



# **Ensuring Iraqis' access to clean water in times of scarcity**

*Submission to the United Nations Universal Periodic Review 34<sup>th</sup> Session, 4-15 November 2019*

*Submitted on 28 March 2019 by:*

- *Save the Tigris Campaign*
- *The Iraqi Civil Society Solidarity Initiative*
- *The Cornerhouse UK*
- *Un Ponte Per*

*We submit this report to the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Iraq in November 2019. This report focuses on the current water crisis in Iraq and has been compiled by non-governmental organisations and initiatives in Iraq, Turkey and Europe that represent dam affected people or have monitored one or more dam projects over a long period of time.*



**Save the Tigris Campaign** is a society advocacy campaign promoting sustainable management of the Tigris River and its tributaries. Our campaign believes a paradigm shift is necessary: instead of being a source of rivalry, water should be a force for peace and cooperation between all the countries and peoples of the Tigris-Euphrates basin. We advocate for safe access to water for all the people of Iraq, and policies that secure the sustainable and equitable use of water for all those who live in the Mesopotamian region and for the coming generations.

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The **Iraqi Civil Society Solidarity Initiative** supports the nonviolent initiatives of Iraqi NGOs, labor unions, social movements and independent media that are striving to promote social justice, defend human rights and overcome years of war, violence, and deprivation by building a just and lasting peace. It does this work via communications, advocacy and campaigning and international solidarity.

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The **Corner House** is a not-for-profit solidarity and research group. It has been actively monitoring the human rights, development and environmental impacts of the Ilisu dam and other dams in the region since 1999.

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**Un ponte per ....** is an association founded in 1991 immediately after the start of the bombings on Iraq ended and the international embargo. It aims to promote solidarity initiatives in favor of Iraqi people who suffered from the war. Since then, Un ponte per... has worked closely with local civil society organizations in order to prevent conflicts, especially in the Near East, by setting up advocacy campaigns, cultural exchanges and international cooperation programs.

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## **Current extent of the water crisis in Iraq**

In 2018 Iraq experienced an arid summer due to lower rainfalls, high temperature and high evaporation rates, which affected the Southern part of the country including the Iraqi Marshlands.<sup>1</sup> In 2018 Iraqis suffered especially severely from a scarcity of water. Citizens cannot find drinkable water and farmers can no longer carry out their work and earn a living. The water crisis has been caused by a lack of rain, high levels of salinity in the rivers, and increased water evaporation due to extremely high temperatures. The construction of Turkish and Iranian dams and projects on rivers they share with Iraq, that were undertaken without studying their impact on the water rights of Iraqis or their environmental and biological impacts has severely exacerbated the crisis. Over the past 15 years, the Iraqi government has failed to take action to stop such projects.

The government of Iraq in 2018 banned the cultivation of a number of crops including rice and maize because of the lack of water. In a speech to the United Nations Security Council, the Iraqi minister of water resources stressed that security and peace in Iraq were at great risk if the lack of water continued. Thousands of people may be displaced and become migrants due to the scarcity. Iraq is suffering from serious environmental degradation due to neglect. Humat Dijlah, an Iraqi environmental NGO released a report showing the seriousness of the pollution affecting the Tigris River, which huge numbers of Iraqis depend on for drinking water and to irrigate their agricultural lands. The report addressed a situation in Baghdad, where the Doura refinery and the City of Medicine, two official institutions, pollute the river, as just one example.

## **Protest against water scarcity in Iraq**

In July 2018 Iraqis demonstrated in immense protests across southern Iraq—in Basra, Nasiriyah, Amarah, Kut, Karbala and Najaf—demanding basic services and rights, including water. The demonstrations targeted oil fields, ports and airports, and the headquarters of political parties. Protesters accused foreign companies of polluting the water and the environment in the city of Basra and more widely throughout southern Iraq; of failing to provide social benefits for the cities in which they work; and of not providing jobs for Iraqis. Protesters denounced environmental destruction and demanded “treatment of high water salinity that has killed the trees and plants and destroyed our land”. The protests intensified after Iraqi police on 10 July 2018 opened fire in an attempt to disperse dozens of protesters near the West Qurna field, killing one person and injuring three others. The demonstrators, who include large numbers of young people are supported by several tribal leaders, then surrounded other oilfields.

On 17 July 2018, In front of the al-Zubayr oilfield in Basra, Iraqi police used batons and water cannons to disperse around 250 protesters gathered at the main entrance to another major oilfield managed by the Italian company Eni. The day before, dozens of people in the district of Rifai, in the north of the province of Dhi Qar, began an open sit-in in front of the Malaysian company, Petronas, which operates the Gharaf oilfield. They too demanded the provision of basic services including water.

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<sup>1</sup> MacDiarmid, C., *Drought-stricken Iraq pleads for more water from upstream neighbours*, 30 September 2018, The National, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/drought-stricken-iraq-pleads-for-more-water-from-upstream-neighbours-1.775573>.

The tribes of Al-Jazaeer Coalition in the province of Basra, which is composed of the tribes of Bani-Asad, al-Sharash, Bani-Mansour, al-Saad, Bani-Malik, al-Imarah, Al-Boutiqikh, Mayah, al-Ganass, Halaf al-Boukatab, Halaf al-Tamar, Alwan, and others, published a statement<sup>2</sup> which said that Basra, especially the districts of al-Midaina and al-Qurnah and their subsidiaries, do not reap the benefits of the work and profits of international oil companies, but experience “only environmental pollution as a result of clouds of smoke” and “the destruction of agricultural land and the pollution of water”. Their statement also called on oil companies to “improve the service situation and infrastructure of the districts and areas in which they are located”.

The Iraqi government needs to ensure Iraqis’ access to clean water and to provide basic services, especially electricity. At the same time, international oil companies should provide jobs and social benefits to Iraqis, and take all necessary measures to protect water and environment. Civil society, the government and the oil companies must work together to promote a long-term strategy to respect and protect the environment and the right to water. Save the Tigris Campaign calls for multinational companies that are working in Iraq to take immediate steps to evaluate the environmental and water impacts of their activities, to limit and mitigate their negative impacts, and to open a transparent dialogue with local community residents about these issues and about providing the necessities of life, especially water and electricity.

### **Impact of large dams**

On top of pollution and climate change, Iraq’s water resources face the threat of mega water projects. Iraq is struggling how to deal with decreasing water flows from Turkey due to upstream dam construction. Balancing the environment and agriculture needs within Iraq is a challenge, and the Iraqi government does not have a clear management plan for the future. Though water is used for human consumption, agriculture and to supply the marshlands, there is no water distribution plan for Iraq even if there is less water coming from Turkey. Ilisu Dam is scheduled to start operating this year. Baghdad acknowledges an agreement is needed with Turkey in order to sustain the water flows to Iraq and in particular the Marshes. The government of Iraq has only received oral confirmation that Turkey will not disrupt water flows to Iraq, but no written agreement.<sup>3</sup>

Iraqi government will have to establish water agreements and transboundary agreements not only with Turkey but with Iran as well. In Iraq. Construction of dams on the Karoun River reduced water flows to the Mesopotamian Marshlands, while other dams such as Daryan and Sardasht have restrained water flows going to Iraq. Even though Iraqi authorities have reached out to Tehran in multiple visits and dialogue has been further fostered with the help of Ramsar,<sup>4</sup> there is no agreement yet on the border and water shares in order to sustain these shared Mesopotamian marshlands.

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<sup>2</sup> شيخ-عشيرة في البصرة يجذر الأ 11 July 2018,

[https://ara.reuters.com/article/ME\\_TOPNEWS\\_MORE/idARAKBN1K70IN](https://ara.reuters.com/article/ME_TOPNEWS_MORE/idARAKBN1K70IN)

<sup>3</sup> *Postponement of Ilisu Dam Reservoir is Not a Success!*, Humat Dijlah, 30 January 2018,

<http://www.iraqicivilsociety.org/archives/8394>.

<sup>4</sup> *Conserving Iran and Iraq’s Wetlands*, UN Environment, 1 February 2018, <https://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/conserving-iran-and-iraqs-wetlands>.

Climate change is producing increasing periods of droughts, and with newly built dams on the Tigris River projected to go into operation soon, water supplies to Iraq will continue to decrease, which will instigate further protests and migration to the cities. In the case of mega hydraulic projects being constructed outside of its borders, Iraq has the duty to work towards an agreement on shares of water with Turkey.

### **Impact of water scarcity on the Iraqi Marshes**

Less than 40,000 of the original 500,000 native Marsh inhabitants of Iraq remain in their ancestral homeland. In recent times, the Iraqi marshes have frequently been affected by severe droughts. Although it is impossible to isolate and identify a single cause for this, the problems started in the 1990s when Turkey built several dams on the Euphrates River. Current salinity in the Iraqi Marshes has risen to dangerously high levels, up to 4,000 ppm in some cases. This is twice the level that most plants can tolerate.<sup>5</sup> In 2018 due to a major drought, herds of cattle in Southern Iraq were reduced by a third as animals died or were sold off by farmers unable to afford to buy water.<sup>6</sup> Due to high salinity the number of fish has greatly decreased. Farmers and fishermen living in the marshes have been internally displaced in an attempt to find water for their animals.<sup>7</sup> Since animals do no longer always guarantee an income for those who live in the marshlands, people migrate and more look set to follow.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, continuous droughts in the Marshes have led to a deterioration of public health. The lack of water translates into the inability of the Marsh Arabs to enjoy their cultural life. In a generation or two the valuable cultural knowledge will be lost as a result of the change in the environmental conditions, namely, the lack of water.

Following its annual meeting in Bahrain in 2018, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee warned the Iraqi government it must protect the Iraqi marshes, which have been included on the World Heritage List, stressing that the Iraqi government must pay attention to the impact of oil exploration and extraction within the marshes of southern Iraq and in nearby areas. The Committee also called upon the government to assure minimum water quotas to sustain the marshes.

Save the Tigris notes that the water crisis has a disproportionate effect on the living conditions of Marsh Arabs in the South, many of whom have become internally displaced after having lost their livestock. We are also concerned that as a result of the shortage of safe drinking water and sanitation facilities, there has been an increase in preventable diseases such as diarrhea and cholera.

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<sup>5</sup> Harte, J., & Ozbek, A., *Infertile Crescent: Waters run dry in Iraqi marshes*, Global Post, 28 June 2013, <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/middle-east/iraq/130531/iraq-marsh-arabs-threat-turkey-dams-gap-basra-saddam-hussein>.

<sup>6</sup> MacDiarmid, C., *Drought-stricken Iraq pleads for more water from upstream neighbours*, The National, 30 September 2018, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/drought-stricken-iraq-pleads-for-more-water-from-upstream-neighbours-1.775573>.

<sup>7</sup> Taken from a statement from Eng. Hasan Al Asadi from Dhi Qar Provincial Council, 13 August 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100003847676675&pnref=stor>.

<sup>8</sup> *Iraqi farmers fight to save cattle as drought tightens its grip*, The National, 30 July 2018, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/iraqi-farmers-fight-to-save-cattle-as-drought-tightens-its-grip-1.755325>.

## Recommendations

Save the Tigris Campaign calls on the Iraqi government to move on three tracks:

1. We recommend the State party to provide drinking water for all Iraqis, to stop pollution, to end unauthorized and irresponsible use of water resources, and to promote new, economical and sustainable irrigation technologies.
2. We recommend the State Party to work with neighbouring countries to initiate comprehensive negotiations to halt Turkey's construction of the Ilisu Dam and all other "mega projects" being built by Turkey and Iran on the Tigris River until there are fair agreements among all nations sharing the river.
3. We recommend that the State party develop a human-rights based strategy on drought preparedness, taking into consideration the National Drought Management Policy Guidelines, and take effective steps, other than compensation for farmers, to assist those most affected by drought.
4. Indigenous communities and civil society are not regarded as key partners in the development of a concrete long-term water strategy. The Iraqi government must involve them as key stakeholders in the creation of a consolidated management