

Iran, Turkey dam projects drying up Iraq's water



Dubai: Iraq, the land of the ancient Assyrian and Sumerian civilisations, had, until recent years, abundant water sources. But, not anymore.


Its neighbours, including its ally Iran, are carrying out ambitious plans that leave Iraq with less water day by day.

At present, the country faces a growing shortage of water due to many factors, including several dam projects built by Iran and Turkey on the two main rivers — the Euphrates and Tigris.

“In summary, there is no agreement among the countries on sharing the water resources of the two rivers,” said Fadel Al Zubi, UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO).

“Each of neighbouring country whether Turkey, Iran or Syria, controls the water flow into Iraq according to its interests, needs and circumstances without adhering to any quota or consideration,” Al Zubi told *Gulf News* in an interview.

At the end, “the one that pays the price is always the country where the river ends — in this case Iraq,” he said.

  **The origin of the problem is “basically there is no agreement (to share water resources) and everything depends on ad hoc diplomatic moves.”**

- Fadel Al Zubi | FAO office head in Iraq

Iran's actions are of particular concern to Iraq, according to the Iraqi Deputy Minister of Water Resources Mahdi Rasheed.

“Iran is trying to divert the course of the (Tigris) river. The amount we currently receive will be cut,” he told Arab media.

It is estimated that between 20 and 30 per cent of the Tigris' annual flow originates in Iran via two rivers: Sirwan and Alwant.

But the construction projects by Iran on the Sirwan has affected the water reaching the Tigris.

The Daryan Dam — expected to be completed in 2018 — is expected to reduce the water flow in Sirwan River by up to 60 per cent, which will affect tens of thousands of people in central and southern Iraq, according to the “Save The Tigris and Iraqi Marshes Campaign”.

However, a 47km-long tunnel being dug near the dam constitutes “the biggest concern for Iraqi officials” as it would completely divert the river into Iran.

In total, Iran has constructed some 14 projects on all the tributaries of the Sirwan River inside Iran, according to experts and studies.

Tehran has also constructed projects on the tributaries that are feeding the Dukan Dam in northern Iraq.

The Tigris and Euphrates are considered the main water resources in Iraq.

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- Mahdi Rasheed | Iraqi Deputy Minister of Water Resources

They account for nearly 98 per cent of the country's surface water, studies show.

The 2,940km-long Euphrates River streams about 1,000km in Iraq, while the 1,718km-long Tigris River runs for nearly 1,300km within the Iraqi borders.

Total annual flow of the two rivers is between 80 and 84.2 billion cubic metres (BCM).

Nearly 65 BCM comes from Turkey, 11 BCM from Iran, 6.8 BCM from Iraq and

0.5 BCM from Syria, according to a study titled “Challenges of Water Resources in Iraq”.

A third river, Shatt Al Arab, also exists in Iraq and it is formed by the joining of Tigris and Euphrates in the southern part of the country.

The total length of Shatt Al Arab is 192km, and there “are more tributaries that join the Shatt al Arab, most importantly the Karkheh and the Karun Rivers”, which both originate from Iran, the study said.

Baghdad has sought to negotiate with its neighbours about their water policies, and the talks aim to find common solutions to the expected water crisis in the summer.

98% of Iraq’s water comes from Tigris, Euphrates

The country’s climate is arid and dry. Its summers are hot and its winters are cold.

Rainfall has dropped due to climate changes, “which accordingly has parched agricultural lands” in Iraq, said Al Zubi.

Moreover, the cycles of terrorism Iraq has gone through and still does had, according to experts, “destroyed the water installations in the provinces hit by terrorism”, including Baghdad, Salah Al Deen, Nineveh, Al Anbar, Diyala and Kirkuk.

The water crisis is expected to increase in Iraq when Turkey starts work on the “Elesso” dam.

However, Ankara has accepted Baghdad’s request to delay work on the dam — which was originally supposed to begin in March — to the summer.

By then, the snow will start melting and this will help Iraq replenish its water reservoirs.

Filling the new Turkish dam could take between seven months and four years, depending on rainfall, studies show.

82b cubic metres is annual flow of the two rivers

Iraq has traditionally been a water wealthy country.

There are no recent figures on water consumption in Iraq. However in 2002, Iraq's water withdrawal per capita was estimated at 2,525m³/inhabitant/year which was much higher than the world average of 506m³.

In 2007, the levels significantly dropped to 1,288m³ while the global average slightly rose to 549.3 m³.

"I am not trying to place blame. Each of these countries has its own circumstances, development and irrigation projects. Turkey and Iran are affected by global climate changes, and its own sources of water are decreasing," said Al Zubi.

The origin of the problem is "basically there is no agreement (to share water resources) and everything depends on ad hoc diplomatic moves," he said.

Elaborating on possible solutions to Iraq's water problem, Al Zubi said FAO is working with Iraq to introduce modern irrigation techniques, "which uses less water and gives higher products".

Fixing a water pump to irrigate is "a luxury that we can't enjoy any more", he said.

Proper water management and spreading more awareness are equally important.

"We (FAO) also offers assistance to establish Water Users Associations, where members help in finding the best usage of the available water, which could reach the point of desalinating water."

Desalination in Iraq does not mean establishing giant stations near the sea to make its water drinkable. However, it does mean introducing simple techniques to desalinate the available water, which has an increasing percentage of salinity due to the fact of decreasing quantities of water.

For example, the water of a well which turned to be brackish water could benefit from a simple technology in order to use the water for irrigation.

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