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ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ

THE SILENT WAR "AFGHANISTAN AND IRAN WATER CRISIS"

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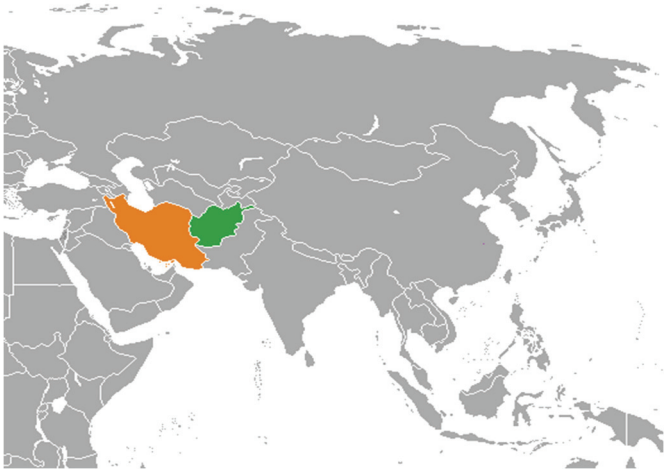
ABSTRACT: Just as the fox's skin is the enemy of his life, so the abundant waters and seas of Afghanistan are also the enemy of the life of this land. The life of many parts of Iran and even Pakistan depends on the flowing waters of Afghanistan. The history of the water problems between these two countries is as old as the historical history of both countries. The same water problems between the two countries could have become more obvious and problematic when Iran was not ready to recognize the independence of Afghanistan. In order to take water from Afghanistan due to the repeated pressure and threats, Iran had to reluctantly recognize the independence of Afghanistan at the Paris Conference. Despite all these different views, fortunately there has been no direct war or conflict due to this rivalry between Iran and Afghanistan for the centuries-old water problem. However, indirectly disruptive actions from Iran have been realized and observed many times. Afghanistan until 2018 believed that by controlling its outgoing waters towards Iran, it was able to control the behavior and political decisions of Iran in the field of selling cheap oil and accepting immigrants.

Keywords: Afghanistan; Iran; Water Dispute; Rivers, Helmand.

SESSİZ SAVAŞ "AFGANİSTAN VE İRAN SU KRİZİ"

ÖZ: Tilkinin derisi nasıl can düşmanı ise Afganistan'ın bereketli suları ve denizleri de bu toprakların can düşmanıdır. İran'ın ve hatta Pakistan'ın birçok bölgesinin yaşamı Afganistan'ın akan sularına bağlıdır. Bu iki ülke arasındaki su sorunlarının tarihi, her iki ülkenin tarihi kadar eskidir. İki ülke arasındaki aynı su sorunları, İran Afganistan'ın bağımsızlığını tanımaya hazır olmadığında daha belirgin ve sorunlu hâle gelebilirdi. Tekrar tekrar yaşanan baskı ve tehditlerden ötürü Afganistan'dan su almak için, İran Paris Konferansı'nda Afganistan'ın bağımsızlığını isteksizce tanımak zorunda kaldı. Tüm bu farklı görüşlere rağmen, İran ve Afganistan arasında su sorunu nedeniyle yüzyıllardır süren bu rekabet nedeniyle doğrudan bir savaş ve çatışma yaşanmamış, ancak İran'dan dolaylı olarak yıkıcı hareketler birçok kez gerçekleştirilmiş ve gözlemlenmiştir. 2018'e kadar Afganistan, İran'a giden sularını kontrol ederek, İran'ın ucuz petrol satma ve göçmen kabul etme alanındaki davranışlarını ve siyasi kararlarını kontrol edebileceğine inanıyordu.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Afganistan, İran, Su Anlaşmazlığı, Nehirler, Helmand.



Water is an essential component of our economies and is at the center of economic and social development. It is vital to maintain health, grow food, manage the environment and create jobs. Managing water is an important way of achieving efficient and equitable economic growth of the economy. As UNICEF reports from 2000 to 2017 indicate that globally 663 million people live without easy access to clean water and many of these people have to walk long distances to and from their homes to access clean water. UNICEF Report on access to clean water from 2000 to 2017 (https://www.unicef.org/reports/progress-on-drinking-water-sanitation-and-hygiene-2019, Accessed date: 27.10.2021). Access to clean water is an essential matter for all the countries around the world most importantly to the countries facing this issue more than the rest.

Countries like Afghanistan and Iran have always had the water crisis among them. Afghanistan with 63% of its people having access to drinking water and Iran with 70% shows that both countries are in the midst of a full-blown water crisis. Disagreements between Afghanistan and Iran over the sharing of the Helmand River have been brewing since the 'Great Game' of the 19th century. Back then the problem was considered dual – that of border delineation and the respective shares of the two countries in the waters of the Helmand. (Abid,1977: 358-367) Today the problem of transboundary water management fasters beneath the otherwise cordial relationship between Afghanistan and Iran. The points of friction now also encompass the other shared water resource, the Harirod-Murghab basin. At stake are the livelihood of the inhabitants of both basins, the environmental integrity of the region, especially the volatile Sistan wetlands, and the development of hydroelectric power from these shared rivers. The border between Persia (Iran) and Afghanistan was formalized in the period 1872-1935 by a series of third-party arbitrations, stemming from the Treaty of Paris (1857) in which Persia and Afghanistan agreed to refer any dispute between them to Britain for arbitration (at this time Britain controlled large parts of India, including what is now Pakistan). (http://iranicaonline.org Encyclopedia Iranica – Boundaries of Afghanistan, retrieved 16 September 2018).

A series of skirmishes between Afghanistan and Persia in the 1860s prompted Persian king Naser al-Din Shah Qajar to request that the British formalize the Afghan-Persia boundary. A rough delimitation was proposed in 1872 by a committee headed by Sir Frederic John Goldsmith following a line from Banda to Kuh-i-Malik Siah (a hill at the modern Afghanistan-Iran-Pakistan tripoint) via the Helmand River. Both parties eventually accepted this proposal however it was not implemented further at that time (International Boundary Study No. 6 – Afghanistan-Iran Boundary*, 20 June 1961).*

The Goldsmith boundary proved to be inadequate, especially given the shifting of the course of the Helmand, and thus a more precise boundary was drawn up in three sections over the following decades. The northern section by General C.S. MacLean, British consul general for Khorasan and Sīstān, in 1888-91, the southern section by Colonel Sir Henry McMahon in 1903-05, and finally the middle section by Turkey's General Fahrettin Altay in 1934-35.

After each demarcation boundary pillars were erected, leading to a total of 172 pillars being erected in the non-riverine sections of the border. Iran knew from the beginning the importance of Helmand water it was the fear of losing the Helmand Water that prevented Iran from recognizing Afghanistan's independence in 1919. The boundary itself was not disputed after 1935. However, it all took a new turn when Afghanistan decided to build the dam of Kamal Khan on the river in 1936. Kamal Khan Dam is one of the major water management projects in Afghanistan located in the Nimroz province above the Helmand River. The dam project started but because of the 1973 coup in Afghanistan which brought down the monarchy, caused the stoppage of the project. The reason why Iran was always against the building of dams on the Helmand River because eastern parts of Iran, which are fed by Afghanistan water, also face water shortages, and the Iranian government has repeatedly opposed the construction of any dam on the Helmand River, saying that Afghanistan should allow sufficient water to enter Iran. However, in 1939 the Iranian government of Reza Shah Pahlavi and Mohammad Zahir Shah's Afghanistan government signed a treaty on sharing the river's waters, but the Afghans failed to ratify it.

In 1948, another attempt to resolve the dispute began in Washington. Based on an American suggestion, a three-person commission was selected by Iran and Afghanistan to investigate the issue and recommend a settlement. On February 28, 1951, the Helmand River Delta Commission presented its report, recommending that Iran's share of the Helmand waters amount to twenty-two cubic meters per second. However, Iran rejected this report asking for a larger share of water. (Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, "Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950, The Near East, South Asia, Africa," Vol. V, Department of State, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1950v05/d824, retrieved 16 September 2021)

Helmand River

Figure 1: Helmand River on Map

The Helmand River basin is home to more than seven million people. (Dehqan, Palmer and Moloney, 2009: 2)

It is one the longest river in Afghanistan it stretches for 1150 kilometer. It rises in the Hindu Kush mountains about 80 km west of Kabul, passing north of the Unai Pass, in the eastern proximities of Hazarajat, in Behsud, Maidan Wardak, flows west to Daykundi and Uruzgan. It crosses south-west through the desert of Dashti Margo, to the Seistan marshes and the Hamun-i-Helmand lake region around Zabol at the Afghan-Iranian border it is also a primary

source of water in a vast arid region of southwestern Afghanistan and eastern Iran and supports the agricultural economy of the relatively fertile and the western part of the delta is in Iranian territory. Helmand River basin constitutes some 45% of Afghanistan's surface area but the river contributes only around 10% of the country's total water resources (United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). 2008. "Afghanistan's Environment 2008", UN Environment Programme:11).

Of that contribution, some 97% is used in the agricultural sector on the Afghan side of the border and around 80% on the Iranian side. (Deh Yet the amount of irrigated land in the Helmand River Basin is limited by a lack of sufficient dams and reservoirs to control the water flow during dry and wet years. Some farmers have claimed that insufficient water supply encourages them to plant poppy, a hardy crop (Dehqan, Palmer veMoloney, 2009: 4).

After the rejection of the report by Iran in 1951, a long period of renegotiation ensued. Asadullah Allam, the shah's minister of court, wrote in his diaries in 1969 that Afghanistan had offered to provide more water, if Iran would give Afghanistan improved access to the Iranian ports at Chabahar and Bandar Abbas, as well as development assistance (Alikhani, 1991: 23).

Four years later, in 1973, Iranian Prime Minister Amir Abbas Hoveida and Afghan Prime Minister Mohammad Musa Shafiq signed an accord that accepted the flow of water into Iran at twenty-two cubic meters per second (The Afghan-Iranian Helmand River Water Treaty, http://internationalwaterlaw.org/documents/regionaldocs/1973_Helmand_River_Water_Treaty-Afghanistan-Iran.pdf., retrieved 16 September 2021).

In return, Iran agreed to allow the ports of Bandar Abbas and Chabahar to be available to Afghanistan without preconditions. However, this agreement was neither ratified nor fully implemented due to the political development in both countries including a 1973 coup in Afghanistan, and the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan that same year, and finally the first rise of the Taliban in 1995.

Afghan governments have sought to bolster agriculture by constructing irrigation canals and dams in the Helmand valley. Germany and Japan each worked to reconstruct ancient canals for Afghanistan in the 1930s, but their work ended in the aftermath of their defeat in World War II. The Afghan government brought in, the US based firm Morrison-Knudsen in 1946 to build irrigation systems and roads in the southern Helmand-Arghandab valleys. The project was financed with US aid. Half-way through rehabilitating old canals, Morrison-Knudsen suggested that to make the best use of water, a storage dam and reservoir should be built. In an effort to keep costs down, the work was done without first conducting surveys, which turned out to be a "fatal weakness" of the project according to a subsequent study by the US Agency for international Development (A.I.D. Evaluation Special Study No. 18, the Helmand Valley Project in Afghanistan, US Agency for International Development, December 1983. http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/Pnaal028.pdf.).

Arghandab Dam

Figure 2: Arghandab Dam, Helmand, Afghanistan

The 44.2-meter (145 feet) Arghandab Dam, 18 miles northeast of Kandahar, was completed in 1952 with a storage capacity of 388,000 acre-feet of water.

Kajaki Dam

Figure 3: Kajaki Dam, Helmand, Afghanistan

A few months later, in April 1953, the Kajaki Dam, seventy-two miles upstream from Lashkar Gah, was also finished. It created the most important water reservoir in Afghanistan and was built with the objective of providing electricity, water for irrigation, and flood control. As with the Arghandab Dam, appropriate soil and topography studies were not conducted, even though a 1950 United Nations report had cast doubt on the economic soundness of the project and predicted negative environmental effects in the lower valley, including water logging and salinization downstream from the dam. (Whitney, 2006: 23-27) The Impact of the Kajaki Dam has been mixed, since it increased water flow to Iran during the dry season but reduced the flood waters on which pastoralists depend for fertilization (Weinthal, Troell ve Nakayama, 2014). Nevertheless, it is obvious that without the 1973 agreement, the situation would have been much more complicated.

Afghanistan's water supply is derived from rain and melting glaciers. Three out of five of the country's major rivers flow into neighboring countries. The Helmand River is one of two

rivers that flow into Iran; the other river is the Harirod River. Two-thirds of Afghanistan's water capacity of seventy-five billion cubic meters is surface water and the country has the capability to use only 25 to 30% of its river water flow. An essential mitigating feature of the problem over water was that it was not permanent but exacerbated in times of water scarcity and also by lack of political understanding and coordination (Abid,1977: 360).

The dispute between the two countries has attracted some international attention in recent years because the Chabahar port on the Oman Sea is being redeveloped as a base for the transportation of goods to Afghanistan via Iran's Zabol region (Suzuki and Hitoshi, 2006: 8-9).

Afghanistan's water policy towards Iran: water against migrants

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the political leaders of Afghanistan have considered the use of Hirmand water as the "exclusive right" of Afghanistan, while according to Goldsmith's ruling (1872/1285), the borders of the Hirmand delta were on the main branch of the river. Apart from this, Smith's decision is described as cruel, because Colonel McMahon also assigned only one-third of the Hirmand River to the Iranian side. Despite this, Afghanistan has refused to give the same small title during its "political stability" periods.

Colonel McMahon's note of September 25, 1904 indicated that the Afghan government does not accept that there is a dispute over the issue of water sharing; Because he believes that the geographical location makes them the only owners of "All of Hirmand". This approach closes the door to any kind of negotiation regarding water sharing. Former president Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai's statements in Tehran are indicative of a part of Afghanistan's new geopolitical policy towards Iran through multiple blue levers. So that it can be called "water against immigrants" policy. In 2015, he said at the Afghan embassy:

"Kabul is not in a weak position in facing the neighboring countries. Neighboring countries also need Afghanistan. We have not begged Tehran to solve the problem of immigrants. There is no need to beg" (https://www.dw.com, retrieved 25 September 2021).

In these few sentences, Ashraf Ghani has explained a large part of Afghanistan's geopolitical intentions regarding Iran. In simpler words, it seems that Afghanistan is trying to create many challenges in different water areas by building various dams. While Iran's main displeasure is over Hirmand's claim, Ghani has actually used an important geopolitical code and sent a clear threatening message to Iran by challenging the claim of Harirud Water Basin, which supplies water to Khorasan. This code can be interpreted in two ways. First of all: the fate of Hirmand is finished in the eyes of the Afghans, and from now on we will negotiate about Harirud, and if we do not give concessions, we will repeat the experience of Hirmand in Khorasan! And secondly, in addition to Hirmand, a new front has opened in Harirud!

Referring to the "Harirud ", Ghani said*:*

"If the Iranian government does not take action to solve the problem of immigrants, Kabul does not see the need to give effect to Iran's demands regarding Iran's "Haqaba". If Iran continues to deport Afghan immigrants, Afghanistan will cut off all its commercial relations with this country" (https://www.dw.com, retrieved 25 September 2021).

According to the information of the Iranian Statistics Center, 1.98% of Iran's population consists of Afghan immigrants, which has been increasing since 2005. But this amount only represents foreigners who are allowed to stay in Iran. According to the statements of the Minister of Interior in 2015, the number of Afghans living in Iran is 2.5 million, of which only 1 million have temporary residence permits. This amount is more than 4.5% of the total population of the country. In addition, Iran has returned 5 million illegal immigrants to Afghanistan in the last ten years (afghanistan.pdf unfccc.int, retrieved 7 November 2021).

Afghanistan believes that by controlling its outgoing waters towards Iran, it is able to control the behavior and political decisions of Iran in the field of selling cheap oil and accepting

immigrants. Afghanistan's "dam construction policy" has benefited rival countries to a large extent. Countries like Turkey, by signing lucrative contracts with Afghanistan, have undertaken the task of building the dam, and most of the foreign aid to Afghanistan is spent on the construction of the dam on the Hirmand and Harirud roads (aswf.pdf (cawater-info.net, retrieved 17 May 2021).

Afghanistan's water policy (despite its unstable dominance over its political sphere) is influenced by the country's geopolitics. All the rulers of Afghanistan, of all orientations, know that they will be able to control their neighbors through water control.

Afghanistan is a country that is in a geographical bottleneck. The landlockedness of this country and the lack of access to open waters have disrupted its trade relations and made this country geographically dependent on Pakistan and Iran. On the other hand, the dominance of the Pashtuns over the political structure of this country has increased the capacity to fight with Iran.

Conclusion

Every country gets its water from different sources, one of which is flowing rivers. These rivers do not always originate from within a country. These sources of life sometimes travel thousands of kilometers and pass through two or more countries. For this reason, there have been water conflicts between countries for a long time. In a region like the Middle East, which is dry by nature and has become even drier due to climate change, water means prosperity, and no country is willing to give water easily to another.

The geographical location of Iran is such that 26 small and large rivers make up 22% of Iran's borders, but the 5 large rivers Hirmand, Hari River, Arvand River, Etrak and Aras play a vital role for Iran. In the meantime, the conflicts related to Harirud and Hirmand rivers have attracted the attention of international experts more than others. These two rivers flow in the east of Iran and in the neighborhood of Afghanistan and Turkmenistan. All 3 of these countries also have a dry climate and these 2 rivers are of great value to them. Currently, Afghanistan has 70 billion cubic meters of fresh water annually, more than 80% of which flows to neighboring countries. On the other hand, colonial agreements, dry weather, and political tensions within Afghanistan, as well as between our country and Iran, have led to water disputes.

For this reason, these disputes continue to this day. According to international agreements, the water of common rivers must be divided equally between countries, but this division is not always possible. On this basis, the water war between Afghanistan and Iran is one of the reasons that has affected the relationship between the two countries. To solve this problem in the 19th and early 20th centuries, England arbitrated between Iran and Afghanistan, and in the 1950s, America tried to intervene for geopolitical reasons. However, no agreement was reached in this regard and the problem remained technical.

During the next 2 decades, both countries gave little importance to this dispute, because water was not vital for them at that time, but in 1972 this dispute intensified and in 1973 the Hirmand River Treaty was concluded. In this treaty, Iran prioritized international relations over water, and for this reason, it entered the door of reconciliation. But at that time, the Afghan coup happened, however, Kabul officials believe that although this coup prevented the approval of the Hirmand water contract between Iran and Afghanistan, Iran has used its share of 26 cubic meters per second from Hirmand. However, the validity period of this contract has also expired and if Iran wants the water of Hirmand to flow, it must conclude a new contract with the Afghan government and pay the water fee. It is on this basis that the water flow from Hirmand to Hamon Lake has been cut off. In 2010, the "East-West" research institute, by publishing a report on Afghanistan's water resources, emphasized: cooperation between neighbors on water resources is not an option or choice, but the only available way. According to this report, the lack of bilateral or regional agreements in this field poses a serious threat to sustainable development and security in the region.

To conclude our paper, we can argue that Afghanistan has more rivers and water reservoirs but due to the political issues between both countries as Iran claims that Helmand and Harirod rivers should be recognized as shared rivers but on the contrary Afghanistan insists that Helmand and Harirod rivers are inland rivers of Afghanistan. However, Afghanistan has less capability in managing and using these rivers water flows. This indicates that Afghanistan can expect future problems to continue arising with regularity of drought if there is a lack of political will and bilateral coordination to address these underlying issues.

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