



Arab Reform Initiative

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# Stopping the Bisri Dam: From Local to National Contestation

→ Joey Ayoub & Christophe Maroun.



Birsi Valley © Ayoub/Maroun



Upon visiting the Bisri Valley, located about 35km southeast of Beirut, one is struck by the large numbers of bean stocks, pines and citrus trees that surround the Roman ruins. In older days, this valley used to link the southern Lebanese city of Sidon with Damascus to the east. In recent years, the valley has come under increased media and public attention due to a planned World Bank-funded dam that will leave much of it underwater. In response, local environmentalists and activists launched the Save Bisri Campaign.

The campaign criticizes the project on environmental and safety grounds but goes further by focusing on water management, public policy and development strategies, as well as the politics behind dams in Lebanon. It has also consciously become interlinked with the wider national contestation that erupted in October 2019 and is now part of a broader effort to renegotiate what the public good means in Lebanon.

## Dams: “an almost idealized place” in Lebanon’s national water strategy

The Bisri dam project’s origins date to 1957 when it was proposed by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation which was assisting the Lebanese authorities in developing a water plan.<sup>1</sup> It was followed up by the Litani River Authority, a governmental body tasked with implementing irrigation, electricity generation and water resource management projects on the Litani River in Lebanon, but preliminary studies by the Lebanese Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR) were not done before 2000.

Although dams have come under increased criticism worldwide since the 1970s due to their negative socio-environmental impacts, in Lebanon, these infrastructures maintain what environmentalist Neemat Abou Cham refers to as “an almost idealized place” in the national water strategy, finding support across the country’s political elite. In an interview with the authors, Roland Nassour, Coordinator of the Save Bisri Campaign, argues that dams carry symbolic political meaning because they are an opportunity for politicians to claim that they are achieving something concrete; dams can quickly be turned into opportunities for political self-advertising and tools to maintain clientelist networks, such as when



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politicians hire “their” people to participate in infrastructure projects.

According to Karim Eid-Sabbagh, who wrote his doctoral thesis on the political economy of water in Lebanon at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, Lebanon’s market-oriented supply-side approach aims to create the highest financial return on water use and, thus, prefers to maximize water production in order to maximize profits. Consequently, policies of large investment and major infrastructure, like dams, are preferred as they allow the distribution of state funding to politically connected companies.

As part of a 2010 national strategy, several dams are projected to be built between 2011 and 2035, at an estimated total cost of \$2 billion. They include the Bisri dam, which is forecast to have a storage capacity of 125 million cubic metres, is supposed to supply water to Beirut and Mount Lebanon via an underground canal to be built for this purpose.

Although the Bisri Dam was part of a national strategy, it only became a reality when the World Bank agreed to extend a loan of \$474 million, making it one its largest projects in Lebanon. The Islamic Development Bank and the Lebanese government are also providing parallel financing (US\$128 million and US\$15 million, respectively). The project was approved by the World Bank on 30 September 2014 and is expected to be completed around five years after the signature of the construction contract.

The World Bank says that the Lebanese government commissioned a detailed analysis of alternative options (different locations and techniques). It insists that an environmental and social management plan as well as a resettlement plan were developed to mitigate the risks identified by the CDR’s Environmental Impact Assessment. Between April 2012 and May 2017, 28 public meetings with different local stakeholders and activists were organized by the CDR, the project’s implementing agency, where they shared their worries and opinions about the project.

The World Bank publicly supports the Lebanese government’s efforts to increase its water supply through loans to several water-related projects. In 2016, it agreed on a loan of \$55 million to the Lebanese government for the lake Qaraoun



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pollution prevention project despite the project receiving a risk rating of “substantial” in its Project Appraisal Document. The World Bank argues this rating was mostly due to weak governance and institutional capacity to implement the project. The Qaraoun dam, built in 1959, is currently the largest in Lebanon; the planned Bisri dam would be the second largest.

In addition, the World Bank's own Strategic Environmental Assessment of the National Water Sector Strategy (SEIA) recommended in 2015 "the scaling-back of the dams' program considering its social, economic, and environmental constraints". It described the Bisri Dam as “land greedy” and criticized its unrealistic amount of resource exploitation.

This very expensive approach, in a country already riddled with debt, is indeed detrimental to Lebanon's delicate ecosystems such as the country's inland aquatic ecosystems which are already under extensive pressure from water pumping, river channelling, and pollution from various origins.

Yet, until the contestation of the Bisri dam, there was little opposition to the dam construction spree in Lebanon and little discussion about other ways to ensure better water management in the country. According to Nassour, this is because both government officials and much of the wider population think it is "common sense that dams are good, that you cannot get water without dams."

## Local resistance to the Bisri dam project

The Lebanon Eco Movement, a network of environmental non-governmental organizations in Lebanon, was the first to initiate campaigns against the building of dams in the country. It first pointed the finger at the Bisri dam for its destructive impacts in 2017. Since then, the campaign grew in stature and took its current shape in 2018 under the name of Save the Bisri Valley (often shortened to Save Bisri), as a campaign that operated on the national level.

According to the National Physical Master Plan of the Lebanese Territory, a strategic reference document which “overrides all documents concerning regional and local urban development and planning [and] guides and locates major public investments”, the Bisri Valley is a protected site by a decision of the Ministry of



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Environment in 1997 and considered a major landscape for its touristic value. The dam and its construction will lead to the cutting down of thousands of pine trees and will flood several archaeological sites and an expansive agricultural plane known for its citrus trees and beans and strawberries plantations. In total, around 570 hectares of agricultural land, natural vegetation and pine woodland will be expropriated and inundated for the implementation of the Bisri dam project.

From a geological perspective, the presence of fault lines and regular seismic activity within Lebanon's geography makes dams additionally dangerous. In 2010, scientists at the American University of Beirut's Department of Geology warned that a major earthquake in Lebanon was "looming", as the country is bisected by two fault lines, the Yammouneh and Mount Lebanon Thrust fault lines.

Activists and experts alike underline the importance of preserving the valley and propose alternatives that are based on harnessing Lebanon's natural and geological advantages. They propose less intrusive strategies by acknowledging the country's natural replenishment of groundwater aquifers with rainfall. This is partly due to the presence of limestone karst formation, a type of permeable calcareous rock that consists of two-thirds of Lebanon's geology, and which already creates aquifers all along its territory.

Hydrologist Samir Zaatiti, for example, recommends that Lebanon makes more efficient use of underground water resources. Roland Riachi, a lecturer at the Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences at the American University of Beirut, proposes instead the construction of small to medium-sized urban collective storage ponds combined by the monitoring of springs and groundwater, which, he argues, would be more cost-effective and environmentally friendly.

One idea is to reduce water loss in the dated distribution network, which currently can reach up to 50 per cent in some areas. Another idea is to tap into the potential of unused sources of water by collecting rainfall and treating and reusing wastewater. Most importantly, Lebanon's water strategy, critics argue, should be based on the collection of accurate data, which is currently not the case.

The Save Bisri campaign also tried to influence the World Bank directly and sent a request for additional investigation to the Inspection Panel, highlighting major



concerns on the project and proposing less intrusive alternatives. However, in December 2018, the World Bank Board of Executive Directors approved the Inspection Panel's recommendation not to investigate the Water Supply Augmentation Project and the Greater Beirut Water Supply Project – which includes the Bisri dam – and its Additional Financing. This led to protests in front of World Bank offices in Beirut, such as the one in March 2019.

### **Dams are political, and so must those who oppose them**

The 17 October uprising played a crucial role in the campaign to stop the Bisri dam. According to Nassour: "We consider the campaign to be an indivisible part of the October 17th Revolution", adding that Save Bisri campaigners were present on the first night of the protests. Given the opposition to clientelist networks that has been at the centre of popular protests – the same networks and dynamics that Nassour and others believe are behind Lebanon's choice of dams over more sustainable alternatives – activists involved in the Save Bisri campaign understood the need to transcend the framework of an environmental NGO that traditionally shies away from more confrontation with the political class.

Indeed, according to Nassour, to achieve the best possible results, the campaign had to "become political" and challenge the intricate links of power behind the project. In other words, the Save Bisri campaign does not place "the environment" as an isolated category divorced from the society which impacts it and is impacted by it. The campaign not only tackled the environmental issues surrounding the dam, but problems with water management, public policy, and development strategies in Lebanon more broadly, as well as international financing.

To that end, the Save Bisri campaign used several tools to build a different discourse around dams in Lebanon. These included: building a new scientific dossier addressing the project in cooperation with experts from AUB; sharing it widely in accessible language on various media platforms; and holding several protests in the valley as well as in front of the offices of the Council for Development and Reconstruction and the World Bank. These tools are now credited by campaign leaders as the reason the Save Bisri campaign managed to



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capture the attention of a much wider cross-section of society.

The campaign has also connected to a wider contestation over public space. In the first weeks of the protest movement, participants reclaimed public land – notably Riad El Solh and Martyrs' Square in Beirut, and Nour Square in Tripoli – that had been up until then the exclusive domain of vehicles. Also on [the list of reclamations](#) were abandoned buildings such as the Dome City Centre (popularly known as “the egg”), or various sites of Beirut's own coastline, which is largely privatized. Slogans such as “it is called Al Balad, not Solidere”<sup>2</sup> on the walls of Beirut's heavily privatized downtown were further reminders of the centrality of these acts of reclamation.

By exercising their rights to these walled off or paved over spaces, protesters were trying to upend nearly three decades-worth of a post-war status quo that equated “development” at all costs over well-being, with the latter negatively affected by the lack of access to public spaces. Just as downtown Beirut became this symbol of post-war neo-liberalization of the economy, the Bisri Valley has since become the leading environmental example of this same system's impacts.

At the time of writing, almost seven months since the protests started, the country's structural issues remain as dire. The financial crisis, which led the Lebanese government to officially default, for the first time in its history, [on a \\$1.2bn bond due on 9 March](#), has since been compounded by a devastating health crisis with the increase in COVID-19 cases in the country.

Those who have campaigned to save the Bisri Valley are likely to face increasing pressure from the government, now that it has decided to go forward with the planned dam project despite all opposition. Activists will have to increase their coordination and strategy to highlight further the risks and the wider repercussions on environmental politics in a country already impacted by global crises such as pandemics and the climate emergency.



## Endnotes

1. For more background information on the US Bureau of Reclamation involvement in the Litani river basin development and the proposal of a diversion towards the Bisri area, see Chris Sneddon, “The Cold War, the US Bureau of Reclamation, and the Technopolitics of River Basin Development, 1950–1970,” *Political Geography* November 2011.
2. Al-Balad (meaning country) is the common way of referring to downtown Beirut. Solidere is a company involved in the privatization of many areas in downtown Beirut.



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## About the authors

### Joey Ayoub

Lebanese writer, researcher and activist based in Geneva

### Christophe Maroun

Environmental Justice Program Manager, Heinrich Böll Foundation - MENA

## About Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is the leading independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality and social justice.

- We produce original research informed by local experiences and partner with institutions to achieve impact across the Arab world and globally
- We empower individuals and institutions to develop their own concept of policy solutions
- We mobilize stakeholders to build coalitions for positive change

Our aim is to see vibrant democratic societies emerge and grow in the region.

Founded in 2005, the Arab Reform Initiative is governed by a Plenary of its members and an Executive Committee.

[arab-reform.net](http://arab-reform.net)

[contact@arab-reform.net](mailto:contact@arab-reform.net)



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