The Growing Power of Water in Syria

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Brief Analysis

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Syria's economic and political stability have long been predicated on a grand bargain of water access. Since Hafez al-Assad seized power in 1970, the Syrian government has manipulated public access to water for political ends. The regime uses water to buy and maintain loyalty, intimidate opponents, and fracture insurgencies, all in an effort to suppress and control the populace. While water has always been politicized in Syria, access to drinking and irrigation water will become an ever more powerful tool of the Assad government as global climate change exacerbates water scarcity in the Mediterranean.

Water and Loyalty

The Assad family legitimated its rule partly by strategically providing benefits to the country's diverse population. In the semi-arid country, water was fundamental, and its infrastructure – wells and irrigation systems – was designed to reward loyalty. Access to water played a particularly large role in buying the loyalty of Sunni farmers in the country's north-eastern provinces. Since the beginning of his rule in 1970, Assad pursued agricultural self-sufficiency, winning the loyalty of rural farmers by propping up their livelihoods. The push for food independence was so aggressive that by the time Bashar al-Assad inherited power from his father in 2000, agriculture used almost 90 percent of the country's water. Irrigation systems expanded rapidly, covering 1.35 million hectares by 2010, from only 651,000 hectares just two and half decades prior. As a result, by the time the Arab Spring reached Syria, approximately 40 percent of the Syrians' livelihoods were connected to agriculture.

Access to water was also used in the Syrian government's vast patronage system, individually benefiting those loyal to the Assad Ba'athist government. A 2006 study by Ellie al-Hadj found that families with close ties to the regime, roughly indicated by their homes' proximity to Damascus, enjoyed greater freedom to dig independent, unregistered wells. Approximately 87% of water wells in the Damascus region were unlicensed, whereas across the rest of the country only 38 percent of wells were unlicensed. Additionally, legal requirements were more strictly enforced outside of the Damascus region. While 25% of illegal wells across the country were regularized by the government from 1998 to 2000, only 11 percent of illegal wells were regularized in the Damascus region during the same time period. Al-Hadj interprets these disparities to mean that the greater a family's loyalty to and connections within the regime, the greater that family's freedom to drill wells and access ground water.

Water in Conflict

Before Syria produced war refugees, it produced climate refugees, breaking the precarious bargain that brought stability for four decades. In the five years leading up to the civil war, Syria experienced one of the worst droughts on instrumental record. If water was a currency of loyalty, the Assad government soon found itself bankrupt. Water shortages killed upwards of 85 percent of livestock in eastern Syria, while average yield of basic crops fell by as much as 23 percent in irrigated areas and 79 percent in rain-fed areas. The resulting economic disruption impacted 1.3 million Syrians, destroyed the livelihoods of 800,000, and forced tens of thousands of rural Syrians to move to shantytowns on the outskirts of Damascus, Aleppo, and Hama. By 2009, UN agencies reported that 60-70 percent of villages in Hasakah Province and the Khabour Riverbed had been entirely deserted.

The effects of the drought were exacerbated by extensive corruption and mismanagement. In Jub Shaeer, outside of Raqqa, olive and citrus trees still grew on the estates of regime loyalists who had the privilege to maintain access to illegal wells, even as their neighbors fled the drought for the slums outside the western cities.

When protests escalated into armed conflict in late 2011, the Islamic State, rebel factions, and the Syrian regime all used water access as a military weapon. In early 2012, rebel forces seized control of the Ain al-Fijeh natural spring, the primary source of drinking water for many loyalist neighborhoods in Damascus. Over the next several years, rebels successfully deterred regime advances by threatening to cut water services to the capital. In July 2015, the rebel Wadi Barada Shura Council halted all water-services to Damascus in retaliation for the regime's attacks on Zabadani. A year later, rebel forces again cut off water to Damascus after regime forces seized the village of Harira in an effort to control alternative water sources in Basima and Efra. After drawn out negotiations and fighting, the regime eventually retook the water source in early 2017.

Similarly, the Syrian regime has deprived opposition-held areas of potable water and other essential goods in a brutal counter-insurgency method. By laying sieges and depriving the population in opposition-held areas of basic necessities like potable water, the regime intended to sap rebels' popular support. Additionally, the regime sought to maintain its monopoly on providing public services. In August 2017, the UN estimated that 540,000 civilians are living in besieged areas, without access to adequate food, water, and healthcare. In late 2016, before the fall of Aleppo, the number of besieged civilians stood at nearly one million.

Biased Reconstruction

Just as the regime predicated water access on loyalty before the war, it will likely continue to do so throughout reconstruction. Current academic discussions have begun to recognize that reconstruction will determine Syria's political dynamics for decades to come. Yezid Sayigh argues that unless the international community rethinks its development paradigm, reconstruction will only serve to further entrench those already in power. Additionally, Omer Karasapan warns that politicized reconstruction will reify the old ethnic, confessional, and class divisions already exacerbated by the civil war.

Local reporting indicates that the regime may already be slanting reconstruction towards its political goals. Kheder Khadour of the Carnegie Middle East Center explains that while the Syrian Foreign Ministry authorized 100 local NGOs in 2014 to work with the United Nations to implement reconstruction and humanitarian projects, all are controlled by regime sympathizers. Some analysts already suspect the regime of deliberately using reconstruction to engineer the country's demographic makeup and demolish opposition strongholds. For example, the regime has begun demolishing homes in the historically opposition-affiliated Damascus neighborhood of Basateen al-Razi to make way for new housing, shopping, and office complexes. Such discriminatory reconstruction practices will inevitably involve water infrastructure. Before the war, Syria had upwards of 260 water sector assets such as water towers and treatment facilities; by 2016, a quarter had been damaged. That estimate, however, does not include

damage to underground pipelines, which have likely sustained significantly greater damage.

Over the coming decades, water scarcity in the region will worsen due to climate change, increasing the Syrian regime's leverage over its people. Rainfall has been decreasing in the region for decades, while droughts are expected to become ever more common. In addition to long term drying, recent research, conducted as a part of NASA's ongoing efforts to model climate change, concludes that the drought is likely the region's worst dry spell in nine centuries.

While academics have correctly argued that the Syrian civil war cannot be solely attributed to climate change, it is clear that water will play a major role in determining state behavior for decades to come. Water has always been political in Syria, and water scarcity will continue to exacerbate political, economic, and social pressures within the region. Western policy makers must understand that water is becoming a major source of leverage in the Mediterranean and that it would be wise to work with regional governments to establish equitable, efficient, and sustainable water policies. ❖

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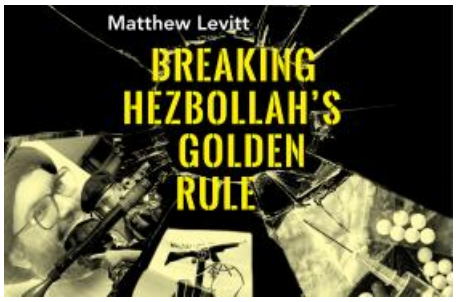

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