



# Water Scarcity Is Helping Radicalize the Middle East

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Al Qaeda is building wells in Yemen, ISIS is trying to capture dams in Iraq, and Hezbollah doled out cans of H<sub>2</sub>O in Lebanon during the 2006 war with Israel. Until the Middle East's colossal water crisis is alleviated, militant and extremist groups may continue to exploit the shortage to gain power, loyalty, and state-like legitimacy.

Lack of water empowers extremists. Nearly [1.6 billion people confront economic water scarcity](#), and the Middle East's arid climate—along with [an increase in droughts attributed to climate change](#)—put the region in particular danger. In Congressional testimony given in March, Paige Alexander, USAID's Assistant Administrator of the Bureau for the Middle East, said that if the region continues on its current trajectory, it "will likely face 'absolute' water scarcity by 2030."

Sana'a, Yemen, may become the world's first capital to drain its water supply.

Access to clean drinking water is only part of the problem. Without water, farmers can't produce crops, which leads to food insecurity. Water scarcity also limits people's ability to carry out basic sanitary habits, thus speeding the spread of illness and disease.

These conditions make communities vulnerable—especially to extremist groups. By either providing water access or holding it hostage, militants like Al Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula (AQAP), the Sunni extremist group's arm in Yemen, and ISIS take advantage of the shortage to buy the population's gratitude or exert control.

Yemen is a prime example of the ways in which water scarcity enables extremists. One of the Middle East's poorest countries, Yemen's water scarcity is correlated to its conflict, said Marcus King, Director of the Master of Arts in International Affairs at George Washington University's Elliot School of International Affairs, in an interview with VICE.

Yemeni President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi's government recently cut the country's National Water Resources Authority budget by 70 percent. Hadi fled the country in February after ongoing conflict with the Houthis, a group of Shia rebels who had, among other grievances, voiced complaints about the unequal distribution of water.

The situation is dire. Farmers have stopped collecting and storing rainwater, instead opting for groundwater irrigation, which is extracting water 12 times faster than it can be replenished. Other factors, like population growth, government mismanagement of resources, and the population's addiction to Qat—a leafy stimulant whose trees use [half of the country's water meant for agricultural purposes](#)—all exacerbate the shortage. Sana'a may become the world's first capital to drain its water supply, with estimates claiming the city could run dry within the next ten years.

As the Houthi insurgency fights against forces still loyal to the exiled president—and Saudi air strikes continue in support of Hadi—AQAP is building wells and other water infrastructure in Yemen's rural villages to win support.

This strategy is purposeful. In 2013, [the Associated Press discovered a document](#) in which AQAP suggested manipulating residents by "taking care of their daily needs like water. Providing these necessities will have a great effect on people, and will make them sympathize with us and feel that their fate is tied to ours."

King, whose research includes overlaying areas of water scarcity with outbreaks of Islamic extremism, says, "In terms of the dire humanitarian situation in Yemen, [water] will only play into the hands of extremist groups."

ISIS is also using water to their advantage. But David Michel, Senior Associate and Director of the Environmental Security program at the Stimson Center, says that the group isn't trying to win over the population like other insurgencies, including AQAP.

Last year, ISIS succeeded in taking the two Iraqi dams, the Mosul and Fallujah, but was soon repelled by Kurdish forces. "So they seem to be using—or in the case of the Mosul dam, trying to position themselves to use—the control water like a medieval siege tactic," Michel told VICE. Later, the group attempted to seize the second largest dam in Iraq, the Haditha dam, which provides control of the Euphrates River.

"If you can't breathe, then water's not your issue." —Edward Saltzberg

"[ISIS] had the potential to destroy the dam and cause widespread destruction," explained Emma Ashford, a visiting fellow in defense and foreign policy at the Cato Institute. "It's very hard to prevent groups from seizing control of resources, and once they control them, they decide what happens to them."

Yet Michel says that water has yet to provide ISIS any real state-like legitimacy. "I don't know of any evidence that suggests that ISIS is a more competent municipal service provider than the Syrian or Iraqi states that they have replaced," he says.

Ashford says it's important to improve the provision of resources in water scarce countries that aren't already actively engaged in war. For countries like Yemen and Syria, where conflict has escalated, "There's really too much going on to deal with [water insecurity]."

Not everyone is as pessimistic about the water situation in the Middle East. While acknowledging challenges, UN Deputy Secretary General Jan Eliasson [wrote in the January 2015 issue of Nature](#), "We must not lose sight of the opportunities that water offers as a source of cooperation. Tensions over water resources have historically led to more collaboration than conflict." He cited the 1960 Indus Water Treaty between India and Pakistan and the 1964 Basin Commission on the Lake Chad Basin as proof of "hydro-diplomacy."

In the short-term, solutions for water relief, such as desalination, can be complicated to implement or expensive. In 2007, Yemen's water minister even suggested relocating people from Sana'a to the Red Sea Coast due to the lack of water. But nearly any solution will be challenging to implement during a war.

"If you can't breathe, then water's not your issue," Edward Saltzberg, Managing Director of the Security and Sustainability Forum, told VICE. "You just can't execute a long-term plan if you're facing immediate threats of conflict."

Before addressing the future, King stresses the importance of examining the underlying causes of counterinsurgency operations and addressing water supplies as part of extremist strategies, "so the Al Qaedas of the world don't become the legitimate providers of basic human needs."