When ‘Ali was a little boy, he spent his summers swimming in the Barada River and playing in the orchards rustling in the breeze along the banks. “Summers in Wadi Barada were amazing,” says the 28-year old from the village of Kufayr al-Zayt to the west of the Syrian capital of Damascus. “I can still hear the water rushing down the valley, and the screams and laughter of children playing in the river. We would spend all day on the banks of the Barada playing in the water, picking blackberries and building campfires in the evenings.”

‘Ali’s grandfather owned several plots of land in Wadi Barada and the surrounding areas. “My father told me that, when he was young, one of the family orchards lay right by the deepest part of the river, a stretch that was lined with tall poplar, sycamore and walnut trees. Because it was shady and the water was deep, it was a favorite swimming spot for boys from the village, and every summer my grandfather...
Water shortages were frequent and access to clean drinking water became a growing problem. Meanwhile, unemployment and land rights, but their demands were not heard.

Situated in the Anti-Lebanon Mountains near the Syrian-Lebanese border, Wadi Barada (the Barada Valley) was a water-rich area before 1970. Two major springs, the Barada and the Fija, fed into the Barada River and formed the main source of water for Damascus and the surrounding Ghouta plain, renowned for its orchards and gardens. But by the early 2000s, dramatic environmental, economic and demographic changes had transformed the landscape: The river had virtually dried up and many centuries-old orchards had died as a result of growing water demand in the capital and its sprawling suburbs.

The large-scale expropriation of agricultural lands in the areas around Wadi Barada from the late 1970s onward also affected the local farming sector, and caused major shifts in the area’s demographic makeup. Many farmers who lost their land abandoned agriculture and turned to the more lucrative business of smuggling.

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, community leaders appealed to the local and national authorities to restore water and land rights, but their demands were not heard. Water shortages were frequent and access to clean drinking water became a growing problem. Meanwhile, unemployment in the Wadi Barada area was constantly rising and smuggling rings thrived. When the Syrian uprising started in March 2011, the restoration of the river, access to clean drinking water and proper compensation for the expropriated lands were among the first demands of protesters in Wadi Barada.

Today, the issue of water and land has faded into the background. Wadi Barada has repeatedly been the scene of violent confrontation between the Syrian army and rebel forces, as well as army shelling and bomb explosions. In the opposition-held areas, lawlessness is widespread and kidnappings, robberies and murders are regular occurrences. Regime-controlled areas have also experienced bombings, kidnappings and killings.

But tensions surrounding land and water persist below the surface: In the past year, members of local armed resistance groups have threatened communities living on the expropriated lands. Moreover, drinking water supplies in Wadi Barada and greater Damascus are under severe pressure following a winter of exceptionally low rainfall in the region. Seventeen-hour water cuts, which usually occur only in July and August, have been in place since April and experts say that the cuts could extend further into the calendar year if the drought persists.

Expropriation “in the Public Interest”

Until the early 1980s, ‘Ali’s family owned more than ten hectares of land in Wadi Barada and the area to the south of the valley. The land by the riverbank was used to cultivate fruit trees and irrigated crops like green beans, corn, tomatoes and cucumbers. The rain-fed land to the south outside the valley was planted with wheat, barley, animal milk and olives. The land by the riverbank was used to cultivate fruit trees and irrigated crops like green beans, corn, tomatoes and cucumbers. The rain-fed land to the south outside the valley was planted with wheat, barley, animal milk and olives.

The Barada River

Lauded by poets as the “bride of cities,” “the beauty spot on the world’s cheek,” and “the paradise of the Orient,” Damascus was from ancient times known across the Middle East as a verdant oasis town with plentiful water supplies of good quality.

On the edge of the Syrian desert, Damascus received little rainfall, but could rely on two springs, the Barada and the Fija, to water not only the city but also the farming communities in the surrounding Ghouta plain. Both of these springs originate in the Anti-Lebanon Mountains to the northwest of the city.

The source of the Barada River, the spring of the same name, lies about 25 miles from Damascus in the Zabadani plain at an altitude of about 3,600 feet. From there the river flows west and south to enter the steep gorges of Wadi Barada. Twelve miles from the Barada spring, the waters of the larger and more reliable Fija spring join the river’s course.

Until some 40 years ago, the Barada branched off into seven channels at the foot of the Anti-Lebanon near the village of Rabwa. Those streams then fanned out through the city and flowed into the Ghouta plain, where they each split into smaller side channels.

In those days, Wadi Barada and the Zabadani plain were rich agricultural areas where fruit trees, vines, corn, barley, olives and wheat grew on irrigated and non-irrigated land. “Wadi Barada was an important agricultural area, both in terms of the quality and quantity of produce,” said local lawyer Zayn al-Abidin al-Dalati. “In season, two trucks a day left from Kufayr al-Zayt for Damascus and Beirut, filled with the best grapes, pomegranates, apples and apricots.”

While farming was the main livelihood of the locals, tourism was an important second source of income. Wadi Barada and the areas of Zabadani and Baludan were popular tourist destinations, especially in the summer, when city dwellers were keen to escape the sweltering heat of Damascus. The shady banks of the Barada were lined with restaurants and parks, which filled up on Fridays and holidays.
fodder, chickpeas, lentils and olives. “My grandfather had built his farm from scratch over a period of 50 years through hard work,” said ‘Ali. “Then, in the early 1980s, the army came in and seized most of the land he owned outside the valley. In all, he lost about eight hectares of land. He died shortly afterward, in 1984, and never had a chance to take his case to court to claim compensation.” The family lands that were seized were partly cordoned off as military zones and partly turned into forest. “They also took the land on the valley ridge—that’s where the snipers and artillery have been positioned since 2011, in a strategic position over the village. On our former lands.”

Like ‘Ali’s grandfather, dozens of villagers from Wādi Barada lost agricultural land in the 1970s and early 1980s as a result of large-scale government expropriation in Zabadani and Baludan and around Wādi Barada.

Overall, hundreds of hectares were confiscated in the area on the basis of two laws from 1958 and 1983, which allow the state to seize private property for projects “of public benefit,” such as a school, a university or a military installation. The expropriations took place gradually, with different ministries and state institutions claiming lands through several mechanisms. The army and Ministry of Defense seized most of the lands for different purposes, including a military driving school. North of Wādi Barada and east of the Zabadani plain a large perimeter was declared off-limits in 1989 when a law was issued to protect the recharge area of the Fija spring and safeguard the water supply for the capital 15 miles downstream. Other expropriated lands to the south of Wādi Barada were planted with pine and cypress forests.

More controversially, large tracts were also sold—illegally—to real estate developers and private individuals, who built luxury villas and housing developments. The “new towns” or suburbs of Qura al-Asad and Masakin al-Dimas, situated around four miles south of Wādi Barada, are examples of such residential areas built in the late 1970s on the expropriated lands of farmers from Wādi Barada. The luxury residences in Qura al-Asad house a largely ‘Alawi elite—members of the extended Asad family, high-ranking officials, army and secret service officers, ministers, rich parliamentarians and other wealthy individuals with close ties to the regime. The adjacent, more modest suburb of Masakin al-Dimas is home to lower-ranking ‘Alawi, Isma’ili and Druze officers in the army and intelligence branches, as well as regular soldiers. The traditional farming communities in the area from Baludan and Zabadani to Wādi Barada and beyond, by contrast, are inhabited by Sunni Muslims.

According to Syrian law, landowners whose land is expropriated must be compensated within five years with a sum...
equivalent to the market value of the property at the time of expropriation. If, however, this payment is not disbursed within 15 years, the owner loses the right to any compensation. Most landowners in Wadi Barada were not compensated for their loss—at least not adequately. “The government compensated people on paper, but not in reality,” said lawyer Zayn al-‘Abidin al-Dalati, a lawyer and former police officer who is originally from Kufayr al-Zayt.

Those who could afford it hired lawyers and went to court, but cases often dragged on for 25 years, by which time the compensation paid out was insignificant given the increase in land prices over a quarter of a century. “No justification was given for the expropriations and people were too scared to stand up for their rights,” said lawyer Dalati. “The country was under martial law since 1963. We were governed by the rule of the sword.”

Abu Sa‘id Hindiyya, 83, is still irate over the six hectares of land he lost in the expropriations in the late 1970s. “After years of court appeals, our family was able to get compensation for the land we lost,” he said. “But is was worthless. The court granted us a sum of 800 Syrian pounds ($18.50) per 1,000 square meters but we never received a single lira of it.” Moreover, Hindiyya says, the land was grossly undervalued, even on the basis of prices at the time of expropriation. Today, real estate in the area of Hindiyya’s confiscated land sells at prices between 20,000 ($133) and 50,000 Syrian pounds ($333) per square meter depending whether it is to be used for agriculture or real estate development.

“It is not surprising that people took to the streets,” Hindiyya said. “Explosions like the protests in this village happen because of injustice and grievances. Taking people’s lands without fair compensation is not what respectable...”
governments do. If we had fair courts in which everyone could seek justice, no one would have taken up arms against the government.”

Some lands were also “rented” by the government instead of being officially seized under the expropriation laws. But the outcome for the owners was more or less the same: They lost their land and rarely received proper compensation as the government fixed the rents at bargain-basement rates and often failed to pay the rent in any case. As the seizure of these lands also took place more than 30 years ago, many of the original landowners have died and most of their descendants are reluctant to engage in lengthy litigation to reclaim their property.

“We try to avoid the courts as the judiciary system is corrupt and unfair,” said ‘Ali. “Besides, I have 11 uncles and aunts and some of them have died, so then it would be up to their children. It would be too complicated to engage in a procedure that may take decades and lots of money and effort. And in the end, each one of us would end up with a tiny plot of land or a few hundred Syrian pounds.”

Indeed, the majority of people who lost land in the late 1970s and 1980s were too afraid to voice their anger at the government’s failure to compensate them. The civil war in neighboring Lebanon meant there was a large army presence in the area between Damascus and the Lebanese border. The frequent transfers of army personnel and equipment, and the ubiquitous checkpoints and plainclothes policemen, created an atmosphere of tension. Moreover, the crackdown on the Muslim Brothers, culminating in the massacre of tens of thousands in Hama in 1982, was seen as a warning of what could happen elsewhere.
“Villagers in Wadi Barada have a reputation for being proud and headstrong,” Hindiyya said. “But after we saw what Rif’at al-Asad [the younger brother of former president Hafiz] did in Hama, everyone kept quiet. We did not want to be the next Hama or the next Lebanon.”

The only place where no land was expropriated was Wadi Barada itself. Farmers who had lost land elsewhere continued to cultivate irrigated fruit trees (apricot, plum, peach, apple) and, higher on the valley slopes, non-irrigated crops such as almonds, walnuts, figs, vines, chickpeas, beans and barley. As plots here were smaller, though, few were able to make a living off the land. Unemployment rose and farming became a source of supplementary income, as residents took jobs in the public sector, small businesses such as carpentry or local restaurants.

But there was also steady growth in smuggling across the Lebanese border, with organized bootleggers bringing everything from cigarettes, drugs and weapons to bananas, toys, stationery and televisions into Syria. “Until the early 1990s, smuggling was looked upon as a profession and an investment,” ‘Ali said. “People avoided weapons and drugs smugglers, and there weren’t many of them at that time. Smugglers who dealt in other goods were seen as businessmen, not criminals. Over the last 15 years, though, weapons and drug smuggling have increased massively. It says a lot about the failure of government policies.”

By the 1990s, the social and spatial dynamics of the area had been profoundly transformed. Before 1970 the region of Wadi Barada and Zabadani was a working-class, Sunni-dominated agricultural area. Twenty years later, military zones and luxury residences occupied swathes of agricultural land, while the influx of new population groups altered the social and sectarian makeup of the area.

But changes downstream, in the rapidly growing capital, were to have a much greater impact on all aspects of life in the Barada Valley in the 1990s.

The River Disappears

In 2009 Abu Hasan stood on the banks of the Barada River and pointed at the trickle of water. “That’s rainwater. It’s not from the spring,” he said despondently. The 60-year-old father of ten looked defeated. “It never used to be like this,” he said as he gazed at the large apple and quince orchard that had been in the family for generations and that he was now no longer able to irrigate. “If my father were here to see this, if he saw that the Barada had died, he wouldn’t believe it. The Barada used to be famous. Everyone knew about it. It was a powerful river, four or five feet deep and very cold. People drowned in its strong current. But then the river suddenly disappeared and now there is no water anymore. My great-grandchildren probably won’t even know that there ever was a river here.”

The sudden drying-up of the Barada River in the mid-1990s was the direct result of the massive and uncontrolled growth of Damascus from 1960 onward. Until that time, the Barada and Fija springs had always provided enough water to satisfy the demand for drinking and irrigation water in Wadi Barada, Damascus and parts of the surrounding Ghouta plain. But exponential population growth in Damascus and its suburbs—from 700,000 in 1950 to more than 5 million in the 1990s and around 7 million in 2011—has weighed heavily not just on the availability of water, but also on the local environment in Wadi Barada and the Ghouta plain.

Until the 1990s, the city of Damascus got all its drinking water from the Fija spring. Part of the spring’s outflow was conveyed by gravity through a pipeline to reservoirs near the capital, while the remainder was released into the river and used by farmers in Wadi Barada and further downstream for irrigation. By the 1990s, however, demand in Damascus was so high that almost all the water from the Fija spring was being diverted from the river to the city, except during flood season in March and April, when some water was still released into the river. Soon, though, demand in Damascus outstripped the supply from the Fija spring and the Damascus water authority decided to drill a series of 120 boreholes around the smaller Barada spring higher up in the valley. This water was conveyed directly via the Fija spring and its distribution system to Damascus. Villagers in Wadi Barada remember that large pipes were laid along the riverbanks in the mid-1990s, and that soon thereafter the river stopped flowing from May until December.

The drying-up of the river had broad repercussions for communities in the Barada Valley: Not only were farmers no longer able to irrigate their crops, but the supply of drinking water also became increasingly unreliable. A ban on well drilling in the wider area after 1989, designed to protect the Fija spring, meant that farmers could not use groundwater as an alternative source of irrigation water.

By the early 2000s, trees in the valley—400-year-old walnut orchards, but also the poplars, willows and sycamores that had provided shade in the hot summer months—were dying and most farmers were abandoning agriculture altogether. Some started raising livestock; others sought seasonal work with landowners in the Zabadani plain who had started irrigating their crops with sewage water. As the river dried up, so did the tourist trade: Restaurants that had once overlooked a rushing river now lay beside a garbage-strewn stream of sewage. Visitor numbers dropped and many restaurants were forced to fire staff. As unemployment rose further, the smuggling business burgeoned, especially after the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Gangs of men spirited weapons and drugs from Lebanon into Syria, moved onward to Iraq, and then carried diesel fuel from Syria back into Lebanon.

After the river ran dry, the quality and supply of drinking water in Wadi Barada also deteriorated. Until then, most villages in Wadi Barada had received drinking water from the
‘Ayn Habib spring near the source of the Barada and the village of Kufayr al-‘Awamid.

But when boreholes were sunk in the area around the Barada spring, the adjacent springs largely dried up and new sources of drinking water had to be found for the valley. The government dug wells in the villages, but the water was muddy and foul-tasting, and water supply cuts became common, especially in the summer months.

In 2004, a delegation of villagers from Wadi Barada traveled to the prime minister’s office in Damascus to complain about the mud in the drinking water. “To this day, everyone in the village of Kufayr al-Zayt remembers the story of Abu ‘Ali Surour, the village elder,” said ‘Ali. “He was furious about the situation and joined the delegation. He went and stood outside the prime minister’s office and held up a bottle of muddy tap water, shouting ‘If you drink from it, I will, too.’”

In response to the complaints, the quality of water improved slightly, but suspensions of supply were still common. “The water was drinkable—according to the government—but you couldn’t make tea with it, because as soon as you boiled it, a layer of scum appeared on the surface,” said ‘Ali. Instead, villagers in Wadi Barada went to fetch their drinking water at the springs in Boukayn to the southwest of Wadi Barada, and in ‘Ayn al-Fija, where they queued to fill jerry cans to take home. Eventually, the local water authority installed a public tap in the village of Dayr Kanoun to distribute water from the Fija spring and which was to serve the whole area. Tanker trucks from the local water board also delivered water twice or three times per week to villages where the water was contaminated.

According to the lawyer Dalati, the government wanted to suppress any discussion of the difficulties in Wadi Barada. “I published one article on the water problem in Wadi Barada in al-Thawra [a state-run newspaper] after the river ran dry. Later, when I wanted to publish a second piece, the editors kept rejecting it, saying it was ‘not the right time to raise this issue.’”

Dalati lists all the points on which the government has failed. “There are no public services like drinking water or proper roads,” he said. “There is a master plan but it is not being implemented because of corruption and ignorance. Law 150 that bans the digging of wells around rivers is not enforced, and the government was the first to break it: When the Barada ran dry, they started digging wells in areas where it was forbidden and even in areas that were geologically unsuitable. Expert advice was overruled by politicians who were seeking personal profit or advancement.”

Meanwhile, down the road in Qura al-Asad, Masakin al-Dimas and other “new suburbs,” there was a constant supply of water of excellent quality that was drawn from groundwater reserves in the nearby Wadi Marwan area. “If you go to Qura al-Asad or Masakin al-Dimas, you can see that they have water 24/7,” ‘Ali said. “While my mother was worrying about how to do the dishes, down the road in Qura al-Asad the swimming pools were full, people were washing their cars with a garden hose and watering their gardens once a day. Next door in Masakin al-Dimas, they also have clean drinking water from the tap. I don’t think they’ve ever had to drink muddy tea like we do.”

Protests and Conflict

The first protest in Kufayr al-Zayt took place on April 1, 2011. “I’ll never forget it,” said ‘Ali. When people left the mosque after Friday prayers, a group of about 30 men gathered outside and started chanting slogans: “Allahu akbar,” “Freedom!” and “Dar’a, we are with you until death!” (Dar’a is the southern town where the uprising had erupted in March.) The protesters were mainly from outside the village, but some of them were villagers, and some were armed. This latter group attacked the security forces, broke the windows of a police car and searched for a sub-lieutenant of the secret services in order to kill him. Protesters were also shooting in the air.

After the unrest, villagers with connections appealed to the presidential palace to send someone to negotiate with the protesters. A week later after morning prayer, a group from Kufayr al-Zayt met with an official delegation headed by ‘Isam Zahr al-Din, a brigadier general in the Syrian Republican Guard who went on to lead the assault on the district of Baba ‘Amr in Homs in February 2012. The first thing the villagers demanded was to have the river restored and thereby get permanent access to clean drinking water. They also complained about the lack of public transportation and the land confiscations, and discussed a number of other local issues. The villagers did not call for the fall of the regime.

Zahr al-Din conceded to all of the demands. According to one villager who attended the meeting, he said: “We are one family. This is a conspiracy against the homeland. We [the army and government] are here for the people and the people are ours.” There was no follow-up to the meeting, however, and in the weeks that followed, the protest movement in Kufayr al-Zayt and across Wadi Barada gained force, despite the efforts of village elders to calm younger residents.

“They told us that we should be patient, that the president was listening to our demands and that the government was implementing reforms,” said ‘Ali. “But we didn’t believe that. We were fed up with being treated like animals. We wanted our dignity back.” ‘Ali joined a local militia in Wadi Barada in December 2011, not out of ideological conviction, but rather “because everyone else was joining and it would have been shameful not to.”

“Many of my relatives in Zabadani were arrested during peaceful protests,” Ali said. “In Wadi Barada we knew that the army would finish Zabadani and come here. And we were right.
The first full-scale army offensive in Zabadani was in January 2012. A month later, the first clash in Wadi Barada took place.”

Abu Shaqra’, a smuggler from the neighboring village of Dayr Kanoun, was a leader of the protests in Kufayr al-Zayt. He said he took to the streets for the women and children of Dar’a, but also to reclaim his expropriated holdings. “First you take my land; now you are killing my brothers and sisters,” he said. “I won’t accept it.”

As the peaceful protests gradually descended into violence, the conflict became increasingly sectarian. Many members of local militias threatened to “slaughter the ‘Alawis,” and sectarian killings and kidnappings became more frequent.

In July 2012, a gang of shabbiha, or regime thugs, abducted a bus driver whose family played a leading role in the Free Syrian Army in Wadi Barada. The shabbiha drove the bus over the driver’s legs and tortured him for five days. The thugs eventually released the driver in a hostage exchange and he fully recovered, but he never went back to his job. He had never been particularly religious or politically active, but after his kidnapping he formed his own Islamist militia, which aspired to the imposition of shari’a law in Syria.

All along, many other residents of Wadi Barada continued to support the Asad government. Allegiances were constantly shifting. “From the beginning, the lines were blurred,” said ‘Ali. “The regime was infiltrating the rebels from the beginning, so there were informers everywhere.” As the fighting worsened, many rebel fighters became disillusioned with the lack of structure in the local militias. Some went back to weapons smuggling; some simply laid down their arms and went back to farming; and still others went over to the government side and became informers. “Today, nothing is clear anymore,” ‘Ali concluded. “I couldn’t tell you whether the village is majority for or against the regime. And it is the same in most other villages in the area.”

There has been no fighting in Wadi Barada since 2012, save minor confrontations, but the effects of the civil war are everywhere evident. The population in most villages has more than doubled since 2011, with the influx of internally displaced persons from war zones such as Homs and Idlib placing severe pressure on food, water and electricity supplies.

Wadi Barada is nominally under government control, but since early 2012 there has been no civil or military security presence in the valley itself. As a result, the incidence of kidnappings, murders and car bombs has increased and theft is common. Meanwhile, the snipers and artillerymen of whom ‘Ali complained are still stationed on the ridges, from which positions they regularly shoot at—and kill—targets in the valley below.

The protracted lack of security has led the rebels to lose popular backing. During the June 3 presidential election, many in Wadi Barada voted for Bashar al-Asad and the stability that his regime offers, rejecting the havoc wrought by local rebel groups, most of which are now made up of smugglers and drug dealers. “We were living in peace until these strangers came here and disrupted our lives,” said Umm ‘Aziz, a housewife from Kufayr al-Zayt. “They have attracted drug addicts and thieves to the area. What do they want from us? We do not want their freedom. We want to feel secure and to feed our children.”

As for resentment over the expropriations, the drying-up of the river and the lack of drinking water, it continues to simmer. But most locals are willing to remain silent about these grievances—as in the past—in exchange for the promise of renewed calm.

“I didn’t have any choice,” ‘Abdallah, a teacher in Kufayr al-Zayt who voted for Asad, said. “I had to vote for him for two reasons: First, I do not want to lose my job. Second, there are many criminal gangs in the area and they can only be defeated by a stable and strong army.”

The regime has issued several amnesty decrees since 2011, releasing convicted criminals. “Asad himself said in a speech in June 2011 that one of the main components of the conspiracy against him are 64,000 outlaws and individuals who are wanted for various criminal offenses,” ‘Abdallah said. “Most of the robbery and criminal activity we have witnessed over the last three years is being perpetrated by former prisoners who Asad released after March 2011. He has put us in front a simple choice: ‘Me or terrorism.’ Overall, it has been a successful strategy.”

But the issue of water supply in greater Damascus is not going away, regardless of whether or not Bashar al-Asad stays in power. In the winter months of 2014, a severe drought reduced the flow of the Fija spring to record lows. Strict rationing was put in place in Damascus beginning in April.

As the Barada and Fija springs are the main sources of water for the Damascus area and supply cannot be endlessly increased, measures will need to be taken to manage demand, for example by cutting down on water use.

“There are no more water resources around Damascus to investigate,” a Syrian water expert said. “So the only short-term solution is to rationalize the daily water supply and to hope that there will be more rain next year. At present, we receive water only every other day or even, in some areas, one day a week. It is imperative for Damascus to focus on demand management rather than supply management. We have to safeguard the rights of the coming generations and protect the local environment: the Damascus oasis, the Barada valley and the fertile Zabadani plain.”

Going forward, climate change is likely to have severe consequences for water availability in the Damascus area. A study carried out in 2007 by the Arab Center for the Studies of Arid Zones and Dry Lands in Damascus showed that a 5 percent decrease in rainfall would cause the Barada spring to dry up entirely by 2040. “However, most climate models predict a 20 percent decrease in rainfall by 2050,” the water expert said. “That gives you an idea of the crisis we are facing.”

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