Searching for Crumbs in Syria’s Breadbasket

By ROBERT F. WORTH

AR RAQQAH, Syria — The farmlands spreading north and east of this Euphrates River town were once the breadbasket of the region, a vast expanse of golden wheat fields and bucolic sheep herds.

Now, after four consecutive years of drought, this heartland of the Fertile Crescent — including much of neighboring Iraq — appears to be turning barren, climate scientists say. Ancient irrigation systems have collapsed, underground water sources have run dry and hundreds of villages have been abandoned as farmlands turn to cracked desert and grazing animals die off. Sandstorms have become far more common, and vast tent cities of dispossessed farmers and their families have risen up around the larger towns and cities of Syria and Iraq.

“I had 400 acres of wheat, and now it’s all desert,” said Ahmed Abdullah, 48, a farmer who is living in a ragged burlap and plastic tent here with his wife and 12 children alongside many other migrants. “We were forced to flee. Now we are at less than zero — no money, no job, no hope.”

The collapse of farmlands here — which is as much a matter of human mismanagement as of drought — has become a dire economic challenge and a rising security concern for the Syrian and Iraqi governments, which are growing far more dependent on other countries for food and water. Syria, which once prided itself on its self-sufficiency and even exported wheat, is now quietly importing it in ever larger amounts. The country’s total water resources dropped by half between 2002 and 2008, partly through waste and overuse, scientists and water engineers say.

For Syria, which is running out of oil reserves and struggling to draw foreign investment, the farming crisis is an added vulnerability in part because it is taking place in the area where its restive Kurdish minority is centered. Iraq, devastated by war, is now facing a water crisis in both the north and the south that may be unprecedented in its history. Both countries have complained about reduced flow on the Euphrates, thanks to massive upriver dam projects in Turkey that are likely to generate more tension as the water crisis worsens.

The four-year drought in Syria has pushed two million to three million people into extreme poverty, according to a survey completed here this month by the United Nations special rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter.

An estimated 50,000 more families have migrated from rural areas this year, on top of the hundreds of thousands of people who fled in earlier years, Mr. De Schutter said. Syria, with a fast-growing population, has already strained to accommodate more than a million Iraqi refugees in the years since the 2003 invasion.

“It is ironic: this region is the origin of wheat and barley, and now it is among the biggest importers of these products,” said Rami Zurayk, a professor of agricultural and food science at the American University in Beirut who is writing a book on the farming crisis.

The drought has become a delicate subject for the Syrian government, which does not give foreign journalists official permission to write about it or grant access to officials in the Agriculture Ministry. On the road running south from Damascus, displaced farmers and herders can be seen living in tents, but the entrances are closely watched by Syrian security agents, who do not allow journalists in.

Droughts have always taken place here, but “the regional climate is changing in ways that are clearly observable,” said Jeannie Sowers, a professor at the University of New Hampshire who has written on Middle East climate issues. “Whether you call it human-induced climate change or not, much of the region is getting hotter and dryer, combined with more intense, erratic rainfall and flooding in some areas. You will have people migrating as a result, and governments are ill prepared.”
The Syrian government has begun to acknowledge the scale of the problem and has developed a national drought plan, though it has not yet been put in place, analysts say. Poor planning helped create the problem in the first place: Syria spent $15 billion on misguided irrigation projects between 1988 and 2000 with little result, said Elie Elhadj, a Syrian-born author who wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on the topic. Syria continues to grow cotton and wheat in areas that lack sufficient water — making them more vulnerable to drought — because the government views the ability to produce those crops as part of its identity and a bulwark against foreign dependence, analysts say.

Illegal water drills can be seen across Syria and Iraq, and underground water tables are dropping at a rate that is “really frightening,” said Mr. De Schutter, the United Nations expert. There are no reliable nationwide statistics, and some analysts and Western diplomats say they believe the Syrian government is not measuring them.

As in other countries across the Arab world, corruption and failed administration are often to blame. “A lot of powerful people don’t abide by the regulations, and nobody can tame them,” said Nabil Sukkar, a Damascus-based economic analyst.

In Ar Raqqah, many displaced farmers talk about wells running dry, and turning polluted.

“My uncle’s well used to be 70 meters deep, now it’s 130 meters and now the water became salty, so we closed it down,” said Khalaf Ayed Tajim, a stocky sheep herder and farmer who heads a local collective for displaced northerners. He left his native village 60 miles from here when half of his herd died off and his fields dried up, and now lives in a concrete bunker with his 17 children, two wives, and his mother.

In Iraq, 100,000 people had been displaced as of a year ago, according to a United Nations report. More than 70 percent of the ancient underground aqueducts have dried up and been abandoned in the past five years, the report said. Since then, the situation has only worsened.

“We saw whole villages buried in sand,” said Zaid al-Ali, an Iraqi-born lecturer at the Institut d’Études Politiques in Paris who returned in August from a survey of water and farm conditions in Kirkuk and Salahuddin Provinces, in northern Iraq. “Their situation is desperate.”

Southern Iraq has seen similar farming collapses, with reduced river flow from the Euphrates and the drying up of the once vast southern marshes.

Syrian officials say they expect to get help from water-rich Turkey, which has recently become a close ally after years of frosty relations. But it may be too late to save the abandoned villages of northern Syria and Iraq.

“At first, the migrations were temporary, but after three or four years, these people will not come back,” said Abdullah Yahia bin Tahir, the United Nations Food and Agriculture representative in Damascus.

“Back in the village, our houses are covered in dust; it’s as if they’d been destroyed,” said Mr. Tajim, the farmer who moved here two years ago. “We would love to go back, but how? There is no water, no electricity, nothing.”

Hwaida Saad contributed reporting.