Influence of intensive agriculture and geological heterogeneity on the recharge of an arid aquifer system (Saq-Ram, Arabian Peninsula)

5   Pierre Seraphin [a], Julio Gonçalvès [a], Bruno Hamelin [a], Thomas Stieglitz [a], Pierre Deschamps [a]

[a] Aix Marseille Université, CNRS, IRD, Coll France, INRAE, CEREGE UM 34, 13545 Aix en Provence, France

10   *Correspondence to*: Pierre Seraphin (seraphin@cerege.fr)

Keywords

15   Saq-Ram Aquifer System, Satellite-gravity data, Water Budget, Spatial distribution of the recharge, Irrigation return flow

Abstract

This study assesses the detailed water budget of the Saq-Ram Aquifer System (520 000 km²) over the 2002-2019 period using satellite-gravity data from the Gravity Recovery And Climate Experiment (GRACE). The three existing GRACE solutions (JPL, CSR, GSFC) were tested for their local compatibility to compute groundwater storage variations in combination 25   with soil moisture datasets (VIC, CLSM, NOAH) available from the Global Land Data Assimilation System (GLDAS) land surface models. Accounting for groundwater pumping (15.7 ± 1.1 mm yr^{-1}), artificial recharge (2.2 ± 0.8 mm yr^{-1}) and natural discharge (0.3 ± 0.06 mm yr^{-1}) uniformly distributed over the Saq-Ram domain, the GRACE-derived water mass balance calculation yields a long-term estimate of the domain-averaged natural recharge of 2.4 ± 1.4 mm yr^{-1}, corresponding to $4.4 \pm 2.6\%$ of the annual average rainfall.

Beyond the global approach proposed here, spatial heterogeneities regarding the groundwater recharge were identified. The first source of heterogeneity is of anthropogenic origin. Within agricultural plots, irrigation excess is great enough to artificially recharge the aquifer (i.e. 167 ± 83 mm yr^{-1} distributed over irrigated areas). However, on the outskirts of 35   these crop areas subjected only to the natural recharge but still influenced by pumping drawdown, there is a risk of relative disconnection from the infiltration front with the declining water table (i.e. the unsaturated zone thickens faster than percolation flows through it), making effective recharge locally zero. The second source of recharge heterogeneity identified here is natural: Volcanic lava deposits (called Harrats on the Arabian Peninsula) which cover 8% of 40   the Saq-Ram Aquifer domain but contribute to more than 50% of the total natural recharge. Hence, in addition to this application on the Arabian Peninsula, this study strongly indicates a major control of geological context on arid aquifer recharge which has been poorly discussed hitherto.

1. Introduction

Freshwater resources in arid regions of the world face growing pressure. Limited reserves, sporadic rainfall, droughts, agricultural production, increasing population and living standards are contributing to environmental and economic pressures. Groundwater resources in arid zones have been heavily exploited for the past 50 years or so, in order to meet growing demands, which has led to overexploitation and local long-term depletion in many cases. When aquifer recharge is lower than withdrawals, this depletion constitutes permanent groundwater mining (Bierkens and Wada, 2019). In arid and semi-arid regions, this is a frequent phenomenon, in particular where large underground water reserves were formed under past climatic conditions (so called "fossil aquifers").

Shared between Jordan and Saudi Arabia, the Saq-Ram Aquifer System (520 000 km²) is the main water resource of the region, the exploitation of which has enabled the development of intensive irrigated agriculture since the mid-1980s. This multi-layered aquifer system is part of the larger Arabian Aquifer System which has been recognized as one of the two most overstressed systems in the world, presenting the highest depletion rates combined with the lowest available recharges (Richey et al., 2015). Despite having significant groundwater reserves, Saudi Arabia had to cope with these difficulties by abandoning its goal of cereal self-sufficiency when groundwater mining became evident (Konikow and Kendy, 2005).

Groundwater recharge is a pivotal term of an aquifer's water mass-balance when it comes to assessing the (un)sustainability of its exploitation. Recharge can be assessed indirectly or directly by studying either surface water bodies (e.g. seepage meters, baseflow discharge, heat tracers), unsaturated (e.g. lysimeters) or saturated zones (e.g. Water-table Fluctuation). Various types of estimation methods (MacDonald et al., 2021) such as numerical models, tracer approaches (e.g. Stable isotopes, tritium, chloride), physical approaches (e.g. Darcy's law) and remote sensing (e.g. Gravity-based approach) are routinely applied. While generally low in an arid context, recharge can be highly variable both in space and time, making its estimation even more complex (Scanlon et al., 2006).

Local-scale studies have demonstrated that whilst mainly recharged under past wet climatic conditions, the Saq-Ram Aquifer System is today receiving a modest modern recharge. A groundwater model applied on the Tabuk region of Saudi Arabia (Kawecki and Pim, 1987 in Lloyd and Pim, 1990) yielded a lateral groundwater flow of 3.1 mm yr^{-1} at steady state which indicates that the natural recharge must be a minor proportion of this figure considering the global water table decline initiated in the mid-1980s. More recently, Al-Sagaby and Moallim (2001) applied a chloride mass-balance method on a sand dune located in the Al Qasim region and derived 1.8 mm yr^{-1} of natural recharge, i.e. 2.5% of the annual average rainfall (AAR). Other chloride mass-balance approaches were applied to small alluvial aquifers of the Asir and Hijaz mountains (along the Red Sea in western Saudi Arabia; Bazuhair and Wood, 1996) yielding recharges equal to 3-4% of the AAR. A Darcy's law method involving the average hydraulic gradient observed on the Saq sandstone outcrops south of Tayma revealed a natural recharge of 2.5 mm yr^{-1} (i.e. 4.3% of the AAR; BRGM and Abunayyan Trading Corp., 2008). The methods used in most of these studies are relevant and convenient when applied at local scales, but much more challenging to integrate over large multi-layered aquifers such as the Saq-Ram Aquifer System.

Since 2002, the GRACE (Gravity Recovery And Climate Experiment) twin-satellite system has provided monthly Earth gravity measurements over large domains, variations of which are chiefly due to mass changes in water bodies (Landerer and Swenson, 2012). GRACE gravity variations integrate terrestrial water storage (*TWS*) variations which include groundwater storage (*GWS*) variations over large regional-scale aquifers. As it is much less time- and cost-consuming than ground-based methods, this remote sensing approach has been widely used for

quantifying variations in aquifer storage (e.g. Bonsor et al., 2018; Othman et al., 2018; Ramillien et al., 2014; Richey et al., 2015; Scanlon et al., 2021; Sun, 2013). Some studies implemented GRACE-derived *GWS* variations in global mass-balance equations to estimate the domain-averaged recharge for large regional aquifers of the Saharan belt (Gonçalvès et al., 2013; Mohamed et al., 2017; Mohamed and Gonçalvès, 2021).

Likewise, Fallatah et al. (2019) applied this approach to the Saq Aquifer System, considering a 440 000 km² surface area domain excluding the Jordanian part (i.e. Ram Aquifer) even though it has been recognized as hydrologically connected to the Saq (UN-ESCWA and BGR, 2013). Using a unique GRACE solution (i.e. CSR RL05M v1) over the 2002-2016 period, their study yielded 11.9 mm yr^{-1} of total recharge, i.e. natural plus artificial recharge (mostly irrigation return flow from agricultural practices and some wastewater reinjection in large cities). Subtracting an irrigation return flow of about 2.3 mm yr^{-1} (using a plausible 15% out of the 7 800 $\times$ 10^6 m^3 yr^{-1} mean 2002-2016 agricultural pumping; Gonçalves et al., 2013) yields a residual natural recharge estimate of 9.6 mm yr^{-1}, which is significantly higher than previous estimates from local studies mentioned above (i.e. 2-3 mm yr^{-1}). This natural recharge estimated using Fallatah et al. (2019) equates to about 18% of the AAR over the Saq Aquifer System while similar arid-zone aquifers (in the Sahara) present recharges of 1.8 $\pm$ 0.3% of the AAR with the same GRACE-derived method (Mohamed and Gonçalvès, 2021). Furthermore, MacDonald et al. (2021) established a recent synthesis of groundwater recharge estimates in Africa using more local methods (chloride mass balance, environmental tracers, water balance, calibrated groundwater models and soil physics methods). Considering only the arid regions presenting annual precipitations below 150 mm, their study revealed on average recharges corresponding to 3.3 $\pm$ 5.5% of the AAR.

The present study proposes a reappraisal of the GRACE-derived water budget of the combined Saq-Ram Aquifer System, accounting for groundwater withdrawal, natural drainage and artificial recharge in order to provide a long-term estimate (2002-2019) of the domain-averaged natural recharge. The three existing GRACE solutions (JPL, CSR, GSFC) were tested for their local compatibility to compute Groundwater Storage variations by combining with the three soil moisture datasets (VIC, CLSM, NOAH) available from the Global Land Data Assimilation System (GLDAS) land surface models. The relevance and consequences of such an application of the GRACE-GLDAS approach on arid aquifers in terms of temporal resolution of the recharge are discussed. Leading to domain-averaged values for the groundwater fluxes, the global approach proposed here was then refined by identifying first-order spatial heterogeneities regarding the recharge of the Saq-Ram aquifer: i) the comparison between the natural recharge obtained here and the values identified for other large arid aquifers is used to highlight a major geological control on recharge distribution; ii) distributed over the agricultural areas, the overall irrigation excess provides a reliable estimate of the artificial recharge; iii) potential local disconnection between the groundwater recharge and the declining water table, causing a local zero recharge in areas of extensive exploitation, is discussed.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Study site

Underlying the Nafud desert of the northern Arabian Peninsula, the Saq-Ram Aquifer System (520 000 km²) constitutes the main water resource supporting vital needs of more than 3.5 million people (considering the Disi-Mudawarra water conveyance system in Jordan; UN-ESCWA and BGR, 2013). Since the mid-1980s, its intensive exploitation through large irrigated areas (Figure 1) has been quickly recognized as causing a depletion of the groundwater

resource, making it one of the most overstressed aquifer systems worldwide to date (Richey et al., 2015).
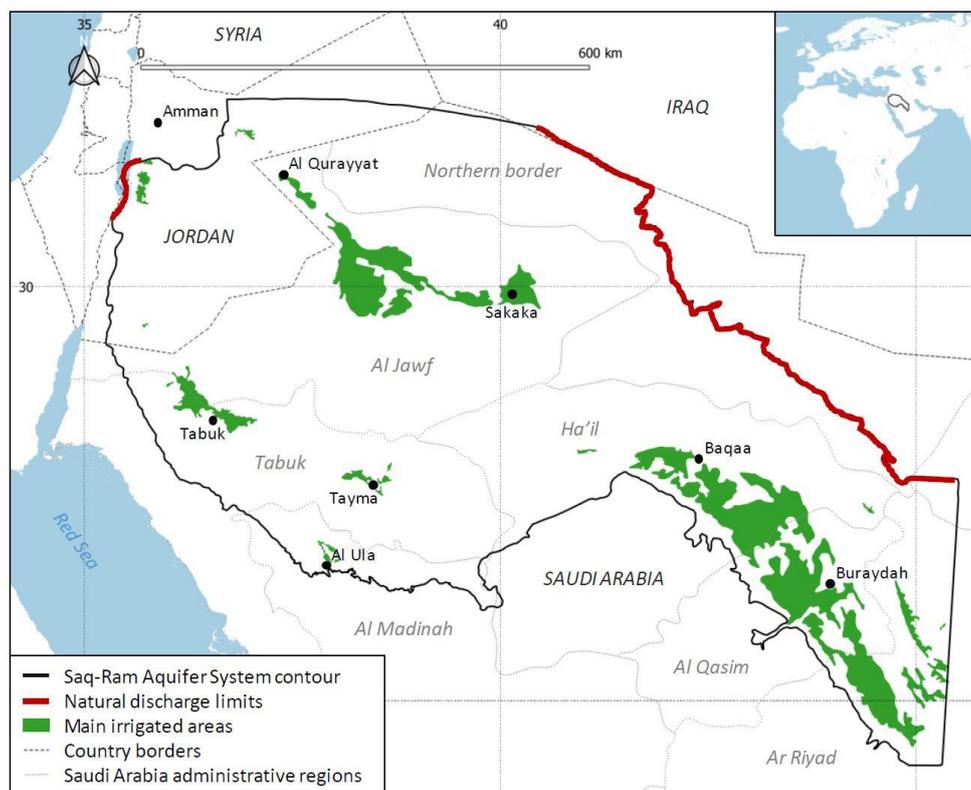
Figure 1: Context map of the Saq-Ram Aquifer System (Shorelines and country borders extracted from Wessel and Smith, 1996; Administrative regions extracted from www.gadm.org).

Mean annual temperature ranges between 20 and 24°C. Typical of other arid domains, recharge (when it occurs) is associated with intermittent rainfall events (de Vries and Simmers, 2002). The Climatic Research Unit (CRU; Harris et al., 2020) long term annual average rainfall (AAR) over the studied domain is 55 mm yr^{-1} (over the period 1901-2019), with a maximum of 80 mm in 1982, and a minimum of about 40 mm in 1978 and 2009 (Figure 2).

2.2 Hydrogeological context

2.2.1. Definition of the reservoirs

Mainly located in the northern half of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), and shared with Jordan, the overall Saq-Ram Aquifer System includes multiple sub-systems of different depths and ages (Paleozoic, Mesozoic and Cenozoic) which are mostly interconnected (see UN-ESCWA and BGR, 2013 for more details about these sub-systems):
- Paleozoic and Mesozoic deep Aquifer Systems:
  o The most productive Saq-Ram formation (West KSA and Jordan)

      o Wasia-Biyadh-Aruma Aquifer System (North KSA)
- Cenozoic shallow Aquifer Systems:
      o Basalt Aquifer System: Azraq-Dhuleil basin (Jordan)
      o Tawil-Quaternary Aquifer System: Wadi Sirhan Basin (North KSA)
      o Umm er Radhuma-Dammam Aquifer System: Widyan-Salman (KSA, Iraq, and
          Kuwait)
      o Other Cenozoic and Quaternary overlying formations (e.g. Harrats)

Hence, a succession of sedimentary formations overlies unconformably the southern Precambrian basement composed of igneous and metamorphic complexes. Dipping gradually towards the north-east to reach a 10 km thickness near the Arabian Gulf, these formations become locally confined (e.g. Hanadir and Qusaiba shale formation) but stay globally interconnected especially by the late Cenozoic reactivation of the Kahf fault systems (Othman et al., 2018). The Tabuk-Al Ula and Al Qurayyat-Al Jawf regions are characterized by overlying volcanic lava deposits called Harrats. These wide and thick heterogenous reservoirs constitute one of the largest multi-layered aquifer systems worldwide.

2.2.2. Natural discharge

In order to limit as much as possible the error in the water balance associated with the lateral drainage, this study focuses on the "large" Saq-Ram Aquifer System contour (Figure 1) defined by Barthélemy et al. (2006). In this large-scale domain, the contact with the crystalline basement along the southwestern margin, and the northern aquifer limit can be considered as no flow boundaries. A drainage boundary toward the eastern flank of the Dead Sea was estimated at 54×10^6 m^3 yr^{-1} by Siebert et al. (2014), or ranging between 30 and 90×10^6 m^3 yr^{-1} (Salameh, 1996; Lensky et al., 2005; in Siebert et al., 2014). A further 80×10^6 m^3 yr^{-1} groundwater drainage along the Iraqi border, toward the Umm er Radhuma-Dammam Aquifer System (and ultimately the Euphrates basin) was reported in Frenken and UN-FAO (2009). Other unquantified outlets exist (e.g. drainage toward the southern basement and the Khuff aquifer at the Southeast) but these are likely minor factors in the water budget compared to other outflows in particular agricultural withdrawals. Moreover, Alsharhan and Nairn (1997) showed that the main Saq formation disappears around where the eastern vertical border (~45°E, Figure 1) has been outlined by Barthélemy et al. (2006).

2.2.3. Groundwater pumping

Groundwater pumping time series can be challenging to obtain in regions where the regulation and monitoring of withdrawals was implemented only recently, as in Saudi Arabia. For countries where most of the water resource is used for agriculture, these data are often estimated using proxies such as agricultural surfaces identified by satellite imagery combined with estimates of irrigation doses supplied per crop type. BRGM and Abunayyan Trading Corp. (2008) applied such a method for each KSA region within the Saq aquifer (i.e. excluding the Jordanian part of the Saq-Ram Aquifer System) over the 1971-2003 period (Figure 2). Othman et al. (2018) presented a time series (1970-2015) of the cumulative pumping amounts for Al Qasim, Ha'il and Al Jawf regions (Figure 1) with data provided by the Water Resources Development Department in the Ministry of Environment, Water and Agriculture (MEWA) of Saudi Arabia (Figure 2). This updated time series revealed a good correlation (R² = 0.996) with the 1971-2003 BRGM estimates (indicating the same source of data), and the three regions considered account for the majority of agricultural withdrawals (85% on average) from the Saq aquifer. In addition, Alhassan et al. (2016), and Chowdhury and Al-Zahrani (2013) provided

regional values of the agricultural water demand for the 2009-2012 period yielding an average
7 740 × 10⁶ m³ yr⁻¹ for the Saq aquifer. Domestic withdrawals for 2003 are given by the BRGM
and Abunayyan Trading Corp. (2008) for each KSA region yielding 294 × 10⁶ m³ yr⁻¹ for the
entire Saq aquifer in that year. The 2003 industrial water demand is also reported by the same
authors at 17 × 10⁶ m³ yr⁻¹.

Finally, Jordan groundwater pumping data are given by region in 2015 and 2017 by the
Jordan Water Sector Facts and Figures (Almomani et al., 2015; url: www.mwi.gov.jo) yielding
respectively 322 and 332 × 10⁶ m³ yr⁻¹ for the Jordanian part of the Saq-Ram Aquifer System.
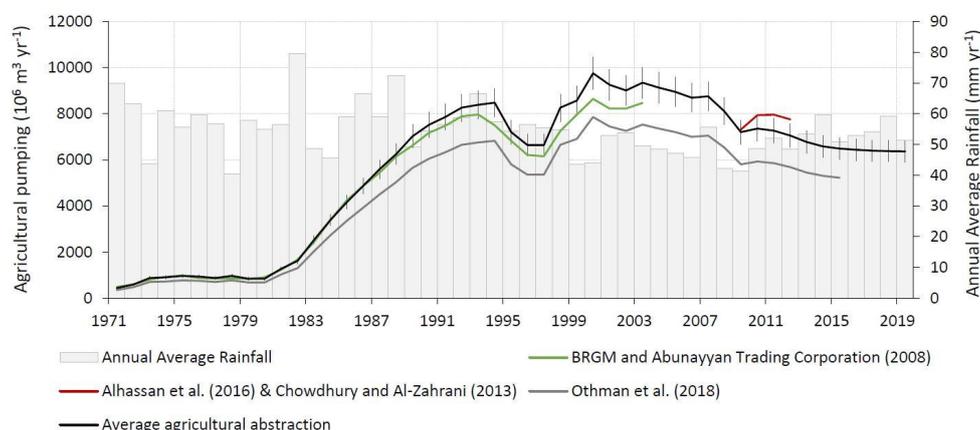
Figure 2: Annual average rainfall (mm yr⁻¹) of the Saq-Ram Aquifer System and agricultural
withdrawal (10⁶ m³ yr⁻¹) of its Saudi part (except for Othman et al.'s (2018) data
corresponding to Al-Qassim, Ha'il and Al-Jouf regions of KSA).

2.3 Gravity and Soil Moisture data

The Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment (GRACE) twin-satellite system launched
in 2002 by NASA and the German Aerospace Center (DLR) monitors the Earth's gravity at a
3°×3° spatial resolution on a monthly basis. Followed by GRACE-FO (GRACE-Follow on) in
2018, the mission measures gravity anomalies (i.e. gravity value at a location minus its 2004.0-
2009.9 average value), which are chiefly due to mass variations in water bodies (groundwater,
soil water, and surface water). Monthly gravity anomalies, denoted terrestrial water storage
(*TWS*), are expressed in water height and can thus be used for hydrological mass-balance
calculations at the regional scale. After more than one decade of gravity field processing using
spherical harmonics (Landerer and Swenson, 2012; Swenson and Wahr, 2006), an alternative
interpretation using Mass Concentration blocks (termed Mascons) of discrete spherical caps at
the Earth's surface was proposed (Watkins et al., 2015). The main advantage of this new
interpretation is lower geophysical signal losses inducing less post-processing treatment.
Provided by different laboratories, three alternative solutions of Mascon interpretations were
retrieved (GRACE/GRACE-FO Mascon data are available at http://grace.jpl.nasa.gov):
- Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL): JPL RL06M v2 CRI filtered (≈ 3×3° squared tiles;
  Watkins et al., 2015; Wiese et al., 2019)
- Centre for Space Research (CSR): CSR RL06 Mascon Solutions v02 all corrections (≈
  1×1° hexagonal tiles; Save, 2020; Save et al., 2016)

-   Goddard Space Flight Center (GSFC): GSFC RL06 v1 OBP-ICE6GD ($\approx 1\times1°$ squared tiles; Loomis, 2020; Loomis et al., 2019)

250 The proposed scaling factors which correspond in fact to downscaling factors (Scanlon et al., 2016) were not used here. In fact, these downscaling factors are based on the mass distribution calculated by the Land Surface Model (LSM) accounting for surface and subsurface water transfers while *TWS* variations in such arid regions are expected to be chiefly controlled by groundwater mass variations. We used 187 monthly observations for the period between April 2002 and July 2020. The trend of a time series can be analyzed and interpreted in terms of variation in water amounts (e.g. in mm yr^{-1}) and thus net water fluxes over a domain of

255 interest.
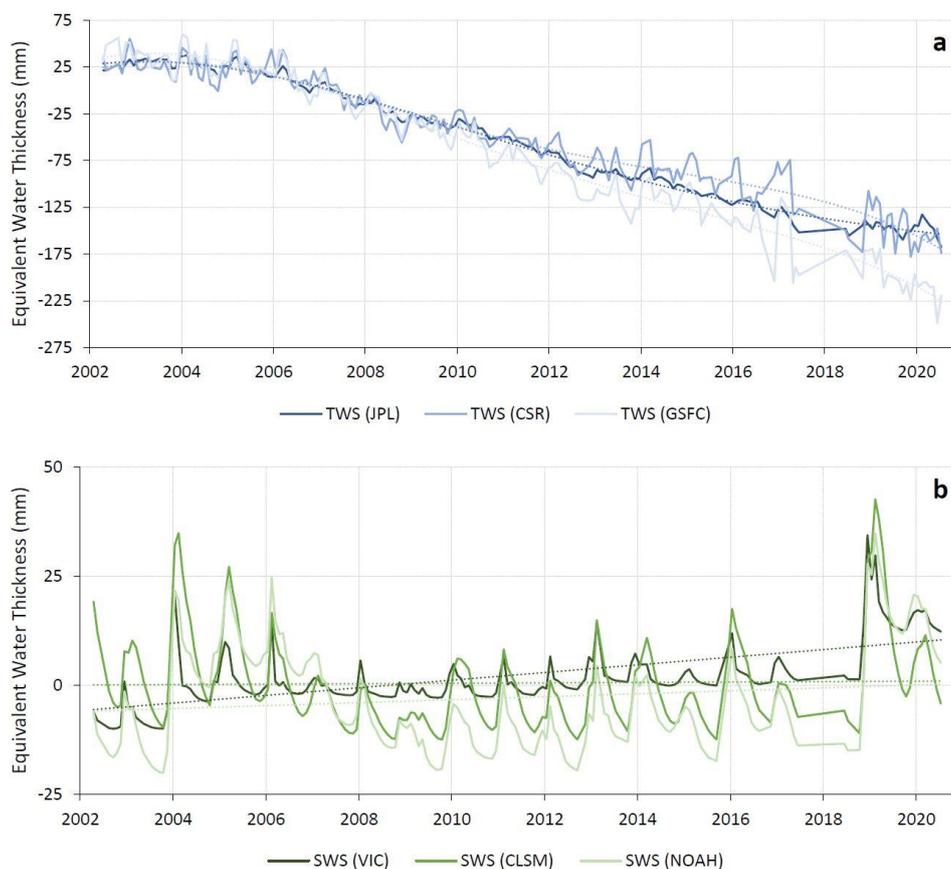
Figure 3: Times series and associated regressions of (a) the GRACE-JPL, -CSR, -GSFC terrestrial water storage (TWS; mm), and (b) the GLDAS-VIC, -CLSM, -NOAH soil water storage (SWS; mm) of the Saq-Ram domain.

260

The Global Land Data Assimilation System (GLDAS) provides soil water storage (*SWS*) for the first couple of meters by combining ground-based, satellite data and hydrological surface model results (Rodell et al., 2004). Matching the GRACE observation dates, we retrieved the 187-monthly data from the 2.1 versions with a $1°\times1°$ spatial resolution computed with (GLDAS

265 data are available at https://ldas.gsfc.nasa.gov/gldas):

- the Variable Infiltration Capacity model (VIC; Beaudoing et al., 2020a)
- the Community Land Surface Model (CLSM; Li et al., 2020)
- the National Oceanic and Atmospheric administration model (NOAH; Beaudoing et al., 2020b).

270   The *SWS* anomalies were computed the same way as for the GRACE *TWS* anomalies, i.e. by subtracting the 2004.0-2009.9 average from each term of the time series. Both the GRACE products and GLDAS solutions were spatially averaged using the weight of each polygon within the Saq-Ram Aquifer domain (Figure 3).

275

2.4 Methods

     A regional-scale water mass-balance was used to estimate recharge from variations in groundwater storage (*ΔGWS*). Usually obtained by piezometric measurements, it is difficult to obtain spatially meaningful averages of *ΔGWS* over large and poorly monitored regions such

280   as the Arabian Peninsula. GRACE data provide a valuable integrated mapping of water storage over large domains. In arid areas, surface water can generally be neglected. Moreover, the Saq-Ram aquifer is devoid of any permanent surface water bodies. Thus, using soil water storage (*SWS*) estimates, the first step was to isolate the groundwater storage (*GWS*) anomalies from the terrestrial water storage (*TWS*) anomalies expressed in water height with the following

285   simple decomposition of the GRACE data:

$$TWS = GWS + SWS \tag{1}$$

And thus:

$$\Delta GWS = \Delta TWS - \Delta SWS \tag{2}$$

     Upon identification of a long-term trend (18 years in our case) of the *GWS* signal, *ΔGWS* is

290   calculated (using polynomial fit; Figure 3) and can be introduced in an overall groundwater balance equation to identify one unknown (e.g. recharge) if all other fluxes are known. The following water budget can be expressed for each of the GRACE solutions:

$$\Delta GWS = R - Q_w - Q_d \tag{3}$$

with R, the total recharge, Q_w, the groundwater withdrawal, and Q_d, the natural discharge.

295   By estimating the artificial recharge flow R_a (i.e. irrigation return flow and domestic water return flow) it is possible to estimate only the natural contribution R_n to the recharge of the Saq-Ram Aquifer System:

$$R_n = \Delta GWS + Q_w + Q_d - R_a \tag{4}$$

     Long-term time series of groundwater withdrawal (Sect. 3.1) and artificial recharge flow

300   (Sect. 3.2) are thus required over the GRACE period considered here (2002-2019) in order to compute the natural recharge rate. Note that the main natural discharge flows (Q_d) previously estimated by other studies have been already listed in the Hydrogeological context (Sect. 2.2).

305   ## 3. Results

3.1 Groundwater pumping

     Groundwater withdrawals from the Jordanian part of the Saq-Ram Aquifer System were estimated with the 2015 and 2017 Jordan Water Sector Facts and Figures (Almomani et al., 2015; url: www.mwi.gov.jo). Using the 2000-2017 evolution of the number of wells per usage

310   and the 2015 and 2017 total groundwater pumping volumes per region, the 2002-2019 time series were reconstructed by extrapolating the trend of the previous years to the 2018 and 2019 missing values. This resulted in $210 \pm 30 \times 10^6$ m^3 yr^{-1} of mean agricultural pumping, and $60 \pm$

10×10^6 m^3 yr^{-1} of domestic uptake for the Jordanian part of the Saq-Ram domain over the 2002-2019 period.

315   Using previously published data (see Sect. 2.2), we can also estimate a continuous agricultural pumping time series for the Saudi part of Saq-Ram Aquifer System. First, we computed linear regressions between the Othman et al. (2018) time series and (i) BRGM and Abunayyan Trading Corp. (2008) data, (ii) Alhassan et al. (2016), and Chowdhury and Al-Zahrani (2013) data given per KSA region. Subsequently, as shown in Figure 2, the mean
320   agricultural withdrawals and their uncertainties were obtained by averaging these two regressions. In the absence of data for the 2016-2019 period, we extrapolated the trend of the previous years assuming a similar evolution of the agricultural coverage as documented in the recent Statistical Yearbook from the Ministry of Economy and Planning of Saudi Arabia (General Authority for statistics, 2019; url: www.stats.gov.sa/en/46). This yielded an average
325   agricultural uptake of $7\,600 \pm 500 \times 10^6$ m^3 yr^{-1} for the Saudi part of the Saq-Ram domain over the 2002-2019 period.

Domestic pumping was reconstructed for the 2002-2019 period based on the BRGM and Abunayyan Trading Corp. (2008) domestic withdrawals per KSA region observed in 2003, and the Saudi Arabia population growth figures per region (United Nations, 2019). For the 2002-
330   2019 period, we obtained an average of $370 \pm 50 \times 10^6$ m^3 yr^{-1}.

Industrial pumping is unknown. Only the 2003 industrial water demand is reported in BRGM and Abunayyan Trading Corp. (2008) at 17×10^6 m^3 yr^{-1}. This corresponds to 0.2% of the total uptakes and can thus be neglected, in particular when considering the uncertainty involved with the other pumping volumes.

335

3.2 Artificial recharge

The artificial recharge by irrigation return flow and wastewater reinjection was considered in this study in order to separate artificial and natural recharge. Based on a spatial decision
340   support system, Multsch et al. (2013) carried out the assessment of the so called 'Water Footprint' (WF) of the agriculture for each region of Saudi Arabia. Using the blue WF (i.e. irrigation dose, coming entirely from groundwater in KSA) and grey WF (i.e. irrigation in excess returning to the shallow aquifer and needed to dilute soil pollutants) computed per region by the authors, it is possible to assess a weighted average Irrigation Return Flow Coefficient
345   (IRFC) of 11.6 ± 5.8% for the Saq aquifer domain. As the associated uncertainties of WF flows are not given, we used half of the IRFC figure as the margin of error. Applying this coefficient to the agricultural withdrawal time series, this yielded an average irrigation return flow of $900 \pm 450 \times 10^6$ m^3 yr^{-1} for the Saq-Ram Aquifer System (including the Jordanian contribution estimated at about $20 \pm 10 \times 10^6$ m^3 yr^{-1}) over the 2002-2019 period.
350   Regarding domestic water, Chowdhury and Al-Zahrani (2015) reported an average wastewater generation coefficient of about 70% in Saudi Arabia. This study also revealed that 38% of these wastewaters are treated by plants. Al-Jasser's (2011) data indicate that 27% of the treated wastewater of Riyadh city does not return to the aquifer, and that the other 73% returns to groundwater through irrigation use and direct injection in Wadis. All combined, it can be
355   estimated from these figures that 63% of domestic uptake returns to the aquifer (i.e. $270 \pm 30 \times 10^6$ m^3 yr^{-1} for the Saq-Ram Aquifer System over the 2002-2019 time period).

3.3 Local compatibility between GLDAS models and GRACE products

360   The high frequency component of the *TWS* signal corresponds to the seasonality (including soil moisture variations) which is theoretically simulated by the GLDAS Land Surface models

(Figure 3). Even if only long-term trends are interpreted here, it is crucial to verify the
compatibility of each of the GLDAS models with each of the GRACE solutions before
assessing the *ΔGWS* (Gonçalvès et al., 2013; Scanlon et al., 2019). A soil moisture amplitude
365 of a GLDAS model greater than the seasonality as shown by a GRACE product disqualifies
this soil model for the groundwater mass balance analysis. Hence, the six time-series were
detrended and their annual amplitudes compared (Figure 4). This analysis revealed that, for the
Saq-Ram Aquifer System, the GLDAS-CLSM and -NOAH products are not compatible with
the GRACE-JPL solution since their mean amplitudes are greater (i.e. overestimated simulated
370 seasonality in *SWS* compared to the *TWS* observations). The other two GRACE solutions (CSR
and GSFC) are compatible with the three GLDAS products with similar performance.
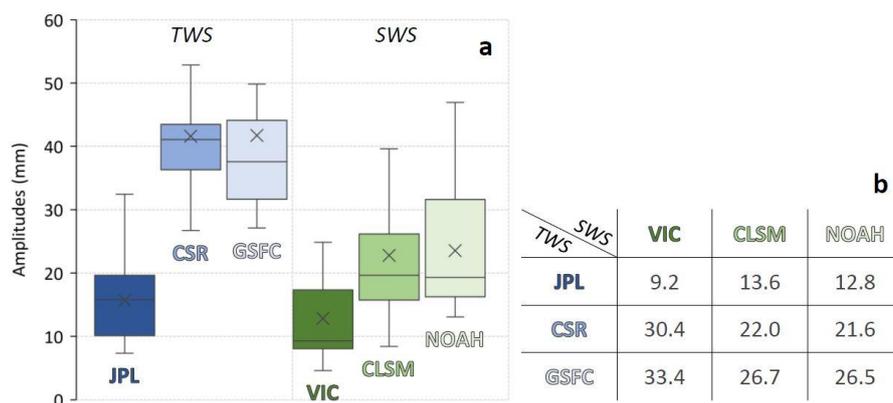
Figure 4: (a) Annual amplitude comparison between the three GRACE solutions and the
375   three GLDAS products and (b) the associated RMSE of the linear regressions applied on
these amplitudes.

3.4 GRACE-GLDAS water budgets for the 2002-2019 period

380   After computing the long-term average (18 years) groundwater storage variation (*ΔGWS*)
for each of the GRACE solutions and implementing the fluxes previously estimated, the water
budgets were calculated (Table 1). The negative natural recharge, i.e. evaporation losses from
the water table, obtained with the GRACE-GSFC solution is not realistic (see the following
discussion; Sect. 4.1). Therefore, only the results obtained from the GRACE-JPL and -CSR
385 solutions were considered.
Hence, the 2002-2019 average natural recharge of the Saq-Ram Aquifer System is estimated
at 2.4 ± 1.4 mm yr^{-1}. Using the long-term annual average rainfall of 55 mm yr^{-1}, the domain-
average natural recharge corresponds to $4.4 \pm 2.6\%$ of the AAR.

	JPL Solution		CSR Solution		GSFC Solution	
GRACE data (TWS)	JPL RL06M v2 CRI		CSR RL06M all cor. v2		GSFC RL06 v1 OBP-ICE6GD	
GLDAS data (SWS)	v2.1 VIC		v2.1 VIC, CLSM, NOAH		v2.1 VIC, CLSM, NOAH	
Water Budget	**Mean**	**SD**	**Mean**	**SD**	**Mean**	**SD**
ΔGWS	-11.35 (-5 940)	0.35 (180)	-11.18 (-5 850)	0.52 (270)	-14.80 (-7 750)	0.50 (260)
Natural discharge (Q_d)	0.27 (140)	0.06 (30)	0.27 (140)	0.06 (30)	0.27 (140)	0.06 (30)
Withdrawal (Q_w)	15.66 (8 200)	1.05 (550)	15.66 (8 200)	1.05 (550)	15.66 (8 200)	1.05 (550)
Artificial Recharge (R_a)	2.23 (1 170)	0.84 (440)	2.23 (1 170)	0.84 (440)	2.23 (1 170)	0.84 (440)
Natural Recharge (R_n)	**2.35 (1 230)**	**1.39 (730)**	**2.51 (1 310)**	**1.44 (750)**	**-1.10 (-580)**	**1.43 (750)**
Total Recharge (R)	4.58 (2 400)	1.62 (850)	4.74 (2 480)	1.67 (870)	1.13 (590)	1.66 (870)

390

Table 1: Domain averaged groundwater budget in mm yr^{-1} (10^6 m^3 yr^{-1}) of the Saq-Ram Aquifer System (520 000 km²) for each of the GRACE-GLDAS solutions (and associated standard deviation SD) for the 2002-2019 period.

395

4. Discussion

4.1 Negative natural recharge of the GRACE-GSFC solution results

The GRACE-GSFC solution resulting in negative natural recharge suggests that the Saq-Ram Aquifer System is subject on average to 1.1 mm yr^{-1} of evaporation losses from the water
400 table. A clear relationship between evaporation losses (also called evaporative pumping) and vadose zone thickness has long been demonstrated (Coudrain-Ribstein et al., 1998; Fontes et al., 1986; Kamai and Assouline, 2018; Zammouri, 2001). Stable isotope measurements by Fontes et al. (1986) in northern Sahara revealed that a groundwater evaporation rate of 2.0 mm yr^{-1} is reached for an average 10 m vadose zone thickness (between 6 and 30 m for 1.0 mm yr^{-1}
405 ^{1} of groundwater evaporation rate according to Coudrain-Ribstein et al., 1998). Two recent studies (Ahmed et al., 2015; Zaidi et al., 2015) computed a mean vadose zone thickness of about 150 m (ranging from 15 to 300 m) for a domain including the vast majority of the Saq-Ram Aquifer System. According to Kamai and Assouline (2018), a vadose zone thickness of 150 m would induce a mean groundwater evaporation loss of about 0.07 mm yr^{-1}, well below
410 0.2 mm yr^{-1}. This discrepancy suggests that the GRACE-GSFC solution is not suitable for this study (probably due to differences in the treatment of the raw GRACE data with the other two products), and that its results may not yield a meaningful mass balance. We therefore interpreted only the JPL-CSR solutions that yield positive water balances (Table 1).

415

4.2 Contribution of the volcanic lava deposits (Harrats) to the recharge

At 55 mm yr^{-1} of long-term average rainfall, the natural recharge of the Saq-Ram Aquifer domain corresponds to 4.4 ± 2.6% of incoming precipitation. This value can be compared to the average 1.7 ± 1.2% recharge-AAR ratio obtained by similar gravity-based approaches on
420 Saharan aquifers with similar hydrogeological characteristics: Murzuq Basin in Libya

(Mohamed and Gonçalvès, 2021 using GRACE data from Bonsor et al., 2018); Nubian Sandstones System (NSAS) covering Egypt, Libya, Tchad and Soudan (Mohamed et al., 2017); North Western Sahara Aquifer System (NWSAS) in Algeria, Tunisia and Libya (Mohamed and Gonçalvès, 2021); Tindouf basin in Algeria and Morocco (Gonçalvès et al., Submitted); and Djeffara basin in Tunisia and Libya (Gonçalvès et al., 2021). A clear positive offset compared to the regression is observed for the Saq-Ram Aquifer System (Figure 5). One of the main differences between the Saq-Ram and the four Saharan basins is that the latter correspond to almost purely sedimentary porous domains, while the Saq-Ram presents a substantial proportion of overlying volcanic lava deposits called Harrats (8% of the domain, i.e. 40 000 km² represented by black areas in Figure 5), over which a higher local precipitation is observed (i.e. AAR of 60 mm yr⁻¹ using CRU data from Harris et al., 2020).

To our knowledge, there is no study reporting recharge rates on these basaltic deposits strictly within the studied domain, but data are available for other parts of the Harrat Al-Sham (Syria, Jordan, KSA; also called Al Harrah in KSA) which corresponds to the largest volcanic lava deposit of the Arabian Peninsula, partly extending over the Saq-Ram Aquifer System. Dafny et al. (2003) reported that the recharge of the northern Golan heights (located at the western extremity of the Harrat Al-Sham) corresponds to 30% of AAR, consistent with the piezometric contour map revealing a major recharge area in this thick volcanic formation. For the Amman-Zarqa Basin (Jordan) located more in the central part of the Harrat Al-Sham, Mahamid (2005) derived a recharge of about 18% of AAR through a steady state model applied on the upper layer which includes a large proportion of limestone formation (B2/A7) underlying the basalt formation (forming a multi-layer aquifer). Provided as supplementary material, we applied a Water Table Fluctuation method on the average seasonal piezometric signal of the limestone/basaltic formation of the very same Amman-Zarqa Basin documented by Al-Zyoud (2012) and Al-Zyoud et al. (2015) yielding a recharge of about 29 ± 3% of AAR. Other areas of high recharge rate within the Harrat Al-Sham are revealed by the piezometric heights reported in different studies: the Jebel Al-Druze volcanic cone (Syria; Al-Homoud et al., 1995), as well as a basaltic relief located between the cities of Safawi and Ruwaished (Jordan; Abu-Jaber et al., 1998) which is partly in the Saq-Ram domain. Moreover, another major overlying volcanic deposit, i.e. Harrat Al-'Uwayrid (located between the cities of Tabuk and Al-Ula), corresponds to a preferential recharge area for the Saq-Ram formation as pictured by a water table mound observed on the contour map of Lloyd and Pim (1990).

Considering the three values previously mentioned leads to an average recharge-AAR ratio of 26 ± 6% for the Harrat Al-Sham. Recharge-AAR ratios about ten times those of porous sedimentary basins (1 to 3%) have also been noted for karstic aquifers in arid environments (Gonçalvès et al., 2021; Messerschmid and Aliewi, 2021). Basalts and karst formations share common characteristics which may explain a 'funnel' role for precipitations: intense fracturing, thin soil and scarce vegetation.

Hence, considering average values of 26 ± 6% and 1.7 ± 1.2% of recharge-AAR ratios over the volcanic and porous sedimentary domains respectively, we can assess the average recharge of the Saq-Ram Aquifer System independently from any data previously used in this study. This yields a total natural recharge of 2.1 ± 0.7 mm yr⁻¹, consistent with the results obtained using the GRACE-GLDAS water budget approach (i.e. 2.4 ± 1.4 mm yr⁻¹), with a 0.9 ± 0.6 mm yr⁻¹ contribution to the total domain-averaged recharge by the porous sedimentary outcrops and a 1.2 ± 0.3 mm yr⁻¹ of contribution by volcanic lava deposits. In other words, these volcanic lava deposits (Harrats), which cover 8% of the Saq-Ram Aquifer System, contribute to more than 50% of the total natural recharge.
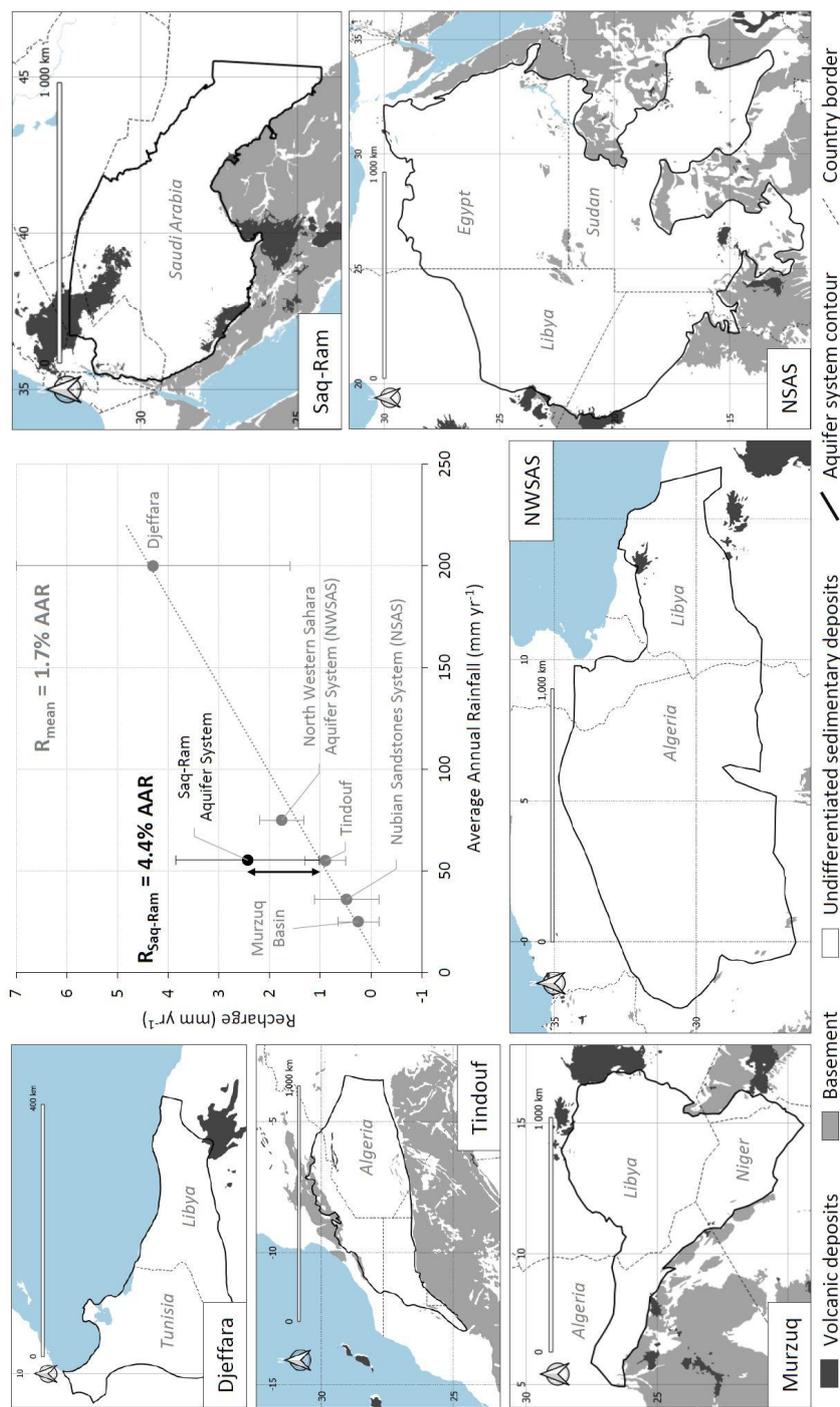
Figure 5: Recharge (R) versus Annual Average Rainfall (AAR) for the Saq-Ram Aquifer System, compared to other Sahara aquifer systems assessed with a similar approach, and their associated simplified geological maps (Pollastro et al., 1999; Persits et al., 1997).

4.3 Local recharge velocity and water table decline

Using the Al-Sagaby and Moallim (2001) study on a sand dune located in the Al Qasim region (within the Saq-Ram domain), it is possible to estimate a local lag time between surface infiltration and recharge. An average natural recharge of 1.8 mm yr^{-1} obtained by chloride mass-balance together with a measured water content on the vadose zone of 0.01% yields a local pore velocity equivalent to a 'natural recharge front velocity' of about 0.2 m yr^{-1}. This means that the transit time of water across the vadose zone in this area (i.e. 70 m) is about 350 years, typical of a dominant diffuse natural recharge mechanism through these porous sedimentary outcrops.

It is interesting to compare this recharge velocity with the water table decline velocity. This sand dune area (Al Qasim) is located outside any agricultural plot (i.e. zero artificial recharge by irrigation return flow) but close enough to still be under the influence of a large drawdown area created by intensive pumping. Considering a conservative 30 m water table decline in 45 years (BRGM and Abunayyan Trading Corp., 2008), a minimum 0.7 m yr^{-1} decline is computed on the outskirts of this piezometric depression. This is significantly faster than the local natural recharge velocity of 0.2 m yr^{-1}, suggesting that the unsaturated zone is thickening faster than the percolation flows into it. Note that we estimated $900 \pm 450 \times 10^6$ m^3 yr^{-1} of irrigation return flow (2002-2019 average; see Sect. 3.2) corresponding to 167 ± 83 mm yr^{-1} distributed only over the irrigated areas of the aquifer (i.e. about 5 400 km² for the 2002-2019 period; General Authority for statistics, 2019). Such a recharge value, two orders of magnitude larger than its natural counterpart, certainly prevents the disconnection between the recharge front and the free groundwater table in irrigated areas.

Hence, while irrigation excess is great enough to artificially sustain the recharge of the aquifer within agricultural plots, the effective recharge becomes locally and temporally zero on the outskirts of such crop areas, similar to observations of a semiarid aquifer of the North China Plain by Cao et al. (2016). Some regions behave as preferential recharge areas for the Saq-Ram Aquifer System, but a mechanism of a relative disconnection of the infiltration front with the declining water table likely occurs in intensively exploited regions, most probably in the vicinity of the main irrigated areas (represented by green areas in Figure 1) where there is no artificial recharge but still a piezometric drawdown induced by intensive pumping.

4.4 Influence of the vadose zone and recharge mechanism on GRACE-GLDAS interpretations in arid domains

The main characteristic of aquifers in arid domains is the presence of a thick unsaturated zone (deep water table) causing considerable lag times for ground surface-water table exchanges (Figure 6). The lag time (n years) between surface infiltration (I) and recharge (R) corresponds to the transit time of water across the vadose zone from the soil surface to the water table at depth. This lag time is highly dependent on the recharge mechanism, with large lags of hundreds of years for diffuse recharge and at most one year for focused recharge (Scanlon et al., 2006). Diffuse recharge occurs fairly uniformly over large areas (precipitation or irrigation) while focused recharge refers to a mechanism of concentration of the recharge from surface topographic depressions (e.g. streams, lakes and playas).
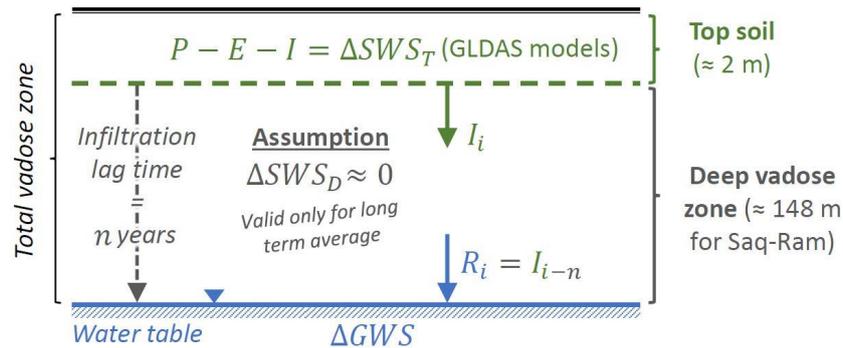
Figure 6: Conceptual representation of the treatment of the vadose zone in the GRACE-GLDAS water budget approach.

The standard interpretation of GRACE data consists in subtracting ΔSWS given by GLDAS models from ΔTWS obtained from satellite Earth gravity monitoring. However, the water balance calculated by Land Surface models in GLDAS is restricted to the top soil (about the first 2 m, ΔSWS_T; Figure 6). Therefore, the implicit assumption behind the standard interpretation is that the soil water moisture variations in the deep vadose zone (ΔSWS_D from 2 m depth to the water table elevation) are negligible which means that infiltration at 2 m from the top of this deep vadose zone (I) equals the recharge outflowing at its bottom (R). For small lag times (focused recharge), or shallow aquifers, this assumption is valid both on an annual basis and for long-term averages. In the case of large lag times (diffuse recharge) as for the vast majority of arid domains (including the Saq-Ram Aquifer System), this assumption may be valid for long term average values ($I = R$) but not on a yearly time scale ($I_i \neq R_i$ for a specific year i, Figure 6). In this case, the application of a yearly GRACE-GLDAS approach will provide annual percolation rates at the bottom of the Land Surface Models (I_i), i.e. future recharges (R_{i+n} reaching the water table only after n years of lag time). Hence, yearly analysis using GRACE-GLDAS solutions in arid domains should be restricted to areas where focused recharge is the main mechanism, while a long-term analysis is valid irrespective of the recharge mechanism (focused or diffuse).

Regarding long-term analysis, the length of the time series considered has a significant impact on the calculated interannual recharge (Figure 7). The computed recharge of the Saq-Ram Aquifer System and the NWSAS (Gonçalvès et al., 2013; Mohamed and Gonçalvès, 2021) is considerably different when considering different time periods of GRACE data. Compared to the NWSAS real estimate for the long-term average recharge obtained using a ^{14}C interpretation (i.e. 1.6 ± 2.3 mm yr^{-1} Chekireb et al., 2021), it appears that about 15 years of GRACE data are required to obtain the long-term average recharge. By fitting the best threshold regression models (dashed lines), it is possible to estimate that the long-term natural recharge of the Saq-Ram Aquifer System is 2.6 mm yr^{-1}.
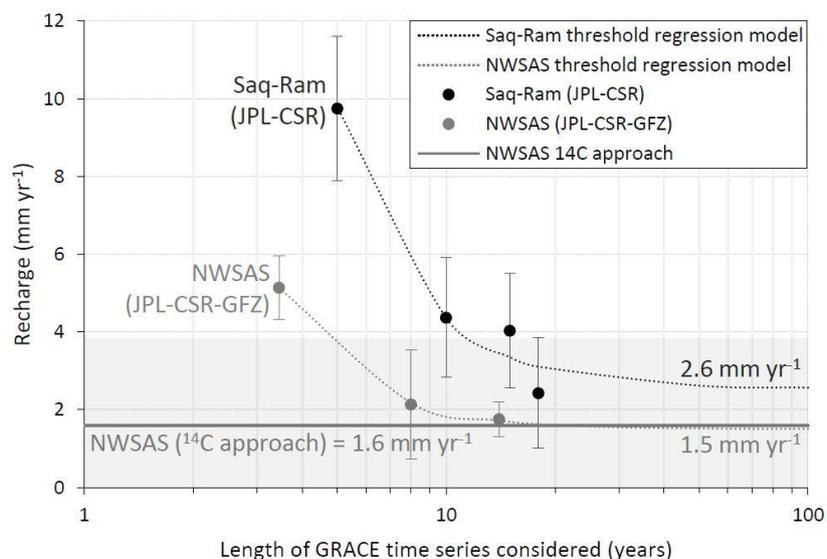
Figure 7: Changes in recharge rate and associated error bars considering different lengths of GRACE time series for the Saq-Ram Aquifer System compared to the NWSAS recharge rates obtained by GRACE and ^{14}C approaches (^{14}C uncertainty as a gray square), and their associated threshold regression models.

550

5. Conclusion

In this study, we retrieved gravity data from the GRACE satellite system and soil moisture variations inferred from GLDAS models to construct a water mass balance, with the aim of
555 estimating the long-term average natural recharge over the Saq-Ram Aquifer domain. As recommended by Gonçalvès et al. (2013) and Scanlon et al. (2019), the local compatibility of the three existing GRACE solutions (JPL, CSR, GSFC) with the soil moisture datasets available from the three GLDAS models (VIC, CLSM, NOAH) was tested to compute groundwater storage variations. Accounting for groundwater pumping (15.7 ± 1.1 mm yr^{-1}), artificial
560 recharge (2.2 ± 0.8 mm yr^{-1}) and natural discharge (0.3 ± 0.06 mm yr^{-1}) derived from previous studies, the GRACE-derived water budget yielded a 2.4 ± 1.4 mm yr^{-1} of domain-averaged natural recharge over the 2002-2019 period, corresponding to $4.4 \pm 2.6\%$ of the annual average rainfall.

In line with many other studies (local or over similar arid aquifers), we suggest that this
565 recharge rate is spatially very heterogeneous. Volcanic lava deposits, which cover 8% of the Saq-Ram Aquifer domain, contribute to more than 50% of the total natural recharge when considering previously published recharge rates over the terrain. Further, due to intensive groundwater withdrawal in the last decades, a mechanism of relative disconnection from the infiltration front with the water table position (i.e. the unsaturated zone thickens faster than
570 percolation flows through it) is suggested to occur at the outskirts of major irrigated areas, presumably making recharge locally null.

Hence, in addition to this application on the Arabian Peninsula, this study strongly indicates a major control of geological context on arid aquifer recharge which has been poorly discussed hitherto. Regarding water resource management, this work has (i) local implications: promoting
575 more hydrogeological studies on these productive basaltic formations overlying the Saq-Ram

Aquifer System; and (ii) regional implications: questioning the impact on sustainability calculations for numerous MENA (Middle East and North Africa) countries presenting basaltic and/or karstic aquifers.

580

Acknowledgments

We thank the *Agence Française pour le développement d'AL-ULA* (AFALULA) and the Royal Commission of Al-Ula (RCU) for their funding of the project 'Past, present and future Water resources in Al-Ula Oasis' (WAO) which this study is part of.

585

References

590 Abu-Jaber, N. S., Ali, A. J., and Al Qudah, K.: Use of Solute and Isotopic Composition of Ground Water to Constrain the Ground Water Flow System of the Azraq Area, Jordan, Groundwater, 36, 361–365, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-6584.1998.tb01101.x, 1998.

Ahmed, I., Nazzal, Y., Zaidi, F. K., Al-Arifi, N. S. N., Ghrefat, H., and Naeem, M.: Hydrogeological vulnerability and pollution risk mapping of the Saq and overlying aquifers
595 using the DRASTIC model and GIS techniques, NW Saudi Arabia, Environ. Earth Sci., 74, 1303–1318, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12665-015-4120-5, 2015.

Alhassan, A. A., McCluskey, A., the University of Colorado Boulder, Boulder, Colorado 80309 USA, Alfaris, A., the Center for Complex Engineering Systems at KACST and MIT, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and Strzepek, K.: Scenario Based Regional Water Supply and Demand Model:
600 Saudi Arabia as a Case Study, Int. J. Environ. Sci. Dev., 7, 46–51, https://doi.org/10.7763/IJESD.2016.V7.739, 2016.

Al-Homoud, A. S., Allison, R. J., Sunna, B. F., and White, K.: Geology, Geomorphology, Hydrology, Groundwater and Physical Resources of the Desertified Badia Environment in Jordan, GeoJournal, 37, 51–67, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00814885, 1995.

605 Al-Jasser, A. O.: Saudi wastewater reuse standards for agricultural irrigation: Riyadh treatment plants effluent compliance, J. King Saud Univ. - Eng. Sci., 23, 1–8, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jksues.2009.06.001, 2011.

Almomani, T., Almomani, M., Subah, A., and Hammad, N.: Jordan Water Sector Facts and Figures 2013, 2015, 2017, Dtsch. Ges. Für Int. Zusammenarbeit GIZ GmbH,
610 http://dx.doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.3419.4088, 2015.

Al-Sagaby, A. and Moallim, A.: Isotopes based assessment of groundwater renewal and related anthropogenic effects in water scarce areas: Sand dunes study in Qasim area, Saudi Arabia, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), 2001.

Alsharhan, A. S. and Nairn, A. E. M.: Sedimentary basins and petroleum geology of the Middle
615 East, Elsevier, 843 pp., 1997.

Al-Zyoud, S.: Geothermal Cooling in Arid Regions: An Investigation of the Jordanian Harrat Aquifer System, Ph.D. Thesis, Technische Universität Darmstadt, Darmstadt, 2012.

Al-Zyoud, S., Rühaak, W., Forootan, E., and Sass, I.: Over Exploitation of Groundwater in the Centre of Amman Zarqa Basin—Jordan: Evaluation of Well Data and GRACE Satellite Observations, Resources, 4, 819–830, https://doi.org/10.3390/resources4040819, 2015.

Barthélemy, Y., Béon, O., Nindre, Y.-M., Munaf, S., Poitrinal, D., Gutierrez, A., Vandenbeusch, M., Shoaibi, A., and Wijnen, M.: Modelling of the Saq aquifer system (Saudi Arabia), in: IAH Hydrogeology Selected Papers vol.10, Taylor & Francis, 175–190, 2006.

Bazuhair, A. S. and Wood, W. W.: Chloride mass-balance method for estimating ground water recharge in arid areas: examples from western Saudi Arabia, J. Hydrol., 186, 153–159, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0022-1694(96)03028-4, 1996.

Beaudoing, H., Rodell, M., and NASA/GSFC/HSL: GLDAS Noah Land Surface Model L4 monthly 1.0 x 1.0 degree V2.1, Greenbelt, Maryland, USA, Goddard Earth Sci. Data Inf. Serv. Cent. GES DISC, https://doi.org/10.5067/LWTYSMP3VM5Z, 2020a.

Beaudoing, H., Rodell, M., and NASA/GSFC/HSL: GLDAS VIC Land Surface Model L4 monthly 1.0 x 1.0 degree V2.1, Greenbelt, Maryland, USA, Goddard Earth Sci. Data Inf. Serv. Cent. GES DISC, https://doi.org/10.5067/VWTH7S6218SG, 2020b.

Bierkens, M. F. P. and Wada, Y.: Non-renewable groundwater use and groundwater depletion: a review, Environ. Res. Lett., 14, 063002, https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/ab1a5f, 2019.

Bonsor, H., Shamsudduha, M., Marchant, B., MacDonald, A., and Taylor, R.: Seasonal and Decadal Groundwater Changes in African Sedimentary Aquifers Estimated Using GRACE Products and LSMs, Remote Sens., 10, 904, https://doi.org/10.3390/rs10060904, 2018.

BRGM and Abunayyan Trading Corp.: Investigations for updating groundwater mathematical model(s) of the Saq and overlying aquifers, Ministry of Water and Electricity, Saudi Arabia, 2008.

Cao, G., Scanlon, B. R., Han, D., and Zheng, C.: Impacts of thickening unsaturated zone on groundwater recharge in the North China Plain, J. Hydrol., 537, 260–270, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhydrol.2016.03.049, 2016.

Chekireb, A., Gonçalvès, J., Hamelin, B., Deschamps, P., and Séraphin, P.: Analytical Expressions of Radiocarbon Distribution in Transient State Unconfined Aquifers and Their Application to Determination of Past and Present Recharges of North Africa Aquifers, Water Resour. Res., 57, e2021WR030018, https://doi.org/10.1029/2021WR030018, 2021.

Chowdhury, S. and Al-Zahrani, M.: Reuse of treated wastewater in Saudi Arabia: an assessment framework, J. Water Reuse Desalination, 3, 297–314, https://doi.org/10.2166/wrd.2013.082, 2013.

Chowdhury, S. and Al-Zahrani, M.: Characterizing water resources and trends of sector wise water consumptions in Saudi Arabia, J. King Saud Univ. - Eng. Sci., 27, 68–82, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jksues.2013.02.002, 2015.

Coudrain-Ribstein, A., Pratx, B., Talbi, A., and Jusserand, C.: L'évaporation des nappes phréatiques sous climat aride est-elle indépendante de la nature du sol?, Comptes Rendus Académie Sci. - Ser. IIA - Earth Planet. Sci., 326, 159–165, https://doi.org/10.1016/S1251-8050(00)89030-8, 1998.

Dafny, E., Gvirtzman, H., Burg, A., and Fleischerc, L.: The hydrogeology of the Golan basalt aquifer, Israel, Isr. J. Earth Sci., 52, 139–153, https://doi.org/10.1560/MXXA-CPJB-8LJ9-R7FM, 2003.

Fallatah, O. A., Ahmed, M., Cardace, D., Boving, T., and Akanda, A. S.: Assessment of modern recharge to arid region aquifers using an integrated geophysical, geochemical, and remote sensing approach, J. Hydrol., 569, 600–611, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhydrol.2018.09.061, 2019.

Fontes, J. Ch., Yousfi, M., and Allison, G. B.: Estimation of long-term, diffuse groundwater discharge in the northern Sahara using stable isotope profiles in soil water, J. Hydrol., 86, 315–327, https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-1694(86)90170-8, 1986.

Frenken, K. and UN-FAO: Irrigation in the Middle East Region in figures: AQUASTAT survey - 2008, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Rome, 2009.

General Authority for statistics: Statistical Yearbook of 1965-2018, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2019.

Gonçalvès, J., Petersen, J., Deschamps, P., Hamelin, B., and Baba-Sy, O.: Quantifying the modern recharge of the "fossil" Sahara aquifers, Geophys. Res. Lett., 40, 2673–2678, https://doi.org/10.1002/grl.50478, 2013.

Gonçalvès, J., Séraphin, P., Stieglitz, T., Chekireb, A., Hamelin, B., and Deschamps, P.: Coastal aquifer recharge and groundwater–seawater exchanges using downscaled GRACE data: case study of the Djeffara plain (Libya–Tunisia), Comptes Rendus Géoscience, 353, 297–318, https://doi.org/10.5802/crgeos.74, 2021.

Gonçalvès, J., Seraphin, P., Nutz, A., Submitted. Dealing with hydrologic data scarcity: the case of the Tindouf Basin. Comptes Rendus Géoscience.

Harris, I., Osborn, T. J., Jones, P., and Lister, D.: Version 4 of the CRU TS monthly high-resolution gridded multivariate climate dataset, Sci. Data, 7, 109, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41597-020-0453-3, 2020.

Kamai, T. and Assouline, S.: Evaporation From Deep Aquifers in Arid Regions: Analytical Model for Combined Liquid and Vapor Water Fluxes, Water Resour. Res., 54, 4805–4822, https://doi.org/10.1029/2018WR023030, 2018.

Konikow, L. F. and Kendy, E.: Groundwater depletion: A global problem, Hydrogeol. J., 13, 317–320, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10040-004-0411-8, 2005.

Landerer, F. W. and Swenson, S. C.: Accuracy of scaled GRACE terrestrial water storage estimates, Water Resour. Res., 48, https://doi.org/10.1029/2011WR011453, 2012.

Li, B., Beaudoing, H., and Rodell, M.: GLDAS Catchment Land Surface Model L4 monthly 1.0 x 1.0 degree V2.1, Greenbelt, Maryland, USA, Goddard Earth Sci. Data Inf. Serv. Cent. GES DISC, https://doi.org/10.5067/FOUXNLXFAZNY, 2020.

Lloyd, J. W. and Pim, R. H.: The hydrogeology and groundwater resources development of the Cambro-Ordovician sandstone aquifer in Saudi Arabia and Jordan, J. Hydrol., 121, 1–20, https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-1694(90)90221-I, 1990.

Loomis, B. D.: GSFC GRACE and GRACE-FO RL06 v1 OBP-ICE6GD, MD, USA, 2020.

Loomis, B. D., Luthcke, S. B., and Sabaka, T. J.: Regularization and error characterization of GRACE mascons, J. Geod., 93, 1381–1398, https://doi.org/10.1007/s00190-019-01252-y, 2019.

MacDonald, A. M., Lark, R. M., Taylor, R. G., Abiye, T., Fallas, H. C., Favreau, G., Goni, I. B., Kebede, S., Scanlon, B., Sorensen, J. P. R., Tijani, M., Upton, K. A., and West, C.: Mapping groundwater recharge in Africa from ground observations and implications for water security, Environ. Res. Lett., 16, 034012, https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/abd661, 2021.

Mahamid, J. A.: Integration of Water Resources of the Upper Aquifer in Amman-Zarqa Basin Based on Mathematical Modeling and GIS, Jordan, Freib. Online Geosci., 12, https://doi.org/10.23689/fidgeo-879, 2005.

Messerschmid, C. and Aliewi, A.: Spatial distribution of groundwater recharge, based on regionalized soil moisture models in Wadi Natuf karst aquifers, Palestine, Hydrol. Earth Syst. Sci. Discuss., 1–19, https://doi.org/10.5194/hess-2021-322, 2021.

Mohamed, A. and Gonçalvès, J.: Hydro-geophysical monitoring of the North Western Sahara Aquifer System's groundwater resources using gravity data, J. Afr. Earth Sci., 178, 104188, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jafrearsci.2021.104188, 2021.

Mohamed, A., Sultan, M., Ahmed, M., Yan, E., and Ahmed, E.: Aquifer recharge, depletion, and connectivity: Inferences from GRACE, land surface models, and geochemical and geophysical data, Geol. Soc. Am. Bull., 129, 534–546, https://doi.org/10.1130/B31460.1, 2017.

Multsch, S., Al-Rumaikhani, Y. A., Frede, H.-G., and Breuer, L.: A Site-sPecific Agricultural water Requirement and footprint Estimator (SPARE:WATER 1.0), Geosci. Model Dev., 6, 1043–1059, https://doi.org/10.5194/gmd-6-1043-2013, 2013.

Othman, A., Sultan, M., Becker, R., Alsefry, S., Alharbi, T., Gebremichael, E., Alharbi, H., and Abdelmohsen, K.: Use of Geophysical and Remote Sensing Data for Assessment of Aquifer Depletion and Related Land Deformation, Surv. Geophys., 39, 543–566, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10712-017-9458-7, 2018.

Persits, F. M., Ahlbrandt, T. S., Tuttle, M. L., Charpentier, R. R., Brownfield, M. E., and Takahashi, K. I.: Maps showing geology, oil and gas fields and geological provinces of Africa, Maps showing geology, oil and gas fields and geological provinces of Africa, U.S. Geological Survey, Reston, VA, https://doi.org/10.3133/ofr97470A, 1997.

Pollastro, R. M., Karshbaum, A. S., and Viger, R. J.: Maps showing geology, oil and gas fields and geologic provinces of the Arabian Peninsula, Maps showing geology, oil and gas fields and geologic provinces of the Arabian Peninsula, U.S. Geological Survey, Reston, VA, https://doi.org/10.3133/ofr97470B, 1999.

Ramillien, G., Frappart, F., and Seoane, L.: Application of the Regional Water Mass Variations from GRACE Satellite Gravimetry to Large-Scale Water Management in Africa, Remote Sens., 6, 7379–7405, https://doi.org/10.3390/rs6087379, 2014.

735 Richey, A. S., Thomas, B. F., Lo, M.-H., Reager, J. T., Famiglietti, J. S., Voss, K., Swenson, S., and Rodell, M.: Quantifying renewable groundwater stress with GRACE, Water Resour. Res., 51, 5217–5238, https://doi.org/10.1002/2015WR017349, 2015.

Rodell, M., Houser, P. R., Jambor, U., Gottschalck, J., Mitchell, K., Meng, C.-J., Arsenault, K., Cosgrove, B., Radakovich, J., Bosilovich, M., Entin, J. K., Walker, J. P., Lohmann, D., and
740 Toll, D.: The Global Land Data Assimilation System, Bull. Am. Meteorol. Soc., 85, 381–394, https://doi.org/10.1175/BAMS-85-3-381, 2004.

Save, H.: CSR GRACE and GRACE-FO RL06 Mascon Solutions v02, TX, USA, https://doi.org/10.15781/cgq9-nh24, 2020.

Save, H., Bettadpur, S., and Tapley, B. D.: High-resolution CSR GRACE RL05 mascons, J.
745 Geophys. Res. Solid Earth, 121, 7547–7569, https://doi.org/10.1002/2016JB013007, 2016.

Scanlon, B. R., Keese, K. E., Flint, A. L., Flint, L. E., Gaye, C. B., Edmunds, W. M., and Simmers, I.: Global synthesis of groundwater recharge in semiarid and arid regions, Hydrol. Process., 20, 3335–3370, https://doi.org/10.1002/hyp.6335, 2006.

Scanlon, B. R., Zhang, Z., Save, H., Wiese, D. N., Landerer, F. W., Long, D., Longuevergne,
750 L., and Chen, J.: Global evaluation of new GRACE mascon products for hydrologic applications, Water Resour. Res., 52, 9412–9429, https://doi.org/10.1002/2016WR019494, 2016.

Scanlon, B. R., Zhang, Z., Rateb, A., Sun, A., Wiese, D., Save, H., Beaudoing, H., Lo, M. H., Müller-Schmied, H., Döll, P., Beek, R., Swenson, S., Lawrence, D., Croteau, M., and Reedy,
755 R. C.: Tracking Seasonal Fluctuations in Land Water Storage Using Global Models and GRACE Satellites, Geophys. Res. Lett., 46, 5254–5264, https://doi.org/10.1029/2018GL081836, 2019.

Scanlon, B. R., Rateb, A., Pool, D. R., Sanford, W., Save, H., Sun, A., Long, D., and Fuchs, B.: Effects of climate and irrigation on GRACE-based estimates of water storage changes in major
760 US aquifers, Environ. Res. Lett., 16, 094009, https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/ac16ff, 2021.

Siebert, C., Rödiger, T., Mallast, U., Gräbe, A., Guttman, J., Laronne, J. B., Storz-Peretz, Y., Greenman, A., Salameh, E., Al-Raggad, M., Vachtman, D., Zvi, A. B., Ionescu, D., Brenner, A., Merz, R., and Geyer, S.: Challenges to estimate surface- and groundwater flow in arid regions: The Dead Sea catchment, Sci. Total Environ., 485–486, 828–841,
765 https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2014.04.010, 2014.

Sun, A. Y.: Predicting groundwater level changes using GRACE data: Predicting Groundwater Level Changes Using Grace Data, Water Resour. Res., 49, 5900–5912, https://doi.org/10.1002/wrcr.20421, 2013.

Swenson, S. and Wahr, J.: Post-processing removal of correlated errors in GRACE data,
770 Geophys. Res. Lett., 33, https://doi.org/10.1029/2005GL025285, 2006.

UN-ESCWA and BGR: Inventory of Shared Water Resources in Western Asia, United Nations, Beirut, https://doi.org/10.18356/48e4072c-en, 2013.

United Nations: World Population Prospects 2019, Online Edition. Rev. 1, https://population.un.org/, 2019.

775 de Vries, J. J. and Simmers, I.: Groundwater recharge: an overview of processes and challenges, Hydrogeol. J., 10, 5–17, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10040-001-0171-7, 2002.

Watkins, M. M., Wiese, D. N., Yuan, D.-N., Boening, C., and Landerer, F. W.: Improved methods for observing Earth's time variable mass distribution with GRACE using spherical cap mascons, J. Geophys. Res. Solid Earth, 120, 2648–2671, 2015.

780 Wessel, P. and Smith, W. H. F.: A global, self-consistent, hierarchical, high-resolution shoreline database, J. Geophys. Res. Solid Earth, 101, 8741–8743, https://doi.org/10.1029/96JB00104, 1996.

Wiese, D. N., Yuan, D.-N., Boening, C., Landerer, F. W., and Watkins, M. M.: JPL GRACE and GRACE-FO Mascon Ocean, Ice, and Hydrology Equivalent Water Height JPL RL06 785 Version 02. Ver. 2, PO.DAAC, CA, USA, https://doi.org/10.5067/TEMSC-3MJ62, 2019.

Zaidi, F. K., Nazzal, Y., Ahmed, I., Naeem, M., and Jafri, M. K.: Identification of potential artificial groundwater recharge zones in Northwestern Saudi Arabia using GIS and Boolean logic, J. Afr. Earth Sci., 111, 156–169, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jafrearsci.2015.07.008, 2015.

Zammouri, M.: Case Study of Water Table Evaporation at Ichkeul Marshes (Tunisia), J. Irrig. 790 Drain. Eng., 127, 265–271, https://doi.org/10.1061/(ASCE)0733-9437(2001)127:5(265), 2001.