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Water Scarcity Worsens in Mideast, Threatens Food Security

By Neena Rai



Syrian workers living in Jordan work on a tomato farm in Shouneh.

Reuters

Water scarcity is one of the most urgent food security issues facing countries in the Middle East and North Africa, with fresh water availability in the region expected to plunge by 50% by 2050, according to the United Nations.

Per capita fresh water availability in those countries has already slumped by two-thirds over the past 40 years. Demographic trends also intensify the water shortages there as population growth in the region continues growing at a strong rate of 2% — that's nearly twice the global rate.

Farming and other agricultural activities, such as irrigation, consume over 85% of available fresh water resources in the region and this is only expected to get worse; the demand for agricultural products is expected to grow amid burgeoning urban populations and increased exports.

“Most Middle Eastern countries are faced with what hydrologists call absolute water scarcity. This means that even if they have the economic capacity to develop their water resources, they will not be able to

meet the demand for freshwater from their growing populations and growing economies,” warns Peter McCornick, deputy director general at the International Water Management Institute.

“Already many countries in the region don’t have sufficient water to grow enough food. As a result many have become net food importers,” adds Mr. McCornick. This means that some countries in the region have chosen to lease farmland abroad because of the shortfalls in local water supply, which has frequently resulted in accusations of “land grabbing.”

“Actually this can be more accurately viewed as securing water, because for many Middle Eastern countries what they lack is sufficient water, and the host countries lack the financial and institutional capacity to develop their agriculture and water resources sustainably,” argues Mr. McCornick.