



Iran's Water Crisis Could Be A Political Earthquake

August 9, 2021 **Ilan I. Berman** *The Hill*

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Economic Sanctions; Energy Security; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Resource Security; Iran; Middle East

The Iranians are thirsty. In the past few weeks, thousands have taken to the streets in cities and towns throughout the Islamic Republic to protest the country's deepening hydrological crisis — and the Iranian regime's chronic mishandling of it. Beginning in mid-July in the oil-rich province of Khuzestan, protests broke out over water shortages brought about by deepening drought conditions and longstanding governmental mismanagement. Since then, the unrest has spread throughout the country.

The protestors have a lot to be angry about. In Khuzestan alone, more than 700 villages are now said to have difficulty accessing water, and many residents are forced to rely on governmental water deliveries by truck. But the problem is bigger still. According to official tallies from the Iranian government, at least 110 cities throughout the country have been forced to implement some form of water rationing or suffered disruptions this summer alone.

These conditions are a reflection of a deeper and more longstanding malaise. Decades of outdated agricultural and irrigation systems, coupled with poor administration and even worse resource allocation, have created a water crisis that is now national in scope. The result, according to Kaveh Madani of Yale University, is that Iran "is essentially water bankrupt," with demand far outstripping available supply. Simply put, "Iran has been using its water resources unsustainably."

It's a problem that experts have been warning about for years. Back in 2018, Mohammad Hossein Shariatmadar, the head of Iran's national center for strategic agriculture and water management, warned that the Islamic Republic "is only five years away from an all-encompassing water disaster as a result of five decades of mismanagement."

That same year, 18 lawmakers from water-poor provinces in central Iran resigned *en masse* in a show of protest over the increasingly inequitable distribution of resources within the country. In an open letter, the parliamentarians demanded that the government take a more active role in ensuring that the country's various regions each receive an equitable share of water — showcasing how water had become a distinct issue in Iranian domestic politics.

And in 2019, the World Resources Institute, a top environmental think tank headquartered in Washington, D.C., ranked Iran as one of the world's most "water stressed" nations. According to the WRI study, the Islamic Republic consumes some 80 percent of its available water resources every year. This situation, WRI warned, means that "even small dry shocks — which are set to increase due to climate change — can produce dire consequences."

Those consequences are now playing out on the streets of Tehran and other cities, as Iranians publicly express their outrage. For its part, the Iranian regime has responded predictably. More than a hundred protesters have reportedly been arrested to date, and some have been killed in clashes with government forces. The Iranian regime also moved quickly to disrupt telecommunications and the internet, relying on lessons learned from successfully suppressing earlier rounds of domestic protests over the past several years.

Yet there's good reason to think that the current protests might end up being more than just a passing inconvenience for Iran's ayatollahs. For years, Iran's assorted opposition groups have been hampered by political disagreements and ideological divisions, which have prevented them from coalescing into a sustainable movement. This has begun to change of late; earlier this year, under the banner of "No To The Islamic Republic," a new civic campaign appeared to unify hundreds of activists, political personalities and cultural figures in opposition to the current regime.

Now, water could help keep these disparate forces aligned. That's because the looming resource crisis created by decades of official mismanagement is a truly universal problem — one that affects every strata of Iranian society, even those that sat out previous rounds of anti-regime activism.

Quite simply, water scarcity has provided a common rallying point for all Iranians, as well as a shared grievance against the Iranian regime.

It is one that authorities in Tehran might find difficult to dispel.