

Water in Tunisia: Should We Expect the Worst?

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Abstract:

Two-thirds of Tunisia's surface area is semi-arid to arid, hence rendering water a rare and precious commodity. Surface- and rainwaters are the only renewable water source, and, comprising 56% of possibly available-to-use water, they therefore represent a key-element for sustainable development, in a country that international institutions have already classified as being on the verge of hydric scarcity (with an yearly average of 420 cubic meters per inhabitant in 2006).

In the present document, we intend to analyze the topic of the threats weighing on the water resources in Tunisia, relating to climate, in its present and projected future situation, while also relating to the country's social-economic context.

In short, Tunisia has virtually reached a quasi-complete mobilization (95% in 2015, 4600 million cubic meters) of its water resources, thus fully exploiting the means that are the easiest and the least costly to mobilize.

Future mobilization efforts will therefore require larger investments, deeper, more refined research and better technological instruments. In the topic of tackling shortages, and of adapting and strengthening capacities, Tunisian results "remain underwhelming" (*Report on the environmental situation, 2010-2011, p.86*). In the current context of climate change, resource degradation will speed up, in terms of both volume and quality.

Even granted the hypothesis of stable climate, the issues with water resources will only gain in importance. Climate change impact on the defining criteria on the water cycle can only be an aggravating circumstance to the problem.

With a quickly rising dam siltation rate, evolving from 20% in 2005, to 28% in 2015, to projected rates of 40% in 2030 and 56% in 2050, the durability of water-impounding structures, and, therefore, of surface water resources incentivizes a general review of the present attitude towards the management and protection of soils and water resources.

Although Tunisia has developed ambitious, field-leading policies, considered as "exemplary" by international dedicated organisms, they remain insubstantially focused on climate change. General use, as well as water management policies, need to be redrawn. The same goes for the legislative framework, in order to promote and implement the concept of "water economy" and the guarantee of water quality.

Moreover, water is no longer viewed simply as a "blue resource" any longer. It is also a "green resource", an integral component, albeit "virtual", in agricultural goods' production and exchange. The "social" and "economic" value of water must be taken seriously, in order to avoid catastrophic scenarios.

These worst-case scenarios can be avoided with proper awareness from potential major water consumers, under careful sensitization plans, but also by sensitizing the general public – and especially younger people, whose future is closely tied with the current efforts.

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