

Swatuk, L. 2011. Book review of Zeitoun, 2009. Power and water in the Middle East. The hidden politics of the Palestinian-Israeli water conflict. I.B. Tauris. Water Alternatives 4(1): 104-105



BOOK REVIEW

Zeitoun, M. 2009. Power and water in the Middle East. The hidden politics of the Palestinian-Israeli water conflict. London and New York: I.B.Tauris and Co. ISBN: 987 1 84511 464 0, 214 pages, £47.50.

(URL: www.ibtauris.com/middle-east/politics-and-current-affairs/israel-palestine.aspx)

Larry Swatuk

University of Waterloo, Canada; lswatuk@uwaterloo.ca

Mark Zeitoun's *Power and Water in the Middle East* is an excellent and compelling story of state-building, inter-state competition, and the central role that water plays in state development. His focus is on the 'hidden politics' of Israeli-Palestinian shared transboundary water management. The author claims that these politics and conflicts are masked by a growing perception of increasing water cooperation in the Middle East: agreements have been signed, organizations have been created and a multilateral network of actors is involved in numerous planning and delivery projects such that Israel appears to be a benevolent actor focused on the water needs of Palestinians. For Zeitoun, we should not confuse cooperation with mutually beneficial outcomes. What the author argues instead is that while Israeli behaviour looks cooperative in comparison to its own past actions, this reflects the fact that as the regional hegemon having captured the lion's share of resources in the first 20 years of its existence, Israel now uses an array of soft power (negotiation; ideational) to maintain its position, all the while holding its oft-demonstrated hard power mainly in reserve. Palestine, in comparison, is consigned to the minor role of a weak actor forced to live with realities constructed by dominant others.

In support of this thesis, Zeitoun presents the reader with a carefully worked out argument based on a combination of theory, facts and informed speculation. The book is organized into nine chapters. Chapter 1 locates the study within the wider literatures of transboundary water resources management, conflict and cooperation. Chapter 2 presents the theoretical model of power (summarised in matrix form on p. 32). Chapters 3 and 4 describe the case study area, and frame issues there as part of contending discourses. Chapters 5 to 8 apply the theoretical model by looking at four different aspects of power: hard power; bargaining power; ideational power; and hydraulic capacity. Chapter 9 summarises the findings, suggesting that Israeli hydro-hegemony, wedded to supply-side practices, is likely to persist despite a variety of social and ecological costs. The book is complemented by numerous photos, graphs, charts and maps, each of which serves to carry forward a persuasive argument in a most readable and enjoyable fashion.

Having said that, one wonders about a more constructive way forward, one that locates these state actors as but two elements within the broader social-ecological system of which they are a part. Put differently, what sorts of arguments might push Israel onto a more constructive and sustainable water management path? Although Zeitoun does not frame the story this way, I could not help but marvel at the persistence of high modern attitudes toward both the state (sovereign; residing in an anarchical system that is fraught with dangerous enemies) and water (as a resource to be captured for state-building). In a semiarid environment, 'making the desert bloom' serves as a tangible symbol of the Israeli state's power over nature and over its neighbours (p. 70). Since Israel resides in a hostile neighbourhood, the strategy of all state-builders (and the interest groups allied to state power, i.e. agriculture, industry, settlements and cities) has been to capture and control the resource in a near

zero-sum fashion even to the detriment of the resource itself. As Zeitoun shows, 'power matters' (p. 144), but it is in a type of retrograde 'power over' all dissenting voices – national, regional, international – that cannot serve as the basis for sustainable and equitable management of a shared resource.

Zeitoun shows quite clearly that there is little room for transnational civil society, or national/regional social movements to effectively challenge the 'hydro-strategic discourse'. Indeed, despite clear evidence of widespread ecological degradation, 'the environment' makes only a cameo appearance as a 'lobby group' near the end of the book (p. 163). Given Zeitoun's analysis of a hard state adhering to power politics, the author is left with no option than to end his book with an ethical or moralistic warning (p. 164): states should learn to cooperate for mutually beneficial outcomes before things get much worse. While I agree with this advice, I would have liked to see the author return to the idea of contending discourses to search for ways of pushing the 'sanctioned discourse' in a more inclusive and less (socially and environmentally) destructive direction. Here I have three suggestions to make.

First, throughout the book the author attempts to speak truth to power, mainly with the use of facts. But some of the facts as presented work in an unconstructive direction. For example, figure 8.1 (p. 130) highlights a 'levelling off' of freshwater production following the first twenty years of Israeli independence. This seems to suggest that Israel's water demand is constant despite rising population. However, on p. 60 the author observes that "Israel's total water footprint is estimated at 8,600 MCM/y... This is more than four times the total renewable amount of freshwater available in Israel (*including* the transboundary water resources shared with Palestine)". It seems to me the author could have made much more of the role of virtual water in Israel's overall water security as a way of nudging Israeli policy makers toward a reconsideration of the present uses of its water for agriculture. Is there no room here to pick up the argument first made by Allan to present Israeli decision-makers with the facts of their vulnerability? What I am suggesting is a framing that emphasises benefits to Israel, not shared benefits (which is, unfortunately, a dead argument) as a means of reducing agricultural water consumption to the benefit of the entire river basin, and therefore indirectly to Palestine.

My second suggestion has to do with the agricultural lobby and follows on from the first. Zeitoun shows how agriculture dominates both water use and water policy but there is very little discussion of what this water is used to grow. Framed in terms of 'food self-sufficiency', might there not be space for a discussion on achieving 'more crop per drop' through what Falkenmark and Rockström call vapour shift? It seems to me that some discussion of the role of green water in food production, and its link to appropriate food crop production for domestic consumption might also be a way of making more water for those downstream without necessarily 'threatening' Israel's sense of interstate water insecurity.

Third, and lastly, perhaps introducing the notion of an environmental reserve – i.e. water for the ecosystem – is another way of producing more water for marginalised actors. Oftentimes, small producers and settlements downstream do not need much water to reap huge social and economic benefits. Ensuring an ecological reserve in the rivers and streams is an indirect and non-controversial way to provide water of sufficient quantity and quality for the weak and marginalised within and beyond Israel's borders. Perhaps Zeitoun's next book will pick up on some of these and related discursive strategies for regional water security in his worthwhile search for a meaningful and lasting way around Israel's hydro-hegemony. I, for one, would welcome such a book. It would make a worthy companion to this excellent study.