

We Won't Let Each Other Go Thirsty

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"I think water hits us at a profoundly different level than other resources. People are willing to do horrible things to each other. What they seem not willing to do is turn off each other's water."-- Aaron Wolf

Water wars. How many times has some expert portrayed a future with nations waging war over that most precious of resources, water? There have even been suggestions of *intranational* water wars, as in Andrew Wice's novel, *To The Last Drop*, in which Texas and New Mexico fight over water. As someone who spent 17 years in the Land of Enchantment, I do not find that premise too much of a stretch.

So wouldn't 263 international river basins and 273 international aquifers dictate that water wars are a virtual certainty? Can history tell us something about the likelihood of water wars?

If anything, history tells us that cooperation over water exceeds conflict. The Indus River Commission survived two major wars between India and Pakistan. During one of the wars, India continued to make payments to Pakistan as part of its treaty obligations. Since the mid-1950s Israel and Jordan held secret "picnic table" talks on managing the Jordan River even though they were technically at war from 1948 to 1994. The USA, Mexico, and Canada have effective institutions to resolve water disputes before they escalate. My colleague Aaron Wolf found that in the fifty years since the late 1940s water cooperative events outnumbered conflictive events by 2.5 to 1. He noted that the only "water war" between nations on record occurred over 4,500 years ago between the city-states of Lagash and Umma in the Tigris-Euphrates basin.

The aforementioned events afford some measure of optimism, but will the past predict the future? We face an uncertain and potentially calamitous future. World population is approaching seven billion people. Climate change and its effect on water resources loom ominously. Watershed boundaries may change. Water supplies may increase in some areas and decrease in others. And since water does more than quench thirst – it grows food, maintains ecosystems and fisheries, dilutes waste, provides recreation, facilitates navigation and trade, and generates power - I can foresee situations where nations, or even states, cities, or provinces, wage war over water and the services it provides.

Can we take preventive measures? Definitely. Rapid changes in international basins in the absence of institutional capacity (e.g., treaties) tend to increase *hydrovulnerability*, the risk of dispute over a shared water resource. We must ensure that all involved have sufficient institutional capacity to enhance *hydroresilience*, the ability to absorb change without negative consequences. River basins receive most of the attention, but so should transnational aquifers. Make no mistake: implementing these measures will be daunting.

Aaron Wolf is correct: water does hit us at a profoundly different level. For that reason, I believe that, despite the perilous road ahead, in 100 years 'Lagash and Umma' will be the answer to a trivia question.