Water Scarcity Triple Threat: Trigger, Weapon, and Casualty of Violence in the CENTCOM AOR

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Key Points

- Water's multifaceted role in global conflicts is undeniable, as it can be wielded as a weapon, act as a trigger for hostilities, and become a casualty of violence.
- Water scarcity is exacerbating existing tensions and further fueling conflicts in the region, with some countries competing for access to limited water resources as an existential threat.
- Violent extremist organizations (VEOs) are exploiting water scarcity to further their goals, using water as a weapon to control populations and territory.
- The deliberate targeting of water infrastructure is being used as a tactic of warfare, deepening conflict and instability in the region.
- Long-term options to address these challenges include urgently needed implementation of transboundary water management agreements, investing in water infrastructure, and promoting water conservation and efficiency practices.
- Key will be enhancement of regional water security and resilience by protecting vital infrastructure, fostering cross-border cooperation, delivering aid, and planning for crises. USCENTCOM can play a vital role in strengthening the Middle East's ability to withstand and respond to water-related threats and challenges.

Introduction

Water is essential for human survival and the cornerstone of civilizations, cultures, and economies. This is most keenly felt in dry regions like the Middle East. In this water-scarce area, where temperatures often soar and rainfall is rare, access to water is a critical factor for life, continued development, and a peaceful environment. The Middle East's rivers, aquifers, and desalinated seawater sustain the region's basic needs and its agricultural sectors, which are vital for food security.

Water also supports key industries, from oil and gas to tourism, and significantly influences geopolitics in the region. Control over water resources has historically been a source of both cooperation and conflict. As increasing temperatures and population growth intensify water scarcity, the need for sustainable water management and equitable distribution becomes ever more pressing. Water, especially its scarcity, is and will continue to be a significant contributor to conflicts in the Middle East, and its impact is likely to worsen in the coming years, posing significant challenges to regional stability and security.

The aim of this paper is to highlight the critical role of water in the Middle East's geopolitical landscape and the urgent need for sustainable water management to prevent and mitigate conflicts. By examining the region's severe water scarcity, rapid population growth, and transboundary water disputes, the paper underscores the necessity for comprehensive strategies involving regional cooperation, infrastructure investment, and diplomatic efforts to avoid increasing waters issues as a destabilizing factor in the region. The paper explores how water serves as a **trigger for conflicts**, a **weapon in disputes**, and a **casualty of war**, emphasizing the multifaceted ways in which water insecurity exacerbates and multiplies tensions and violence in the region. Urgently addressing these issues will avoid future conflicts in the region.

International laws and norms governing water usage

The laws and norms are crucial for managing shared water resources and preventing conflicts between nations. These frameworks promote sustainable water management, equitable use, and environmental protection. They address various aspects, including pollution control, access to safe water, and the impacts of human activities on water resources. By providing a set of rules and principles, these laws and norms encourage cooperation and help ensure the responsible use of water globally. Here is a list of some international laws and norms that govern water usage:

Helsinki Rules on the Uses of the Waters of International Rivers (1966): These rules, developed by the International Law Association, outline principles for the equitable use of international rivers and their waters. They emphasize the need for cooperation and the prevention of harm.[1]

Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (1971): This convention provides a framework for the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands, which are crucial for water storage, flood control, and biodiversity.[2]

UNESCO International Hydrological Programme (1975): While not a law, the IHP promotes international cooperation in water resources management, research, and education, contributing to the development of water policies and norms.[3]

Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (1992): This convention focuses on the sustainable and equitable management of transboundary water resources, emphasizing pollution control and environmental protection. [4]

United Nations Watercourses Convention (1997): This is a global framework for the use, development, conservation, management, and protection of international watercourses and their drainage basins. It provides a set of rules for preventing and resolving disputes related to water usage.[5]

UNECE Protocol on Water and Health (1999): This protocol aims to protect human health and the environment by preventing, controlling, and reducing water-related risks. It emphasizes the importance of access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation.[6]

Berlin Rules on Water Resources (2004): An update to the Helsinki Rules, these guidelines address the sustainable use and management of water resources, including groundwater, and emphasize environmental protection and human rights.[7]

World Trade Organization (WTO) Agreements: While not specifically about water, WTO agreements can affect water usage through trade-related measures, such as subsidies for water-intensive industries.[8]

The Current State of Water in the Middle East – general overview

According to the World Resources Institute, the most water-stressed regions are the Middle East and North Africa, where 83% of the population is exposed to extremely high water insecurity, and South Asia, where 74% is exposed.[9]

Population growth and urbanization are significant contributors to the worsening water scarcity crisis in the Middle East as well. As cities expand and populations grow, so does the demand for clean water. However, this increased demand is not being met with a corresponding increase in supply. Instead, governments are struggling to provide adequate access to clean drinking water for their citizens. The absence of fresh, clean water precipitates a cascade of health issues and environmental disasters as well.

Political decisions on water distribution have further fueled tensions over access to freshwater resources across different domains and countries in the region. Governments' repressive policies on transboundary waters have often prioritized national interests over regional cooperation or environmental concerns. This has resulted in disputes over shared rivers, where the interests of states often are to prioritize control over cooperation, leading to a lack of peaceful sharing agreements among riparian states and thereby fueling unnecessary tensions and potentially even violent conflicts over this vital resource.

Water as a trigger, weapon, and casualty

Water plays a significant role in triggering and amplifying existing tensions, leading to conflicts and violence in the Middle East. Water scarcity is increasingly becoming a source of growing tension and violence in the region, with freshwater becoming both a weapon and a threat to national security. Water insecurity is increasing worldwide, raising the chance of competition, conflict, and instability in communities, countries, and regions, and the Middle East is no exception. As scientist Peter Gleick notes, there is a concerning rise in water-related conflicts, and the term "water war" is often used to describe these disputes, highlighting the critical role that water plays in exacerbating existing tensions and leading to conflicts and violence in the Middle East.[10] The Pacific Institute, a leading think tank on water policy, has extensively studied the role of water in global conflicts, highlighting that water can serve as a **trigger, weapon**, and **casualty** of violence. [11]

Trigger: Water as a trigger or root cause of conflict, or underlying cause of ongoing tension that is contributing to conflict, where there is a dispute over the control of water or water systems, or where economic or physical access to water, or scarcity of water, triggers violence.

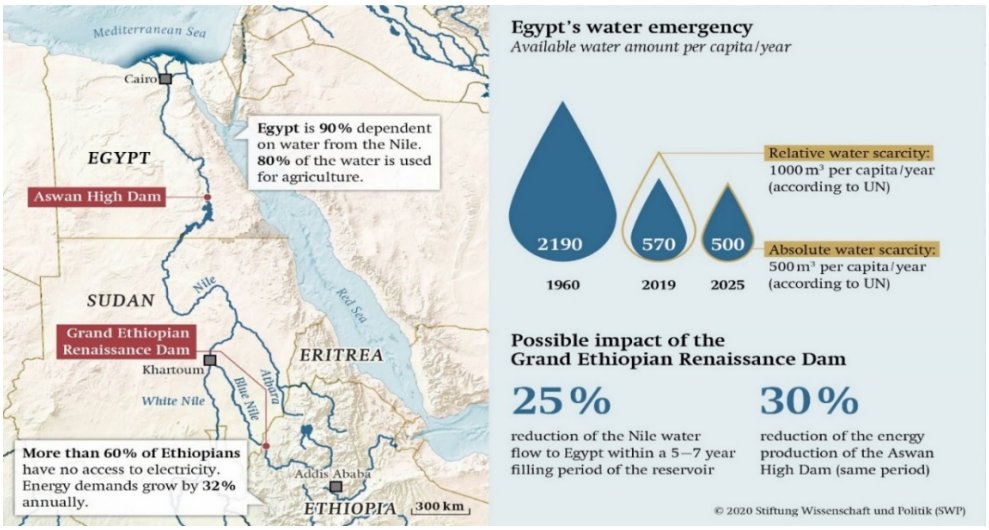
Weapon: Water as a weapon of conflict, where water resources, or water systems themselves, are used as a tool or weapon in a violent conflict.

Casualty: Water resources or water systems as a casualty of conflict, where water resources, or water systems, are intentional or incidental casualties or targets of violence".[12] The Middle East region is currently plagued by numerous ongoing armed conflicts. According to the Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, more than 45 armed conflicts are currently taking place in the region, making it one of the most affected areas in the world. Limited access to drinkable water can lead to new conflicts in the future, with water being a trigger, a weapon or a casualty of those conflicts. [13]

Water as a trigger

One notable example of water being used as a trigger for conflict in the Middle East is the **"War over Water" or "Battle over Water,"** which occurred in the region surrounding the Jordan River. This conflict, which took place between November 1964 and May 1967, involved Israel and its Arab neighbors, particularly Syria, over control of water sources in the Jordan River drainage basin. The tensions escalated when Israel began construction of its National Water Carrier, which was designed to divert water from the Jordan River to the arid southern regions of Israel. This move was seen as a threat by Syria, which responded by firing on Israeli patrols around the construction site. The conflict intensified as both sides engaged in military actions, including Israeli air strikes into Syrian territory. The dispute over water resources became a significant factor leading to the outbreak of the Six-Day War in June 1967, where control of water became a crucial strategic issue.

At present, we are facing another possible trigger of conflict, which is **the Nile River dispute between Egypt and Ethiopia.** The Nile River is a major transboundary water system in Africa, shared by 11 countries. All those countries depend on the Nile River as source of water, to a greater or lesser extent. The dispute over the Nile River centers on Egypt's historical claim to a significant portion of the river's waters and its opposition to Ethiopia's Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) project (see the graphic below). Egypt has long relied on the Nile as its primary source of freshwater for agriculture and drinking purposes.



Graphic 1. Implications of the Ethiopian Renaissance Dam[14].

This dispute presents a significant geopolitical flashpoint with the potential to cause conflict between Egypt and Ethiopia. The GERD, upon completion, will be Africa's largest hydroelectric dam, granting Ethiopia substantial control over the Nile's water flow. This has raised alarms in Egypt, which is almost entirely dependent on the Nile for its freshwater supply and has historical precedence for water rights. The core of the conflict lies in the unequal power dynamics and the potential for Ethiopia to unilaterally alter the water distribution, threatening Egypt's water security and agricultural livelihood. If not managed diplomatically, this dispute could easily escalate into a full-blown conflict, drawing in regional powers and further destabilizing an already volatile area.

Another example for the potential future **water related conflict is the present situation in Iran**. It is currently grappling with severe water shortages that have reached a critical point, exacerbating social tensions and fueling the potential for new conflict. The country is experiencing its most severe drought in decades, with reservoirs at dangerously low levels and rainfall significantly below average. This has led to widespread power outages and disrupted essential services, causing significant public frustration.

The water crisis has particularly affected provinces like Khuzestan, Isfahan, Sistan, and Baluchistan, where periodic shortages have prompted protests that quickly turned political. Farmers and residents, already frustrated by years of mismanagement, have clashed with security forces, highlighting the growing unrest over scarce resources.

Experts warn that the situation could escalate into more severe conflicts if not **addressed**. The combination of water scarcity and extreme heat, with temperatures exceeding 149°F in some areas, has pushed the country's aging infrastructure to its limits. This has resulted in scheduled power cuts and severe water rationing, further straining social cohesion.

"The water crisis is more serious than what is being talked about today, and if we do not make urgent decisions today, **we will face a situation in the future that cannot be cured**," President Masoud Pezeshkian said at a cabinet meeting, adding, "We cannot continue this way."[15] So far, the Iranian government has responded with measures such as 12-hour water cut-offs for high-use households and appeals to limit water consumption. However, these actions are seen as insufficient by many, who argue that deeper reforms and a shift in national strategy are needed to address the root causes of the crisis. As the water shortage continues to deepen, there is a growing concern that it could lead to a **"water war" between provinces or even trigger broader social unrest**. The situation underscores the urgent need for sustainable water management and infrastructure improvements to prevent further escalation and potential conflict.

Water as a weapon

The weaponization of water, especially by **Violent Extremist Organizations** (VEOs) in the Middle East, is a growing concern. VEOs are turning scarce water into **a weapon**, contributing to desperate conditions and instability in the region. In the Middle East and North Africa, water stress is being exploited by non-state armed groups, such as ISIS, which has controlled major dams and exercised control over dependent populations. For example, in 2014, **strategic water weaponization** in Iraq was widely covered in the press and caught the attention of people around the globe. The Islamic State seized and briefly controlled the Mosul Dam on the Tigris River, about 140 kilometers upstream from the Iraqi capital city of Baghdad. "This action theoretically provided the Islamic State with the ability to destroy the dam and unleash a torrent of water capable of flooding the "Green Zone" - or the location where allied forces led by the U.S. were based."[16]

Recently, **tensions between India and Pakistan,** involving the strategic use of **water infrastructure as a weapon**, have intensified conflict between those two nuclear powers. Following an attack in Pehalgam claimed by India to be carried out by militants, India has suspended its participation in the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT), a crucial agreement that governs the sharing of water from the Indus River and its tributaries. This move by India threatens to block Pakistan's vital water supplies, which are essential for its agricultural and economic stability, as "Pakistan depends critically on the Indus. Over three-quarters of the country's annually available renewable water resources come from outside its borders, almost entirely from the Indus."[17] The IWT, brokered by the World Bank in 1960, allocates the waters of the Indus River system between the two countries, with India controlling the eastern rivers (Sutlej, Beas, and Ravi) and Pakistan managing the western rivers (Indus, Jhelum, and Chenab). The treaty includes provisions for data sharing, dispute resolution, and the development of hydrological infrastructure. By suspending the treaty, India can cease data sharing, which includes critical information such as flood warnings and hydrological conditions.

Water as a casualty

Perhaps the most striking example of water as a critical element in conflict can be found in Gaza. In Gaza, the water situation was already dire before Israel's retaliation for Hamas' deadly attack on October 7. The aftermath of the war has left much of Gaza's water and wastewater infrastructure destroyed, damaged, or unusable. As of April 2025, the water crisis in Gaza has reached catastrophic levels, worsened by ongoing conflict, infrastructure destruction, and political blockades. Humanitarian organizations report that over 1,025 miles of water and sanitation infrastructure in Gaza have been destroyed, leaving less than 7% of pre-war water levels in cities like Rafah and North Gaza. This devastation includes the destruction of all six main wastewater treatment plants, severely limiting access to clean water and increasing the risk of waterborne diseases.[18] What is more, Gaza's water crisis has worsened significantly since Israeli authorities cut the entry of aid and electricity in early March, with serious consequences for people's health.[19]

The data presented above clearly depicts **water as a casualty of war** in this conflict, but it could also turn into a new conflict. When individuals are deprived of water and food, which are basic physiological needs for survival, it may engender further tensions or even full-blown conflict. This potential conflict would not be rooted in religious, racial, or ethnic issues, but rather in the fundamental human right to exist. According to Maslow's theory, physiological needs are the basis of all human needs, and we need these to be met to survive. Otherwise, people have only one choice left – to fight for their survival. It is hard to determine the precise target of this "anger"—whether it is directed towards Israel, Hamas, or perhaps both entities simultaneously. Additionally, "access to water and sanitation are recognized by the United Nations as human rights – fundamental to everyone's health, dignity, and prosperity. Governments must take a human rights-based approach (HRBA) to water and sanitation improvements, so that no one gets left behind."[20]

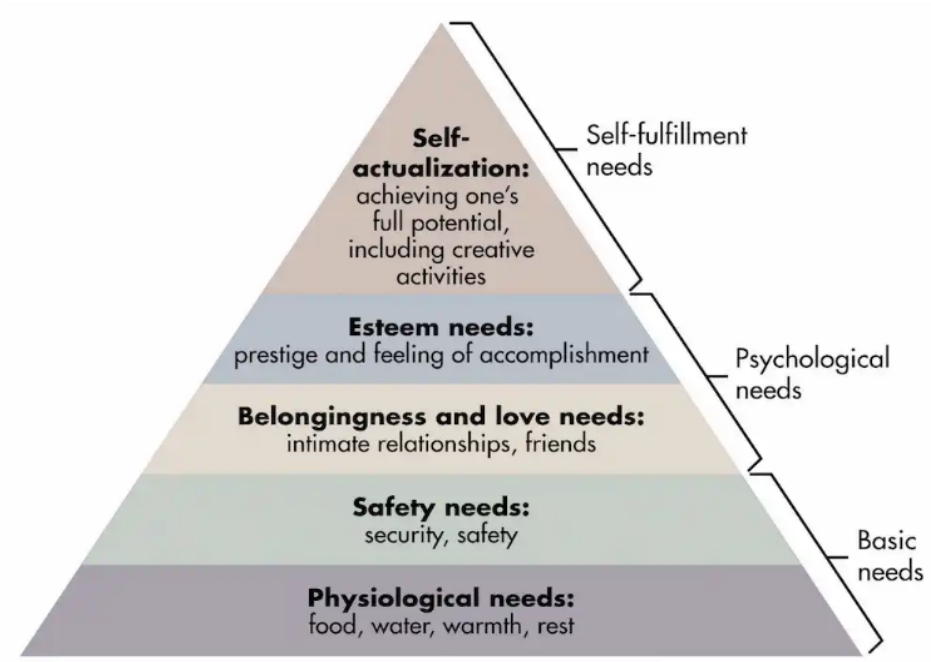


Figure 1 – Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs[21]

The impacts of water scarcity on military operations in the CENTCOM AOR

1. **Increased Logistical Strain:** The scarcity of water sources can significantly strain military logistics. Troops may need to rely on water convoys, which are vulnerable to attacks and can divert resources from other critical

missions. This increased reliance on water transportation can lead to longer supply chains, making it more challenging to maintain a steady flow of essential supplies, including potable water and sanitation facilities.

2. **Health and Hygiene Concerns:** With limited access to water, maintaining proper hygiene becomes a challenge. This can lead to an increase in waterborne diseases among troops, requiring additional medical resources and potentially reducing combat readiness. The lack of water for showers and sanitation can also affect morale, which is crucial for maintaining operational effectiveness.
3. **Operational Constraints:** Water scarcity can limit the deployment of certain military assets that require large amounts of water, such as certain vehicles or equipment that need cooling systems. This can restrict the types of operations conducted and may require adjustments to tactical plans, potentially compromising mission objectives.
4. **Increased Clashes and Instability:** Water disputes can exacerbate existing tensions and lead to clashes between local populations and military forces, or even between different factions within the region. These conflicts can undermine strategic goals by diverting attention and resources from primary missions to managing local disputes and providing humanitarian aid.
5. **Strategic Vulnerability:** Relying on external water sources makes military operations more vulnerable to disruptions. If supply routes are cut off or attacked, troops may be left without essential water resources, compromising their ability to sustain operations. This vulnerability can be exploited by adversaries, potentially leading to strategic setbacks.
6. **Economic and Political Impact:** Water scarcity can have broader economic and political implications, affecting local populations and their support for military operations. This can lead to increased resistance or insurgency, further complicating the military's role in the region and potentially undermining long-term strategic goals.

Conclusions:

The water crisis in the Middle East is a complex and multifaceted issue, with various factors contributing to the region's severe water scarcity. Some of the key factors include:

1. **Limited water resources**: The Middle East is one of the most water-scarce regions in the world, with many countries having limited access to renewable water resources. The region's water resources are primarily comprised of non-renewable groundwater, which is being depleted at an alarming rate.
2. **Rapid population growth**: The Middle East has experienced rapid population growth, which has put a significant strain on the region's water resources. The population of the region is expected to continue growing further, exacerbating the water crisis. [22]
3. **Global Warming and Climate Instability**: Global Warming and Climate Instability is having a significant impact on the Middle East, with rising temperatures and changing precipitation patterns affecting the region's water resources. It is also leading to more frequent and severe droughts, which are further depleting the region's water resources.
4. **Agricultural water usage**: Agriculture is a significant user of water in the Middle East, with many countries relying heavily on irrigation to support their agricultural sectors. However, the use of water for agriculture is often inefficient, with much of the water being wasted or lost to evaporation.
5. **Urbanization**: The Middle East is experiencing rapid urbanization, with many people moving to cities in search of better economic opportunities. This has put a significant strain on the region's water resources, with many cities struggling to provide adequate water and sanitation services for their growing populations.

What the U.S. and USCENTCOM should/could do about it

The United States, with its extensive diplomatic and technological resources, is well-positioned to lead a concerted international effort to address the water crisis in the Middle East. By leveraging its global influence, the U.S. can spearhead a collaborative initiative that brings together key international organizations, including the European Union, the Arab League, and other relevant stakeholders. This leadership role would entail facilitating dialogue, coordinating resources, and promoting innovative solutions that align with the unique challenges and cultural contexts of the region. Through such a comprehensive and inclusive approach, the U.S. can catalyze significant advancements in water management, infrastructure development, and sustainable practices, ultimately contributing to long-term stability and prosperity in the Middle East. This effort can be divided into the following areas:

Diplomatic Approaches:

1. Encourage regional cooperation: The U.S. could facilitate dialogue and cooperation among Middle Eastern countries to address shared water challenges, such as the management of transboundary water resources.
2. Support water-related agreements: The U.S. could encourage countries to negotiate and implement water-sharing agreements, such as the Jordan-Israel Treaty of Peace, which includes provisions for water cooperation.
3. Foster international partnerships: The U.S. could collaborate with international organizations, such as the United Nations, to promote water cooperation and address the root causes of water scarcity in the region.
4. Provide technical assistance: The U.S. could provide technical assistance to Middle Eastern countries to help them develop and implement effective water management practices, such as water conservation and efficient irrigation systems.

Informational Approaches:

1. Share water data and research: The U.S. could share water-related data and research with Middle Eastern countries to help them better understand and manage their water resources.
2. Promote water awareness: The U.S. could support public awareness campaigns, organized by the host country, to educate people in the region about the importance of water conservation and the impacts of water scarcity.
3. Support water-related education and training: The U.S. could provide educational and training programs for water professionals in the region, focusing on topics such as water management, conservation, and efficient use.
4. Encourage transparency and accountability: The U.S. could encourage Middle Eastern countries to be more transparent and accountable in their water management practices, including the publication of water data and the involvement of civil society in water decision-making.
5. U.S. Central Command could exploit Iran's current water problems to undermine the regime through information operations by leveraging public discontent and frustration caused by the crisis. By amplifying narratives of government mismanagement and corruption, CENTCOM can highlight how the regime's policies and the "water mafia" have exacerbated the situation, alongside the regime's decision to prioritize spending on proxies over investing in water infrastructure. Targeted messages and visual content could underscore severe water shortages, power outages, by emphasizing the human impact and fostering urgency and anger among Iranians. Highlighting these failures can further erode public trust and create a narrative of resistance, encouraging more Iranians to question the regime's legitimacy.

Military and Security Approaches:

Although the protection of infrastructure is a national responsibility, USCENTCOM can still play a crucial and multifaceted role in supporting protection of critical water infrastructure in the region.

Strategic Planning and Coordination:

1. Leadership and Oversight: USCENTCOM can lead the strategic planning efforts by coordinating with local governments, military forces, and international partners to develop a comprehensive security framework for water infrastructure.
2. Regional Strategy Development: Work with regional partners to create a unified strategy that addresses specific threats and vulnerabilities unique to the Middle East and Central Asia.

Intelligence Gathering and Analysis:

1. Threat Intelligence: Leverage USCENTCOM's extensive intelligence network to gather and analyze threat intelligence specific to water infrastructure. This includes monitoring terrorist groups, assessing cyber threats, and identifying potential state-sponsored attacks.
2. Shared Intelligence: Share actionable intelligence with regional partners to enhance their situational awareness and response capabilities.

Training and Capacity Building:

1. Specialized Training Programs: Develop and conduct specialized training programs for local security forces, focusing on infrastructure protection, counter-terrorism tactics, and emergency response procedures.
2. Joint Exercises: Organize and participate in joint military exercises with regional partners to simulate and practice responses to various security threats against water infrastructure.

Technological Support and Innovation:

1. Advanced Surveillance Systems: Provide advanced surveillance technologies, such as drones, satellite imagery, and cybersecurity tools, to enhance the monitoring and protection of critical sites.
2. Cybersecurity Assistance: Offer cybersecurity expertise and resources to help regional partners safeguard their digital control systems and networks.

Resource Allocation and Logistics:

1. Equipment and Supplies: Facilitate the sale, via FMS or other U.S. led program, of necessary equipment and supplies — including protective gear, communication systems, and emergency response vehicles, to strengthen and support local initiatives aimed at safeguarding water infrastructure.
2. Logistical Support: Offer logistical support for the deployment of response teams and the transportation of critical supplies during emergencies.

Economic Approaches:

1. Support water-related economic development: Promoting economic development projects that focus on water conservation and efficient use can help the region become more resilient to water scarcity. This approach can create new business opportunities for U.S. companies specializing in water-saving technologies and sustainable industries, fostering economic growth and strengthening U.S. influence in the region.

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