

# 'Water, not oil, drives the Middle East — the river and the sea are lived realities'

Photos: Getty Images & iStock

**Alan Mikhail** is Chace Family Professor of History at Yale University. Speaking with **Srijana Mitra Das** at **Times Evoke**, Mikhail discussed nature — shaping power — in the Middle East:

**What is the core of your research?**

■ I'm interested in humanising the Middle East and Islam in world history to understand how individuals on the ground connect to larger processes. I did that through environmental history in my earlier work and I'm now doing so through the histories of individual lives on a global scale.



**When people imagine natural resources in the Middle East, they think 'oil'. How accurate is this?**  
■ Oil is an important part of the Middle East — that said, it's a very modern phenomenon. Oil was first discovered around the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the region. A large percentage of the Middle East doesn't have any oil or natural gas. So, looking at the long sweep of history, oil is not the most important phenomenon — I argue that water is much more important in shaping the region's history.

Closely connected to water are food resources and agricultural commodities which are key to understanding politics, social construction and economies. Cotton and tobacco became very important in parts of the Middle East in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These are closer in some ways to the histories of oil in that they became important exported commodities that connected the region to modern capitalism. But again, these are relatively recent — we should think about the region as being interconnected by seas and rivers. In terms of navigating the Middle East and providing fresh water, we're talking about the Tigris and Euphrates, the Oxus and Nile — rivers are most connected to politics in the form of who controls irrigation and therefore, the cultivation of food. The seas



**OX POPULI?** An ancient Egyptian carving of a buffalo which helped ploughing and transport



**AN ARCHIVE OF WATER:** Egyptian cotton along the Nile (L) grew from irrigation systems (R) which needed precise knowledge of weather and terrain

connect the Middle East to the wider world, the Mediterranean linking North Africa and the Levant to Europe. The Red Sea is crucial for the Middle East connection to South Asia and Southeast Asia as far as China, and similarly, the Persian Gulf. Being interested in people's lived realities and how those connect to the world, the river and the sea is a good shorthand for thinking about that.

**Did nature shape political power here?**

■ The control of natural resources as economic commodities is key for any political entity. For empires in the pre-modern Middle East, those commodities were control of water and food like wheat, grains, rice, etc. Irrigation was key as freshwater resources were channelled through canals and other waterways to fields, creating a system of connections that had to be managed — this suggests politics. Understanding the politics of how water resources came to be managed, controlled and negotiated is crucial for understanding the pre-modern politics of the Middle East. As an example, there's an older way of talking about irrigation and politics in a place like Egypt — that's the theory of 'Oriental despotism', suggesting that to control a sprawling irrigation network, you need a potentate at the top who has underlings, who themselves have underlings, that creates this pyramidal structure, in Egypt, headed by Pharaohs. My research actually shows politics was much more contested in Egypt — people at ground level had more authority and power than a theory like Oriental despotism posits.

People who understand irrigation at very local levels have power in relationships with the people above them because the latter can't understand all the different locales, irrigation depending on topography and elevation. You need very specific knowledge of every place

connected on this network. So, people at the very small scale have a lot of power in those relationships — that leads to a very different model of politics than what we've been offered.

**What was the place of animals?**

■ In the 'Before' picture, animals were the motors of the countryside. They powered mills and large infrastructure. They helped to plough fields. They were the many-wheelers that moved goods long-distance. They were key even in the systems produced by irrigation — large foodstuffs would be moved down-river, offloaded onto animals and taken to towns.

Animal labour, I argue, helped to shape cities and the routes commodities moved along — we can't understand Egypt or the Ottoman empire without understanding animals. Towns had a certain look because of the place of animals. Colonisation and industrialisation changed that — all the functions I described were taken over by industrial power;



**STAY WITH ME...** Colonialism and capitalism dented the old Egyptian bond with animals

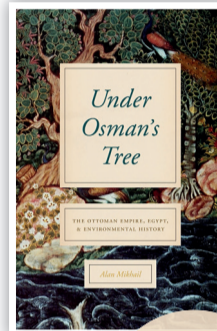
steam, oil, coal and other fossil fuels. Animals labour became less crucial to society. They were then expended for, among other things, meat production. It's no coincidence 'industrialised slaughter' is the phrase used to describe meat production — as industry increasingly displaced animals from all they did before, they were killed on an unprecedented scale. Yet, pet keeping also rose. Animals took different roles.

**Did older views of nature alter?**

■ Certainly. After colonialism and capitalism, the intimacy between humans and other parts of nature came to be fractured in very complicated, novel and intricate ways. Animals, water, food, even the field came to be seen as commodities or sites of extraction for a market. Instead of growing food, Egyptian cotton or Iranian tobacco were now planted for global markets.

**In Iran, are nature and politics still linked?**

■ The energy crisis and water scarcity are huge questions across the Middle East. When Iran makes claims to be interested in nuclear power, one can understand the motivations, given energy resources. In the Gulf, the 'after oil' question is perennial. A resource will end — what does one do in the present, knowing that future? This question has a lot of bearing on politics.



**AT ITS ROOT:** Mikhail writes of nature across the Ottoman empire

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