



Global Water Crisis and National Security

Societies and civilizations formed around rivers and lakes or near other sources of fresh water. Where no permanent supply existed, entire societies grew as nomadic cultures that followed the seasonal patterns of rain. Water is the most plentiful natural resource on the planet. Over two-thirds of the earth is covered by water, more than 97 percent of it found in the oceans. According to water statistics compiled by the United Nations (UN), however, the total usable supply of fresh water amounts to less than 1 percent.¹

Unlike other natural resources such as oil, water is infinitely renewable, but the supply remains finite. As demands increase, the competition for water intensifies, not only among nation-states but also within countries. Even the United States is not exempt from this phenomenon, as reflected by the following headlines: “Atlanta’s Water War Is First in a Gathering Flood,” “Vegas Goes to War over Water,” “River Pumping Proposal Sparks North Jersey Water War,” “Fees and Anger Rise in California Water War,” and “Water War with Mexico Looms in Southwest.”² Fortunately, as noted by the UN Development Programme, we “resolve water disputes in courts of law. But across much of [Africa and] the developing world competition for water is intensifying at an alarming rate, giving rise to intense—and sometimes violent—conflict.”³ Due to the demand for water in most parts of the world, rivers, lakes, and aquifers have become vital to a nation’s security and, thus, a motive for war. Already “over 1.4 billion people currently live in river basins where the use of water exceeds minimum recharge levels, leading to the desiccation of rivers and depletion of groundwater. . . . The number of countries in shared basins—145, account[s] for more than 90% of the world’s population. More than 30 countries are located entirely within trans-boundary basins.”⁴

The report *Global Water Security: Intelligence Community Assessment* predicts that “a number of countries (or regions within countries) are already experiencing

high ‘water stress.’ . . . Such areas include the western United States, northern Africa, southern Africa, the Middle East, Australia and parts of south Asia and China.” Moreover, “as water shortages become more acute beyond the next 10 years, water in shared basins will increasingly be used as leverage; the use of water as a weapon or to further terrorist objectives also will become more likely beyond 10 years.”⁵

In the twenty-first century, the global water crisis has already claimed more lives through disease than have wars, insurgencies, and terrorism. More people die each year from drinking dirty water than from all the world’s natural disasters.⁶ Each year, unclean water and poor sanitation contribute to the death of about 1.5 million children from diarrhea.⁷ The economic devastation generated by this crisis is unequaled by the aftermath associated with violent conflicts. Clearly, this phenomenon should figure among the acute challenges to national security strategy or occupy an equal or more prominent footing with transnational terrorism, criminal organizations, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and the spread of deadly technologies.

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Notes

1. “Water Resources,” UN Water, accessed 2 August 2012, http://www.unwater.org/statistics_res.html.
2. Peter Orszag, “Atlanta’s Water War Is First in a Gathering Flood,” Bloomberg, 20 March 2012, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-03-20/atlanta-s-water-war-is-first-in-a-gathering-flood.html>; Joanna M. Foster, “Vegas Goes to War over Water,” TakePart, 26 April 2012, <http://www.takepart.com/article/2012/04/26/vegas-goes-war-over-water>; James M. O’Neill, “River Pumping Proposal Sparks North Jersey Water War,” NorthJersey.com, 27 May 2012, http://www.northjersey.com/news/bergen/052712_Pumping_proposal_sparks_North_Jersey_water_war.html; Adam Nagourney and Felicity Barringer, “Fees and Anger Rise in California Water War,” *New York Times*, 23 April 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/24/us/san-diego-takes-water-fight-public.html>; and Logan Hawkes, “Water War with Mexico Looms in Southwest,” Western Farm Press, 13 April 2012, <http://westernfarmpress.com/government/water-war-mexico-looms-southwest>.
3. United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2006: Beyond Scarcity; Power, Poverty and the Global Water Crisis* (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2006), 17, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR06-complete.pdf>.
4. *Ibid.*, 24, 205.
5. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Global Water Security: Intelligence Community Assessment*, ICA 2012-08 (Washington, DC: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2 February 2012), 2, 3, <http://www.fas.org/irp/nc/water.pdf>. “This report—requested by the Department of State—is designed to answer the question: How will water problems (shortages, poor water quality, or floods) impact US national security interests over the next 30 years? . . . The Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) was the principal drafter with contributions from NGA, CIA, State/INR, and DOE” (“Scope Note” preceding page i).
6. “A Global Crisis,” Living Water International, accessed 2 August 2012, <http://www.water.cc/water-crisis/>.
7. United Nations Children’s Fund and World Health Organization, *Diarrhoea: Why Children Are Still Dying and What Can Be Done* (New York and Geneva: UNICEF/WHO, 2009), 1, 2, http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2009/9789241598415_eng.pdf.