



PERSPECTIVES

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Iran Struggles with Potentially Explosive Environmental Crisis

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Iranian leaders are struggling, three months after anti-government protests swept the Islamic Republic, to ensure that environmental issues that helped spark a popular uprising in Syria in 2011 leading to a brutal civil war don't threaten the clergy's grip on power.

Like Syria, Iran has been suffering a drought that has affected much of the country for more than a decade, with [precipitation](#) dropping to its lowest level in half a century. Environmental concerns have figured prominently in protests in recent years, often in regions populated by ethnic minorities like Azeris and Iranian Arabs.

Unrest among ethnic minorities, who account for almost half of Iran's population, have taken on added significance of late. Iran has reason to fear both Saudi Arabia's activist crown prince, Muhammad bin Salman, and US President Donald Trump, whose antipathy towards the Islamic Republic has been bolstered by the appointment of hardliner John Bolton as his national security advisor.

Bolton has called for regime change in Iran, aligning himself with a controversial exile opposition group, while Prince Muhammad is believed to have tacitly endorsed the stirring up of unrest among Iran's ethnic minorities even if he has yet to decide whether to adopt subversion as a policy. Iran has repeatedly accused Saudi Arabia in the past year of supplying weapons and explosives to restive groups like the Baluch and the Kurds.

Yet, concern about environmental degradation and its potential political fallout goes beyond fear that it could facilitate interference by external powers.

Demonstrators in the province of Isfahan last month clashed with security forces after they took to the streets to [protest water shortages](#). The protest occurred some three months after Iran was wracked by weeks of anti-government demonstrations.

The protest was the latest in a series of expressions of discontent. Anger at [plans in 2013 to divert water](#) from Isfahan province sparked clashes with police. The [Isfahan Chamber of Commerce](#) reported a year later that the drying out of the Zayandeh Roud river basin had deprived some 2 million farmers – 40% of the basin’s local population – of their income.

“Over 90% of (Iran’s) population and economic production are located in areas of high or very high water stress. This is two to three times the global average in percentage terms, and, in absolute numbers, it represents more people and more production at risk than any other country in the Middle East and North Africa,” [Al-Monitor](#) quoted Claudia Sadoff, director general of the Sri Lanka-based International Water Management Institute, as saying.

A [panel of retired US military officers](#) noted in December that “since the 1979 revolution, the per capita quantity of Iran’s renewable water supplies has dropped by more than half, to a level commonly associated with the benchmark for water stress. Even more troubling, in large swaths of the country, demand for fresh water exceeds supply a third of the year. Fourteen years of drought have contributed to the problem, as has poor resource management, including inefficient irrigation techniques, decentralized water management, subsidies for water-intensive crops like wheat, and dam building. As a result, parts of the country are experiencing unrest related to water stress.”

By identifying water as one of the country’s foremost problems, the government recognized that mismanagement leading to acute water shortages risks becoming a symbol of its inability to efficiently deliver public goods and services.

The government has sought to tackle the issue by promoting reduced water consumption and water conservation, halting construction of dams, combatting evaporation by building underground water distribution networks, introducing water meters in agriculture, encouraging farmers to opt for less water-intensive crops, multiplying the number of treatment plants, and looking at desalination as a way of increasing supply.

With agriculture the main culprit in Iran’s inefficient use of water, Iranian officials fear that the crisis will accelerate migration from the countryside to

urban centers incapable of catering to the migrants and, in turn, increase popular discontent.

A [US study](#) suggested in 2015 that decades of unsustainable agricultural policies in Syria; drought in the northeastern agricultural heartland of the country; economic reforms that eliminated food and fuel subsidies; significant population growth; and failure to adopt policies that mitigate climate change exacerbated grievances about unemployment, corruption, and inequality that exploded in 2011 in anti-government protests in Syria.

The Syrian government's determination to crush the protest rather than engage with the protesters sparked the country's devastating war, currently the world's deadliest conflict.

"We're not arguing that the drought, or even human-induced climate change, caused the uprising. What we are saying is that the long-term trend, of less rainfall and warmer temperatures in the region, was a contributing factor, because it made the drought so much more severe." said [Colin Kelley](#), one the study's authors.

"The uprising has...to do with the government's failure to respond to the drought, and with broader feelings of discontent in rural areas, and the growing gap between rich and poor, and urban and rural areas during the 2000s, than with the drought itself," added [Middle East water expert Francesca de Chatel](#).

Adopting a different emphasis, de Chatel argued that demonstrations in Syria, despite the drought, would not have erupted without the wave of protests that by then had already swept the presidents of Tunisia and Egypt and that subsequently toppled the leaders of Libya and Yemen.

She asserted further that the protest movement-turned-war in Syria would not "have persisted without input and support from organized groups in Syria who had been planning for this moment for years and certainly since before 2006 or the start of the drought."

For Iranian leaders, the threat is real irrespective of the difference in emphasis between Kelly and de Chatel. Former [Iranian agriculture minister Issa Kalantari](#) warned in 2015 that left unresolved, the water crisis would force 50 million Iranians to migrate within the next 25 years. In other words, the environmental crisis that drives migration and unemployment and fuels discontent risks political upheaval.

Similarly, multiple groups and external powers have for years contemplated regime change in Tehran. The issues that were at the core of the initial protests in Syria in 2011 – unemployment, corruption, and inequality – were at the heart of Iranian anti-government demonstrations in December and January.

Despite a renewed focus on the water crisis, the government's Achilles Heel could prove to be its tendency to shoot the messenger. Environmentalists increasingly find themselves in the firing line.

In January, authorities arrested [Kavous Seyed-Emami](#), a dual Iranian-Canadian national who directed the Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation, as well as six other environmentalists. It asserted two weeks later that Seyed-Emami had committed suicide in jail after confessing to being a spy for the US and Israel.

Three more environmentalists were arrested a month later, and [Seyed-Emami's wife](#) was prevented from leaving Iran.

State TV subsequently reported that Seyed-Emami and his colleagues had told Iran's enemies that the country could no longer maintain domestic agriculture production because of water shortages, and needed to import food.

Said [Saeed Leylaz](#), a Tehran-based economist and political analyst: "Public opinion has become sensitized to environmental issues. So the government may see the organizations and institutions who work on environmental issues as problematic."

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