



Aalto University  
School of Engineering

# Water, Politics & Power

*Amy Fallon*  
*DSc. Candidate*

*Water and Development Research Group, Aalto University*

*19th February 2019*  
*WAT-E2080*

# Who gets how much water, how and why?



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A photograph of a child in a green dress walking on a large, elevated concrete pipe in a slum. The pipe is surrounded by a stream of dirty water and a large amount of trash. In the background, there are makeshift buildings and more trash. The text "Water flows uphill to money and power" is overlaid on the image.

# Water flows uphill to money and power

*Marc Reisner, 1986: "The Cadillac Desert: The American West and its Disappearing Water."*

# Politics in Water Interaction

**Politics** is the **activities** associated with the governance of a country or area, especially the debate between parties having power.

→ ‘who gets what, when, where and why?’ (Lasswell, 1936)

**Hydro-politics** is the politics affected by the availability of water resources and vice versa. It refers to inter-state political processes concerning the allocation & use of water flowing through international rivers and aquifers.

**Hydro-diplomacy** is bilateral or multilateral contact between state and/or non-state actors over transboundary water resources for the purposes of deterring conflict and promoting cooperation.

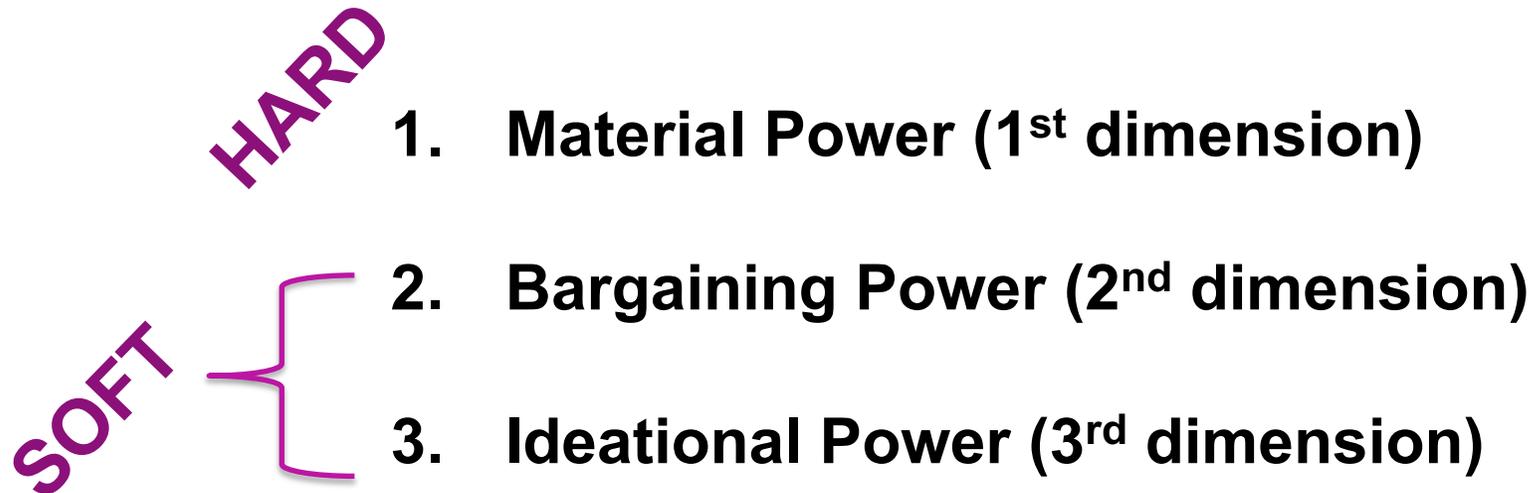
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# When the great lord passes, the wise peasant bows deeply, and silently farts.

- Ethiopian proverb, in Lukes (2005[1974]: 125)



# Lukes' Three Dimensions of Power



(Lukes, 2005)

# i. Material Power (1<sup>st</sup> Dimension)



Achieving interests through physical or economic force – hard power.

- Military force
- Economic strength
- Upstream position

*Nile disputes between Egypt & Ethiopia re: Grand Renaissance Dam - reshaping regional politics?*

*But is it cost-effective?*

## ii. Bargaining Power (2<sup>nd</sup> Dimension)

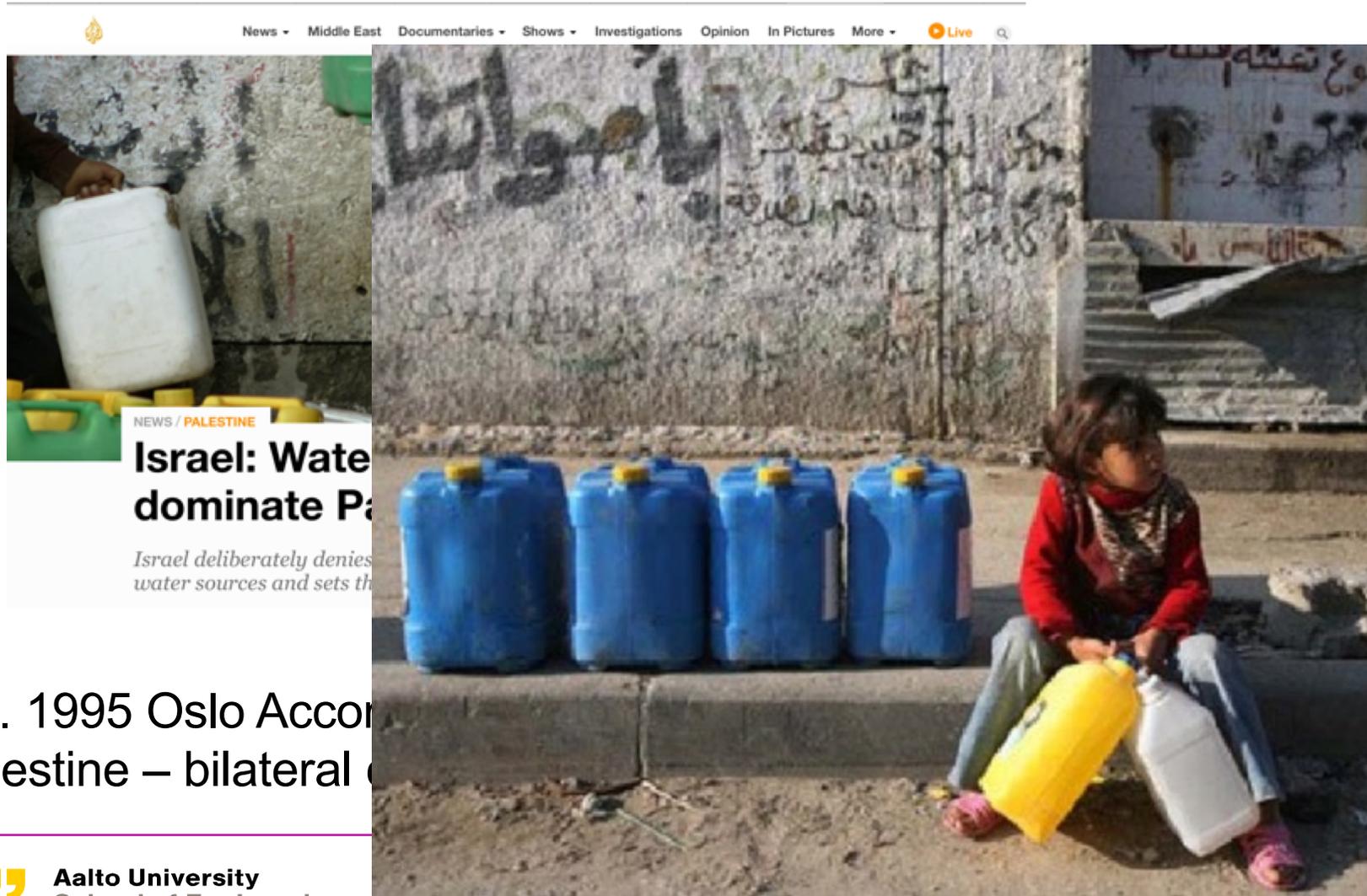


*e.g. 1995 Oslo Accords between Israel & Palestine – bilateral cooperation or domination?*

Ability to shape and control the rules of the game – soft power.  
*‘Carrots and sticks’*

- Coercion in decision-making
- Conflict dressed as cooperation
- Creating, influencing and writing laws

## ii. Bargaining Power (2<sup>nd</sup> Dimension)



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# iii. Ideational Power (3<sup>rd</sup> Dimension)



Capacity to create, uphold, and destroy narratives, perceptions, and knowledge – soft power.

- Language in formal negotiations
- News & other media
- International law reflects and reproduces global discourses
- Framings of problem - e.g. securitisation
- Sovereignty paradox
- Ideas

**Can you recognise any of these 3 dimensions of power in your case studies?**

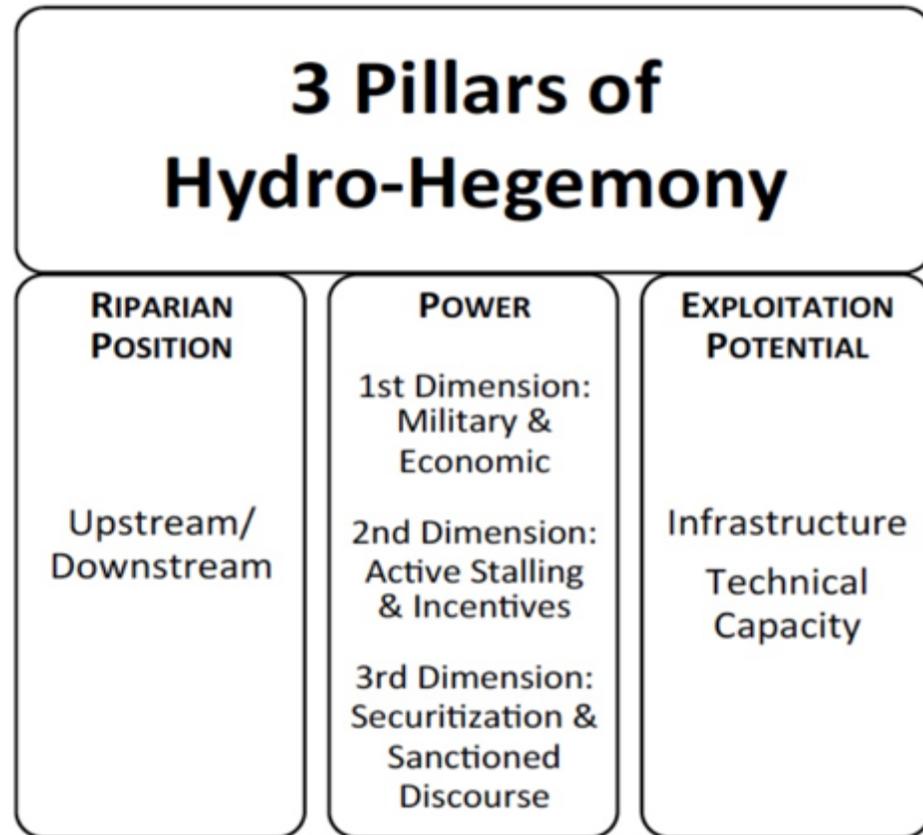
# Hydro-hegemony

The classic hydrological cycle's focus is on biophysical processes, which neglects the ways that humans “move” water globally through politics and economics, and ignores water's cultural and religious significance.

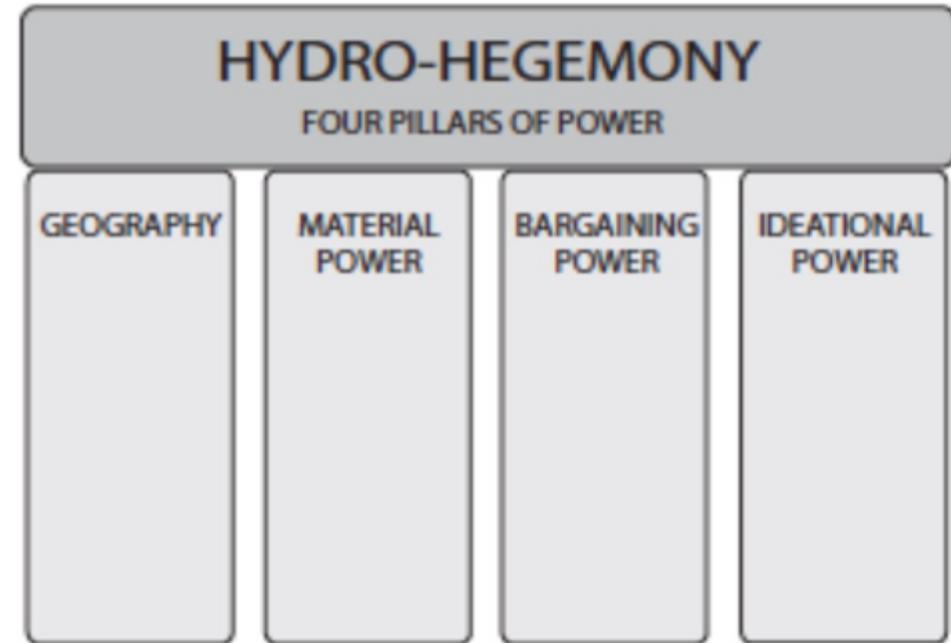
**Hegemony** : “Leadership or dominance, especially by one state or social group over others.”

**Hydro-hegemony**: “hegemony at the river basin level, wherein one state, or a bloc of states, has more control over water flows and usage than other riparians, achieved through water resource control strategies such as resource capture, integration and containment.”

# Analytical Framework of Hydro-hegemony



**Figure 1.** The Original Pillars of Hydro-Hegemony  
(Zeitoun & Warner 2006, pp. 451)



**Figure 2.** The Revised Pillars of Hydro-Hegemony  
(Casção & Zeitoun 2010, pp. 32)

“How do the powerful  
secure the compliance  
of those they dominate  
– and, how do they  
secure their *willing*  
compliance?”



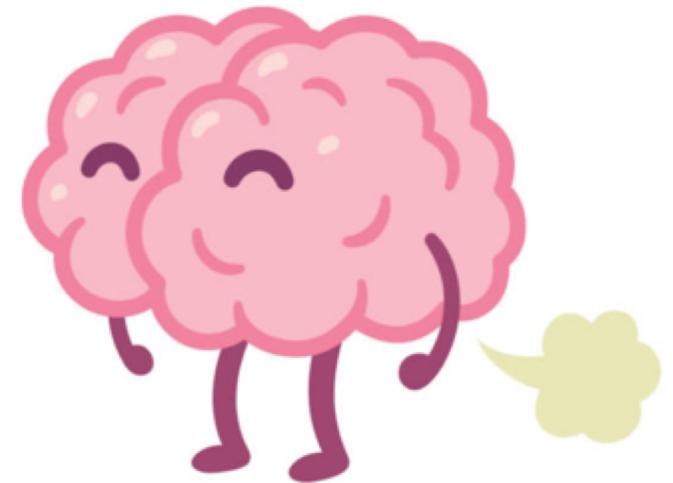
(Lukes 2005 [1974],p. 12)

# Hegemony in Ideas?

Ideas can be hegemonic too – sometimes ‘nirvana concepts’ are pervasive, even with empirical evidence against them. This influences decision-making regarding water (although they can also have their merits – e.g. in inspiring water professionals).

- *E.g. water pricing, IWRM, water wars...*

They tend to **reflect the interests of powerful parties.**



Ideas can 'snowball' and become pervasive, but some can fade away because they fail to establish themselves in competition with more effective concepts.

**They are not immune to critical analysis,  
and by countering them, we can challenge  
exclusion of certain viewpoints or social groups.**

(Molle,2008)



# Water Wars or Water Conflicts?

The "water wars" rationale has been a hegemonic 'common-sense' concept for years, despite clear evidence against them.

- Water is not like oil (it's renewable and inexpensive), most goes to agriculture (farmers starting wars?), and there are better ways to deal with scarcity (e.g. food imports)
- states more often employ words and ideas ahead of actual violence

**BUT – absence of war does not mean absence of conflict.**



The 'water wars' narrative blocks out other, more pressing, narratives:

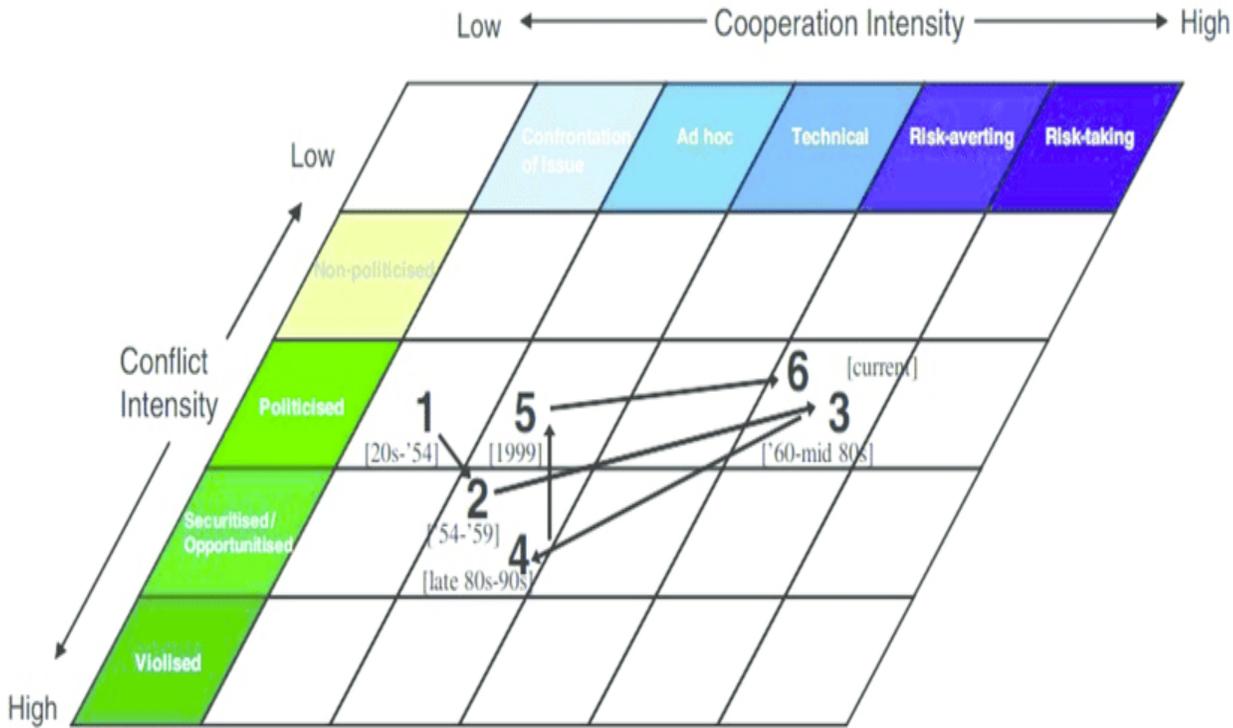
1. Actual cases of resource-based conflicts and associated inequities at the national and sub-national levels – affecting livelihoods of the most vulnerable (e.g. land & water grabs in sub-Saharan Africa; hydropower development in SE Asia).
2. The 'big picture' of transboundary cooperation (e.g. UN Water Convention entering into force).
3. The role that shared waters play in bringing 'parties' together to generate significant economic benefits for society.

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(Cascao et al. 2018)

# Conflict and Cooperation

Conflict and cooperation are not opposites – they can co-exist.



TWINS matrix of conflict and cooperation  
(Mirumachi, 2007)

- Not all conflict is negative
- Some cooperation is based on coercion or submissiveness
  
- Cooperative efforts can be a part of the problem because of power asymmetries
- Hurried diplomacy can perpetuate conflicts.

# Levelling: What Can We Do?

- Turn a 'basin bully' into a 'basin leader'?
- Challenge power and the status quo
- Level the players (e.g. capacity building)
- Level the playing field (e.g. through international law standards, increase bargaining power of non-hegemons, influence regional agendas)
- And others!

*(e.g. Zeitoun, 2012)*

# Key Messages

- Power and politics are key to understanding water interactions across scales.
- ‘Soft’ power is commonly used by hegemonies to coerce the less powerful, and can be harder to identify than ‘hard’ power.
- Ideas can be hegemonic too – e.g. water pricing, IWRM, water wars.
- We can use the theory of hydro-hegemony to analyse power relations and to challenge the status quo.
- Conflict and cooperation can co-exist.
- We can challenge hegemonic arrangements by levelling the playing field and levelling the players – it’s not all doom and gloom!
- We can use ideas of power & politics to question who benefits from water agreements, and for whom we should be advocating.

# Extra Slides

GLOBAL WATER FORUM ARTICLES LEARNING HUB LISTEN COMMUNITY

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## A perfect storm: The hydropolitics of Cape Town's water crisis

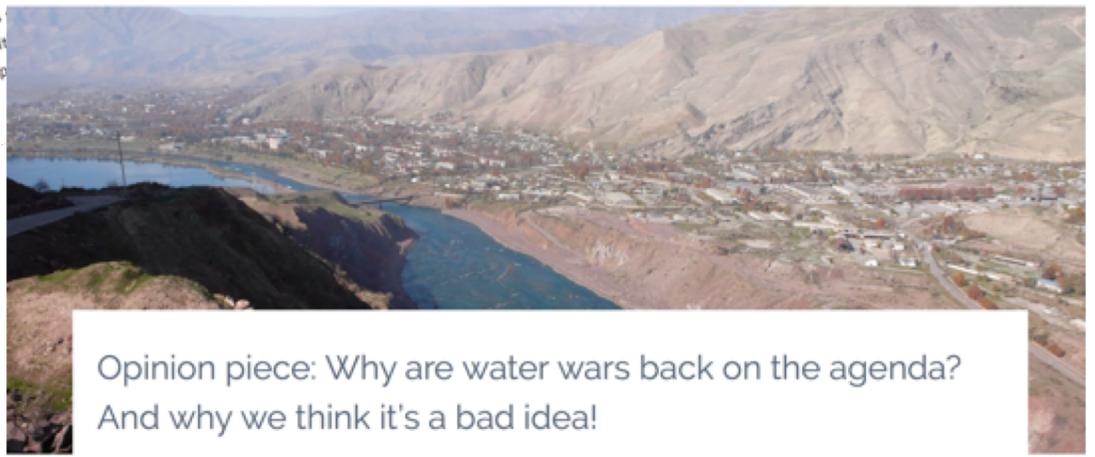
GOVERNANCE | URBAN WATER | WATER SECURITY

April 17th, 2018  
Amy Fallon, GWF Transboundary Editor, Aalto University

As one of the most severe urban droughts in modern history, the Cape Town water crisis has flooded 5 African and international news in recent months. After an unprecedented three-year drought, the city is meet 'Day Zero' by August 2018, with implications for public water access, agriculture, and industry. Although current conservation efforts could mean that Day Zero will be avoided, there are useful lessons the Cape Town experience can offer for effective drought management for other vulnerable cities across the world.

A? Water & Development Research Group

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### Opinion piece: Why are water wars back on the agenda? And why we think it's a bad idea!

News Archive

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> January 2019

# Interesting Cases to Read About

- **Israel-Palestine water conflict → see Zeitoun’s work on the role of power and politics in the conflict, and to learn more about “water wars”.**
  - 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, 214pp.
- **South Africa → Implementation of the 1998 Water Act post-apartheid, and the implications on blacks and minorities. Also the recent Cape Town water crisis, and the role of politics.**
  - *E.g. see work by Barbara van Koppen - e.g. van Koppen, B., Schreiner, B., 2014. Priority General Authorisations in rights-based water use authorisation in South Africa. Water Policy 00: 1–19 & Amy’s short piece on Cape Town.*

# Hydro-Hegemons and International Water Law

- The political processes that create international law are shaped in part by power relations between states.
- Legal norms and institutions often serve to reinforce existing power dynamics.
- Legal norms and institutions can also be leveraged for or against extant hegemonic orders.

*(Farnum et al., 2017)*

# References & further reading

Cascao et al. 2018. Opinion piece: Why are water wars back on the agenda? And why we think it's a bad idea! Available at: <https://wdrg.aalto.fi/opinion-piece-why-are-water-wars-back-on-the-agenda-and-why-we-think-its-a-bad-idea/>

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