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OPINION

Water Security in Jordan is Crucial to Maintaining Stability in the Country

By Rabiya Jaffery

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A child from the Za'atari Refugee Camp in Jordan raised a flag to represent Goal 6, Safe Water and Sanitation. Credit: UNICEF Jordan/badran

AMMAN, Jordan, Oct 1 2020 (IPS) -

Jordan is one of the driest countries in the world, raking the fifth most water-stressed nation in an analysis by the World Resources Institute.

The middle eastern country gets 60% of its water from aquifers that lie in a dozen groundwater basins. And 10 of them are currently being pumped at a deficit.

“Not all aquifers are renewable and the ones that are storing rainwater that is released by springs,” says George Stacey, an analyst working with Norvergence, an environmental advocacy NGO. “No aquifer holds an endless amount of water and Jordan is extracting more water each year is getting replenished by rain.”

Three-quarters of Jordan is desert and desert steppe and is one of the countries that receive the least amount of annual precipitation.

“Climate change has made Jordan drier and the coming decades will see temperatures rising further and rain becoming more unpredictable,” adds Stacey. “Water scarcity is only going to get much worse in the coming years.”

And while rising temperatures and reducing rainfall reduce the available water supply, Jordan's demand for water is increasing due to a rise in the country's population as it continues to take in refugees from nearby countries.

Jordan became a state in 1946 and has since absorbed millions of refugees – mainly from Palestine, Iraq, and Syria as well as a number of Yemenis, Sudanese, and Somalis. There are currently 750, 000 refugees registered in Jordan but government figures estimate that the total number, including unregistered migrants, exceeds a million and excludes those who have gained citizenship.

“Water scarcity in Jordan will affect both refugees and Jordanians,” says Lilly Carlisle, from United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) – Jordan. “The increase in population and resulting increase in water demand have caused enormous pressure on the limited water resources and created a chronic poor water supply and demand imbalance.”

Although some government players have stated that the large influx of refugees in the country is worsening water scarcity in the country and opinions in many amongst the public and the media have implied that refugees threaten Jordan's water security, experts disagree.

“The vast majority of refugees in Jordan come from Syria and from the Southern Governorate of Dar'a. With similar cultures and availability of water to where they now live in Northern Jordan, refugees are well aware of the need for water conservation,” says Carlisle.

“Added to this, over the past ten years of the Syrian conflict and refugee crisis, UNHCR and partners have enacted various campaigns to promote water conservation.”

In Zaatari Camp, for example, UNHCR has been running hydroponics projects since 2017 to educate refugees about water consumption within agriculture and establish new practices among refugees working in the agricultural sector to reduce water usage.

Roughly 45% of the water used in Jordan goes to agriculture and one of the key points on Jordan's 2008–22 National Water Strategy has been efforts to stop over-pumping groundwater through reducing the amount of water that is given for free to farmers as well as water theft.

Water theft has been a regular problem in the country and, in 2013, the Ministry of Water and Irrigation launched a dedicated campaign to crack down on water violations. Between 2013 and 2017, over 30,000 violations on water mains and resources had been prevented and millions of cubic meters of stolen water have been retrieved.

Carlisle stated that the UNHCR is jointly tackling with the Jordanian Government and partners to “ensure that all people who live in Jordan, refugees and Jordanians alike, continue to have access and are aware of steps they have to take towards water conservation”.

Other solutions that the government is looking into include desalinated water from the Red Sea, which makes up 27 kilometers of coastline in Jordan, but the process requires a high amount of energy and the country lacks the necessary oil and gas deposits.

The country has, however, been in the talks with Israel for a joint mega-project, the Red Sea-Dead Sea Water Conveyance Project, that would bring desalinated water from the Red Sea to Jordan and dump the brine into the Dead Sea through a canal to stabilize the shrinking lake.

The agreement for the joint project was first signed by Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority, in 2013 but the work has been stalled several times. When completed, the Red-to-Dead canal would contribute roughly 10% of the country's water needs.

However, environmentalists are concerned about the damage to coral reefs and other species in the Red Sea and Dead Sea if the project is completed.

“Water scarcity results in food shortage, internal migration, and can create conflicts between groups,” says Stacey. “These conflicts can also pore out to nearby countries – this is why ensuring water security in Jordan a matter of regional security.”

In 2017, a report by the Atlantic Council highlighted how water scarcity had been an indirect factor that lead to increasing tensions in, both, Yemen and Syria.

“The regional and international community needs to come together to work on sustainable solutions to Jordan's water crisis to maintain the relative stability it has in a region that has seen multiple conflicts in the past few decades,” says Stacey.

“The country is already facing many major economic and political challenges and if the government does not adapt and implemented an effective policy to solve the water crisis, the situation will significantly worsen.”

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Social frustrations about the country's economic crisis, stemming from the IMF-backed austerity adopted by the government to tackle the country's growing debt, have increased in the past few years. In 2018, as increasing youth unemployment and price hikes, and also resulted in a series of protests.

<https://www.unicef.org/jordan/stories/water-security-critical-issue-children-jordan-today-and-future-generations>
