

Syria

Council of Arab Environmental Affairs Ministers

Developing strategies to protect environmental infrastructure, particularly water and energy, from being utilized as tactical weapons in environmental warfare

Past and Current International Action

In 1976, the General Assembly added a resolution preventing what has become known as active environmental warfare; defined as “intentional modification to the environment causing widespread, long lasting, or severe effects” (The International Law of Environmental Warfare: Active and Passive Damage During Armed Conflict). Later, in October of 1978, Protocol I was passed as an addition to the Geneva Convention of 1977, stating that passive environmental warfare was a violation of international law only if the damage caused was “considered widespread, long lasting, or severe” (The International Law of Environmental Warfare: Active and Passive Damage During Armed Conflict). The goal of these laws was to minimize civilian injuries, as disrupting the environment directly affects living conditions and access to necessary resources, such as water and electricity. These two resolutions and the language used in them allowed for differentiation between passive and active environmental warfare, although the two resolutions are ambiguous, causing problems in the enforcement of these laws today. One important UN intervention was during the 1991 Gulf Wars, when international law was implemented to hold Iraq liable for environmental damage caused by the intentional dumping of oil into the Persian Gulf (The New Middle Eastern Wars: To Protect Civilians, Protect Environmental Infrastructure). This set the precedent for future UN interventions in similar situations. Our task is to revisit these resolutions and modify them, taking into account the

political instability and civil war in Syria and the Arab world today, as it is clear that the current international laws are not doing enough for the situation.

Syria's Position

As the target of environmental warfare during its civil war, Syria supports international law preventing environmental warfare, and has therefore signed Protocol I of the Geneva Convention (Global Edge: Syria). Syria recognizes the impact of environmental warfare on civilians during war, as the Tishrin and Tabqa hydroelectric dams in Syria were both under rebel or ISIS control, cutting off nearly 2 million people from water access in 2016 (The New Middle Eastern Wars: To Protect Civilians, Protect Environmental Infrastructure). As a country divided by a proxy war, Syria has been greatly impacted by the negative effects of environmental warfare. Therefore, Syria is eager to help pass legislation preventing further damage from being caused to its environmental infrastructure. Moreover, the political instability and violence in Syria has caused 13.1 people in need of humanitarian aid and more than 11.8 million internal and externally placed refugees (Syrian Refugee Crisis: Facts, FAQ's, and How to Help). These extreme, chaotic conditions have already strained the Syrian government's resources, without the added pressure of attacks on their water and energy sources.

Water scarcity has always been a problem for Syria, as the country is largely desertified and shares all major rivers with neighboring countries (World Factbook: Syria). This makes the protection of the little water infrastructure Syria possesses even more important for the continued safety of its civilians. According to a 2012 estimate, 78% of all groundwater in Syria is unsustainable (Water, Drought, Climate Change, and Conflict in Syria). This shows that Syria's water resources are not only limited currently, but on a path to being even more sparse in the

future, as they're unsustainable. This means that water will only continue to grow as an obstacle for the country of Syria. Syrian agriculture and the food supply system also rely heavily on this unsustainable water system, making its water infrastructure an ideal target for enemy groups.

The Syrian government cares about environmental warfare, especially water, because “the targeting of water systems highlights the strategic value of water supply, hydroelectricity, and flood control in water-short regions, (Water, Drought, Climate Change, and Conflict in Syria). Syria is located in one of these previously mentioned water-short regions, and this highlights why environmental warfare prevention is a priority for the country.

Proposed Solutions

Although international law exists regarding environmental warfare, the country of Syria recommends that the distinction between passive and active environmental warfare be clearly defined in future international legislation. The country of Syria believes that this would lead to greater enforcement of existing United Nations legislation if this distinction were made clearer. Environmental warfare, especially active environmental warfare, is a new military technique which “transforms the environment from the surroundings in which man fights, into a tool by which he fights” (The International Law of Environmental Warfare: Active and Passive Damage During Armed Conflict). In the past, the confusion in the definition of environmental warfare and the lack of enforcement has prevented more care from being exercised to allow “sustainable development and recovery from conflict” (Secretary- General’s Message on Exploitation of the Environment in War and Armed Conflict). However, it is no longer the past. As environmental warfare has been observed in recent wars such as the Gulf Wars and Vietnam War, it’s time for

new legislation to be implemented as we now have more information on the detrimental ramifications for civilian populations.

While Syria advises the enforcement of international law, Syria also believes that as a country, it should take measures to lessen the implications of environmental warfare when it inevitably occurs. Therefore, Syria believes that in rebuilding already damaged infrastructure, there should be a focus on withstanding future bombings and attacks (Syria: Government). This would reduce the effects of enemy attacks on environmental infrastructure, making them easier to recover from. However, this would require an increase in funding for the reconstruction, but Syria believes that the long term effects in future wars would be worth the increased cost (Global Edge: Syria). As environmental infrastructure significantly impacts civilian life, Syria believes it could redirect bilateral funds from currently donating countries, such as the United Kingdom and United States. Once the country is determined politically stable, the Syrian government would use these funds to reconstruct in a responsible and war resilient fashion.

Syria also recommends that sustainable water practices are increased in agriculture. This would include the responsible use of irrigation water, as currently less than 65% of the water used by farmers is absorbed into the crops (Sustainable Water Management in Agriculture under Climate Change). The proper management of water would help tremendously, as water is considered the “most critical resource for sustainable agricultural development worldwide” (Sustainable Water Management in Agriculture under Climate Change). Increasing the quality of water management would minimize the effect on civilians if the water supply was reduced or cut off during war, as the food supply system could still somewhat function, even with less water (The New Middle Eastern Wars: To Protect Civilians, Protect Environmental Infrastructure).

Reducing the amount of water used for agricultural purposes would also be beneficial to Syria, as water is a scarce resource.

As possible solutions to the problem of the use of environmental infrastructure as warfare, which Syria believes international law should regulate; Syria suggests a clarification of international law, as well as sustainable water practices and the replacement of damaged environmental infrastructure with war resilient infrastructure.