Editorial

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In recent years, we have witnessed a profound transformation in environmental policy studies. While in the past most studies assumed that language simply mirrors environmental realities, nowadays, given the rich literature anchored in disciplines like political ecology, environmental politics and communication studies, it is clear that rhetoric, language and discourse shape policies on physical systems such as water. This discursive approach that acknowledges the existence of multiple, social constructed realities makes it especially important to analyze the political realities shaping discourses, to examine what alternative perspectives may be concealed and to explore the implications of discourses on policy making. By focusing on the narrative of water security, this special issue seeks to contribute to recent social constructivist studies that examine the use and abuse of language in public policy on the allocation of natural resources.

Hence, this special issue is motivated by the fact that the environmental literature, the media and the statements of politicians are becoming saturated with security jargon. The framing process that constructs issues as a security threat provides a fertile ground for this special issue that is organized around three aims. The first is to provide concrete examples that shed light on the use, misuse and abuse of the securitization framing of water. The second is to identify the triggers for securitization and to reveal the mechanisms used to convey urgency and existentialism. The third is to trace the impacts of securitization on the shaping of national policies in practice. The last aim is crucial as papers discuss possible escape routes for redirecting the discourse to other political and technical avenues. By perusing these aims, this special issue hopes to better place the securitization phenomena in the critical securitization literature, including literature that addresses natural resources. This issue aims to provide a platform for launching future research directions on the development of a critical and discursive prism for water securitization.

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In order to address these aims, several distinctly separate scholarly fields should be brought together into the realm of environmental policy making. These include communication studies, behavioral studies, securitization studies and conflict resolution. For this reason, a diverse range of scholars assembled in Jerusalem for an explorative workshop on the securitization theme. The workshop explored a variety of case studies and political settings including the case of the Mountain Aquifer shared between Israel and the Palestinians, the case of the Cyprus water stress, the case of migration linkages in Israel, Jordan and Syria, the case of Spain during a recent drought episode (2005–2008) and the case of the replacement of Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) by the securitization discourse. This special issue on the securitization of the water discourse, which is an outcome of the workshop, compiles a set of articles that take stock of how water issues are presented to the public and decision makers and their implications. The special issue begins with papers that mostly focus on the securitization phenomena, continues with those that expose how securitization is institutionalized and textualized and ends with papers that identify its implications, suggesting concrete alternative discourses to the securitization one.

This issue demonstrates that the securitization of the water discourse is not a sporadic phenomenon but is widespread. Securitization has multiple definitions. Some perceive it via human rights and development lenses while others prioritize its environmental aspects. Often each definition masks certain interests while excluding other voices. However, as demonstrated by Mukhtarov and Gerlak, any new (water security) discourse has to grapple with previous discourses (IWRM). The new discourse may strive to replace the old paradigm or to develop rhetorical tactics intended to be presented as a supplement to the old one. Their paper emphasizes that the securitization discourse, just like the IWRM discourse, aims to raise awareness as an agenda-setting catalyst through the use of different discursive strategies. It also demonstrates that each discourse is advocated by different players. A good example of how the notion of water security is prioritized and communicated to the public is provided by the paper by Zikos, Sorman and Lau. In their case, this is done by linking water to high politics in selective cases. The paper by Urquijo, De Stefano and La Calle, which addresses the ways in which the drought discourse was built through the enactment of exceptional laws in Spain between 2005 and 2009, is especially relevant in identifying the securitization mechanisms. The authors highlight the role of exceptional procedures (embedded in exceptional laws) that were legislated by bypassing parliamentary debate in the name of water security. Their study also focuses on a wide range of linguistic mechanisms aimed at creating a sense of danger and a need for immediate action.

At the same time, this special issue illustrates that securitization does not come out of the blue. The work of Weinthal, Zawahri and Sowers is especially pertinent in explaining the triggers for securitization. In two of their three cases, continuing drought and growing water demand served as compelling justifications for presenting migration as a security issue. But their paper also exposes the deeper motivation for such a discourse including the need to address funding scarcity by means of a linkage between drought and migration to attract international assistance for large-scale hydrological infrastructure. The work of Urquijo, De Stefano and La Calle similarly shows the instrumental use of droughts to justify the securitization rhetoric. However, they point toward another trigger for what the authors call “creeping securitization”—a governability capacity deficit which the securitization rhetoric seeks to overcome. These findings imply that we are likely to encounter a securitization discourse around natural resources in places that experience a governability crisis and hence need a window of opportunity for policy change. This window of

opportunity may come in the form of a drought with collateral damage such as economic decline or migration waves.

This special issue also demonstrates that a securitized discourse exacts a price. The work of Zikos, Sorman and Lau points toward the impact of the securitization lenses used to justify unilateral mega water works that are irreversible and block mutual social identity. Similarly, the work of Weinthal et al. demonstrates how securing an alleged nexus between migration, water and climate change has supported large-scale infrastructure projects in Jordan. In both cases, the authors suspect that this mode of framing may trigger and even hinder the resolution of standing intra- and inter-conflicts. Several papers identify not only how the framing mode impacts water infrastructure but also how it molds the power structures between parties. In the case of Zikos et al., this takes the form of perpetuating the “patron powers” of Greece and Turkey while in the work of Karin Aggestam on the Israeli–Palestinian case, it relates to maintaining the Israeli hegemony.

Another detrimental effect of securitization is demonstrated through the works of Urquijo, De Stefano and La Calle. Their study shows to what extent securitization is a slippery slope. In their case, exceptional measures bypassing water planning processes that were enacted in the name of exceptional drought were extended to areas barely hit by drought. Even in affected places, the measures taken were disproportional to the climatological events. In such cases, securitization framing seems to help elude cost recovery and accountability, as it allows for the approval of new large public spending and legal changes with little debate and no public scrutiny of their outcome. Their paper also demonstrates the distributional impact of securitization as exceptional measures (like water trade) seem to benefit some sectors more than others. Since a securitization framing mode attracts attention and even institutional reform, the work of Weinthal et al., which covers the Syrian crisis, demonstrates how the avoidance of a securitization discourse (in response to the drought and massive migration) deflected attention from the need to pursue agrarian and economic reforms in Syria.

The detrimental implications of securitization identified in this special issue highlight the need to identify alternative discourses to securitization. The work of Zikos, Sorman and Lau on a security provides an alternative to desecuritization. The authors assert that the way forward for the Cypriot water conflict is a functional social–ecological perspective as taken in the Nicosia sewerage system where regions are considered functional agglomerations rather than territorial/state entities. Yet, the work of Karin Aggestam questions the suitability of some of the alternative discourses to govern water. It sounds a warning signal on the fitness of a technocratic and technicality approach to water in peacebuilding areas. While exploring the case of Israel and the Palestinians, Aggestam shows how desecuritization attempts by third parties consolidate a status quo in water conflict which may perpetuate the power asymmetry between parties and erode trust.

The securitization of the water discourse goes to the heart of environmental policy making both at the international and national level. Building both international and national regimes requires consensus on a fragmented water regime. The consensus must overcome the present stalemate of no comprehensive international legal regime around freshwater resources. As demonstrated here, a water security framework is one common way for coalition building and placement on the agenda of high-profile policy makers. However, a careful and discursive approach for securitization as a framing mode is needed, one that also discloses the perils and hence the alternative pathways to a securitized discourse.