

Water User Associations and the Politics of Water in Jordan

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Summary. — Jordan is often held up as one of the most water scarce countries in the world. The water scarcity in the country is not an absolute, but rather a politically mediated reality. The cubic meter numbers for Jordan may very well point toward absolute scarcity, but those numbers hide as much as they reveal. They hide the worlds of meaning, emotion, and social interactions centered around water. It is no surprise then that despite donor-driven push for greater economic rationality in water resources management, political stability continues to be the prime objective of water management in Jordan. Through a case study of Water User Associations (WUAs) in the Jordan Valley we try to demonstrate the political imperatives of water management in Jordan. The WUAs are an example of donor-instigated institutions for water management at the local scale. The WUAs have had variable success in the Jordan valley and some fear that they will not outlast the donors' and the government's financial support to them. The WUAs have been appropriated by the elites where their tribal dominance allows for it, while in other places larger farmers operate outside of them. Farmers nevertheless prefer WUAs because they are helpful in gaining access to patronage and water. The future of WUAs in the Jordan Valley is going to be constricted by the Jordanian state's (in)tolerance of them also becoming politicized spaces for claim-making on the state.

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1. INTRODUCTION: POLITICAL MEDIATIONS IN WATER SCARCITY

Jordan is one of the most water scarce countries in the world, or so goes the popular refrain. More than 30 years of scholarship drawing upon political-economic, critical realist, and socio-nature frameworks has essentially questioned the Malthusian idea of resource scarcity being driven by population growth in most environmental resources sectors from forestry to agriculture to bio-diversity (e.g., see Kull, 2000; Peet and Watts, 2004; Robbins, 2012). In the water sector, however, the notion of socially unmediated, absolute scarcity continues to have remarkable resilience, most persistently in the context of water resources in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Jordan is somewhat at the epicenter of the debate, with international donors and research communities putting forth significant efforts to understanding and then mitigating the consequences of that scarcity (e.g., see Bonn, 2013). Most of the research literature on the Jordanian water sector has focused on the national- and international-scale dimensions of water politics, supply enhancement, management, and conservation questions (e.g., see Humpal et al., 2012; Yorke, 2013). In this paper we move beyond the national-scale supply side approach toward addressing water security in Jordan and instead highlight the politics of access to and control over water. We focus on the case of Water User Associations (WUAs) in the Jordan Valley (JV), drawing upon insights from a series of interviews conducted with farmers and officials working in this arena (Figure 1). We furthermore draw upon a series of interviews conducted at the policy level in Jordan to contextualize the WUA case study within the larger political economy of water management in the country. With the following article, we hope to contribute to the literature on the politics of water scarcity across local, national and international scales.

The predominantly national- and international-scale water scholarship on Jordan, just as with many other countries, has centered upon the volumetric measures of water. Such measures, on the one hand, are the essential currency of

intersectoral, regional, and transboundary water flows and the largely technocratic thinking thereupon. On the other hand, they also tend to hide as much as they reveal. They hide, in the first instance, the materiality of water as it intersects, mostly at the local scale, with human labor and bodies to produce use and exchange values. The same cubic meter numbers also tend to hide the discursive worlds of meaning, memory, emotion, and connection that humans inevitably ascribe to and realize through water (e.g., see Mustafa, 2013). Last but not least, the big volumetric numbers demand and are given an authenticity and authority precisely because they offer a [false] sense of systemic logic to the circulation of water through the hydro-social metabolism, with tidy lines connecting different parts of the hydrologic system without the interruption of the social system (e.g., see Figure 2 as a schematic of the Jordanian water system linked to JV by USAID). This manuscript is an attempt at illuminating precisely these hidden [social] stories behind the interconnected boxes and circles, which represent one construction of water's reality, through the case study of WUAs. It should be noted that WUAs do not even feature on the schematic map in Figure 2.

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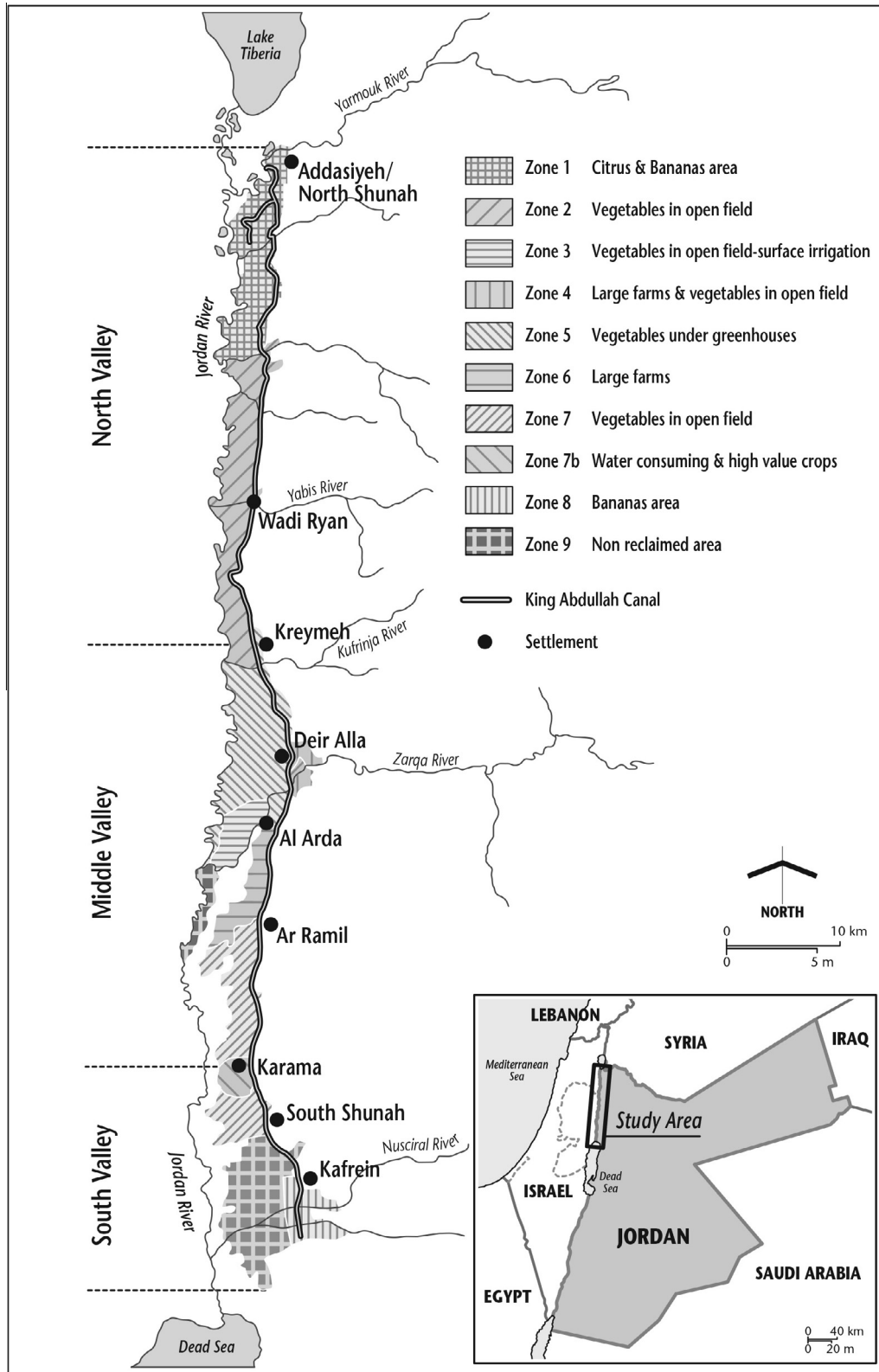


Figure 1. A general map of Jordan Valley with land use.

Of all the international community and donor-driven interventions and institutional innovations in Jordan—and there are many—WUAs are the most emblematic of the participatory water management ethos popular among the

international water policy community. There is a wealth of literature that exists about them in many contexts and while the donor-based literature often promotes them as the ultimate conduit for democratization in water resources,

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