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# Where Oil and Water Do Mix: Environmental Scarcity and Future Conflict in the Middle East and North Africa

JASON J. MORRISSETTE and DOUGLAS A. BORER

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“Many of the wars of the 20th century were about oil, but wars of the 21st century will be over water.”

— Isamil Serageldin  
World Bank Vice President

In the eyes of a future observer, what will characterize the political landscape of the Middle East and North Africa? Will the future mirror the past or, as suggested by the quote above, are significant changes on the horizon? In the past, struggles over territory, ideology, colonialism, nationalism, religion, and oil have defined the region. While it is clear that many of those sources of conflict remain salient today, future war in the Middle East and North Africa also will be increasingly influenced by economic and demographic trends that do not bode well for the region. By 2025, world population is projected to reach eight billion.<sup>1</sup> As a global figure, this number is troubling enough; however, over 90 percent of the projected growth will take place in developing countries in which the vast majority of the population is dependent on local renewable resources. For instance, World Bank estimates place the present annual growth rate in the Middle East and North Africa at 1.9 percent versus a worldwide average of 1.4 percent.<sup>2</sup> In most of these countries, these precious renewable resources are controlled by small segments of the domestic political elite, leaving less and less to the majority of the population.

As a result, if present population and economic trends continue, we project that many future conflicts throughout the region will be directly linked to what academic researchers term “environmental scarcity”<sup>3</sup>—the scarcity of renewable resources such as arable land, forests, and fresh water.

The purpose of this article is twofold. In the first section, we conceptualize how environmental scarcity is linked to domestic political unrest and the subsequent crisis of domestic political legitimacy that may ultimately result in conflict. We review the academic literature which suggests that competition over water is the key environmental variable that will play an increasing role in future domestic challenges to governments throughout the region. We then describe how these crises of domestic political legitimacy may result in both intrastate and interstate conflict. Even though the Middle East can generally be characterized as an arid climate, two great river systems, the Nile and the Tigris/Euphrates, serve to anchor the major population centers in the region. Conflict over the water of the Nile may someday come to pass between Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia; while Turkey, Syria, and Iraq all are located along the Tigris/Euphrates watershed and compete for its resources. Further conflict over water may embroil Israel, Syria, and the Palestinians.

Despite many existing predictions of war over water, we investigate the intriguing question: How have governments in the Middle East thus far avoided conflict over dwindling water supplies? In the second section of the article, we discuss the concept of “virtual water” and use this concept to illustrate the important linkages between water usage and the global economy, showing how existing tangible water shortages have been ameliorated by a combination of economic factors, which may or may not be sustainable into the future.

### ***Environmental Scarcity and Conflict: An Overview***

Mostafa Dolatyar and Tim Gray identify water resources as “the principal challenge for humanity from the early days of civilization.”<sup>4</sup> The 1998 United Nations Development Report estimates that almost a third of the 4.4 billion people currently living in the developing world have no access to

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clean water. The report goes on to note that the world's population tripled in the 20th century, resulting in a corresponding sixfold increase in the use of water resources. Moreover, infrastructure problems related to water supply abound in much of the developing world; the United Nations estimates that between 30 and 50 percent of the water presently diverted for irrigation purposes is lost through leaking pipes alone. In turn, roughly 20 countries in the developing world presently suffer from water stress (defined as having less than 1,000 cubic meters of available freshwater per capita), and 25 more are expected to join that list by 2050.<sup>5</sup> In response to these trends, the United Nations resolved in 2002 to reduce by half the proportion of people in the developing world who are unable to reach—or afford—safe drinking water.

In turn, numerous scholars in recent years have conceptualized water in security terms as a key strategic resource in many regions of the world. Thomas Naff maintains that water scarcity holds significant potential for conflict in large part because it is fundamentally essential to life. Naff identifies six basic characteristics that distinguish water as a vital and potentially contentious resource. (1) Water is necessary for sustaining life and has no substitute for human or animal use. (2) Both in terms of domestic and international policy, water issues are typically addressed by policymakers in a piecemeal fashion rather than comprehensively. (3) Since countries typically feel compelled by security concerns to control the ground on or under which water flows, by its nature, water is also a terrain security issue. (4) Water issues are frequently perceived as zero-sum, as actors compete for the same limited water resources. (5) As a result of the competition for these limited resources, water presents a constant potential for conflict. (6) International law concerning water resources remains relatively “rudimentary” and “ineffectual.”<sup>6</sup> As these factors suggest, water is a particularly volatile strategic issue, especially when it is in severe shortage.

Arguing that environmental concerns have gained prominence in the post-Cold War era, Alwyn R. Rouyer establishes a basic paradigm of contemporary environmental conflict. Rouyer argues that “rapid population growth, particularly in the developing world, is putting severe stress on the earth's physical environment and thus creating a growing scarcity of renewable resources, including water, which in turn is precipitating violent civil and international conflict that will escalate in severity as scarcity increases.”<sup>7</sup> Rouyer goes on to assert that this potential conflict over scarce resources will likely be most disruptive in states with rapidly expanding populations in which policymakers lack the political and economic capability to minimize environmental damage.

Security concerns linked fundamentally to environmental scarcity are far from a contrivance of the post-Cold War era, however. Ulrich Küffner

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***“Almost a third of the 4.4 billion people currently living in the developing world have no access to clean water.”***

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asserts that conflicts over water “have occurred between many countries in all climatic regions, but between countries in arid regions they appear to be unavoidable. Claims over water have led to serious tensions, to threats and counter threats, to hostilities, border clashes, and invasions.”<sup>8</sup> Moreover, as Miriam Lowi notes, “Well before the emergence of the nation-state, the arbitrary political division of a unitary river basin . . . led to problems regarding the interests of the states and/or communities located within the basin and the manner in which conflicting interests should be resolved.”<sup>9</sup> Lowi fundamentally frames the issue of water scarcity in terms of a dilemma of collective action and failed cooperation—the archetypal “Tragedy of the Common”—in which communal resources are abused by the greediness of individuals. In many regions of the world, the international agreements and coordinating institutions necessary to lower the likelihood of conflict over water are either inadequate or altogether nonexistent.<sup>10</sup>

Thomas Homer-Dixon argues that the environmental resource scarcity that potentially results in conflict, including water scarcity, fundamentally derives from one of three sources. The first, *supply-induced scarcity*, is caused when a resource is either degraded (for example, when cropland becomes unproductive due to overuse) or depleted (for example, when cropland is converted into suburban housing). Throughout most of the Middle East and North Africa countries, both environmental and resource degradation and depletion are of relevant concern. For instance, many of these countries face significant decreases in the agricultural productivity of their arable soil as a result of ongoing trends of desertification, soil erosion, and pollution. This problem is coupled with the continued loss of croplands to urbanization, as rural dwellers move to cities in search of employment and opportunity. The second source of environmental scarcity, *demand-induced scarcity*, is caused by either an increase in per-capita consumption or by simple population growth. If the supply remains constant, and demand increases by existing users consuming more, or more users each consuming the same amount, eventually scarcity will result as demand overtakes supply. The third type of environmental scarcity is known as *structural scarcity*, a phenomenon that

results when resource supplies are unequally distributed. In this case the “haves” in any given society generally control and consume an inordinate amount of the existing supply, which results in the more numerous “have-nots” experiencing the scarcity.<sup>11</sup>

These three sources of scarcity routinely overlap and interact in two common patterns: “resource capture” and ecological marginalization. Resource capture occurs when both demand-induced and supply-induced scarcities interact to produce structural scarcity. In this pattern, powerful groups within society foresee future shortages and act to ensure the protection of their vested interests by using their control of state structures to capture control of a valuable resource. An example of this pattern occurred in Mauritania (one of Algeria’s neighbors) in the 1970s and 1980s when the countries bordering the Senegal River built a series of dams to boost agricultural production. As a result of the new dams, the value of land adjacent to the river rapidly increased—an economic development that motivated Mauritanian Moors to abandon their traditional vocation as cattle grazers located in the arid land in the north and, instead, to migrate south onto lands next to the river. However, black Mauritians already occupied the land on the river’s edge. As a result, the Moorish political elite that controlled the Mauritanian government re-wrote the legislation on citizenship and land rights to effectively block black Mauritians from land ownership. By declaring blacks as non-citizens, the Islamic Moors managed to capture the land through nominally legal (structural) means. As a result, high levels of violence later arose between Mauritania and Senegal, where hundreds of thousands of the black Mauritians had become refugees after being driven from their land.<sup>12</sup>

The second pattern, ecological marginalization, occurs when demand-induced and structural scarcities interact in a way that results in supply-induced scarcity. An example of this pattern comes from the Philippines, a country whose agricultural lands traditionally have been controlled by a small group of dominant landowners who, prior to the election of former President Estrada, have controlled Filipino politics since colonial times. Population growth in the 1960s and 1970s forced many poor peasants to settle in the marginal soils of the upland interior. This more mountainous land could not sustain the lowland slash-and-burn farming practices that they brought with them. As a result, the Philippines suffered serious ecological damage in the form of water pollution, soil erosion, landslides, and changes in the hydrological cycle that led to further hardship for the peasantry as the land’s capacity shrunk. As a result of their economic marginalization, many upland peasants became increasingly susceptible to the revolutionary rhetoric promoted by the communist-led New People’s Army, or they supported the “People Power” movement that ousted US-backed Ferdinand Marcos from power in 1986.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, as shown in the Philippines, social pressures created by environmental scarcity can have a direct influence on the ruling legitimacy of the state, and may cause state power to crumble. Indeed, reductions in agricultural and economic production can produce objective socio-economic hardship; however, deprivation does not necessarily produce grievances against the government that result in serious domestic unrest or rebellion. One can look at the relative stability in famine-stricken North Korea as a poignant example of a polity whose citizens have suffered widespread physical deprivation under policies of the existing regime, but who are unwilling or unable to risk their lives to challenge the state.

This phenomenon is partly explained by conflict theorists who argue that individuals and groups have feelings of “relative deprivation” when they perceive a gap between what they believe they deserve and what in reality they actually have achieved.<sup>14</sup> In other words, can a government meet the expectations of the masses enough to avoid conflict? For example, in North Korea—a regime that tightly controls the information that its people receive—many people understand that they are suffering, but they may not know precisely how much they are suffering relative to others, such as their brethren in the South. The North Korean government indoctrinates its people to expect little other than hardship, which in turn it blames on outside enemies of the state. Thus, the people of North Korea have very low expectations, which their government has been able to meet. More important, then, is the question of whom do the people perceive as being responsible for their plight? If the answer is the people’s own government—whether as a result of supply-induced, demand-induced, or structural resource scarcity—then social discord and rebellion are more likely to result in intrastate conflict, as citizens challenge the ruling legitimacy of the state itself. If the answer is someone else’s government, then interstate conflict may result.

On numerous occasions, history has shown that governments whose people are suffering can remain in power for long periods of time by pointing to external sources for the people’s hardship.<sup>15</sup> As noted above regarding political legitimacy, perception is politically more important than any standard of objective truth.<sup>16</sup> When faced with a crisis of legitimacy derived from environmental resource scarcity, any political regime essentially has a choice of two options in dealing with the situation. The regime may choose temporarily not to respond to looming challenges to its authority because water-induced stress may in fact pass when sufficient heavy rainfall occurs. However, most regimes in the Middle East and North Africa have sought more proactive ways to ensure their survival. Indeed, a people might forgive its government for one drought, but if governmental action is not taken, a subsequent drought-induced crisis of legitimacy could result in significant social upheaval by an unforgiving pub-



lic. Furthermore, if the government itself is perceived to be the direct source of the scarcity—through structural arrangements, resource capture, or other means—these trends of social unrest are likely to be exacerbated. Thus, in order to survive, most states have developed policies to increase their water supplies and to address issues of environmental scarcity. The problem with doing so throughout most of the Middle East and North Africa, however, is that increasing supply in one state often creates environmental scarcity problems in another. If Turkey builds dams, Iraq and Syria are vulnerable; if Ethiopia or the Sudan builds dams, Egypt feels threatened. Thus far, interstate water problems leading to war have been avoided due to the economic interplay between oil wealth and the importation of “virtual water,” which will be discussed at greater length below.

As noted above, resource scarcity issues centered on water are particularly prominent in the Middle East and North Africa. Ewan Anderson notes that resource geopolitics in the Middle East “has long been dominated by one liquid—oil. However, another liquid, water, is now recognized as the fundamental political weapon in the region.”<sup>17</sup> Ecologically speaking, water scarcity in the Middle East and North Africa results from four primary causes: fundamentally dry climatic conditions, drought, desiccation (the degradation of land due to the drying up of the soil), and water stress (the low availability of water resulting from a growing population).<sup>18</sup> These resource scarcity problems are exacerbated in the Middle East by such factors as poor water quality and inadequate—and, at times, purposefully discriminatory—resource planning. As a result of these ecological and political trends, Nurit Kliot states, “water, not oil, threatens the renewal of military conflicts and social and economic disruptions” in the Middle East.<sup>19</sup> In the case of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Alwyn Rouyer suggests that “water has become inseparable from land, ideology, and religious prophecy.”<sup>20</sup> Martin Sherman echoes these sentiments in the following passage, describing specifically the Arab-Israeli conflict:

In recent years, particularly since the late 1980s, water has become increasingly dominant as a bone of contention between the two sides. More than one Arab leader, including those considered to be among the most moderate, such as King Hussein of Jordan and former UN Secretary General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali of Egypt, have warned explicitly that water is the issue most likely to become the cause of a future Israeli-Arab war.<sup>21</sup>

While Jochen Renger contends that a conflict waged explicitly over water may not lie on the immediate horizon, he notes that “it is likely that water might be used as leverage during a conflict.”<sup>22</sup> As a result of such geopolitical trends, managing these water resources in the Middle East and North Africa—



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especially when it is in severe shortage.”***

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and, in turn, managing the conflict over these resources—should be considered a primary concern of both scholars and policymakers.

***Keeping the Peace: The Importance of Virtual Water***

The warning signals that war over water may replace war over oil and other traditional sources of conflict are very real in recent history. Yet, for more than 25 years, despite increasing demand, water has not been the primary cause of war in the Middle East and North Africa. The scenarios outlined in the section above have yet to fully address the fundamental questions of why and how governments in the region have thus far avoided major interstate conflict over water. In order to understand the likelihood of war, we must address the foundation of the past peace, testing whether or not this foundation remains strong for the foreseeable future. How have the governments of the region been able to avoid the apparently inevitable consequences of conflict that derive from the interlinked problems of water deficits, population growth, and weak economic performance? In this section of the article, we turn our attention to the important linkages between water usage and the global economy, showing how existing water shortages have been ameliorated by a combination of economic factors.

To understand the politics of water in the Middle East and North Africa, one must first look at the region’s most fungible resource: oil. For much of the post-World War II era, the growing need for oil to fuel economic growth has served as the dominant motivating factor in US security policy in the Middle East. Conventional wisdom in the United States holds that US dependency on Middle Eastern oil is a strategic weakness. Indeed, the specter of a regional hegemonic power that controls the oil and that is also hostile to the United States strikes fear into the hearts of policymakers in Washington. Thus, for roughly the past 50 years, the United States has sought to prop up “moderate” (meaning pro-US) regimes while denying hegemony to “radical” (meaning anti-US) regimes.<sup>23</sup> However, we contend that both policymakers and the public at large in the United States generally misunderstand the politics of oil as they relate to water in the Middle East.

In absolute terms, problems arising from US vulnerability to foreign oil are basically true—it would be better to be free of dependency on oil from any foreign source than to be dependent. However, the other side of the equation is often forgotten: oil-producing states are dependent on the United States and other major oil importers for their economic livelihood. More bluntly put, oil-exporting states are dependent on the influx of dollars, euros, and yen to purchase goods, services, and commodities that they lack. Thus, oil-producing countries in the Middle East and North Africa, few of whom have managed to successfully diversify their economies beyond the petroleum sector, exist in an interdependent world economy. The world depends on their oil, and they depend on the world's goods and services—including that most valuable life-sustaining resource, water.

On the surface, this perhaps seems to be a contentious claim. Outgoing oil tankers do not return with freshwater used to grow crops, and Middle East countries do not rely on the importation of bottled water for their daily consumption needs. However, according to hydrologists, each individual needs approximately 100 cubic meters of water each year for personal needs, and an additional 1,000 cubic meters are required to grow the food that person consumes. Thus, every person alive requires approximately 1,100 cubic meters of water every year. In 1970, the water needs of most Middle Eastern and North African countries could be met from sources within the region. During the colonial and early post-colonial eras, regional governments and their engineers had effectively managed supply to deliver new water to meet the requirements of the growing urban populations, industrial requirements, agricultural needs, and other demand-induced factors. What is clear is that in the past 30 years, the status of the region's water resources has significantly worsened as populations have increased (an example of demand-induced scarcity). Since the mid-1970s, most countries have been able to supply daily consumption and industrial needs; however, as indicated in Figure 1, the approximate 1,000 cubic meters of water per capita that is required for self-sufficient agricultural production represents a seemingly impossible challenge for some Middle Eastern and North African economies.

Simply put, many countries of the region cannot presently meet the irrigation requirements needed to feed their own growing populations.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, for those countries that have sufficient resources to meet this need in aggregate (such as Syria), resource capture and structural distribution problems keep water out of the hands of many citizens. If this situation has been deteriorating for nearly three decades, the question remains: Why has there been no war over water? The answer, according to Tony Allen, lies in an extremely important hidden source of water, which he describes as “virtual water.”<sup>25</sup> Virtual water is the water contained in the food that the region im-

Country	Total Water Resources per Capita (cubic meters) in 2000	Percent of Population with Access to Adequate, Improved Water Source, 2000	GDP per Capita, 2000 Estimate
Algeria	477	94%	\$5,500
Egypt	930	95%	\$3,600
Iran	2,040	95%	\$6,300
Iraq	1,544	85%	\$2,500
Israel	180	99%	\$18,900
Jordan	148	96%	\$3,500
Kuwait	0	100%	\$15,000
Lebanon	1,124	100%	\$5,000
Libya	148	72%	\$8,900
Morocco	1,062	82%	\$3,500
Oman	426	39%	\$7,700
Qatar	–	100%	\$20,300
Saudi Arabia	119	95%	\$10,500
Sudan	5,312	–	\$1,000
Syria	2,845	80%	\$3,100
Tunisia	434	–	\$6,500
Turkey	3,162	83%	\$6,800
Yemen	241	69%	\$820

Sources: World Bank Development Indicators, Country-at-a-Glance Tables, Freshwater Resources, and *CIA World Factbook*, at <http://www.worldbank.org> and <http://www.cia.gov>.

Figure 1. Water Resources and Economics in the Middle East and North Africa.

ports—from the United States, Australia, Argentina, New Zealand, the countries of the European Union, and other major food-exporting countries. If each person of the world consumes food that requires 1,000 cubic meters of water to grow, plus 100 additional cubic meters for drinking, hygiene, and industrial production, it is still possible that any country that cannot supply the water to produce food may have sufficient water to meet its needs—if it has the economic capacity to buy, or the political capacity to beg, the remaining virtual water in the form of imported food.

According to Allen, more water flows into the countries of the Middle East and North Africa as virtual water each year than flows down the Nile for Egypt's agriculture. Virtual water obtained in the food available on the global market has enabled the governments of the region's countries to

augment their inadequate and declining water resources. For instance, despite its meager freshwater resources of 180 cubic meters per capita, Israel—otherwise self-sufficient in terms of food production—manages its problems of water scarcity in part by importing large supplies of grain each year. As noted in Figure 1, this pattern is replicated by eight other countries in the region that have less than 1,100 cubic meters of water per person. Thus, the global cereal grain commodity markets have proven to be a very accessible and effective system for importing virtual water needs. In the Middle East and North Africa, politicians and resource managers have thus far found this option a better choice than resorting to war over water with their neighbors. As a result, the strategic imperative for maintaining peace has been met through access to virtual water in the form of food imports from the global market.<sup>26</sup>

The global trade in food commodities has been increasingly accessible, even to poor economies, for the past 50 years. During the Cold War, food that could not be purchased was often provided in the form of grants by either the United States or the Soviet Union, and in times of famine, international relief efforts in various parts of the globe have fed the starving. Over time, competition by the generators of the global grain surplus—the United States, Australia, Argentina, and the European Community—brought down the global price of grain. As a result, the past quarter-century, the period during which water conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa have been most insistently predicted, was also a period of global commodity markets awash with surplus grain. This situation allowed the region's states to replace domestic water supply shortages with subsidized virtual water in the form of purchases from the global commodities market. For example, during the 1980s, grain was being traded at about \$100 (US) a ton, despite costing about \$200 a ton to produce.<sup>27</sup> Thus, US and European taxpayers were largely responsible for funding the cost of virtual water (in the form of significant agricultural subsidies they paid their own farmers) which significantly benefited the countries of the Middle East and North Africa.

For the most part we concur with Allen's evaluation that countries have not gone to war primarily over water, and that they have not done so because they have been able to purchase virtual water on the international market. However, the key question for the future is, Will this situation continue? If the answer is yes, and grain will remain affordable to the countries of the region, then it is relatively safe to conclude that conflict derived from environmental scarcity (in the form of water deficits) will not be a significant problem in the foreseeable future. However, if the answer is no, and grain will not be as affordable as it has been in the past, then future conflict scenarios based on environmental scarcity must be seriously considered.

***Global Economic Restructuring:  
The World Trade Organization's Impact on Subsidies***

Regrettably, a trend toward the answer “no” appears to be gaining some momentum due to ongoing structural changes in the global economy. The year 1995 witnessed a dramatic change in the world grain market, when wheat prices rose rapidly, eventually reaching \$250 a ton by the spring of 1996. With the laws of supply and demand kicking in, this increased price resulted in greater production; by 1998, world wheat prices had fallen back to \$140 a ton, but had risen again to over \$270 by June 2001.<sup>28</sup> These rapid wheat price fluctuations reemphasize the strategic importance and volatility of virtual water. If the global price of food staples remains affordable, many countries in the Middle East and North Africa may struggle to meet the demand-induced scarcity resulting from their growing populations, but they most likely will succeed. However, if basic food staple prices rise significantly in the coming decades and the existing economic growth patterns that have characterized the region's economies over the past 30 years remain constant, an outbreak of war is more likely.

It is clear that recent structural changes in the world economy do not favor the continuation of affordable food prices for the region's countries in the future. As noted above, wheat that costs \$200 a ton to produce has often been sold for \$100 a ton on world markets. This situation is possible only when the supplier is compensated for the lost \$100 per ton in the form of a subsidy. Historically, these subsidies have been paid by the governments of major cereal grain-producing countries, primarily the United States and members of the European Union. Indeed, for the last 100 years, farm subsidies have been a bedrock public policy throughout the food-exporting countries of the first world. However, with the steady embrace of global free-trade economics and the establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO), agricultural subsidies have come under pressure in most major grain-producing countries. According to a recent US Department of Agriculture (USDA) study, “The elimination of agriculture trade and domestic policy distortions could raise world agriculture prices about 12 percent.”<sup>29</sup>

Thus, as the WTO gains systematic credibility over the coming decades, its free-trade policies will further erode the practice of farm price supports, and it is highly unlikely that the aggregate farm subsidies of the past will continue at historic levels in the future. Under the new WTO regime, global food production will be increasingly based on the real cost of production plus whatever profit is required to keep farmers in business. Therefore, as global food prices rise in the future, and American and European governments are restricted by the new global trading regime from subsidizing their

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***“Many countries of the region cannot presently meet the irrigation requirements needed to feed their own growing populations.”***

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farmers, the price of virtual water in the Middle East and North Africa and throughout the food-importing world will also rise. According to the USDA report mentioned above, both developed and developing countries will gain from WTO liberalization. Developed countries that are major food exporters will gain immediately from the projected \$31 billion in increased global food prices, of which they will share \$28.5 billion (\$13.3 billion to the United States), with \$2.6 billion going to food exporters in the developing world. However, the report also claims food-importing countries will gain because global food price increases will spur more efficient production in their own economies, thus enabling them a “potential benefit” of \$21 billion.<sup>30</sup> Even if accepted at face value, it is clear that such benefits will occur mostly in those developing countries with an abundance of water resources. Indeed, developing countries that produce fruits, vegetables, and other high-value crops for export to first-world markets may indeed benefit from the reduction of farm subsidies, which today undercut their competitive advantage. But when it comes to basic foodstuffs—wheat, corn, and rice—the cereal grains that sustain life for most people, the developing world cannot compete with the highly efficient mechanized corporate farms of the first world.

In future research, basic intelligence is needed on two fronts. First, we must obtain a clearer understanding of the capacity of global commodity markets to meet future virtual water needs in the form of food. Second, we must identify which Middle East and North Africa governments will most likely have the economic capacity to meet their virtual water needs through food purchases—or, perhaps more important, which ones will not. In short, is there food available in the global market, and can countries afford to buy it? Countries that cannot afford virtual water may choose instead to pursue war as a means of achieving their national interest goals. Clearly the strongest countries, or those least susceptible to intrastate or interstate conflict arising from environmental scarcity, are those that have significant water resources or the economic capacity to purchase virtual water. However, it is also clear that the relative condition of peace that has existed in the Middle East and North Africa has been maintained historically through deeply buried linkages



between American and European taxpayers, their massive farm subsidies programs, and world food prices. In the future, it appears that these hidden links may be radically altered if not broken by the World Trade Organization, and, as a result, the likelihood of conflict will increase.

### ***Conclusion: Why War Will Come***

Having moved away from the conventional understanding of water strictly as a zero-sum environmental resource by reconceptualizing it in more fungible economic terms, we nevertheless believe two incompatible social trends will collide to make war in the Middle East and North Africa virtually inevitable in the future. The first trend is economic globalization. As capitalism becomes ever more embraced as the global economic philosophy, and the world increasingly embraces free-trade economics, economic growth is both required and is inevitable. The WTO will facilitate this aggregate global growth, which, on the plus side, will undoubtedly increase the basic standard of living for the average world citizen. However, the global economy will be required to meet the needs of an estimated eight billion citizens in the year 2025. Achieving growth will demand an ever-greater share of the world's existing natural resources, including water. Thus, if present regional economic and demographic trends continue, resource shortfalls will occur, with water being the most highly stressed resource in the Middle East and North Africa.

Globalization is both a cause and a consequence of the rapid spread of information technology. Thus, in the globalized world, the figurative distance between cultures, philosophies of rule, and, perhaps more important, a basic understanding of what is possible in life, becomes much shorter. Personal computers, the internet, cellular phones, fax machines, and satellite television are all working in partnership to rewire the psychological infrastructure of the citizens of the Middle East and North Africa, and the world at large. As a result, by making visible what is possible in the outside world, this cognitive liberation will bring heightened material expectations of a better life, both economically and politically. Consequently, citizens will demand more from their governments. This emerging reality will collide head-on with the second trend—political authoritarianism—that characterizes most Middle East and North Africa governments.

Throughout the region there are few governments that allow for public expression of dissent. Although Turkey, Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt are democracies in name, these states have exhibited a propensity to revert to authoritarian tactics when deemed necessary to limit political activity among their respective populaces.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, while Israel is institutionally a democracy, ethnic minorities are all but excluded from the democratic process. The remainder of the Middle East and North Africa states can be de-



scribed only as authoritarian regimes. In retrospect, the most fundamental common denominator of all authoritarian regimes throughout history is their fierce resistance to change. Change is seen as a threat to the regime because most authoritarian regimes base their right to rule in some form of infallibility: the infallibility of the sultan, the king, or the ruling party and its ideology. Any admission that change is needed strikes at the foundation of this inflexible infallibility. Historically, most change has occurred in the Middle East and North Africa during times of intrastate unrest and interstate war. In the coming decades, globalization will bring change that will be resisted by governments of the region. As a result, to the distant observer the future will resemble the past: periods of wholesale peace will be a rare occurrence, intense competition and low-intensity conflict will be the norm, and major wars will occur at sporadic intervals.

The wild card in this equation may be post-2004 Iraq. Operation Iraqi Freedom and the ouster of Saddam Hussein have altered the strategic political landscape. If a sustainable democracy indeed emerges in Iraq, the country may turn away from future conflicts with its neighbors. Potential conflict between Turkey and Iraq over water may now be averted due to the fact that both countries may choose nonviolent solutions to their disputes. If President Bush's vision of a democratic Middle East comes to fruition, war may be averted. After all, there is a rich body of scholarly research regarding the "democratic peace" that suggests liberal democracies are significantly less likely to resort to war to resolve interstate disputes, and post-Saddam Iraq could serve as a key litmus test for the future of democratic reform in the region. However, it is also highly unlikely that regime change will come quickly to the moderate authoritarian states of the region that are also US allies. Decisionmakers in Washington may be able to dictate the political future of Iraq, but even America's mighty arsenal of political, economic, and military power cannot alter the basic demographic and environmental trends in the region.

#### NOTES

1. Alex Marshall, ed., *The State of World Population 1997* (New York: United Nations Population Fund, 1997), p. 70.

2. "The World Bank: Middle East and North Africa Data Profile," *The World Bank Group Country Data* (2000), <http://www.worldbank.org/data/countrydata/countrydata.html>.

3. The leading scholar in this area is Thomas Homer-Dixon. For example, see his recent book (coedited with Jessica Blitt), *Ecoviolence: Links Among Environment, Population, and Security* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), which focuses on Chiapas, Gaza, South Africa, Pakistan, and Rwanda.

4. Mostafa Dolatyar and Tim S. Gray, *Water Politics in the Middle East: A Context for Conflict or Co-operation?* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), p. 6.

5. *Human Development Report: Consumption for Human Development* (New York: United Nations Development Programme, Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), p. 55; "Water Woes Around the World," MSNBC, 9 September 2002, <http://www.msnbc.com/news/802693.asp>.

6. Thomas Naff, "Conflict and Water Use in the Middle East," in *Water in the Arab World: Perspectives and Prognoses*, ed. Peter Rogers and Peter Lydon (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1994), p. 273.
7. Alwyn R. Rouyer, *Turning Water into Politics: The Water Issue in the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), p. 7.
8. Ulrich Küffner, "Contested Waters: Dividing or Sharing?" in *Water in the Middle East: Potential for Conflicts and Prospects for Cooperation*, ed. Waltina Scheumann and Manuel Schiffler (New York: Springer, 1998), p. 71.
9. Miriam R. Lowi, *Water and Power: The Politics of a Scarce Resource in the Jordan River Basin* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), p. 1.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 2ff.
11. Thomas Homer-Dixon and Jessica Blitt, "Introduction: A Theoretical Overview," in *Ecoviolence: Links Among Environment, Population, and Scarcity*, ed. Thomas Homer-Dixon and Jessica Blitt (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), p. 6.
12. Thomas Homer-Dixon and Valerie Percival, "The Case of Senegal-Mauritania," in *Environmental Scarcity and Violent Conflict: Briefing Book* (Washington: American Association for the Advancement of Science and the University of Toronto, 1996), pp. 35-38.
13. Douglas Borer witnessed this agricultural problem while visiting rural areas on the Bataan peninsula in late 1985 and early 1986. The members of the New People's Army which he met were uninterested in Marxism, but they were very interested in ridding themselves of the Marcos regime. See Thomas Homer-Dixon and Valerie Percival, "The Case of the Philippines," *ibid.*, p. 49.
14. Ted Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1970).
15. One need only look 90 miles southward from the Florida coast to find proof of this reality in Castro's Cuba.
16. Thus, Saddam Hussein was able to remain in power in Iraq until 2003 due to two essential factors. First, as noted in a recent article by James Quinlivan, Saddam had created "groups with special loyalties to the regime and the creation of parallel military organizations and multiple internal security agencies," that made Iraq essentially a "coup-proof" regime. (See James T. Quinlivan, "Coup-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East," *International Security*, 24 [Fall 1999], 131-65.) Second, Saddam had convinced a significant portion of his people that the United States (and Britain) were responsible for their suffering. Thus, as long as these perceptions held and Saddam was able to command loyalty of the inner regime, his ouster from power by domestic sources remained unlikely.
17. Ewan W. Anderson, "Water: The Next Strategic Resource," in *The Politics of Scarcity: Water in the Middle East*, ed. Joyce R. Starr and Daniel C. Stoll (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1988), p. 1.
18. Hussein A. Amery and Aaron T. Wolf, "Water, Geography, and Peace in the Middle East," in *Water in the Middle East: A Geography of Peace*, ed. Hussein A. Amery and Aaron T. Wolf (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 2000).
19. Nubiti Kliot, *Water Resources and Conflict in the Middle East* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. v, as quoted in Dolatyar and Gray, p. 9.
20. Rouyer, p. 9.
21. Martin Sherman, *The Politics of Water in the Middle East: An Israeli Perspective on the Hydro-Political Aspects of the Conflict* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), p. xi.
22. Jochen Renger, "The Middle East Peace Process: Obstacles to Cooperation Over Shared Waters," in *Water in the Middle East: Potential for Conflict and Prospects for Cooperation*, ed. Waltina Scheumann and Manuel Schiffler (New York: Springer, 1998), p. 50.
23. Thus, even though the Saudi government is much more Islamized in religious terms than that of the Iraqis or Syrians, as long as the Saudi government is pro-US and serves US interests in supplying cheap oil, it receives the benevolent "moderate" label, while the more secularized Iraqis and Syrians have been labeled with the prerogative labels "radical" or "rogue-states."
24. Tony Allan, "Watersheds and Problemsheds: Explaining the Absence of Armed Conflict over Water in the Middle East," in *MERNIA: Middle East Review of International Affairs Journal*, 2 (March 1998), <http://biu.ac.il/SOC/besa/meria/journal/1998/issue1/jv2n1a7.html>.
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*
28. Prices from 26 June 2001 quoted at <http://www.usafutures.com/commodityprices.htm>.
29. "Agricultural Policy Reform in the WTO—The Road Ahead," in *ERS Agricultural Economics Report*, No. 802, ed. Mary E. Burfisher (Washington: US Department of Agriculture, May 2001), p. iii.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
31. For instance, as of 2004, Freedom House (<http://www.freedomhouse.org/>) classifies Algeria, Egypt, and Tunisia as "not free," and Turkey as only "partly free."