

U.S. Wars in the Middle East: Imperialism and the Battle for Water

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Water is to the twenty-first century what oil was to the twentieth century: the commodity that determines the wealth and stability of nations.

People who think that the West's interventions in Iraq, Libya and Syria are only about oil are mistaken. Broadly speaking, Western interest in the Middle East is becoming increasingly about a commodity more precious than oil, namely water.

According to the U.S.-based Center for Public Integrity, Western nations stand to make up to a US\$1 trillion from privatizing, purifying and distributing water in a region where water often sells for far more than oil.

Although over two thirds of our planet is water, we face an acute shortage. This scarcity flies in the face of our natural assumptions. The problem is that 97 percent is salt water. Great for fish, not so good for humans. Of the world's fresh water, only one percent is available for drinking, with the remaining two percent trapped in glaciers and ice.

Put differently: if all the water on earth was represented by an 11-litre jug, the freshwater would fill a single cup, and we can only access the last drop.

Nature has decreed that the supply of water is fixed; all the while, demand is rising as the world's population increases and enriches itself. By 2030, climate change, population growth, pollution and urbanization will compound, such that the demand for water globally is estimated to outstrip supply by forty percent.

Increasingly, for water to be useful, it needs to be mined, processed, packaged, and transported, just like gold, coal, gas or oil. Unlike oil, there are no substitutes, alternatives or stopgaps for water.

There have been three waves of resource-driven imperialism in the modern era.

A quest for gold fueled the first wave. Old-fashioned colonialists, regal and unembarrassed, rode in on horseback, brutally took control of American territories, sent in ostrich-plumed governors, minted coins with the Queen's head on them, and gazed proudly over natives toiling away in perilous mine-shafts. An unprecedented kidnapping of millions of Africans ensued, so as to replace the indigenous Americans that had initially been exterminated by their European conquerors. This coincided with white pioneers brutally conquering Southern Africa, also in search of gold.

The second wave of imperialism has been driven by an unquenchable, post-industrial thirst for oil.

Modern petro-imperialism, the key aspect of which is the U.S. military's transformation into a global oil-protection armed force, puts up a democratic facade, emphasizes freedom of the seas (or pipeline routes), and seeks to secure, protect, drill, and ship oil, not to administer everyday affairs. Nevertheless, the means by which the U.S. is centering its foreign policy around oil is hardly new in spirit, albeit unprecedented in scope.

The third wave of imperialist wars is currently being fought over nature's most valuable commodity: water.

Prior to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, CIA analysts reported on a prediction of a new theater of war: hydrological warfare, "in which rivers, lakes and aquifers become national security assets to be fought over, or controlled". These predictions became realized in quick succession, beginning with the recent wars in Iraq, Libya and Syria. It is now clear that the age of hydro-imperialism is upon us.

On April 17, 2003, in Iraq, the American company Bechtel received a no-bid reconstruction contract from U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) for US\$100 billion; thus, making it the largest Iraq reconstruction contract. Therefore, the most lucrative Iraq reconstruction contract was not used to repair oil facilities, build schools and hospitals, or to repair bombarded infrastructure: it was used to source, process, and distribute *water*.

The secretive, opaque and no-bid nature of the water contract award process is made even worse by one incredible fact. Bechtel has botched many of its previous projects.

In California, Bechtel installed one of the nuclear power plant reactors backwards. In Boston, what promised to be a US\$2.5 billion job for an infamous "Big Dig" project became the most expensive in U.S. history costing US\$14.6 billion. The tunnel project was plagued by charges of poor execution, corruption, criminal arrests, and even four deaths.

In Bolivia, Bechtel's record is one of privatizing water by inflating prices by 35 percent. The inflation caused public riots, in which several people died. Bechtel was ousted from the country and tried to sue the Bolivian government for canceling their contract.

Since the turn of the century, Iraq was the first casualty of hydro-imperialism, and Colonel Gaddafi's assassination marked the second. Libya sits atop a natural resource more valuable than oil: the Nubian Sandstone Aquifer, which is a vast underground reserve of fresh water, estimated to be the largest in the world. Mr. Gaddafi had invested \$25 billion into the aquifer, which had the potential to turn a country that is 95 percent desert into an arable oasis. As it now stands, France's global mega-water companies: Suez, Ondeo, and Saur, control almost half of the world's \$400 billion water market. They are poised to rake in billions of dollars from Libya's eighth wonder of the world.

Mr. Gaddafi had intended the scheme to be designed by Libyans, constructed by Libyans, for the benefit of the Libyan population. Now it is being redesigned by Frenchmen and women at inflated costs, constructed by French contractors, largely for the benefit of French shareholders. Libyan taxpayers will undoubtedly be stuck with the bill and higher water bills.

The most recent case of hydro-imperialism is the war in Syria. Israel has been leading a Western campaign to support Syrian rebels; in part, because its leaders assert that the Syrian President, Bashar Al-Assad, poses an existential threat to Israel on the issue of water. Assad has vowed to reclaim the Golan Heights - a strip of land that Israel captured from Syria in the Six Day War of 1967. The Golan Heights provides a staggering 40 percent of Israel's fresh water.

"Syrian control of half of our water poses more of a threat than Iran with one bomb", once remarked ex-Israeli intelligence head, Meir Dagan.

Assad has also been reticent to privatize the water industry and expose the population to predatory pricing, thereby preventing the West from tapping into a multi-billion dollar revenue stream.

Mr. Assad's refusal to play ball on water privatization and his choice to play hardball over the Golan Heights meant that the Syrian President, like Mr. Hussein and Colonel Gaddafi before him, is an obstacle to the West's hydro-imperialist agenda.

Control of nature's most precious and increasingly valuable commodity will, for any nation, spell the difference between greatness and decline. Mr. Hussein, Colonel Gaddafi and a defiant Mr. Assad know that all too well.

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