

Iran Has Reasons for a Deal.  
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That the sanctions against Iran have brought the economy close to collapse is well known. I heard from one friend recently returned from a visit that some people are buying pistachios by the piece! Probably a joke, but maybe not.

A much more serious issue facing Iran has just emerged, without much world attention. The country is in grave danger of running out of water. Lake Urumia (Orumiye in Persian), the country's largest lake and third largest in the world, is drying up. Half the surface water is gone, leaving behind salt that blows in the wind. Protesters in Tabriz have clashed with police and scores of street demonstrators have been arrested and one killed. Now because the riot police are so violent, students take advantage of football matches in Tehran's Azadi stadium (holding 100,000 people) to chant slogans about the lake.

Located in northwest Iran, this lake is beautiful and is host to 200 species of birds, reptiles and amphibians, and 27 mammals. It is, like Israel's Dead Sea, mineral rich, with minerals and salts useful in treatments for rheumatism and dermatological problems. It is a national asset, and in a normal country it would attract international tourism.

This lake for centuries has been crucial to agriculture and tourism, but it is well underway to disappearing. The causes are increasing drought and government mismanagement, with 36 dams created upstream diversion of water away from the lake.

The aquifers in Iran are also drying up, and climate change has reduced the mountain snow packs that formerly provided water in an ingenious system of underground tunnels (qanat system) that have been essential to agriculture for 3,000 years.

Salt-laden dust storms envelop Iran's major cities (this was once a rare event) to the point that one out of three days sees such storms. The increase of asthma among young children is alarming. This is serious stuff, and when the public is aroused enough to demonstrate, the government is in trouble. Parliament sees the demonstrations (any demonstrations) as a security threat and rejected a proposal by local MPs to feed the lake with water from a nearby river. But according to Fars News Agency, the Iranian cabinet and President Rouhani have approved a project to rehabilitate the Lake. They are obviously responding to the public outrage (not to mention UN outrage) that has been growing daily.

Several comparisons are important here. Russia has gone through this same thing with dire results. The Aral Sea, formerly one of the four largest lakes in the world, has nearly disappeared because of Soviet aggressive irrigation projects. They grew cotton in Central Asia (a very thirsty crop), replacing the orchard and melon industries that thrived there for millennia. Stupid policies and global climate change work together to devastate entire regions.

Kashmir, another region with a contentious population, is also experiencing the shrinking of their lakes. Water shortages have a devastating affect on the survival and health of the population.

Iran has faced another water issue after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini. Khomeini had forbidden contraceptives, which resulted in the doubling of Iran's population just during his tenure. Iran's climate is like that of our own Rocky Mountains and High Sierra: dry highlands. Such a geography cannot sustain a huge population. When Khomeini's successor turned on the water for a shower and nothing came out, the Iranian government instituted the Islamic world's first mandatory contraceptive program. The population rate is beginning to drop.

The Iranian press is directed to downplay any reports of public demonstrations, but the government is very much aware of the danger. Discontent on many fronts is simmering under the surface and could erupt at any time.

This is the moment for an agreement on Iran's rash nuclear program. The government cannot afford sanctions, a nuclear program, and restoring the lake and aquifers. Furthermore, if there is a military strike, the Revolutionary Guards have warned that it will fill the Gulf with a massive oil spill that will result in an international ecological disaster. We (and they) have nothing to lose by seizing the opportunity to resolve this contentious issue.

685 words

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