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MILITARIZING WATER IN MIDDLE EAST WARS

A STRATEGIC ANALYSIS OF THE IRAN-US-ISRAEL WAR

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The Middle East has long experienced multiple geopolitical tensions and conflicts, generating serious economic, political, and social repercussions that affect the integrity of its economies and its energy- and water-related infrastructure, in addition to the security of maritime routes and transport networks. Since late February 2026, however, a complex military escalation has unfolded in the confrontation between Iran on one side and both the United States and Israel on the other. This multidimensional conflict has extended beyond the conventional military domain to encompass the targeting of critical infrastructure and key economic and strategic sectors across the region as a whole. Military operations, which began with joint US-Israeli strikes against targets inside Iran, have contributed to a widening of the confrontation at the regional level, encompassing attacks on energy facilities, ports, shipping lanes, and civilian infrastructure in several Middle Eastern states.

As military operations, cyberattacks, and drone strikes have intensified, a new dimension of the conflict has become increasingly evident—namely, the "militarization of water," whereby water resources and related infrastructure are transformed into targets or instruments within geopolitical conflict. Alongside attacks on energy facilities, transport systems, and maritime corridors, water facilities, desalination plants, and water supply networks have become part of the critical infrastructure exposed to threat in the context of the current war. Reports indicate that military strikes and war-related disruptions have already affected water-related installations, including an attack that led to the disruption of a desalination plant on Iran's Qeshm Island, thereby impacting water supplies to several villages, in addition to other attacks in some Gulf states, such as a strike on a desalination facility in Bahrain, among other locations.

These developments carry particular significance in a region that is among the most water-scarce in the world. The Arab Gulf states, for example, rely heavily on seawater desalination to meet their potable water needs, with some countries depending on desalination plants to supply between 70 percent and 90 percent of their water requirements. This renders such facilities highly vulnerable to any form of military targeting. In this context, the current war in the Middle East raises fundamental questions about the transformation of water from a developmental resource into an element within the equations of power and geopolitical conflict.

Accordingly, this research paper seeks to analyze the implications of the ongoing war between Iran, the United States, and Israel for water security in the Middle East, with particular emphasis on the phenomenon of water militarization, patterns of targeting water infrastructure, and the impact of the conflict on the stability of life systems in the region. It further aims to explore potential future scenarios for this phenomenon in light of continuing military escalation and regional geopolitical tensions.

Design & Art Direction

Monem Aboutaleb

First:

The Concept of the Militarization of Water in International Relations

The concept of the militarization of water, or the weaponization of water, emerged in the 1990s to describe the use of water resources or related infrastructure as instruments in armed conflict. It refers to the deliberate employment of water or water systems to inflict harm on an adversary or to achieve military or political gains. Contemporary studies indicate that the militarization of water can take several forms, including:

- Cutting off water supplies to civilian populations or opposing forces.
- Destroying water infrastructure such as dams, treatment facilities, and desalination plants.
- Flooding areas through the destruction of dams.
- Polluting water sources or disrupting their operation.

In essence, the militarization of water signifies a shift whereby water ceases to be merely an environmental, humanitarian, or economic resource and becomes instead a strategic instrument in conflict and a legitimate military target. According to contemporary frameworks, this concept is associated with several interrelated dimensions, most notably:

- Water as a military target: In this context, water infrastructure—such as dams, desalination and treatment plants, canals, and pipelines—is treated as a legitimate military objective that may be struck to disrupt an adversary's capabilities or paralyze its operations (as is currently occurring in the course of US–Iranian military operations).
- Water as a weapon: Control over water flows is employed as a tool of pressure to secure political or military advantages (for example, Turkey's regulation or restriction of the flow of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers to exert pressure on Syria and Iraq).

• Water as a proxy for conflict: In some cases, water is not the direct cause of war but becomes a domain of contestation and a theater of military operations, wherein control over or protection of water resources forms an integral component of a state's military doctrine.

- Water securitization: The stage of "securitizing" or politicizing water typically precedes its militarization; at this stage, water is shifted from a conventional humanitarian and developmental framework into the realm of national security, thereby justifying the use of force to protect or secure access to it.

Reviving the Concept of the Militarization of Water

A series of rapidly evolving international developments has contributed to the revival of this concept on the global stage, particularly in light of the increasing targeting of water infrastructure in armed conflicts and the mounting pressures associated with climate change and water scarcity. Foremost among these global developments are the following:

1. Climate Change as a Risk Multiplier

Climate change is no longer merely an environmental issue; it has become a geopolitical driver and arguably the most significant factor behind the resurgence of this concept over the past two decades, due to:

- Water scarcity and climate variability: The challenge is no longer limited to reduced water availability, but extends to unprecedented disruptions in precipitation patterns and snowmelt cycles. Rivers that once served as stable water sources (such as the Tigris and Euphrates) have become increasingly prone to drying, while other regions are experiencing destructive flooding. This growing uncertainty encourages states to pursue unilateral solutions—such as constructing dams or undertaking projects without coordination or international cooperation—thereby exacerbating tensions and fueling further conflict.

- The intensification of climate-induced displacement and migration: Severe droughts have adverse effects on food security and agriculture, prompting population displacement (as previously observed in Syria,

where drought was among the contributing factors to unrest). When large numbers of water-scarcity-driven migrants cross borders, the resulting pressure on downstream water resources becomes a matter of national security, creating conditions conducive to the consideration of coercive or even military responses.

Accordingly, increasing water scarcity and the pressures of climate change are likely to exacerbate political and social tensions, particularly in states that depend on shared water resources or suffer from weak resource governance institutions. In such fragile environments, water may shift from a resource for development to an instrument of pressure or a factor in political and military conflict.

2. The Escalation of Targeting Water Infrastructure in Contemporary Conflicts

The past decade has witnessed a marked increase in attacks on water facilities during armed conflicts, with hundreds of incidents involving violence against water resources and infrastructure worldwide—ranging from the destruction of dams and pumping stations to the deliberate disruption of water supplies to civilian populations. Several recent conflicts have underscored the strategic role of water in warfare, most notably the war between Russia and Ukraine since 2022. The destruction of the Kakhovka Dam in 2023 resulted in widespread flooding and significant environmental and humanitarian consequences, serving as a clear example of the use of water infrastructure as an instrument of modern warfare.

Similarly, conflicts in Syria and Yemen have seen repeated instances of targeting water networks or cutting off supplies to besieged cities, leading to acute humanitarian crises and drawing renewed attention to the risks associated with the militarization of water resources.

In the ongoing war between Iran, the United States, and Israel, the concept has once again moved to the forefront following a US strike on a desalination plant on Iran's Qeshm Island, as well as an Iranian drone attack that damaged a desalination facility in Bahrain. These developments represent a direct exchange of strikes on water installations within the context of this conflict, establishing a dangerous precedent in the militarization of water.

3. The Emergence of the Cyber Dimension in the Militarization of Water

Many modern water networks have come to rely on digital control systems, rendering them increasingly vulnerable to cyberattacks. Attacks targeting water management systems have grown in frequency, highlighting this emerging risk. For example, in 2020, water facilities in Israel were subjected to a cyber intrusion attempt targeting control systems of water pumping stations. Cybersecurity experts viewed this incident as a clear indication of the potential use of digital attacks to disrupt water services or compromise water quality. This cyber dimension has introduced a new layer to the militarization of water, whereby targeting water resources no longer requires direct physical destruction, but can instead be achieved through the disruption of the digital systems that operate water networks.

4. The Growing Interconnection Between Water Security and Energy Security

There is an increasing interdependence between water and energy infrastructure. In many countries—particularly in the Middle East—water supplies depend heavily on energy, whether through desalination plants or the long-distance pumping of water. In this context, targeting energy infrastructure in armed conflicts may indirectly disrupt water supplies, effectively integrating both sectors into a single, interconnected system of critical infrastructure. Large-scale strikes on gas and oil facilities in the Gulf and Iran, for instance, have heightened the risk of disruptions to energy-dependent desalination plants.

Second:

Why the Middle East?

The Middle East and North Africa region represents a unique global case with regard to water scarcity, due to a complex interplay of geographic, climatic, demographic, and political factors. These dynamics make the region particularly susceptible to the transformation of water into an instrument of conflict and militarization.

• Acute structural scarcity and population growth

The region possesses only about 2 percent of the world's renewable freshwater resources , despite its large population and the additional pressures resulting from displacement and migration. This creates a persistent structural gap between available resources and rising demand. At the same time, approximately 83 percent of the region's land area experiences severe water stress, with projections indicating that nearly the entire population could face acute water scarcity by 2050. This imbalance is not temporary, but rather a structural reality that renders water an inherently scarce resource—and therefore more prone to politicization and militarization compared to other regions.

• A region below the "water poverty line"

According to international standards, a country is considered "water poor" if per capita water availability falls below 1,000 cubic meters annually. In the Middle East, average per capita water availability is significantly below this threshold. In the Gulf states, per capita availability ranges approximately between 80 and 150 cubic meters per year, while countries such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar fall below the threshold of "absolute scarcity," with less than 100 cubic meters per capita annually. Indeed, the Gulf states collectively fall within the category of "extreme scarcity," at around 500 cubic meters per capita per year. These figures indicate that water in the region is not merely scarce, but essential for

survival. Between 60 percent and 90 percent of drinking water is derived from desalination, and in some countries—such as Kuwait and Qatar—dependence is nearly total. This significantly heightens the strategic sensitivity of water resources, making control over them tantamount to control over the very means of life for the population.

• Climatic Conditions: Drought as the Norm Rather Than the Exception

Climatic conditions in the Middle East have become a primary driver of intensifying water scarcity, transforming it into a persistent structural crisis. Geographically, the region lies within the arid and semi-arid belt, where low precipitation and high evaporation rates constitute the norm rather than the exception, making it one of the most drought-prone regions in the world. Climate change is expected to reduce rainfall levels by between 5 percent and 20 percent, alongside rising temperatures, thereby accelerating water loss and diminishing available resources. More critically, evaporation rates are increasing at a pace approximately five times faster than any gains in precipitation. This means that even in scenarios of stable or marginally improved rainfall, land conditions are becoming progressively drier. Reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change project an additional decline in freshwater resources ranging from 15 percent to 45 percent by mid-century, reflecting a shift from cyclical drought patterns to a sustained climatic condition. In this context, drought in the Middle East is no longer merely an environmental phenomenon, but a structural factor reshaping the equation of water security and heightening the likelihood of water being employed as an instrument of conflict and militarization.

• Dependence on Transboundary Water Resources

Reliance on transboundary water resources represents one of the most critical sources of geopolitical vulnerability in the Middle East. Data indicate that approximately 60 percent of the region's water supply originates from beyond national borders—the highest proportion globally. This dependence reaches critical levels in several countries: both Egypt and Bahrain rely on external sources for more than 96 percent of their total water resources, while Syria depends on such sources for nearly 72 percent and Iraq for approximately 60 percent, largely through upstream flows. In the Tigris–

Euphrates basin, downstream states such as Syria and Iraq rely heavily on water originating in Turkey, with dependency rates reaching approximately 72 percent and 61 percent, respectively. This structural reality transforms water into a "sovereign transboundary resource," whereby upstream states, through dam construction or flow regulation, can exert direct influence over the water and food security of downstream countries. Consequently, international rivers shift from shared resources into instruments of geopolitical leverage, increasing the potential for tension and conflict and rendering the militarization of water a viable option within regional power dynamics.

• Heavy Reliance on Desalination: Solution and Vulnerability

The reliance on desalination in the Middle East—particularly in the Gulf states—constitutes a critical strategic solution to natural water scarcity, yet it simultaneously represents a major source of structural vulnerability in water security. The region accounts for approximately 41.8 percent of global operational desalination capacity, with thousands of plants producing tens of millions of cubic meters of water daily. Estimates suggest that the Gulf states alone produce nearly 40 percent of the world's desalinated water. Desalination has effectively become a lifeline for these countries, some of which depend on it for between 70 percent and 90 percent of their drinking water supply. This heavy dependence renders the water system highly susceptible to militarization. Desalination plants are geographically concentrated along coastlines, energy-intensive, and closely linked to electricity grids. As a result, any targeting of energy infrastructure or coastal facilities can lead to the rapid disruption of water supplies.

• The Economic Dimension of Water in the Region

The water crisis in the Middle East has evolved from a humanitarian service issue into a direct threat to growth and macroeconomic stability. World Bank estimates indicate that climate change–driven water scarcity could result in some of the highest economic losses globally, reaching between 6 percent and 14 percent of GDP by 2050. The impact is not confined to the long term; a 20 percent reduction in water supply could lead to a decline of approximately 10 percent in GDP in certain Middle Eastern countries,

accompanied by reduced labor demand and diminished agricultural productivity. More than 70 percent of the region's economic output is exposed to high levels of water stress, compared to roughly 22 percent globally, reflecting an unprecedented degree of vulnerability in regional economies. These indicators underscore that water is no longer merely an input to production, but has become a structural constraint on growth, a driver of rising food and energy costs, and a contributing factor to migration and social instability. As such, it constitutes a critical element in the equation of economic security and is increasingly susceptible to use as an instrument of pressure within the context of regional conflicts.

Israel: Heavy Reliance on Desalination Plants

Israel presents a case of "natural scarcity versus industrial abundance," whereby limited natural water resources have been offset through advanced desalination and water treatment technologies. The country's water sector relies heavily on seawater desalination, with recent data indicating that approximately 70 percent to 80 percent of its drinking water is sourced from desalination plants along the Mediterranean coast, including facilities such as Sorek, Ashdod, and Hadera. This system produces more than 600–700 million cubic meters annually, making Israel one of the most desalination-dependent countries in the world, with a near-structural reliance on this technology—particularly as dependence on natural sources such as Lake Tiberias has declined.

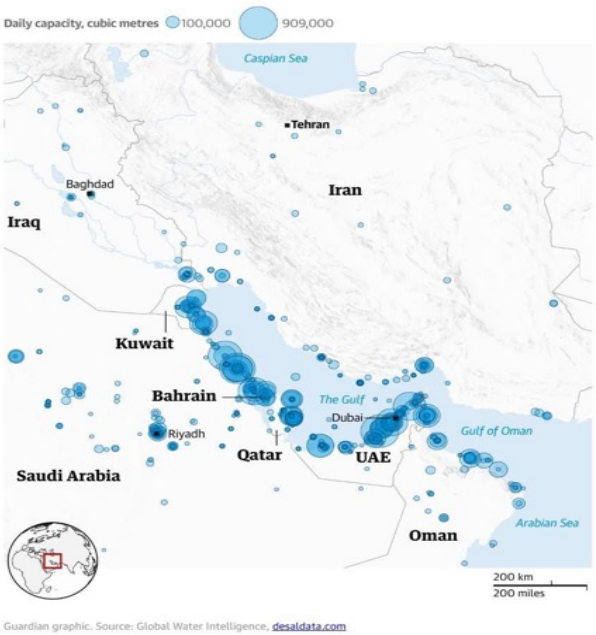
In terms of per capita water availability, Israel's renewable natural water resources remain relatively limited, averaging approximately 200–300 cubic meters per person per year—well below the water poverty threshold of 1,000 cubic meters per capita annually. While the extensive use of desalination and water reuse has provided a degree of water stability, it has also resulted in a high concentration of critical infrastructure along a limited number of coastal sites. This concentration increases vulnerability during times of conflict, particularly in light of the growing likelihood of such facilities being targeted in regional confrontations.

Iran: Natural Resources and Water Mismanagement

Iran relies on a traditional mix of water resources that differs from the models observed in the Gulf states or Israel, as it depends predominantly on natural sources—both surface and groundwater—rather than desalination. This reliance makes it more vulnerable to drought and climate change. Water levels across nearly all of the country's dams have declined significantly, with storage falling to approximately 10 percent of capacity. Data indicate a sharp deterioration in per capita water availability, declining from around 1,500 cubic meters annually to approximately 800 cubic meters by 2025, placing Iran among countries experiencing very high water stress (with 80–100 percent utilization of available resources). With the intensification of climate change, Iran has increasingly faced structural weaknesses in water management.

In the context of the current war, this vulnerability has evolved into a strategic liability, as even limited targeting of water infrastructure could rapidly trigger humanitarian crises and formally incorporate water into the arsenal of military conflict in the region.

Map of Desalination Plants in the Region according to a recent report by The Guardian



The map illustrates the distribution of seawater desalination plants across the Gulf states and the Arabian Sea, highlighting the daily production capacity of each facility in cubic meters. Desalination plants are heavily concentrated in the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait, where these countries rely primarily on desalination to meet their water needs. This concentration renders such facilities potential strategic targets in the event of escalating conflicts or the militarization of water in the region. The map also highlights disparities in plant capacities, with some facilities reaching daily production levels of approximately 909,000 cubic meters.

Third:

The Militarization of Water in the Current War: The Iran-US-Israel Model

Developments associated with the ongoing regional war between Iran, the United States, and Israel point to a qualitative shift in the nature of conflict, as water infrastructure has effectively entered the realm of military targets after having long been regarded as a relatively stable red line. The targeting of desalination facilities has intensified: a desalination plant in Bahrain was struck by a drone attack, causing material damage and raising widespread concerns about the security of water supplies in the Gulf. Similarly, a desalination facility on Iran's Qeshm Island was targeted, disrupting water supplies to approximately 30 villages. This marks a significant precedent, reflecting the transition of warfare toward the direct targeting of vital resources and confirming that water is no longer insulated from conflict but has become part of the operational theater.

Within this context, the current war has also demonstrated that the interdependence between water and energy constitutes a strategic vulnerability susceptible to military exploitation. Attacks on critical energy infrastructure—such as the South Pars gas field, the largest gas field in the world, which resulted in the disruption of approximately 12 percent of Iran's gas production, or the Ras Laffan gas facilities in Qatar—pose direct risks to the energy systems upon which desalinated water depends. This, in turn, affects the electricity generation capacity required to operate desalination plants and water pumping systems. Consequently, targeting power grids can indirectly disrupt water production, given the energy-intensive nature of desalination. In this sense, water need not be directly targeted to be effectively disrupted; striking interconnected systems can achieve the same outcome.

In the case of Israel, desalination and water treatment facilities emerge as high-value strategic targets in any escalation scenario involving Iran. Targeting desalination plants—whether through precision missiles, drones,

or even cyberattacks—constitutes a plausible option within the spectrum of non-conventional deterrence tools, given the disproportionate impact relative to the limited military cost. The coastal concentration of these facilities further exposes them to long-range threats, particularly in the event of an expanded regional confrontation.

In terms of impact, any partial or total disruption of these plants could trigger a rapid water shock within Israel. Technical estimates suggest that the loss of a single major facility could reduce water supply by approximately 10 percent to 20 percent within a short period. In the event of simultaneous targeting of multiple installations, the state could be compelled to implement immediate water rationing, prioritizing domestic consumption over agricultural and industrial use. Moreover, the interdependence between desalination and energy implies that targeting electricity networks could produce similar outcomes, thereby compounding the vulnerability of the water system.

The war has also brought renewed attention to the geographic vulnerabilities associated with strategic chokepoints, most notably the Strait of Hormuz, through which a substantial share of global energy trade passes. Military escalation has led to significant disruptions in maritime navigation and a sharp decline in tanker traffic, thereby affecting energy supplies and, consequently, the production of desalinated water in Gulf states. Given that these countries rely almost entirely on desalination, any disruption in this corridor threatens not only energy security but also directly undermines water and food security.

Moreover, the current conflict has not merely revived the concept of the militarization of water; it has advanced it into a more complex pattern within the framework of hybrid warfare, where military operations intersect with economic pressure and the targeting of critical infrastructure. Even limited targeting or disruption of desalination facilities can trigger water crises within days in highly dependent states, with rapidly cascading humanitarian consequences. This dynamic raises the risk of broader escalation, in which vital resources are transformed into instruments of deterrence and reciprocal pressure. Accordingly, the present war does not simply reflect the use of water as a weapon, but signals the emergence of a new phase in which water occupies a central position in the equations of power and regional conflict.

Fourth:

The Strategic and Humanitarian Dimensions of the Militarization of Water

Control over water resources in the Middle East has become a decisive factor in reshaping regional power balances and security dynamics. Water, particularly in Gulf states, provides leverage to influence the internal stability of other countries, whether through the regulation of flows or the targeting of infrastructure. Disruptions in water supply can lead to significant declines in economic productivity and institutional stability, rendering water an instrument of non-conventional deterrence within conflict strategies.

At the humanitarian level, the militarization of water directly exacerbates humanitarian crises, as the destruction or disruption of water systems deprives millions of people of essential services. Data indicate that more than 2 billion people worldwide lack access to safe drinking water, with disproportionately high concentrations in conflict-affected areas. This contributes to the spread of waterborne diseases and malnutrition. Furthermore, disruptions in water supply accelerate patterns of displacement, as basic resources become unavailable, transforming water into an underlying driver of protracted humanitarian crises and a factor in undermining national security and internal stability.

In this sense, water emerges as a central element not only in the management of conflicts, but also in their reproduction and long-term intensification.

Economically, water has emerged as a critical constraint on growth and stability. It directly affects productivity, economic growth rates, and investment attractiveness, while also exerting significant pressure on key sectors such as agriculture and energy. Agriculture is highly water-intensive, whereas desalination requires substantial energy inputs.

Consequently, any reduction in water supply leads to declining agricultural output and rising food prices, thereby intensifying economic and social pressures in affected states.

Strategically, the implications extend beyond the water sector to encompass national security and societal stability. Disruptions to water supply in advanced urban environments can trigger rapid economic and social disturbances, undermining public confidence in the state's capacity to manage crises effectively.

From an environmental perspective, the targeting of water infrastructure and desalination facilities results in both direct and indirect water contamination. Attacks on desalination plants or pumping networks may lead to the leakage of chemicals or increased salinity levels, while strikes on energy facilities can disrupt pumping and treatment systems, rendering water less suitable for drinking and agriculture. This, in turn, accelerates land degradation, salinization, and drought conditions. Beyond these immediate impacts, the current war has contributed to the release of pollutants through the destruction of industrial and energy facilities, including emissions of gases and contaminants into the atmosphere and the occurrence of acid rain. These developments further degrade ecosystems in coastal areas and transboundary river systems. In this sense, the militarization of water transforms it into a long-term environmental risk.

Fifth:

The Iranian War and Future Scenarios

Water security scenarios in the Middle East, under the current tensions, appear open to several fundamental strategic trajectories:

- Worst-case scenario: This entails an expansion of direct military operations targeting water resources and their use as instruments of pressure in warfare. Such a trajectory would lead to the erosion of water resource management systems, the destruction of infrastructure, an increase in both local and transboundary conflicts, and a rise in displacement. Under this scenario, attacks on dams, pipelines, and desalination and treatment facilities could intensify, exacerbating humanitarian crises and reshaping water security priorities along purely military lines.

- Most stable scenario: This scenario assumes a near-term cessation of hostilities, followed by the strengthening of regional cooperation and transboundary resource management through effective diplomatic frameworks. Such efforts would aim to prevent the targeting of water and energy infrastructure and avoid the escalation of current conflicts into resource-based wars that could undermine the humanitarian, social, and economic structures of the region. Gulf states, as well as Iran and Israel, would all face significant repercussions if attacks on critical water and energy facilities were to persist.

The evolution of these scenarios will depend largely on the ability of states and international organizations to coordinate and activate legal frameworks that protect water as both a humanitarian necessity and a political right, rather than allowing it to be reduced to a mere instrument in conflict. This underscores the urgent need to strengthen international legal regimes that prohibit the use of water as a weapon in armed conflicts.

Conclusion

Water in the Middle East is no longer merely a natural resource; it has evolved into a strategic instrument at the intersection of military, economic, and humanitarian dimensions. The ongoing war between Iran, the United States, and Israel has exposed the fragility of water systems across the region—whether in terms of absolute water scarcity and heavy reliance on desalination in the Gulf states, the dependence on desalination, treatment, and energy infrastructure in Israel, or the extensive reliance on surface and groundwater resources in Iran. As a result, water has become a central element of the conflict, while simultaneously emerging as a decisive factor in national security and social stability.

The militarization of water has proven to extend well beyond the military sphere, encompassing environmental, health, economic, and social dimensions. These include water contamination, land degradation, declining agricultural productivity, mass displacement, and the rise of what is termed environmental migration—namely, the movement of populations driven by climate change and resource scarcity, particularly water. Such dynamics pose a broad threat to human security. Heavy dependence on desalination and water reuse, as well as the overexploitation of natural resources, further heightens the vulnerability of these systems to military targeting or environmental disruption.

Accordingly, it has become imperative to integrate water management into national strategies and diplomatic frameworks, while strengthening regional and international legal regimes aimed at protecting water resources and safeguarding the right of populations to access safe drinking water. The adoption of transboundary water cooperation policies, the protection of critical infrastructure, and investment in sustainable water technologies represent the most effective pathways for mitigating the impacts of conflict and transforming water from an instrument of confrontation into a cornerstone of peace and regional stability.

In conclusion, the militarization of water in the Middle East, in the context of the current war, can be regarded as a strategic indicator reflecting the level of regional tension and the scale of future risks. It underscores that water resource management is not merely an environmental issue, but a matter of strategic national security and human security alike.

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