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Commentary on Miriam Lowi's
"West Bank Water Resources and the Resolution
of Conflict in the Middle East"

by
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Miriam Lowi has, for the most part, achieved admirably the goals she set for her paper--particularly illuminating the relationship between two aspects of national security which have been consigned to a shadowy place in conflict literature by analysts: that of the core values of the state and scarce natural resources. She has done so with clarity, originality, and an understanding of the complex conceptual and empirical issues involved. She has also worked with accuracy, except for two bits of data which need correction: the Jordan basin covers an area of about 18,300 square kilometers, not 2730 (p.4), and the area of the West Bank is ~~5585~~ square kilometers, not 3520 (p.5).
59% incl. E. Jerusalem

Whether or not one can make large generalizations from her case study of the West Bank, Dr. Lowi has given us important insights into one of this century's more recalcitrant conflicts and has effectively demonstrated the weaknesses of various received notions concerning certain theoretical approaches to varieties of conflict, especially those with important environmental or resource dimensions. Perhaps the most important point she makes, one with which I emphatically agree, is that in regard to water in Middle East, where aridity, scarcity, and some of the world's most intense atavistic rivalries coexist, there is little hope for the resolution of resource based conflict or cooperation until adequate political settlements are put in place. Repeatedly, the region has resisted proposed solutions to its central conflict--Israel and the Palestinians--that have been indirect, peripheral("nibbling around the edges"), or incremental ("step-by-step"), including propositions that argue the necessity of first creating the "right ambiance" or working for "spill-over effects" but always failing to engage straight-on the main problem. Miriam Lowi has demonstrated that the Israeli-Palestinian problem, in which the hydrological dimension is

central to the main issue, is the nut on which functionalist, neo-functionalists, and others like them, break their beaks.

As commendable as Lowi's paper is, there are some not-too-serious problems. A few can be usefully cited:

Very summary
1) An expanded conceptual (or even empirical) context for her case study would have made it easier to draw larger generalizations. The setting or context in which relationships are embedded must in themselves be better understood in order to understand the various relationships she analyzes. A good place to begin would be to ask what are the key relationships, which Lowi has in part done, but needs to carry through more thoroughly.

2) Lowi's lumping of power analysis approaches with those of the realist school, is misleading. There is a significant difference between the realist school and modern power analysis (my colleague Fred Frey likens it to using a Model T to criticize modern cars). Power analysis which begins by identifying the key actors, what they want and how they see matters, is far more encompassing and flexible than the realist school.

3) As Lowi carries this study forward, she will have to be more rigorous in her treatment of the notions of core values and resources, both of which are problematic. Apart from self-preservation, how does one determine a core value, and how is a resource defined? (A resource may not be physical matter but, e.g., GNP per capita). Stipulatively (which is how Lowi appears to use them) or teleologically? A core value in one situation or time may change or not be considered to be one in another--polls indicate that the values of younger generations of Israelis are moving away from those of the founding generation which have guided Israel's domestic and foreign policies. In Lowi's defence, this is not a problem peculiar to her work, rather it is a problem that reflects a weakness in the literature of social science in general.

4) It would have been helpful if Lowi had provided as a kind of framework some of the basic characteristics of water that makes it a peculiar issue of conflict, security, and management (even at the risk of stating, in some instances, the obvious), such qualities pertaining to its pervasiveness, complexity, and utter necessity; relationships of power, position, and interest; its universal perception as a zero-sum security issue; deeply rooted cultural and social attitudes toward water that make change difficult, etc.

5) Finally, it would be interesting to know whether Lowi conceives of any circumstances where water can be used to promote cooperation in the absence of trust or peace, as, say, proponents of the idea of superordinate goals or interests do.