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Is this the beginning of water wars?

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As Barcelona runs out of water, Spain has been forced to consider importing water from France by boat. It is the latest example of the growing struggle for water around the world – the "water wars".

Barcelona and the surrounding region are suffering the worst drought in decades. There are several possible solutions, including diverting a river, and desalinating water. But the city looks like it will ship water from the French port of Marseilles.

The water services authority in Marseille say that no contracts have been signed, and would not say how much the water would cost, although it is unlikely to cost any more than it costs the inhabitants of Marseilles. And the amounts of water that have been discussed are small – 25,000 cubic metres, less than what's needed to grow an acre of wheat, and not enough to keep 30 Spaniards going for a year, based on their average consumption.

But the proposal is interesting because it turns a local drought into an international situation.

Water conflict

Climatologists predict that certain regions, [the Mediterranean basin among them, will increasingly suffer from water shortages](#) as global temperatures are pushed up by greenhouse gas emissions.

Combined with reports that [water scarcity can escalate conflicts](#), the forecasts have raised fears that climate change could bring about water wars.

"People will not fight over water," says [Mark Zeitoun](#), from the London School of Economics' Centre for Environmental Policy and Governance in the UK. "But that's not to say water shortages will not contribute to existing tensions."

This is already happening. Zeitoun advises the Palestinian authorities in their water negotiations with Israel. The latter controls 90% of the two territories' shared water resources. "The fact that the Palestinians are deprived of their water doesn't help the situation," Zeitoun says.

Like Spain, the Palestinian authorities are considering their options, and like Spain one of them is to import water – in this case from Turkey, a country which is already involved in its own water disputes with Syria and Iraq.

The Tigris and Euphrates rivers start in Turkey and supply Syria and Iraq. The Turkish government is building dams on those rivers, reducing the flow downstream and stoking long-standing tensions with its neighbours. "Iraq desperately needs that water," says Zeitoun.

Water for arms

Turkey already exports water to Cyprus and in 2004 signed a "water for arms" deal with none other than Israel, an agreement which sees Turkey deliver converted oil tankers full of water to Israel in exchange for tanks and air force technology.

Israel's situation is typical of a state that is severely mismanaging its water resources, says Zeitoun. Climate change models predict that while water will become scarcer in some regions, it will be more abundant elsewhere, suggesting efficient water management is key.

"If Spain is drawing a lot of water to grow oranges for the UK, the city of Barcelona doesn't benefit. The only people profiting are a few large farmers," he says.

So while the water wars may not spark conflict between states, Zeitoun's colleague Elena Lopez-Gunn says we could well see water riots. "Whether the political systems can cope with that, we don't know," she says.

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