



BACKGROUND PAPER:

UN Security Council (UNSC)

Saving Iraq, Saving MENA: The Situation in Basra

“The perception of inequitable distribution of climate-related investments could exacerbate existing grievances and feelings of marginalization, potentially eroding trust in the state's legitimacy.”

– UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, April 2023

This Basra “environmental uprising” froze the government, targeted the Iranian consulate, and ultimately contributed to the powerful Dawa Party losing its position as the country’s ruling party. This marked a turning point in Iraqi politics.

– Safaa Khalaf, August 2023

Introduction: Once upon a time, Basra was one of the cradles of civilization, filled with canals and gardens, it was even fabled to be the original Garden of Eden. Today it is a salt-encrusted desert filled with trash and undermined by victims of drug addiction and cholera. Lower rainfalls, rising sea levels, and everything discussed in the previous two background papers combine in Basra to threaten its very existence. (Security Council delegates are expected to be familiar with the previous two papers to effectively address the current topic.)

Positioned at the very end of the Tigris and Euphrates river system, a system that has lost 90% of its water, Basra has few resources at its disposal. After decades of war and the current climate politics playing out, Basra is positioned as not only a first major casualty of climate change but as a hotbed for local, regional, and trans-national conflict in its perhaps final chapter.

What will interest the Security Council are essentially two questions:

1. What actions can the international community take to prevent the Basra region from becoming a conflict zone which might lead to the collapse of Iraq and even surrounding nations?
2. To what extent and in what circumstances might non-cooperation around shared natural resources be considered an act of war?

Background & History:

Most of the background on the climate crisis and its consequences have been established in the previous two background papers.

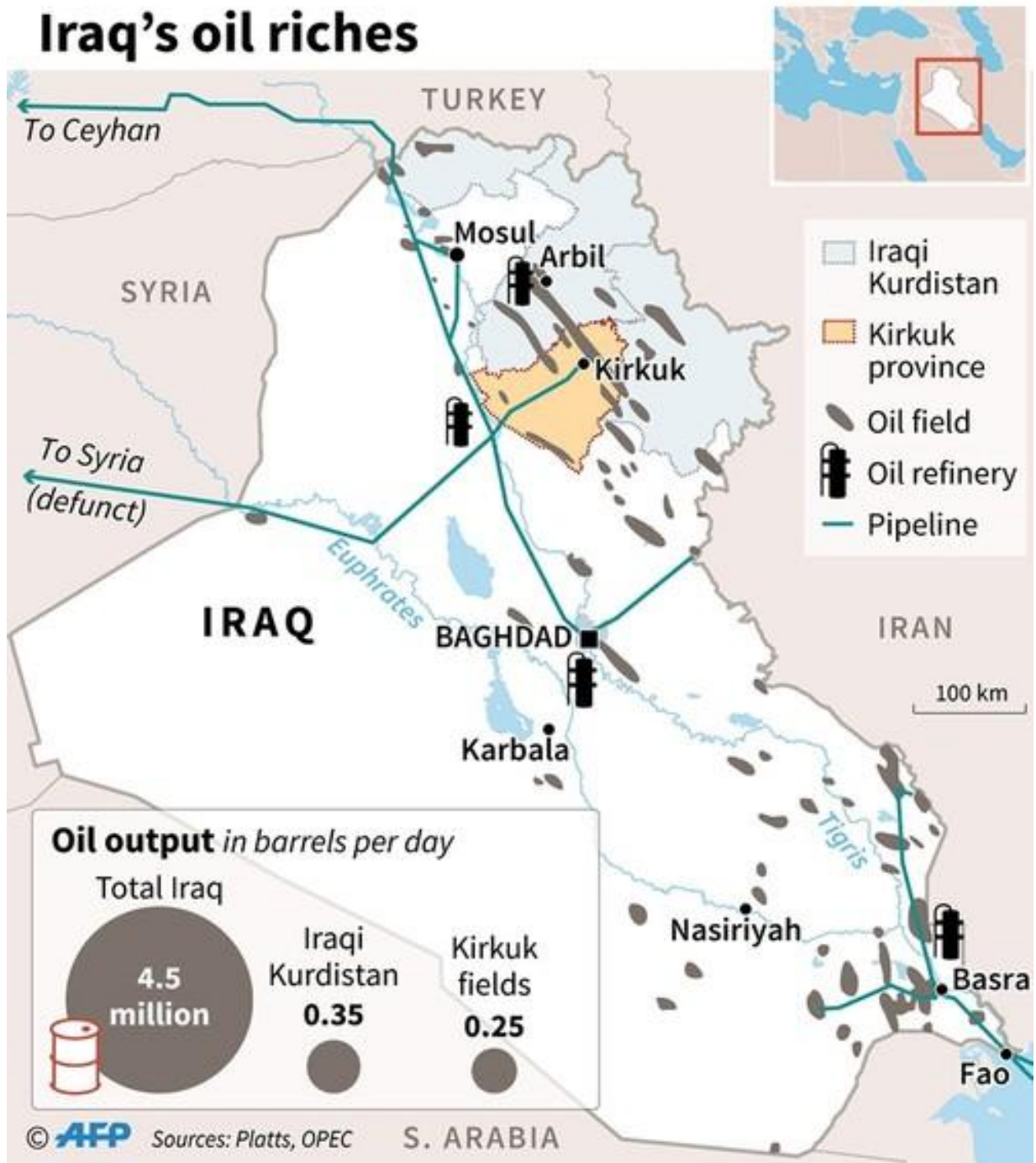
Analysts have described Basra as a “catastrophic convergence” of circumstances, and strong-arm solutions are unlikely to do anything but exacerbate the situation. Without intervention, however, the current direction for the region is one of calamity. A few of the significant problems in Basra currently:

- **Desertification, Drought, and Sea Water Rise** - all contributing to an environmental catastrophe which may well submerge Basra completely if not addressed effectively
- **Reduced access to clean water** and the means to deliver it - causing disease, pollution, and black market trade
- **Failed Agriculture and Loss of Food Security.** Displaced farmers and fishermen have created a food, economy, and unemployment crisis.
- **Overpopulation in cities**, caused by IDPs mostly, creating terrible stress on infrastructure (shelter, hospitals, water, sewage, energy, etc.)
- **Poverty** from inequities, joblessness, etc. - creating a rising crime and drug addiction rate
- **Lack of Perception of Legitimacy of National Government** - government cannot satisfy needs of people or secure their safety. Government is known for crackdowns vs. protestors
- **Lack of Perception of Legitimacy of Local Government** - local governments play favorites and hire paramilitary and non-state actors to advance their own interests
- **Crime and Violence** - A collection of inter-tribal conflicts and protests, mafias (organized criminal enterprises), paramilitary groups (some Iranian-backed), terrorist insurgents (IS and Al Qaeda), and private sector security forces, all with changing and diverse interests. Dozens of incidents are reported daily.
- **Oil Company Profits and Power** - Most powerful economic force in Iraq, local companies connected to political leaders, partnered with US, UK, and Chinese oil companies



(Wilkinson)

For reference, the seawater of the Persian Gulf already travels nearly 200 km inland to salinate the delta region; Basra is within this range. The Marshlands are also partially in Iranian territory. The “Prosperity River” is an artificial river created by Hussein to divert water away from the Marshlands in the 1990s, draining them.



Most of Iraqi oil comes from the Basra region. (Nearly 20% comes from the north in Kurdistan.) The oil industry has established itself in some areas of former Marshland.

Timeline of Iraqi War and Basra Status

The following timeline is an expansion of the one offered in the UNEP paper. Here, however, we have added specific impacts to Basra from these conflicts as sub-points. This timeline is the combination of a number of sources, but the Basra portions are largely from Wilkinson's essay, "A Vicious Circle."

- 1970s - Rise of Saddam Hussein
- **1980-1988 - Brutal war with Iran** with no clear winner.
 - This war was, in large part, waged around control of the Shatt al-Arab river (the combination of Tigris and Euphrates). During the war, forests and fruit trees were destroyed to reduce cover for troops, and chemical weapons were used extensively in the region, causing untold damage.
- 1988 - Iraq attacks own territory of Kurdistan with poison gas
- **1990 - Iraqi invasion of Kuwait**; UN passes SC Resolution 678 authorizing military force to remove the invaders.
 - The war found Iraqi forces dumping billions of barrels of oil into the Persian Gulf. Illegal dumping afterwards may have released dioxins into the groundwater.
- **1991 - Operation Desert Storm** (US and allies) ends the conflict; Iraq continues forceful repression of rebellious Kurds.
 - A rebellion against Hussein in Basra sparked Hussein's retaliation against the Marsh Arab Ma'Dan peoples. He drained 90% of the surrounding Marshlands to cut off food and water from the rebels, displacing many who often went to Basra to find work.
- 1990s - Hussein's rule continues along with severe UN sanctions against oil trade with Iraq and several failed UN inspections seeking Weapons of Mass Destruction
- 1998 - Operation Desert Fox US bombing campaign vs Iraq's potential weapons sites
- 2001 - Al Qaeda terrorists attack World Trade Center
- 2002 - Suspicious that Iraq is behind the attacks, US Congress votes for military force against Iraq
- **2003 - Operation Iraqi Freedom** removes Hussein from power (he is later executed by the Iraqi government); Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) is put into power. US begins occupation of Iraq.
 - The invasion began in the Basra region to secure the oil fields and it caused more chemical damage there from the assault. However, coalition forces began a restoration of the Marshlands soon afterwards, which began to see success until 2009.
- **2004-2005 - A New Constitution of Federalism.** After months of terrorist bombings against occupied forces and political figures, and after months of Shiite insurgency against US and coalition troops, after thousands of

civilian deaths, a new constitution and government are formed, though divided.

- In Basra, this meant some autonomy of operations, resulting in clientelism, where projects and government contracts are handled by power elites for whoever they favor. These are often enforced with non-state militia groups. Iran-aided paramilitary smuggling and other groups (tribes, mafias, and private sector security forces) continue to operate there today. Because Baghdad has not been able to exert power there, oil companies hire combinations of these non-state actors for their own security.
- 2007-2008 - The US “Surge” increases US responses to insurgency.
- 2009-2011 - US slowly relinquishes control back to Iraqi forces, completing major troop withdrawals. Terrorist attacks and regional unrest continues. Kurds and Sunni minorities in Iraq protest frequently and are often banned from trade and political representation.
- 2011 - Insurgent forces openly ally with Al Qaeda forces.
- 2013 - 2015 - Insurgent forces organized as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), later Islamic State, across Iraq and Syria. Several regions fall to ISIS fighters. US bombings of ISIS begin.
- 2014 - Iraq installs a broader representation in government which includes Sunni and Kurds
- **2015-2019 - Fighting with Islamic State continues**, and IS withdraws from most major areas. Other insurgent and terrorist group, including Iran-backed Hezbollah, continue to stage attacks on US and political targets in Iraq.
 - In Basra, additional funding for Iraq defense meant the end of water infrastructure projects, which have now fallen into disrepair. Militia and paramilitary groups have taken over parts of the water industry to “support the community,” but they often find conflict with local villages starved of essential water.
- **2018 The Basra Poisoning -**
 - Water poisoning sent more than 100,000 people to hospitals in Basra. Many died. This led to widespread protests into the following year.
- **2019 -** An Iraqi government, still struggling to rebuild itself and accused of corruption by many international partners, faces Covid.
 - **The water protests of 2019** in Basra saw legal authorities, paramilitary, and non-state actors allied to crack down against protestors in order to retain power. “Some tribes control vast amounts of water and have so many weapons that it is difficult to challenge their control” (Wilkinson). Even foreign investors and government workers attempting to repair or build water infrastructure projects have been threatened and attacked.
- 2020 - While most of the Islamic State has been routed, they remain active in Iraq, returning to their insurgency roots and adopting “hit-and-run” attacks on a variety of targets in Kurdistan and elsewhere, mostly

bombings and targeted killings. As a result, the US still has about 2500 troops in Iraq to help train and coordinate Iraqi forces.

- 2021 - Iraq signs on the Paris (Climate) Agreement.
 - This means that Baghdad will have to confront the situation in Basra in order to regain control of 80% of its oil industry in order to make the necessary changes.

Current Situation:

How is this an International Conflict?

The Security Council has taken the topic under consideration for two reasons:

Climate change is rarely a direct source of conflict, but is seen as a **threat multiplier** that compounds existing problems. The Security Council has previously recognized the security implications of climate change. The UN also recognizes the need to build questions of natural resource allocation, ownership and access into peacebuilding strategies in the immediate aftermath of conflict. Each November 6, the UN marks the International Day for Preventing the Exploitation of the Environment in War and Armed Conflict. The UN has undertaken a principle of “Greening the Blue Helmets” as a way to note this expansion of principle.

In this case, the Basra situation is one the Security Council has undertaken because:

1. The immediate possibility for the expansion of violence in the region of Basra continues to compound. With non-state actors involved supporting various positions of regional power struggles and foreign involvements from Iran, US, UK, China, and others, the possibility for expansion from regional to international conflict is not simply speculative. The region, of course, saw a devastating decade-long war with Iran (partially over water) which haunts the region still.
2. The upriver decisions by Iran and Turkey are arguably antagonist positions in denying an essential and shared natural resource, compelling the Security Council to consider whether dam projects, combined with unending delays in negotiations, form Acts of Aggression. Such a decision, for or against, would be an historic one for the international community.

Who’s Side Is it On? The Iraqi Government

It is difficult to place one’s thumb on the “center” of Iraqi policy and governance, since so many different people hold the reins of disparate power structures, from ministerial positions to corporate leaders to militant organizations. There have

always been tensions between the Sunni (some are former Hussein supporters) and Shiite (some are supporters of Iran) groups in Iraq and between these and the Kurds to the north, themselves divided. These internal divisions made defeating the Islamic State difficult; they continue to haunt Iraq and a resurgence of IS in ungoverned territory is all too possible.

The 2021 election and government saw more minorities elected but it attempted and failed to form a coalition government in Baghdad; no one had a majority. An Iranian militia assassination attempt on the Shiite Prime Minister caused many to resign from politics; this opened up spaces for Shiites that Iran supported to take over in government. The current prime minister, Mohammad Shia al-Sudani, is an ally of Iran and many of the ministers in his government have ties to US-identified terrorist groups, including Hezbollah. (The President Abdul Latif Rashid is a Kurdish former Minister of Water Resources.) Needless to say, bringing disenfranchised Sunni and Kurdish representation back into the government has not been easy, despite al-Sudani's "balance and openness" policies. (Over 50 Kurdish representatives resigned from government this summer in protest of national government take-overs in Kurdistan; and a kind of "redistricting" or gerrymandering operation in Iraq has reduced the ability of smaller candidates and parties to gain power). In addition, Iran continues to influence the government in Baghdad, and it has worked to separate Iraq from the US and from its Arab neighbors, working against regional solutions to geopolitical issues ("Instability").

In short, Iraqi policy and practice are less predictable, and the delicate balancing games between power brokers in Baghdad sometimes means inaction.

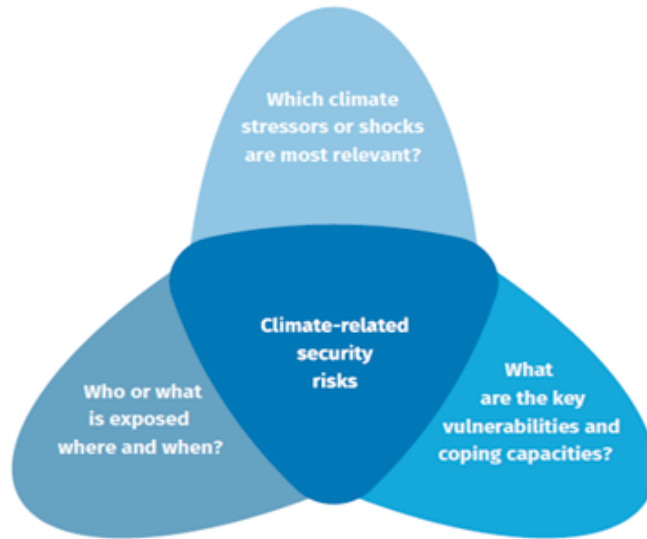
What's Happening Now?

Dozens of incidents of violence are reported daily. Suffering of the people of Basra continues and grows. The environmental damage increases. Rather than an "explosion" of violence to which the Security Council might respond, we have instead a slow boil.

Your chairs will likely introduce various small incidents through the session. You may choose to ignore them as "routine" for the region or to remain, diplomatically, "Actively Seized of the Matter," meaning that you will continue to watch it closely. However, ignoring too much of this for too long may also cause a convergence and eruption of greater violence which SC action might better have prevented.

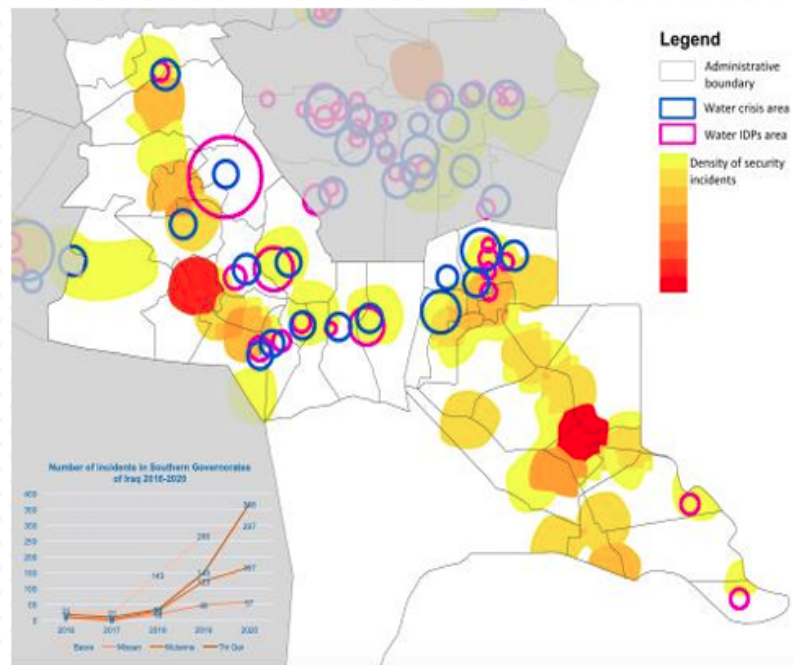
In the meantime, consider addressing your policies and speeches in keeping with this model and data:

Figure 1: Dimensions of climate-related security risks



Source : Climate Security Mechanism. “United Nations Conceptual Approach to Integrated Climate-Related Security Risk Assessments”, April 2020.

Figure 7: Conflict and water-induced displacement in Basra and Thi Qar



Source: SWEDO. Basra and Thi Qar Governorates, 2021

Crimes of Aggression:

ICC definition aligned with the UN General Assembly definition Resolution 3314 (1974):

Crime of aggression

1. For the purpose of this Statute, “crime of aggression” means the planning, preparation, initiation or execution, by a person in a position effectively to exercise control over or to direct the political or military action of a State, of an act of aggression which, by its character, gravity and scale, constitutes a manifest violation of the Charter of the United Nations.

2. For the purpose of paragraph 1, “act of aggression” means the use of armed force by a State against the sovereignty, territorial integrity or political independence of another State, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Charter of the United Nations. Any of the following acts, regardless of a declaration of war, shall, in accordance with United Nations General Assembly resolution 3314 (XXIX) of 14 December 1974, qualify as an act of aggression:

(a) The invasion or attack by the armed forces of a State of the territory of another State, or any military occupation, however temporary, resulting from such invasion or attack, or any annexation by the use of force of the territory of another State or part thereof;

(b) Bombardment by the armed forces of a State against the territory of another State or the use of any weapons by a State against the territory of another State;

(c) The blockade of the ports or coasts of a State by the armed forces of another State;

(d) An attack by the armed forces of a State on the land, sea or air forces, or marine and air fleets of another State;

(e) The use of armed forces of one State which are within the territory of another State with the agreement of the receiving State, in contravention of the conditions provided for in the agreement or any extension of their presence in such territory beyond the termination of the agreement;

(f) The action of a State in allowing its territory, which it has placed at the disposal of another State, to be used by that other State for perpetrating an act of aggression against a third State;

(g) The sending by or on behalf of a State of armed bands, groups, irregulars or mercenaries, which carry out acts of armed force against another State of such gravity as to amount to the acts listed above, or its substantial involvement therein.

Article 4

The acts enumerated above are not exhaustive and the Security Council may determine that other acts constitute aggression under the provisions of the Charter.

Article 5

1. No consideration of whatever nature, whether political, economic, military or otherwise, may serve as a justification for aggression.

Committee Mission:

Resolutions and Statements:

This is a difficult topic, and while the Security Council fashions a comprehensive resolution or a series of smaller ones, it may also find it valuable to issue Official Statements which are brief opinions serving as policy markers in the interim. Such statements might serve to address current challenges on the ground quickly or they might act as “progress points” for building larger resolutions going forward.

Some Security Council Tools:

- **Agenda** - Simple discussing a topic heightens awareness and attention
- **Statements and Declarations** - Have weight as advisory recommendations under international law unless otherwise indicated
- **Resolutions** - Have the weight of international law
- **Special Envoys** - Individuals or Groups specially charged to act in the interest of preventing conflict or ensuring diplomatic acts
- **Observer Missions** - Blue Helmets placed to observe, verify, and report incidents
- **Creating Sanctions** - Calling upon the global community to withhold trade, diplomacy, etc. to modify a nation’s behavior
- **Peacekeeping** - Lightly armed Blue Helmets charged with continuing an existing peace
- **Peacemakers** - Blue Helmets charged with engaging national forces to bring about peace
- **Peace Enforcement** - Blue Helmets charged with engaging forces to bring about peace against the will of the nations involved.

Questions to Consider:

1. How dire must a situation become before international security action is called for?
2. Do 20th century norms of international law account for the current global crisis of climate change? What is different? To what extent is every local conflict now regional or global under such differences?
3. Most current SC members have a stake in Basra, either directly due to political or economic interests there, or indirectly in that their nation faces similar circumstances. What should you know about other voting members before the session begins?
4. What might a quick read of the UN DPPA Report on Iraq reveal? (UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs in Bibliography)
5. Delegates interested in a deeper dive on local politics in Basra should also read: “Tribes of Basra: The Political, Social, and Security Issues” in the Bibliography.