

Khomeini Promised Free Water. Iran Is Running Out of It.

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Articles & Testimony

Reservoirs are drying up due to systemic mismanagement and other problems, and regime officials do not appear willing or able to undertake the necessary fixes.

“Bravo, mom!” a little girl cheers in a 2024 (<https://www.instagram.com/reel/DQ95E4WDOY1/>) video as her mother swims laps in Iran’s Karaj Dam reservoir. Then the Instagram post cuts to a scene from the present day: the same mother is staring out at the same reservoir—now mostly dried earth.

Such videos have flooded social media in recent months as Iranians document how reservoirs that once supplied Tehran are disappearing. Their capital, a city of nearly 10 million, (<https://worldpopulationreview.com/cities/iran/tehran>) is edging toward “Day Zero,” when its taps will run dry. President Masoud Pezeshkian [warned this month \(https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/land-use-biodiversity/tehran-taps-run-dry-water-crisis-deepens-across-iran-2025-11-12/\)](https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/land-use-biodiversity/tehran-taps-run-dry-water-crisis-deepens-across-iran-2025-11-12/) that if meaningful rainfall didn’t arrive by December, Tehran might have to be evacuated—an [unprecedented scenario. \(https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/468778/tehran-water-crisis-iran-day-zero-relocation-solutions\)](https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/468778/tehran-water-crisis-iran-day-zero-relocation-solutions)

Iran has entered its sixth consecutive year of drought. The [five major reservoirs \(https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/11/12/as-the-dams-feeding-tehran-run-dry-iran-struggles-with-a-dire-water-crisis\)](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/11/12/as-the-dams-feeding-tehran-run-dry-iran-struggles-with-a-dire-water-crisis) that supply Tehran are down to an average 10 percent of their capacity. Around the country, 19 others are below 5 percent, according to [state media \(https://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/1339046/%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%85%DB%8C-%DB%B1%DB%B9-%D8%B3%D8%AF-%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%B1%DB%8C%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%84%DB%8C-%DA%A9%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%B1\).](https://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/1339046/%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%85%DB%8C-%DB%B1%DB%B9-%D8%B3%D8%AF-%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%B1%DB%8C%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%84%DB%8C-%DA%A9%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%B1)

Oil is not the only precious resource handled poorly by the Islamic Republic. Today’s empty reservoirs, dried wetlands and depleted aquifers stem largely from decades of poor water management by the clerical establishment, including unchecked urban expansion and excessive dam construction by what [analysts and activists have dubbed \(https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/06/02/iran-water-mafia-environment-drought-crisis/\)](https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/06/02/iran-water-mafia-environment-drought-crisis/) the “Water Mafia (<https://www.mei.edu/publications/irgc-and-irans-water-mafia>):” the beneficiaries of billion-dollar megaprojects, including the [Khatam-al Anbiya Construction Headquarters. \(https://www.iranwatch.org/iranian-entities/khatam-al-anbiya-construction-headquarters-kaa\)](https://www.iranwatch.org/iranian-entities/khatam-al-anbiya-construction-headquarters-kaa) the engineering arm of the powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. These problems have been exacerbated by the extended drought, of course, and, to an extent, Western economic [sanctions \(https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f0f5b1018e89f351b8b3ef8/t/5fe3841454f9a77b9f81aaeb/1608746004707/IranUnderSanctions_Madani.pdf\)](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f0f5b1018e89f351b8b3ef8/t/5fe3841454f9a77b9f81aaeb/1608746004707/IranUnderSanctions_Madani.pdf), producing Iran’s [worst water crisis \(https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/land-use-biodiversity/tehran-taps-run-dry-water-crisis-deepens-across-iran-2025-11-12/\)](https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/land-use-biodiversity/tehran-taps-run-dry-water-crisis-deepens-across-iran-2025-11-12/) in decades.

Even though the strain is becoming woven into Tehran’s daily life, some remain in denial about the severity, fueled by a lack of transparency and mistrust of almost anything the Islamic Republic says. Those who can afford it [install pumps \(https://iranwire.com/en/news/143655-water-crisis-drives-rush-for-pumps-in-tehran-as-prices-soar/\)](https://iranwire.com/en/news/143655-water-crisis-drives-rush-for-pumps-in-tehran-as-prices-soar/) to pull what they can from often [leaky pipes \(https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/11/11/tehran-evacuation-water-drought-crisis/\)](https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/11/11/tehran-evacuation-water-drought-crisis/) or rely on storage tanks. Some districts face sudden, unannounced water cuts lasting up to half a day, according to [published reports \(https://iranwire.com/en/news/146205-water-rationing-begins-in-tehran-without-official-announcement-reports/\)](https://iranwire.com/en/news/146205-water-rationing-begins-in-tehran-without-official-announcement-reports/) and people I’ve spoken to by text or telephone. In other neighborhoods, water is regularly shut off in the evenings, and residents are urged to limit consumption during the day. Energy Minister Abbas Aliabadi, claiming that some Tehrani households are consuming as much as 145 times the recommended amount of water, announced on Nov. 12 that some will face fines and supply cuts.

“The water bankruptcy problem of Iran is too obvious to be denied,” Kaveh Madani, director of the United Nations University’s Institute for Water,

Environment and Health, told me. But he said officials are still [downplaying \(https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-water-crisis-drought-tehran/33588345.html\)](https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-water-crisis-drought-tehran/33588345.html) the severity. “I’m not convinced that the roots of the problem are well understood and that the leadership is ready to pay the political cost of the necessary fundamental reforms,” he added. (In 2017, the security apparatus [forced Madani \(https://www.science.org/content/article/iranian-researcher-went-home-serve-his-country-now-i-realize-i-m-lucky-i-m-not-prison\)](https://www.science.org/content/article/iranian-researcher-went-home-serve-his-country-now-i-realize-i-m-lucky-i-m-not-prison), then the deputy head of the country’s Department of Environment, to flee just [months \(https://iranhumanrights.org/2018/04/iranians-lament-loss-of-top-environmentalist-from-governmental-post-kaveh-madani/\)](https://iranhumanrights.org/2018/04/iranians-lament-loss-of-top-environmentalist-from-governmental-post-kaveh-madani/) after recruiting him from abroad to address the water problem.)

Though Tehran did finally receive some scattered showers in recent weeks, it wasn’t nearly enough. Clerics urged Iranians to [pray \(https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/09/world/middleeast/iran-water-rationing-drought.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/09/world/middleeast/iran-water-rationing-drought.html) for rain—and, in one instance, [said the drought might be God’s punishment \(https://iranfocus.com/iran/55938-state-cleric-blames-women-not-wearing-hijab-for-drought-in-iran/\)](https://iranfocus.com/iran/55938-state-cleric-blames-women-not-wearing-hijab-for-drought-in-iran/) for women’s failure to abide by the hijab requirement. The clerical establishment has also blamed foreign sanctions and damage caused to infrastructure by the 12-day [war with Israel \(https://www.nbcnews.com/world/iran/iran-water-crisis-taps-run-dry-tehran-evacuation-looms-rcna243430\)](https://www.nbcnews.com/world/iran/iran-water-crisis-taps-run-dry-tehran-evacuation-looms-rcna243430). Some observers also cite climate change, though it is usually seen as a contributor, not [the root cause \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/11/24/iran-tehran-water-crisis-agriculture/\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/11/24/iran-tehran-water-crisis-agriculture/).

But many Iranians see the crisis as yet another product of the Islamic Republic’s [systemic \(https://www.eghtesadonline.com/fa/news/2100655/%D9%BE%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%85-%D9%87%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B4%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B3%DB%8C-%D8%AD%D9%82%DB%8C%D9%82%D8%AA-%D8%B1%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%85%D9%84%D8%A7-%DA%A9%D8%B1%D8%AF-%D8%AF%D9%84%DB%8C%D9%84-%D8%B9%D8%AF%D9%85-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B4-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%81-%D9%88-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%AE%D8%B5-%D8%B4%D8%AF\)](https://www.eghtesadonline.com/fa/news/2100655/%D9%BE%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%85-%D9%87%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B4%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B3%DB%8C-%D8%AD%D9%82%DB%8C%D9%82%D8%AA-%D8%B1%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%85%D9%84%D8%A7-%DA%A9%D8%B1%D8%AF-%D8%AF%D9%84%DB%8C%D9%84-%D8%B9%D8%AF%D9%85-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B4-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%81-%D9%88-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%AE%D8%B5-%D8%B4%D8%AF) mismanagement [\(https://iranwire.com/en/features/143577-irans-capital-faces-day-zero-water-crisis-as-dams-run-dry/\)](https://iranwire.com/en/features/143577-irans-capital-faces-day-zero-water-crisis-as-dams-run-dry/) and corruption. Water protests have erupted repeatedly, including one in 2021 in southwest Khuzestan province, where security forces reportedly responded with [deadly \(https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/07/22/iran-deadly-response-water-protests\)](https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/07/22/iran-deadly-response-water-protests) force. At protests later that year in central Isfahan province, [dozens of demonstrators \(https://iranhr.net/en/articles/5000/\)](https://iranhr.net/en/articles/5000/) lost at least one eye to pellet guns fired by security forces. In August, demonstrators in southwestern Fars province [chanted \(https://www.ncr-iran.org/en/news/iran-protests/iran-protests-erupt-over-systemic-corruption-and-collapse-of-basic-services/\)](https://www.ncr-iran.org/en/news/iran-protests/iran-protests-erupt-over-systemic-corruption-and-collapse-of-basic-services/), “Water, electricity, life is our inherent right”—a bitter play on an old chant backing the country’s controversial nuclear program, which declared, “Nuclear energy is our inherent right.”

Recently, authorities began trying [cloud seeding \(https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/land-use-biodiversity/rainfall-causes-floods-parts-drought-stricken-iran-2025-11-17/\)](https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/land-use-biodiversity/rainfall-causes-floods-parts-drought-stricken-iran-2025-11-17/) in parts of western Iran, unfortunately triggering [floods \(https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-weather-floods-drought-extreme-rain/33594137.html\)](https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-weather-floods-drought-extreme-rain/33594137.html). But for clouds to be seeded, atmospheric moisture must reach [50 percent \(https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/09/world/middleeast/iran-water-rationing-drought.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/09/world/middleeast/iran-water-rationing-drought.html)—conditions Tehran and other parts of the country don’t have. Meanwhile, a wildfire in northern Iran has [destroyed part of the Hyrcanian Forest, \(https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/23/world/europe/iran-fire-hyrcanian-forests.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/23/world/europe/iran-fire-hyrcanian-forests.html) an ancient forest that is a UNESCO World Heritage site.

This needless crisis is especially galling because Iran rightly prides itself as an ancient civilization that managed groundwater for thousands of years through underground channels called [qanats \(https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20180619-irans-ancient-engineering-marvel\)](https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20180619-irans-ancient-engineering-marvel). When Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini rose to power in 1979, [one of his promises was \(https://iranwire.com/en/fact-checking/68822/\)](https://iranwire.com/en/fact-checking/68822/) to “provide free water...for the poor.” Forty-six years later, the Islamic Republic that he built has failed to deliver on that and so much more for the Iranian people.

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