

Afghanistan will never succumb to the bullying and scare tactics of Tehran

[Abdul Farid Zikria](#)



A river in Helmand province. Wakil Kohsar / AFP

Earlier this month, Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, in a speech in the Iranian Parliament, warned of reciprocity against Afghanistan over the issue of water rights should Afghanistan continue to disregard Iran's demands.

"At this point in time, we are left with one option and that's reciprocity; that is, to take tough measures in certain areas of Afghanistan," he said. "We expect the Afghan government to meet our legal and legitimate demands before Iran is obliged to act in reciprocity."

This is not the first time that Iranian officials are threatening their sovereign

neighbour to the East, Afghanistan, for [unreasonable demands with regard to sharing water from the Helmand River](#).

President Hassan Rouhani, at a conference on combating sand and dust storms in July last year in Tehran, has also stated that “we cannot stay indifferent to something that can degrade our environment. The construction of numerous dams in Afghanistan such as the Kajaki dam, Kamal Khan dam, Salma dam and others in northern and southern part of Afghanistan have affected our provinces of Khorasan, Sistan and Baluchestan.”

The narrative provided by the Iranian leadership is not only meritless but is also not fact-based.

Afghanistan and Iran have three trans-boundary rivers between them – Helmand, Harirod and Farahrod, which originate deep inside Afghanistan.

On March 13, 1973, the Helmand River Treaty was signed between then Afghan prime minister Mohammad Mousa Shafiq and then Iranian prime minister Amir-Abbas Hoveyda.

The treaty contained 12 articles and two attached protocols, which included the legal conditions, the water situation proportional to the rainfall, the use of water sensors and Iran’s share, as well as the rights and obligations of both sides. Furthermore, the mechanism for resolving the disputes are also addressed in the treaty.

As per the treaty, the total amount of water supplied to Iran from the Helmand River, on average, is 22 cubic metres per second. As a good neighbourly courtesy, Afghanistan added 4 cubic metres per second more to the Iranians' share.

Thus, a total of 26 cubic metres per second was allocated for Iran. Article five of the treaty stipulated that Iran cannot claim water in excess of the specified amount, “even if additional water” becomes available in the future.

In accordance with the provisions of the treaty, the flow of Helmand River to Iran is conditional on the annual state of water, climate conditions and rainfall. The parties can build mutually agreed and appropriate facilities in conformity with the parties' share specified in the treaty.

While the Afghan nation was engaged in defending its sovereignty and religious beliefs against the invading Soviet Red Army and defending the entire region against the menace of communism, albeit with a heavy price, Iran took advantage of the situation and abused the treaty provisions.

A number of dams were constructed and water pumps installed that have never been agreed upon by the Afghan side.

For nearly 45 years since the water treaty had been signed, Iran has been getting up to three times more water from the Helmand River than it is allowed.

A rough estimate indicates that water worth between an extra \$5 billion to \$25 billion has been received by Iran, without any compensation to Afghanistan.

Officials of Tehran have been talking about the lack of justice in the case of the Helmand River.

It is not very clear what the Iranian official's understanding of justice is. Disregarding the terms of a treaty is not considered preservation of justice by any book of law.

If "reciprocating measures" such as expulsion of refugees or more support to armed groups are used as scare tactics, the sign of which we are already witnessing, let it be clear: the Afghan people will never succumb to unjust and unreasonable demands or pressures.

I am certain that the Iranian officials are well aware of Afghanistan's proud history.

In accordance with the principles of international law, states have the absolute right to seek reciprocity in justifiable cases. However, in situations where there is no rationale, reasoning or contentious legal justification, threatening statements also mean a breach of legal obligations, [non-observance of the principles of good neighbourliness and bullying](#).

In lieu of threats, Iran should use the established mechanisms, included in the provision of the agreement, to resolve the disputed issues. A successful implementation of any agreement requires both sides to fully adhere to the terms of their agreements.

After more than four decades, the Afghan government is seriously trying to bring change to the lives of its people.

Water management is an essential element of Afghanistan's strategy for its economic development. The country cannot afford to witness nearly 70 per cent of its waters flowing into neighbouring countries while suffering economically by importing three-quarters of its electricity as well as a significant portion of its foodstuff needs from its neighbours.

Finally, we must not confound the rights of both signing partners. The recent statements by the Iranian officials are obvious violations of the Helmand River Treaty.

We call on Tehran to respect and honour the terms of the treaty and to stop the blame game on others for their own failed water management strategies.

Iran should replace its asymmetric economic policies with a symmetric economic relationship with Afghanistan, for the wellbeing of both our nations.

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