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Iraq is running out of water

The country can't master such a bleak future on its own. Failing to take vital measures will result in a regional security nightmare

The United Nations representatives who took the microphone in Baghdad in early June 2023 to talk about Iraq's current drought had little reason to be optimistic. While Germans and Central Europeans were moaning about one of the year's first heatwaves with temperatures from 30-34 degrees, in southern Iraq, prolonged temperatures above 50 degrees and long overdue rains have been *destroying its marshlands*, the ecosystem at the heart of the Middle East's 'fertile crescent'. Other stretches along the Euphrates and Tigris are also facing huge challenges: if climate change in the region continues like this, by 2050 it will suffer more than 300 sandstorms a year. Evaporation, reduced water flow and lack of rainfall will reduce the entire country's water capacity to a minimum. Too little water stored in the soil available for agriculture has serious consequences for both rural and urban populations. More than a year ago, Iraqi Minister of Environment Jassim Abdul Aziz al-Falahi hinted at what scientists had predicted much earlier. What has already begun to happen will, within the next decades, also impact the surrounding countries and the European community.

As in other Middle Eastern countries, ever more critical climatic conditions are affecting the daily lives of much of Iraq's population, which still needs the same regular access to fresh water that allowed advanced civilisations to flourish there centuries ago. But precisely *that* is becoming increasingly difficult – because of multiple factors over which Iraq has only limited influence.

Lack of water leads to migration

At the turn of the 20th century, water flow of 1,350 cubic metres per second was normal. Today it's just 149. The tributaries of the large Euphrates, Tigris and Diyala rivers are increasingly drying up. Apart from the drought plaguing Iraq's mountainous regions, Iran and Turkey are constructing dams and other retention basins and taking more and more

water for their own needs. In particular, Turkey – the source of nearly 70 per cent of Iraq's fresh water – has escalated repressive policies to force through its own interests in Iraq's (Kurdish) north. This, despite the 2021 agreement between Ankara und Baghdad on increased water flow.

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The now minimal water flow is further aggravated by evapotranspiration, which causes 14.7 per cent of Iraq's surface water to evaporate each year. Grain-growing regions along the rivers and in the southern marshes are almost completely drying up. Some bodies of water, like the Hamrim reservoir and the Umm Al-Binni lake have already lost more than 50 per cent of their volume and are expected to turn into desert in the next years. This is causing local, often agricultural, communities to lose their livestock and livelihoods. These Iraqis, some of whom who have lived in the country for centuries, have no choice but to migrate to bigger cities, where they also have to struggle to survive.

In 2022 alone, according to the Iraqi Ministry of Migration and Displacement, more than 7,000 farmers and their families left rural areas. Iraq's high level of urbanisation had dipped in the late 1990s but has been rising due to climate change: in 2021, 71.2 per cent of its population lived in cities like Baghdad, Basra, Najaf and Mosul. The rural exodus thus has other ramifications, including the growing difficulties that many municipalities have in maintaining their dilapidated water and electricity infrastructures. All this as the country lurches from one political crisis to another.

How the EU can help

Internal migration further burdens state budgets. That's because the state has to prop up food and fertiliser subsidies and constantly provide for new imports. Inflation, the huge rise in the cost of foodstuffs on global markets and fragile supply chains are straining budgets and creating new financial dependencies.

High oil prices may allow Iraq to stabilise its budget, but the country will have to make massive investments to maintain the quality of life, which for some is quite low – and unhealthy. Sandstorms paralyse public transport and also drive up the incidence of respiratory diseases. In addition, weeks of record-breaking temperatures exceeding 50 degrees are

raising the mortality rates of vulnerable and older population groups.

Iraq can hardly master such a bleak future on its own. Civilian and state actors need help to become climate resilient. After all, a collapsing state is not in the interest of its neighbours or the international community. This means exchanging knowledge about how to use water sustainably as well as providing technical know-how for new sewage treatment plants and water reclamation facilities. At the political level, mediation and diplomatic initiatives must be undertaken to ensure that more water flows through Iraq. European actors must also boost and enlarge their own capacities to provide on-site support in the form of foresight scenarios, climate and weather forecasts and local disaster relief. As mentioned, Iraq's water infrastructure is in a terrible state after decades of neglect and considerable mismanagement by political and economic actors. Repairing that is another way European actors can help – always targeting investments tied to specific projects to increase efficiency and prevent other state actors misusing the funds.

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Failing to undertake these measures for Iraq will create a nightmare scenario for the regional and supra-regional security architecture. For one thing, the loss of livelihoods of millions of people would create a breeding ground for fundamentalist and extremist movements and new recruitment areas for organisations like *Daesh* (IS) and Al-Qaida. For another, more internal migration would further pressure Iraqi cities and create new challenges for civil society. We can already see that too much stress is pushing ever more people to migrate – with major ramifications for Europe.

It is therefore in the clear interest of all national and international actors to limit the incipient consequences of climate change now – so that developments in the coming decades are manageable.



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