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SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

TITLE:

Turning water into politics: narratives, imaginaries and practices in the Middle East and North Africa

PROPONENT/s:

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ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):

Environmental questions are no longer a marginal topic in Middle East politics (Sowers & Lynch, 2022), gaining ground after as long as striking disconnect between ecological changes and continuities and the region's history, domestic politics, and international relations (Verhoeven, 2018). As an essential as precarious basic good in the region, water ranks high among environmental issues and is imbued with a substantial symbolic value.

The Middle East and North Africa region is the most water-stressed globally, whereby anthropogenic factors and geographical-climatic drivers affect water availability, quality and management.

Since the end of the Cold War, the water issue has often been analyzed through a security lens and portrayed as a potential trigger for conflicts or tensions, particularly among states with high water stress levels and sharing international water resources -e.g., lakes, transboundary rivers (Frey, 1993; Elhance, 1997). Remarkably, former UN General Secretary and previously Egypt's Deputy Foreign Minister, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, reportedly observed that the next war in the Middle East would have been fought over water, expressing concern over dwindling supplies. Popularization notwithstanding, the securitarian approach, which finds one of its main declinations in the 'water wars' focus, overlooks instances of cooperation and efforts towards multilateral or bilateral agreements between states (the Nile Basin Initiative, as an example). Additionally, this perspective tends to be state-centric, neglecting the domestic repercussions of water scarcity and its influence on state-society relations as a fundamental means of legitimation or de-legitimation.

Moving beyond a dystopian Malthusian-oriented perspective of water wars too simplistically connecting resource scarcity to violence and, more broadly, from a solely securitarian perspective, this panel is inspired by a political ecology approach (Verhoeven, 2018). It aims to unravel the political, economic and cultural dynamics around water at multiple levels of analysis, domestically, regionally and internationally. Turning water into politics means addressing water issue(s) from various dimensions and viewpoints, from governance to diplomacy to state-society relations, especially as opportunities for cooperation or instances of contention also within states, becoming focal points of social mobilizations, either as single-issue protest movements or as part of a broader basket of claims.

By connecting a site's ecological trajectories to its political and socioeconomic history, the panel thus welcomes in-depth single case studies or comparative accounts from different disciplines and interdisciplinary approaches to examine whether and to what extent practices and narratives around such a fundamental 'eco-political' issue travel across the region.

We invite theoretical and empirical contributions that examine

- water politics and policies;
- water diplomacy and hydro-politics approaches (see, e.g., Ohlsson, 1995);
- water narratives and imaginaries;
- water usage, infrastructure and management;

- water scarcity and insecurity, while challenging the straightforward nexus between resource scarcity and violence, provide a fresh framework for comprehending this phenomenon in the Middle East and North Africa.

The panel welcomes interdisciplinary approaches from political sciences, to area studies, and international relations.

References

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SHORT BIO OF PROPONENTS

Giulia Cimini is a Junior Assistant Professor at the Department of Political and Social Sciences, University of Bologna. Her research interests include political parties, environmental governance, and security assistance in the Middle East and North Africa. She authored *Political Parties in Post-Uprising Tunisia and Morocco* (Routledge 2023) and co-edited *Political Islam Inside-Out* (Routledge 2022). She published in the *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, *Contemporary Politics*, and *Middle Eastern Studies*. Between 2019 and 2023, Giulia was the Principal Investigator of the research project 'Security for Whom?' funded by the German Gerda Henkel Foundation. Currently, she coordinates the project 'Go Green: A Trans-Mediterranean Approach to Climate Change' with the International University of Rabat.

Giorgia Perletta - Postdoctoral research fellow at the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the University of Bologna. Her research interests focus on Iran's contemporary history, post-revolutionary factionalism and Iran's regional projection. She is Adjunct Lecturer in Geopolitics at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan and teaches two graduate courses on Iranian History and Water Security in the Middle East at the Master in Middle Eastern Studies at the Graduate School of Economics and International Relations (ASERI), Milan.

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