

Iraq's Water Politics: Impacts of Drought, Mismanagement and Conflict in the Middle East

RETHINKING **SECURITY** IN THE 2020s SERIES – POLICY BRIEF

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1. INTRODUCTION

Iraq is currently facing one of its driest summers on record. 2018 was the driest year ever recorded due to a lack of rainfall, and 2021 is not far behind.¹ Recent years' droughts have wreaked havoc on the land in Syria, Turkey, Iran, and Iraq, but climate change is not the only driver of water shortages. Consequences of unilateral, upstream activity, water mismanagement, a lack of accountability and conflict have all exacerbated Iraq's water crisis. The political consequences of the ongoing water emergency have worsened the regional tensions between Iraq and its neighbours and is yet another factor in the Iraqi people's mistrust of their government, who continues to fail them and dismiss their concerns.

The ones who pay the highest price are the Iraqi people, as more are at risk of becoming displaced or losing their livelihoods, due to the lack of water. There should be active operations to identify ways to hold the Iraqi government accountable, as well as ensure better regional cooperation for the already scarce water resources. Without cooperation, Iraq will suffer the greatest consequences from water loss, which could result in greater political/regional tensions and greater risk of conflict. The overall lack of water in Iraq cannot be attributed to one specific cause, but rather a culmination of climate change, geopolitical tensions carried forth by unilateral actions and interests, mismanagement at a regional and national level and the impacts of conflict for and politicizing water to achieve ulterior motives and unilateral serving goals.

¹ <https://www.nrc.no/news/2021/august/water-crisis-iraq-syria>

2. HISTORY, CONFLICT AND HYDRO-HEGEMONY

Iraq's water crisis is not a new phenomenon and the country, or region more broadly, has been struggling with drought for hundreds of years. What have been the causes of some of the recent years of water crisis for Iraq? Given its geographical position, any upstream activity has direct consequences for Iraq. Despite the hundreds of years of intermittent drought in the Middle East, the last 50-60 years have resulted in exponential water loss and challenges of water management for Iraq, Syria, and their neighbours. Infrastructure development, conflict and climate change are all contributing factors in the history of Iraq's water crisis that have led it to today's position.

2.1 Turkey's GAP Project

One of the most controversial indicators of Iraq's water crisis is Turkey's Southeast Anatolia Project, known better by its Turkish acronym GAP.² The GAP project was initially launched in the 1970s to develop water and land resources, but has transformed over the last 50 years into a predominantly infrastructural and economic development project, through the construction of over 1,000 dams in the south of the country.³ While Turkey has benefitted from these dams economically and agriculturally, the outcome of the project has been unsuccessful in many ways, as the original goals of the project are unfulfilled and tensions as a direct result of the GAP project in Iraq and Syria have developed. However, the outcome of the GAP project may be different from its intended purpose, as Turkey has viewed the project as largely successful given the hydropower that is generated from the dams and supplying a good portion of the country.⁴ Turkey often acts unilaterally and based solely off their own interests, without any concern for the impact downstream, impacting areas in Syria, the semi-autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan as well as Iraq. Examples such as the Ilisu Dam project have greatly impacted the flow of water throughout the region and can be turned on and off without notice to the downstream countries.⁵

²<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13530194.2018.1549978?journalCode=cbjm20>

³<https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/is-turkey-a-water-hoarding-bogeyman-or-yet-another-nation-struggling-with-water-scarcity-1.1230551> ;

<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202105/1223064.shtml>

⁴<https://theArabweekly.com/iraq-complains-turkey-causing-water-shortages>;

[https://www.mondaq.com/turkey/renewables/782900/energy-](https://www.mondaq.com/turkey/renewables/782900/energy-2019#:~:text=Turkey%20produces%20its%20electricity%20mainly,only%208%25%20from%20renewable%20sources.)

[2019#:~:text=Turkey%20produces%20its%20electricity%20mainly,only%208%25%20from%20renewable%20sources.](https://www.mondaq.com/turkey/renewables/782900/energy-2019#:~:text=Turkey%20produces%20its%20electricity%20mainly,only%208%25%20from%20renewable%20sources.)

⁵<https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2018/08/21/iraqis-blame-poor-infrastructure-corruption-in-baghdad-for-water-crisis> ; <https://theArabweekly.com/iraq-complains-turkey-causing-water-shortages>



Photo of the Ilisu Dam in Turkey (Tigris River)

2.2 Wars Weaponizing Water

While the developments carried out by Turkey have resulted in higher tensions, there are previous instances of water in Iraq resulting in or being used in conflicts within the country. It is no surprise that water resources have been politicized and abused by actors in conflict, but in the case of Iraq, there has been irreversible damage to the water infrastructure from previous conflicts. In the 1990s, following the first Gulf War, the United Nations imposed an embargo on Iraq that resulted in malnutrition, a lack of medical supplies and diseases from a lack of clean water.⁶ Additionally, Saddam Hussein played a major role in water loss prior to the UN embargo, as he deliberately drained the marshes of the southern region of Iraq, in hopes of exposing adversaries who sought refuge in the area.⁷ By diverting water from the marshes, there were severe consequences to the surrounding areas, as the marches largely dried up and the surrounding arid regions flooded.⁸ After Saddam Hussein was ousted in 2003 the marches were able to recover, but not to their former capacity. Since then, thousands of people have lost their livelihoods and have moved elsewhere in the country to have access to resources. Conflict, and its aftermath have greatly impacted the water resources around the country.

In 2014, when the Islamic State took over Iraq, they gained access to key water access points, infrastructure, and the ability to control water throughout the country. Gaining control of these resources was part of their territorial expansion plan and allowed them to manipulate water flows throughout the region.⁹ Their control of key water infrastructure enabled them to control large swaths of the population indirectly while also seeking refuge in dams during times where counterinsurgency campaigns were taking place.¹⁰ The strategic use of water throughout conflict has greatly impacted Iraq

⁶<https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2018/08/21/iraqis-blame-poor-infrastructure-corruption-in-baghdad-for-water-crisis>

⁷ <https://www.dw.com/en/dam-building-projects-could-fuel-water-stress-in-middle-east/a-55169989>

⁸ <https://www.ft.com/content/82ca2e3c-6369-11e8-90c2-9563a0613e56>

⁹ <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/role-water-syrian-and-iraqi-civil-wars>

¹⁰ <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/role-water-syrian-and-iraqi-civil-wars>

and threatens the future of the country as well, should water resources once again be used in conflict settings.

3. DRIVERS OF WATER INSECURITY: WHO'S AT FAULT?

The public discourse surrounding Iraq's water crisis in recent years has placed blame on multiple actors including upstream neighbours Turkey and the semi-autonomous Kurdish region, but some blame a group closer to home, with the mismanagement and negligence of the Iraqi government. Ultimately, there is not one entity that can be blamed, as Iraq's decreasing water supply is impacted by multiple factors, groups, and histories. There are actors that play a major role however, those that Iraqi people blame: the Turkish government and their own Iraqi government.

Turkey's ongoing GAP project has resulted in the construction of hundreds of dams, with little-to-no regard for Iraq, who suffers the consequences of water shutoffs and diversions. In March 2021, Turkish President Recep Erdogan noted "there is no difference between protecting our water and protecting our homeland,"¹¹ taking a very clear stance on Turkey's ability to act on their own volition without concern for downstream actors. Unilateral action on behalf of the Turkish government has frustrated both Iraq and Syria but has left them paying the consequences and further impacting their own efforts to advance their water infrastructure, such as dams. Consequently, Turkey's standoff with the semi-autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan has led them to take unilateral action too, as they embark on a multi-teared dam building spree, Iraq (proper) continues to pay the price for upstream activity. Iraqi people are no stranger to the price of water politics, blaming at times both the Iraqi and Turkish government. Iraqi politicians prove time and again that they are unwilling to take responsibility, listen to their people and enact positive, lasting change within the country.

In 2018, the worst year for rainfall in Iraq's history, people took to the streets in protest of their government.¹² In recent weeks, regions of Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan have also erupted into protests again over the lack of water and inability of the government to enact change.¹³ The political situation in Iraq makes it difficult for politicians to adopt lasting change because there is no lasting government and therefore they are unable to plan strategically for the long-term. This short-sided planning will have major impacts on Iraq's future and further emboldens other regional actors to take advantage of Iraq's inability to act. Forward planning is absolutely necessary, as the country's youth-bulge population continues to urbanize, fewer people work in agriculture, but the rapidly growing population remains reliant on Iraq's agricultural sector for food.¹⁴ At a point in the near future Iraq's landscape will not be able to

¹¹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/turkey-water-climate-change-idUKL8N2MC1UM>

¹² <https://www.futuredirections.org.au/publication/the-basra-protests-and-the-future-of-iraq/>

¹³ <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/iraqis-protest-over-power-water-cuts-amid-heat-wave>;
<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/08/water-protests-erupt-kurdistan-region-iraq>;
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/22/iraq-water-crisis-basra>.

¹⁴ <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/sustainability/war-scarred-iraq-climate-crisis-next-great-threat-1984881>

sustain the needs of the people, rendered completely unusable due to desertification and salination of fresh water.¹⁵ The situation is grave but action on behalf of the government must be taken in order to save the water resources left in Iraq. The consequences from the actions of actor's upstream cannot be ignored and the government of Iraq must prioritize water resources for their people. The situation in Iraq, politically, economically, and socially places water rights and resources low on the priority list, as it is unlikely that the government will prioritize spending resources on water infrastructure during a time where oil prices are so low and many people in the country have relied on the oil sector for income.¹⁶ In a sense, there is a trickle-down effect, as water impacts multiple domestic sectors and is impacted by other factors as well.

4. CONSEQUENCES FROM UPSTREAM

One fact is upstream activity, which Iraq directly suffers from, as it is the end point in the Tigris-Euphrates basin, which is deposited into the Persian Gulf (see map below). The Tigris and Euphrates rivers begin in the highlands of Turkey, flowing through Syria, Iraqi-Kurdistan, and Iraq, with tributaries from Iran as well.¹⁷ Turkey contributes 90 percent of the water to the Euphrates, while Syria contributes 10 percent.¹⁸ The Tigris is fed only 40 percent of its water from Turkey, while 51 percent comes from Iraq and 9 percent of the water, from the tributaries, comes from Iran.¹⁹



Map of Tigris-Euphrates Basin with key dams highlighted

¹⁵ Salt water from the Persian Gulf is moving upstream into the Tigris-Euphrates threatening agricultural lands in one of the most fertile regions of the country. <https://tcf.org/content/report/iraqs-climate-crisis-requires-bold-cooperation/?session=1&agreed=1>; https://knowledge.unccd.int/sites/default/files/ldn_targets/2019-08/Iraq%20LDN%20TSP%20Country%20Report.pdf

¹⁶ <https://tcf.org/content/report/iraqs-climate-crisis-requires-bold-cooperation/?session=1&agreed=1>

¹⁷ Tributaries are smaller fresh water rivers that feed into main rivers. The main tributaries of the Tigris river are the Feesh Khabor (Iraqi Kurdistan), the Greater Zab (Iraqi Kurdistan), the Lesser Zab (Iran) and the Diyala (Iran). http://waterinventory.org/surface_water/shared-tributaries-tigris-river;

¹⁸ <https://climate-diplomacy.org/case-studies/turkey-syria-and-iraq-conflict-over-euphrates-tigris>

¹⁹ <https://climate-diplomacy.org/case-studies/turkey-syria-and-iraq-conflict-over-euphrates-tigris>

Both Syria and Iraq have publicly complained and expressed concern over Turkey's mismanagement of water and their over development of dams.²⁰ By the time the water reaches Iraq, there are decreased flows as well as concerns of contamination and usability for Iraq's own needs (whether agricultural, industrial, or personal).²¹ The ability of all actors to utilize water on unilateral action based on political and economic needs has obstructed Iraq's landscape and they pay the highest price.

5. CONCLUSION

Iraq, positioned downstream from hydro-hegemonic actors such as Turkey, pays the greatest cost for regional actions that are taken based on self-interest. The politicization and weaponization of water is directly affecting the lives of the Iraqi people. Iraq's water crisis cannot be solved without a multi-faceted approach to achieve greater accountability on behalf of the government, greater regional cooperation on issues impacting water infrastructure, a stable economy and a better security state that lowers the possibility for conflict to erupt or for rebel actors to take control of water resources. The external factors must also be considered; climate change will continue to impact the region and Iraq remains one of the most vulnerable countries to it. Future generations of Iraqis will bear the weight of the current government's inability to act on water related issues, whether they are exacerbated by conflict, regional relations, economic factors or climate change, the government of Iraq must invest in improving water infrastructure and collaborate with neighbours to ensure the consistent access to water from upstream, while also tackling water issues within the country such as desertification.

²⁰<https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/is-turkey-a-water-hoarding-bogeyman-or-yet-another-nation-struggling-with-water-scarcity-1.1230551>

²¹<https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/factors-of-instability-in-the-nineveh-plains.pdf>; <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20210816-how-water-shortages-are-brewing-wars>

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the regional partners: Turkey, Syria, Iraqi Kurdistan, and Iraq

- Engage in bilateral and multilateral discussions on dam activity and water infrastructure.
- Establish an agreement on the development of water infrastructure. Cooperation surrounding water resources is absolutely vital to the success and continued flow of water in the Tigris-Euphrates basin.
- Create a clear line of communication on water flows and the filling or development of dams. Turkey cannot monopolize the water resources for their own use. Iraq and Syria must be involved in the planning of water infrastructure, and attempt to mitigate the consequences of water scarcity due to upstream dams.

To the international community and foreign entities assisting in water infrastructure projects in Iraq

- Ensure environmental and impact assessments are being made when new projects are being proposed or carried out. Regional actors who lack the resources to carry out assessments prior to development projects should not be allowed to continue on the project until an impact assessment, particularly to downstream partners has been made.
- Prioritize regional cooperation, or an awareness of regional impact when carrying out projects. Companies who engage in water infrastructure development should be encouraged to engage with multiple stakeholders who could be impacted.

About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

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