

Israeli and Jordanian Water Politics and Conflict: A Critique of Realist Theory

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The 1994 Israel-Jordan Treaty of Peace provides a clear challenge to the Realist theories of water as a scarce resource leading to a zero-sum game and ultimately, interstate conflict. A number of factors should have provoked conflict over water between Israel and Jordan. Instead, these two countries came to sign a viable peace treaty addressing substantive issues that included water allocation and distribution. This treaty is an appropriate case to critique the realist prediction of water scarcity and power calculations breeding interstate conflict. In this paper, I will critique the realist theory on two accounts. First, the importance of the historical precedent of cooperation between Israel and Jordan must be noted. Secondly, on whether water was the primary national interest, beyond all others, for the two countries. Indeed, water policy between the two countries could have been subject to other wider domestic and regional forces that affect the possibility for conflict or cooperation.

This paper will be organized as follows. It provides a background on water supply and its importance to Israel and Jordan. It then explains the realist theory for resource conflict and applies these arguments to the case of Israel and Jordan. Following this background, the paper moves onto the critiques. I will argue that despite conditions between Israel and Jordan supporting the realist argument for resource conflict, this narrow view negates wider historical patterns and political issues for the two countries, and subsequently reduces the explanatory value of the realist account.

The Water Situation in Jordan and Israel

The Jordan River basin comprising the Yarmouk and Jordan rivers is a small, but crucial source of water for Israel and Jordan. This basin provides between 1200-1800 million cubic meters (mcm) of water annually, or to put it in perspective, less than 2% of the total water flow from the Nile and 1% of the Congo.¹ That said, both states are dependent on the river basin, with the Jordan River providing 75% of Jordan's water supply and 60% of Israel's.² The agricultural sectors are the dominant consumers of water

resources for both countries. Of Jordan's total demand of 740 mcm, agriculture utilized 520 mcm or close to 70% of total demand in 1990. Similarly, agriculture consumed 1250 mcm of Israel's total demand of 2100-2200 mcm or close to 67% in the same year. Yet, renewable supplies failed to meet growing demand and both countries faced deficits in water supply. In 1990, Jordanian supply reached 720 mcm equating to a shortfall of 20 mcm; Israel faced a shortfall of 150 mcm with supply reaching 1950 mcm. It should be noted that although Israel faced greater deficits, Jordan experienced higher rates of population growth, greater variability in supply and had lower absolute supply and supply per capita. These water deficits contributed to the overexploitation of domestic sources by both sides with each exceeding the sustainable level by between 15%-20% and lowering water tables.³ However, the issues directly related to the allocation, quality, and management of water between Israel and Jordan were resolved in Article 6 and its annexes of the 1994 Peace Treaty.

Before the 1994 treaty, the most substantive example of Israeli-Jordanian conflict over water cooperation occurred with the American-negotiated Johnson Plan in 1953. The Johnson Plan derived from UNRWA's "Main Plan" established water allocation quotas for the countries in the Jordan Basin. The two states never officially signed the agreement. The plan failed as political factors impeded its success. Among the most salient was the official state-of-war existing between the two countries after the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. For Jordan to sign an agreement with Israel would signify officially recognizing Israeli statehood. The rise of the Pan-Arabist movement, following Nasser's assumption of power in Egypt the year before, further pressured this decision. Jordan would have considered its relationship with other Arab states compromised by signing the agreement. Moreover, suspicions that the United States used the Johnson Plan as a guise to gain Arab cooperation with Israel precluded cooperation on water issues.⁴ Israel and Jordan continued to tacitly follow the regulations outlined in the Johnson Plan with the help of American aid and other inducements. In the absence of an officially recognized agreement, there were disputes that

could be used by realists to link water issues to interstate conflict. One example is a chain of events linking a dispute over the 1963 Arab-led water diversion plan and the outbreak of the June 1967 War.⁵ Similarly, Jordanian troops mobilized along the shared border after accusing Israel of diverting water from the East Ghor Canal in 1979.⁶

The 1994 treaty between Israel and Jordan ended the forty-year long state-of-war between the two states. Yet, as shown in the previous paragraph, relations between the two countries were certainly less contentious than relations between Israel and its regional neighbors. The treaty addressed water issues in Article 6 with four key specifications: i) agreement on the need to develop and maintain new water sources to increase the quantity of water available; ii) to prevent contamination of water resources and protect water quality; iii) mutual assistance to prevent shortages through allocation and sharing during the winter and summer months; and iv) to establish a Joint Water Committee (JWC) to increase the flow of information and promote joint research and development between Jordan and Israel. This agreement was depicted as being derived from mutualism without asymmetrically benefitting one party and as a bilateral institutional framework on which to base other riparian reconciliation in the region.⁷

The Realist Argument

The realist argument begins with the premise that resources become securitized or a military aim when they come to define the power of a country. According to this argument, water can be treated in this way because it provides a source of economic and political strength for countries. Wolf argues that water as a resource shares its most “contentious characteristics” with other resources.⁸ Yet water unlike oil, has no clear substitutes and is difficult to redistribute, making it a valid concern in security calculations. Within this framework, water is an essential resource with many crosscutting influences that prompt states to maximize its use. Thus, when water reaches a point of relative scarcity and states reach a “water barrier,” conflict is likely to erupt between states competing over water resources.⁹

Authors give four distinct criteria for determining the likelihood of conflict over water.¹⁰ Firstly, the degree of water scarcity between the two countries and within each country can increase tensions. The root of this scarcity can be from environmental changes or technical and actual/perceived political issues called “blockages.” Political factors

are especially polemic because, while they increase scarcity, they can also raise perceptions of threat to national interest that can lead to conflict. Secondly, the nature of the interests involved for each state. This can include how states utilize water in their economies and politically, their shared dependence on a single water source and the extent of their shared interests. Thirdly, authors point out the relative riparian position of basin states or the geographic location of the state and access to the river.

Accordingly, upstream states have greater “riparian power” to control river flow than downstream states.¹¹ For Naff and Matson, this concept of riparian power can be linked to broader realist conceptions of internal and external state power and the ability of one state to project power to shape the actions of the other, such as through access to water. According to Gleick, a fourth criterion is the availability of alternative sources or technology to reduce scarcity, such as desalination, improved irrigation, water purification, or more efficient water use. As a general hypothesis, conflict potential is highest with increased scarcity (with few alternatives) with high water-related interests and similar relative riparian power between the two states.

Conflict between Israel and Jordan over Water?

Realists demonstrate that the prevailing conditions and power dynamics between Israel and Jordan before the 1994 peace agreement should have culminated in conflict. First, in terms of water supply, each state faced high water scarcity in relation to the size of the shared Jordan River basin and each country’s dependence on the river for water. Each state relied on inefficient, low quality domestic sources of water and these situations were greatly exacerbated by a series of droughts and crop failures between 1988 and 1993. Moreover, given the importance of water to agriculture, which is the principal industry in the Jordanian and Israeli economies, increased scarcity should breed competition and conflict over water. At the time, the increased scarcity was certainly exacerbated by population growth, development, climate change and hydroelectric dependence.¹² This point satisfies one criterion that determines the likelihood of conflict.

For both countries, other water-related enter into their political calculations. Beyond the immediate economic considerations on Israel’s national interest, agricultural activity figures prominently in Zionist ideology.

Water takes on a symbolic significance within this Israeli nationalist discourse due its use in agriculture.¹³ In addition, Wolf argues that water is crucial to Israel for strategic purposes. Water was a necessity for irrigation and hydropower in the establishment of Israeli towns and settlements. It took on strategic importance as Israel sought to develop and defend of borders and its peripheral areas.¹⁴ Water as a resource is thus intimately connected to Israeli national interest and power. For Jordan as well, water relates to two issues of primary concerns, sustainable development and political stability. Arguably, water does not take on the same strategic value for Jordan as Israel.

On the third point, Israel's geographic location as the "upstream" country puts it in a powerful position. Israel's greater riparian power gives it leverage against Jordan, as a "weaker", downstream country), enabling it to control the quantity and quality of the flow. That said, Jordan would likely perceive any disruption of flow or "blockage" by Israel as inflammatory.

There are few alternatives or substitutes for water in either country, which further increases the chances of armed conflict. Each country relies heavily on the Jordan River for the majority of its water resources and is forced to overexploit its own domestic resources to meet its needs. The possibility for improvements of desalinization or irrigation technology could potentially alleviate some of the burden, but are too high cost on the scale needed to be efficient.¹⁵ If we accept the realist hypothesis regarding water conflict, the Jordan-Israel case should have erupted into conflict. Yet, history reminds us that they instead cooperated to sign a peace treaty in 1994.

Resource Non-Conflict

Before critiquing the realist argument, it is important to understand an alternative argument that explains or can be used to predict non-conflict within the realist framework. Naff and Matson do not dismiss the possibility for cooperation, but instead suggest that if there are high shared interests between both countries--that is, if water is so essential in highly charged situations--it will not always culminate in conflict.¹⁶ Additionally, if a state's political or economic interests are perceived as "fostered" by other actors, participants will move towards non-conflict.¹⁷ One state must be the dominant actor in terms of relative interests, power and riparian position for this to occur. These explanations are inextricably linked to calculations of power in which water is an essential determi-

nant. According to the argument, Israel was the dominant power in the relationship where there was a high degree of shared interests between the two actors and this precluded conflict.

Naff and Matson's theory is valuable as it can be used to explain, within a realist framework, how two states can rest in non-conflict. Yet, I would argue that this theory remains weak because it assumes preeminence of riparian or water-related interests over other interests. Furthermore, it relies on power relations between the two countries as the key determinant of policy. This aspect of the theory comes into critical question as it negates the role and importance of the weaker state in affecting the situation. For example, after a closer study of the negotiation process, it emerges that it was in fact Jordan who pursued water cooperation and therefore, non-conflict. Haddadin, the senior negotiator for the Jordanian delegation during the peace process, highlights Jordan's insistence on addressing water issues, while Israel sought to focus more on electricity and environmental issues. Jordan had greater interests in increased water supply compared to Israel during this period, due to the water shortage and domestic/regional issues it faced.¹⁸ In this case, the weaker riparian power addressed water issues and shifted the relationship from one of possible conflict to non-conflict and cooperation.

The authors also highlight three determinants that can complicate moving from this state of conflict or non-conflict to cooperation over water disputes. These determinants include:

- 1) Water's cross-cutting nature and purposes in many different spheres;
- 2) Water being used as a weapon, a symbol and ideological tool domestically and internationally; and
- 3) Water's relationship to wider issues and conflicts (such as the Arab-Israeli conflict).¹⁹

Within the authors' framework, other issues limit cooperation between the two countries, rather than relative power. To the extent Naff and Matson address non-conflict, despite rising scarcity at the time, they argue it occurs due to rising Israeli riparian power vis-à-vis Jordan. Having considered how the realists address water related conflict, non-conflict and cooperation, I will now turn to critiquing the argument.

Critiques of Realism

Historical Perspectives

The first point of contention in the realist argument is its inability to explain the historical precedent of tacit cooperation between Israel and Jordan on issues of high and low politics, including water. Israel and Jordan were often called the “best of enemies” whereby, despite being in a formal state of war, they continued to maintain functional ties. Garfinkle notes that cooperative day-to-day relations have emerged from the needs of living in a small area with a shared border and multiple, overlapping interests.²⁰ Areas of cooperation include: agriculture, pest control, pollution control, intelligence, navigation, air traffic control, mining, banking and commerce, and scientific exchange on water conservation and allocation.

Specifically on water issues, we observe a largely cooperative relationship that serves the interests of both countries. As discussed previously, the Johnson Plan (1953) remained a tacit agreement between the two countries on water allocation between 1953 and 1967. The East Ghor Canal and National Carrier projects (1965) represent the clearest examples of cooperation where each country referenced the Johnson plan and the interests of the other in the construction of these projects.²¹ Furthermore, diplomatic meetings at high and low levels on water issues took place in 1970-71 and 1976. In 1985, the states established an agenda for future negotiations on issues such as administration of the West Bank, control over Jerusalem, settlement building in the West Bank, final status for the Palestinians and water administration. Contacts were mixed into the Gulf War Era as regional and domestic politics became the primary concern for both countries. Israel’s relative economic and military power and Jordan’s relative weakness bred a level of public hostility, suspicion and caution of threat between the two countries.²²

It is notable that from 1985 to 1993, when water scarcity rose and realists predicted a water conflict between Israel and Jordan, the states maintained functional ties and dialogue. Although the conditions at the time were ripe, the countries were not driven to conflict. This result is contrary to the realist prediction that high scarcity, high political and economic interests, and similar riparian power between the two countries would lead to such a conflict. Therefore, we can firstly critique the realist account on the basis that it overlooks previous repeated patterns of engagement between the countries when predicting con-

flict. Closer consideration of these patterns in the Jordanian/Israeli case reveals a longer history of tacit cooperation over a multitude of issues and interests, rather than a conflict over a single issue. Wolf supports this critique by arguing that water resources were not a factor in strategic, spatial, or territorial terms in any previous wars between Israel and Jordan, or in the context of the wider Arab-Israel Conflict.²³ This critique raises questions over whether water can be considered a primary interest for either country; I will now address this question at greater length.

Water in the Domestic/Regional Context

The realist argument posits that water scarcity will culminate in conflict driven by competition over the resource. In doing so, the realist argument elevates water to be a state’s primary interest and relegates other issues to lesser importance, such as regional security, regime stability and issues of domestic politics. I will instead argue that these issues are factors that are important drivers of policy in the place of water issues in some cases.

Realists posit that if cooperation occurs (because it is a primary interest) water will form the basis of a wider peace.²⁴ We can question the viability of the argument by considering the content of the peace treaty. The main body of the peace treaty addresses broader issues of normalization of political relations. Water issues were negotiated under Annex 6 with other issues of low politics. This is not to deny the importance of water as an issue, but it does raise questions over water’s relative importance as a national interest in relation to other issues. To resolve these questions we must consider domestic/regional events and interests, which affect water policy.

Jordan

It is widely argued that in the case of Jordan, the most prominent interest related to its domestic policy and policy vis-à-vis Israel was its treatment of the Palestinians. Between 1948 and 1988, uncertainty over Palestinian statehood and state responsibility of the Palestinians dominated Israeli/Jordanian relations. At the same time, prior to at least 1988, questions over who claimed sovereignty over the West Bank and ultimately, representation of the West Bank Palestinians, further deepened competition between the Jordanian Monarchy and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). In the Israel-Jordan-PLO triangle, Israel tended to support the Jordanian Monarchy. Israel’s own antagonistic relationship with the PLO drove

this policy. I would argue that the issue of the Palestinians superseded water issues in domestic politics and its importance to higher level Jordanian/Israeli diplomacy.

Palestinians or so-called “West Bank Jordanians” comprise over half of the Jordanian population. In the interest of regime stability, the Monarchy maintained (and continues to maintain) a steady balance between representing the interests of this group and favoring the East Bank Jordanians who form the core of regime support. This balance entailed on the one hand, claiming a degree of economic and political responsibility over the West Bank and its people, supporting Palestinian nationalism, and refusing formal negotiations and peace with Israel. While on the other hand, it entailed relying on low-level patronage and preferential parliamentary and economic laws to appease the “East-Bank Jordanians.”²⁵ A clear break in this policy occurred in 1988 when King Hussein renounced control over the West Bank. The monarchy introduced the policy in the hopes of promoting internal stability by insulating the monarchy from the Intifada uprising and establishing a new image of “Jordan for the Jordanians.”²⁶ Water can be linked to issues of economic prosperity, sustainable development, and internal stability, which are important concerns of the Monarchy. Yet, I would argue that internal political dynamics and their implications on regime stability to the Jordanian Monarchy were of greater concern and surpass water as a primary interest. The limited and tightly controlled political liberalization led by the monarchy that was taking place during the same period further supports this point.²⁷

Israel

To view water as the primary concern for conflict negates Israel’s wider security interests and domestic interests. Firstly, within Israeli nationalist (Zionist) discourse, water becomes connected with agriculture, taking on great symbolic value, and comes to be part of the wider drive for territorial expansion. Water as well becomes a tool for projecting internal and external state power to achieve aims connected to the wider conflict.²⁸ In this way, water takes on a greater significance as part of a wider agenda. For example, we can highlight Israeli policy towards the Palestinians with its deep domestic and regional significance as one that takes precedent over issues of water. Israel can limit Palestinian access to water to disrupt agricultural production or lower standards of living, while at the same time supplying a disproportionately high amount to Israelis.²⁹ It appears that it is water’s connec-

tion with this broader conflict that causes it be perceived as a primary interest.

It could be argued that Israel did not perceive water to be one of its primary interests in terms of its relations with Jordan because it had not reached its “water barrier.” For example, during the peace negotiations, energy and environmental interests were treated as equally important as water in Israel’s negotiating platform. This could be because Israel faced a lower relative scarcity of water compared to Jordan. As discussed previously, although Israel faced a higher absolute shortfall, it faced fewer pressures on this shortfall compared to Jordan. In addition, as an upstream country, Israel had greater control over the flow, quality and quantity of water resource compared to Jordan.

Lastly, Israel’s own interest in putting pressure on the PLO, as well as the combined Intifada leadership provided strong motivation for supporting the Jordanian Monarchy at the time. Garfinkle underlines the degree of coordination between Israel and Jordan during the Intifada period (1987-1992). These actions were taken to politically isolate and economically squeeze the Intifada leadership to weaken their efforts.³⁰ These activities took place during the same period as the realist predicted conflict between Israel and Jordan and show the importance of other interests in the relations between these two states.

Regional Forces

Authors highlight other regional forces that combined to increase Israeli and Jordanian receptiveness towards cooperation. It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully explain the significance of each event; however, it does allow us to appreciate the limits of the narrow realist view. Three systemic events are highlighted as significant: the end of the Cold War, the Gulf War and the signing of the Madrid and Oslo agreements.

Dolyatar and Gray argue that the end of Cold War affected regional politics by ending the competition between superpowers that previously polarized the region. In the new environment States could instead move toward multilateral negotiations.³¹ Garfinkle highlights the significance of Jordan’s support of Iraq during the Gulf War in increasing Israel’s perception of threat. Israel would come to reassess its relationship with Jordan due to this involvement.³² A belligerent Iraq and the possibility of a consolidated Palestinian State caused Israel to value the Jordanian rela-

tionship as a buffer against these threats.

Lastly, Lukacs emphasizes the importance of the Madrid agreement and Oslo Accord I & II accords in (partially) settling issues of boundaries, legal status and governance between the Israelis and Palestinians. This ultimately solved the question surrounding the Palestinians between Israel and Jordan. These events removed the taboo on Arab states of negotiating directly with Israel.³³ This taboo developed following the 1948 War and affected previous efforts such as the Johnson Plan, from seeing success. Jordan's position to that point was to support a full Israeli withdrawal and the formation of a Palestinian state. The formal agreements between Israel and the PLO "legitimized the idea" that separate peace with Israel was not "treason."³⁴

In addition, authors point to greater environmental awareness and a desire for sustainability within Israel and Jordan, as well as greater recognition of the economic benefits from cooperation, in explaining the lack of conflict.³⁵ Factors at the time such as a series of droughts and bad harvests and increased water scarcity were said to drive these ideological changes. These examples of regional forces affecting Israeli-Jordanian relations at the time highlight that water was not the primary interest between the two countries. Selby contends that water conflict and cooperation is not reducible to a set of universal assumptions and requires analysts to account for wider historical precedents, regional/domestic structures, struggles and forces.³⁶ Indeed, an analysis of the Jordanian/Israeli case supports this assertion.

Conclusion

I have presented the realist argument for resource conflict by applying it to the case of Israel and Jordan, but I ultimately questioned the viability of this theory. The realist argument presents four conditions that could increase the possibility of a water-related conflict. This theory was then applied to the case of Israel and Jordan. Although the theory predicted a water conflict, this did not happen. I argued that the realist account overlooks substantive issues that precluded conflict and contributed to cooperation in 1994 and that this weakens its explanatory power. Firstly, it overlooks the historical precedent of Israeli-Jordanian cooperation on issues of low and high politics. Secondly, it overstates the importance of water as the central interest in Israel and Jordan's foreign and domestic policies. In doing so, it negates the wider regional context affecting

the likelihood of conflict over water. Water issues must be placed within a wider context by recognizing historical, regional, domestic, symbolic and other forces and how they interact to promote conflict or cooperation on water. Further research on other riparian conflicts such as in the Tigris/Euphrates Basin between Iraq and Syria and Indus Basin between India and Pakistan should be pursued to further support or challenge this argument.

¹ Lowi, *Water and Power*, 1993.

² Lindholm, *Water and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 1995.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Stevens, *Jordan River Partition*, 1965.

⁵ Wolf, *Hydropolitics along the Jordan River*, 1995 p.51

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 56

⁷ Selby, *Power & Politics in the Middle East*, 2003.

⁸ Wolf, *Hydropolitics along the Jordan River*, 1995:89

⁹ Gleick, *Water and Conflict*, 1993: 90

¹⁰ Naff and Matson, *Water in the Middle East*, 1984 and Gleick, *Water and Conflict*, 1993.

¹¹ Naff and Matson, *Water in the Middle East*, 1984.

¹² Gleick, *Water and Conflict*, 1993.

¹³ Wolf, *Hydropolitics along the Jordan River*, 1995.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Frey and Naff, *Water: An Emerging Issue in the Middle East? 1985*

¹⁶ Naff and Matson, *Water in the Middle East*, 1984.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*: 72

¹⁸ Haddadin, *Water in the Middle East Peace Process*, 2002,

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Adam Garfinkle, *Israel and Jordan in the Shadow of War*, 1992.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Wolf, *Hydrostrategic Territory in the Jordan Basin*, 2000.

²⁴ Gleick *Water and Conflict*, 1993.

²⁵ Brand, *Palestinians and Jordanians: A Crisis of Identity*, 1995.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Robinson, *Defensive Democratization in Jordan*, 1998.

²⁸ Selby, *Power & Politics in the Middle East*, 2003.

²⁹ Selby, *Dressing up domination*, 2002

³⁰ Garfinkle, *Israel and Jordan in the Shadow of War*, 1992.

³¹ Dolatyar and Gray, *Water Politics in the Middle East*, 2000.

³² Garfinkle, *Israel and Jordan in the Shadow of War*, 1992.

³³ Lukacs, *Israel, Jordan and the Peace Process*, 1999: 187

³⁴ *Ibid.*: 196

³⁵ Dolatyar and Gray, *Water Politics in the Middle East*, 2000

³⁶ Selby, *Power & Politics in the Middle East*, 2003: 64.

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