

Militarization of water

Water wars refer to the increasing relevance of water for strategic military or law enforcement purposes. Given the soaring value of water and the prospects of forthcoming scarcity, the access to water for human survival is no longer taken for granted, and thus deserves to be enforced, or “protected”, by all the necessary means, including the use of force. Just as much as oil, water is viewed as a strategic asset and a fundamental mineral resource, and it is therefore increasingly accounted in terms of national security, i.e. matters for whom States are ready to wage wars. In other words, water is increasingly securitized.

This type of water grabbing manifests itself typically where water is particularly either lacking, or abundant. In the Sahara/Sahel region, granting one's access to water has been often reported among the main reasons behind the frequent armed insurrections in Mali, Niger, Chad, and the overall persisting insecurity experienced in the wider region. Similarly, one cannot overlook the fact that the US military positioning in the Amazonian basin has to do with the strategic control over the world largest water veins.

As a matter of national security, water is “protected”, or grabbed, by military means at the expenses of local communities, whose livelihoods often depend on the access to those resources. Different practices, discourses and resources are mobilized to promote the idea that, since water is allegedly threatened, a “sovereign” (i.e. State's) interest justifies the violation of individual and collective human rights and environmental regulations in this respect. In many cases, a simulated concern for water provision actually hides a deliberate policy of massive displacement and abusive forced evictions, targeting groups or movements that are perceived as “public enemies”. Cases in point here include most notably the water grabbing intentionally carried out *manu militari* by Israeli authorities in the West Bank, that clearly violates international law and threatens the survival of Palestinians communities. Due to lack, or contamination, of water resources, many individuals and groups are then forced out of their lands, thus clearing the ground for Israeli colonial policies. A similar strategy has been implemented in Turkish and Iraqi Kurdistan: the construction of the big dam along the Tigris river is projected to dry up downstream communities, most of whom are of Kurdish origin, in order to break up and disperse local resistance and ease the military occupation of the territory. In Ghana, instead, legislative measures aimed at importing the full recovery costs and pre-paid water regimes include the (proposed, so far) introduction of the crime of water theft. The free access to water would then be prevented and legally enforced as a criminal offence, without providing reasonable alternatives to those who lack the economic means to pay for water provisions. This shows, moreover, that the framing of water as a “public” good can be sometimes as dangerous as the “private” appropriation of the resource, and that only an approach grounded in the principle of the commons is likely to seriously protect individual and collective human rights, and namely the human right to water, both at international and community level.

Beyond being unfair and unjust in terms of human rights, internal policies and minority statuses, this attitude risks to exacerbate existing tensions at the international level, thus dangerously contributing to increase the likelihood of the eruption of water wars environmental conflicts. One just needs to think about the Grand Renaissance Dam currently being built on the Nile river in Ethiopia, that has greatly strained the international relations between the Ethiopian government and downstream Egypt. Both countries are highly dependent on water resources provided by the Nile, but no real framework of international cooperation is currently in place, thus leaving the last word to the threat of the use of force.

Face to State-sponsored “legal” violence, and the use of force used to exert and enforce control over water resources, communities are left with little options: either they surrender, or they take up arms and resort to “illegal”, non-state sponsored violence, as occurred in Niger's delta, thus risking to feed an unstoppable spiral of violence. In this sense, the struggle for access to water against the securitization of water resources is inseparable from a serious commitment to transparency, accountability, human rights and democratic governance.