Transboundary Hydro Politics; Cross Border Implications of Natural Resource Management

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Small summary: transboundary hydro politics in Iran, Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Category: Analysis

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The Middle East region as a whole suffers from unfavorable demographic trends, droughts and decreasing quantities of fresh water. Climate change is a global problem and the prognosis for the Middle East includes rising temperatures, decreasing precipitation which will intensify evaporation of surface water while slowing down the renewal of groundwater. Predictions are that the consequences for economic growth, social stability and food security are severe. It is therefore of importance that national governments formulate an adequate response to the challenge of tackling the water management issue. So far, this has not been the case.

When looking at the Iraqi context, one sees many growing pressures on water resources including population growth and increased water demands for agricultural and industrial uses. Changes in land use, climate variability and climate change also feature. There are also strategic problems that make formulating policy and strategy planning difficult. Iraq is in a position of strategic disadvantage with regard to water supply. It is therefore highly dependent on first Turkey and, to a lesser, yet important extent on Iran for its water reserves. In addition, the Kurdistan region of Iraq serves as the transit zone for Iranian water to the Iraqi heartlands. The government of Iraq has a tensed relation with both Iran and the KRI, and transboundary water flows have become an important security issue, yet inadequately acknowledged as such, in the tense understandings of cooperation between the three political entities.

**The hierarchy of regional water supply**

The Euphrates and Tigris rivers are the fertile lifeline of Iraq, providing the majority of water supply. The twin rivers make up for the Tigris–Euphrates river system which has its sources originating in the Armenian Highlands of eastern Turkey after which they flow via Syria through Iraq into the Persian Gulf. Iraq has the relative disadvantage of being geographically located at the downstream and therefore is highly dependent on the surrounding countries to have its share of the water pie.
North Eastern Iraq is the entry point for three important rivers originating in Iran. The Alwand, Sirwan and Lower Zap run through the Kurdistan Region and join the Tigris River in Iraq. Iran has its own concerns with regard to decreasing water supplies. Over the years, the global reach of climate change has not left Iran untouched as is, among others, illustrated by the dramatic reduction of its rivers water inflow and the subsequent arid lands and environmental degradation.\(^1\) However, to bring down Iran’s water concerns to climate change only, is a miscalculation. Kaveh Madani, former deputy head of Iran’s department of Environment has argued that Iran suffers a structural symptom-based management paradigm. While ignoring the three main causes of its current water crisis; (1) rapid population growth and inappropriate spatial population distribution; (2) inefficient agriculture sector; and (3) mismanagement and thirst for development, the Iranian government is focusing on curing the problems symptoms rather than addressing the root causes.\(^2\) In trying to reverse effects of climate deterioration, the Islamic Republic has embarked on massive water planning initiatives. The most recent statistics available show that as of 2011, 541 large and small dams had been built, 135 were under construction and 546 were in the planning phase.\(^3\) These water planning practices have aimed to provide fertile conditions for vast area’s in Iran, however, these projects have dramatic effects on central and southern parts of Iraq that suffer severely from the interrupted water flows. During the summer months, the Basra protests—which have spread to Wasit, Maysan, Dhi Qar, and Karbala provinces—resulted mainly from an energy crisis. The dependence of the Basra province on electricity from Iran turned problematic once Iran stopped electricity exports to the region after the American decision to resume sanctions. The lack of cooling devices and potable water during the summer, sparked popular protests.\(^4\)

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However, the Iranian pursuit of interests that cross national borders into Iraq are not limited to water only and Iraqi citizens recognize this. The protests that initially broke out over Iraq grievances with regard to lack of basic services such as water and electricity, turned into a revolt against the emerging increase of Iranian influence in Iraq.

The KRI as a transit zone for the cycle of water interdependency

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq is the entry point for the water flows from Iran. Although it is blessed with large groundwater reserves, it highly depends on water supply from the rivers shared with Iran. With these water flows under increasing stress due to changing demographics, dam building and drought, localized water shortages are provoking tensions between the already fragile working relationship between Kurdish and Iraqi leaders but also between indigenous Kurds and the internally displaced people and refugees in Iraqi Kurdistan. It has been estimated that Kurdistan hosts approximately 2,250,000 IDPs and refugees fleeing war and destruction in Syria and Iraq which has increased the burden on water demands. A 2014 report by the UN High Commission for Refugees found poor water conditions in displaced persons camps, and household surveys indicated that only between 25-59 percent had enough drinking water.  

Resource Management & Decent frameworks for cooperation

Governments need solid institutions in order to manage their water resources in a responsible way. The most important obstacle is that a decent framework for cooperation is missing. Iran is not a party to the 1979 UN Watercourses Convention or any other non-navigational international watercourse conventions. The Iraqi government has so far not been able to make serious efforts to address the water concerns. The Kurdistan region of Iraq is an integral part of Iraq and is equally unable to independently deal with the

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international concerns of Iraq; as external water supply and the status of riparian state is the exclusive domain of the Iraqi federal government.\textsuperscript{7}

However, it’s not only the lack of Kurdish sovereignty or Baghdad’s neglect that hinders domestic water policies. While the Baghdad central government is preoccupied with its state security agenda while building political and economic institutions, the KRG suffers from financial problems because of the devastating aftermath of the 2017 referendum for independence and an economic policy largely depending on oil revenues currently suffering under Baghdad restrictions and recent shifts in regional trade preferences. Both Baghdad and Erbil are facing internal political divisions and internal and external threats. Water, therefore, doesn’t have priority neither in Baghdad, nor on the KRG’s agenda. Although the KRG shares juridical responsibility with the central government in Bagdad, the recent shift to an economy that is more reliant on water-intensive agriculture might push responsible water management further down on the list of priorities.\textsuperscript{8}

This illustrates that transboundary water problems in the Middle East are hardly limited to water quantity and quality anymore. These issues are intrinsically woven into the political fabric of the region. The relative position among states with regard to the degree and origin of water supply, the lack of policies, managing and monitoring capacities in combination with increasing demographic pressure and demand, exacerbate crises in the already conflictual relations between states in the region. In recent decades, military security and the concerns of trying to uphold a fragile government have been a priority for Iraq and has showed that securitizing non- military issues is a very difficult task for a developing country.\textsuperscript{9}

**Water issues as a catalyst for interregional political interference**

The Kurdish, Iranian and Iraqi internal concerns are highly interlinked among others, through the shared water resources. All three entities have their own local concerns in providing their

\textsuperscript{7} https://www.newsecuritybeat.org/2018/05/watershed-moment-iraki-kurdistan-subnational-hydropolitics-regional-stability/

\textsuperscript{8} Abdulrahman, S.A., 2017, Natural resources in Kurdistan and the legitimacy of their exploitation by the regional authority: Water, oil and gas. International Journal of Environmental Studies, 74(6), 1013–1030.

population with potable and household water while trying to obtain a level of food self-sufficiency by meeting conditions to incentivize the agricultural sector. These pressing socio economic dimensions of water lead to a further deterioration of eco systems vital for a country’s viability. The popular protests in both Iraq and Iran illustrate that the efforts undertaken, until now, fall short. Among the grievances articulated by the population, the lack of basic services such as electricity and water occurs as a prominent concern. The water issue, which is traditionally more pressing in the luring hot summer months is a yearly reoccurring theme has, yet, less to do with a temporary shortage than with structural flaws in national and regional water policies. The Iran- Iraq connection manifests itself in various ways, economic links, Iranian military presence on Iraqi territory and social cultural links between religious leaders and groups. The water issue, is there for perhaps better perceived as a catalyst with regard to of the hierarchy of relations between the three political entities and the national approach to governance and water management in particular.

Transboundary water resource do, however, have the potential to strengthen dialogue, common benefits and assistance in economic and environmental development. It can play an important role in improving state relations. In addition, civil society in Iran, Iraq and Kurdistan is closely interconnected, as it shares a wide variety of similar concerns with their cross-border peers. Responsible water management that results in better conditions for the people on the ground, will most likely contribute to a certain level of trust. If a degree of regional identification can emerge as a result, the steps towards forming a pluralistic security community will be much more realistic.10

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