



## BACKGROUND PAPER:

### UNGA Working Groups (UNGA): ***Saving Iraq, Saving MENA: Systemic Responses***

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*“Infrastructure is always political, especially when it comes to nationwide projects.”*

– Sardar Aziz, August 2023

*“The MENA region is a sensitive region due to a wide range of factors. Not only does its hot-dry climate leave it in a bad position from a global warming perspective, but corruption, redundant policies, government mismanagement, civil unrest and war are other issues severely affecting the living populations of these regions.”*

– Jangira Lewis, Oct. 2021

*“I have the honor to announce that, on 22 September 2020, Iraq’s Parliament voted to accede to the Paris Climate Agreement. Iraq is heading into a new era, planning on a paradigm shift toward more economic diversity. This includes support for renewable energies and access to environmentally friendly technologies, as well as helping the most vulnerable parts of our society and the most vulnerable regions.”*

— Barham Salih, President of the Iraqi Republic  
at the UN Climate Ambition Summit 2020

### **Introduction and Committee Mission:**

Iraq will soon become the first Middle East country to sign the Helsinki Water Convention which calls for international assistance and support in resolving its crisis and preparing for the future. This is a hopeful sign: Iraq welcomes this discussion. However, is it prepared for the breadth of changes it must make?

While the UNEP works to seek long-term solutions to the water crisis in Iraq, the UN General Assembly has broken into several Working Groups to investigate the more complex issues surrounding Iraq’s future. In the end, no environmental solutions will prove successful if the broader complications and consequences surrounding the crisis are addressed. The task of your working group is to bring

recommendations regarding one or more of these related issues to the broader body.

Working Groups serve a vital function in the United Nations. While they operate in similar ways to full Committees or Plenary meetings, they have a more intense focus and rely upon more detailed examination of the problems before them. While they may write their findings in the forms of resolutions, these are usually passed to the larger bodies to examine, debate, and vote. In this case today, then, while your Working Group will vote on whether to bring a resolution recommendation to a larger committee, it is not expected that your resolution be all-encompassing or solve every issue: you will focus on a particular sub-topic of the larger Iraqi challenge.

Since this is a GA Working Group, every topic that might be relevant to any GA body is appropriate. This includes all topics that might relate to disarmament or international security (1st Committee), economic and financial issues (2nd Committee), social, humanitarian, or cultural issues (3rd Committee), political issues (4th Committee), or legal issues (6th Committee)\*<sup>1</sup> or any combination of these. War and other international-level conflicts are under the purview of the Security Council, not your Working Groups.

Regardless of your Working Group's choice (recommendations follow below), you are expected to address the connections and impact of your sub-topic on the pressing issue of the Iraqi water crisis. **Therefore, you should read and understand everything from the UNEP Background Guide in addition to whatever you consider here.** It might be helpful to think of your topic, then, as following this format: “[WGroup Subtopic] and the Iraqi Water Crisis.”

Therefore, the challenge of your Working Group today is two-fold:

1. **Quickly establish a sub-topic focus for your committee room.** If you are not careful, you will spend too much time here and be unable to complete any recommendations;
2. **Keep debate focused and work cooperatively to develop recommendations.** It's easy to “widen the net” and take on too much; it's also easy to get bogged down in needless political posturing and combative argument. Can you work productively to provide real recommendations?

In actual diplomacy, various levels of discussion amongst dozens of different specialist groups occur for weeks or years before executive action results. Think of a Working Group as a collection of one of these earlier levels of discussion. *Everybody wants something constructive for their upper-level decision-makers to vote for.* It makes little sense for one or two delegates to fold their arms and try to stop a Working Group. Instead, whatever your group votes on at the end, you

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<sup>1</sup> The 5th Committee of the GA deals primarily with in-house administration and budget issues.

would (of course) pass on your personal recommendations to the rest of your country's diplomatic team.

Quite possibly, every Working Group at SEMMUNA will address a different sub-topic(s) and therefore create a broad and intensive recommendation to combat climate change in MENA.

### **Agenda-Making Strategy:**

Your chairs will assist the room in establishing an agenda. However, that does not mean you cannot have some real say in the matter. Many delegates wait and hope their favorite topic will become the focus for debate. Here are some real things you can do to move the debate forward:

1. Choose 2-3 focus areas ahead of the conference to become comfortable with, that would be your main interests: read, research, and prepare for these. If you choose only one, you may be at the mercy of the room's voting.
2. Have some familiarity with many focus areas for debate. You may even consider arguments why these other topics are unsuitable for your room to debate: too broad, not enough information, not related to the committee mission, not significant enough to warrant attention, not as important as the ones you chose to make a difference, not the topics for first consideration, etc.
3. Do not wait for the committee to begin to start your lobbying and persuasion. Meet delegates early, before the gavel, to caucus about topic/focus choices. Build allies in your thinking.
4. Make early speeches or arguments not merely about the topic focus, but about how to think about the challenges: what should be the first consideration before others, which topics are essential for us to debate the others, which are most immediate, etc.? You might also make a list of criteria a good sub-topic must satisfy for the committee to debate it.
5. If you are losing your position, look for ways to connect one of your main interest topics to the sub-topics gaining favor in the room (e.g. "Well, we can't address the refugee situation without also addressing the agricultural impact that refugees create. The topics are too closely related to choose just one.")
6. If you lose your sub-topic idea, quickly pivot to the new topic and learn from delegates who have researched it more. Then find out how the principles or details from your top1ic might still inform or add to the Working Group's chosen focus.

### **Systemic Relationships:**

In diplomacy, nothing is ever debated in isolation. Political topics overlap into economic and cultural topics which themselves speak to human rights and other

topics still. One topic *always creates consequences or impacts* upon another area. It is our job to predict and prepare for these.

In the Iraqi Water Crisis (as in the case of all of MENA and, implicitly, the entire planet), we can see common complicators at work. We might group these by subject:

- **Climate Change (the Iraqi Water Crisis) AND. . .**
  - **Political Considerations** - Internal Politics (government democracy-building, resources, and transparency; regional stakeholder involvement, government stability and credibility), External Politics (relationships with neighbors), etc.
  - **Economic Considerations** - Domestic Government Finance (banking, treasury, spending, corruption, planning, stability, trade), Regional Finance (same issues but for collections of nations like ASEAN, EU, MENA), and International Financing (World Bank, IMF, and other markets), Future Impact Projections (If climate change goes uncorrected. . . ), etc.
  - **Humanitarian Considerations** - Relief Work (medical, food, and disaster recovery), Equity Work (religious, generational, ethnic, and wealth issues), Displaced Peoples Work (prevention, reception of, aid to, long-term plans, rights of return), Rights Work (to what should all peoples be entitled?),
  - **Legal Considerations** - Treaties and Conventions (what is in place and who follows it), International Norms (common expectations for behavior and legal foundational concepts), Accountability in International Law, Internal Law and Custom (which may or may not align with international expectations)
  - **Technological and Developmental Considerations** - Sustainability, Right to Develop/Grow, Expectations of Government, Access to Modern Technology, Cooperation, Equity of Access, Transportation and Supply Issues, etc.
  - **Potential Conflict Situations** - Prevention Efforts, Education Work, Disarmament Work, Resource Access, Religious and Ethnic Tolerance Work, Economic Gaps, etc. (The Security Council addresses issues where international violence is involved; other UN bodies work to prevent the Security Council from having to get involved.)

*All of these* are at play in the Iraqi Water Crisis. As your Working Group proceeds, keep in mind some of the items on this list that you may not be accounting for.

Here are a few selected areas we recommend as potential sub-topics for your Working Group:

### **Sub-Topic: Stakeholder Inclusion**

Who must be involved in the resolution of the Crisis? In terms of the water management issues themselves, the UNRMS recommends four groups:



Each has a key role to play, but their inclusion and the definition of their roles is not always guaranteed. Corruption, financing, political considerations, and time often compromise roles.

- Governments includes not just the nation-states themselves, but smaller political organizations within them. For instance, are Sunni and Shiite populations equally represented by the government? Is the Kurdistan region represented and included? Are there other less-recognized factions to be included? If the government is sufficiently democratic/representative, why do villages and tribes still rise up to protest and even raid government facilities?
- Industry means not just the types of private and public companies in the country, but globally, as well. The under-developed agricultural sectors in Iraq and its neighbors, for instance, could benefit from outside expertise, but would this also prevent local populations from seeing profit? If left internally, how equitable is the process of inclusion (vs. corrupt money-handling)? The same could be said of waste water treatment, conservation industries, construction industries, education work, etc.
- Investment Sector refers not just to a nation's banks and the government's budget but also to the transparency and stability of these institutions and the capacity of them to fund larger projects. It includes regional banks with the same questions. It also includes 'private investment' and international banks like the World Bank and IMF, which often place difficult restraints on a country or saddle it with long-term debts to pay off.
- NGOs, the non-government organizations which can often fill in the gaps on larger projects with humanitarian relief, expertise, and local support, also provide a powerful intelligence-gathering service for the UN and other groups. Including particular groups in the solution work can do much to assist, but sometimes at the price of honesty.

It may be, as well, that different groups come into play at different levels, times, or capacities in the solution-making process. As it is, however, it is clear that, left to themselves, the nation-states involved have historically been unable to address the water crisis.

**Sub-Topic: Displaced Persons in Iraq**

Most climate refugees in the region are considered Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs), meaning that they do not leave their own nation's borders. Even so, people have been leaving Iraq to flee water shortages and war since 2003, often to nearby countries like Jordan or Saudi Arabia. (Jordan's refugees, for instance, now account for over 1/3 of its population, increasing water pressure there. Similarly, countries like Lebanon have taken in over one million refugees from Syria.)

Whether IDPs or refugees, however, the circular impact of climate and the displaced is extraordinary: when people flee a region (from conflict or climate), it weakens the central government and makes those spaces ungovernable. This opens the space for extremist groups and criminal organizations to take over. In the case of IDPs who look for jobs and often move to cities unprepared to accommodate them, the infrastructure is further weakened, poverty increased for all, and social clashes arise. This demoralization helps extremists and criminal groups to grow their memberships. Because of migration, growing conflicts, rising costs, and the failure of central governments to respond, long and violent protests erupt, sometimes across entire regions and across borders. (Alaaldin)

From Lebanon to Iran, this has been happening with increasing frequency. And the Syrian civil war which began in 2011 can be traced (in large part) to a 2007 drought which spawned refugee movements in this way.

And the temperatures keep increasing.

The refugees themselves are in sore need of immediate assistance. Education, health care (which includes an increasing need for psychiatric care), reliable shelter, employment, and clean food and water should all be provided to Iraq's citizens, but today's cities are not able to keep up. Even locating them in groups to permit efficient distribution of aid has proven problematic, and local distribution efforts often see graft and corruption, preventing full allotments to reach those in need. When they move internationally, these problems spread to neighboring countries.

Longer-term solutions might well depend on returning IDPs and refugees to safe and viable lands where they may resume their previous lives. But this requires a restoration of sustainable water, securing lands now under illegal local rule, and preserving long-term solutions for sustainability.

### **Sub-Topic: Improving Financial Resources to Iraq**

Certainly any war-torn region would be hard-pressed to recover its economy quickly, but this is further complicated in Iraq. MENA receives the least climate assistance funds of any other region.

We might think of several broad areas where financial support is needed:

- Food systems and water security
- Energy transition (reducing dependence on oil)
- Climate-Smart cities (including new infrastructure)
- Sustainable financing for climate projects (reduce dependency on aid)
- Restoration of current climate-impacted environments
- Humanitarian assistance, including poverty relief
- Government stability and security
- Reduction of inequities in sustainable development

Some money is already moving, but only *some*; it seems frightfully small. The World Bank Group's Climate Change Action Plan (2021-2025) is recommending \$10 billion (and another \$2 billion from the private sector), but this is for the entire MENA region, 21 countries, across five years. Worse, by the end of 2022, only 19 projects had begun in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen (the most needy) at a total cost of only \$21 million. In May of 2023, the Red Cross (IRC) called for an immediate increase in funds for a region that has "alarmingly intensified humanitarian woes" (Al Jazeera). Even so, the World Bank money is directed to "climate smart" improvement projects and policy changes, but not for redress of existing damages or humanitarian assistance. (It addresses only the first 4 bullet points above.)

In addition, World Bank partners like the IFC have moved forward on other parts of Iraq's economy, like a recent plan to renovate Baghdad airport. However, when in May of this year, Iraq announced a similar project, building a new \$17 billion road and rail network to link Asia and Europe (such projects improve the efficiency of trade), the Kurdistan region (KRI) in Iraq was bypassed, perhaps in retaliation against its 2017 vote to secede. (In 2022, Iraq stopped the KRI's ability to export oil, as well.) Such moves are seen as de-development; at the least, it speaks to the inequities in development and improvement in the country (Aziz).

The government has made pledges to abandon its dependence upon oil exports, but this has been slow: Iraqi political and civil leadership is deeply involved in oil profits (along with accompanying corrupt practices), and all signs point to increased global need for oil at home and abroad in the coming decade. Unfortunately, this reliance on oil makes investment in Iraq very risky (all the eggs in one financial basket) and promotes civil conflict as groups vie for power.

Certainly a committee can always call for short-term loans, etc. But the real challenge here is building sustainable financing, a means for the country to re-invest and build upon its previous climate successes. What might that look like? And how can it be implemented?

### **Sub-Topic: Desalination and Improved Agricultural Practices**

Wasteful agricultural practices have certainly contributed to the crisis. More distressing, as water becomes scarce, the salination (salt) percentage in remaining water and soil has grown so large as to kill off all plant life in key areas. In other words, when water leaves the remaining naturally-occurring salt is consequently higher. Dead heavily-salinated soils make a return to farms nearly impossible; worse, they increase the intensity and likelihood of drought *and* floods as water cannot remain in a region (no plants to hold it). In the case of coastal regions like Basra, this makes coastal flooding and storm damage even greater (and plantlife is not present to filter or buffer the salt from incoming seawater).

Farmers in Iraq (and other MENA countries) have traditionally grown food in the ways of their fathers and grandfathers. But as climate change has occurred, the conditions have, too, and they have not been able to adapt. In 2022, for instance, the country had over a dozen dust storms in a four-month period. When farmers cannot grow food, Iraq (already a net food importer) must buy more food abroad; the result is shortages and increases in prices, which has in turn caused a number of food riots and demonstrations.

In terms of agricultural practices, sometimes it's a matter of tools and technology (for instance, many farmers do not have any kind of irrigation systems—or what they did have was destroyed in the wars with IS), and sometimes it's a matter of training (different handling of seed, handling livestock disease, strategic planting and fertilizer use, etc.). “Traditional” practices in the Fertile Crescent have not proven effective against climate changed and reduced water availability; and they have proven catastrophic when continued under these conditions.

Water farmers have discovered with new wells, for instance, has proven too salinated and/or polluted for use.

The solution seems fairly straightforward: give the farmers training and clean up and desalinate the water. However, desalination is an expensive and slow process, requiring energy infrastructure (thermal or electric) and has only been successful on a large scale recently in Spain, where it was used primarily in greenhouses and other small controlled systems, not entire valleys. Water pollution in Iraq is due to poor sewage systems (re: fecal contamination) and oil and medical wastes; cleanups are quite a bit larger a project. Worst, the areas that the farmers live or formerly lived has already been damaged and will take at least a year or more to recover.

Most frustratingly, there is no sign that water supplies will increase with the return to valley farms.



### **Sub-Topic: Reducing Corruption in Iraq**

*“Iraq’s struggle with corruption — and specifically public sector corruption — can be traced back to occupation-era reconstruction policies and to Baathist-era patronage. In reconstructing Iraq, the United States scattered unregulated and unmonitored money at many projects and, in the process, unleashed a thirst for graft and easy money at nearly every level of government, and even arguably in civil society organizations” (Dhingra).*

Civil society organizations in the above quotation means international groups such as the UN. For instance, in the UN Oil-for-Food program during the 1990s sanctions on Iraq, a number of UN personnel were implicated in graft and other profiteering violations, including the son of the then-UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. Since the war and occupation of 2003, Iraq has traded some of its oil profits for reconstruction profits. From 2003-2014, over \$220 billion was spent on rebuilding the country, which included \$74 billion in foreign aid. Overpricing costs, kickbacks, and other illegal behavior on the part of both foreign investors and local power brokers cause a deficit in development which is still felt today and still in practice today. Anti-corruption political figures in Iraq are often targeted for assassination.

It’s true that Iraq has moved from the 2nd most corrupt country in 2006 to the 23rd most in 2022, a nation that increases its operating budget each year (over \$150 billion this year) also is a tempting target.

The problem is worsened by an oil industry which is largely unregulated, a cash-based and paper-based economy where transactions are difficult to track, and a patronage system where competency is optional (people are appointed to positions of power for favors rather than ability). When an economy has decreasing options for staying out of poverty, corruption becomes necessity. And, of course, corruption always wants to preserve the environment for more corruption. Corrupt power figures will sometimes hire militant groups or threaten the use of force to preserve power. In a recent case, international organizations provided money for water projects to people who were money launderers. The government oversight agency knew they were corrupt, but said nothing (Lewis).

The Iraq Vision 2030 makes bold claims about Good Governance and ending corruption, but in a number of areas, this document is already falling short of its ambitions. Whatever methods for ending the water crisis are employed, hands and pockets will be waiting for their share. Not only laws are necessary, but methods of monitoring and enforcing their violation—and genuine transparency of government actions and of those who do business with it.

### **Sub-Topic: Protecting Environmental Infrastructure from Terrorism and Insurrection**

Defeating ISIS was important, but doing so left a country with an additional \$45 billion in damage to infrastructure: water, sewers, roads, power plants, schools, hospitals, etc. It could be said, however, that this was only a single chapter of a debilitation of the country which began in the 1990s when the US and allies removed Hussein's Iraqi military from Kuwait and successively bombed the country during the years of sanctions.

Today, threats from terrorist and extremist groups like Da'esh (ISIS in the Arab world) still exist, and an August meeting of the UN Security Council underscored that—despite counter-terrorism efforts—many armed groups remain active in Iraq, most of them opposed to foreign (particularly Western) influences, such as those used to rebuild infrastructure and assist in financing. How can a nation rebuild when so much ungoverned territory becomes a staging area for more attacks against infrastructure?

But terrorism is hardly the only threat to necessary development projects in the country. Sometimes the people themselves are the problem.

*“Localized conflicts and unrest directly over water within countries are a regular and a common feature in many countries in the Middle East. Tribes in southern Iraq engage in deadly blood feuds that can often be traced back to conflict over water. Militias and soldiers in Iraq have also killed civilians protesting over water resources. In a vicious cycle, this violence and instability degrades the trust needed for water cooperation and institution-building between and across borders, further aggravating tensions” (Hall).*

Just because protests don't explicitly declare themselves about water, however, does not mean that a lack of natural resources is irrelevant to them. When there is want there is increased anxiety and tension. The UN has long maintained that environmental crisis is an enormous factor in conflict (see the SC Background Paper).

But some protests explicitly are. In Basra in 2018, over 118,000 people were poisoned by Iraq's water, causing nationwide protests. In 2017, some southern tribes in Iraq threatened war if anyone took more than their “fair share” of water. Villages and tribes will establish illegal wells or dig trenches, “tapping into” water systems. Inter-tribal and inter-village clashes happen with some frequency.

Unfortunately, the government has frequently put down protests with violence, often with killings, and this has further undermined trust in new (and often corrupt) development projects.

### **Sub-Topic: Schooling Iraq**

One of the most popular and effective approaches to development for any nation is education: schooling, training and re-training, public awareness campaigns, and the like. In Iraq, farmers need training in new practices and equipment (drip irrigation systems or strategic planting, for instance); oil workers need re-training to move to renewable energy systems; children need re-opened and improved schools and even curricula in climate change (currently 2-3 million children, many IDPs, are not in school).

Less than half the schools in Iraq have access to water at all, amounting to about seven million children. More, 21 million children live in Iraq, and because of the enormous conflict casualties, this is nearly ½ of the Iraqi total population. Most dropouts are girls because of a lack of gender-specific wash facilities (Aldroubi).

Currently 50% of schools need updates or reconstruction following decades of conflict, but less than 6% of Iraq's budget goes to education, the lowest of any MENA country. Students are often suffering from post-conflict trauma, and schools are so overcrowded that too few and under-trained teachers have large class sizes and teach in shifts since all the students cannot fit into the existing buildings (UNICEF). The water crisis only promises to divert the country's attention further from prioritizing education, even while it makes the situation worse each year. How can Iraq's future work force and leadership be better prepared to meet what's ahead?

Whatever solutions are generated to the dire water situation in Iraq, clean water for the children is a critical future investment. But do water solutions follow the mobility of families and children? If so, how can Iraq build infrastructure for clean water effectively? Or does Iraq provide water only to urban areas and expect children to live there? If so, what does this do to the future of rural families and agriculture? What else about education is critical to these questions?

Whatever ideas are generated, they should account for:

- Providing secure clean water equitably to as many children as possible
- Securing safe structures and effective teachers for students
- Creating a curriculum which meets the current needs of Iraqi children
- Supporting their learning with trauma and other counseling
- Future needs of a workforce in a new climate-sensitive economy
- Directing and providing sufficient funds to effect these changes

In short, while the water crisis is critical for Iraq's future, solving it does little unless it also immediately speaks to the people in that future.

### **Sub-Topic: Balancing Oil Against Water: Saving the Marshlands**

In the 1990s, the famous Mesopotamian Marshes of the Fertile Crescent region were drained by leader Saddam Hussein in order to take revenge on Arabs he believed had supported Iran in the previous war. The Ma'dan people had lived there for 2,000 years; many argue that mankind moved from a hunter-gatherer to agricultural society 12,000 years ago. Now the Ma'dan are scattered across the Middle East, and their lands—largely between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers—are part of the spreading desertification in Iraq. And the region has the mainstay of Iraqi oil fields.

Any recovery the Marshes might have gained since the 1990s was reversed in 2009 when Iran built a 56-mile low dam (a weir) and diverted water from a primary source of water (the Tigris and Euphrates water levels were already much lower). As a consequence, salination and drought have killed plantlife, and Persian Gulf seawater sometimes proceeds nearly 200 kilometers inland, destroying farmland and forests for the foreseeable future. Oil pollution, sewage, and agricultural product pollutants are more concentrated in the water which remains. (90% of wheat crops in the region failed last year.) (Crisp) Fortunately, in 2016 UNESCO named the marshes a World Heritage Site (Iran opposed this), and this should assure their protection overall, but in what condition? and how?

The Eden in Iraq project is working to convert wastewater into freshwater than can partially replenish the marshland. Still, it is short critical funding, and even if successful cannot save the entire region (Mehdi).

Many do not realize that oil extraction requires incredible amounts of water. In Iraq's case, millions of gallons of water are used each day to increase oil profits. And without its oil profits, Iraq has little left for its government budget (99% of Iraq's exports and 42% of its GDP are from oil). Diversifying industry and economy are essential, of course, but this is a slow (and resisted) process. For instance, the oil companies could reduce gas-flaring (literally burning the excess gas fumes released during oil extraction) and convert this to positive energy production (thus turning a polluting practice to a beneficial one), but this would alter its relationship with Iran, from which it gains reduced energy with waivers from the United States. If Iran does not sell its energy to Iraq, it would have its own economic crisis (Shuker).

Moving Iraq away from an oil-based economy may be a long-term strategy as would improving industry practices, but a more rigorous "encouragement" for it to do so may be in order. It may help to know that since the 2003 war, British and US oil companies are heavily invested in Iraqi oil production.

## **Working Group Resolutions**

Whatever sub-topic(s) your committee places on its agenda, resolutions from the committee should be motivated to improve the water situation in Iraq, both in response to the existing crisis and in anticipation of future shortages.

Building schools is a nice idea, but unless the committee is building strategically in response to displaced and traumatized children and providing sustainable experiences which offer them secure clean water, the committee is off topic. Creating an advisory council to reform Iraq's transparency laws might help reduce corruption in general, but unless its mission is targeted to those involved in water projects (which might include trans-national actors, NGOs, and the private sector) and unless it works to measure effectiveness against higher stakes if resources dwindle further, the committee is failing its goals.

Ideas for all of these sub-topics exist (and SEMMUNA committees can undoubtedly think of more); see the Bibliography for good sources. In preparing for sub-topics, it might be helpful to come to committee with some strategic directions for where the committee can go. This will help in making arguments for the committee agenda in the first place. Good luck!