On the political sideline? The institutional isolation of donor organizations in Jordanian hydropolitics

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Abstract

Fresh water availability is very low in Jordan. Current water usage is unsustainable and structures of water resource governance are inadequate. Drawing on expert interviews and the analysis of media texts, this study shows that patterns and privileges of water consumption sustain specific political and social orders, aggravating Jordan’s suboptimal water resource deployment. Many of these long-established modes of water distribution are not commensurate with new resource governance structures fostered by international development cooperation. This puts pressure on Jordan’s political elite: the flow of foreign aid stabilizes the regime as does the preservation of existing privileges. It is argued here that maintaining two opposed but coexisting ‘resource realities’, i.e. governance structures and usage patterns of water resources, allows the regime to escape this dilemma. Donor organizations are thus bound to operate in an institutionally isolated sphere in Jordan with only a marginal ability to penetrate the relevant actor groups to trigger profound effects on either resource reality.

Keywords: Development cooperation; Hydropolitics; Jordan; Resource governance; Water scarcity

Introduction

Even though the Kingdom of Jordan has overused its renewable fresh water resources on a significant and long-term basis, 40% of its water demand cannot currently be satisfied (MWI, 2008). If plant-available soil moisture is included, renewable water resources amount to approximately 850 m³ per capita. According to the ‘water stress indicator’ introduced by Falkenmark (1989), this value indicates ‘water scarcity’, a category that can imply threats to human well-being and limits to economic development. The severity of the situation has been long known to Jordan’s political elite. King Abdullah II has even spoken about the ‘strategic challenge’ considering the water resources of his country and has called for more prudent water management (MWI, 2008). Despite this, resource use is characterized by strong ecological and economic non-sustainability: seven of the 12 groundwater aquifers are overexploited at a rate of 135–225% of their safe yield (GTZ & MWI, 2004).

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The international donor community has been seeking to alleviate Jordan’s water scarcity for the last four decades with a variety of approaches. Based on the ‘ingenuity-gap’ theory by Homer-Dixon (1995) and its further development into the ‘social resource scarcity’ thesis by Ohlsson (1999), current paradigms of development cooperation generally treat the global water crisis as a management and governance crisis, rather than as a deficit of the physical resource itself. In the course of the current paradigm of ‘Integrated Water Resource Management’, strengthening institutional structures within the water sector has become the leitmotif of donor activity (cf. USAID, 2010). The German donor organization ‘Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit’ (GIZ, formerly GTZ) has introduced so-called ‘water user associations’, which play a mediating role between the governmental water supplier and the local farmers in the Jordan Valley. Another example is the introduction of the ‘Highland Water Forum’ by the GIZ, serving as an exchange platform between subsistence agriculture, agribusiness and government agencies. Although these and similar projects have allowed some interim goals to be reached on the way to an institutional change in Jordan’s water resource governance, the main objectives are still far away: cross-social awareness for the causes of water scarcity; adequate formal and informal institutions for water resource governance; and significant changes in resource utilization and management. In the course of institutional change, donor organizations above all demand two revisions: first, an adjustment of water prices and subsidies in the water sector to trigger a sectoral shift of water resource uses to increase factor productivity; and second, the streamlining and disentangling of administrative structures in the water sector. None of this has yet been implemented.

This paper focuses on the specific power politics in Jordan to explain the hesitant changes in water resource governance. The relatively unstable position of the Hashemite Royal House within Jordan’s elite structure and its dependence on foreign aid (cf. Antoun, 2000) serve as the study’s pivotal points. The paper shows that water use patterns and distribution privileges serve to maintain the existing power-political and social order. These power-political considerations yield frictions which hamper a socially and economically sustainable water resource management.

Method

The present study employs the methods of qualitative social research. During three research visits, 36 semi-structured expert interviews were conducted. Initially the first interviewees were selected by their authorship of relevant policy papers in the Jordanian water sector. The selection was then extended using a ‘snowball system’: interviewees were requested to name other individuals in the water sector who, in their opinion, play an important role in the interaction process between water agencies and donors. The chosen interviewees included high-ranking representatives from the following institutions: ministries (Ministry of Water and Irrigation (MWI): five interviews; Ministry of Agriculture (MOA): four interviews; Ministry of Environment: one interview); other official agencies and institutions (Jordan Valley Authority: one interview; National Centre for Agricultural Research and Extension: two interviews; Royal Water Committee: one interview); employees of German, American and international agencies for development cooperation: nine interviews; Jordanian scholars: five interviews; representatives of professional and religious associations: three interviews; non-governmental organizations (NGOs): three interviews; and entrepreneurs in the agribusiness sector: two interviews. The interview analysis was conducted using the Toulmin Model of Argument (Toulmin, 2003 [1958]). Some of the interviewees were revisited and confronted with statements from other interviewees (presented anonymously), using the Delphi method.
Additionally, an extensive media analysis of Jordanian and international publications was carried out. A corpus of policy and strategy papers from donors, agencies and NGOs was considered and analysed (part of it in summary, part of it in depth) using the Toulmin Model. Another text corpus, including about 700 articles from the daily Jordanian newspaper *Jordan Times*, was compiled. The articles were collected systematically from 2008 and evaluated. The primary aim was neither to use the *Jordan Times* as a source of reliable data nor (given the intense censorship in Jordan’s media) as an account of public debate, but rather as a way of studying the official discourse produced by the Jordanian authorities and the government. For that purpose, the newspaper proved an appropriate source, since it is owned by Jordan Press Foundation, a mainly government-controlled institution, and can in this regard be seen as a government mouthpiece.

Further research included an analysis of the ‘logics of practice’ of individual actor groups to reconstruct power relations and interests. Following Pierre Bourdieu’s theoretical conceptualization, logics of practice denote the ‘social rules of the game’ by means of which resources are utilized and allocated (cf. Wacquant, 1989).

**Results and discussion**

**Mitigating Jordan’s water scarcity: conflicting preferences**

Jordan features many of the characteristics of a semi-rentier state: attracting financial support is an inherent part of foreign policy and an important pillar used to stabilize the position of the Royal House within the elite structures of domestic policy (cf. Lancaster & Lancaster, 1999; Bouillon, 2002; Ibrahim, 2006). In the last decade, grants and soft loans (of an average of 768 million USD, which is about 7% of Jordan’s gross domestic product (GDP)) have been allowed by international donors every year. Most of the funding has been supplied by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the European Union, the World Bank and German donor agencies. The assistance of neighbouring Arab countries has played a minor role within this period of time. In terms of total amount of funds supplied, the water sector was the biggest beneficiary. More than half of the funds raised were allocated for urgently needed infrastructure projects, thus forming a direct relief for the Jordanian national budget (infrastructure c.57%, consultancy and studies c.40%, campaigns c.3%; MOPIC, 2011). Apart from a direct amelioration of the water supply situation within the country by financial, material or conceptual assistance, there is at least an indirect exercise of political influence on the patterns of resource governance belonging to the preferred goals of the donor organizations. The aim is to call for political measures within the recipient country that fight the causes of water resource scarcity and not only treat the symptoms. The most important measures called for (allocation through pricing and resource management) have already been mentioned above. From this perspective, the problem of water resource scarcity is regarded mainly as Jordan’s domestic problem, caused by national shortcomings and solvable through domestic institutional changes on a cross-social and trans-sectoral scale. The most intensive criticism is directed towards the use of groundwater for irrigation purposes in the north-eastern and south-eastern parts of the country. The main arguments of the donors’ discursive framing of water scarcity as a ‘home-made’ problem are that:

- irrigation farming consumes the biggest share of available fresh water (c.65–70%; MWI, 2008);
- at c.50%, on-farm irrigation efficiency is low (USAID, 2006);
• the small contribution of the agricultural sector to the GDP of just about 3% (GOJ, 2006) does not justify the high water resource input;
• the high subsidies for agriculture of about 2.7% of GDP (GOJ, 2006) set wrong incentives and cause suboptimal resource allocation;
• the agricultural goods produced do not match international standards, which narrows export opportunities; and
• agriculture has only a minimal effect on employment: only 3.1% of the working population work full-time in agriculture whilst 89% of permanent agricultural labour is foreign (DOS, 2007).

In contrast to this discursive framing, the storyline used by Jordan’s authorities and expressed in the media is quite different. Mostly external factors, outside the country’s circle of influence, are named as reason for Jordan’s water scarcity. The following lines of argument can be differentiated.

• The influx of refugees: Jordan was forced to absorb a large number of refugees during the Arab–Israeli wars and the US wars on terror. Over the last decades, this massive population growth has caused an abnormal pressure on water resources.
• Jordan’s geopolitical misfortune: Jordan is surrounded by military and economically predominant neighbours, ‘digging off’ Jordan’s fair share of transboundary water resources. Most prominently mentioned are Israel (Jordan River), Syria (Yarmouk River) and Saudi Arabia (Disi Aquifer).
• The burden of former incorrect planning: the deterioration of the unique Azraq Wetlands, the formerly lax assignment of concessions to large agribusiness companies for fossil groundwater use and the deficient regulations concerning well drilling have all created burdens which have still to be rectified.
• Global climate change: in 2009 Jordan’s media reported anthropogenic climate change as one of the biggest threats to the kingdom’s water resources and even claimed the volume of surface water flows was already reduced by 30% due to climate change (cf. Jordan Times, 2009b, c), although no reference to the source of this figure was given.

The ‘Jordanian storyline’ and the ‘donor storyline’ are not only opposed to each other when describing the reasons for water scarcity but also opposed in relation to the possible courses of action to overcome the problem. Jordan opts for measures of supply enhancement; enormous infrastructure projects are either in planning stages or even already being constructed. For the so-called ‘Red–Dead Canal’, which is planned to link the Red Sea with the Dead Sea via a pipeline, investors and a political agreement between the three involved parties (Israel, Jordan, Palestinian Authority) are still being sought. The canal will make seawater desalination possible on a grand scale and the resulting brine could be used to stop the rapid drawdown of the water level in the Dead Sea. Another proposed venture, the ‘Jordan Red Sea Project’, follows a similar concept, albeit on a smaller scale, though the funding and implementation have yet to be secured. The ‘Disi Water Conveyance’, another megaproject, is at a stage further and currently under construction. With estimated building costs of c.1,100 million USD, a pipeline has been built which, from July 2013, will supply the city of Amman with c.107 million m³ of fresh water annually. The water will be pumped from the fossil Disi Aquifer in the country’s south-east. Both Jordan’s media and representatives of governmental agencies style these megaprojects as the perfect solution to simultaneously overcome future water scarcity and restore natural habitats.
Perpetuating logics of practice: Jordan’s faith in the ‘hydraulic mission’

The extension of the existing water supply is politically opportune for Jordan’s Royal House. Despite the rising demand for water, extending the supply allows the status quo of water use patterns to be preserved, thus circumnavigating dangerous political cliffs: *de jure* the existing water laws are obligatory within the whole kingdom but *de facto* there are so-called ‘tribal areas’ where rights to water are assigned by principles that do not match the official legislation. Granting a certain amount of autonomy to such areas (which are mainly inhabited by kinship-based groups) is a concession made by the Royal House. In return, the Royal House receives the loyalty that helps to preserve its position within Jordan’s elite structure. Disruptions to this balanced political order have led to incidents such as attacks by people living in these areas on employees of governmental water suppliers trying to install or read meters to issue bills. Drilling wells, not approved by official authorities, can also often be observed. Another political cliff is the narrative of an original Transjordan culture based on the Bedouin lifestyle and on subsistence farming. Originally from Saudi Arabia and installed by British mandate power, the Hashemites emphasize such cultural clichés and endorse accordant practices to prove their local affiliation. An alteration of such societal ordering by the Royal House would mean a weakening of its own position. As these two examples show, patterns of water use, as logics of practice, are inherently part of a fragile system of social order and political power in Jordan. A change of logics of practice as demanded by the donors, in the form of institutional change, directly triggers feedback in this fragile balanced system.

In contrast to the philosophy of supply enhancement, most donor organizations see better demand management as a way to overcome Jordan’s resource dilemma. The megaprojects are often criticized as being too expensive and ecologically not sustainable (cf. USAID, 2008a, b). Furthermore, such projects can be seen as relics of a bygone era of uncritical faith in technology and the art of engineering; this ‘hydraulic mission’, as Allan (2002) termed this period, is difficult for Jordan to follow today, as many donor organizations are reluctant to finance such ventures. As illustrated in Figure 1, Jordan’s Royal House has to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds: the explanation for water resource scarcity which is politically opportune in Jordan is only hard to ‘promote’ to international donors because it does not fit into current paradigms of development cooperation and does not match the donors’

![Diagram of discursive framings](https://iwaponline.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/DiscursiveFraming.png)  

**Fig. 1.** Two different discursive framings of the reasons for Jordan’s water scarcity.
agenda of resource governance. However, to keep up funding, a kind of ‘goodwill’ must be exhibited. But the action requested by donors is hard to introduce within the country and threatens the power-political position of the Royal House.

So far, the two opposing storylines concerning the causes of Jordan’s water scarcity and the respective mitigation measures have been outlined. In the following section, the mechanisms of ‘promotion’ and ‘mediation’, as symbolized by the opposing arrows in Figure 1, are discussed. These mechanisms can be seen as discourse strategies applied to bridge the gap between the two opposing storylines. In detail, two questions arise: first, which strategies are applied by the Jordanian authorities to effectively promote their own conceptions of resource governance within the donor community and secure funding for the planned megaprojects? and second, what social impact does the donors’ critique on the unsustainable water resource use in irrigated agriculture have in Jordan and which modifications of resource governance does this critique trigger?

**Jordan’s discourse strategy: embracing demand management and appraising supply enhancement**

A brief analysis of the four ‘water strategies’ published by ministries during the last 20 years sheds light on Jordan’s promotional strategies (MMRAE, 1991; MWI, 1997, 2002, 2008). These lengthy documents draft a detailed picture of Jordan’s water resources and their utilization. Different ‘visions’ are presented as cornerstones of future water resource governance. The arguments made within official strategy papers are a remarkable mimicry of the respective prevailing international paradigms of water resource governance. Amongst employees of Jordan ministries and donor organizations, these official water strategy papers are perceived as ‘advertisement booklets’. Nonetheless, newly published strategies are received optimistically by most donors and appreciated as commitments, showing that Jordan is on the right track to handle its water crisis and that thus it is an eligible partner (USAID, 2010). The considerable development and alteration of particular master paradigms of water resource governance have been carved out by Allan (2005) in his ‘Trajectories of freshwater use in the Northern and the Southern economies’. Each of Jordan’s ‘water strategies’ takes the respectively prevailing paradigm of international development policy and translates it into dominating dicta within the text. For the 1991 strategy, ‘sustainability’ was the guideline for action. In line with the ‘neoliberal turn’ in water resource governance policies at the beginning of the 1990s, the commodification of water resources and the demand for an economically efficient resource allocation were the key aspects of the 1997 strategy. The 2002 strategy and, even more so, that of 2008 strongly serve the newer institutional approaches of water management. The individual strategies pick up the particular main points of donor critiques and vow to reform, using full-bodied commitments according to each particular donor ideal. The main points taken on in the current water strategy (MWI, 2008) are supply-orientated water management, the massive consumption of groundwater within irrigated agriculture and the lack of any problem awareness in society. In official statements, such commitments are often linked to references to the inalienability of proposed megaprojects. Due to the opposed direction of the underlying arguments, this occasionally leads to argumentative contradictions, as this quote from Prime Minister Dahabi shows:

‘The plan [Jordan’s water strategy, 2008–2022] cites a water deficit of 638 million cubic metres in 2007. The minister said better water management is the answer to this problem. Even when the Disi project is fully implemented, he told the meeting, the deficit will be about 503 million cubic metres in
2022. These figures highlight the vitality of implementing desalination projects under the Red–Dead project, he said’ (Jordan Times, 2009a; emphasis added).

With regard to Jordan’s ‘promotional strategy’ for attracting funding and grants from development organizations, the following recurring theme can be observed: although demand management is the preferable option, all possible actions in this regard have already been taken and thus it is now time to turn to supply management. Despite the success achieved in demand management, the severity of water scarcity forces additional infrastructure to be built for supply. The proposed projects are make-or-break decisions, which, if rejected, could threaten the well-being of a whole nation. In contrast to that statement, the reality shows that existing measures of demand management are far from being fully implemented yet: within the last few decades, progress over subsidy reduction, reduction of groundwater allocation to irrigated agriculture and bureaucracy reduction has been achieved at best de jure, but not de facto. Employees of donor organizations working on the ground are aware of this situation but try to be pragmatic and justify the slow improvements with the motto ‘Rome wasn’t built in a day’, whilst noting the similarly very slow reactions of western industrialized nations to their environmental problems.

‘Resource realities’ in Jordan: opposed but untroubled

The second question raised concerns the societal impact in Jordan aroused by the donors’ critique of unsustainable water use. As stated above, groundwater use in irrigated agriculture is one of the pivotal points of this critique. Water resources are scarce and thus should be utilized according to the maxim ‘more profit per drop’, meaning that water should be diverted to sectors with high factor productivity. This normative demand by the donors also constitutes the backbone of the current official Jordanian water strategy (MWI, 2008). As several studies have shown, there is a broad awareness of water scarcity among Jordanians (Theodory, 1999; ECODIT, 2011). This awareness is fed by people’s day-to-day experiences: water supply in Amman is intermittent; households receive water only once or twice a week; the absence of precipitation and low dam levels are regular topics in the daily press. However, only 1% of the people questioned shared the donors’ view that reducing agricultural water is the key to the problem. Most people see natural factors (arid climate) or the failure of governmental agencies (ailing infrastructure) as decisive (ECODIT, 2010). In contrast to the actual situation, agriculture is ranked by respondents as the second-most-important sector in the Jordanian economy (USAID, 2009). This suggests that donor requests, which have been verbalized for about two decades, may be strongly repeated within official policy documents but play hardly any role in the public discourse. Why are donor arguments receiving such little attention?

Jordan shows a strong institutional detachment of actor groups with differing logics of practice. Antagonistic logics of practice go along with opposed ‘resource realities’, i.e. governance structures and usage patterns of water resources, produced to legitimize one’s own action. This circumstance is well illustrated by the example of the absolute non-cooperation between the MWI and the MOA. Interviews conducted at management level in both ministries show that there are no sector-comprehensive approaches between the two agencies – not to mention any concrete action – although water resource management is a core responsibility of both ministries. Both agencies serve a specific group of actors with their respective resource realities. This enables a parallel coexistence of opposing resource realities in Jordan. Institutional detachment reduces friction between groups of antagonistic logics of practice. To a large extent, the MWI follows the donor discourse. After the Ministry of Planning and
International Cooperation, it is the central cooperation partner for donors in the water sector. Following the donor discourse, the MWI emphasizes the following issues: groundwater use in agriculture must be cut radically, since its contribution to the GDP is very low (about 3%); agribusiness serves only a small, well-connected elite group; water-intensive crops can be obtained from the world market instead of being grown in Jordan. The opposite viewpoint is represented by the MOA, which does not cooperate with donors: agriculture’s contribution to the GDP is not 3% (as claimed by the donors and some Jordanian agencies) but 30%; irrigated agriculture reflects true Jordanian culture and has been practised since the dawn of civilization; local agriculture reduces dependence on the world market for food; agriculture uses water that otherwise could not be utilized. Jordan’s big agribusiness enterprises also sail under this banner. The companies are mostly owned by politically well-connected businessmen and representatives of influential tribes. Large firms with over 100 hectares account for only 0.4% of all enterprises but farm 30% of the agricultural area (computation base; DOS, 2007). Most of these holdings can be found in the arid regions of Jordan’s north-east and south-east (around Mafraq, Azraq and Disi-Mudawwara). In most cases they were established in the 1980s, stimulated by governmental incentives. The owners’ social structure, the sizes of enterprises and the source of irrigation water differ from those of the Jordan Valley, where mostly treated wastewater is used on smaller parcels of land.

Although agribusiness uses a significant share of the available fresh water, this fact is hardly recognized within public debate and much less criticized. One of the reasons for this is agribusiness’s ability to count on the appreciation of agriculture in Jordan as a traditional and authentic business. Thus the values it claims include that: agribusiness considers itself to be the preserver of employment in rural areas, as the sustainer of cultivated landscapes, as the bearer of the Jordanian culture of desert cultivation and as the guarantor of food security. Furthermore it has other important values, such as providing foreign exchange via crop export and preventing rural depopulation. Despite numerous awareness campaigns conducted by donor organizations within the last few years, they have not been able to emerge from the shadow of their respective cooperation partners in the water sector – namely the MWI and the affiliated Jordan Valley Authority, and the Water Authority of Jordan. The ‘institutional isolation’ in which these organizations are encapsulated could not be overcome and donor arguments are hardly noticed.

**Conclusion**

**The institutional isolation of donor organizations in Jordan**

This paper has identified two opposing but parallel storylines about the causes of Jordan’s water scarcity. The Jordanian authorities and media see external factors as being responsible for water scarcity, and measures of supply enhancement are suggested as a proper solution to the crisis. Most international donor organizations engaging in Jordan’s water sector disagree, perceiving demand management and good resource governance as adequate measures to alleviate water scarcity. According to the donor organizations’ resource reality, false incentives provoke unsustainable deployment of water resources in agribusiness. But the implementation of the donors’ resource reality into a broad public discourse is insufficient and thus the effect on prevalent logics of practice is small. The exertion of influence is complicated by the fact that the water question is often stylized as a national affair in Jordan, which leads to an attitude of ‘yes to projects but no to political interference’. Due to a *de facto* censorship
of Jordan’s media, the shaping of public opinion is impeded. Thus a significant debate about reasons for water scarcity hardly exists in Jordan. At the institutional level, water resource governance was strongly centralized and put under the umbrella of the Royal House by the foundation of the ‘Royal Water Committee’ in 2008. Although the committee comprises representatives of all relevant agencies, no level of cooperation has evolved because of the high churn rate of personnel (as described by one member of the committee). Another problem concerning coherent policy in the water sector is the King’s own tendency to serve as his people’s advocate by toppling Cabinet decisions. In September 2009, for example, he reversed a price adjustment decision for water and electricity.

If donor organizations want to affect the logics of practice of water resource use in Jordan and thus impact resource governance, they will have to escape institutional isolation. As foreigners, and thus outsiders to the ‘national problem’ of water scarcity, these organizations have the appearance of experts but not concerned parties, which strongly reduces their weight in the debate. Approaches for sustainable resource governance may originate from international donors but must be spread by local mediators, in each case well connected within their local communities. Such mediators serving as nuclei for cross-social awareness need to have a high level of personal involvement, possess a certain moral authority and hold adequate social status within their respective communities. Current donor projects, such as the ‘Highland Water Forum’ by GIZ, which has been gathering dialogue partners from politics, agriculture and science in regular round-table talks since 2010, could contribute to develop a cross-social awareness. The participants in the forum were identified as suitable opinion formers after network analysis. The aim is to find comprehensive solutions to the depletion of the local groundwater basins by irrigated agriculture. GIZ itself only has organizing functions without any involvement in the debate. So far, the outcomes have included an acknowledgement of the severity of the problem and a general willingness to tackle it, though tangible commitments are yet to come.

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