

Water Security in Southeast Iraq

The Role of Iran in Environmental Degradation and Subsequent Socio-Economic Consequences on the Marsh Arabs of Southeast Iraq

Introduction

Iraq faces an acute water security crisis, with 70% of its water stemming from Iran, Turkey and Syria.

Iran plays the largest role in Iraq's water crisis because of inconsistent communication between the two countries and unreliable bilateral agreements. Iran also has an aggressive and manipulative foreign policy, using water diplomacy to gain political influence in Iraq.

This has led to Iraq's waters becoming increasingly saline and polluted, making it undrinkable and unusable for pastoral and agricultural purposes, and ultimately leading to desertification. **Southeast Iraq** is where this environmental degradation is most severe, as Iraq's water reserves (which are rapidly depleted) are primarily located in the marshlands there, and on which the Marsh Arabs live on.

The Shatt al-Arab is a key river in southeast Iraq, flowing from the marshlands and through the largest city in the region, Basra. Both Iran and Iraq have official shared governance over the river's flow and maintenance. In recent years, the river has faced low water levels (due to overuse and unregulated extraction) and high salinity levels (from sewage discharge and seawater entering the river), affecting Basra and the marshes upstream.

Methodology and Literature Review

The objective of this project is to use an interdisciplinary approach to tie domestic contexts, diplomacy, and socio-economic research together to answer:

- (1) What are the domestic and diplomatic contexts leading to environmental degradation of the marshlands and water systems in southeast Iraq?
- (2) What are the socio-economic consequences of this continued environmental degradation on the Marsh Arab population in southeast Iraq?

Water security is not specific to Iraq or the Middle East, with desertification and drought occurring in Iran and the Mediterranean. However, the case of Iraq is specifically interesting because of the political context in worsening these environmental consequences, as well as the unique culture of the Marsh Arabs as the victims of this. Literature focusing on Iraq's water security crisis, including domestically produced research, fail to explicitly identify, beyond a general acknowledgement, of the several overlapping factors that underpin environmental and socio-economic changes in southeast Iraq.

Results

Iran and Iraq are at a complete stalemate in the reality of what water diplomacy can be achieved.

Iran is unwilling and unable to develop any comprehensive water diplomacy agreement with Iraq, because:

- (1) A 'water mafia' in Iran successfully lobbies the government to construct unnecessary and environmentally destructive dams to increase the wealth and authority of their members.
- (2) Iran's foreign policy aims to manipulate the flow and provision of water for political influence in Iraq, by installing pro-Iranian politicians.
- (3) Local corrupt politicians in Iraq manipulate the flow of water to gain power by blaming opposition and incumbent politicians for the water security crisis.



Discussion

The socio-economic consequences of this environmental degradation on the Marsh Arabs are severe.

The primary changes involve wealth-creation and subsistence farming practices, because of overly salty water and low water levels. Crop failure can be as high as 90%, and each year, buffalo breeders (a common source of income) see around a third of their livestock die.

Depopulation in the marshes is a major social concern as whole families migrate to the slums of Basra, and those who do stay on the marshlands now live on top open wastewater flow. Over 330,000 citizens of Basra (mainly migrants) do not have clean drinking water from official water networks. Therefore, disenfranchised Marsh Arabs are exploited by Iranian linked militants who blame the local government for the water crisis by damaging water pipelines, perpetuating the links between environment, socio-economic, and security concerns in southeast Iraq.

Conclusion

Without a radical change in diplomatic processes between Iran and Iraq, environmental degradation will continue due to poor forms of accountability and responsibility over the supposed shared governance over the Shatt al-Arab. The climate crisis already causes water shortages and desertification across the world, and so wilful, political examples of exploitations of the environment entangle attempts at resolving water security crises with complex diplomatic considerations in a context where international law and accountability are weak.

The consequences of this on the Marsh Arabs are catastrophic, as traditional practices such as buffalo breeding, fishing, transportation using small boats [see picture on the right] and reed housing on top of the marshes are now unsustainable. Their new lives as they migrate to urban centres (such as Basra) to find employment and housing are unsafe, unclear, and unfamiliar. I aim to develop further research on the role of the international community in worsening this diplomatic context, and changes in the role and status of Marsh Arab women in particular.

"All we know is raising buffalo. How would we survive? We're looking for mercy from God. **Here, water is mercy - and there is less and less of it"** - Ms Nasr, buffalo herder from marshes in 2018 (Priestley, 2021)."

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