



**Accelerating inclusive
implementation of SDG 6
for improved resilient water
security in the Arab region**

Background note

74%

**access to
safely managed
drinking water**
in 2024, up from
70.1% in 2015

54.7%

**sanitation
services**
in 2024, up from
44.7% in 2015

129M

**lack access
to basic water
services**

223M

**lack safely
managed
sanitation
services**

Since 2015, the Arab region has made notable progress towards improving access to safe water and sanitation services for all, but conflict has threatened these advances and exposed new vulnerabilities. ESCWA member States have made significant investments in water, wastewater and desalination facilities to address the impacts of various stresses, including climate change, on growing water scarcity. However, these facilities are particularly susceptible to attacks in times of war as evidenced by recent damage to desalination facilities in the Gulf. Furthermore, water infrastructure has been severely impacted across the Levant and the Sudan owing to past and ongoing conflict. Going forwards, sustaining and advancing progress towards SDG 6 will require the design and implementation of resilient water and sanitation infrastructure and governance systems capable of withstanding a wide range of threats.

The main markers of SDG 6 achievement to date include the following:

- Increasing the portion of the region's population with access to safely managed drinking water from 70.1 per cent in 2015 to 74 per cent in 2024.
- Increasing the share of the population using safely managed sanitation services from 44.7 per cent in 2015 to 54.7 per cent in 2024.

Nonetheless, there is significant need for improvement as more than 129 million people in the region still lacked access to basic drinking water services in 2022, and 223 million people have lacked access to safe sanitation services since 2024.¹

Closing this achievement gap will require significant investment not only in infrastructure but also appropriate training and capacity-building for water governance. Water diplomacy and the adherence to international law that protects water supplies in times of conflict are also essential.

Baseline assessment

Achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all (SDG target 6.1)

While the proportion of the region's population with access to safely managed drinking water services rose four percentage

¹ . ESCWA, *Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals in the Arab region in 2026*, 2026.

points between 2015 and 2024, 26.2 per cent of the population (around 129 million people) in the Arab region lack access to safe drinking water resources.^{2,3}

Achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations (SDG target 6.2)

In terms of sanitation, the Arab region has seen significant gains, with the share of the population using safely managed sanitation services increasing

by 10 percentage points to 54.7 per cent between 2015 and 2024.⁴ Nonetheless, 45.3 per cent of the population (223 million people) remain without access to safe sanitation services.⁵ Access to overall basic sanitation has improved from 82 per cent in 2015 to 89 per cent in 2022, with marked rural-urban disparities.⁶

In terms of hygiene services, 14 per cent of the population (70.7 million people) remain without access to basic handwashing facilities.⁷ Open defecation has been largely eliminated, declining fourfold since 2000, with only 2.9 per cent of the population engaging in this practice in 2024.⁸

Access to safe water and sanitation services

People without access

to safe drinking water services

26.2%

129 million people



to safe sanitation services

45.3%

223 million people



to basic handwashing facilities

14%

70.7 million people



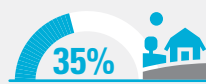
People with access



of the urban population



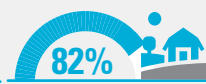
of the urban population



of the rural population



of the urban population



of the rural population

Source: ESCWA, *Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals in the Arab region in 2026*, 2026.

2 . Ibid.

3 . Ibid.

4 . Ibid.

5 . Ibid.

6 . ESCWA, *ESCWA Water Development Report 10: The Water Action Decade (2018-2028): Midterm Review in the Arab region*, 2025; E/ESCWA/C.4/2025/6.

7 . ESCWA, *Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals in the Arab region in 2026*, 2026.

8 . Ibid.

Improve water quality by reducing pollution, eliminating dumping and minimizing release of hazardous chemicals and materials, halving the proportion of untreated wastewater and substantially increasing recycling and safe reuse globally (SDG target 6.3)

While water scarcity is the most frequently addressed challenge in the Arab region, water quality is also a critical concern. Since 2023, 4 out of 10 water bodies have been classified as having poor water quality.⁹ However, since 2024, the Arab regional average for safely treated domestic wastewater flows stood at 63.2 per cent, above the global average of 55.8 per cent.¹⁰ Efforts are being made to increase the proportion of treated wastewater and its reuse, given its importance as a supplemental resource.

Substantially increase water-use efficiency across all sectors and ensure sustainable withdrawals and supply of freshwater to address water scarcity and substantially reduce the number of people suffering from water scarcity (SDG target 6.4)

In the Arab region, water-use efficiency increased slightly from \$10.8 to \$11.6 per cubic meter between 2015 and 2022, but remained well below the global

average of \$21.4 per cubic meter in 2022.^{11,12} There are also notable disparities within the region on this target: water-use efficiency in high-income countries was significantly higher at \$45.1 per cubic meter compared with both middle-income and low-income countries with water-use efficiency at \$7 and \$2.2 per cubic meter, respectively.¹³

Water stress has increased over the last decade as levels of freshwater withdrawals as a proportion of available freshwater resources in Arab countries reached 114 per cent in 2022, a 13 per cent increase from 2015. The Arab region average is considerably greater than the global average of 18 per cent.¹⁴

Implement integrated water resources management at all levels, including through transboundary cooperation as appropriate (SDG target 6.5)

Arab region scores on integrated water resources management (IWRM) are on par with the global average at 56 per cent and 57 per cent, respectively. However, eight Arab countries with medium-low to low IWRM implementation levels are unlikely to meet the global target in 2030 unless progress is significantly accelerated.¹⁵

Transboundary water cooperation is a serious concern for the Arab region as

⁹ . Ibid.

¹⁰ . Ibid.

¹¹ . Ibid.

¹² . ESCWA, *Arab SDG Monitor*.

¹³ . ESCWA, *Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals in the Arab region in 2026*, 2026.

¹⁴ . Ibid.

¹⁵ . ESCWA, *2024 Progress report on the implementation of integrated water resources management in the Arab region*, 2024.

17 of the 20 Arab States are riparian to either a shared surface water basin or an aquifer. Only 27 per cent of shared water bodies currently have operational agreements for cooperation in place. This is well below the global average of 59 per cent.¹⁶ Significant efforts must be made to prioritize water diplomacy to close this achievement gap.

Expand international cooperation and capacity-building support to developing countries in water- and sanitation-related activities and programmes, including water harvesting, desalination, water efficiency, wastewater treatment, recycling and reuse technologies (SDG target 6.A)

Significantly greater international support is needed to strengthen water and sanitation services in the Arab region. The amount of official development assistance received in this category declined by 34 per cent between 2015 and 2021.¹⁷

Furthermore, while desalination and wastewater treatment facilities have expanded significantly, they are highly concentrated in a few large facilities.

With regard to capacity-building support and in response to existing gaps, the UN-Water SDG 6 Capacity Development Initiative¹⁸ provides a structured and demand-driven framework, through which countries can develop national capacity-development plans. Jordan is currently piloting the initiative in the Arab region, and efforts are ongoing to expand the initiative's reach.

**17
Arab States**

are riparian to either
a shared surface
water basin or an
aquifer

**Only
27%**

of shared water
bodies currently
have operational
agreements for
cooperation in
place

**34%
decline between
2015 and 2021**

in development
assistance for water
and sanitation
highlights the urgent
need for international
support

¹⁶ . ESCWA, Transboundary cooperation in the Arab region: third regional report on SDG indicator 6.5.2, 2025.

¹⁷ . ESCWA, Arab Sustainable Development Report, 2024.

¹⁸ . United Nations, SDG 6 Capacity Development Initiative.

Escalating impact of conflict on the Arab region

The impact of conflict on water resources in the region has intensified due to multiple wars across the past decade. In the Syrian Arab Republic, losses in potable water owing to conflict reached almost 50 per cent of projected capacity in 2015.¹⁹ In the Sudan, air strikes and bombings have damaged water treatment plants and pipes in Khartoum, leading to severe water shortages.²⁰

More recently, since the war on Gaza in 2023, water resources in the Strip have been severely affected. The three primary desalination plants are inoperable or operating at highly reduced capacity due to energy shortages. Within the first month of the war, water production fell to 5 per cent of pre-conflict levels.²¹ In southern Lebanon, between October 2023 and November 2024, nearly 30 water pumping

facilities connected to public networks and a similar number of water pipeline systems were damaged.²² During the current conflict, water desalination plants in the Gulf have been targeted, making them a major source of concern. The bulk of water desalination is undertaken in a limited number of plants: more than 90 per cent of the Gulf's desalinated water originates from just 56 plants.²³ This makes them easily identifiable targets.

Moreover, water resources across the region are at risk of contamination due to the use of white phosphorous and chemical bombs and the increased possibility of oil spills.²⁴ Conflict also diverts resources away from climate adaptation to address emergency relief needs and reconstruction.

50%
loss

of potable water capacity in the Syrian Arab Republic due to conflict

The **3** main
desalination
plants

in Gaza are inoperable since the 2023 war

30
water pumping
facilities

and a similar number of pipeline systems were damaged in southern Lebanon

90%
of Gulf
desalinated
water

comes from 56 plants, making them highly vulnerable during conflict

19 . ESCWA, *Policy gap analysis: an examination of the policy-based gaps hindering Syrian Arab Republic's peacebuilding process*, 2020.

20 . European Union Agency for Asylum, *Conflict-related infrastructure damage and other war impacts*, 2025.

21 . ESCWA, *War on Gaza: weaponizing access to water, energy and food*, 2023.

22 . Oxfam and others, *When bombs turn the taps off: the impact of conflict on water infrastructure in Lebanon*, 2025.

23 . Water as a Strategic Resource: Which Countries Control the Rivers & Infrastructure Other Countries Need. Unteachable courses. <https://unteachablecourses.com/water-strategic-resource-2026/>.

24 . ESCWA, *War on Gaza: weaponizing access to water, energy and food*, 2023.

Policy responses to address risks to water resources

Progress towards the achievement of SDG 6 in the region is directly impacted by conflict, in addition to climate change and a lack of access to finance. To ensure achievements to date are maintained and the region continues to advance, the following recommendations should be taken into account:



Ensure that water and other related critical infrastructure are protected during conflict and are not weaponized, in line with international humanitarian law and the human rights to water and sanitation.



Take swift action to diversify water sources, enhancing climate resilience and adopting inclusive governance to tackle challenges exacerbated by climate change and conflict.



Strengthen efforts for inclusive and integrated water management across sectors. The inclusion of vulnerable communities in water management is essential to developing resilient, innovative and sustainable solutions at all levels.



Increase funding to the water sector. International concessional funding is needed in addition to public and private investments in the water sector. Governments are encouraged to strengthen regulatory frameworks to facilitate financing and explore innovative approaches to mobilizing investment in environmentally sustainable water and sanitation infrastructure and services. This should be done while ensuring the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation are upheld, and prioritizing resilient infrastructure to reduce vulnerability to disruption in conflict-prone areas.



Invest in solutions to water stress and build resilience. As agriculture accounts for more than 80 per cent of freshwater withdrawals in the Arab region,^{25,26} it is crucial to invest in sustainable water management in agriculture to reduce vulnerability to water stress, especially in arid and semi-arid areas. Solutions include investment in rainwater harvesting and storage, wastewater reuse, drought-resilient crops, and efficient irrigation systems.



Strengthen inclusive water governance in agrifood systems. Institutionalize robust cross-sector coordination between the water and agriculture sectors at the local, basin and national levels. This integration is a prerequisite for fostering policy coherence and reconciling competing water demands.



Promote the role of women in water security. Ensuring women's active participation and leadership in water governance is crucial for addressing their unique needs and perspectives including by empowering community-based structures, such as water user associations.

²⁵ . Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), *Restoring land and soil health to ensure sustainable and resilient agriculture in the Near East and North Africa region*, 2023.

²⁶ . FAO, *AQUASTAT - FAO's Global Information System on Water and Agriculture* (accessed on 26 May 2025).



Use science-based assessments to guide action on water and climate issues. National authorities working on water and climate issues are encouraged to cooperate in the preparation of nationally determined contributions and national adaptation plans.²⁷



Bridge the data gap for evidence-based policy. Develop and maintain robust and integrated information systems that enable the design of evidence-based water-agriculture policies, and allow practitioners to optimize water-use efficiency. Furthermore, national capacity must be strengthened in the application of geospatial and remote sensing technologies to effectively analyse critical data for informed decision-making.



Leverage the 2026 United Nations Water Conference as a global advocacy platform for Arab water priorities. The conference provides an opportunity to address the need for increased financing and official development assistance to support SDG achievement in the Arab region. It can also serve as a platform to strengthen water diplomacy and advance SDG 6. Lastly, it should facilitate an open discussion of the impact of conflict on water resources, and reinforce compliance with international humanitarian law prohibiting attacks on water infrastructure.

²⁷ . E/ESCWA/EC.9/2024/8.

