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Review: "Negotiating International Water Rights: Resource Conflict in Turkey, Syria and Iraq" by Müşerref Yetim

Abstract

A review of *Negotiating International Water Rights: Resource Conflict in Turkey, Syria and Iraq* by Müşerref Yetim (2016).

Keywords

Water Rights, International Watercourse, Water Resources

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Review: *Negotiating International Water Rights: Resource Conflict in Turkey, Syria and Iraq*
By Müşerref Yetim
I.B. Taurus, London, 2016

As the twenty-first century stumbles forward, there is every possibility that the warnings about peak oil might have been overstated. The bourgeoisie is investing heavily in new alternative energy sources such as wind and solar, while at the same time relying on shale oil despite its harmful environmental impact. Whether this will allow capitalist production to move forward perpetually is open to question but it might in the long run be overshadowed by a much bigger challenge: peak water. Nations everywhere are contending with dwindling water sources that are necessary not only for capitalist production but biological reproduction as well. This is exacerbated by climate change that has produced drought conditions in much of the world, including California according to some scientists. But nowhere in the world has water become such a critical path for economic and biological sustainability than in the Middle East and North Africa, even to the point of helping to precipitate the civil war in Syria.

A recent and deeply informed book titled *Negotiating International Water Rights: Resource Conflict in Turkey, Syria and Iraq* by NYU professor Müşerref Yetim examines tensions between the three states over access to the waters of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers that flow across their borders from north to south. The study evaluates property rights as understood by contending political philosophies ranging from Hobbes to contemporary liberalism based on their applicability to a vexing problem, namely how a free-flowing resource like water can be shared equitably. The book concludes with a case study of the Euphrates-Tigris watercourse that does not leave room for optimism. Considering the intractable wars in the three countries, it would be almost Panglossian to think otherwise.

The phenomenon is referred to as an “international watercourse” in scholarly literature. The two rivers examined by Yetim are not the only example of such frequently troubled waters in the world today. The Mekong River flows through China's Yunnan Province, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Despite a treaty over equal access to its waters worked out by the various countries, Laos has taken the unilateral step of constructing the Xayaburi Dam that would have a devastating impact on fish life downstream from the dam as well as restricting the flow of water into agricultural areas to the south of Laos.

European philosophy of the 17th and 18th centuries wrestled with the problems of collective action over “the commons” as would be expected during the rise of the bourgeoisie. Contradictions between the property rights of the individual and that of society had to be adjudicated. Hobbes believed that the state had to impose order on a feral world, while Rousseau viewed cooperation as the more natural mode of social behavior. Hume also believed that cooperation was possible but only within limits. He conceived of two neighbors agreeing on a shared irrigation system but for thousands it was an impossible task. It was up to Adam Smith to see unregulated markets as the solution to conflict. Self-interest is the ultimate guarantee of a peaceful order.

But no philosopher from the early rise of capitalism would be able to conceptualize the magnitude of the problems faced by nation-states in the 20th century, when economic self-

interest pursued on a national level led to costly wars that left the contending parties in ruins. The problem of international watercourses would fall within the rubric of the “tragedy of the commons” that was analyzed by Garrett Hardin in his famous 1968 article. Hardin identified the “free rider” who would take advantage of any collective agreement to share a resource. Instead of self-interest acting as an “invisible hand”, it would instead tear apart society after the fashion of Hobbes’s “Leviathan”.

The search for collective solutions coincides with the formation of bodies such as the League of Nations and the United Nations whose power to provide the kind of supra-state regulation on behalf of peace and equitable development has fallen short of its stated goals. If a national government can establish laws that prevent free rider abuse of the commons, why can’t a world government resolve differences between Turkey, Syria and Iraq over how to share an international watercourse? This assumes, of course, that the UN has ever had the ability to settle any conflict that pits one powerful state or bloc of states against one another.

Liberal illusions die hard. Even after the 1928 Kellogg-Briand Pact promised an end to war, the same tensions that produced WWI would produce another world war. If individuals could maximize personal gain by exploiting the commons, why wouldn’t some nations make war in the expectation that to the victors belong the spoils?

For Yetim, the solution to seemingly intractable contradictions is a bargaining framework presented in chapter four. For the most part this consists of the affected parties negotiating with each other to share water resources on an equitable basis, something that works best when the power relationships between them is also on a near equal basis. In a region like the Middle East, there are long standing rivalries that are often tied to their roles as players in broader geopolitical conflicts.

Within such a conflict-laden setting, the presence of a hegemon can provide the stability can help mediate such conflicts like an impartial judge imposing a settlement on two plaintiffs in a civil case. Citing Hegemonic Stability Theory in the previous chapter and referring to Turkey as possibly playing such a role, Yetim discusses the role of hegemons in the past:

There are several cases of successful hegemonic state interventions in the history of Middle Eastern watercourse conflicts. The first water regime concerning the Nile waters, for example, was established under the auspices of Great Britain, which provided compensation packages, including technical assistance, for both Egypt and Sudan in the first half of the twentieth century. Later, in 1959, Egypt and Sudan signed an agreement with the assistance of the Soviet Union, which helped to build the Aswan Dam. Likewise, the Soviet Union also provided technical know-how and assistance to Syria for building the Tabqa dam when both Syria and Iraq were its client states in the Euphrates/Tigris Basin. The US has played a major role in establishing the current regime governing the Jordan watercourse. In the early 1950s, the US sent a special ambassador, Eric Johnston, to mediate the water conflict between the Arab states and Israel; the 1955 Johnston plan was a byproduct of this endeavor. Although, the Arab states did not ratify the Johnston plan for political reasons, they continued to adhere to the plans' water quotas.

Are such solutions possible today? The final chapter of *Negotiating International Rights* is a case study of bargaining for water rights between the three countries sharing the waters of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. Given the general retreat from its role as a hegemon, the USA would hardly be a guarantee of stability, especially with someone so averse to stability currently occupying the Oval Office. Furthermore, the sharp tensions between the USA and Russia over the 6-year long war in Syria make any initiative taken by the USA seem predicated on its own narrow interests as is also the case with Russia, another candidate for hegemonic stability.

Despite her espousal of hegemonic stability theory, Yetim cannot but help recognize that the Middle Eastern realities has a long history of defying both bargaining in good faith and a hegemonic intervention to impose an equitable solution.

In April 1975, Iraqi and Syria squared off against each other despite their shared Baathist ideology that theoretically would have drawn them together against the Kemalist power to their north. Yetim cites Patrick Seale, an authority on Syria:

If Damascus and Baghdad had not been so much at odds, they might perhaps have been able to resolve their longstanding dispute over the division of the Euphrates waters (...) Dam-building and irrigation projects in all three countries from the 1960s onwards caused a row to break out over the volume of water each was entitled to [...] The squabble over water rights grew into a vast bone of contention, not to be assuaged by mediation attempts, most notably Saudi efforts. From 1975 onwards the two countries began abusing each other over the airways — “fascist right-wing criminal” was standard invective — arresting each other’s sympathizers, moving troops threateningly to the border, setting off explosions in each other’s capitals.

Divisions between the two countries continued to deepen. Syria cut the water flow throughout 1974 and 1975, leading to the destruction of 70 percent of Iraq’s winter crops. Indeed, Damascus has seen fit to use water as a weapon in the current conflict with the rebels, often cutting off both water and food to a besieged area like East Aleppo. Despite attempts by the regime to blame the rebels for sabotaging water supplies to Damascus, the UN has concluded that it was indiscriminate bombing by the Syrian air force in Wadi Barada that led to water shortages.

Competition for Euphrates and Tigris water has reverberated in domestic politics, especially in Iraq and Turkey. Following the March 1975 Algiers Agreement between Iran and Iraq, Iraq began to step up suppression of the Kurdish movement in the north. This prompted Syria to undermine Saddam Hussein by reducing the Euphrates flow. In effect, the conflicts between states in the Middle East over strategic goals almost inevitably spills over into the conflicts over water.

In the concluding chapter, Yetim recognizes the intractable conflicts over water that are likely not resolvable if the three affected nations continue to operate as self-interested parties in the manner that drove Hobbes to theorize the need for an absolutist state and more recent theorists to conceive of a more benevolent hegemon to play a similar role:

States that are in conflict over high politics issues are often disinclined to cooperate over low politics issues. The existence of a protracted conflict among states could make the escalation of conflict less likely due to spillover fears, but could also create a status quo bias. Water issues cannot be readily isolated from other issues of ongoing conflict among states. Even if we leave aside the political impediments, ceteris paribus, it is not always possible to make one state better off without making the other one worse off, especially in international watercourses when it comes to the division of the resource. Aside from political circumstances, social, economic, technological, geographic, and environmental circumstances all play a role in determining the cost of delineating water rights by creating a gap between the social cost and benefits and the private costs and benefits of comprehensive water rights institutions.

In my own research on water use in Syria, it is not hard to make the connection between irrational resource allocation within the country and without. In a blog article (<https://louisproyect.org/2017/02/16/syria-water-and-the-fall-from-eden/>) prompted by the conflict over Wadi Barada, I investigated the relationship between recent droughts likely exacerbated by climate change, the termination of Baathist support to small farmers, and unwise use of irrigation methods that has led to an ongoing crisis that in the view of one scholar might lead to Damascus running dry before the decade is up.

I wrote:

Considering the terrible shape of Damascus's water today, a decrease of 220% in only four years is a forecast of certain doom. Even under the best of circumstances, such a prognosis requires drastic action and a transformation of the Syrian state that would not be guaranteed of success. We can conclude, however, that the Assad dynasty is the ruling class least capable of solving such problems. As the water department official Nizar put it, "Arab governments have no idea about long-term planning. They have no vision, no plan."

I would only add that the Turkish government must be seen in the same light. Despite the prevalence of market solutions in the Middle East, there is little hope for long-term viability if water resources are squandered. A total transformation of property relations is urgently needed even though the absence of an agency capable of carrying it out is lacking. As is the case everywhere in the world, the crisis of leadership in the working class is the central obstacle to the resolution of an environmental crisis that will only deepen under the current destructive neoliberal regime.