



THE LINK BETWEEN WATER-RELATED RISKS AND CONFLICT

Dr. Susanne Schmeier

IHE Delft Institute for Water Education

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Excerpts from slides prepared for Water, Peace and Security tailor-made capacity development activities in Iraq. Please attribute authors when using materials.

The link between water and conflict can be complicated

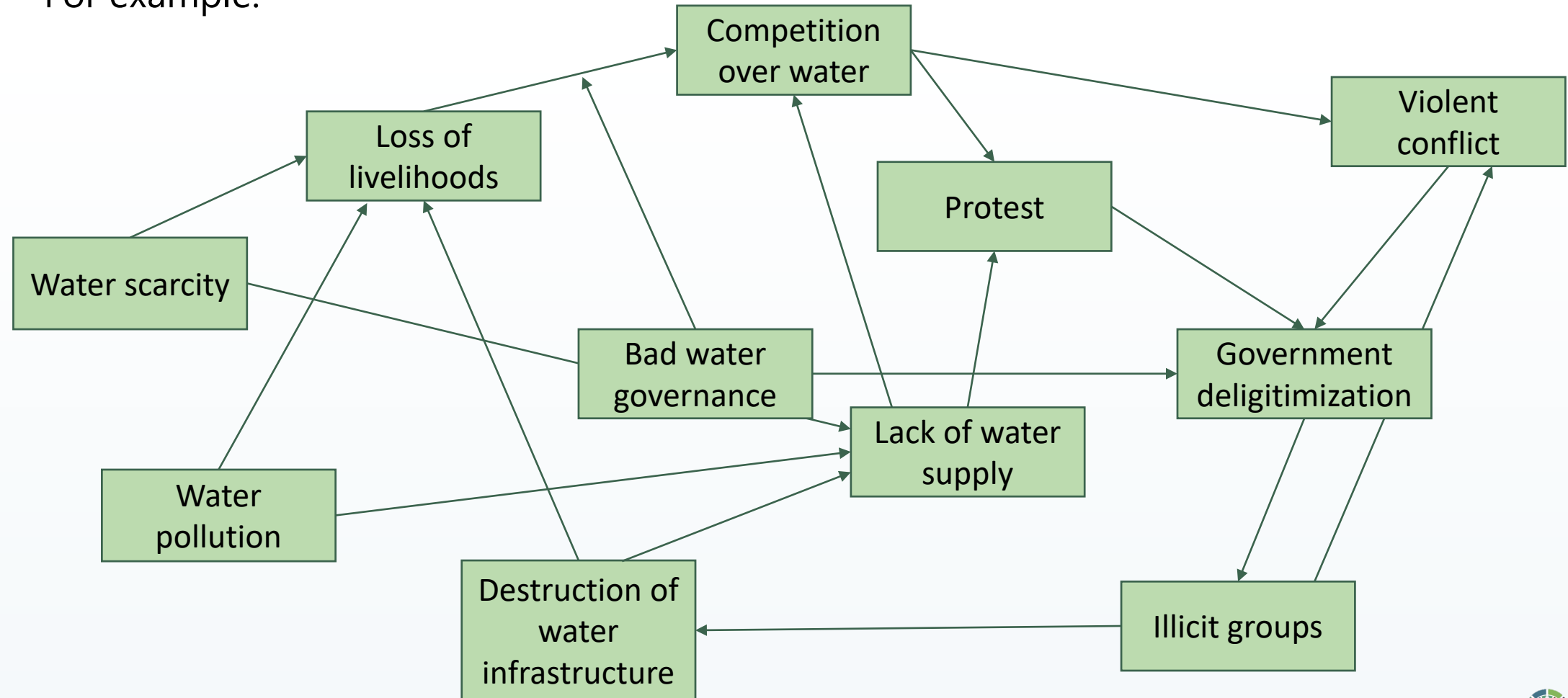
- Many people assume that water-related risks (especially scarcity) directly leads to competition or conflict between different water users
 - Simply, water -> conflict
- Reality is much more complex
 - In some places a water-related risk does not result in conflict
 - Sometimes a conflict becomes violent, sometimes not
 - Sometimes, water is not the only or not even the main trigger of conflict
 - ...
- We therefore have to understand the link between water and conflict in more detail
- This can provide the basis for conflict prevention or mitigation

Intervening factors

- The link between water and conflict is determined by many other factors that influence if water-related risks lead to conflict, when they do so, what intensity the conflict will have, etc.
- These factors are
 - Speed at which water resources change
 - State of water infrastructure
 - Population growth/change
 - Dependency on water for livelihoods and economic development
 - Access to alternative sources of livelihoods
 - Economic development level/inequality
 - Prevailing instability and conflict
 - Geopolitical rivalry and conflict
 - Governance quality/effectiveness
 - ...

Many factors shape the relationship between water and conflict

- For example:



The relationship between water and conflict also varies

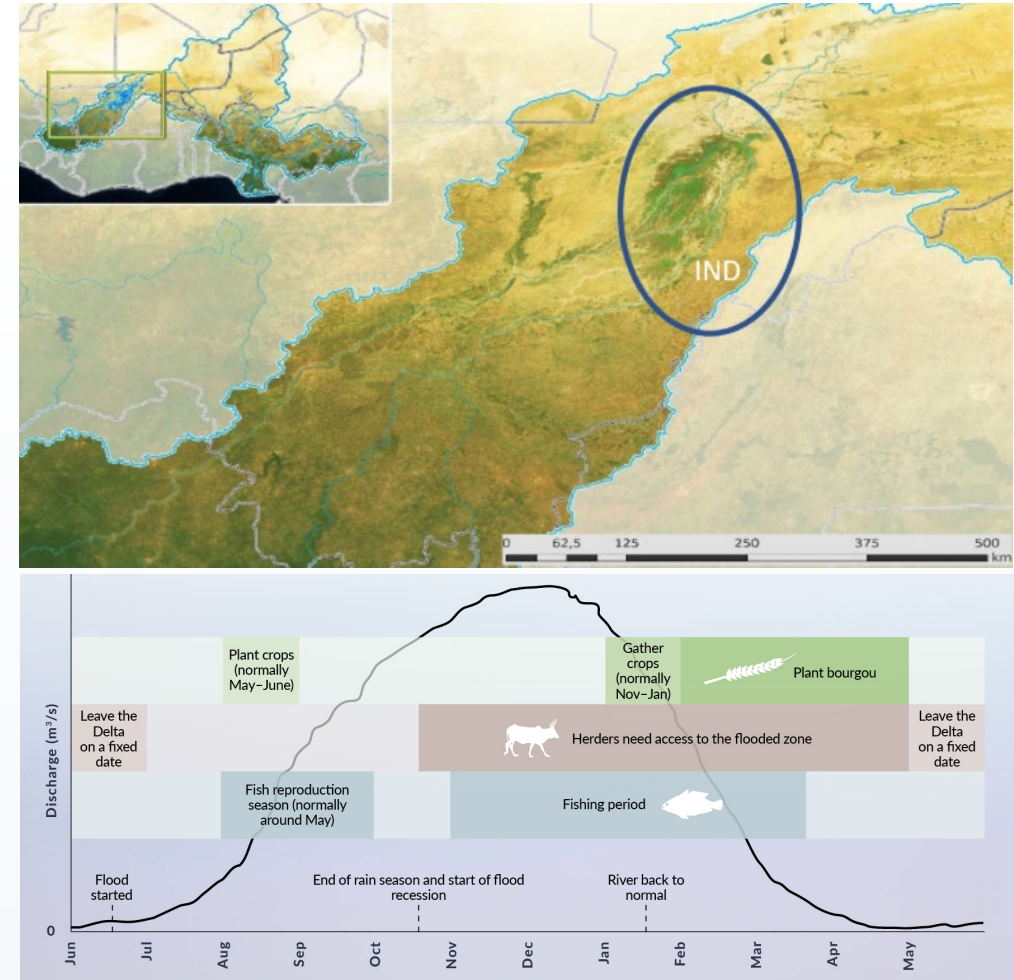
- Relationships can include:
 - Water as a source
 - Water as a threat multiplier
 - Water and geopolitical dynamics
 - Water as a trigger for fragility
 - Water affected by conflict
 - Water as a weapon

Water as a source of conflict

- Conflict over water typically occurs as a result of scarcity and competition
 - Environmental change, population growth or unequal distribution of resources lead to perceptions where different actors see their benefits from water resources negatively affected
 - This leads to situations in which water users see their interests as incompatible with the interests of others
 - This can lead to direct conflict (e.g. fights over a well or water infrastructure) or indirect conflict
- Water is, however, rarely the sole source of conflict – typically it interacts with other conflict drivers

Example: Competition between farmers and herders in Mali

- Dry area of high ecological sensitivity, transboundary setting (with upstream infrastructure developments)
- High dependence on population on water resources for subsistence livelihoods
- Area suffering from instability and conflict already (ethnic tensions, fragility, terrorism, religious extremism)
- Government focuses on large-scale agriculture investments, which will most likely increase inequalities
- Led to conflicts between farmers, herders and fishermen as they compete over increasingly limited resources



Water as a threat multiplier

- Very often, water is not the only or not even the most important factor that drives conflict
- Instead, it often plays the role as a threat multiplier – adding water to existing challenges other than water can be additional oil added to the fuel
- It is then the combination of water factors (drought, scarcity, floods, pollution, etc.) and other factors that leads to conflict

Example: Water-related conflicts and general insecurity in Lake Chad

- Lake surface highly variable since centuries – now increasing pressure by climate change
- Population highly dependent on water (agriculture, drinking water, herding fisheries)
- Water-related conflicts between water users, deprivation of water-related livelihoods
- Political and humanitarian crisis in the lake area (economic crisis, absence of government, terrorism/extremist groups)
- In this context, the additional conflict potential water brings has deteriorated security situation further
- Recently attempts to address security situation (Multi-National Joint Task Force) – not sufficiently linked to water yet



Water and geopolitical dynamics

- When water is shared between countries, relations over water are also influenced by more general relations between countries (trade, political, cultural, etc.)
- Geopolitics also plays a role – relations between the states, history of conflict, questions of power
- In turn, a deterioration in relations over water can also negatively affect more general relations between countries and regional stability overall

Example: The Nile water conflict

- Longest and one of the biggest river systems with 11 riparian states and > 100 million people
- Highly uneven distribution of water (86% of water from Ethiopia) and use (75% utilized by Egypt)
- Basin connects different countries, cultures and political systems and priorities
- Existing cooperation agreements stem from colonial period or are not accepted by all basin states
- Disagreements over water (CFA, GERD) embedded in broader geopolitical competition between states
- Has led to highly conflictive situation, including threats of war, possible destabilization of countries, etc.

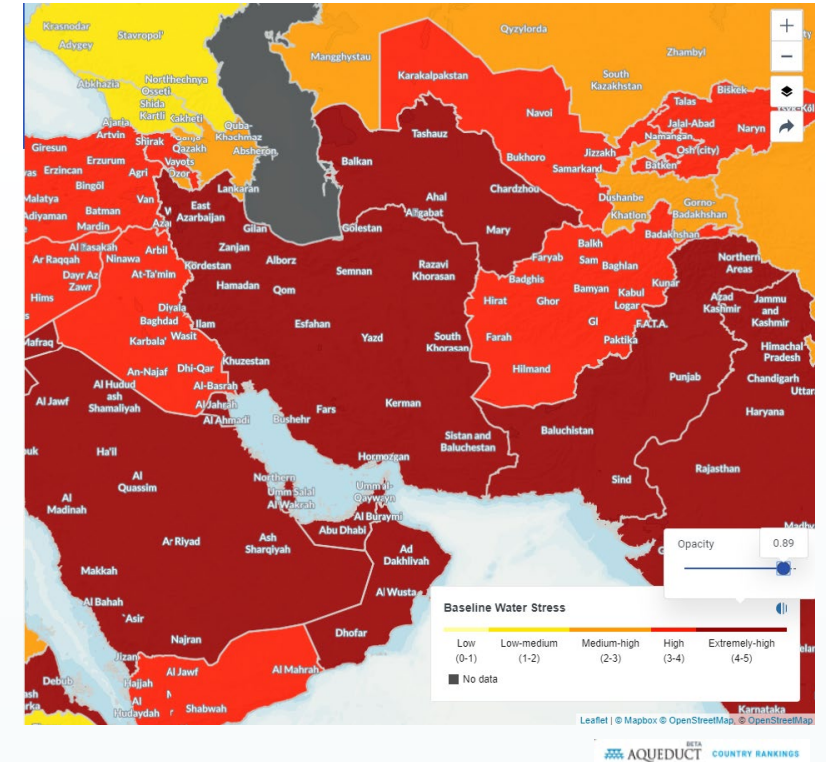


Water as a trigger for fragility

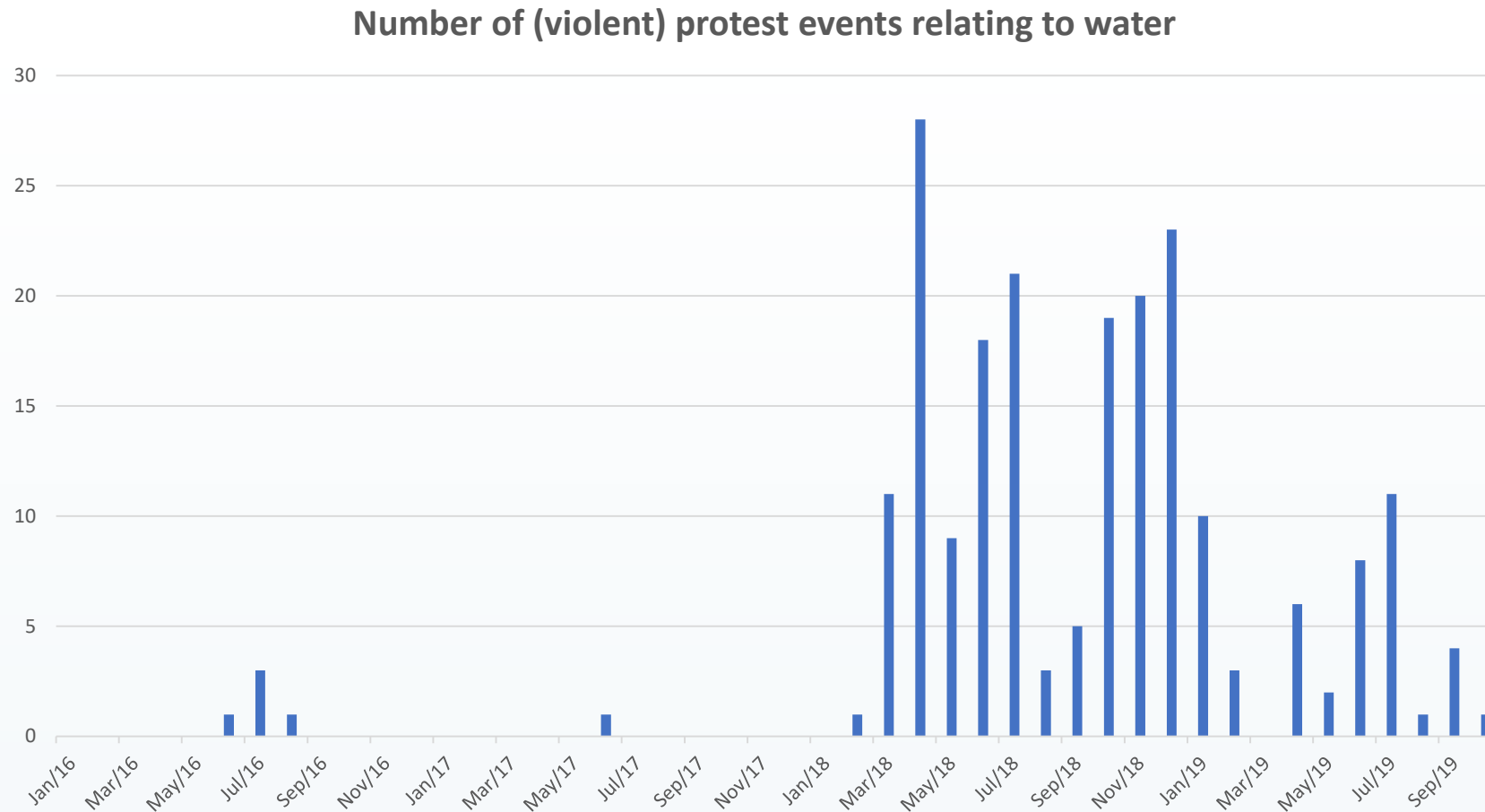
- Water supply is a key basic service governments provide to their population
- The inability of governments to provide such services can trigger dissatisfaction of (local) populations
- This can lead to
 - Protests against government authorities
 - Protests against infrastructure schemes (including damaging or destruction)
 - Search for alternative authority/management capacity
- This can lead to a destabilization of an entire government, especially if other factors foster instability as well
- This can also provide a fertile ground for illicit groups, extremist groups/terrorist groups, etc.

Example: Water-related protests in Iran

- One of the most water-stressed countries in the world
- Population growth, high dependence on water, especially for agriculture
- Rapid water infrastructure development and inadequate water management and governance
- Consequences are
 - Increasing water scarcity and depletion of water resources
 - Environmental challenges (rivers drying, sand storms, etc.)
- Leads to competition, conflict and instability
 - Competition between users (urban /rural, agriculture/industry)
 - Increasingly common protests over water issues
 - Internal migration (rural to urban)
 - Undermining of government legitimacy
 - Tensions with neighboring states



Example: Water-related protests in Iran



Water affected by conflict

- Violent conflict, civil war and war damage infrastructure, often including water infrastructure (water treatment plants, dams, water supply schemes, irrigation schemes)
- Often, these damages are unintentional – however, they affect the population and the economy of an affected region
- International law prohibits the targeting of water infrastructure (whether intentional or not), however, increasingly happening, especially also in conflicts other than state-to-state conflicts

Example: Water infrastructure in Yemen

- Water infrastructure has been destroyed as a consequence of years of war, civil war and fighting
- This include both collateral damage and direct targeting of water infrastructure
- Water supply networks in the country's cities are now all at the risk of collapse
- As consequence, more than 15 million people have been cut of from regular access to water and sanitation
- This has led to health effects, effects on livelihoods, etc.



Water as a weapon

- Refers to direct and targeted attacks on water resources and water infrastructure in the context of violent conflict
- Is used as a means to pursue certain conflict goals (holding population hostage, diverting water to controlled areas, threatening downstream populations), but also more indirectly to manifest control over a certain area
- Is employed by both state and non-state actors (with international law not applying to the latter)

Example: The use of water as a weapon in Syria

- In the civil war in Syria, water has been used as a weapon by various actors
- Included
 - the interruption or destruction of water supply systems e.g. to Aleppo
 - the destruction of irrigation infrastructure
 - the sieging of dams
- ISIS/Daesh has been particularly prominently using attacks on and the siege of water infrastructure as a means of conflict
- Attacks on water and water infrastructure have been undertaken by almost all parties involved in the conflict



What is known about the water-security nexus

- Water-related risks and instability and conflict are clearly linked – yet often not directly and in a straightforward manner
- Water is hardly ever the sole cause of instability and conflict – it often acts as a contributing or escalating factor
- The water-conflict nexus interacts with many other factors, creating a complex web of interdependencies
- Many intervening factors contribute to this web including food and energy security, population, economic development and diversification, governance, and more
- These intervening factors determine the link between water-related risks and conflict and the intensity of this relationship

Understanding the water-conflict relationship and intervening factors that influence it help to understand that important factors (e.g., water, environmental resources, governance) are considered in conflict resolution/dialogue and conflict mitigation.

Activity

- In groups of 2, brainstorm a list of how water relates to conflict or displacement within Iraq
- Identify the relationship as
 - Water as a source
 - Water as a threat multiplier
 - Water and geopolitical dynamics
 - Water as a trigger for fragility
 - Water affected by conflict
 - Water as a weapon
- Discuss in the bigger group how these different relationships between water and conflict may affect dialogue