ON THIRST AND MIRAGE

RETHINKING THE DESERT

BORDERS & TERRITORIES

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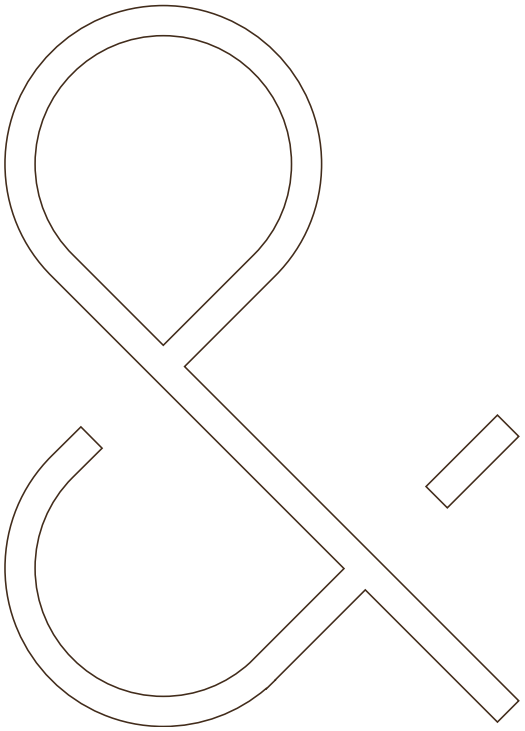

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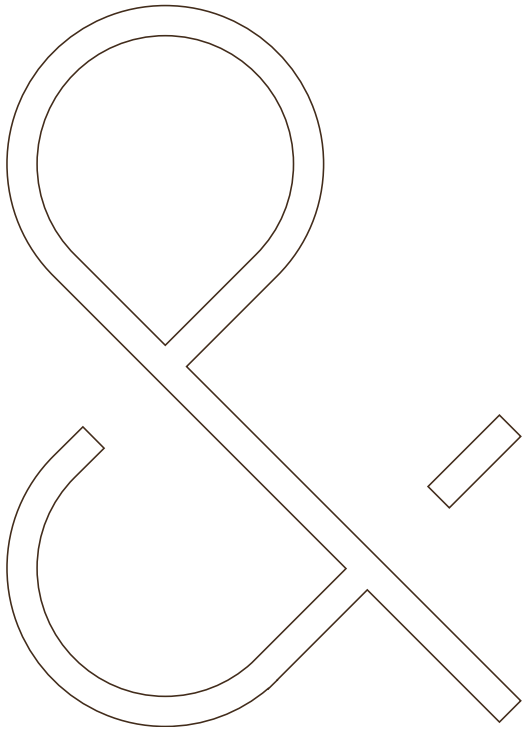
Keynote Speakers: Samia Henni and Muna Dajani



CONTENT

Introduction

Negar Sanaan Bensi

Deserts cover about one-fifth of Earth's land areas* and are home to around one-sixth of the Earth's population. This surface area is estimated to be enlarged with climate change, and the current population movements and patterns of ecological migrations will increase. In such a context, the tension over the few remaining bodies of water will probably only intensify and expand as a result of desertification and little common political grounds.

In their scientific classifications, deserts are often framed as environments with low precipitation, low rainfall, hostility, and aridity, perhaps compatible with how a desert or desertum (Latin) is perceived: deserted, abandoned, empty and left out. The recent scholarly works on deserts, however, have already criticized such an understanding as being Eurocentric and Western-oriented. This literature has suggested that to be able to continue living in deserts, there is a need to decolonize them as concepts, entities, processes and environments.

To do this, the first step will be to think of deserts as multitudes of worlds containing diverse biota that are embedded in various cultural imaginaries. For example, moving from the desert as a singular, abandoned place to biābān [Farsi] as somewhere 'with little water' that requires 'care' and 'nourishment' for it to be inhabited, already suggests a shift in perceiving and thinking about them.

In this symposium, we intend to think about the desert through what it hides the most: the water, in any form and state it can have, to conceal or emerge; The water that connects and is connected and the water that separates or is separated and displaced. This means not only the displacement of human bodies across borders and territories, perhaps due to drought, but also the displacement of bodies of water across landscapes to compensate for the increasing pressing scarcity. While the displaced bodies are not homogeneously impacted- considering, for example, that often the children and females are more affected by scarcity and displacement; The issues related to displacements of water may refer to various scales of events: from the daily [smuggling] operations and the flows of water in smaller scale to the state policies of diverting and transferring bodies of water from one region to another, or a larger scale of the changing patterns of precipitations, disturbed by heat and storms. All these lead us to re-think our modes of co-existence in the desert, on the one hand, between communities (what is justice in the context of scarcity?) and, on the other hand, amongst various beings- i.e., human and non-human and life and non-life.

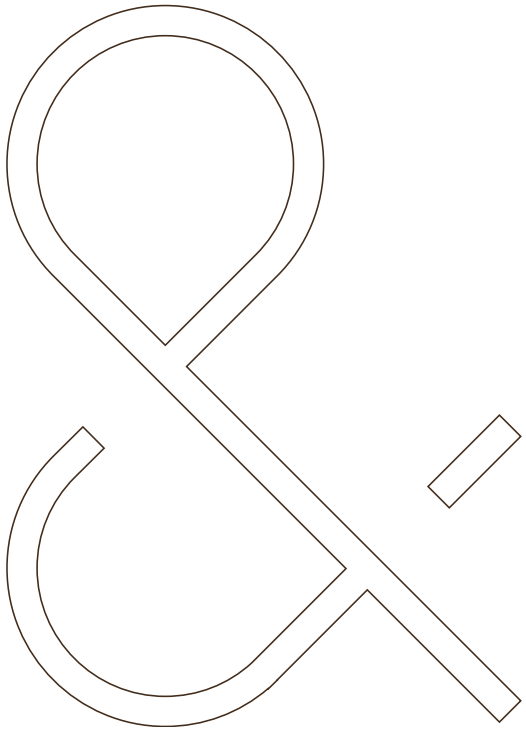
This one-day symposium intends to open a conversation around the spatialities and materialities of bodies of water in the context of deserts that have been under colonial, extractive and technocratic operations or have been impacted by border regimes, conflicts, and wars, which have led to disjunction of ecologies and disembodied governance of resources and increasing political tension between communities and countries. Such conditions often have become more critical with climate change.

On the one hand, we are interested in exploring the technocratic, extractive and colonial approaches to water that have led to disentangled ecologies, the imposition of borders, conflicts and wars throughout various desert landscapes; on the other hand, we would like to pay attention to the complex relationship between the entangled milieus of water, soil and air which have formed the deserts through weathering processes, as well as how such entanglements have been materialized in the vernacular built environment, crafts, technique on chasing [hidden] waters and traditional methods of governance and water management.

We are interested in the stories, cultural and philosophical implications, as well as the geopolitical, technological, and technocratic processes involved in the worlding of these water bodies. Specifically, we would like to question how the ongoing technocratic, colonial, and extractive procedures will further impact or cease to impact these bodies in the context of climate change. In other words, what we are searching for in this conversation lies in the interconnection between culture, nature, power, techniques, and infrastructures.

This symposium intends to establish a long-term research inquiry and community to focus on desert landscapes where topics of water scarcity alongside the practices of spatial demarcation, migration, transgressions and even ongoing colonization, adaptation and justice can be discussed and investigated.

* This includes only hot-arid and semi-arid deserts. It is, however, possible to also include the cold deserts spreading in the Arctic and Antarctic areas. One can recognize similarities in the ways cold deserts and their Indigenous communities have also been approached by the new settlers and colonizers as non-existent, especially since these areas are currently undergoing extensive extractive operations for oil or metal and mineral substances.



Program

9:00 - 9:15 Coffee

9:15 - 9:45 Introduction by Assistant Professor Negar Sanaan Bensi (B&T, TU Delft)

Morning Panel/ General Topics

Moderator: Professor Nishat Awan (UCL, Urban Laboratory, Bartlett)

10:00 - 10:45 Professor Samia Henni (Architectural History and Theory, McGill, Canada)

10:45 - 11:15 Dr. ir. Elnaz Najafi (Independent Researcher and Writer, Iran) - Online

11:15 - 11:45 Dr. ir. Henk Ovink (Executive Director, Global Commission on the Economics of Water) - Online

11:45 - 12:15 Professor Behnam Taebi (Scientific Director of CaSS)

12:15 - 13:00 Panel discussion

13:00 - 14:30 Lunch/ Coffee

Afternoon Panel/ Specific Cases,

Moderator: Assistant Professor Filip Geerts (B&T, TU Delft)

14:30 - 15:15 Dr. Muna Dajani (LSE, UK)

15:15 - 15:40 Setareh Noorani (Researcher, Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam)

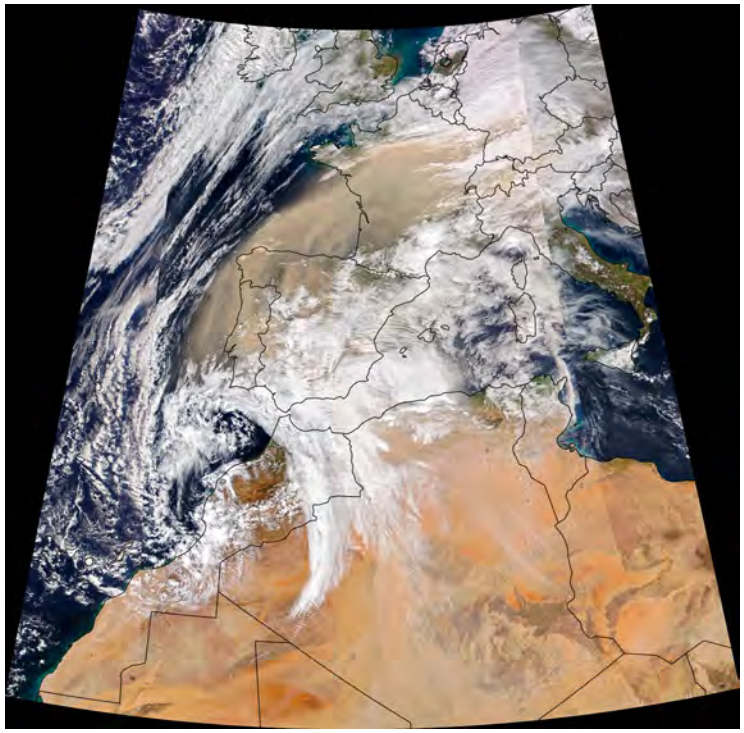
15:40 - 16:05 Ameneh Solati (Independent Architect and Researcher)

16:05 - 16:30 Amitangshu Acharya (Lecturer, Water Governance, IHE Delft Institute for Water Education)

16:30 - 16:45 Meriam Sehimi (Independent Architect and Researcher)

16:45 - 17:50 Panel discussion

18:45 Dinner (for invitees only)



Against the Regime of Emptiness

Samia Henni

Against the Regime of Emptiness

Samia Henni

The term "desert" stands in for a complex locus of imageries, imaginaries, climates, landscapes, spaces, and histories. The territories of both hot and cold deserts embody various forms of anthropogenic exploitation, such as colonial dispossession, resource extraction, and civil and military occupation. And yet, among the most common platitudes about the desert are ideas that "deserts are empty," that "the desert is absent of life," or that "there is nothing at all in the desert." This misleading *conceptualization* of the desert has served to legitimize its transformation, manipulation, toxification, and destruction. This stereotype was, for instance, the justification offered by the French army to defend its choice to use the Algerian Sahara—then a French colonized territory—as the firing field for France's first atomic bombs between 1960 and 1966.

According to General Charles Ailleret, the head of France's nuclear program, the Sahara was "a land of thirst and fear, from which all life was reputedly absent," the designated desert characterized by "the total absence of animal and vegetal lives." Contrary to this imaginary, the Sahara is not devoid of life. Desert territories—which comprise approximately one-third of the Earth's land surface—host human, nonhuman, biological, microbiological lives. They support sedentary, nomadic, animal, vegetal, mineral forms of existence. Even though the presence of life in desert territories might seem evident, to this day, one is repeatedly hearing and reading the same old colonial platitudes.

This is because industrialized subjectivities and exploitative authorities are constantly searching for and in need of so-called "empty" places to be "filled" through occupation, extraction, mining, production, and accumulation. These mechanisms are often intertwined with implicit or explicit forms of *coloniality* and *toxicity*, which result in racializing, altering, damaging, or destroying the living, natural, and built environments present in the desert.

This talk discusses the arguments presented in the edited volume *Deserts Are Not Empty* (New York: Columbia Books on Architecture and the City) and *Colonial Toxicity: Rehearsing French Radioactive Architecture and Landscape in the Sahara* (Amsterdam: If I Can't Dance and Framer Framed; Zurich: edition fink).

Samia Henni is a historian and an exhibition of the built, destroyed and imagined environments. She is the author of the multi-award-winning *Architecture of Counterrevolution: The French Army in Northern Algeria* (gta Verlag 2017, 2022, EN; Editions B42, 2019, FR), and *Colonial Toxicity: Rehearsing French Radioactive Architecture and Landscape in the Sahara* (If I Can't Dance, Framer Framed, edition fink, 2024), and the editor of *Deserts Are Not Empty* (Columbia Books on Architecture and the City, 2022) and *War Zones* (gta Verlag, 2018). She is also the maker of exhibitions, such as *Performing Colonial Toxicity* (Amsterdam; Zurich; London; New Haven; Berlin; Ottawa, 2023–25), *Discreet Violence: Architecture and the French War in Algeria* (Zurich, Rotterdam, Berlin, Johannesburg, Paris, Prague, Ithaca, Philadelphia, Charlottesville, 2017–22), *Archives: Secret-Défense?* (ifa Gallery, SAVVY Contemporary, Berlin, 2021), and *Housing Pharmacology* (Manifesta 13, Marseille, 2020). Samia was an invited tutor at the first Biennale College Architettura 2023 at the 18th International Architecture Exhibition, "The Laboratory of the Future," at Venice Architecture Biennale. She received her PhD in the history and theory of architecture (with distinction, ETH Medal) from ETH Zurich and has taught at Cornell University, Princeton university, ETH Zurich, the University of Zurich, and Geneva University of Art and Design. Currently, she teaches at McGill University and co-chairs Columbia University Seminar's *Beyond France*.

Flights over ancient cities of Iran, Erich Friedrich Schmidt, B. Turut, A town in the salt desert

On Mirage: Confrontation with the Desert Giant

Elnaz Najar Najafi

On Mirage: Confrontation with the Desert Giant

Elnaz Najar Najafi

This speech narrates the story of Iranians' awareness of the 'desert giant' [ghul-i-biaban]. The desert giant metaphorically is a set of obstacles and threats to life in a water-scarce environment, which has practically turned living in Iran into a complicated equation. Behind the dry and harsh appearance, the desert giant has vital gems in his fist; So, the problem of living in Iran is to find these hidden potentials and vital cores and to actualize and expand them. The most vital of these gems is water, which is hidden in the depths of the desert, but in accessible distance. By uncovering the hidden water, the habitats in the plateau of Iran can push back the boundaries of the desert like oases surrounded by the desert.

On the other hand, the desert giant has not sat idle in this confrontation; The giant's deceptive weapon in this competition is "Mirage". In the desert, where water emerges only with difficulty from the depths on the surface, mirage is a ready source of water. In fact, the mirage makes a thirsty person greedy for effortless resources. The mirage leads the person left in the desert to nothingness, but it is difficult to resist its temptation. The mirage is not limited only to water, but still most of the current technocratic approaches in dealing with the desert follow similar deception: such as the misuse of oil resources and wrong patterns of agriculture.

The mirage makes the person living in the desert feel the illusion of living in a water plenty, and with this trick, he takes away the knowledge and skills of living in the desert and its limited resources. In recent decades, Iranian plateau has been facing severe drought, there is a fear that these inhabitants will lose life to the desert giant. In this speech, I intend to explain that the simplest measures of living in the Iranian plateau, including choosing "Qanat" instead of digging a well, show that the inhabitants of this plateau were aware of the dangers of being caught in the illusion of a mirage.

Elnaz Najar Najafi was born in 1983 in Tehran. She graduated with distinction in both bachelor's degree in Architecture in 2006 at *Iran University of Science and Technology (IUST)*, and master's degree in Iran Architectural History in 2010 at *Shahid Beheshti University (SBU)*. Following her research interests, she managed to obtain a Ph.D. in Architecture from the same university in 2015 with her dissertation on the history of gardens and architectural materials in three cultural realms of Iran, China, and Europe. Between 2008 to 2010, along with her studies, she worked on a research project on Shiraz historical water supply network, she began her ever since constant cooperation with *Seyed Mohammad Beheshti* in an ongoing study on the Iran cultural landscape, of which the first volume is published in a book titled *'Where is Iran? Who is Iranian?'*. She has also published several papers, and many brief notes. Since 2013, Elnaz Najafi has been assisting *Seyed Mohammad Beheshti* in his lectures on the Iranian cultural landscape as *'the Culture of Life in Iran's Ecosystem'* at *Shahid Beheshti University* and *Tehran University of the Arts*. She has also been doing in-depth studies on the Iranian art since 2015, parts of which were published in a book titled *'Namak Nameh: Notes on the Iranian Taste'* in 2022. She has been the theorist and co-author in the research project: *'Where in Iran? Who is Iranian?'*

Water is the Silent Currency that Keeps the Global Economy Flowing

Henk Ovink

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Henk Ovink

It's easy to take water for granted — until there's too much or too little of it. Yet in the way we govern our economies, water is overlooked, undervalued, and mismanaged. If we fail to change course, the crises we already see — droughts, floods, wildfires, and ecological disruption— will intensify, displacing communities, triggering food shortages, and ultimately exacerbating conflicts. Water is the first casualty of global warming and ecosystem degradation.

Water is not just another resource — it is the silent currency underwriting every purchase, investment, or trade we make, from the farmer's market to the stock market. Without reliable freshwater flows, ecosystems collapse and undermine carbon sequestration and food security. But today, decisions about water remain disconnected and uncoordinated. If we don't act, the failures will pile up: shortages, conflicts, and humanitarian disasters. We can no longer afford to treat water as an isolated issue.

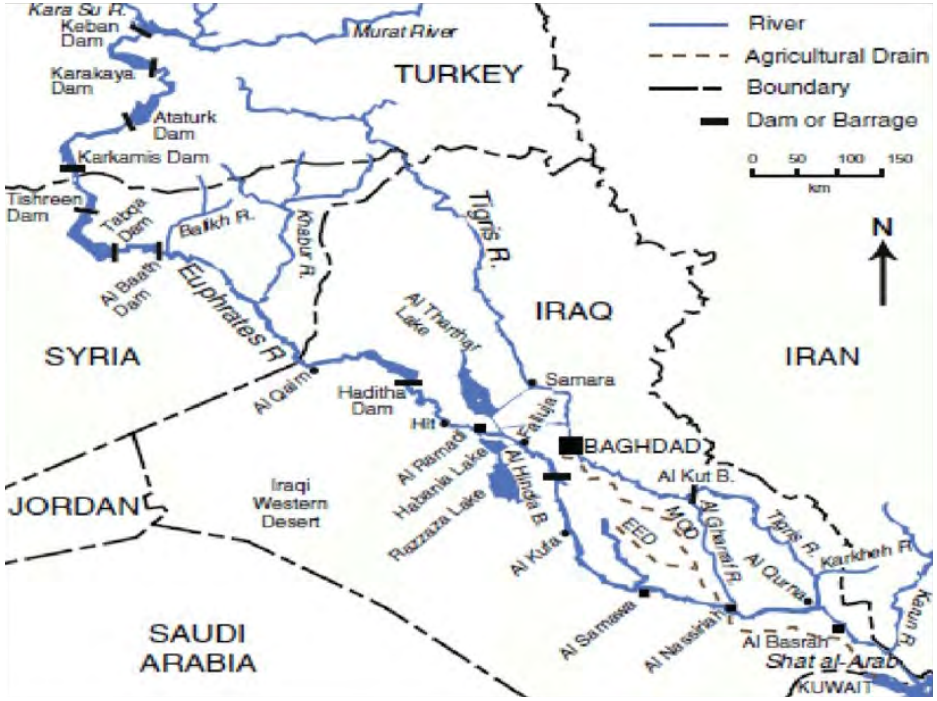
The Global Commission on the Economics of Water has called for a major shift in global governance that positions water as an organizing principle.[1] This means incorporating all of water's essential functions — not just its market price — into every level of economic planning, from investment and trade policies to international agreements. The foundation for this shift already exists.

Four major global environmental conventions — the Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar), the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) — all recognize water's critical role yet fail to give it the prominence it deserves.[2] Because these frameworks remain disconnected, they also lack the coordination and transformative capacity needed to drive systemic change. We are missing a crucial opportunity to approach these four conventions as a cohesive, mutually reinforcing system. Aligning their mandates, commitments, and programmes through the lens of water can generate solutions that benefit them all.

A crucial step is ensuring that 'green water' — the moisture stored in soil and vegetation — is factored into land-use decisions. Protecting forests, wetlands, and watersheds, which help regulate rainfall and prevent drought, can strengthen climate resilience.[3] One approach is Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES), where governments, businesses, or organizations provide financial incentives to farmers, landowners, and communities to conserve and restore these natural water sources.[4] By compensating those who protect these critical ecosystems, PES ensures they continue to provide clean water, store carbon, and support biodiversity.

1. Global Commission on the Economics of Water. Transforming Global Water Governance (United Nations, 2023).
2. Water and Global Environmental Conventions (United Nations Environment Programme, 2022).
3. Ellison, D. et al. Glob. Environ. Change 43, 51–61 (2017).
4. Wunder, S. Payments for Environmental Services: Some Nuts and Bolts, CIFOR Occasional Paper No. 42 (Center for International Forestry Research, 2005).

Henk Ovink is the Executive Director and founding Commissioner for the Global Commission on the Economics of Water. He was the first global water ambassador, appointed in 2015 by the Dutch Cabinet as Special Envoy for International Water Affairs. As Ambassador to the UN on Water he led the second UN Water Conference in 2023, the first since 1977. Henk served on President Obama's Hurricane Sandy Rebuilding Task Force where he led the long-term innovation, resilience, and rebuilding efforts and developed and led the groundbreaking 'Rebuild by Design' competition. Before joining the Task Force Ovink was both Acting Director General of Spatial Planning and Water Affairs and Director National Spatial Planning for the Netherlands after multiple roles in the private sector and academia. Henk holds an honorary doctorate at Delft University and is associate professor at the University of Groningen in Climate Adaptation and Water Management. In 2023 Henk Ovink was the 10th recipient of the Foreign Affairs Decoration of Honor in Gold for his global leadership on water diplomacy.



Tigris and Euphrates basin with major dams in Turkey and Syriya (National Center for Water Resources Management, Iraq).

Climate Justice in the Face of Desertification: A View from Ethics and Governance

Behnam Taebi

Climate Justice in the Face of Desertification: A View from Ethics and Governance

Behnam Taebi

Climate justice is a widely discussed notion in climate policy. Already in the United National Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 1992, justice or equity featured as a key principle. This was particularly an acknowledgement of the role of accumulated historical emissions in the exacerbation of climate change. This should urge the parties to "protect the climate system for the benefit of present and future generations of humankind, on the basis of equity and in accordance with their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities."[1] This was an expression of distributive justice in terms of a just distribution of risks and benefits, also across generations. In this talk, I will first review the history of climate justice and its four tenets, being distributive, procedural and restorative justice as well as justice as recognition. In different moment of this history, different tenets have been at the forefront of discussions. In the second half of the talk, I will particularly focus on the implications of distributive justice in the face of desertification. More specifically, I will focus on the three questions of what is it that should be distributed (unit of justice), how it should be distributed (pattern of distribution), among whom it should be distributed (the locus of justice).

Climate justice is often considered either at a global level or a national level as to how to distribute the costs of climate policy fairly. Climate justice could, however, also be a helpful framework to assist the governance of bodies of water that are held in common by several countries. Positioned between local and universal scales, such approach advocates for the approach of bilateral or multilateral climate justice as a means of considering justice manifestations between neighbouring countries that share common water concerns.

I will discuss these by focusing on the example of dams that are built on transboundary rivers, such as Turkey's grand plan to build a total of twenty two dams on the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, which run downstream to Syria, Iraq and Iran. This has caused unrest in the downstream countries. It has among other things contributed to the drought in Syria between 2006 and 2010, which exacerbated public grievance about Assad regime, culminating in the protests of 2011. It has also reduced the water streams through Iraq and by that presumably contributed to the desertification of some wetlands in the neighbouring Iran, causing sand and dust storms in the south-western provinces of that country.

Claiming that the already built dams in Turkey have contributed to this desertification, Iran petitioned the UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, to call on Turkey to stop building dams on these two international rivers. Iraq has expressed similar concerns. Turkey, however, rejects both countries' claims. While there is an international convention from 1997 prescribes that water transboundary allocations must be done in an "equitable and reasonable" manner, it remains unclear what exactly "equity" entails in this regard.

Behnam Taebi is a Professor of Energy & Climate Ethics and Scientific Director of the Climate Safety & Security Center at Delft University of Technology. He further leads Campus The Hague of TU Delft, which aims to bring engineering knowledge closer to the heart of (international) public policy and politics. Taebi studied Material Science and Engineering (2006) and received his Ph.D. in Philosophy of Technology (2010). He was affiliated with Harvard University's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs (2014-2020) and a member of The Young Academy of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (in Dutch: DJA-KNAW, 2016-2021). He is editor-in-chief of Science and Engineering Ethics, co-editor of a volume on The Ethics of Nuclear Energy (Cambridge University Press, 2015), and the author of a monograph on Ethics and Engineering- an Introduction (Cambridge University Press, 2021). Taebi is also a Member of the Netherlands Scientific Climate Council (in Dutch: WKR), which advises the Dutch government and Parliament on matters of climate policy.

Thirst and Resistance: Water Scarcity and Political Struggle in Palestine

Muna Dajani

Thirst and Resistance: Water Scarcity and Political Struggle in Palestine

Muna Dajani

This intervention critically examines how discourses on water scarcity and climate change are shaped by environmental orientalism and structural racism, deeply embedded in colonial, settler-colonial, and nation-state policymaking. It argues that such narratives perpetuate the dehumanization of affected communities by normalizing scarcity as an inevitable condition rather than acknowledging it as a politically and racially constructed process. As a result, communities must not only navigate the imposed scarcity and systemic injustice in resource access, use, and control but also contend with the accelerating impacts of climate change.

In Palestine, the depoliticization of climate change policy has reduced what is fundamentally a struggle for liberation and self-determination into a site of humanitarian aid and uneven development. By ignoring the colonial and settler-colonial legacy in the region, dominant climate change narratives present a flawed and incomplete picture of Palestine, reinforcing policies that serve as mechanisms of domination. These policies transform Indigenous landscapes, undermine Palestinian presence on the land, and weaponize environmental precarity. The resulting multi-faceted violence—manifesting through destruction, displacement, and the erosion of sovereignty—tightens control over space, time, and narratives, distancing Palestinians from self-determination and liberation.

By framing Palestine as a climate justice struggle, this paper challenges the systematic denial of Palestinian rights to historical, present, and future ecological existence. It advocates for reimagining transformative not as a tool of domination but as a pathway toward liberation. In doing so, it calls for a revival of collective resistance strategies aimed at dismantling settler-colonial structures and reclaiming Palestinian sovereignty over land, water, and identity. This discussion contributes to broader conversations on climate justice, highlighting the transformative potential of decolonial praxis in addressing global ecological crises and forging sustainable, inclusive futures.

Like the contested landscapes highlighted in this symposium, Palestine's water crisis is not solely an environmental issue but a deeply political one. In Gaza and the West Bank, Israeli policies fragment access to water, enforce dependency, and disrupt Indigenous water management systems that have long sustained arid environments. This pattern reflects a broader global trend in which Indigenous and marginalized communities are systematically denied sovereignty over their water resources, leading to cycles of forced migration and territorial contestation.

Despite these challenges, Palestinian communities continue to resist through adaptive water practices, communal resource management, and political mobilization—demonstrating how Indigenous knowledge serves as a counterforce to imposed scarcity. While international interventions often emphasize technological solutions like desalination and wastewater treatment, this presentation argues that achieving true water justice requires dismantling colonial water regimes and restoring Indigenous agency over land and water. By drawing connections between Palestine and other contested arid regions, this discussion reframes water not just as an issue of environmental precarity but as a battleground for political sovereignty and decolonial futures.

Muna Dajani is a political ecologist focused on understanding environmental and water governance through decolonial and critical lenses. She holds a PhD from the Department of Geography and Environment at the London School of Economics (LSE), where her doctoral research focused on examining community struggles for rights to water and land resources in settler colonial contexts in Palestine and the occupied Syrian Golan Heights. She is currently a Fellow in Environment at the Geography and Environment Department at LSE. Previously, she held the position of Senior Research Associate at the Lancaster Environment Centre, Lancaster University where she worked on enhancing joint learning on the project entitled, "Transformations to Groundwater Sustainability". Her work at the University of East Anglia focused on exploring ethnographic and historical examinations of the highly contested and politicised transboundary river basins of the Upper Jordan and Yarmouk rivers.

Dajani is the lead editor of The Untold Story of the Golan Heights (I.B. Tauris, 2021), which resulted from her co-development and management of a collaboration project entitled Mapping Memories of Resistance between the LSE Middle East Centre, Birzeit University and Golan Heights based Al-Marsad, alongside online curriculum in Arabic and English teaching about the Golan Heights. Dajani has published papers in Political Geography, AREA, Antipode, Environment and Planning E and Water Alternatives. She also led publications of non-academic books such as "The Ethical Guide to Consumerism in Palestine" (2015 and 2021), policy briefs on water and climate change politics (Al-Shabaka Palestinian Policy Network, Jadaliyya, Minority Rights Group), in addition to speaking about issues of environment, climate advocacy and decolonising universities on several campuses and institutions in the UK.

The Fight for the Ocean's Oasis: An Entangled Reading

Setareh Noorani

The Fight for the Ocean's Oasis: An Entangled Reading

Setareh Noorani

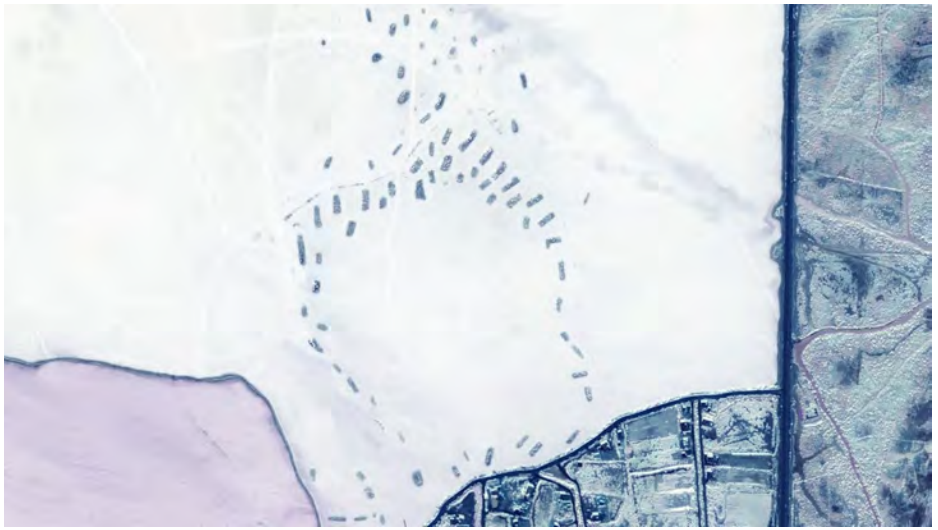
Geographically, the Indian Ocean (also known as the Afrasian Sea) strategically connects Asia, Africa, Europe, and Australia through its coasts, inland territories, archipelagos, and oceanic zones. Despite its crucial role in global historical, political, cultural, economic, and ecological dynamics, the Indian Ocean is often overlooked by Western political powers in a strategic blindness.

The Indian Ocean is a complex spatial fabric of multiple colonised spaces, designated for continued extraction, resource optimisation, and as such militarised to the benefit of the world's largest political powers (United States, European countries such as France and Britain, China, and India). As the third-largest of the world's oceans, the Indian Ocean is a hub of marine biodiversity and responsible for feeding bordering countries and the wider global population its fish, such as shrimp, squid, and tuna. This critical region faces an as much entangled amount of pressures on its natural ecosystems due to the ongoing presence of unsustainable human activities.

At this point, the Eastern Indian Ocean belongs to a global ocean desert surface of 6.6 mil. square kilometers - detrimental to the Ocean's key task to supply nutrient rich waters, blooming and dispersing due to the monsoon winds. For this presentation, I connect the rise of the ocean's desert, and the fight for the remaining oases, with the extra-regulatory fishing and transhipment, port development initiatives, and ongoing militarisation of the fishing industry in the Western Indian Ocean by extra-regional actors under proliferating maritime security strategies; perhaps best known for the multilateral determent of Somali "pirates".

This inquiry departs from the research project New Currents: Indian Ocean Futures. New Currents raises questions about the diverse shared heritages and situated futures of the Indian Ocean territories. By addressing the conditions of economic and cultural competition and dominant power structures, the research departs from the design of land and water spaces that serve as vital nodes for remapping collaborations — networks of migration and exchange in this region.

Setareh Noorani is an architect, researcher and curator at Nieuwe Instituut, and an independent artist. Setareh Noorani's current (curatorial) research at the Nieuwe Instituut (Rotterdam, NL) focuses on the paradigm-shifting notions of decoloniality, feminisms, queer ecologies, non-institutional and collective representations in contemporary architecture, its heritage and future scenarios. At Nieuwe Instituut, she chairs the research theme lines Remapping Collaborations and Collecting Otherwise, is part of the committee writing the new collections policy for Collection Nieuwe Instituut, and leads the project New Currents: Indian Ocean Futures, with past projects being Feminist Design Strategies, Arus Balik - Shifting Currents, and Appropriation as Collective Resistance.



Wetlands Beyond Water: Entangled Ecologies in the Southern Marshes of Iraq

Ameneh Solati

Wetlands Beyond Water: Entangled Ecologies in the Southern Marshes of Iraq

Ameneh Solati

In 1991, the marshes of southern Iraq—home to the indigenous Ahwari people—became a key site of insurgency during a rare nationwide uprising against Saddam Hussein. In response, hydro-infrastructural projects of dams, barrages, sluices, artificial rivers, and dikes orchestrated the near-total drainage of a 6,500-year-old wetlands within two years. The desiccation of the marshes led to the mass displacement of its people and the loss of a unique ecosystem, home to countless species of plants, fish, animals, and birds. These plans were originally conceived by British engineers in the early 20th century and revived during the Iran-Iraq War in 1984 until rapidly accelerated after the uprising. This act of environmental erasure fits within a broader continuum of ecological violence—one that extends from colonial interventions to contemporary regimes of control and extraction, including hydropower and the oil industries.

Although the Ahwari people successfully re-flooded parts of the wetlands after the fall of the Ba'ath regime in 2003, and UNESCO designated the wetlands a World Heritage Site in 2016, the past few years have seen a rapid decline in water levels due to two key factors. Firstly, Turkey's Ilisu Dam, constructed on the Tigris River which acts as the lifeline of the marshes, has drastically reduced water flow to the region. At the same time, Iraq's water redistribution in favor of agricultural land and urban expansions have further deprived the wetlands of their essential supply.

Second, Iraq's reliance on oil as a tool to reassert sovereignty has made the marshes an expendable landscape. Decades of British and U.S. imperialism, military interventions, and economic sanctions including the oil-for-food program have left Iraq's economy heavily dependent on oil. With some of the marshes sitting atop valuable oil reserves, they have been targets of pollution, blockades, and drainage since the discovery of oil.

Spatial and infrastructural strategies continue to manipulate the ecological flows that sustain the marshes, often under the guise of economic growth, national security, nation building, and development. These interventions accelerate the climate crisis and threaten the survival of the remaining Ahwari people, whose ways of life have been intricately interwoven with the wetlands for centuries. The wetlands of southern Iraq blurs distinctions and divisions between human, non-human, water and land. Here, nature is not a scenic vista, it is an evolving process, shifting, porous, interwoven. Against this, the infrastructures of control and extraction impose violent static geometries. Pipelines, dams, and dikes carve through the terrain, channeling resources away, severing interdependencies, and deepening fissures between living beings and their environment. Tracing the story of the marshes renders them as far more than mere zones of ecological and cultural richness but a complex arena where ideologies of power, autonomy, and resistance are spatially inscribed.

Ameneh Solati is a research-based artist and architect. Her practice investigates the spatial manifestations of power and resistance within marginalized spaces. She leads a design studio at the Design Academy Eindhoven and serves as an editor-at-large at Failed Architecture. Her writing includes Wetlands of Resistance (e-flux Architecture, 2023), and her work has been exhibited at the Stedelijk Museum Schiedam (2024) and the Venice Architecture Biennale (2021). Solati holds a master's degree in architecture from the Royal College of Art in London.

Desalination and the Politics of Aridity: Investigating the Reconfiguration of Postcolonial Landscape of Kachchh, Gujarat

Amitangshu Acharya

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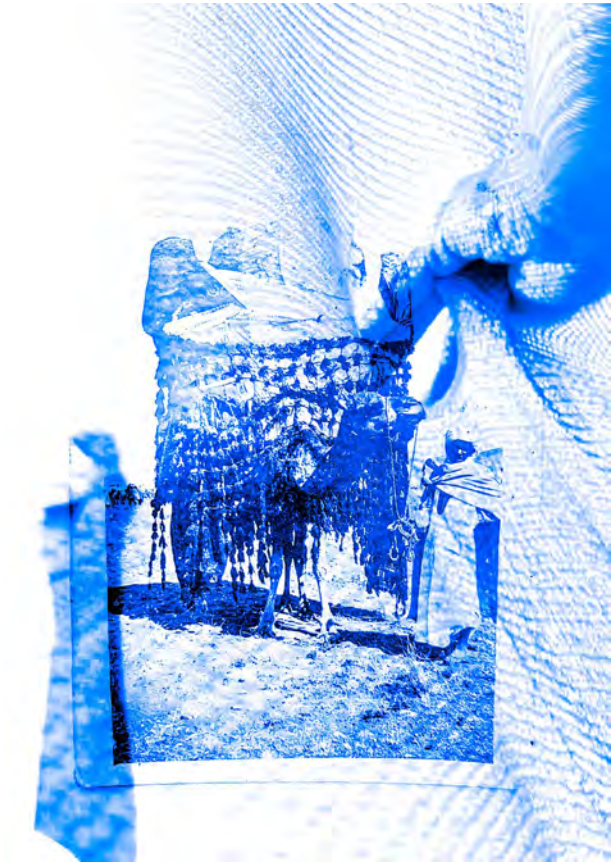
Development in post-colonial India had largely been a technocratic project (Visvanathan 1997), involving terraforming through modernist reconstitution of landscapes, practices and worldviews. As a result, multipurpose dams and the Green Revolution were accompanied with "technoscientific euphoria" (Nandy, 1998) which drowned out conflicting narratives of popular resistance and ecological devastation. In this context, "scarcity" and "thirst" have been enrolled into the developmentalist discourse to legitimize the transformation of "arid" landscapes in India, a continuation of the colonial hydraulic obsession to "rectify" South Asia's uneven precipitation.

Thirst was a statist raison d'être for constructing the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada River, to supply drinking water to the "arid" regions of Kachchh and Saurashtra in the western Indian border state of Gujarat. The displacement and ecological devastation it produced led to the Narmada Bachao Andolan, India's longest running environmental movement (Mehta, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2007). However, in parallel, and in a much smaller scale, the development of desalination technology to produce potable water in "water scarce" regions of Gujarat (including Kachchh) has remained unnoticed in scholarship.

My paper examines the discursive construction of Kachchh as "rainfed" and "arid", which rationalises the postcolonial development of extractive desalination technologies. I illustrate how the evolution of membrane-based desalination reveals that the reconstitution of water through desalination technoscience is entangled with reconfiguration of landscapes and the securitization of borderlands, with the latter shaping technology transfer between India and Israel. I argue that membrane-based desalination is central to Israel's claim to disciplining arid environments and as the use of these technologies intensify in Kachchh through "South-South cooperation", they continue to materially and spatially reconstitute arid landscapes and (re)produce new socio-ecological concerns.

Amitangshu Acharya is a critical geographer and specializes in the field of political ecology, focusing on postcolonial nature in South Asia. His work as an academic, writer, and practitioner spans activist networks, philanthropic organisations, and international research institutes.
Amitangshu completed his PhD. from the University of Edinburgh as a Leverhulme Trust Scholar. His doctoral research bridged political ecology with science and technology studies (STS) to explore the rising popularity of Reverse-Osmosis (RO) membrane-based water filtration in urban India. He obtained his MSc in Environment, Culture, and Society from the University of Edinburgh as a Sir Ratan Tata Trust Scholar. He has also been a grant recipient of IJURR Foundation, UK; and Konrad Lorenz Institute, Austria.
Amitangshu is currently the Principal Investigator of the WaterPIP KAN project which is exploring how smallholders can effectively use geospatial data for their irrigation needs, within which he hosts the webinar series *"Watering the Margins"*. He is an advisor to Digital Climate Futures, a 3-year research project led by Lancaster University which explores a decolonial and justice perspective on digitalised climate change adaptation. He coordinates the Decolonising Science PhD Course at IHE Delft and is also a TEDx speaker.
Amitangshu has written on water cultures, the climate crisis, and everyday urbanism in *The Economist, The Independent, Places Journal, Huffington Post, The Hindu, Khaleej Times, Indian Express, Scroll.in,* and *The Mint.* Amitangshu's research interests includes decolonising science, cultural politics, and marginality in agriculture.



Weaving Ephemeral Literacies: Poetics of Tension and Nomadic Resilience in Invisible Desert Waterscapes

Meriam Sehimi

Weaving Ephemeral Literacies: Poetics of Tension and Nomadic Resilience in Invisible Desert Waterscapes

Meriam Sehimi

The perception of deserts as barren voids is a colonial construct—a narrative that justified occupation, resource extraction, and the erasure of Indigenous identities and spatial knowledge. Yet, these landscapes hold vast archives of intelligence, cultivated by communities whose spatial practices have been systematically overlooked and actively rendered invisible.

My mother, from a Bedouin tribe in the Sahara, represents the last generation of a nomadic community that sustained life for generations in the desert, revealing a history of both abundance and struggle. Rooted in environmental attunement and minimal resource use, nomadic practices embody an ethic of interdependence that does not respond to scarcity through extraction or control but transforms it into adaptive strategies, navigating constraint as a generative condition for survival.This ethic is grounded in a spatial negotiation that takes only what the earth can replenish, guided by an intimate reading of terrain, the sensing of moisture, and adaptation through cultural continuity.

What endures in the desert is never still. Both desert waters and nomadic passage traverse shifting thresholds, folding into the textures of their surroundings, becoming part of the rhythms that weave the landscapes they cross. Desert waters are not merely a resource but a relational and elemental force that shapes and is shaped by human, non-human, and more-than-human lives. As agents of co-creation, these liquid paths carry embodied knowledge, giving rise to spatial practices responsive to the ecologies of desert life.

In the context of the Sahara, this water literacy moves beyond traditional infrastructures like foggaras and oases to include the interspecies relationships that desert dwellers engage with to access and understand water. Focusing on water as an interconnecting material flow, this dialogue explores the invisible forms of water literacy embedded in the nomadic knowledge systems that shape the desert existence. This research proposes an epistemological shift and approaches place knowing as an embodied practice—unlearning and questioning frameworks that continue to marginalize Indigenous knowledge systems.

Meriam Sehimi is a researcher and architect with a Bedouin background, exploring the intersections of nomadic spatial practices, desert epistemes, and ephemeral architecture. Her interdisciplinary work focuses on adaptive, non-fixed practices that challenge traditional frameworks, merging material experimentation, particularly textiles, and movable spatial systems, with archival work. Through fieldwork and collective making, she investigates spatial imaginaries, using storytelling and curatorial methods to uncover and engage with overlooked and invisibilized modes of placemaking, particularly those rooted in Indigenous knowledge systems, while questioning traditional concepts of authorship. This commitment is anti-colonial, challenging established structures and prioritizing marginalized knowledge systems.

Meriam's methodology emphasizes adaptive, rather than extractive, approaches to architecture, addressing colonial erasure. She focuses on the role of architecture in restoring cultural, environmental, and epistemic justice, highlighting the need to rethink architecture as a tool for resilience and repair. Her work integrates tacit knowledge, anthropological approaches, and performative practices, aiming to challenge dominant narratives and generate alternative understandings of spatial agency. Meriam Sehimi's education includes studies at TU Munich, Istanbul Technical University, and TU Delft, where she graduated cum laude. She has worked in international practices engaging with vernacular architecture, human-centered design, and research-driven methodologies. Her thesis and ongoing research explore the understanding of literacy within Indigenous lifeways and ecological intelligence, focusing on the embodied practices of desert dwellers.

Abandoned village near lake Hamoun, Hamed Gholami , 2018, Goleh Bacheh village on the periphery of Lake Hamoun, Sistan, Iran

On Thirst and Mirage: Multilayered Spatial Research on the Dried Hamoun Wetlands in the Desert Border Landscape of Sistan

Negar Sanaan Bensi

On Thirst and Mirage: Multilayered Spatial Research on the Dried Hamoun Wetlands in the Desert Border Landscape of Sistan

Negar Sanaan Bensi

This project investigates the complex relationship between environmental degradations, bordering processes, political tension and indigenous techniques in desert landscapes surrounding the dried basin of the Hamoun Wetlands in Sistan, located across the Iran-Afghanistan border. It critically examines the resilience of Indigenous practices of the inhabitants who adhere to the desert and what it offers. Studying these practices sheds light on traditional governance systems, vernacular crafts, and techniques for managing entangled milieus of water, soil and air that have formed the deserts through weathering processes.

Historically, the Hamoun wetlands were a significant inland delta fed by Helmand and other seasonal rivers flowing from Afghan territory, supporting ancient civilizations and thriving biodiversity. The wetlands were home to diverse forms of life- settled communities, villages and cities as well as various nomadic life forms, who inhabited all marginal possibilities of such an ecosystem in short and longer distances.

However, bordering demarcations in the late 19th century, including British colonial interventions and the technocratic modernization of two countries, divided these wetlands and disrupted their ecosystems, leading to geopolitical disputes, ecological disentanglement, and the gradual degradation of the wetlands and, with it the indigenous practices.

This work presents a multi-layered image of Sistan's territory and contributes to a broader discourse on climate resilience, scarcity, and transboundary cooperation in a region long marginalized and understudied. It asks how can we tell 'better stories' about Sistan and Hamoun Wetlands, which as Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing states, do not induce paralysis but invigorates thinking and encourage actions.

This proposal builds on the ongoing research funded by the Climate Action Program at TU Delft (2024-25) and is based on collaboration between experts and local communities.

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