

# What Iran and Pakistan Want from the Afghans: Water

By Mujib Mashal / Kabul, edited by Mrs. Cooper & Mrs. Haugan

With a vast, empty desert as a backdrop, the militants recorded the execution of Khan Wali on video. As someone held a camera, the others encircled the condemned man to read out his sentence. “This is not brutality — this is justice,” declared one of the executioners...

What was Khan Wali’s crime? He was protecting one of [Afghanistan](#)’s most important resources: water. Khan Wali led a 60-man semiofficial militia tasked with defending the Machalgho dam in eastern Paktia province. Already two years behind schedule because of security concerns, the dam would irrigate about 16,000 hectares of land and produce 800 KW of electricity once completed. The government had pledged that if Khan Wali held his ground for two months, he and his men would receive weapons and cash. But Khan Wali lasted only 20 days into the mission.

His remains were recovered eight days after his savage execution, his nephew Agha Jan told TIME. ...

“With such bravery, he had tried to protect the dam — and they killed him so brutally,” says Rohullah Samoon, a senior aide and spokesman of the governor of Paktia.

Water is a critical issue in Afghanistan — and for countries like [Iran](#) and Pakistan that are dependent on four of the five river basins that flow out of Afghanistan to irrigate their territories. Meanwhile, though the Afghans currently have enough water for their own needs, any perception of abundance is illusory, experts say. Indeed, the availability of water per capita is expected to decline by 50% in the next three decades, according to a U.N.-funded report. Afghanistan’s extremely weak infrastructure and one of the lowest water-storage capacities in the world means that large parts of the country cannot make use of their own water resources. Frequent droughts, localized and national, further affect the population, causing food shortages and migration. In 2008, for example, wheat production declined by 40% to 55% because of lack of precipitation.

Water is key to strengthening the foundations of Afghanistan’s mainly agricultural economy. But only about 5% of the massive international investment and aid in the past decade went to the water sector, according to the U.N. report. And, critics say, too much of that went to ad hoc small dams and schemes that had no long-term vision.

The geopolitical factors are such that Afghans are paranoid that both Iran and Pakistan are sabotaging their efforts to build dams and control their hydro resources — though the evidence is circumstantial and speculative at best. For example, there were broad hints that elements in Pakistan may have contributed to the death of Khan Wali. Says one local official in Paktia: “The price that our neighbors pay for a human life around here? It’s 50,000 Pakistani rupees [about \$500].”

It is true, however, that Pakistan’s energy crisis has furthered its dependence on Afghan water. Iran, the only country that Afghanistan has a water treaty with, is now taking up to 70% more water than agreed to, according to officials, and has built infrastructure on the incoming water without Afghanistan’s consent. If Afghanistan tries to build major dams to hold more of its own water, both Pakistan and Iran are likely to object and to hold up the projects. Indeed, because diplomatic objections can create bureaucratic bottlenecks, major aid donors have increasingly shied away from funding water projects in Afghanistan.

An official at the Afghan Ministry of Energy and Water claims that the [World Bank](#) called off funding for a major project after it learned that it required clearance from Iran. The World Bank would not comment, saying only that it did not have projects in Afghanistan’s water sector. “I think our neighbors have better relations with the major donors — such as the World Bank,” the official said accusingly. They lobby to get bigger loans for themselves but create hurdles on the way of such projects in Afghanistan, he says.

“Out of 57 billion cu m of average annual rivers flow, only less than 30% is consumed in Afghanistan; the remaining part of water flows out into neighboring countries,” says Sayed Sharif Shobair, a water expert with several years of experience with national and international agencies in Afghanistan. “Attracting investment in the water sector from donor agencies may require us to resolve transboundary water issues first.”

“The Afghan government, every now and then, announces the building of 20 dams or so. But it remains only plans on paper because they can rarely gather the funding for it,” says Khwaga Kakar, an independent researcher who spent two years on the U.N.-funded report on Afghanistan’s water resources. “There is a disconnect between ‘we plan to do’ and ‘what the donors are giving us.’”

The anxieties about Iranian and Pakistani meddling are exemplified by the speculation around the long-stalled Salma dam, being built by India in the province of Herat in western Afghanistan, which borders Iran. The dam has the potential to irrigate nearly 75,000 hectares and produce 42 MW of electricity. However, the project is already four years behind schedule. Its cost has [doubled](#) and is expected to rise by another 50%. Some Afghan officials are astonished that Indian engineers, who have built highways in Afghanistan in

record time, are taking so long to complete the dam. They hypothesize that Iranian diplomatic meddling has caused the delays.

The Indians, however, deny it. “Afghans tell us that Iran has created issues, but we haven’t had to talk to Iran about it because we haven’t had evidence linking them to insecurity there,” says Gautam Mukhopadhaya, the Indian ambassador to Afghanistan, blaming the delay on cost escalation. “The Salma dam will be completed, no question about that.”

Lack of data is the biggest hurdle, says senior Afghan diplomat Enayatullah Nabel, who worked on the transboundary water issues for several years. And many Afghans look suspiciously upon the Iranian experts who moved in to fill the expertise gap by setting up the research center inside Afghanistan’s Water Ministry tasked with gathering information and data on the country’s water resources. The Iranian experts provide what other countries and companies no longer do because of the fragile security within Afghanistan. But the result is increased suspicion. Says Nabel: “The fact that Iranians are involved in running the research center inside the Ministry of Water is very dangerous — they have loyalty to their own country.”

Some analysts say Afghanistan — given its already grave security issues — should seek nonconfrontational methods of solving its cross-border water problems. “It might be good if Afghanistan could move in some specific cases from water sharing to river-benefit sharing,” says Shobair. “In Kunar River, for example, joint hydropower production could be one idea to look into. Afghanistan could convince Pakistan that is for their good as well.”

But that process requires protracted negotiations with the neighbors. Margaret Vick, who advised the Ministry of Water and Energy on cross-border water laws, says the government has capable diplomats and negotiators but has to use them to deal with other crises. She adds that the ministry continues to have other deficiencies that have not been dealt with in decades. “Pre-Soviet invasion,” she explains, “the government had an engineering branch to work on water and other infrastructure issues of national importance.” Today, however, she says, “it’s the depth of engineering capability that has not yet recovered.”