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The Water Shortage Crisis in Iraq

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Middle East and North Africa are dry, with higher temperatures, fewer rivers, and less rain and snowfall than the rest of the world. Thanks to the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, Iraq is one of the richest countries in the region in terms of water resources—but millions of Iraqis nevertheless suffer from a lack of clean water as temperatures rise and desertification overtakes large parts of the country. This problem is badly mismanaged by the Iraqi government, as it is by other governments across the region, and is worsened by the malign actions of neighboring countries. If the water problem is not solved, Iraqi civilization could disappear completely.

The Middle East contains 6.3% of the world's population but only 1.4% of its usable clean water. In 1955, only three Arab countries suffered a water crisis, but that figure has risen to 11. Scientists forecast that seven more will suffer a water crisis by 2025.

The British think tank Chatham House titled a report on this problem, "Do not solve the water problem in Iraq using an old policy." The center argues that the Iraqi PM's office must prioritize the water problem, as successive governments largely contributed to its severity.

According to Chatham House, Iraq was in a good position regarding water due to the Tigris and Euphrates rivers until 1970. After that year, however, the country lost about 40% of its water. This was partly due to policies in neighboring countries (especially Turkey) toward Iraq. High temperatures and low rainfall rates also had a serious impact on Iraq's reservoirs, from which about 8 billion cubic meters of water evaporated.

According to the Aljazeera Research Center, the main culprit behind the shortage of running water in Iraq was the cutting off of water flows from the

Tigris and Euphrates by Turkey. The Tigris River, the second-longest river in southwest Asia, originates in southeastern Turkey and is 1,718 kilometers long. It passes through Syrian territory for 50 kilometers and enters Iraq at the village of Fishkhabour. Five tributaries flow into Iraq: the Khabur, the Great Zab, the Little Zab, the Azim, and the Diyala. The Tigris meets the Euphrates at Qurna to create Shatt al-Arab.

The water shortage has had a serious effect on Iraq. This year, Mahdi Rashid Hamdani, the Iraqi minister of water resources, said water coming from Turkey through the Tigris and Euphrates had decreased by 50%. The Zab River in the Kirkuk region has decreased its water content by 70%, and tributaries and rivers such as those reaching the Darbandikhan Dam (in northern Iraq) have reached zero.

Hamdani noted as well that Iran has changed the course of many important rivers that flow into Iraq, such as the Sirwan River, which Iran has tried many times to drain. The Islamic regime has also changed the course of rivers in the border areas of Diyala and Khanaqin so they flow into Iran.

According to research by the Mediterranean Institute for Regional Studies, Iraq is losing the bulk of its water resources. In 1933, water entering Iraq through the Euphrates River from Turkey and Syria amounted to 30 billion cubic meters. In 2021, they amount to 9.5 billion cubic meters. As a result of the construction by Turkey of the Ilisu Dam, the discharge of the Tigris River into Iraq decreased from 20.5 billion cubic meters to 9.7 billion cubic meters. Iran, meanwhile, drained five Iraqi rivers—the Kanjan Jam, the Kalal Badra, the Jankilat, the Karkh, and the Khobin—all of which are now dried up. The loss of the rivers led to radical changes in the biological and environmental systems in the region, prompting the uprooting and migration of the residents of dozens of Iraqi border villages.

Lake Sawa is 4.47 kilometers long and 1.77 kilometers wide, and is considered one of the foremost tourist areas in Iraq due to its proximity to archaeological sites and place in Iraqi culture (it is mentioned in many poems and stories). This lake, which is thousands of years old and dates back to before the era of the written word, has now dried up completely, and the lands near it are a wasteland. Lake Sawa is dead because of reckless human intervention in nature, industry, geological factors, increased evaporation, lack of rainfall, and the complete failure by the Iraqi government to do anything about it.

The lack of rain and other external factors, including terrorism, affect not only Iraqi rivers but also drinking water. ISIS, which is known for targeting oil pipelines, also targets irrigation projects and dams. The group destroyed the Fallujah Dam in western Iraq in 2014, which caused the drying up of many

agricultural and irrigation projects in the areas of Saqlawiya, Abu Ghraib, Radwaniyah, Latifiya, and Alexandria.

Recommendations

- The Iraqi government must develop a program to address the problem of water scarcity and identify solutions. It is high time that it adopted a modern policy for water management.
- The present generation of Iraqis must put pressure on the water authorities in Iraq to ensure that future generations do not become victims of Turkey's and Iran's aggressions against Iraq's water resources. Iraq has more than one card to play against Turkey on this score.
- At one time, international organizations provided large sums of money to people who claimed to be working in the water field in Iraq. As it turned out, they were corrupt and involved in money laundering. The Iraqi government knows who these people are and should inflict severe punishments on them. (Other money that was allocated to the water problem has disappeared completely.)
- Awareness must be raised among Iraqis regarding rational uses of water. A water education strategy is badly needed in schools, the press, and religious circles.
- As is the case in European countries, water and electricity usage should be efficiently monitored so as to control consumption and hold violators accountable.
- As a proactive step to mitigate future environmental risk, seeds that have the ability to withstand drought should be scattered in areas prone to desertification.

Conclusion

Four main factors are worsening the water shortage in Iraq: the cutting off of water from Kurdistan and Iraq by neighboring countries Turkey and Iran; the combined effects of lack of rainfall due to climate change, high temperatures, and evaporation; wars and violence—especially that committed by ISIS, which has blown up water stores; and the lack of a modern policy regarding water security within the government of Iraq. The Iraqi people have also developed wasteful habits with regard to water usage.

The most essential element sustaining human existence is water. Through the decline of Iraq's waters, the drying up of the marshes in southern Iraq, and the change in the environment due to desertification, the Iraqi people have been put at great risk. As agriculture and irrigation collapse, neighborhoods

and, indeed, the entire ecosystem of the region will change. Iraqi civilization, which is thousands of years old, could disappear forever.

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