



BACKGROUND PAPER:

UN Environment Programme (UNEP)  
***Saving Iraq, Saving MENA: Responding to the  
MENA Water Crisis***

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*“Around 92% of Iraqi land is threatened by desertification and temperatures here are increasing seven times faster than the global average.”*

– Cathrin Schaer, July 2023

*“Climate change is the biggest threat Iraq has ever faced.”*

– UN Sustainable Development Group, Nov. 2022

*“According to a report compiled by a group of international organisations, . . .the main culprit behind the shortage of running water in Iraq and Syria was the cutting off of water flows from the Tigris and Euphrates by Turkey.”*

– Jangira Lewis, Oct. 2021

**Introduction:**

None of us are strangers to the threat of climate change, and no country on the planet disbelieves the danger human civilization faces, though finding agreement of the strategies and means to combat the problem becomes increasingly difficult. The First Earth Summit resulted in the Stockholm Declaration of 1972 warning governments then to enter into regional partnerships and to build international law around future projects which would impact the environment. Now, just over 50 years later, we face real crises from global delayed response to those warnings.

The problem, however, is not ever as simple as “take action.” Energy conservation efforts and efficient management policies are all well enough, but even the best efforts cannot withstand the differing practices of our neighbors, our fellow member states. And the “actions” themselves to slow, stop, or even reverse climate change inevitably have far-reaching consequences and complications.

This year’s SEMMUNA will examine the challenges of international cooperation around climate change and development, around accountability and the roles of various players on the international stage. While we will focus specifically on the situation in Iraq, it is easy to see how similar situations occur around the entire region of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and also for nearly every UN member state.

As you consider solutions to your committee’s challenges, think also if your own nation would accept the conditions and demands you create.

**MENA -**  
Acronym for Middle East and North Africa, a region with much shared culture and politics, often shared interests, and shared risk in the climate crisis.

### **Background & History:**

Iraq is considered by the UN to be the fifth most vulnerable nation to climate catastrophe due to high temperatures, drought and water scarcity, and frequent sand storms and floods. However, it is arguably *the most likely* to see an irreversible disaster because of its unique historical conditions and current situation. Some researchers suggest that the country may lose some cities and towns by 2030, and that much of the nation could become uninhabitable by as early as 2050.

It might seem strange that Iraq, one of the earliest and greatest regions for early human civilization in the original Fertile Crescent, would be struggling. In fact, Iraq has several rivers to potentially support it:

- **The Euphrates River** forms in the Armenian Highland of Turkey. It flows through the Taurus Mountains of Syria and down to Iraq where it joins with River Tigris before draining in the Persian Gulf.
- **The Tigris River** forms in the mountains in Eastern Turkey. The river flows through Syria and down to Iraq where it joins with the Euphrates. Ancient civilization thrived on the banks of the river. The capital city of Iraq, Baghdad, stands on the banks of Tigris.
- **The Diyala River** begins in the Zagros Mountains in Western Iran and flows through the lowlands into Iraq before draining into the Tigris.
- **The Lower Zab**, also known as the Little Zab, flows from the Zagros Mountains in Iran down into Iraq where it empties into the Tigris.

These rivers are essential for irrigation projects, hydroelectric power generation, fishing, and domestic use as well as industrial water supply. In short, without them, Iraq cannot easily survive. However, the past several decades have seen erosion, drought, flooding, and poor conservation efforts; many plant and animal species have died and much of the water (as high as 90%) is polluted by oil, medical waste, and wastewater from the absence of sewage infrastructure. (The UN has approved over 70 water treatment plants, but these will take many years to put into place.) Worse, last year, a report by Iraq's Ministry of Water Resources predicted that unless urgent action is taken to combat declining water levels, Iraq's two main rivers will be entirely dry by 2040. In all, over 60 million people will be affected locally.

Certainly low water levels are due in part to drought, rising temperatures (which reduces the rejuvenation of seasonal ice from the mountains), and poor management (such as inefficient or wasteful use by farming). In addition, more people have fled to the cities, causing an increase in food demand. Finally, when sufficient water does not reach the marshlands downstream, the water that remains becomes saltier, and as a result the region dies off.

But the water shortage is due also, largely, to dam projects upstream from the Iraqi rivers in Syria, Iran, and Turkey. Each country decides how to use its section of the river to supply its own people, and downstream Iraq suffers. Each country understands that cooperation is necessary to find a solution, but so far, no solutions have been found. Turkey, for instance, has been creating a massive project to boost food production and generate hydroelectricity. Under its Southeast Anatolia Project (GAP is the Turkish acronym), it has built 19 dams on the Euphrates and Tigris and plans a total of 22.

Past talks between Turkey and Iraq have gone largely the same:

- Turkey says that they cannot guarantee a set amount of water downstream because climate change causes water levels to vary year to year. They are willing to discuss a proportional delivery of water downstream if Iraq (and Syria) first details all its purposes for the water. Turkey does not trust the details Iraq offers. It also says that Iraq must be more efficient with its water use.
- Iraq, rebuilding from decades of war, understands that its demands will change. It has claimed that Turkey wastes 70% of its water on outdated farming and industrial practices. It also says that Turkey cannot be the sole manager of shared environmental resources (a concept shared by the United Nations); they should not need Turkey's "approval" for water.
- Syria, still involved in civil war, cannot reliably offer details on its water usage, either.
- Farmers and regional leaders in Iraq, frustrated that the central government cannot guarantee water, have often in recent years conducted raids on water facilities to secure water themselves, increasing the instability in the country (Kullab).

For background, consider the difficulty Iraq has had in building and sustaining its water and sewer infrastructure. A history of the political conflicts in Iraq might be summarized as follows:

- 1970s - Rise of future dictator of Iraq Saddam Hussein
- 1980-88 - Iran - Iraq War, killing millions
- 1990-1991 - Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and UN-approved US Operation Desert Storm removing Iraqi forces.
- 1990s - Trade (mostly oil) sanctions against Iraq
- 1998-2002 Operation Desert Fox, US bombings of Iraq vs. possible weapons sites
- 2001 - Al Qaeda terrorists (from Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan) attack World Trade Center (unrelated to Iraq)
- 2003 - Operation Iraqi Freedom ends rule of Hussein and begins US occupation of Iraq
- 2004 onwards - Insurgent uprisings, civil war, and terrorist attacks in Iraq, including ISIS (Islamic State), new Al Qaeda bases, Iran-backed Hezbollah groups, Kurdish and Sunni resistance movements, etc.
- 2011 - US completes formal withdrawal from Iraq
- 2019 - An Iraqi government, still struggling to rebuild itself and accused of corruption by many international partners, faces Covid.

Another crisis is upon us, it seems inevitable, and your committee is meeting to find strategies toward solutions. But the committee must keep in mind that any ideas it submits might be used for other countries and regions. Similar dam projects in Ethiopia and Israel have created crises in Egypt, Sudan, and Palestine. *In the MENA region, every single country has a shared river system where improved cooperation might help prevent real catastrophe.*

### **Current Situation:**

Talks between the affected nations (Syria, Iran, Turkey, and Iraq) continue informally, but chosen representatives from these countries are frequently replaced and this creates setbacks. In the meantime, individual infrastructure projects upstream continue to move forward, making each passing season more and more difficult. Individual UN representatives present have not seemed to have much impact.

More, each of these countries has had its own share of difficulties in sustaining a single policy over the long term: Syria is still war-torn in its conflict with resistance forces (though Islamic State has been mostly subdued); Turkey recently suffered a major earthquake in its south while it sought to expand its agriculture and energy infrastructure in that region; and Iran continues to be caught in international political sanctions and posturing, intensifying its own need to be self-sufficient for water and power.

In the meantime, as ever, the civilian cost is largest. Climate refugees in 2021 in the MENA region numbered three million. In Iraq alone, the problem is growing worse quickly: in March 2022 50% of regions reported that over 20,000 people had been displaced due to the water crisis; but only three months later, that number was over 34,000 (Schulman). Mostly, these people seek the cities for jobs, which only exacerbates the clean water crisis. In addition, the influx of different peoples with differing ideas, values, and customs into the cities has caused a significant rise in violence and unrest, kind of a microcosm of the national conflicts the country has recently experienced.

**The UN’s Work:**

To date, the UN has passed numerous declarations and Climate Agreements across the past 50 years.

**Sovereignty -**  
 The basic principle of a nation’s right to govern itself. Sovereign governments in general have four qualities: territory, population, authority/credibility, and recognition (by other nations). Many delegates seem to believe that yelling “sovereignty” prevents any reason for cooperation. In fact, however, the very presence of a government in an organization like the UN suggests that compromise with the community of nations is a real possibility. The same might be said of any conditions on a treaty a nation enters into. In other words, sovereignty is never absolute: all member states have sovereignty (so it need not be said).

The first Earth Summit of 1972 established a phrase, the “**global commons**” into international law. In general, the global commons is any resource that lies outside of a country’s boundaries but is a shared resource. This would include things like the Antarctic region, the high oceans, outer space, our atmosphere, and even cyberspace. We agree as nations and peoples to share these and treat them with respect and towards sustainability, since most of these are non-renewable; we abide (in general) with limits of their use.

This idea is furthered with other basic concepts of shared environmental resources. In 1992, the Rio Declaration offered this idea of **sustainable development**: “The right to development must be fulfilled so as to equitably meet developmental and environmental needs of present and future generations.” UNEP expanded this idea to one of **intergenerational**

**equity**, “the right of future generations to enjoy a fair level of the common,” and **intragenerational equity** – “the right of all people within the current generation to fair access ... of the Earth’s natural resources.”

Many nations may cry out that they have a “sovereign right” to do as they wish inside their own border. However, UNEP has already placed into international law the idea of **transboundary responsibility** as a potential limitation on the rights of the sovereign state. In other words, anything one nation does which impacts the basic needs of another state (food, energy, water, etc.) can be regulated or controlled; the nation *does not* have sovereignty.

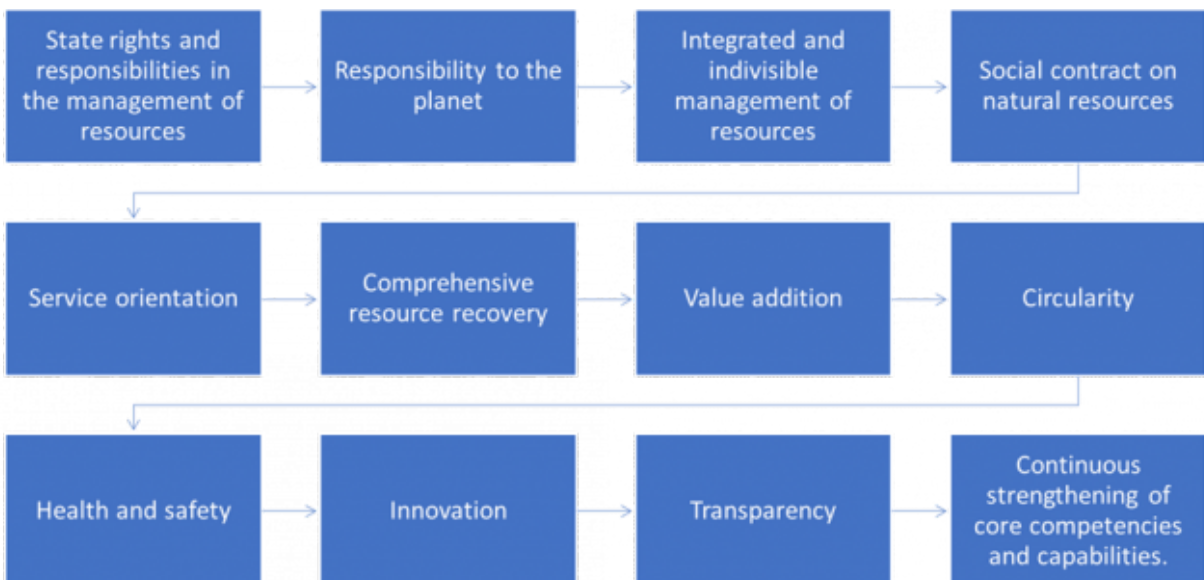
Finally, delegates may find that the **polluter pays principle** is valuable. From the Rio Declaration, this means that "the environmental costs of economic activities, including the cost of preventing potential harm, should be internalized rather than imposed upon society at large." In other words, if someone has violated any of the above issues and needs to make amends, the responsible party must pay directly.

Many of these concepts are detailed in the 1998 Convention on International Watercourses, which Iraq has signed. Iran, however, failed to sign the agreement, and Turkey voted “No” on the Convention.

What this means for delegates is that nations will not be found arguing openly against these established norms of international behavior and law. (Though interpretation of them is always an issue!)

Perhaps more interesting for our discussion, the recent 2021 United Nations Resource Management System (UNRMS) is a voluntary global standard for integrated and sustainable resource management. This is a good tool for delegates to consider when assembling a resolution to our topic.

### UNRMS Fundamental Principles





A good resolution might address each of these areas:

- State/Nation rights and responsibilities - Expectations of each nation for behavior and for what they can expect in return
- Responsibility to the planet - long-term and short-term support of food, energy, and water
- Integrated management of resources - keeping finance, governance, and other management operations under one common cooperative “umbrella”
- Social contract on natural resources (includes everyone, equitable, etc.)
- Resource Recovery - think of efficient use of land, projects, waste, etc.
- Value Addition - continuous study, reporting, improving
- Circularity - think of the reduce, reuse, recycle model
- Health and Safety - emergencies, worker and civilian health
- Innovation - who owns and profits from new uses and discoveries?
- Transparency - how do we manage everyone being open and honest?
- Continuous Strengthening - how do we grow our successes?
- *(The others not named are more complex concepts best set aside for today!)*

This is a difficult topic: any committee which can successfully address even a few of these should consider itself quite successful!

### **Committee Mission:**

The UNEP is fully competent to address the concerns addressed here, according to the UN Charter and the Secretary-General of SEMMUNA.

The UNEP is charged with establishing principles and programs by which all involved parties in the Iraqi Water Crisis can resolve the emergency. The UNEP *should not* call for talks: this committee *is* the discussion. Instead, delegates should work to establish whatever programs or rules for behavior it can to bring about necessary changes immediately.

Ideally, of course, all involved state parties should agree to the resolution, but this may not occur. If one nation, for instance, chooses not to follow a resolution (a “No” vote), it can still be seen as a public humiliation for non-cooperation.

Likewise, however, it may be that all involved parties agree but other member states do not. Remember, whatever UNEP enacts today might be used in similar ways to resolve other environmental crises down the road. For instance:

- Use of the Levant or Nile rivers in MENA
- Use of the Congo or Amazon rivers through central Africa and South America
- Use of the American Great Lakes region (or those in Africa)
- Use of the Ganges, Indus, Yangtze or Mekong rivers in Asia
- Use of the Danube or Volga rivers in Europe



If the committee operates well, this debate can be a discussion of opportunities for rethinking how we understand our common resources. If not, we might doom ourselves to the worst forecasts coming from Iraq, perhaps our first major human disaster from climate change.

Good luck!

**Questions to Consider:**

- 1.) Make a few lists. Some might be:
  - a. Who are the main Actors in this problem? Think not only of governments, but perhaps power groups that are not formally governments and have no say in this committee.
  - b. Which Actors clearly need to behave differently?
  - c. What Problems seem impossible to repair?
  - d. What Problems might be solvable?
  - e. \*\*What Ways of thinking might need to change (regionally or your own!)?
- 2.) What solution strategies might be short-term? Which will require a longer period of time?
  - a. For longer term solutions, how can UNEP best set up the conditions for success now?
- 3.) Which outside parties (if any) might be helpfully involved?
- 4.) How does your solution offer (or not offer) a model which may be used by others?
- 5.) What is the least/smallest outcome of your idea which you might accept? What is the most/greatest outcome you might hope for?
- 6.) What areas of the problem does your solution not address? (Can you find someone in committee to help there?)