Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

# Babel: Translating the Middle East

# "Peter Schwartzstein: Climate Violence in the Middle East"

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FEATURING

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Jon Alterman: Peter Schwartzstein, welcome to Babel.

Peter Schwartzstein: Thank you very much for having me back on.

Jon Alterman: One of the themes of your book is that climate exacerbates bad governance. People have talked about how climate causes conflict. People have talked about how climate exacerbates conflict. What do you mean by climate exacerbates bad governance?

Peter Schwartzstein: I think of climate as amplifying a society's existing fissures or weaknesses. When you have a place that is suffering from varying degrees of state mismanagement, climate change reduces that already poorly governed state's capacity to deliver various services such as fresh water, sufficient sewage disposals, and affordable food. It ensures that they're even less capable of providing those services than they previously were.

Jon Alterman: There are a number of scholars who've been looking at the nexus between climate and conflict. You've read all their books. What do you think they're either getting wrong, or what do they need to focus on that they're not focusing on?

Peter Schwartzstein: I'm always wary of bricking on my peers, given that so much of what I've done owes a tremendous debt to the work that's come before me. But perhaps I also have a journalist's slight prejudice against the manner in which some scholars and academics go about their work. There's too much focus on the minutiae of a subject and insufficient focus on the bigger picture.

For example, take the conflict in Syria. From about 2013, there was an enormous amount of coverage on the supposed extent to which climate change contributed to the beginnings of the revolution that then bled into the civil war. That, in turn, led to this enormous backlash from various scholars who insisted with a degree of reason, but only a degree of reason, that many sensationalist parts of media had massively overstated the influence of climate change. That's all true, but as is so often the case, there's a very real middle ground in which the research and groundwork that I've done over many years in Syria, and that of many of my peers have done, shows that climate change was very much

a factor, just not the be-all and end-all that slightly shoddy articles at one point or other suggested.

Jon Alterman: You had examples of the government adulterating fertilizer, which would have been a problem in an earlier time, but in the face of climate change, it becomes catastrophic.

Peter Schwartzstein: Absolutely. I've tried to steer clear of Syria just because of the extent to which that did monopolize coverage of the conflict-climate space, but I lead with it because it's unavoidable, and I wanted to provide an example as to one of the ways in which climate change did actually play a part. As you alluded to, for many years in the run-up to 2011, farmers in northeast Syria in particular, which was the most agrarian part of the country, had to put up with the same kind of volumes of corruption from these kickback-seeking officials as their peers elsewhere in the country.

But as that drought intensified and continued through the years in the run-up to 2011, these farmers' willingness and ability to put up with those bribe-seeking demands decreased. At a time when their harvests were failing and crop yields were shrinking, officials were coming back demanding the same sums of cash that farmers were now even less capable of providing and hampering farmers with lower quality seeds and fertilizers at a time of their greatest need. This meant that the degree of rage at that corruption was even higher. When I try and look at how climate change contributes to other drivers of instability, such as corruption or inequality, that's really what I'm driving at.

Jon Alterman: We first spoke on Babel five years ago. What's changed between the conversation we had five years ago and what you're seeing on the ground now?

Peter Schwartzstein: I'll give you one way in which things have become worse and one way in which they've become better. First, the general environment and climate prognosis in the Middle East has only worsened over the past few years. This is a region which has roughly 6 percent of the world's population and about 1.5 percent of its freshwater resources. The mismatch between available supply and demand is only widening. At the same time, quality of governance has by and large only worsened across the board, ensuring that the impact of those worsening and

intensifying climate stresses is felt more profoundly. That's the change for the worse. Things on that count are becoming more debilitating almost by the year.

The good change is, as you might have seen over the past year or two, that there has been this rash of transboundary water, environment, and climate initiatives across the region, particularly in the Gulf. Now, many of these are purely rhetorical. They're not really meant to get off the ground, and some of them are opportunistic initiatives that sound good, but ultimately stand little prospect of generating meaningful change. However, the very fact that we're seeing more and more of these initiatives is a massive net positive, even if most of them lead to very little concrete action.

That's because, a lot of the time, you're having interaction between different parts of government that wouldn't otherwise happen. That's almost always a net positive. Then equally, this does seem to illustrate the fact that some of these countries with their often complicated, to put it lightly, relations with one another, really are seeking to at least partly divorce climate, water, and environment from their wider relationships. There is an understanding that this can't really be a zero-sum issue, and that this really can and should be at least partly disconnected from the wider dynamic.

Jon Alterman: You've spoken to more people in more places about climate and conflict than anybody I've come across in this field. What do you see as the most important similarities across regions and countries? What are some of the important differences, and is there any difference that you see between the Middle East context and the South Asian context that your book also explores?

Peter Schwartzstein: One of the key points of similarity is that it's at a very local level between communities, villages, and various subnational actors like provinces and governorates in an Iraqi context, where resource-related violence is really mushrooming. That's true of the Middle East, and that's true of parts of Africa and South Asia, as well. Now, we know that at a global level, there are more conflicts within countries than at any point since the Second World War. A lot of the time that's because there is more incentive for violence at a local level than there is between nation states, where countries are aware that there's limited prospect of

pilfering additional resources from one's neighbor. Unfortunately, it's often a rather different situation at a local level.

That's a key similarity. Points of difference? I'd have to rack my brain here. For me, someone who's done most of my work in different parts of the Middle East and North and East Africa, the captivating thing is the relative absence of water.

In South Asia, a lot of the time there's an issue of excess water, but also, the degree of variation in South Asia is extra problematic. The monsoon has sometimes been described only half-jokingly as the real finance minister of South Asia. The Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis of the world are acutely vulnerable to this increasingly fickle series of seasonal rains, which arguably places them at an even greater risk than many of their Middle Eastern peers who don't have enough water but aren't necessarily suffering with quite the same degree of seasonal variations as their peers elsewhere.

Jon Alterman: Does that suggest that in South Asia, more of the emphasis should be placed on large scale infrastructure, and in the Middle East, more emphasis should be placed on community-based or locally based initiatives to distribute scarce water? Or are there other conclusions we should draw from that?

Peter Schwartzstein: It varies a lot through different parts of South Asia and the Middle East. Really, we need everything. In some instances, we need a return to the kinds of nature-based or indigenous solutions that are sometimes excessively fetishized, but nevertheless play their role. I'm talking here of things like the *karez* systems that we've historically had in parts of Iran and northern Iraq, as well as the *falaj* system in Oman and parts of the Arabian Peninsula. They can play a role to a certain extent. Equally, there are places, especially in Saudi Arabia and other parts of the Middle East, in which enhanced and more efficient desalination is, unfortunately, likely the only solution, despite the many potential pitfalls.

Then in parts of South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa alike, there's going to be some really tough policy levers that states have to pull. There are places in which agriculture is no longer viable, no matter

what kinds of infrastructure is built and no matter what kinds of support is offered to farmers. From a psychological point of view, that's extremely difficult. There's a desire to at least have partial mastery over your food supplies in places in which denial of food access or rising food prices has often been fatal for regimes. However, you have places in which the nature of climate stresses mixed in with the nature of environmental degradation ensures that farming just isn't viable. The understandable unwillingness on the part of authorities in parts of Jordan and Iraq to recognize that will, unfortunately, stand these places in in ever poor stead as we go on.

Jon Alterman: The Rutgers historian, Toby Jones, who wrote about Saudi Arabia in the 1970s, talked about how the Saudis had turned oil into water. They had used the oil resources to dig into aquifers and make Saudi Arabia one of the world's largest wheat producers for a while. I was surprised that aquifers didn't play a larger role in your book. As you know, aquifers have been very important to agriculture in a number of arid places. Aquifers are a bit difficult because you can't see them, so you don't really know that they're shrinking. Although certainly, the water table in places like Yemen is dropping precipitously. Are aquifers a piece of this? Why were they not a focus of what you wrote about?

Peter Schwartzstein: It's partly a function of where I've kind of centered much of my work. The Arabian Peninsula has not been as significant of an area of research for me as it has for many others. But in the places where I have done much of my work—Jordan, Iraq, and Syria—part of the issue is that we just don't have anywhere near as much data as we need. Now, this is a classic, recurring problem across the region in which either data doesn't exist, or it's not made widely available by authorities.

People often look at aquifers, especially farmers and municipal water authorities, as some kind of magical alternative source of water that can be turned to at a time when the rains are not falling as they previously did. This is a massive issue, because we have a wealth of anecdotal evidence, if not statistics, to show that groundwater levels are falling at a pace that simply can't be sustained for much longer.

In Jordan, a country which is more groundwater dependent than almost any other in the region, approximately 10 out of the country's 12 main non-renewable aquifers are being pumped dry. As of a few years ago,

Amman and the popular cities to its north are mostly dependent on the Disi aquifer near the Saudi border. Now, when that aquifer runs dry, because it is non-renewable, at some point in the next 10, 15, 20, or 25 years maximum, nobody really knows what's going to come next or where the authorities are going to turn to for that irreplaceable source of current supply. This is a real “watch this space” issue.

Jon Alterman: One of the things that we're seeing people talk about around the world is the energy transition and a shift toward renewables. That certainly is not going to end a lot of the disruptions we see because of climate change, but it also seems that the energy transition can have its own disruptions in many states. As you think about your experience throughout the Middle East, what kinds of disruptions do you expect to see because of the energy transition and a shift toward renewables?

Peter Schwartzstein: Like you, I go to some of the same conferences across the region and I sometimes walk away shaking my head thinking that so many folks here, including these extremely clever, very “switched-on” people are just sort of walking into the abyss. That abyss is a world with less fossil fuel usage, which is absolutely vital for some of the reasons we've touched on. But for countries like Iraq and Libya, which derive over 90 percent of their state revenues from oil and gas, there is next to no conversation on anything like the scale necessary as to what comes when the lifeblood of those economies slowly dissipates.

The EU forecasts that by 2050, it will have around a 79 percent reduction in its consumption of oil and gas. If anything like that alone comes true, then that's punching a yawning gap in the balance sheets of basically every petro-state in the region. I've talked to an array of Iraqi senior policymakers in particular, from the former president and the former prime minister downwards, and they still talk about this as if it's some sort of hypothetical, vague future threat, rather than something that will come their way even if we don't move away from oil and gas at the speed or to the full extent that is necessary. This is a speeding bullet heading the way of so many of the regional regimes, and so few of them seem to be making the adequate preparations.

Jon Alterman: You and I have also spent a lot of time in Egypt. How do you think this is going to unfold in a place like Egypt, which has a lot of infrastructure

and a lot of people who need transportation and cooling? How does this play out there?

Peter Schwartzstein: On balance, I fear that it will not play out well. Egypt, in theory, has quite a lot going for it in this perspective. It's got a large chunk of what's known as the solar belt, which is a swathe of reliably sunny territory in the far south where one could generate not only enough energy to supply Egypt's own needs, but arguably and quite possibly the energy needs of a chunk of Europe as well.

Jon Alterman: Is it really of the scale where they could meet all of their electricity needs domestically as well as export?

Peter Schwartzstein: In theory, yes. It's just a question of whether they could get anything like the start-up capital needed to build sufficient solar facilities. There's also the issue of needing the storage capacity to hold themselves over during the nighttime hours and during those rare windows when the sun doesn't shine. All of this requires quality governance. It requires anything but the relatively chronic short-term thinking that we've seen from Cairo and so many other capitals. Even among states like Egypt that do have some of the tools to begin making this transition, we're just not seeing the degree of management necessary.

Jon Alterman: And profound amounts of capital. Jordan has been very interested in building its solar capacity. The United States has been investing in that and trying to wean Iraq off Iranian energy by having Jordanian exports. It still seems like it is relatively small-scale and slow in a place that is 10 percent the size of Egypt and relatively better governed.

Peter Schwartzstein: When it comes to renewables, Jordan is more than a relative success story. It's gone from having around 10 to 12 percent of its electricity needs met by renewables to more than tripling that in the past decade. Given the fact that these solar panels and other associated bits of infrastructure keep on absolutely plummeting in cost, there's plenty of reason to envisage them making significantly greater gains in the years ahead. In climate discourse, this is one of the massive sources of optimism at a time when a lot else is not going right.

The economic competitiveness of renewables is extraordinary. At this point, they are not just matching, but in some places, they are massively outpacing oil and gas. For places like Egypt, Jordan, and further afield where it is cost and almost cost alone that is the key driving factor, that's really important and good news.

Jon Alterman: What about the costs of moving away from all the infrastructure that is built around fossil fuels and electrifying everything into a sophisticated grid? Is there money to do that in places like Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq?

Peter Schwartzstein: In Egypt and Jordan, I don't think so. It would require not only a lot of international assistance but also the kinds of private sector investment that we don't yet seem to see. In the Gulf and, in theory, Iraq, there are some of the sums of money necessary to begin making that happen during periods when oil prices are perhaps a little bit higher than they currently are. I used to get asked by western diplomats in Baghdad, "What would it take for Iraq to begin addressing its water issues and treating them with the appropriate seriousness?" I used to say with relative conviction, "It will take a massive crisis, and at that point they'll have to act whether they want to or not."

Then along came the 2018 super drought, and approximately 120,000 people were hospitalized for waterborne illnesses in the Basra area. Some quick fixes aside, the Iraqi state did very little. My confidence that crises will begin to shake states out of their torpor has been quite seriously shaken.

Jon Alterman: In Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, rather than relying on solar, there's been an investment in nuclear power. According to some assessments, even though that's a multibillion-dollar, decade-long operation to get going, it's still a better bet than large-scale solar.

Peter Schwartzstein: I'm not an energy expert. I'm going to move a little beyond this to add that the concentration of key resources, in either the form of desalination facilities or nuclear facilities, is a dangerous and possibly messy phenomenon in a region where, for example, the Houthis have attacked some of Saudi Arabia's desalination facilities, thereby massively reducing the volume of fresh water that the Saudi state was able to provide to its citizens for a period. We've had similar things playing out with some of Israel's desalination facilities over the years.

Arguably, in a region which doesn't look like it's going to reach necessary degrees of stability and peacefulness anytime soon, one of the key advantages behind wind, solar, and other forms of dispersed renewables is the way in which that can be partly insulated from broader chaos.

Jon Alterman: There's a large theme at the end of your book about environmental peacemaking and peacebuilding, as well as the role that environment can and should play in healing some of the divisions in the region. A lot of the examples you have are international ones, especially around Arab-Israeli issues. What are the unexploited opportunities to do environmental peacemaking domestically, and why haven't more of them been exploited?

Peter Schwartzstein: From a Middle Eastern context, this environmental peacebuilding idea has a lot of attractions, and I would also argue, a lot of potential. As I alluded to with this raft of transboundary initiatives in the environment, climate, and water space, I think there is a recognition among authorities in the Gulf and perhaps elsewhere that you can kill two birds with one stone. You can achieve slightly superior environmental outcomes while also reducing the prospects of conflict. Now even in the Tigris-Euphrates basin sense, there's been a lot of water-related negotiations over the years, mostly behind the scenes. I'm only privy to sort of small bits of it.

There's an argument to be made that even though the lower Zab, one of the Tigris' key tributaries, more or less ran dry last week and doesn't look like much of a success story, the absence of additional tensions or forms of violence that might have existed otherwise, can be a success story in relative terms. There's a lot of utility to be had here.

Jon Alterman: Is there an international edge in helping domestic efforts and environmental peacebuilding? Why should international actors be concerned with domestic environmental peacebuilding?

Peter Schwartzstein: As we perhaps ought to have learned over the years, problems in one place don't remain self-contained messes. This is one of the key arguments to be made for aiding climate action elsewhere. You don't necessarily have to do it for the sake of justice, but you should do it because it's in your own self-interest. When it comes to tackling climate

stresses at large in the Middle East, Africa, and poorer parts elsewhere in the world, or when it comes to helping to resolve or in some way mitigate these environment or non-environment-related domestic disputes, it's in our interest. Those can bleed into issues that we do deeply care about, from migration to radicalization to the rise of various non-state groups, which—as I cover in the first chapter of the book—thrive in these ungoverned, climate-battered vacuums.

I spent the best part of three years looking at how the Islamic State group in rural parts of Iraq and Syria profited from collapsing agricultural conditions to bolster its ranks. At no point am I arguing that this is a climate fueled phenomenon alone, but it would not have been able to secure anything like the number of fighters that it initially did, were it not for the fact that you had this climate-battered, rural expanse in which jobs were disappearing at an extraordinary pace, farmers were living off a fraction of the volume of money that they deemed to be viable, and most particularly, that farmers weren't receiving any of the support that they felt entitled to. That added to an array of other grievances and resentment. That's a global story. Failed states, as we have learned over the years, are in nobody's interest.

Jon Alterman: Peter Schwartzstein, thank you very much for joining us once again on Babel.

Peter Schwartzstein: Thank you very much. I look forward to making it a hat trick a number of years into the future.

(END.)