismanagement, faulty water regulations, and rampant corruption has paralyzed the state’s powers to develop a working national water strategy and apply it. Examples of case studies include Basra water crisis (2018) that has been expounded widely with the aim of pointing out the overlap between environmental degradation and political destabilization.

On the other hand, the literature on Jordan has, though tentative, a brighter account. Regularly epitomizing, Jordan is one of the countries with the lowest water availability per capita in the world, which has led to a number of water saving innovations. Another strength of Jordan has been noted to be their capability to participate in international cooperation especially in relation to the cooperation with Israel as well as donor agencies such as the USAID. Academics have pointed out the technocratic, albeit relative, system of institutions sustaining the water management sector in Jordan since the country has fairly centralized and efficient institutions.

The differences in the literature are, however, comparative. Studies of the two countries (Iraq and Jordan) are quite numerous when treated separately, but they are scarce on how the two systems of governance result differently when faced with water stress. This ration indicates the necessity of more cross-country and integrative studies which take into consideration not only structural factors (geography, hydro-dependency) but political (institutional quality and public trust) ones as well. The paper fills this gap by carrying out an analysis of the political implications of water scarcity in two essentially different but regionally adjacent states.

2.1.1 Research Gaps

On the one hand, literature on this subject is enriched with theoretical discussions; on the other hand, empirical studies correlating water shortage and political stability of Arab states, particularly in a cross-country setting, are scarce. It is with an intention to take up this gap that this thesis seeks to use the relevant theories into practice; real life governance response in Iraq and Jordan.

Theoretical Framework

The present chapter lays out the theoretical background underlying this study. It combines a multidisciplinary body of theories to relate how the problem of water scarcity is connected to political institutions, the governance structure and social stability.

2.2.1 Hydro-Hegemony Framework

Developed by Zeitoun and Warner, the theory describes the nature of trans-boundary river power imbalance that allows the upstream states to have power over the water flows at the cost of downstream nations. It is imperative to highlight the fact that this framework is critical in examining how Iraq has been susceptible to the water manipulation policies of Turkey and Iran and how Jordan had to negotiate the shared waters with Israel.

2.2.2 State Capacity and Theory of Public Goods

According to this theory, a state has to deliver critical services to its citizens: water is one of these services. A state that does not effectively deliver water runs the risk of losing the trust of its people and consequently results in political instability. The theory is applied to explain the position of weak institutions in Iraq and the relative coherent governance in Jordan and how these two facts have intensified the water crisis in the first case and curbed violence in the latter.

2.2.3 Political Ecology

Political ecology examines ecological decision-making power relations. It showcases the inequality, the existence of societal classes in the water distribution and historical legacies. This approach is imperative to unblock the interaction and experiences of diverse populations within Iraq and Jordan; and how the state interventions to the issue may affect the diverse groups differently.

2.3 Synthesis

All these theoretical frameworks are integrated into the design of the research and the comparative analysis in subsequent chapters. The theories are operationalized using indicators that include institutions performance, transboundary cooperation, pattern of protests and regime legitimacy. The dynamics of water-politics in Iraq and Jordan are captured within the multi-dimensional context using the combined theoretical approach in the study.

METHODOLOGY

The research methodological approach of this study involves a qualitative comparative case study to examine the two countries: Iraq and Jordan in terms of relationships between water scarcity and political stability. These two countries are chosen with purpose, as they are of different hydrological situations, systems of governance and trend of political development. Iraq

presents how to handle water stress in a post-conflict, institutionally frail environment, whereas, Jordan acts as an example of how such an environment can be managed, with a good supply of resources, but on a politically stable environment.

This paper relies on a variety of sources of secondary research data to make the work triple-checked and multifaceted. These include:

1. Peer-reviewed academic literature related to hydro-politics, environmental leadership as well as Middle East politics that have undergone.
2. Reports and publications of international organizations like the World Bank, the agencies of the United Nations, and non-governmental organizations, which conducted activities in the region.
3. Policy documents (official), water strategies developed by a country, and government letters.
4. Journalistic investigations on the protests related to water, breakdown in the infrastructure and the reaction of the people are reported in the media.

The study will follow a chronological order within the time frame between 2010-2025 securing a critical period which include major historical political events such as Arab Spring, post- ISIS reemergence in Iraq and climate challenges of the region. This period enables the study to examine both the structural patterns of long-term evolution and certain points of abrupt, moments of crisis and reform.

This qualitative study is suitable since it allows understanding the causal processes, government reactions, and social or political implications in a more detailed manner that might not be obvious with a quantitative study. Although no fieldwork data has been collected because of the nature of access and safety, the study makes up in this respect through the painstaking synthesis of the extant sources of empirical evidence and policy analysis.

RESULT

This chapter provides an elaborate comparison of two countries, Iraq and Jordan, to unearth the crux of differences and similarities in the manner in which the two states are faced by the scarcity of water, as well as how they react to the water scarcity. This chapter summarizes the findings of this research by comparing governance structures, transboundary water politics, institutional performance, mass reaction, and international interaction to point to the factors influencing political stability or political fragility in circumstances of environmental pressure.

4.1 Governance and Institutional Capacity

Iraq's framework of governance is marked by fragmentation, politicization and endemic corruption. The ministries and local governments are constantly interfering with each other, and there is no coordination between the federal and the provincial levels. On the contrary, in Jordan, water governance is centralized and flexible. The Ministry of Water and Irrigation has its fair share of technical skills and a long term strategic planning horizon, supported by sound links with donor agencies.

4.2 Hydro-Political Context and Trans-boundary Dependencies

Iraq excessively relies on the inflows of water from the Tigris and Euphrates, which rise out of its territory. Both Turkey's Southeast Anatolia Project (GAP) and Iran's deviation have drastically lessened the freshwater supply in the country. Even in the face of such difficulties, there is no enforceable bilateral or multilateral water-sharing covenants in Iraq. On the other side, Jordan has also been dependent on the common water resources, especially the Yarmouk and the Jordan River, and have been able to achieve cooperation by engaging in diplomacy with Israel and other forces.

4.3 Public Trust and Citizen Response

In Iraq, protests have been rife against water crises especially in the southern parts. The Basra uprising (2018) was one such instance in which polluted water was used to mobilize people at large in response to the governmental slip-up. Jordan, on the other hand, does not have mass protests related to water as a source of discontent, despite the discontent among populations in areas impacted by poverty. The relative stability has played out due to government communication, efforts, transparency, and visible efforts in the democracy.

4.4 Donor Involvement and International Assistance

Jordan has been quite successful in its use of donor funding with foreign aid being incorporated into the national plans on water conservation, desalination and infrastructure. The weak institutions, corruption, and politicking have plagued the ability of Iraq to efficiently use resources, despite international aid.

4.5 Technological and Policy Adaptation

Jordan has adopted a diverse selection of technological measures such as waste water reuse, control of leakages and desalinization. Water Sector Capital Investment Plan and Red Sea-Dead Sea Project are two examples of national strategy of proactive response. Iraq has not established an overarching and comprehensive water strategy and still maintains water distribution channels through antiquated irrigation systems as well as inefficient mechanisms of supplying water to its urban areas.

4.6 Political Outcomes and Regime Stability

Water insecurity has varying political implications in the various countries. In Iraq, it increases already existing tensions, weakens the legitimacy of the government and creates state fragility. While in Jordan, water shortage has proved to be a means of reform and foreign cooperation that has strengthened regime legitimacy. This deviant pattern indicates the centrality of state ability, institutional agreement, and political resolution of the effect of environmental strain.

4.7 Comparative Summary Table

Table 1. Comparative Summary Table

Dimension	Iraq	Jordan
Governance Structure	Fragmented Politicized	Centralized and Technocratic
Institutional Effectiveness	Low	Moderate To High
Hydro Dependency	Very High (Turkey, and Iran)	High (Israel, and Yarmouk)
Public Response	Frequent Protests	Limited Dissent
International Support	Poorly Integrated	Strategically Utilized
Technological Adaptation	Minimal	Significant
Political Stability Outcome	Undermined	Reinforced

The comparative analysis indicates that although both Iraq and Jordan have the problem of acute water shortage, the consequence with reference to political occurrences vary considerably, since they differ in the institutional standing, policy of government, and foreign diplomacy. The case of Iraq demonstrates how ignoring water management can lead to unrest and the institutional breakdown due to water shortages. The harsher physical constraints, however, do not alter the fact that Jordan proves that it is possible to assess a resource crisis and convert it into a source of resilience through strategic planning and international involvement. Indeed, the main lesson is that water scarcity does not always lead to destabilization of states; it depends on their political and institutional environment.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This thesis has looked at case-study in two states of Middle East: Iraq and Jordan and the relevance of water scarcity and political stability in the two states in a comparative dimension. The two countries share a lot of similarities when it comes to water stress yet their stories are sharply contrasting in terms of governance systems, effectiveness of the institutions, diplo-politics of the region, and citizen trust. Cumulatively, the causes of the instability in Iraq are disintegrated governance, deficient water facilities, and hydro-political influences. On the contrary, Jordan shows that despite severe water scarcity, the goal of political stability is feasible by way of logical administration, international cooperation, and progressive water management policy setting.

The analysis confirms that the premise of water scarcity being inherently destabilizing is simply inaccurate; the real outcome evident in the political outcomes of water scarcity is deeply relative with respect to the institutional

ability of the state to respond, manage and adapt itself. Water as a source of power and legitimacy of states is the most important element of the regime-citizen relationship. These issues have been attracted by the difficulty of Iraq in controlling water, which sparks unrest and challenges of legitimacy of the state, and even positive examples, such as the Jordanian experience, which demonstrates how water can be controlled through managing through planning and trust.

5.2 Policy Recommendations

Based on the comparative findings, this thesis proposes the following policy recommendations:

1. **Enhance Institutional Coordination:** To curb the current level of fragmentation of water agencies in Iraq, there is an urgent need to beef up coordination between national, provincial and local agencies focusing on water. Jordan ought to persist with its centralised model of water governance even as improved transparency and accountability is embarked upon.
2. **Design Regional Water Diplomacy Processes:** Building regional water diplomacy protocols would benefit both nations in the form of equitable and binding agreements with their neighbors. The latter should focus on hydro-diplomacy and designing basin-level regimes and frameworks especially in Iraq.
3. **Water Infrastructure and Technology:** Iraq needs to invest in the rehabilitation of its broken and poor outdated irrigation systems and also invest in new technological water treating processes and desalination. Jordan ought to go on and broaden its innovative water conservation and water re-use initiatives.
4. **Leverage Foreign Assistance Strategically:** Foreign donors must become good governance change agents and not technical experts. Iraq shall require to develop stronger institutional absorptive capacity to implement external aid.
5. **Enhance Public Awareness/Community Involvement:** Both states should involve the public in terms of water conservation. Through participatory governance, it is possible to establish a higher level of trust between the citizens and create a feeling of collective obligation, which would limit the chances of water-related protests.
6. **Mainstreaming Climate Resilience into National Planning:** Iraq and Jordan have to integrate climate adaptation at the national level in planning. This will incorporate climate risk assessment, pre-control, and portions of adaptive infrastructure.

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