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Water Scarcity in Iraq

From Inter-Tribal Conflict to International Disputes

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Summary

This paper investigates the impact of the decreasing availability of water on security and politics in Iraq. Contrary to the bulk of existing research, international dynamics only play a minor role in this study. Instead, the focal point of what follows lies in domestic hydropolitics. Water scarcity has already brought about several security and political challenges in the country – both as a primary factor, and in conjunction with other elements. On the domestic front, scarcity has for example led to disputes among tribes and provinces, large-scale protests, and militancy. In the future, water could induce tension along ethnosectarian lines and strain the relationship between the Kurdish region and the federal government in Baghdad. On the international front, water allocation will increasingly influence Iraq's external relations. However, a conventional inter-state 'water war' is unlikely to take place.



Infographic 2: Iraq in Detail



Legend

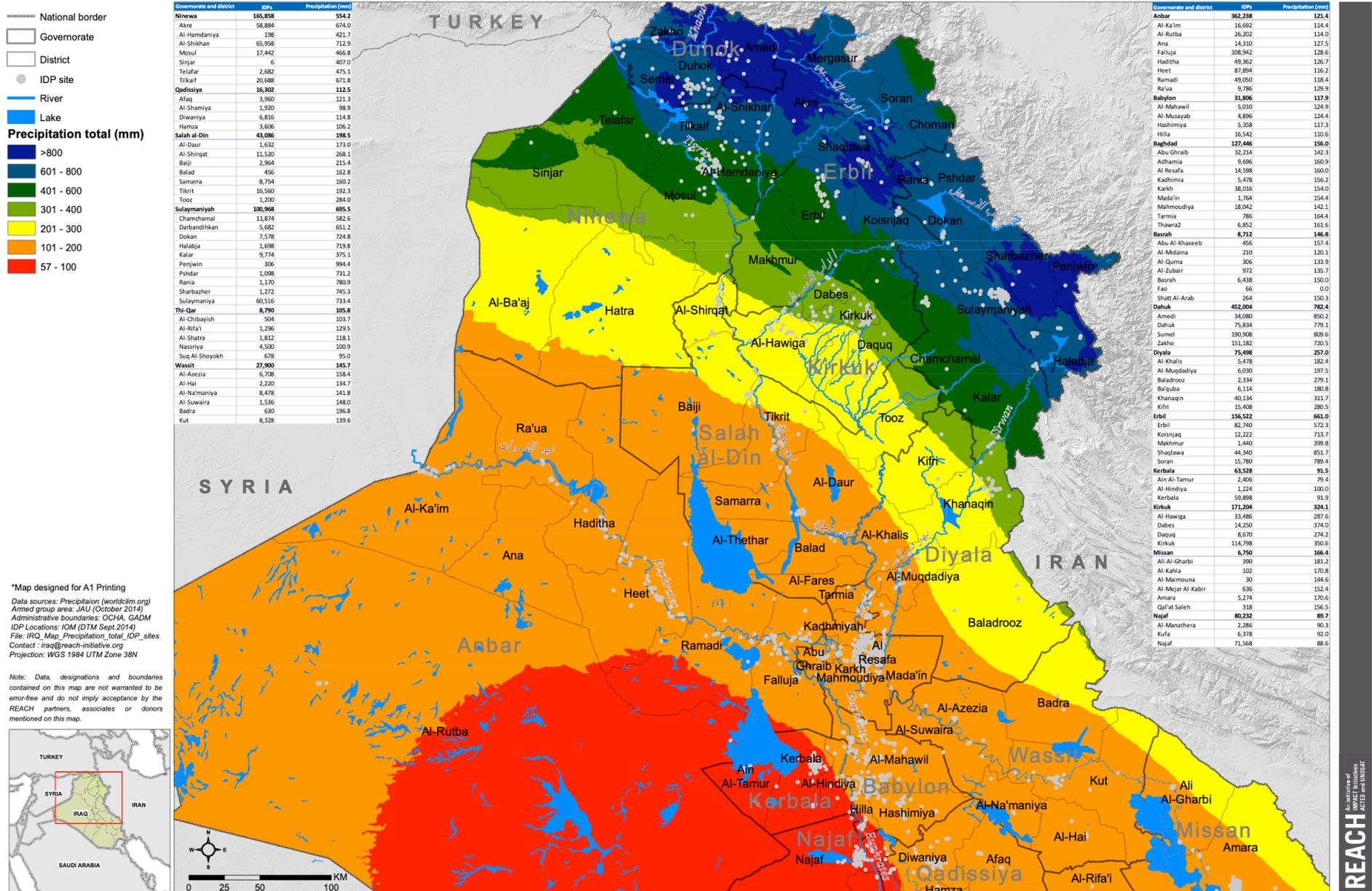
	International Boundary		River
	Administrative Boundary		Intermittent River
	Capital, Regional Capital, Town		Canal
	Zone of Irrigation Development		Lake
	Irrigation Scheme		Intermittent Lake
			Wetland
			Dam

0 25 50 100 150 km
Albers Equal Area Projection, WGS 1984

Infographic 3: Precipitation levels in Iraq

OCHA IRAQ
Aggregate annual precipitation

FOR HUMANITARIAN PURPOSES ONLY
Production date: 17 November 2014

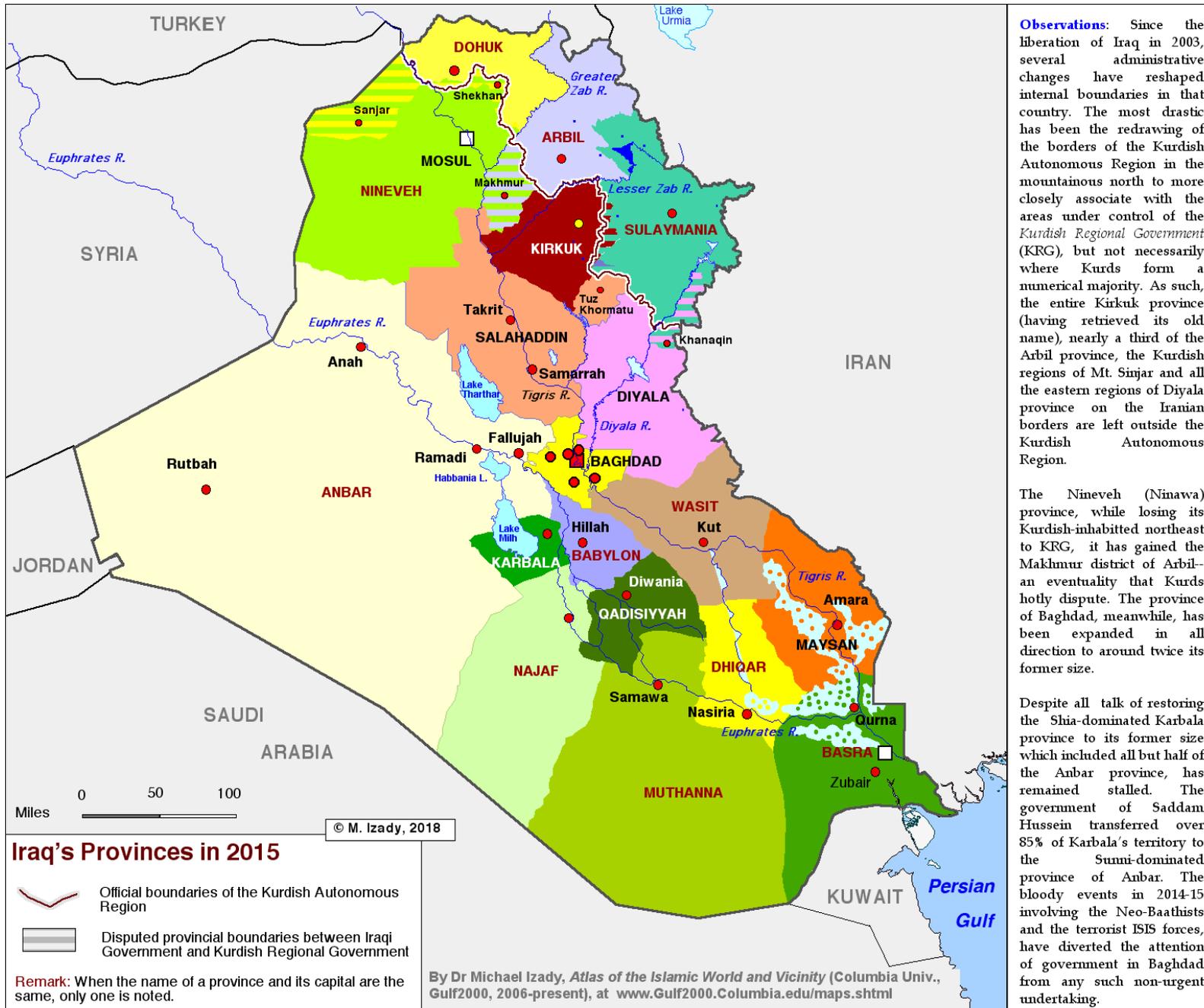


*Map designed for A1 Printing
Data sources: Precipitation (worldim.org)
Armed group area: UAI (October 2014)
Administrative boundaries: OCHA, GADM
IDP Locations: IOM (DTM Sept. 2014)
File: IRQ_Map_Precipitation_total_IDP_sites
Contact: ira@reach-initiative.org
Projection: WGS 1984 UTM Zone 38N

Note: Data, designations and boundaries contained on this map are not warranted to be error-free and do not imply acceptance by the REACH partners, associates or donors mentioned on this map.



Infographic 4: Iraq's Provinces



Observations: Since the liberation of Iraq in 2003, several administrative changes have reshaped internal boundaries in that country. The most drastic has been the redrawing of the borders of the Kurdish Autonomous Region in the mountainous north to more closely associate with the areas under control of the *Kurdish Regional Government* (KRG), but not necessarily where Kurds form a numerical majority. As such, the entire Kirkuk province (having retrieved its old name), nearly a third of the Arbil province, the Kurdish regions of Mt. Sinjar and all the eastern regions of Diyala province on the Iranian borders are left outside the Kurdish Autonomous Region.

The Nineveh (Ninawa) province, while losing its Kurdish-inhabited northeast to KRG, it has gained the Makhmur district of Arbil—an eventuality that Kurds hotly dispute. The province of Baghdad, meanwhile, has been expanded in all direction to around twice its former size.

Despite all talk of restoring the Shia-dominated Karbala province to its former size which included all but half of the Anbar province, has remained stalled. The government of Saddam Hussein transferred over 85% of Karbala's territory to the Sunni-dominated province of Anbar. The bloody events in 2014-15 involving the Neo-Baathists and the terrorist ISIS forces, have diverted the attention of government in Baghdad from any such non-urgent undertaking.

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1 | Introduction

Over the years, the availability and quality of potable water in Iraq has been decreasing and this trend is set to continue in the future. In 2018, the Iraqi federal government noted that the water flowing through the Euphrates and Tigris (see Infographic 2), the country's two most important waterways, has plummeted by 30 per cent since the 1980s. They expect a further decrease in the discharge by up to 50 per cent by 2030. Moreover, the limited amount of water available has also deteriorated in quality due to, for example, increased salination.¹

Three processes that seem unlikely to subside have led to this development. The first of these is climate change. Issues like diminishing rainfall have an undeniably adverse effect on the availability of water. The second important factor concerns dam building by upstream riparian states. Turkey, where both rivers originate, has been building dams, and Iran has also dammed various tributaries to the Tigris and the Shatt al-Arab. The third issue is state weakness. Systemic corruption has impeded general policymaking, including water resource management policy, further aggravating Iraq's water issues.²

This study explores how the decrease in availability of water impacts politics and security in Iraq. Rather than another inquiry into solely inter-state dynamics, the emphasis of this analysis is on domestic concerns. The international aspect will be touched upon briefly at the end. This paper demonstrates how water scarcity, especially in combination with other factors - but also in itself - has already prompted violence and has affected political power dynamics. Given the seemingly perpetual nature of the processes mentioned above, the issues discussed are likely to persist and could possibly

¹Matthew Schweitzer, "Drought in the land Between two rivers", *Epic*, July 18, 2017, <https://www.epic-usa.org/iraq-water/>; Tobias von Lossow, "More than infrastructures: water challenges in Iraq", *Clingendael*, July 10, 2018, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2018-07/PB_PSI_water_challenges_Iraq.pdf

²Kawa Hassan, Camilla Born, & Pernilla Nordqvist, "Iraq: Climate-related security risk assessment", *Expert Working Group on Climate-related Security Risks*, August, 2018, <https://www.eastwest.ngo/sites/default/files/iraq-climate-related-security-risk-assessment.pdf>; Nadheer al-Ansari, "Water Resources Policies in Iraq", *Al-Bayan Center*, March 1, 2016, <http://www.bayancenter.org/en/2016/03/641/>; Suraj Sharma, "Turkey's forgotten economic project", *Middle East Eye*, October 22, 2015, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/analysis-turkeys-forgotten-economic-project>

intensify. Further, by linking the current hydro-political conditions with the broader political and security context of the country, future scenarios of water-related conflict are extrapolated.

This has led to the following findings:

- Current water-related disputes have predominantly been located in the country's south, especially in Basra province;
- Inter-provincial struggles over the resource have occurred, but have remained largely institutional;
- Disagreement between tribes over water allocation has already turned violent;
- Water scarcity has been one of the key grievances of anti-government protests in recent years;
- The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) holds the potential to politicise water; but the central government has largely prevented this from happening;
- The so-called Islamic State (IS) utilised water deprivation to recruit disenfranchised Sunni Arab farmers;
- Iraq's geography and its history of ethno-sectarian conflict makes water a possible source for ethno-sectarian tension;
- Inter-state 'water wars' between Iraq and its neighbours are unlikely to materialise;
- Hydro-politics is anticipated to become a more prominent feature in Iraq's future external relations.

To examine these findings in greater detail, this study has been divided into three parts. The first section investigates water-related issues at the micro-level, which includes tribal and provincial disputes. The second section analyses the country's hydro-politics at the meso-level, between the federal government in Baghdad and the semi-autonomous Kurdistan region as well as between Sunni and Shia Arabs. The final part explores the macro-level dynamics, i.e. Iraq's relationship with its upstream riparian neighbours.

2 | Local-level water related issues

This section examines disputes at the micro-level. The first sub-section, 'Trouble in the south', looks at various water-related issues in southern Iraq such as inter-tribal fighting, provincial disputes, and popular protests. In 'Central and northern Iraq: More issues in the future?', the central and northern areas of the country are discussed and projections for future conflict are made.

Water-related conflict at the local level in Iraq demonstrates the importance of riparian positioning. Simply put, an actor located more upstream can access water in larger quantities and at an earlier time than its counterpart closer to the mouth of the river. Not only does this give the upstream actor superior access to water, it also creates a power dynamic in favour of this actor. In a nutshell, the entity closer to the source is able to manipulate the flow downstream, giving it the upper hand.

2.1 Trouble in the south

This dynamic has already led to conflict between tribal factions in southern Iraq. Operating in an environment of relatively weak governing institutions, various tribes compete over the gains of smuggling arms and narcotics. Disputes over access to water have increasingly become part of this spectrum.³ In rural areas, where tribal affiliation has traditionally remained important, over one-third of the population is dependent on agriculture for their livelihoods. Thus, in order to safeguard their legitimacy, tribal leaders encroach on the rivers to guarantee sufficient access to water for their own farming constituencies. Herein, they often disregard downstream tribes, which then results in conflict. Over the past year, this has led to several deaths with more deadly

³Benedict Robin-D'Cruz, "South Iraq security report: August 2017", *Iraq After Occupation*, August 30, 2017, <https://www.iraqafteroccupation.com/2017/10/06/south-iraq-security-report-september-2017/>

clashes likely to have gone unreported. Coverage of water-related conflict between tribes goes back several years, including the drought years between 2007 and 2010.⁴

Water scarcity has also led to contention among the various provinces in the south of the country. Provincial councils have often accused their upstream neighbours of encroaching on the flow of waterways. For instance, authorities from Misan province have expressed their discontent with their upstream neighbours of Wasit; Muthanna finds itself downstream to two provinces, Dhi Qar and Qadisiyah (see Infographic 2), both of whom local officials have blamed for exceeding their respective water quota. While most of these disputes lead the aggrieved provincial council to request mediation by the federal government, some disputes result in destructive violence. In July 2018, the governor of Muthanna, joined by local security forces, unlawfully entered Qadisiyah to forcefully remove the structures that had reduced the flow of water to his province.⁵

Out of these two manifestations of water-related disputes, inter-tribal violence is more likely to cause further fatalities. The tribes are known for their 'gun culture', which makes them more likely to resort to arms, in comparison to officials representing provincial councils. As tribal affiliation remains important in some parts of Iraq, tribal leaders are also able to mobilise their constituencies more successfully. Provincial authorities, on the other hand, are increasingly being seen by the population as part of a corrupt political elite that caused the water issues in the first place. Disputes between tribes are also no longer confined to rural areas. Growing urbanisation, partly driven by

⁴"Displacement Tracking Matrix Round 100", *International Organization for Migration Iraq*, July 31, 2018, http://iraqdtm.iom.int/LastDTMRound/Round100_Report_English_2018_July_31_IOM_DTM.pdf; "Killing In The Name Of... Water (In Iraq)", *Green Prophet*, June 24, 2010, <https://www.greenprophet.com/2010/06/water-murder-iraq/>; Mustafa Saadoun, "Tribal disputes flare in southern Iraq over water scarcity", *al-Monitor*, February 15, 2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/02/water-security-iraq-tribal-conflicts.html>; Sharon Otterman, "Iraq: The Role of Tribes", *Council on Foreign Relations*, February 2, 2005, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/iraq-role-tribes>

⁵ Ahmed Waheed, "العراق: تصاعد النزاعات العشائرية على المياه في ذي قار", *al-Hayat*, February 2, 2018, <http://www.alhayat.com/article/914156/العراق-تصاعد-النزاعات-العشائرية-على-المياه-في-ذي-قار>; "حرب مياه داخلية في العراق", *al-Hurra*, July 9, 2018, <https://www.alhurra.com/a/445723-حرب-مياه-داخلية-في-العراق>

the water crisis, has meant that strife between tribes is increasingly unfolding in urban centres.⁶

Furthermore, while some provincial councils seek mediation by the federal government, others have a rather inimical relationship with Baghdad. In addition to both federal and provincial officials scapegoating each other, there is also friction over actual water management policy. Water resource policy has become part of a larger set of issues between both levels of government. The most notable example of this was a disagreement between Basra province and the federal government over the construction of a dam near Abu Flous Port that had been lingering for years. Only after popular protests and the threat of establishing a semi-autonomous region, did the federal government agree to the Basrawis' demands.⁷

This demand for greater regional autonomy has the potential to escalate, especially in the case of Basra. The oil-rich province is often described as the 'economic artery' of Iraq as its oil production makes up a large majority of the country's federal budget. Basra also holds the country's only deep-water port at Umm Qasr through which an estimated 80 per cent of imports arrive.⁸ Were the province to become a semi-autonomous federal region, the ambiguity in the constitution would cast doubt over the existing internal market and revenue sharing mechanisms, as indicated by disputes between Baghdad and the semi-autonomous Kurdish region.⁹ More autonomy in terms of trade

⁶"Provincial government building in Iraq's Basra on fire", *Reuters*, September 6, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-protests-fire/provincial-government-building-in-iraqs-basra-on-fire-idUSKCN1LM239>; Salam Faraj, "In Iraq, bloody tribal custom now classed as 'terrorism'", *The Times of Israel*, November 18, 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-iraq-bloody-tribal-custom-now-classed-as-terrorism/>

⁷Adnan Abu Zeed, "Iraq's Basra plans dam on vital river", *al-Monitor*, August 5, 2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/08/shatt-alarab-iraq-basra-dam-water.html>;
"وزير الموارد المائية من البصرة: لا حاجة لإنشاء سد في شط العرب", *Alsumaria*, September 10, 2016, <https://www.alsumaria.tv/news/179068/الوزير-الموارد-المائية-من-البصرة-لا-حاجة-ل-سد-في-شط-العرب>

⁸"البصرة.. الفقر يسبح فوق بحر من النفط", *Rudaw*, April 25, 2018, <http://www.rudaw.net/arabic/middleeast/iraq/250420182>;
"New customs import tariff in Iraq, Kurdistan exempt", *Ekurd Daily*, February 16, 2016, <https://ekurd.net/import-tariff-iraq-kurdistan-exempt-2016-02-19>

⁹Azam Ahmed, & Clifford Krauss, "Oil Gives Kurds a Path to Independence, and Conflict With Baghdad", *The New York Times*, October 25, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/26/world/oil-gives-kurds-a-path-to-independence-and-conflict-with-baghdad.html>; "Turkish truckers frustrated with double tariffs on route to Iraq", *Rudaw*, October 7, 2018, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/business/07102018>

and natural resources management would allow the governorate to leverage both aspects to a guarantee sufficient flow of water. However, such institutional crises could also lead to armed conflict, which has again been demonstrated by the tense relationship between Baghdad and Erbil.¹⁰

The perceived absence of an effective domestic water management strategy has also damaged the legitimacy of the state. In July 2018, protests swept across the south of Iraq. While protests have occurred in the region for years now, last year's protests have arguably been one of the most severe yet. Groups of disillusioned young men set ablaze numerous government buildings and headquarters of political parties. These demonstrations were an outcome of various grievances such as unemployment, corruption, and a lack of services. However, the two most crucial grievances were arguably the shortage of electricity and potable water. Protestors also expressed grievances towards Iran. Apart from their perceived influence over the Iraqi government, Tehran was accused of polluting and cutting water to cross-border rivers.¹¹

While the protests in July were multi-layered in terms of their causes, when they reignited in late August of 2018, it was clear that water was the main trigger and legitimating narrative. Large-scale water contamination had led to the hospitalisation of tens of thousands of people in Basra province. Basrawis took to the streets again to protest against the government, which they held responsible not only for the water pollution but also for negligence during the subsequent health crisis.¹²

¹⁰Christophe Ayad, "Kurdistan conflict threatens to bring new violence to Iraq", *The Guardian*, August 14, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/aug/14/iraq-kurdistan-maliki-barzani>

¹¹Benedict Robin-D'Cruz, "As Protests Sweep Iraq, are the Country's Political Elites Running out of Options?", *LSE Middle East Centre Blog*, July 18, 2018, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/07/18/as-protests-sweep-iraq-are-the-countrys-political-elites-running-out-of-options/>; Saleem al-Wazzan, "Liquid Threats: Basra's Barrier Against Poisoned Iranian Water Crumbling", *Niqash*, January 4, 2018, <http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/economy/5804/>

¹²Mohamed Mostafa, "More than 110.000 people infected by water pollution in Iraq's Basra", *Iraqi News*, October 19, 2018, <https://www.iraqinews.com/features/more-than-110-000-people-infected-by-water-pollution-in-iraqs-basra/>; "محتجون يقتحمون صحة البصرة احتجاجاً على تفاقم أزمة تلوث المياه", *Rudaw*, August 27, 2018, <http://www.rudaw.net/arabic/middleeast/iraq/270820186>

Iraq's recent history has already demonstrated the potential for escalation of anti-government protests. In 2012-2013, disillusioned with the then-Maliki government, Sunni Arabs embarked on demonstrations which ultimately culminated in the rise of the Islamic State (IS).¹³ Although the unrest in 2018 did not lead to large-scale violence, calls for armed resistance did enter the public discourse. Also significant was the fact that the protests were not being held in Sunni-dominated areas but in the Shia heartland of the country's south, which has been the main source of legitimacy for the post-2003 Shia-dominated governments. This, combined with the low turnout during the 2018 parliamentary elections, points at a near complete breakdown of government legitimacy. With half of the population too young to have experienced the authoritarian regime of Saddam Hussein, a desire for a "strong [undemocratic] leader like Saddam" has already surfaced, even in the Shia south.¹⁴

The fact that the epicentre of these protests has been the Basra province is no coincidence. While the entire Iraqi south will be prone to more water-related issues because of its geography, Basra is likely to be especially hard-hit. Located at the mouth of the country's waterways, the province is most vulnerable to an upstream disruption of the flow. Basra is also first in line to suffer the consequences of the subsequent inflow of highly saline water from the Gulf. In the summer of 2018, salinity levels in the Shatt al-Arab were an estimated ten times higher than normal, negatively impacting local agriculture. Moreover, the situation in the province is further exacerbated by the

¹³Pieter-Jan Dockx, "ISIS and the Importance of Popular Support", *International Perspective*, May 7, 2017, <http://www.internationalperspective.be/impression/2017/05/isis-and-the-importance-of-popular-support/>

¹⁴Ahmed Tabaqchali, "The protest movement, the politicians and the elections", *1001 Iraqi Thoughts*, June 25, 2018, <http://1001iraqithoughts.com/2018/06/25/the-protest-movement-the-politicians-and-the-elections/>; "Iraqi cleric killed after calling for armed Basra protests over failing public services", *The New Arab*, November 18, 2018, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2018/11/18/basra-cleric-killed-after-urging-armed-protests-over-services>; Marsin Alshamary, "Authoritarian Nostalgia Among Iraqi Youth: Roots and Repercussions", *War on the Rocks*, July 25, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/07/authoritarian-nostalgia-among-iraqi-youth-roots-and-repercussions/>; Renad Mansour, & Christine van den Toorn, "The 2018 Iraqi Federal Elections: A Population in Transition?", *LSE Middle East Centre*, July, 2018, http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/89698/7/MEC_Iraqi-elections_Report_2018.pdf

pollution caused by the petroleum industry and by waste water coming from across the border in Iran.¹⁵

2.2 Central and northern Iraq: More issues in the future?

The predominantly Sunni and Kurdish areas located in the central and northern parts of the country (see Infographic 5) have experienced less water-related incidents than Iraq's south. This could be explained by its more upstream location and the presence of rainfall, especially in the Kurdish region (see Infographic 3). Data analysis also indicates that the rate of annual reduction of water flowing through the Tigris is on average five times lower in central and northern areas than in the south, making the decline there less severe.¹⁶

However, these provinces have not been spared entirely from water scarcity and are likely to face more issues in the future. For years, farmers in predominantly Sunni Arab and Kurdish governorates have decried the deteriorating availability of water. The recent conflict between government forces and the IS has also further impaired the irrigation infrastructure in the majority-Sunni Arab provinces. With reconstruction efforts facing numerous hurdles, the lack of adequate water infrastructure is likely to persist. The local population has often opted for impromptu solutions like well-digging, which is unsustainable in the long-run.¹⁷

¹⁵Ibid. 11, Saleem al-Wazzan; Faris al-Imarah, Maryam al-Bydhani, & Mahmood Haider, "Continuity of Pollution by Petroleum Hydrocarbons in Water and Sediments of Shatt al-Arab River, Southern Iraq, North West Arabian Gulf", *Proceedings of The IIER International Conference*, October, 2017, <http://un.uobasrah.edu.iq/papers/3802.pdf>; Sinan Salaheddin, "Basra's Tap Water Is Too Salty and Polluted Even for Washing", *Bloomberg*, August 2, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-08-02/water-crisis-salts-the-earth-in-iraq-s-long-neglected-south>

¹⁶Issa Issa, Nadhir al-Ansari, Govand Sherwany, & Sven Knutsson, "Expected Future of Water Resources within Tigris-Euphrates Rivers Basin, Iraq", *Journal of Water Resources and Protection*, 2014, 6, 421- 432, https://file.scirp.org/pdf/JWARP_2014042109135235.pdf

¹⁷"Iraq: Agriculture and livelihoods Needs Assessment", *Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations*, February, 2016, http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/FAO-countries/Iraq/ToR/FAO_Assessment1.pdf; Judit Neurink, "Kurdish farmers hit by water crisis", *al-Monitor*, August 17, 2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/08/iraq-kurdistan-water-environment.html>; Mina Al Droubi, "Iraq does not have capacity to rebuild after ISIS, culture minister says", *The National*, September 10, 2018, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/iraq-does-not-have-capacity-to-rebuild-after-isis-culture-minister-says-1.768917>

While the tension this has already generated has remained relatively limited in scope, it does form a template for possible future events. Various cities that depend on cross-border flows coming from Iran have already witnessed protests against alleged Iranian cuts to their water supplies. Aggrieved locals have also targeted domestic policymakers, who they perceive as being unable to alleviate the situation. Moreover, residents have resorted to small-scale civil disobedience. For example, farmers in the border areas have on various occasions voiced their discontent by obstructing cross-border traffic with Iran.¹⁸ During the recent unrest across Iraq's southern governorates, many Sunni Arabs expressed a desire to join the protest movement. However, their past experiences with protests, as mentioned earlier, has deterred them from taking to the streets once again.¹⁹ The most incriminating evidence of the water-conflict nexus in the region has come from the link between grievances over water scarcity and recruitment by the IS. This will be discussed in detail subsequently.

Past and present experience of conflict in the area can also serve as a predictive framework for future water-related disputes. Unlike the more homogenous south, the central governorates in Iraq are more diverse (see Infographic 5), making them prone to tension along ethnic lines. This is especially true for the territory contested between the federal government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) (see Infographic 4). In the past, Arab farmers living in the disputed territories have already named the upstream KRG as the main source of water deprivation.²⁰ If water scarcity were to intensify, locals could turn against their Kurdish neighbours by association. Furthermore,

¹⁸Ahmad Majidiyar, "Iraqi Kurds protest Iran's decision of restricting water flow into northern Iraq", *Middle East Institute*, June 11, 2018, <http://education.mei.edu/content/article/io/iraqi-kurds-protest-irans-decision-restricting-water-flow-northern-iraq>; Joel Wing, "Summer Protests In Iraq Turn Deadly In Basra", *Musings on Iraq*, July 9, 2018, <http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com/2018/07/summer-protests-in-iraq-turn-deadly-in.html>; Kamal Chomani, & Toon Bijnens, "the impact of the Daryan dam on the Kurdistan region of Iraq", *Save the Tigris and Iraqi Marshes Campaign*, October, 2016, <https://www.iraqicivilsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Daryan-Dam-Report.pdf>

¹⁹Mustafa Habib, "Haunted By History, Iraq's Sunni Muslims Won't Join Shiite-Led Protests", *Niqash*, July 24, 2018, <http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/politics/5957/>

²⁰Saied Qassim, "Disputed Zones: A Reservoir of Eternal Conflict", *The Washington Institute*, January 12, 2018, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/disputed-zones-a-reservoir-of-eternal-conflict>; Zanko Ahmad, "Water - a new battleground between Kurds and Arabs", *Niqash*, March 30, 2011, <http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/economy/2807/>

as Tehran could be perceived as defending the so-called 'Shia interest' in Iraq, water-related issues originating from Iran could incite sectarian tension locally.

Even in the Kurdistan region itself, a dispute between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Erbil and the Patriotic Union Kurdistan (PUK) located in Sulaymaniyah cannot be discounted in the foreseeable future.²¹ With the various conflicts in its neighbourhood, the KRG has also welcomed a substantial number of (Arab) refugees from Syria and Arab areas in Iraq. This increase in population has put a strain on water supplies, which could intensify the social division between the groups in the future. While some refugees have returned home, the number of returnees has been declining with some expressing concern about the precarious access to water in their hometowns.²²

²¹From 1994 until 1998 the KDP and PUK were engulfed in a civil war. Namo Abdulla, "Is Iraqi Kurdistan on the verge of another civil war?", *Aljazeera*, September 30, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/iraqi-kurdistan-verge-civil-war-180928115350018.html>

²²Joel Wing, "Displacement Situation in Sinjar And What It Means For Rest Of Iraq", *Musings on Iraq*, June 19, 2018, <http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com/2018/06/displacement-situation-in-sinjar-and.html>; Marcus DuBois King, "Hydropolitical Trends and the Future of Iraqi Kurdistan", *Pacific Council*, May 2, 2018, <https://www.pacificcouncil.org/newsroom/hydropolitical-trends-and-future-iraqi-kurdistan>

3 | Sub-national water disputes

The previous section highlighted how water scarcity could lead to ethnic tension locally. The following demonstrates how water could also impact ethnosectarian dynamics at the sub-national level. In general terms, Iraq can be divided into roughly three ethnosectarian zones. The south of the country is predominantly Shia Arab, the central areas are broadly Sunni Arab, and the Kurds live in the north of Iraq. In 'The Kurdish water question' the dynamics between the semi-autonomous KRG and the federal government in Baghdad are scrutinised. 'Sectarian hydropolitics' looks at water through the framing of a Sunni-Shia divide.

3.1 The Kurdish water question

The areas under the jurisdiction of the KRG are located at the utmost north of the country (see Infographic 4: Provinces of Dohuk, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah). The Kurds thus enjoy preferential access to the water flowing from the north in Turkey and Iran to the central and southern mostly-Arab areas of the country. The best known of these waterways is the Tigris, but also its main tributaries such as the Great Zab, the Little Zab, and the Diyala River, which pass through the Kurdish region first (see Infographic 2).²³

The availability of dam infrastructure on its territory allows the KRG to capitalise on this early-access advantage on a larger-scale. It also gives it the ability to regulate the flow to governorates controlled by the federal government, thus potentially empowering the KRG with certain political leverage. Around a dozen dams are operated by the regional government of which the Dukan Dam on the Little Zab and the Darbandikhan Dam on the Diyala are the largest ones (see Infographic 2). According to Kurdish sources, these dams and the various reservoirs could hold just over 10 billion cubic metres of water.²⁴

²³David Spires, "Projected Water Demand and the Impact of Climate Change", *Strategic Water: Iraq and Security Planning in the Euphrates-Tigris Basin*, 2015, Progressive Movement, p.228

²⁴Ibid. 18, Kamal Chomani, & Toon Bijmens

To expand control over its water resources, the KRG intends to develop more dams. The most notable of these would be the Bekhme Dam on the Great Zab River which would be the dam with the largest reservoir in Iraq but remains unfinished.²⁵ Further, currently Iraq's most strategically important dam, the Mosul Dam, is located a mere 40 km outside KRG jurisdiction, making it an attainable target during a possible military confrontation with the central government (see Infographic 2).

Despite this geographical advantage, the KRG has mostly refrained from using its 'water weapon' against Baghdad. Because the federal government has leverage over the KRG in other dimensions of power, it has largely prevented the Kurds from utilising their riparian advantage politically. For example, the KRG has been highly dependent on money transfers from Baghdad for its public finances. With a quarter of the local population on the government payroll, the Kurdish economy is highly dependent on the budgetary decisions made at the centre. Attempts by the KRG to become more self-reliant by exporting oil independently from the central government have not led to the desired results.²⁶ In addition, the government offensive to retake disputed territory from the Kurds in the aftermath of the KRG's independence referendum in 2017 also partially highlighted Baghdad's relative military superiority.²⁷

Yet, with water becoming scarcer, the relative power of the KRG's riparian position is set to increase. This is likely to make water a more important bargaining tool but also makes water-related issues between both actors more probable. Based on past experience, scenarios for future hydropolitical tension between Erbil and Baghdad can be hypothesised. Water scarcity could lead to rising articulations of Kurdish (water)

²⁵Fred Pearce, "Mideast Water Wars: In Iraq, A Battle for Control of Water", *Yale Environment 360*, August 25, 2014, <https://e360.yale.edu/features/mideast-water-wars-in-iraq-a-battle-for-control-of-water>

²⁶Independent oil sales were not able to match the KRG's national budget share. Even more, this share was also cut by the central government as a response to the KRG's autonomous oil exports.; Andrew Snow, "Kurdistan Region's Debt Crisis Threatens Iraq's Economy", *United States Institute of Peace*, May 9, 2018, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2018/05/kurdistan-regions-debt-crisis-threatens-iraqs-economy>; Mohammed Hussein, "The Collateral Damage of the KRI's Economic Policy", *LSE Middle East Centre Blog*, April 17, 2018, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/04/17/the-collateral-damage-of-the-kris-economic-policy/>

²⁷Martin Chulov, "Kurds defeated, displaced and divided after Iraq reclaims oil-rich Kirkuk", *The Guardian*, October 22, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/22/kurds-bitter-defeat-iraq-reclaims-kirkuk>

nationalism, to the detriment of Arabs. While this could occur on a micro-scale with individual farmers monopolising the water, it could also take the form of KRG policy. In 2017, when Iran cut the flow of the Little Zab into Iraqi Kurdish territory, in order to meet their own needs, the KRG reduced the subsequent flow of water to Arab governorates.²⁸

The Kurds have also possibly already resorted to the use of water for political purposes. The earlier mentioned KRG response to Iran's reduction of the downstream flow not only had a self-sustainability component but also likely a political one. In Iraq, the federal government has exclusive authority over external water resource management. To date, Baghdad has only made agreements with Iran concerning cross-border flows to Arab governorates of Iraq. Hence, the KRG's decision to reduce the downstream discharge could be seen as a means to pressure the centre to make similar deals for rivers entering Kurdish areas.²⁹ Erbil, too, has on several occasions threatened to reduce downstream flow in order to influence a range of political and economic disputes with the central government. The KRG is said to have acted on its threats during at least one of these disputes, over oil exports in 2014. By allegedly ignoring Baghdad's request to increase downstream flow from the Dukan Dam, the KRG used its riparian position for political ends.³⁰

²⁸ "Iran cuts flow of Little Zab river to Kurdistan", *Rudaw*, June 2, 2018, <http://www.rudaw.net/NewsDetails.aspx?pageid=381860>; "Iran Deprives Iraqi Kurdistan of Drinking Water", *Asharq al-Awsat*, July 3, 2017, <https://eng-archive.aawsat.com/theaawsat/news-middle-east/iran-deprives-iraqi-kurdistan-drinking-water>; Sangar Ali, "Kurdish minister will visit Iran after serious water flow reduction to Kurdistan", *Kurdistan 24*, June 27, 2017, <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/1871c580-f1ac-466c-9e31-2a7471b03d7b>

²⁹Ibid. 18, Kamal Chomani, & Toon Bijmens; "Iran-Iraq water deals do not cover Sirwan, Little Zab rivers: Iranian official", *Rudaw*, June 4, 2018, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/040620183>; See also the Iraqi Constitution article 110 section 8 and article 114 section 7

³⁰ "Amid Erbil-Baghdad Budget Row, Kurds Control the Water Taps", *Rudaw*, February 25, 2014, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/25022014>; Baxtiyar Goran, "Kurdistan considers cutting water supplies to Iraq", *Kurdistan 24*, June 21, 2016, <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/66faa943-6947-4143-9df3-fba0aea86dcf/Kurdistan-considers-cutting-water-supplies-to-Iraq->

3.2 Sectarian hydropolitics

Apart from issues between the KRG and the central government, access to water could also become an element of contention between Sunni and Shia Arabs. Since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the country has been characterised by intensified ethnosectarian politics. With the majority-Sunni Arab governorates located upstream from the predominately Shia Arab governorates, water scarcity has the potential to be politicised in increasingly sectarian terms (see Infographic 5). Anecdotal evidence from interviews with water-deprived Shia Arab farmers along the Euphrates, which passes Sunni-dominated Anbar province before going to the Shia Arab south, corroborates this possibility. Apart from condemning an upstream riparian entity like Turkey, or the Iraqi federal government, locals also implicitly accused their upstream Sunni neighbours who seem relatively better off.³¹

Although less readily predictable, the reverse process of water-related mobilisation by some Sunnis against Shias has already occurred in Iraq. One of the factors that facilitated the rise of the IS in the country was resentment held by Sunni Arabs towards a repressive Shia-dominated government. While grievances related to the political exclusion of Sunnis are well-known, the IS also incorporated water scarcity in its narrative. The militant group claimed that water scarcity was a deliberate government plan to displace Sunni farmers in favour of others of Shia identity. As a result, Sunni farmers from water-deprived areas were more likely to join the militants.³²

The Sunni-dominated provinces are also home to several dams and barrages that are of strategic importance during armed conflict. Local militant groups could seize control of this infrastructure and cause havoc in downstream Shia areas. When the IS took over parts of northern and central Iraq, it also seized important barrages like the ones in

³¹Campbell Robertson, "Iraq Suffers as the Euphrates River Dwindles", *The New York Times*, July 13, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/14/world/middleeast/14euphrates.html>

³²Peter Schwartzstein, "Climate Change and Water Woes Drove ISIS Recruiting in Iraq", *National Geographic*, November 14, 2017, <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2017/11/climate-change-drought-drove-isis-terrorist-recruiting-iraq/>

Ramadi and Fallujah in Anbar province (see Infographic 2). The militant group subsequently closed the barrages' floodgates, harming downstream Shia communities and their farmland. Apart from the tactical advantages that came with control of the barrages, fuelling sectarian tension was likely part of the group's intentions.³³

³³Tobias von Lossow, "Water as Weapon: IS on the Euphrates and Tigris", *German Institute for International and Security Affairs*, January, 2016, https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2016C03_lsw.pdf

4 | Neighbourhood tensions

With Iraq's main rivers originating outside its borders, the changes in the country's water availability will also impact its external relationships. The first section, 'Upstream riparian states', gives an overview of the hydropolitical dynamics present in the basin. In 'Inter-state war?' the applicability of the concept of 'water wars' is assessed in the case of Iraq. This is followed by 'Balancing and bargaining' which hypothesises a more realistic scenario than water wars.

4.1 Upstream riparian states

Iraq's most important riparian neighbour, arguably, is Turkey. The country is home to the sources of both the Euphrates and the Tigris. Through its Southeastern Anatolia Project, Ankara has constructed various dams on both rivers.³⁴ This has allowed it to regulate the downstream flow to Iraq (and Syria on the Euphrates). Water policymaking in Ankara thus has repercussion for communities across Iraq. More specifically, a reduction in the flow of the Tigris has especially adverse effects for the northern, central and finally the southeastern areas of Iraq. Reduced discharge of the Euphrates negatively impacts the Anbar governorate and the adjoining provinces further south (see Infographic 2).

However, Iraq has two other upstream neighbours, Iran and Syria, whose impact has often been overshadowed by the debate on Turkey's infrastructure projects. While the Tigris originates in Turkey, tributaries coming from Iran have been estimated to contribute at least one-fifth of the river's flow. Further south, cross-border streams from Iran also account for around 40 per cent of the Shatt al-Arab.³⁵ Dam-building on these various rivers especially impacts the eastern areas of Iraq. The provinces of Sulaymaniyah and Halabja in Iraqi Kurdistan, and Diyala in central Iraq, are first in line to

³⁴The most notable of these dams are arguably the Atatürk Dam on the Euphrates and the Ilisu Dam on the Tigris (of which the reservoir is yet to be filled); Ibid. 2, Suraj Sharma

³⁵Ibid. 2, Nadheer al-Ansari; Ibid. 16, Issa Issa, Nadhir al-Ansari, Govand Sherwany, & Sven Knutsson

bear the brunt of harmful Iranian water-related policies (see Infographic 1). The Shatt al-Arab is the primary source of water for Basra province, which has been at the heart of the earlier mentioned protests demanding better services, like access to water. Further, Syria's geography makes it the middle riparian on the Euphrates, between upstream Turkey and downstream Iraq. If the country decided to appropriate a greater share of the river's flow, it would have negative consequences foremost for western and southern Iraq (see Infographic 1).

These three states have already encroached the rivers running towards Iraq and are likely to further monopolise these in the future. Both Iran and Syria have been facing unrest and conflict that has been linked to issues of water availability.³⁶ With this resource in decline, both Tehran and Damascus may further restrict the downstream discharge. While Turkey has been relatively less prone to water scarcity compared to its southern neighbours, when water resources do become strained, Turkish authorities prioritise their own supply over that of the neighbouring countries.³⁷ Moreover, there is also the precedent of Ankara manipulating river flows for political purposes.³⁸

4.2 Inter-state war?

While 'water wars' have to some extent captured various public imaginations, these conventional wars between any of the states in the Tigris-Euphrates basin are unlikely to

³⁶In Syria, the 2011 uprisings and the subsequent civil war have been linked to water scarcity. One of the latest examples of the connection between water scarcity and unrest in Iran was the 2018 protests in Khorramshahr.; "Protest Over Water Scarcity Turns Violent In Southwestern Iran", *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, July 1, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/protest-over-water-scarcity-turns-violent-in-southwestern-iran/29330155.html>; Thomas Friedman, "Without Water, Revolution", *The New York Times*, May 18, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/19/opinion/sunday/friedman-without-water-revolution.html>

³⁷During the drought year of 2009, Turkey denied a request from Syria and Iraq to increase the downstream flow because of a decrease in rainfall in Turkey.; Ryan Wilson, "Water-Shortage Crisis Escalating in the Tigris-Euphrates Basin", *Future Directions*, August 28, 2012, <http://www.futuredirections.org.au/publication/water-shortage-crisis-escalating-in-the-tigris-euphrates-basin/>

³⁸The latest example has been the alleged purposeful reduction in water flowing into Syria since Kurdish forces took over the Tabqa Dam.; Ben Hubbard, "An Ancient River in Syria Sections Off a Modern War", *The New York Times*, August 3, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/03/world/middleeast/syria-euphrates-river-war.html>

materialise, especially not with Iraq as a party to the conflict.³⁹ Generally, there has been a global trend away from classic inter-state conflict towards internal and internationalised strife.⁴⁰ There is no evidence that suggests a reversal of this direction or that contestation over access to water could change this trend.

Although in the past Saddam Hussein threatened and mobilised against Syria and Turkey over the issue of water, this scenario has little chance of repeating itself.⁴¹ Since the 2003 invasion, Iraq has suffered from state weakness and experienced continuous internal turmoil. To deal with these challenges, Baghdad has had to rely extensively on external support and is likely to continue doing so in the foreseeable future.⁴² Regardless of institutional weaknesses, many of Iraq's political elites have also lost their legitimacy in the eyes of the people, making the population, exhausted by war, less likely to support a new conflict.⁴³

The fragility of the Iraqi state is possibly even more discernible in comparison to its upstream neighbours. Turkey has, on various occasions, violated Iraqi sovereignty by sending troops and conducting airstrikes in the country. Baghdad has condemned these incursions but has been unable to halt them, thus exemplifying the asymmetrical power relationship.⁴⁴ Turkey's NATO membership also adds to this asymmetry and makes a

³⁹Tom O'Connor, "War for Water? Syria, Iraq and Turkey will Next Fight for Rivers, Report Says", *Newsweek*, July 27, 2018, <https://www.newsweek.com/war-water-syria-iraq-turkey-will-next-fight-rivers-report-says-1046349>

⁴⁰Kendra Dupuy, & Siri Aas Rustad, "Trends in Armed Conflict, 1946-2017", *Peace Research Institute Oslo*, May, 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Dupuy%20Rustad-%20Trends%20in%20Armed%20Conflict%201946-2017%20Conflict%20Trends%205-2018.pdf>

⁴¹In 1975, Iraq and Syria mobilised its forces at the border after a significant reduction in the flow of the Euphrates in Iraq. Before the Atatürk Dam became operational in the early 1990s, Saddam Hussein threatened to bomb the dam.; David Spiers, "Hydropolitics", *Strategic Water: Iraq and Security Planning in the Euphrates-Tigris Basin*, 2015, Progressive Movement, p.339-343; Joost Jongerden, "Dams and Politics in Turkey: Utilizing Water, Developing Conflict", *Middle East Policy Council*, March, 2010, <https://mepec.org/dams-and-politics-turkey-utilizing-water-developing-conflict>

⁴²Thanassis Cambanis, "ISIS was a symptom. State collapse is the disease", *The Boston Globe*, July 15, 2017, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/ideas/2017/07/14/isis-was-symptom-state-collapse-disease/9s1UfPUigAeAyLYwQUKAIO/story.html#>

⁴³Ibid. 11, Benedict Robin-D'Cruz

⁴⁴Sangar Ali, "Iraq condemns Turkish airstrikes in Shingal, denies coordinating with Ankara", *Kurdistan 24*, August 17, 2018, <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/dd9eaf09-3655-4d0e-9ff3-293c445241b6>; Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "Turkish warplanes conduct strikes on Shingal: sources", *Kurdistan 24*, August 15, 2018, <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/a3c6c475-c074-49a2-a448-44f94d7a4263>

conventional military confrontation unlikely. Since 2003, Iran has expanded its influence in Iraq, making the latter significantly dependent in spheres such as security and energy.⁴⁵ The chances of officials in Baghdad openly confronting Tehran are slim.

4.3 Balancing and bargaining

Instead of a 'water war', water is more likely to become a central component of Iraq's wider (non-violent) political and economic relations with its neighbours. In the past, Turkey has already used water as a bargaining tool in exchange for political concessions. In particular, (tacit) support by downstream countries to Kurdish separatists has made Ankara employ water-related policies strategically.⁴⁶ In this sense, Turkey has mostly used water provision as a carrot; that is, increasing downstream supply if political conditions are met. This trend is likely to become more pronounced as Ankara becomes more assertive in its policy towards the Arab world. In light of this increased assertiveness, the possibility of Ankara utilising water like a stick, by reducing downstream supply until compliance is achieved, also cannot be discounted.⁴⁷

To defy these upstream attempts to exercise influence through water policies, the Iraqi government can be expected to take certain counter-measures. In 1977, Baghdad attempted to influence Ankara's water infrastructure projects by halting its oil exports to the latter.⁴⁸ Although Turkey has diversified its import sources, geopolitical changes could partly restore the importance of Iraqi oil. In the longer term, Baghdad could

⁴⁵Patrick McGee, & Ed Crooks, "General Electric beats Siemens to Iraq power-generation contract", *The Financial Times*, October 17, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/191f62a6-d1a3-11e8-a9f2-7574db66bcd5>

⁴⁶*Ibid.* 41, Joost Jongerden

⁴⁷Abbas Djavadi, "Turkey's Foreign Policy: From 'Zero Problems' To 'Nothing But Problems'", *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, June 6, 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkey-foreign-policy-erdogan-zero-problems/27781927.html>

⁴⁸Michael Rubin, "Water wars in the heart of Mesopotamia?", *American Enterprise Institute*, September 8, 2014, <http://www.aei.org/publication/water-wars-in-the-heart-of-mesopotamia/>

possibly link natural gas exports to the issue of transboundary water-sharing.⁴⁹ Iraq could also team up with its neighbours to balance Turkish dominance. In 1990, when Ankara filled up the reservoir of the Atatürk Dam on the Euphrates, Baghdad and Damascus united in a boycott against Turkish businesses involved in the project.⁵⁰ Finally, states have also resorted to supporting militant groups against their upstream opponent to favourably impact access to water. For example, in the 1980s, Syria supported separatist Kurdish militants operating in Turkey as a reaction to Ankara's water policies.⁵¹

However, the present relationship between Baghdad and both Ankara and Tehran remains uneven to the extent that the upstream riparian states have had no need to openly politicise water as they did in the past. The politicisation and/or weaponisation of water is also often perceived as unethical by the international community. Therefore, upstream policymakers have acted both cautiously and covertly.⁵²

⁴⁹ "Iran keeps position as top crude oil exporter to Turkey", *Daily Sabah*, May 30, 2018, <https://www.dailysabah.com/energy/2018/05/31/iran-keeps-position-as-top-crude-oil-exporter-to-turkey>; James Jeffrey, & Michael Knights, "Iraq's Energy Future Lies to the North", *The Washington Institute*, March 8, 2018, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iraqs-energy-future-lies-to-the-north>

⁵⁰Ibid.48, Michael Rubin

⁵¹David Spires, "Hydropolitics", *Strategic Water: Iraq and Security Planning in the Euphrates-Tigris Basin*, 2015, Progressive Movement, p.346-347

⁵²Christian Borja-Vega, "Why a human rights based approach to water and sanitation is essential for the poor", *The World Bank (The Water Blog)*, September 28, 2018, <http://blogs.worldbank.org/water/why-human-rights-based-approach-water-and-sanitation-essential-poor>

5 | Conclusion

Water scarcity has already impacted a range of political and security issues in Iraq, especially in the south of the country. Discord has involved a variety of actors such as the central and provincial governments, tribal factions, and the general population. Of these, inter-tribal conflict and popular mobilisation are arguably the most important issues. While inter-provincial disputes and friction between the provincial and central government have remained largely institutional, water-related conflict between the tribes has turned violent with casualties being recorded. In 2018, the south of the country, particularly Basra province, also saw large partly water-related popular protests. These protests highlighted the general dissatisfaction with Baghdad's water management policies and were yet another indication of the legitimacy crisis the central government faces.

Although the upstream location of the central and northern areas of Iraq make them less prone to water scarcity, they have also faced significant issues. Locals, especially farmers, have held small-scale protests against perceived government mismanagement of water resources. Moreover, Iran, which is said to be responsible for cuts to cross-border flows, has attracted the ire of the farmers. Another response to Tehran's water policy has been the occasional blocking of automobile traffic to and from the country. Most notably, the IS also used water scarcity, as part of a broader range of grievances, to recruit local Sunni Arabs. It sectarianised the issue by portraying water scarcity as a deliberate action by the Shia-dominated central government to displace Sunni farmers.

As the availability of water is set to reduce further, these issues are likely to persist and possibly intensify. Given Iraq's post-2003 history of ethnosectarian tension, hydropolitics could become part of this dynamic. While the IS pitted Sunnis against the Shia-led government, the country's geographic reality lends itself to the reverse scenario, that is, Shia resentment against Sunnis. The more upstream location of Sunni Arabs could be exploited by Shia sectarian entrepreneurs who aim to divide the communities.

Another water-related point of contention that could gain salience is between the upstream semi-autonomous Kurdish region and the downstream federal Iraqi government. As water becomes scarcer, the leverage associated with the Kurds' riparian position is set to increase, allowing them to progressively politicise the resource.

Finally, inter-state 'water wars' between Iraq and its neighbours are unlikely to occur. At least in the foreseeable future, the Iraqi state's relative weakness will continue to prevent it from mounting a credible challenge against its upstream neighbours, particularly Turkey and Iran. Nonetheless, as water becomes scarcer, it will become a more prominent element in the international affairs of Iraq and the basin, intersecting with other political and economic concerns. Downstream actors like Iraq may be prompted to counter-balance their riparian disadvantage by, among other things, building coalitions with other downstream states.



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