

## Afghanistan's Water Fight with Iran

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### Summary

*Efforts to address Iran-Afghanistan disputes on shared waters will require active diplomatic engagement, and careful internal and transboundary water management. Bilateral tensions and clashes along their border will worsen the drought faced by the two countries.*

In May 2023, shooting broke out near a border post between Iran and Afghanistan in which two Iranian border guards and a Taliban fighter were killed and [a few injured](#). The immediate reason for the incident is not apparent, but it occurred amid tensions between the countries over [shared waters](#).

The water disputes between Iran and Afghanistan date back to the 1870s when the British tried to draw the Iran-Afghan border along the main branch of the [Helmand River](#). In 1939, the Iranian government, under Reza Shah Pahlavi, and Mohammad Zahir Shah's regime in Afghanistan signed a water treaty that was never ratified by the [two countries](#). In 1948, on a suggestion from the United States (US), a three-person commission was set up to investigate water-related matters and recommend probable solutions. In March 1950, both countries agreed on three names for the neutral commission – Francisco J Dominguez from Chile, Robert L Lowry from the US and Christopher E Webb from Canada. Called the Helmand River Delta Commission, it offered various suggestions in its report submitted in [February 1951](#). Talks were held between Kabul and Tehran for years before Afghan Prime Minister Mohammad Moussa Shafiq and his Iranian counterpart, Amir Abbas Hoveyda, signed the treaty in March 1973.

Under Article III of the Afghanistan-Iran Helmand River Treaty of 1973, Kabul has to allow 22 cubic metres per second of water flow into Iran. In addition, four cubic metres per second of water are allowed to flow as [“an expression of goodwill”](#). In short, Iran is entitled to receive about 820 cubic metres of water [per year](#). In return, Iran agrees to allow Afghanistan the use the ports of Bandar Abbas and Chabahar without preconditions. The 1973 treaty could not be ratified or [fully implemented](#) because of political developments in the two countries such as a coup in Afghanistan that year, the Iranian revolution in 1979, the landing of the Soviet Army in Afghanistan in 1979 and the rise of the Taliban [in 1995](#).

In 2021, Iran and Afghanistan signed another agreement under which the two sides showed commitment to carry out a new survey of the Helmand catchment area and grant water rights based on the agreement they signed [in 1973](#). Of the total entitlement, in May 2023, Iranian Special Representative and Ambassador to Afghanistan Hassan Kazemi Qomi said that his country received only about [27 million cubic metres](#) of water [last year](#).

Both Afghanistan and Iran suffer from acute water scarcity, leading to consecutive years of droughts. The 2018 drought in Afghanistan affected 22 of the country's 34 provinces, displaced more than 260,000 people and left around 10 million facing a [food crisis](#). In 2021, 30 per cent of Afghanistan was exposed to severe drought, 50 per cent to serious drought and another 20 per cent to [moderate drought](#). In 2023, Afghanistan faced another serious [drought](#).

In late 2022 and January 2023, about 270 Iranian cities and towns witnessed acute water shortages. According to Iran Water Resources Management Company, the total water reserves stood at about 18 billion cubic metres, and 63 per cent of the country's dams were [empty](#). In 2022, there were protests over water, due to increased droughts and the government's mismanagement of water resources. The security authorities used violence and arrests to intimidate [the protestors](#). Many major water sources in Iran are shrinking and drought has also stoked migration from the rural areas to the cities.

Dams on the Afghanistan side of the Helmand River are the centre of the water tensions between Kabul and Tehran. Inaugurated in March 2021, the Kamal Khan Dam in the Chahar Burjak district of Nimroz province is capable of storing 52 million cubic metres of water, irrigating more than 180,000 hectares of land and generating nine megawatts (MW) of [electricity](#). While inaugurating the Kamal Khan Dam, then-Afghan President Ashraf Ghani stressed the Helmand Treaty of 2021 and underlined that Tehran should provide oil in exchange for [more water](#). In January 2022, to deepen its ties with Iran, the Taliban released water from the Kamal Khan dam into the arid southwestern region of Iran. The Taliban's decision to increase water flows to Iran outraged many in [Afghanistan](#). In 2011, a captured Taliban commander, Mullah Dadullah, claimed he received training in Iran and was offered US\$50,000 (S\$67,478) to blow up the Kamal Khan Dam and sabotage other infrastructure projects in [the region](#). The second phase of the Kajaki Dam was inaugurated in July 2022. It provides 100 MW of [power](#). Located in the Kajaki district of Helmand province, the Kajaki Dam was commissioned in 1953 but only fully completed in [2022](#). Iran also considers the Kajaki Dam as a barrier to its water supply. A few days after the recent border clash, Qomi said that the Taliban had given consent to Iranian officials to visit and assess the water level behind the [Kajaki Dam](#). He believed that it would provide the "[ground for the release of the water](#)" to Iran. Finally, there is the Grishk Dam which was commissioned in the 1940s. Iran has accused Afghanistan of using the dam to curtail its [water share](#). In 2005, 20 Taliban fighters were captured while attempting to blow up the [Grishk Dam](#).

Due to climate change, Afghanistan and Iran are likely to witness more severe droughts. To address the situation, Afghanistan and Iran need to build good hydrological infrastructure to manage their waters. Decades of war and political instability, compounded by climate change, have destroyed the hydrological infrastructure [in Afghanistan](#). Second, although never ratified, the 1973 treaty has some solution to the Iran-Afghanistan water tensions. In accordance with [Article XI](#) and Articles 8 and 9 of Protocol 1 of the 1973 treaty, in the case of extreme drought, the Commissioners of the two parties can enter into talks and formulate urgent plans to deal with the condition. The Joint Committee, mentioned in the treaty, can hold regular meetings and take stock of the water situation. Then, as mentioned in [Article IX and Articles 2-7 of Protocol Number 2 of the 1973 Treaty](#), differences in the interpretation or application of the provisions in the treaty should be diplomatically

negotiated. They could seek help from a mutually-agreed third party. In case the two processes fail, Kabul and Tehran could opt for arbitration. However, given Iran and Afghanistan's political position in the world, it is least likely that the two countries will be keen to seek help from a third party or opt for arbitration. Hence, greater bilateral engagement is needed to address the issues of transboundary waters for the mutual benefit of people in the Helmand basin region.

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