

Controlling water was one of the first technological efforts at the beginning of what we call "civilization," or city building. Even today, most human beings live on the rims of oceans or on river systems. We need water to drink, for washing ourselves and our goods, but most of all, for agriculture.

Where today Iraq and Iran meet arose the first urban civilization 5,000 years ago, Sumeria. This amazing culture created the first big city-state (Ur), a system of writing, sea-going boats, the wheel, and most important of all, irrigation systems to moderate and control the flow of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. These two rivers customarily flowed either too much or too little (floods and droughts). The Sumerians devised a system of canals and dams to moderate the flow.

Iran (Persia), differed in geography from flat Mesopotamia, with highlands and plateaus ringed by mountain ranges. They invented a unique water system of tunnels that brought snowmelt from mountaintops down through gravity-flow earthen tunnels ending in the plateaus where villages, towns, and cities farmed. Climate change today is drying up lakes, melting glacier snows, and collapsing the tunnels. Villages are emptying, and population explosion, although now being reversed, has stressed water capacity. How does a country keep a population of 70 million alive with dwindling water, dwindling agriculture, and massive political corruption? Governments have fallen over less.

Egypt was the child of the Nile River, a river that rises in the mountains of East Africa (today's Ethiopia and Sudan). The Nile predictably (mostly) rose to gentle flood stage when it reached flat Egypt, every spring. The Egyptians designed a system of canals using waterwheels to irrigate what would otherwise be desert. It fed them and made them rich and powerful from antiquity---until recently.

Population explosion has overwhelmed the water capacity of the Nile. The disastrous Aswan dam on the Nile has failed to produce enough electric power and has devastated the agriculture of the Nile delta, depriving the land of the floods and new topsoil. Egypt now has bread riots.

Yemen, at the south end of the Arabian Peninsula, was a breadbasket that fed the entire region, thanks to building the world's largest earthen dam in the 6th century BC, 50 feet high and almost 2,000 feet long. A thousand years later, 6th century AD, global climate change with torrential rains made the dam collapse, flooding Yemen. Yemen began its long trajectory to becoming today's dysfunctional, water-short basket case. Their capital city Sanaa has no water today; they will move it to the seashore.

This miserable place, now in a proxy civil war, produces nothing but narcotics (qat), child brides, and far too many babies, a blueprint for disaster. On March 21st, Israel secretly rescued the last 19 Jews from Yemen, a place their ancestors had lived for 2,000 years. If not rescued, one or another of the warring factions would have exterminated them.

Iraq, the present heirs of ancient Babylon, Assyria, and Sumer, houses the most dangerous dam of all in Mosul, recently in the hands of ISIS. Saddam Hussein originally built this badly designed dam using cheap concrete that had to be regularly injected to plug the leaks. With Saddam gone, there is no more upkeep. The dam's cracks are growing and when that dam goes, there may be no more Iraq. The US is trying to help save the dam, not easy amidst warfare.

Other problems besetting the Middle East are the war within Islam, with sect fighting sect; passionate hatred of all the social aspects of modern Western society (emancipation of women and freedom of thought) but taste for its weapons and modern medicine for its leaders; and generational conflicts between half-educated youth and conservative parents. The dysfunction is clear in the flood of people trying to escape, and not just those immediately involved in civil war.

The entire Muslim world is in meltdown. The outcome of this war will depend upon who wins it: those opting for the modern world or those hankering after an imagined Muslim golden age.

675 words

Dr. Laina Farhat-Holzman is a historian, lecturer, and author of God's Law or Man's Law. You may contact her at Lfarhat102@aol.com or www.globalthink.net.