

## The lack of Afghanistan's ability to develop its water resources adversely affects its national security and regional peace & stability <sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

A greater distance in relations between Afghanistan and the International Community will adversely affect its national water development, management as well as stability and security in the region.

Therefore it needs to be clarified what happens if Afghanistan is not able to develop its water resources and if it is excluded from the international community for a long time. This requires to study of emerging water insecurity-related threats in the region.

In 2013 the UNEP produced a report that found that 70-80% of Afghans are directly dependent on natural resources for income and sustenance, meaning farming, animal husbandry, and artisanal mining.

The prospects of peace and stability in Afghanistan will continue to be low, if food insecurity, water scarcity, and population growth continue. If the water does not develop and managed sustainably in Afghanistan, in that case, it can turn over to be the prime cause of social tension and instability leading to mass migration and growing conflict among the riparian countries connected through historical, cultural, environmental, and economic ties.

The ongoing situation has also undermined Afghanistan's capacity to cope with water and food insecurity threats, with natural disasters adding stress to an already weak system of governance.

Therefore international community needs to think about the Afghanistan water and food crisis and its role in the security situation in Afghanistan and regional instability.

**Keywords:** Afghanistan's Transboundary Rivers, Regional Water Security, Hydro Politics of Afghanistan, Peace, and stability,

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

*Because of Afghanistan's innate land-locked setting, virtually all of Afghanistan's major rivers drain off into riparian neighboring states. Transboundary concerns are intensifying along all of Afghanistan's borders....<sup>2</sup>*

Afghanistan has many water resources and its geography provides significant opportunities for their exploitation.<sup>3</sup> Afghanistan possesses many rivers, river basins, lakes, and desert areas. The four major river systems are the Amu Darya, the Oxus of antiquity, (boundary with Central Asia, 1,100 kilometers in Afghanistan); the Helmand (1,300 kilometers); the Harirud (650 kilometers in Afghanistan); and the Kabul (460 kilometers). Only the Kabul River, joining the Indus system in Pakistan, leads to the sea. Many rivers and streams simply empty into arid portions of the country, spending themselves through evaporation without replenishing the four major systems; others flow only seasonally.<sup>4</sup>



Afghanistan is an unlucky country that lacks the ability to develop its water resources. The existing water infrastructure has been destroyed during thirty years of war, This deficit in water management capacity exacts a heavy toll, exacerbating unemployment, food insecurity, water disputes, and the production of crops that can compete with illicit drugs. Without the means to store and divert water, existing infrastructure is vulnerable to devastating seasonal floods and droughts. Afghanistan also needs electricity, which only reaches 6 percent of its rural communities and 15 percent of its urban population.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Shojaudin, Ziaie, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Ministry of energy and water, "Water sector strategy for Afghanistan, National Development Strategy" March 15, 2007, p-9

<sup>3</sup> King, Matthwe, Sturtewagen, Benjamin, "Making the most of Afghanistan River Basins, opportunities for regional cooperation". February 2010, p-1.

<sup>4</sup> <http://countrystudies.us/afghanistan/33.htm>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.stimson.org/spotlight/transboundary-water-sharing-iran-and-afghanistan/>

Afghanistan is highly susceptible to drought. When the country suffered a drought from 1999 to 2005, whole villages with limited water resources were forced to abandon their land and flee to larger cities and towns.

Improving the national and transboundary management of water resources in Afghanistan is a necessity to improve the lives of millions of people. Enhanced regional cooperation to avoid tension over the use and management of shared water resources will also be crucial to providing a secure and stable future for the country and its neighbors.

## **2. WATER RESOURCES POTENTIAL IN AFGHANISTAN**

Afghanistan's water resources are unequally distributed. The Amu Darya Basin, including the Harirud and Murghab Basin and non-drainage areas, covers about 37 percent of Afghanistan's Territory but contains about 60 percent of the water flow. The Helmand Basin covers about 49 percent of the territory and holds only 11 percent of water flow. The Kabul–Eastern River Basin, with area coverage of about 12 percent, holds around 26 percent of the water flow.<sup>6</sup>

Afghanistan has many water resources and its geography provides significant opportunities for their exploitation.<sup>7</sup> Insufficient infrastructure and a lack of capacity, however, limit Afghanistan's ability to store, properly manage, and develop its water resources. Ninety percent of Afghanistan's irrigation today is managed through traditional, community-based mirab schemes, which are independent of broader national or regional arrangements and limited in their efficiency.



<sup>6</sup> R. Favre and G. M. Kamal, "Watershed Atlas of Afghanistan," 2004, pp. 63–66.

<sup>7</sup> Shojaudin Ziaie, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Ministry of Energy and Water, "Water Sector Strategy for Afghanistan National Development Strategy," March 15, 2007, p. 9, [http://www.ands.gov.af/ands/final\\_ands/src/final/ministry\\_strategies/English/Ministry%20of%20Energy%20and%20Water-Water%20Resources%20-%20English.pdf](http://www.ands.gov.af/ands/final_ands/src/final/ministry_strategies/English/Ministry%20of%20Energy%20and%20Water-Water%20Resources%20-%20English.pdf). The quote from the Afghan Ministry of Energy and Water's Draft Water Sector Strategy of 2007 is on p. 9.

Figure 1. Afghanistan map and transboundary rivers

The main surface water resources of Afghanistan are the Amu Darya, the Helmand River, the Kabul River, and the Harirud and Murghab rivers. Afghanistan shares these rivers with Iran, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan (Figure 1).

Despite this need for regional cooperation, there are no formal dialogue processes or bilateral or multilateral agreements on the transboundary waters in the region (except for the Iran-Afghanistan treaty on the Helmand River).



### **3.NO DEVELOPMENT, PEACE, AND STABILITY IN THE SHORT TERM WITHOUT WATER AND FOOD SECURITY**

Without substantial improvements in the development and management of Afghanistan's water resources, Afghanistan will not reach its energy, agriculture, or rural and urban development goals. These goals are crucial elements of the Afghanistan National Development Strategy 2008–2013 (ANDS), the cornerstone of Afghanistan's development policy.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, under the umbrella of economic and social development, water and irrigation feature prominently as a separate area of focus in the ANDS.

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<sup>8</sup> Ziaie, "Water Sector Strategy"; Afghanistan National Development Strategy (2008), p. 60.

The development of water infrastructure and dams can produce several positive results for Afghanistan, such as reducing dependency on imported hydropower and improving the availability of water for irrigation and livestock. Yet this must be complemented with effective diplomacy to engage in water negotiations and provide a platform for dialogues and signing of formal agreements with its neighboring countries<sup>9</sup>.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that Afghanistan's neighbors have not undertaken any serious efforts to incorporate Afghanistan into their institutionalized cooperation frameworks on water, either.

On the other hand, existing frameworks for regional cooperation on some of the shared water resources exclude Afghanistan. The lack of transboundary water agreements/institutions between Afghanistan and its neighboring countries will significantly affect short and long term the inter-state multilateral cooperation and the status of the water resources in the region.

#### **4. WATER AND FOOD SECURITY CRISIS GROWS IN AFGHANISTAN**

A landlocked country, Afghanistan could have adequate rainfall from snowdrifts for all agricultural output were that water capably captured and managed, but war, corruption, and malaise have meant that much of Afghanistan's water becomes unusable, or flows out of the country. Even in Afghanistan's major cities drinking water is not readily available to many people(5).

Afghanistan has experienced major wars in the 20th and 21st centuries. These wars did not allow Afghanistan to develop water resources, and they flowed to neighboring countries without being developed. For the last 10 years, Afghanistan has started to develop projects in both agricultural and hydroelectric fields. However, in 2021, the Taliban took over the country. This situation interrupted these projects as well.

Afghanistan faces substantial impacts from natural disasters and climate change, hindering prospects for peace and development in the country(5). Climate change poses a threat to Afghanistan's natural resources, and the continuation of floods and droughts is expected to impact agricultural productivity and output. The ongoing conflict has also undermined Afghanistan's capacity to cope with ecological threats, with natural disasters adding stress to an already weak system of governance(5).

United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said in his briefing at the UN Security Council on January 26, 2022, "There is no time to lose". Antonio Guterres wanted to remove the obstacles to the financing of humanitarian aid activities in Afghanistan. Guterres said that millions of people were starving and warned that mass migration from the country could occur.

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<sup>9</sup> Said Hashmat Sadat Nasrat Sayed. Afghanistan: Water management for peace  
<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/afghanistan-water-management-peace>

Stating that more than 80 percent of the population does not have access to clean drinking water, Guterres requested that the necessary financial transactions be allowed for humanitarian aid.



## **5. CONCERN ABOUT THE TALIBAN DISRUPTS HUMANITARIAN AID**

After the US and NATO withdrew from Afghanistan and the Taliban took control of the country in August 2021. On August 15, 2021, Taliban fighters entered the Afghan capital, Kabul, and assumed control of the city and country. It was the culmination of a Taliban military offensive that started in May 2021 and resulted in that force taking control of most of Afghanistan, including every major city(5).

The new Taliban rule in Afghanistan has not been recognized by many countries. The international community, which did not want to work with the Taliban, stopped its aid to Afghanistan. Donor states have set specific criteria for humanitarian aid, such as respect for human rights. He stipulated the fulfillment of these conditions for the release of aid.

In January 2022, representatives of the Taliban and Afghan civil society held a meeting in Oslo, Norway. During this meeting, it was announced that the Taliban held direct talks with representatives of Norway, the USA, France, and the British. However, Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr emphasized that these contacts did not mean that the Taliban government was officially recognized.



## **6. THE CURRENT STATE OF AFGHANISTAN ADVERSELY AFFECTS ITS WATER RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT ABILITY**

Today, Afghanistan has to carry out both agricultural and hydroelectric projects on waterways. However, there are serious problems that arise from both the Taliban administration and the riparian countries.

Afghanistan has survived despite numerous challenges. International assistance has played a significant role in its survival. Challenges continued and the government struggled to make use of national resources effectively.

The World Bank estimates that Afghanistan's overall poverty level rose from 55% to 72% in 2020, as a result of economic contraction. The majority of Afghans suffer from a lack of water, sanitation, and hygiene. As reported by the UNAMA, only about 27% of the population has access to safe drinking water (3).

Afghanistan faced one of the world's most serious humanitarian and environmental crises, according to the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP). In 2020, tens of thousands of families in several provinces in Afghanistan were existentially threatened as a result of natural disasters(3). In addition, climate change has affected the lives of Afghans in recent years, resulting in internal displacement and increased poverty. (3)

All the negative conditions mentioned above were made much worse by the Taliban's takeover of the government in 2021.

Afghanistan has also several problems with transboundary water resources with all its neighbors. It has a problem with Iran regarding the Helmand Waterway. Although there is an agreement between Afghanistan and Iran, in practice Iran indirectly objected to the agreement and did not act in accordance with the agreement. Likewise, the Central Asian states did not comply with the agreement on the Amu Darya Waterway after the collapse of the USSR. Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan made unilateral projects against the 1958 Treaty.

In addition, Turkmenistan and Iran unilaterally carried out the Friendship Project regarding the Harirud-Murghab Waterway. Pakistan, on the other hand, has studies on generating hydroelectric power and agricultural irrigation on the Kabul Waterway.

After New Taliban Regime, several ongoing processes toward bilateral and regional cooperation between Afghanistan and its neighbors are adversely affected.

## **7. A REGION-SPECIFIC HYDROPOLITICS IS REQUIRED**

Water is more important to Afghanistan than any mineral or other natural resource. Population growth, urban expansion, more intensive agriculture, and prospective mining operations will all require more water that is under the effects of climate change.

All neighboring countries of Afghanistan shouldn't restrict Afghanistan's development of water resources. Preventing Afghanistan from developing agricultural and energy projects on its transboundary rivers will lead to long-term instability in both Afghanistan and the region.

Currently, there are both economic and hydro political challenges for Afghanistan to develop its water projects. To eliminate these problems, innovative hydropolitics in this region is needed. However, it may take a long time for recognition of the Taliban Regime by the international system and official talks to begin between Afghanistan and neighboring states. Prolonging this period will increase instability in the region.

In this case, an urgent, short, medium, and long-term international assistance plan for water and food security is required for the region. Failure to follow this plan will adversely affect peace and stability in the region and will lead to an increase in mass migration from Afghanistan.

Creating applicable solutions to water development and management issues is urgent in terms of food security in Afghanistan. One way of reaching this goal could be developing more projects on each of Afghanistan's transboundary river basins. This need to be a joint effort of Afghanistan and its neighbors, with financial support from the international community that seems to be difficult in near future.

If the international community doesn't involve in the situation water-related national policy measures of Taliban Governance won't take the interests of neighboring countries into account. This will raise the political stress among riparian states.

Failure to reach this goal, on the other hand, will contribute to heightened regional instability and limit the prospects for providing basic needs to millions of people in the region

Confidence-building and mutual trust between Afghanistan and the international community as well as riparian states may take a long time. This can limit the development of its water potential and may lead to severe water and food security crises in Afghanistan. This requires a third-party involvement in this situation with an innovative visioner international aid program and a new region-specific hydropolitics approach.

The international community needs to think about Afghanistan's water resources development to avoid more severe water and food crises and mass migration. It should be noted that Afghanistan and the region would greatly benefit from increased water resources development efforts in a regional context, rather than a merely national context.



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## **Biography**



Dursun Yıldız is a hydropolitics expert and Director of the Hydropolitics Academy Association located in Ankara-Turkey. He is a civil engineer and used to be Deputy Director at State Hydraulic Works in Turkey; completed hydro informatics post-graduate course at the IHE in Delft, Technical training program in USBR-USA and a master's degree in Hydropolitics at the Hacettepe University-Turkey. He has over 5 years of teaching experience in some Turkish Universities and now works as head of his own Hydro Energy & Strategy consulting company located in Ankara. He has published several international articles and 15 Books. He received the Most Successful Researcher Award on International Water Issues from the Turkish Agricultural Association in 2008 and from the Central Union of Irrigation Cooperatives in 2016. He is also awarded the Outstanding Service to the Profession award in 2021.

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