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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

CHAIRS:

Giulia Cimini (UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA) e Giorgia Perletta (UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA)

DISCUSSANT:

Giulia Cimini (UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA)

ABSTRACT:

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.

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SHORT BIO OF PROPONENTS

Giulia Cimini is 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 is 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.

EMAIL ADDRESSES:

giulia.cimini@unibo.it

giorgia.perletta@unibo.it

PANEL ABSTRACTS:

1) The Legacy of Ba'th Party Land and Water Management in Syria: Environmental Impact, Rural Society, and Soviet Influence (1960s-1980s)

Mauro Primavera, University of Padova

Due to its environmental characteristics, which lie halfway between a Mediterranean and semi-arid climate, Syria is considered one of the Middle Eastern countries most affected by climate change and global warming. Although these dynamics are intertwined with the current war scenario, it is undeniable that the Baathist regime, from a historical perspective, significantly contributed to endangering the rural environment by implementing a series of infrastructure projects and water policies throughout the second half of 20th century, with the aim to modernize the country and making it a key geopolitical player within the Arab region. This proposal intends to evaluate the impact of water and agrarian policies implemented by the Ba'th party and the Assad dynasty between the 1960s and the 1980s in terms of popular consensus, State propaganda and official ideology. In particular, the research will focus on three main fields of study. Firstly, it will examine the relationship between infrastructure projects and Hafez Assad's authoritarian rule; secondly, it will discuss the role of Pan-Arab and Socialist ideologies in shaping a new rural environment and society; thirdly, it will analyze the outcomes of agrarian and water policies in relation to cooperation with the Soviet Union, that is Syria's most relevant partner in terms of military, economic, and technical cooperation. The research will be based on official documents produced by the Syrian government and the Ba'th party, French Foreign Ministry archival documents, as well as Arab and Western academic literature.

2) Hassan Rouhani's Water Policies and its Socio-political Consequences: Analyzing the 2021 "water protests" in Iran

Giorgia Perletta, University of Bologna

Since the inception of the Islamic Republic, water planning has served as a tool for political maneuvering. Rather than addressing genuine needs and employing efficient strategies, investments in large-scale infrastructure projects have often been driven by political favoritism and dynamics. Consequently, the confluence of climate change, environmental degradation, and administrative mismanagement has precipitated water crises in various regions of Iran. Hassan Rouhani's presidential campaign in 2013 emphasized the urgency of addressing these water crises and advocated for reforms in water planning and management. Despite these promises, during his second term (2017-2021), the country witnessed numerous water-related protests, fueled by popular discontent stemming from both socio-political grievances and inadequate access to safe and sufficient water resources. This paper scrutinizes Hassan Rouhani's water policies across his two terms in office (2013-2021) and contextualizes Iran's water management within the backdrop of historical and contemporary challenges. Additionally, it explores the underlying causes, operational methods, and contextual nuances of the water protests, revealing how public dissatisfaction has been amplified by the mismanagement of water resources. Given the escalating issue of water scarcity, this topic holds significant relevance and demands comprehensive examination.

3) Amman, "City of Waters"

Odetta Pizzingrilli, The Renaissance Strategic Center (RSC)

The paper reflects on how the Amman spatial and environmental dynamics are integral to understanding the Jordanian self. Amman's character as the "City of Waters"—in reference to the abundance of water flowing in its known stream—has faded because of the municipal policy of covering the river in the 1960s, which gradually changed its ecological character. I will trace and explore the impact of this stream-coverage policy on the city's character, morphology, and land use changes. The purpose is to understand how an engineered problem-solving policy changed physical and perceptive factors and affected the city's character. I aim to explore the complex relationship between Amman's urban landscape and the formation of identity narratives. I will do so by focusing on two seminal works by the Jordanian activist and writer Hisham Bustani (Hishām al-Bustānī¹): Arā

al-ma'nā and An taktub al-madīna. 'Amman min almasāfa şifr,² through extracts from a conversation with the author, conducted in English in September 2022. Besides, I will include in the discussion Bustani and al-Khoury "Waking up to My Distorted City" (2023), that focuses on how the latest wave of urban transformation is dramatically changing the city's characteristics, impacting its identity and the authors' sense of place. Following the insights of Milstein and Castro-Sotomayor (2020), I explore the mutual constitution of sociocultural and ecological identities within the context of Jordan's "imagined community" and Amman's "imagined space." How do I maintain my identity while the world around me is constantly changing? Amman's history reveals a dynamic interplay of memory, space, and identity. Additionally, the city's integration into meta-narratives such as Arab Islam and its physical Islamization, along with the urban transformations discussed by Daher and Ababsa (2011), provides a multifaceted view of how urban and environmental changes, and especially the presence and absence of water, shape our understanding of self and place in an ever-evolving world (Bustani and al-Khoury 2023).

4) Riverine Histories: Water, Modernity and Environmental Imaginations in Modern Iraq

Rebecca Irvine, City University of New York

In March 1956, Baghdad suffered catastrophic floods, as water breached the Iraqi capital and destroyed tens of thousands of homes and agricultural land. Though this flood was worse than many in previous years, it was by no means a unique event. Similar crises hit Basra, Mosul and other cities due to high water levels in the Euphrates and Tigris rivers following winter rain further north. While they were severe short-term economic, health and environmental disasters, these floods also served as a reminder of the long-term need to manage Iraq's rivers. Indeed, from the late 1950s, various Iraqi governments accelerated investment in large scale water management programmes – such as barrages, dams and irrigation canals – in the name of flood control and environmental management, and with the overall aim of improving economic development. Beyond the economic dimensions, however, Iraqi water and irrigation engineers at the helm of the projects took an active role in not only managing the physical landscape, but conceptualizing their work within a long trajectory of Iraqi science, moving beyond the confines and colonial influence of mandate-era engineers. In their visions, the remaking of the Tigris and Euphrates was an expansive and far-reaching social, cultural and scientific endeavor.

5) Amazigh Tropicality: Afterlife of Saharan Oases of the Maghreb

Sarah DeMott, Harvard University

Saharan oases, perhaps more than any other imperial geography, belies tropical seduction through its allure of water. What has been written about the afterlife of tropicality has most often been written from the perspective of an Orientalist critique of Western influence. Tropicality has spiraled into a synonymous discourse of development geography on the one hand and what we might think of as a counterinsurgency or security geography on the other hand. Tropicality has spawned worlding concepts such as the developing world, mono-crop agricultural zones, and militarized interventions including strategic hamlets and population resettlement programs. This paper lays out a research agenda for the afterlife of tropicality from the perspective of contemporary semi-nomadic oasis settlements through water usage, irrigation, and date palm production. Date palms, southern Tunisia's cash crop, simultaneously exemplify colonial legacies and indigenous endurance through hydraulic practices of water distribution and resource management. In short, this paper considers the durée of Amazigh irrigation practices in the Maghrebin oasis from the perspective of the tropicalized.