9 Is not Water more Precious than Oil?

Water in the Middle East is as scarce and precious as oil is plentiful. The region is among the least blessed areas on earth with respect to the availability of water resources. Vast areas in the region are even bedevilled by hyperaridity.

The Middle East is not the only place where water crises and disputes exist, but it is the region in which the potential for conflict over water is at its most extreme. The disputes that divide the area over borders, religion and race today may pale into insignificance against the potential future conflicts over water. Water is so vital in this most volatile of the world’s troubled regions that it could be a force for peace, inducing old enemies to co-operate for the common good; but history shows that it is more likely to be a disruptive cause of conflict. Indeed, for those who possess water, it is usually a means of leverage and a way of projecting power; to those who lack adequate supplies, a prime concern of national security consists of increasing what is available. Those two concerns often collide.

Discrepancy in water availability in the Middle East is basically caused by the great variation in annual average precipitation which ranges from well below 100 millimetres (mm) in the Arabian desert and in lower Egypt to 2000–2500 mm along parts of the Turkish coasts of the Black Sea and the Caspian coastlands of Iran. Other areas with an average annual precipitation of more than 750 mm, a volume that can be described as abundant by Middle Eastern standards, are limited in extent and include the coasts of southern Turkey and the Levant, and the mountain zone running northwest – southeast from Lake Van in Turkey into the Zagros Mountains of Iran. Areas of moderate annual rainfall between 500 and 700 mm include most of Turkey, Lebanon – the only country in the region that lacks extensive arid areas – and most northern and western Iran.

The uneven distribution of precipitation over the land areas of the Middle East constitutes a major influence on the agricultural potential of various countries and on the distribution of cultivated land. There is also some correspondence between the rainfall map and that of population density – though with major anomalies where agriculture is supported by the irrigation of desert lands, as in the valleys of the Nile, Tigris and Euphrates rivers.
Middle Eastern populations, concentrated on coasts, riverbanks and oases, have learned over time to live with meagre water resources. They adapted their socioeconomics and their relations to the available water which, until recently, was sufficient to cover their demands. But as a result of population growth, urbanisation, higher standards of living, industrialisation and other activities as well as inefficiency (up to 50 per cent in some countries!) in urban water distribution networks due to poorly constructed, maintained and managed systems, which have all accelerated the exhaustion of available resources, the spectrum of water use has widened and the intensity of water needs increased.

But the principal cause of the rise in water use is national water policies. More than 80 per cent of water in the region is allocated to irrigated agriculture although the marginal value-added of water used in agriculture is low compared with that in the municipal or industrial sectors. Over-ambitious agricultural schemes continue to receive a high level of attention from governments fearing dependence on food imports and seeking – not to say dreaming of – food security in staple crops (like wheat in Saudi Arabia, 1 ton of which requires 2000 tons of water, and where agriculture – now aimed to meet the domestic demand and no longer oriented towards export – accounted for 90 per cent of water use in the late 1980s), or due to other security considerations. Some examples from actual sociopolitical life help to clarify the picture.

In the Southeastern Anatolia Development Project in Turkey, also called Great Anatolian Project (GAP), the integration of the Kurdish areas into the rest of the country is a prime concern, with the aim of making it difficult for the Kurdish Labour Party (PKK) or other radical groups to operate in the future. By offering greater prosperity to all, Ankara hopes to remove the water in which the separatist fish can swim. In Egypt, graduates and veterans of the 1973 Arab–Israeli war were given plots of reclaimed land designated for increased food crop cultivation despite their lack of farming expertise; more important than ensuring high production, the process aimed to remove potential dissidents, to relieve chronic unemployment and to transfer population away from the densely-populated areas in the Nile delta and valley. In Syria, priority has been given to irrigation in the Euphrates valley, though it might be better used elsewhere; but the valley is a major recruiting ground for the armed forces.

Most of the countries in the Middle East are at present using or overusing all their annual renewable water resources. If a minimum acceptable annual supply of 1000 cubic metres (cu m) per capita is taken as an indicator, only Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Oman, and Turkey had in 1992 an