

Afghanistan's Biggest Project Yet: The Qosh Tapa Canal

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In the northern regions of Afghanistan, villages have become dependent on a scarce supply of rainwater after the assurgent effects of drought have depleted the land of groundwater. Farming land bordering canals that were once filled with [residual snow from the Hindu Kush](#) now sits dry, making it nearly impossible to yield crops and provide food for the growing population of 1.5 million inhabiting bordering areas. In response to the escalating urgency of famine and water shortages, the Afghan government has proposed a solution requiring multinational support and collaboration: the construction of the Qosh Tapa Canal. The canal is estimated to stretch 285 km long, diverting water from the Amu Darya to irrigate 550,000 hectares of unusable farmland. Having begun construction in May of 2022, the Qosh Tapa Canal is built with public assistance funds as issued by the Taliban, consisting of [about \\$100 million](#) — around a quarter of Afghanistan's yearly tax income.



Photography of Urgench fishermen captured by David Trilling, 2022.

However, the construction of the Qosh Tepa Canal has escalated tensions amongst nations involved, mostly regarding the environmental state of the land through which the canal would run and the use of the water provided. One of the remedial actions concerning the partition of water usage between countries in Central Asia was the Almaty Agreement. The [Almaty Agreement](#) was signed in 1992 by five countries from Soviet Central Asia to dictate water usage between the regions, but it has failed to de-escalate agitation between nations over the years. The [1992 UN Water Convention](#) has also served as a guideline for procedural undertakings concerning the utilization of water. Although many countries in Central Asia have signed this treaty, Afghanistan has declined. Nonetheless, the Taliban are firm in the stance that it remains the right of Afghanistan to use the water provided by the Amu Darya for its needs.

Negative consequences that may come as a result of building the canal have also been publicized. It is estimated that Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan — countries downstream of Afghanistan — are to lose 15-20% of their previous water resources. The loss of glaciers combined with the lowered water levels is estimated to slow the Amu Darya's flow by a significant 50%, putting the river — which is already in critical condition — at a grave risk of severe pollution if the collected water is to remain stagnated in an area for too long. In addition, [the salinization of land](#), claims Sayed Waliullah Aqili (previous director of the Groundwater Department in Kabul) to *Third Pole*, is a growing fear amongst those in the Afghan region. Especially in the northern area, there have already been continuous efforts to drain salt from water basins so that land can be irrigated for agricultural use, resulting in large amounts of highly saline water being deposited into the Amu Darya if the canal is to extend past farming regions in Afghanistan for irrigation.



December 2021, Humanitarian assistance is provided to those in the capital of Balkh province. Credit: Alamy.

At the same time, the Qosh Tepa Canal promises many benefits to Afghanistan and proposes a solution to many long-standing problems experienced by the country. For example, the canal is predicted to bring a [great influx of agricultural harvest](#) to Afghan regions, mitigating the overwhelming presence of food shortages and starvation amongst citizens. It would give the country a significant opportunity to become self-sufficient and enable more exports, resulting in a much-needed economic boost to solve lesser-known issues affecting local communities. With a water carrying capacity of 650 cubic meters per second, the canal is also predicted to permanently solve the issue of water shortage in regions such as Jawzjan, Faryab, and Balkh by the completion of its construction in 2028. It would also supply an estimated 250,000 Afghan citizens with new jobs in said regions.

However, as exciting as these prospects may be, the current state of international relations remains a key factor as to whether or not the project is to be condoned by countries involved.

Shavkat Khamraev — the Uzbek Water Resources Minister — revealed that a representative was sent to Kabul in February to voice the concerns of Uzbekistan when it came to their share of water needed to grow cotton, which is a highly profitable crop. The added internal conflict present in Afghanistan has diverted the country's attention away from issues such as water resource distribution between the Central Asian countries. As a result, surrounding countries have used [more water than what was previously distributed between them](#).

As it continues its construction, the Qosh Tepa Canal remains one of Afghanistan's biggest ambitions for making a resurgence in agricultural production and improvement in the economy. Since the country receives no water from monsoons, it is up to periodic instances of rainfall and snow to supply the rivers with water, leaving it incredibly vulnerable to drought. As a result, Taliban officials have ranked the project as one of high importance and are continuing to allocate funds from their own organizations in order to finish the operation.