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ENVIRONMENTAL MOBILIZATION IN IRAQ: NGOS, LOCAL ACTORS AND THE CHALLENGE OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Safaa Khalaf

About the author

Safaa Khalaf is an Iraqi investigative journalist and independent researcher. He has published books on politics and culture. His works have been translated into English, French, German, Spanish, and Persian. He worked with the London School of Economics (LSE) and the Arab Reform Initiative. He is the recipient of the European Union Award for Press Freedom – Samir Kassir 2022, and the Kurt Schurk Award for Journalistic Courage from the Thomson Reuters Foundation 2018, and the Naseej Award by the French Agency for Media Cooperation (CFI) in 2017. In 2019, he published his most important book, “Post-ISIS Iraq – The Crisis of Overoptimism.”

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Photo cover: Al-Chibayish, Iraq. November 1st 2018 A Marsh, a woman collecting water in the parched wetlands of the Central Marshes of southern Iraq © John Wreford/Shutterstock

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Introduction

The urgent environmental and climate crisis demands a shift in research focus toward an analytical study on environmental mobilization in Iraq. This study specifically explores the activities of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and individuals working on the environment. Our methodology encompasses a comprehensive survey approach, examining both the legal and institutional frameworks and the challenges associated with national environmental action. The aim is to shed light on a new and expanding landscape of active entities, including NGOs and activists, that employ diverse strategies and tactics in their environmental advocacy.

These entities come from varied backgrounds and employ increasingly sophisticated methods, depending on the public response to the environmental crisis.

Having thoroughly analyzed the patterns and dynamics of mobilization, we identified three factors that shape the future of environmental advocacy in Iraq:

| 3 FACTORS IMPACT THE FUTURE OF ENVIRONMENTAL ADVOCACY IN IRAQ | | |
|--|--|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 |
| <p>The decline of public liberties is an obstacle faced by the growing number of civil entities advocating for public accountability. This can be attributed to the excessive and largely unofficial violence of state-affiliated and non-state actors. These violent groups raise suspicions regarding NGO activities that depend on international (foreign) funding, even in the absence of domestic funding. As a result, environmental mobilization activities conflict with structures that protect vested interests that do not align with the increasing severity of environmental and climate risks.</p> | <p>NGOs and organizational practices are flexible in shaping and reshaping the identities of organizations within the parameters set by governing legislation. This allows for loose identities and the modification of public titles and internal systems to encompass environmental conservation and enhance the capacities of civil societies to address climate change. In turn, this may result in an increase in the number of entities engaged in the environmental sector and a promising expansion of local thinking with deep knowledge of environmental issues, integrating them into discussions and the overall social discourse.</p> | <p>Nationally, environmental work remains embryonic and subject to short-term initiatives that are contingent on funding or a shift towards more “efficient” programs, such as relief efforts or emergency responses to temporary crises like COVID-19 or water shortages in displacement camps. This common and prevalent approach among environmental advocates may lead to regression or excessive reliance on donor-driven plans. It may also be diverted under the influence of funding, networking, or bureaucratic subordination by governmental structures to produce policies that diminish the power of environmental mobilization, particularly within organizations that base their findings on desktop academic environmental research</p> |

Iraqi Civil Society: From Centralization to the Public Sphere

During the republican eras in Iraq (post-1958), Iraqi social forces frequently organized themselves as centralized trade unions and associations. However, these organizations were often influenced by partisan visions or controlled by the state, which aimed to maintain hegemony over sectoral representation. Essentially, before 2003, public sector organizations mirrored the policies of the central state. As a result, societal representation entities became politicized – reflecting the fragmented trade union interests among workers, peasants, and artisans – operating within different ideological frameworks and used to gain influence or vie for power.¹

In the 1970s, significant transitional and central structural changes occurred between organizations and the emerging power, which was administered with extreme totalitarianism by the Ba'ath Party from 1968 to 2003. These changes involved the nationalization of civil society structures, transforming them into additional instruments of the hegemonic state. As a result, the organizational forms were simplified to suppress whatever remnants remained of the diminishing public sphere.² Structuring society in favor of the state “arises mainly from the problem of trust,” and actually “presents a model of a society in which the silent motto of individualism and capitalism is prepared by modernity”.³ Hence, the notion and structures of civil society and NGOs were entirely novel in Iraq, with their initial inception occurring in a “fragmented and divided society grappling with a chronic identity crisis.”⁴ This period, following the “liberation” from the totalitarian regime after the 2003 occupation of Iraq, underscored society’s lack of trust, capabilities, and the institutional capacity necessary to fill the void of social power during that time.

Considering the government’s policies against independent community organizations spanning over half a century (1958-2003), the formation of the new civil society and its

entities was driven by the top-down initiative of the Coalition Provisional Authority.⁵ This initiative aimed to establish a public sphere that would deviate from the previous centralized approach to managing society and align with the Iraqi democratization program. However, this program did not resonate with the existing civil movement – which had struggled due to institutional distortions – and instead reflected the urgency of economic liberalization, hurriedly seizing the opportunity through force. As a result, the emerging civil society organizations have been shaped by international organizations through training and donations.

“The emergence of civil society in Iraq was not the outcome of a paradise of harmony, but rather a result of conflicting interests and divergent agendas colliding with each other.”⁶ While this may be true, more importantly, civil work in Iraq has been primarily associated with funding and donors rather than arising from social voluntarism driven by a sense of public responsibility towards local issues and crises. Iraq lacked a proactive civil society dedicated to environmental concerns for decades. Since the establishment of the modern state in Iraq in 1921, no organization or initiative led by civil society paid significant attention to environmental issues until early 1987. It was during this time that the government established the Iraqi Youth and Environment Office as a civil organization under the supervision of the Ministry of Youth. This office faced the same state-pursued centralization that controlled non-governmental activities.⁷

Despite Iraq being classified as an agricultural country with significant ecological importance as a region supplied by two rivers since ancient times, local civil societies’ attention towards environmental issues only started to gain momentum between 2008 and 2012. This shift coincided with the adoption of programs by international donors specifically targeting these issues, which was in turn prompted by two severe droughts that affected the country during that period.⁸ The emergence of NGOs in the public sphere, as understood in the Habermasian sense, can be attributed to three interconnected factors: the absence of a strong state presence, a power vacuum, and the desire of the local community to represent its interests.⁹ Remarkably, despite

1 Safaa Khalaf and Omar Al-Jafal, *The Smell of Pepper, Analysis, History and History of the Iraqi Uprisings, Separation of Trade Unions in Iraq - The Weight of the Past and the Crisis of the Present*, Dar Al-Rafidain, Beirut 2022, p. 245 onward.

2 Eric Davi, *Memories of State, Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq*, University of California Press: 2005.

3 Ulrich Beck and Brian Wynne, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, Sage 1992.

4 Faleh Abdul-Jabbar, *Civil Society in Post-War Iraq*, Publications of the Institute for Strategic Studies, Beirut, 2006.

5 The occupying power introduced [Law No. 45 of 2003](#), which outlined the regulations and procedures for the establishment of NGOs.

6 Faleh Abdul-Jabbar utilizes this concept to challenge the notion put forth by the idealistic view of the 18-century British liberal school, influenced by Adam Smith’s hypothesis, that “civil society is nothing but a self-organizing paradise of harmony”. Abdul-Jabbar, 2006.

7 See for example the [by-laws](#) of the Iraqi Youth and Environment Office.

8 Phone interview with the head of an environmental NGO in Basra, 6 February 2023.

9 Jurgen Habermas defines the public sphere as a social space that is independent of authority, where individuals engage in free discussions to define and address societal issues. These discussions enable the exchange

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the enactment of approximately 35 environmental laws and regulations in Iraq since the issuance of the first environmental law in 1929, none of them included provisions for civil society or environmental NGOs. This raises significant concerns for affected communities and underscores the lack of coordination and dialogue between independent civil actors, legislative authorities, and executive government structures. Environmental issues were seldom considered a valid cause during local community efforts to secure a place for themselves in the emerging power dynamics after 2003. The severe environmental damage inflicted by the wars conducted by the Iraqi state in the region, including the use of internationally prohibited weapons, as well as the extensive environmental degradation and manipulation of ecological systems, such as the draining of the historic Mesopotamian marshes and increased salinization of lands beneath the alluvial plain, did not elicit a significant response from civil society.¹⁰

In the years following 2003, there were only a few environmental NGOs established, and many of them were focused on addressing regional injustices resulting from the policies of the previous authoritarian regime. Furthermore, the prolonged security tensions in the pre-ISIS era (2003-2013) severely hindered the capacity of civil society to engage in environmental advocacy, as they were preoccupied with violent confrontations. Consequently, numerous environmental actors disappeared without viable alternatives. One such actor was the Iraqi Green Peace organization – originally denied registration in April 1997 due to objections regarding foreign funding – which was eventually registered in 2004 as the first local environmental organization under Coalition Provisional Authority regulations.¹¹

The escalating climate change challenges, including water scarcity and desertification particularly exacerbated by the drought that affected Iraq in 2008, highlighted the necessity for the establishment of new environmental entities.¹² This

of ideas, the formation of collective actions, and the development of public opinion. See Habermas Jürgen, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Cambridge MIT Press 1989.

10 For instance, a report of the World Health Organization on environmental health activities in Iraq between 2002-2003 did not mention any environmental NGOs during that period. Instead, it focused on training government employees and establishing information centers under its supervision to address the gap in civil society involvement. The World Health Organization's plans were disrupted due to the deterioration of the security situation, which subsequently impacted the performance of environmental actors.

11 "The Iraqi Green Peace Sounds the Alarm Bell in Iraq", *Al Mada Newspaper*, Issue 188, August 29, 2004, <https://almadapaper.net/sub/08-188/p06.htm>. The organization was subsequently registered again in January 2012 with the Department of NGOs. However, the previous license granted to it by the Ministry of Planning was revoked.

12 "Drought Threatening the Fertile Crescent and Turning Agricultural

need arose within the limited space available for civil society representation in accordance with the national legislative framework governing NGOs in 2010, which contributed to improved governance of these organizations. However, environmental NGOs in Iraq have generally exhibited two contrasting features: a sluggish response to local environmental challenges and unstable funding opportunities that depend on donor interest in addressing critical issues.

The governmental structure responsible for registering and documenting NGOs does not provide updated lists of civil actors and their classifications.¹³ However, there is ongoing speculation regarding the actual number of NGOs. According to the general secretariat of the Council of Ministers, which is the highest administrative authority in the country, there are approximately 5,000 locally registered NGOs with work permits, in addition to 100 branches of international NGOs operating under the framework of Law No. 12 of 2010.¹⁴ In parallel, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research grants a limited number of licenses to NGOs involved in environmental and biological fields, often functioning as scientific offices that support government research centers. Furthermore, some NGOs obtain approvals from the Ministry of Planning and operate as sectoral organizations providing advisory services, as the Ministry of Environment grants no licenses for civil environmental work.

Methodology

This study used the descriptive analytical method to examine mobilization patterns among environmental NGOs in Iraq. The research involved 18 of these NGOs operating in regions and governorates under the federal government.¹⁵ The selection sample was based on tracking activities, initiatives, priority issues, and advocacy methods through website analysis,

Lands into Desert", *Asharq Al-Awsat Newspaper* 20 June 2008, <https://archive.aawsat.com/>.

13 The Department of NGOs within the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers was established in 2004 in accordance with the Coalition Provisional Authority's Order No. 45 of 2003. Initially named the NGOs Assistance Office, it was placed under the Ministry of Planning. In 2005, it was officially transferred to the Ministry of State for Civil Society Affairs (which has since been abolished). The financial and administrative management of the office remained under the Secretariat of Ministers until 2008, when it transitioned into an independent governmental structure (department) directly linked to the General Secretariat.

14 "Civil Society Organisations: Thousands and Absent Role in Iraqi Reality", *Earth News Agency*, 14 January 2023.

15 The interviews with the main actors in these organizations were conducted remotely via email, instant messaging applications, and direct video meetings.

social media monitoring, and news coverage. In addition, actors from nine of these NGOs were interviewed,¹⁶ and they responded to 13 questions related to five main perspectives: primary environmental concerns, forms of mobilization, motivations and mechanisms, networking and financing, and challenges and risks.

As there is no final and up-to-date official list of NGOs in Iraq, the study relied on alternative sources to estimate the number of environmental NGOs. By monitoring environmental meetings, advocacy campaigns, official statements, and the database of the Department of NGOs from 2011 to 2018, an independent count identified approximately 185 officially registered environmental NGOs.¹⁷ Additionally, there are 12 demining NGOs, with only two actively operating in southern

and the environment were classified based on their publicized names as entities involved in environmental mobilization. The study found that 96 environmentally oriented NGOs, as indicated by their advertised names, had their applications rejected or were removed from official records based on five official bulletins from the Department of NGOs between June 2016 and January 2023.¹⁹ In the northern, semi-autonomous Kurdish region, 223 organizations focused on environmental issues were found,²⁰ all registered with the Department of NGOs of the Kurdistan Regional Government.

Based on the independent quantitative findings of this study, the percentage of registered environmental organizations compared to the total number of declared public organizations is 2.02%. This indicates that environmental

| | | |
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| Local NGOs registered between 2011 and 2018 3,514 | Registered environmental NGOs in Iraq 185 | Iraqi NGOs declared as of 2023 5,000 Local NGOs 100 International NGOs |
| Officially dissolved environmental NGOs between 2016 and 2023 96 | including 79 focused on agriculture and animal resources | |

Iraq.¹⁸ Finally, organizations focusing on agriculture, water,

16 The remaining organizations declined or had reservations about participating in the study. This was due to the timing of the study coinciding with the kidnapping by an armed group in Baghdad of Jassim Al-Asadi, an environmental activist and the head of Nature Iraq in southern Iraq. These organizations expressed concerns that answering the researcher's questions or sharing information could potentially jeopardize their situation within Iraq. Other organizations that were contacted did not respond.

17 The statistics mentioned in this study do not represent the total number of registered environmental NGOs or those operating without a license. They solely reflect the independent findings of this study, which were obtained by reviewing the official database. It is worth mentioning that 69 licensed environmental NGOs have been suspended for a minimum of 30 days due to their failure to submit annual financial statements to the Department. Additionally, according to a [bulletin](#) released on 25 November 2021, and another [statement](#) on 3 February 2023, a total of 37 organizations have been suspended.

18 "Minister of Environment Nizar Amedy: More than 150 Will be Victims

issues are still in the early stages of gaining prominence among civil organizations, suggesting a slow response by civil society in organizing itself to address the challenges of environmental and climatic deterioration.

of Mines and War Remnants in 2022", Rudaw Arabia, 28 December 2023, <https://www.rudawarabia.net/arabic/middleeast/iraq/281220222>.

19 Applications for incorporation and registration rejected by the Department of NGOs: bulletin on 12 January 2023, bulletin on 30 December 2021, bulletin on 17 November 2021, bulletin on 2 December 2018, and bulletin on 22 June 2016.

20 According to the Environmental Protection and Conservation Authority in the Kurdistan Region. See: Environmentalist Conference in Erbil Warns of Drought Dangers in Kurdistan and Iraq, Shafaq News, 19 May 2022, <https://shafaq.com/ar/>.

Environmental NGOs: Evolving Structures Arising from Conventional Entities

The majority of local NGOs lack clear and fixed organizational structures, with a tendency for domination by the founders. Over time, they can evolve into family partnerships that monopolize funds and programs. The absence of proper donor oversight may lead to corrupt practices such as fund mismanagement or misuse of authority.²¹ In many cases, kinship relations dominate these NGOs, which deviates from Tocqueville's vision of "voluntary non-kinship-based associations" that facilitate effective communication between society and the state.

NGOs operating in the Middle East have faced criticism for engaging in practices that deviate from their intended purpose. Some individuals have proposed adding letters to their names, such as T-NGOs, F-NGOs, or G-NGOs – with T, F, and G standing for tribal, familial, or gang – suggesting that such NGOs are influenced by tribal dynamics, familial connections, or even engage in illicit activities reminiscent of criminal organizations.²²

Lack of governance poses a significant challenge for organizations in general, including those working on environmental causes, due to the prevalent issue of limited transparency in their operations.

In terms of institutionalization and governance in non-governmental work, the Department of NGOs operates within the framework of Law No. 12 of 2010, which regulates organizations. Founders of civil entities are subjected to security checks by intelligence agencies prior to establishment.²³ Additionally, the Office of Financial

21 Abdul-Jabbar, 2006.

22 Ibid.

23 In January 2020, the Department of NGOs [announced](#) its intention to share data and information on NGO workers (in both local organizations and foreign branches) with various government agencies, including security agencies, "as per the law". However, the legal mandate authorizing such data sharing with undisclosed government entities was not specified. The Department also mandated that all organizations update employee, associate, and contractor data. Failure to comply may result in "appropriate measures" being taken against the civil entities.

Supervision, as the highest financial control authority in the country, monitors fund movements.²⁴ Its stated aim is to "investigate any suspicions of corruption, financing terrorism, or engaging in activities that may harm the country on behalf of foreign entities".²⁵

Such governance procedures raise concerns among environmental NGOs and actors regarding the subjective classification of "on behalf of foreign entities". State authorities tend to view NGOs with suspicion due to their external relations and activities that sometimes overlap with state-provided services, which limits the government's control over public resources.²⁶ Consequently, NGOs are often accused of treason following civil protests,²⁷ which leads to campaigns of physical assault²⁸ and assassinations targeting civic activists.²⁹ This situation forces NGOs to either disengage from activities conflicting with the interests of the state's upper circles or adopt a compliant approach of "dutiful environmentalism" that avoids questioning the established order while seeking change through collaboration.³⁰

This study identified three primary classifications for local environmental NGOs in Iraq:

24 In February 2020, the Department of NGOs [issued a directive](#) requiring NGOs, upon request from the Integrity Commission, to disclose their financial assets.

25 According to Haider Majeed, the spokesperson for the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers. See Thousands of NGOs in Iraq and Controversy over their Role, Aljazeera.net, 15 January 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.net/politics>.

26 Sari Hanafi and Linda Tabar, "Donors, International Organizations, and Local NGOs: The Emergence of the Globalized Palestinian Elite", Institute for Jerusalem and Citizen Studies, and the Palestinian Institute for the Study of Democracy, 2006.

27 "Civil Society, Washington's Hands That Tamper with Iraq's Security and Future", Al-Khanadeq, 1 September 2021, <https://www.alkhanadeq.com/post.php?id=1240>.

28 "The Role of American Consulate in Basra in Mobilizing the Iraqi Street", Mehr News, 18 September 2018, <https://ar.mehrnews.com/news/>.

29 Since the onset of public protests in 2019, there have been 81 assassination attempts targeting civil activists and anti-government journalists, resulting in 34 fatalities. See, HRW, "Impunity for Grave Violations", 13 January 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/ar/news/2022/01/13/380554>.

30 O'Brien, K., E. Selboe, and B. M. Hayward, "Exploring youth activism on climate change: dutiful, disruptive, and dangerous dissent", Ecology and Society 23(3):42, 2018.

TYPES OF LOCAL ENVIRONMENTAL NGOS IN IRAQ

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| <p>Environmental Advocacy NGOs: These local NGOs, numbering in the tens to hundreds, operate across various fields including relief and humanitarian support. They incorporate environmental initiatives into their programs and often rely heavily on funding from international donors. They play a crucial role in implementing programs, particularly in the volatile northern basin of Iraq, which spans the eastern and western regions and extends northward into the Kurdish region, which has been marred by long-term armed conflicts over the past two decades, impacting both urban and rural communities.</p> | <p>Public Environmental NGOs: These operate within the national framework of local organizations and focus directly on environmental issues. Their names are closely associated with environmental activism, which helps them secure funding and establish themselves as leaders in defining programs related to environmental and climate challenges. They often have a broader scope and aim for regional expansion due to their focus on addressing environmental impact in general. These organizations are relatively new and their programs revolve around environmental and climate issues. They are not limited to specific problems or regions, taking advantage of increasing funding opportunities. This category of NGOs holds a significant presence among environmental organizations, with many activists having previous experience working with public civil entities.</p> | <p>Specialized Environmental NGOs: These organizations primarily focus on water-related issues and the revitalization of marshes, aquatic habitats, and water-dependent areas. They engage in systematic and effective networking with international or governmental donors, as well as other transnational organizations. Their activities encompass both fieldwork and advocacy campaigns. Some of these NGOs have an environmental and developmental orientation, utilizing scientific research, monitoring reports, regional surveys, and projects aimed at revitalizing and supporting local populations. Others concentrate on the conservation of sedentary or migratory wildlife species endemic to aquatic habitats. Additionally, there are “desktop-academic organizations” that prioritize qualitative networking to advance environmental concerns, leveraging the affiliation of their activists with universities and government research centers.</p> |
|---|--|--|

The organizations interviewed in this study concur that environmental advocacy organizations have gained the trust of international donors as a result of their relief work since 2004. These organizations enjoy an advantage over newly created NGOs due to their longer establishment and regional presence, allowing them to develop strong ties with the local population and gain valuable experience working within conflict-affected areas.

The regions in question have experienced significant disruptions, marked by the aftermath of the post-2003 rebellion against the central authority. These disruptions include mass displacement to temporary camps; ongoing military actions; governmental neglect; delays in resettlement and reconstruction processes; the presence of pollutants, mines, and war remnants; and the intensification of climate and environmental effects such as drought, desertification, and agricultural decline. These factors have rendered these regions fragile, potential breeding grounds for future waves of violence. The collapse of local agricultural economies, the near-absence of essential services, and the deterioration of water and environmental infrastructure have further exacerbated the situation.

International donors, based on established trust and

contractual arrangements, tend to favor local organizations operating in the “unstable basin” due to their track record in implementing relief and humanitarian operations as trusted local contractors.³¹ Newly established environmental NGOs, often led by academics and activists, may not have strong connections with the local population, leading to concerns about potential discrimination or favoritism. As a result, “international NGOs and UN agencies often prefer to partner repeatedly with the same trusted local organizations and to exclude others”,³² creating a “preferential hierarchy based on funding criteria”.³³

International donor partnerships with environmental

31 The head of an environmental NGO from the “unstable basin” voiced concerns about “the pervasive funding discrimination, whereby international organizations prioritize allocating funds to local NGOs with prior working relationships or experience in relief programs. They do not prefer newly established NGOs which are allegedly less experienced. [...] This creates great challenges for us in convincing donors to fund our environmental initiatives and projects.” Phone interview, 3 February 2023.

32 Linking Local NGOs with International Donors, Statement by NGO Coordination Committee for Iraq (NCCI), 17 October 2016, <https://www.ncciraq.org/ar/about-ar/about-ncci-ar/ncci-updates-ar/item/18687>.

33 Hanafi and Tabar, 2006, *ibid*.

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advocacy NGOs are often characterized by a transactional approach where funding is exchanged for representation. This can be seen as a form of new mercantilism based on mutual interests, limiting the community's ability to prioritize independently³⁴ and potentially leading to compromises of commercialized nature.³⁵

The mercantilist system explains why international donors prioritize supporting advocacy NGOs over public relief and development work. This shift in focus allows NGOs to secure funding by adapting their programs and functions to meet donor requirements. International NGOs and UN agencies prefer to support local organizations that can operate effectively in risky environments, which nonlocal entities may not be able to do due to security concerns and legal responsibilities, especially in the volatile northern basin. This

creates a structural dependency between donors and local actors. As a result, nonspecialized local NGOs often align their structures and activities with donor-planned programs without initiating significant adaptation or modification, and without engaging in sustainable campaigns or activities beyond emergency relief work.³⁶

Environmental Mobilization: Repeated Patterns and Specific Causes

| 27 URGENT ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES OUTSIDE THE CONCERN OF IRAQI NGOS AND ACTIVISTS | | | | | |
|---|--|---|--|---|--|
| Pollution of air, water and soil as a result of unclean extraction of oil and gas | Transformation of the land, such as diverting the course of rivers, filling lakes, burning and razing forests and wooded areas | Marine pollution due to oil ports and marine activity leaks | Encroachment on wild nature reserves and open spaces with natural vegetation | Erosion of the neritic zone on Iraqi shores | Food waste |
| Dredging of green spaces and agricultural lands for hydrocarbon extraction | Hospital, chemical, and radioactive waste (such as radioactive iron) | Pollutants in brick, cement, and industrial lime factories | Building dams and water regulators that affect local environments | Shrinking green spaces within cities | Lack of investment in clean energy, such as solar or wind energy |
| Urban pollutants, such as vehicle exhaust and independent electricity producers (diesel generators) | Landfill areas and poor treatment of solid and liquid waste | Unfair water-sharing policies between governorates | Fish farms that drain freshwater | The lack of effective and enforceable laws to protect the environment and natural resources | Environmentally unfriendly consumption |
| Increasing carbon footprint due to harmful human, industrial, and agricultural activities | Unsustainable farming | Overfishing in the Iraqi marshes and prairies, causing the extinction of rare species of migratory birds and wild animals | Destruction of the rare plains, mountain, and desert ecosystems | Extinction of livestock | Prevalence of plastic use in day-to-day life |
| Expansion of telecommunications companies and the installation of environmentally unsafe towers with low safety conditions in residential areas | Noise pollution | Militarization of the environment | | | |

34 According to the environmental organizations interviewed for the research paper, there is a discernible, discriminatory pattern in the donor-organization relationship “characterized by vague and incomprehensible exchange of interests and lengthy, complex procedures that often result in local NGOs withdrawing or avoiding applying for uncertain funds.” The head of an NGO operating in the Middle Euphrates region (central Iraq) said that “seeking international grants is risky and time-wasting, because of unclear requirements and a constant frustration of witnessing the preference of one organization over another.” Phone interview, 15 February 2023.

35 The paper will explore and analyze this form of environmental investment in subsequent sections.

36 Organizations in Iraq have the flexibility to re-adapt their mission by submitting a request to the Department of NGOs under the Federal Council of Ministers. This can be done by convening the administrative body, voting to include specific activities such as environmental protection or water quality monitoring, or changing the organization's name to reflect environmental focus, such as adding “environment”, “water”, or “agriculture”, and then informing the federal authority. While this allows organizations to target environmental activities, it presents an additional challenge for those with a purely environmental orientation. Phone interview with the head of an environmental NGO in central Iraq, 22 February 2023.

Water scarcity³⁷ is a prominent environmental concern in Iraq, especially within networks focusing on protecting the public's right to access renewable resources amidst recurring droughts since 2008. This issue poses a threat to the historic water network of Mesopotamia and disrupts economic activities in the Tigris and Euphrates basins, which are vital for stability and civil peace. However, this study highlights 27 other urgent environmental issues that receive limited attention from NGOs and actors due to inadequate funding or potential conflicts with the state or some communal practices.

Water: The Main Issue

The loss of the natural water network poses significant risks to civil peace and the environment. This can result in violent shocks, leading to the collapse of social and economic structures and unforeseen internal migration. The influx of migrants to new areas creates pressure and competition over limited resources, potentially triggering civil conflicts. The situation is exacerbated by the prevalence of weapons among individuals, tribes, and armed groups who engage in economic activities while undermining the state through corruption and clientelist networks. These circumstances raise concerns about the future territorial integrity of Iraq as resources continue to deplete.³⁸

The heightened environmental fragility in Iraq is attributed to the interconnected impact of climate change and water scarcity. These two factors contribute to escalating violence, poverty, and population growth, which are critical indicators of the severity of the environmental situation.³⁹

Amidst the government's ineffective planning and inability to manage risks, environmental mobilization efforts in Iraq on water-related issues, and the preservation of historical aquatic habitats like the marshes, were largely grassroots. These efforts manifested in public discussions, initiatives, and voluntary campaigns to raise awareness about the threats posed by water scarcity and rivers drying up, particularly due to the policies of upstream countries. Save the Tigris, for instance, has been actively advocating for

water conservation in Iraq for 11 years.⁴⁰ It operates through a transnational network of civil society organizations from Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and supportive international organizations, all aiming to protect the Tigris River basin from the impacts of dams constructed by Turkey and Iran.

The Save the Tigris campaign exemplifies the power of transnational networking in overcoming bureaucratic barriers and mobilizing international support for environmental issues that endanger historic habitats like the marshlands.⁴¹ This campaign played a significant role in Iraq's achievement of listing the marshlands as a World Heritage Site in 2016, thanks to the international advocacy efforts initiated by the campaign starting in March 2012. Building on these successful tactics, Iraqi activists went on to establish Humat Dijlah (Guardians of the Tigris).

Humat Dijlah actively engages volunteer youth groups across 16 Iraqi governorates to promote environmental preservation and water conservation.⁴² Its four main goals are protecting rivers and marshes from threats like dams and overfishing, promoting sustainable development aligned with UN objectives on climate change, reducing pollution and promoting renewable energy, and encouraging tourism to aquatic habitats while revitalizing cultural traditions. However, the organization faces "obstacles due to government bureaucracy hindering licensing activities" that limit their outreach nationally.⁴³ To overcome these challenges, they focus on "smaller interim goals" to maintain continuous mobilization.⁴⁴ Notably, they have formed 10 local guardian teams along the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and organize the Iraqi Water Week annually in March, serving as a platform for awareness campaigns and networking opportunities with other organizations.⁴⁵

40 Sources and documents from the Save the Tigris and the Iraqi Marshlands campaign, a transnational act of solidarity with Iraqi civil society, <https://www.iraqicivilsociety.org/resources-and-documents>.

41 Now registered as an NGO in the Netherlands, Save the Tigris operates as a platform for promoting water justice in the Mesopotamian basin. It brings together groups from Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and Iran, fostering solidarity and knowledge sharing to advocate for environmental justice and highlight water as a tool for peace. For more: www.savethetigris.org.

42 E-mail interview with the NGO's executive director, 18 February 2023.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 This year it coincided with the 20th anniversary of the invasion of Iraq. The event was called "Water Management and Water Scarcity in Iraq Over 20 Years: Our Water Situation is Worse and We Must Act Fast". For more about the 2023 Iraqi Water Week: <https://www.iraqicivilsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Iraqi-Water-Week.pdf>.

37 Safaa Khalaf, "Water Crisis and Climate Change in Iraq Led to Migration and Civil Conflicts" Al-Aalam, 27 November 2021, <https://al-aalem.com/news/>.

38 Safaa Khalaf, "Water Crisis in Iraq: The Dynamics of Regional Conflict and the Risks of Internal Fighting", Riwaq Baghdad Center for Public Policy, 2021, <https://rewaqbaghdad.org/>.

39 Safaa Khalaf, "Climate Change and Water Crisis in Iraq: Indicators of Fragility and the Acuity of Environmental Impact", Al-Safir Al-Arabi, 2 October 2022, <https://assafirarabi.com/ar/47760/2022/10/02/>.

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Environmental mobilization efforts at the national level are influenced by the organizational and networking capabilities of individual NGOs, particularly those that have cultivated expertise among their staff. These NGOs have contributed to the dissemination of information through monitoring and analysis reports, such as those produced by Nature Iraq, which provide the international community with a more transparent understanding of environmental issues in Iraq as compared to government reports.

Nature Iraq is an influential NGO operating in the Tigris River basin, including the Kurdish region in the north and the marshes in the south.⁴⁶ As a partner of the UN Environmental Program and BirdLife International, it has a significant impact on government environmental policies. It is internationally recognized and collaborates with national bureaucracies to enhance environmental protection, including the development of scientific databases, monitoring programs, and conservation efforts for water resources, biodiversity, and indigenous lifestyles. Over the past two decades, Nature Iraq has implemented operational measures in the marshlands that have led to various institutional initiatives.⁴⁷ Their approach to environmental mobilization goes beyond public discussions and lobbying, encompassing collaborative development projects that aim to enhance the environment through financial and supervisory partnerships with government and international entities.

In the same region, the Iraqi Green Climate Organization (IGCO), led by local environmental and wildlife experts, actively works towards preserving biodiversity and rehabilitating marshland and aquatic habitats to protect rare and endangered animal species. They achieve this through awareness programs for the local population and research partnerships with universities and research centers. The IGCO's academics and independent activists utilize new media techniques to expand local awareness of environmental risks, drawing inspiration from Antonio Gramsci and promoting data partnerships and culture-oriented approaches to environmental issues.

Environmental work requires basic informational knowledge of the damages and risks, which are further explored by research centers, scientists, governments, reputable

organizations like the UN, and climate conferences. The modern German school of public sphere theory emphasizes the importance of information flow, enabling individuals (activists, NGOs) to make informed choices and mobilize effectively for their causes. This includes utilizing various platforms such as TV programs, social media, and smartphone applications. The IGCO demonstrates expertise in this regard through initiatives like the Al-Mustakshif (The Explorer) show hosted by wildlife expert Omar Al-Sheikhly,⁴⁸ the activism of Mahdi Laith,⁴⁹ and the introduction of the Iraqi Water Quality Index (IraqWQI) for researchers and government agencies to assess surface water quality.

The IGCO has effectively utilized new forms of environmental mobilization through engaging science popularization shows on YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram. Additionally, they have collaborated with the Al-Jbayish Environmental Tourism Organization to promote ecotourism in the region.⁵⁰ The partnership has facilitated voluntary campaigns to clean the marshes and organize tours for Western tourists.⁵¹ This collaboration has led to significant wildlife documentation, including the discovery of extinct species of aquatic mammals.⁵² The organizations also work together to monitor and evaluate threats to the fish population in the southern Iraqi marshes in cooperation with the Ministry of Environment.⁵³

Iraq has witnessed the emergence of a unique form of collaboration and networking among academic institutions and government structures, forming environmental networks with clear leadership, organizational structures, work strategies, and defined goals. These entities can be referred to as “desktop-academic NGOs” as they utilize their qualitative networks to advocate for environmental research. They also engage in discussions and deliberations,

48 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d3TOBIT8hN4>

49 <https://www.instagram.com/mahdilaith/>

50 “Initiative to Revive Eco-tourism in Iraq to Save the Marshes”, Rudaw, 2 May 2019, <https://www.rudawarabia.net/arabic/middleeast/iraq/2205201913>.

51 In late February 2023, the IGCO campaign witnessed the participation of approximately 60 volunteers from the governorates of Basra, Maysan, Dhi Qar, Najaf, as well as local communities and water border protection personnel.

52 In May 2021, the [collaborative efforts](#) of the IGCO and Al-Jbayish resulted in the discovery patent for the long-tailed nesokia rat, locally known as the Bani Ahmar rat. This species, which had disappeared from its ecoregion due to the draining of the marshes in the early 1990s, was registered on the International Union for Conservation of Nature Red List of Threatened Species. Extensive field surveys and exploratory missions conducted over the past four decades had previously failed to locate the rat.

53 Endangered Brown Fish, Ministry of Environment, 30 July 2017, last access 18 February 2023.

46 The author was unable to contact Dr. Jassim Al-Asadi, the head of the organization in the marshes, as he was kidnapped by an armed group in early February 2023 for two weeks. Due to the incident, many staff members were hesitant to provide any information related to their NGO. For more information about the Nature Iraq, see: www.natureiraq.org

47 These initiatives include the Hawizeh Marshes Plan, the Mud House in the Marshes initiative, and the Darbandikhan Lake Project in Kurdistan. Additionally, there are ongoing projects such as the Basic Biodiversity Areas Project, the establishment of a national park for the Mesopotamian marshes, and the Upper Tigris Water Protection Project.

often in collaboration with government institutions and sometimes with international entities. In return, government agencies, through their parallel desktop-academic groups, establish connections with the international community outside the confines of bureaucratic frameworks.⁵⁴ However, these innovative organizations still face challenges such as government restrictions, hierarchical relationships, and a lack of prioritization in funding.⁵⁵ In addition, while the desktop-academic model provides valuable environmental databases, it often lacks meaningful engagement with local communities and remains largely detached from in-the-field mobilization efforts.

Based on the analysis of announced campaigns, this study identifies four types of field mobilization in Iraq:

1. **Pre-programmed campaigns**, which are driven by the vision of international donors and involve the majority of organizations.

generate publicity and fame for participating NGOs, they often lack operational impact or sustainable solutions to the identified issues.

3. **Recruitment campaigns**, which typically emerge as part of emergency or seasonal initiatives and aim to address local environmental issues like cleaning rivers or afforestation. They often involve young volunteers who strive to emulate international and regional campaigns found on social media. However, the potential and enthusiasm of these volunteers are not always effectively harnessed and developed for more impactful campaigns.

4. **Politicized campaigns**, launched by political parties, religious movements, or violent groups, and characterized by a strong political agenda. Established environmental NGOs tend to avoid engaging in politicized campaigns, unlike smaller NGOs that may have a more regional focus or undisclosed connections with political actors.

| | | | |
|---------------|-------------------|---------------|-----------------|
| Baghdad 55 | Nineveh 25 | Babylon 12 | Diwaniyah 11 |
| Anbar 6 | Diyala 6 | Najaf 5 | Kirkuk 5 |
| Muthanna 4 | Saladin 4 | Karbala 4 | Dhi Qar 3 |
| Dohuk 3 | Erbil 3 | Maysan 3 | Basra 2 |
| Wasit 2 | Sulaymaniyah 2 | | |

2. **Emergency campaigns**, launched in response to environmental phenomena that capture public concerns, such as water shortages, dust storms, the drying of marshes, the death of fish stocks, or soil salinization. While they may

Networks and Funds: Obstacles to Environmental Mobilization Networking in the Iraqi context undergoes unique transformations and adaptations, despite its inherently participatory nature. In Iraq, local environmental NGOs encounter challenges in finding suitable areas for participation and establishing partnerships.⁵⁶ The operational landscape is highly competitive with limited options, modest capabilities, regulated financial frameworks, and small profit margins. This is especially true in light of the small financial grants provided by international donors to assess the responsiveness of civil society.

Local networking in Iraq remains underdeveloped and lacks

54 Numerous scientific conferences, meetings, seminars, and workshops have been organized under the coordination of these desktop-academic organizations. Some notable examples include [APSU](#), focusing on water sustainability; [Duhok Eco Institute](#), dedicated to water and energy strategies; and [AGERC-Iraq](#), the Iraq Association of Genetic and Environmental Resources Conservation.

55 "The most significant obstacles faced by civil society organizations, including ours, are government restrictions and a lack of understanding from officials regarding the role of organizations, and the allocation of grants to inactive parties, often influenced by local workers seeking favor with government agencies" E-mail interview with the head of a desk-academic environmental organization based in Baghdad, on 11 February 2023.

56 Most of the NGOs interviewed for this paper preferred not to network or implement projects with other NGOs, preferring international NGOs and international donors instead.

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transparency, leading to the breakdown of collaborative partnerships, even on matters of shared interest. For example, Nature Iraq withdrew from the Save the Tigris and Marshes Campaign, which was led by the Iraqi Civil Society Solidarity Initiative citing concerns regarding transparency.⁵⁷

Local networking in the context of NGOs can sometimes exhibit discriminatory relationships based on personal connections and areas of activity, leading to an elitist hierarchy among individuals. For instance, NGOs led by professional academics tend to network with similar organizations, while those rooted in traditional communities seek connections within their networks. Some NGOs, on the other hand, are willing to take on any role assigned to them or actively participate in public discussions and events in the hope of securing future funding opportunities through networking. In neighboring Palestine, “political and personal competition among NGOs plays a significant role in increasing divisions.”⁵⁸ Similarly, in Iraq, “competition for funding has been identified as a major obstacle to networking, leading to fierce and sometimes unethical competition among NGOs.”⁵⁹

According to the perceptions of NGO activists interviewed in this study, local environmental networking in Iraq is more focused on personal gain and visibility rather than sharing and collaborative efforts. There is a lack of institutional networking that involves understanding, agreements, and equitable distribution of work and benefits. Collaborative fieldwork is similarly absent. However, networking for the purpose of considering different perspectives, signing public statements, and participating in deliberation meetings is common, especially in politically oriented NGOs.⁶⁰

The initiatives undertaken by environmental NGOs in Iraq have not yet transformed into a revolutionary social force that redefines the relationship between the state or society and the environment. These NGOs have been influenced by the practices of political NGOs, leading to a shift in focus while maintaining conventional thinking, mechanisms, and procedures. “Many organizations have not adequately

addressed the problem of consistent failures due to the broader dynamics within the NGO sector. This results in the persistent use of outdated methods and frameworks to address new environmental challenges.”⁶¹ As such, the slight change observed is primarily a shift in focus toward environmental issues in line with donor priorities.

The monopoly of decision-making and the lack of public participation, even in NGOs attempting to expand their membership through community outreach, highlight the absence of meaningful dialogue with the local community. The networking dynamics between organizations and donors can be described as micro-networking, characterized by an imbalanced relationship where a dominant donor is superior to the local organizations with limited resources. This relationship lacks true participation, mutual influence, or knowledge exchange. On the other hand, local networking that attracts volunteer work also faces challenges due to its limited scope and temporary nature, often ending once the task is completed. This too is not a sustainable form of networking for causes that require long-term efforts to achieve their goals.

Notably, there is growing youth interest in environmental advocacy.⁶² Organizations that have previously faced challenges in mobilizing an audience due to factional or regional issues with limited participation now experience a sense of relief. This is attributed to the growing enthusiasm among a broad spectrum of youth who are actively engaged. However, there is a concern regarding the potential exploitation of these youth groups and the risk of their involvement turning into disguised forced labor. This exploitation may lead to reluctance in future volunteer mobilization efforts or result in a void created by a transformative shift in their engagement, particularly as the environmental crisis intensifies.⁶³

Some advocacy campaigns have struggled to effectively reach the individuals directly affected by environmental challenges. These campaigns have been confined to internal discussions within organizations and rely on long-term or temporary volunteers recruited online.⁶⁴ As a result, the impacts of these campaigns are vague or transient at best, as they fail to build lobbying capacity or establish meaningful connections with the local community. On the other hand, commercial initiatives by companies and businesspersons

57 Nature Iraq Withdraws from the Save the Tigris and the Marshes Campaign, Iraqi Civil Society Solidarity Initiative, 8 November 2013, <https://www.ncciraq.org/>.

58 Hanafi and Tabar, 2006, *ibid*.

59 Phone interviews conducted with environmental NGO leaders from various regions of Iraq confirmed the widespread nature of the phenomenon and its significant impact on local networking.

60 For instance, in January 2021, a political NGO focused on democracy and elections proposed the creation of the Environmental Protection Network in Basra as part of the Green Alliance for a Pollutant-Free Basra. The aim was to unite organizations and environmental activists under a common framework. However, the initiative did not lead to the establishment of the network or its operationalization through an institutional framework or action plan. Consequently, no environmental movement was launched.

61 David Scott, *Refashioning Futures Criticism After Postcoloniality*, Princeton University Press, 1999.

62 “Iraqi Youth Initiative to Face Environmental Problems”, BBC Arabic, 14 November 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/tv-and-radio-63627559>.

63 Abdul-Jabbar, 2006, *ibid*.

64 Mohamed Ali, “Save the Marshes of Iraq, Campaign Responding to Unprecedented Drought”, Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, 15 August 2022, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/society>.

utilize environmental mobilization as a marketing tool, promoting “eco-friendly” products that may not be truly as advertised. Additionally, unsustainable projects are often presented under the guise of creating a sustainable economy, leading to a superficial resolution of environmental issues driven by commercial interests.⁶⁵

Certain rural areas, as well as aquatic habitats within the marshes, and even neighborhoods in some cities, rely on the initiatives of independent activists who are driven by a sense of public responsibility to restore the original environments. These activists operate separately from mainstream NGO efforts, which are primarily concentrated in major cities and often disconnected from politically marginalized and environmentally vulnerable villages and neighborhoods.⁶⁶ While the informal leadership role played by independent environmental activists contributes to achieving certain conservation objectives, it also carries the risk that the absence of these activists could result in the breakdown of activism networks and the decline of advocacy and mobilization efforts, leading to the neglect of environmental concerns.

The lack of engagement with local communities in environmental decision-making processes has led to increased gaps and detachment between these communities and their environmental crises. The impact of wars, including the destruction of ecosystems and displacement, has further contributed to the separation of population groups from their natural environments, resulting in a lack of responsibility

65 A group of consumer import companies [launched](#) the Baghdad Center for Renewable Energy and Sustainability to promote an alternative market that relies on clean energy in line with international sustainability goals. They promoted a permanent product exhibition, as well as six youth start-ups aimed at preserving the environment.

66 For instance, there are notable examples of individual efforts by environmental activists in various regions of Iraq. [Ahmed Saleh Nima](#), an environmental activist and blogger, has made significant contributions in the central-southern region of Iraq. [Anas Al-Taie](#) has played a role in reforesting neighborhoods in Mosul (northwest). [Haji Abbas Jallub](#) has planted palm trees along the banks of the Dujaili River in the Wasit governorate (central east). Environmental volunteer [Abu Yasser](#) has dedicated 12 years to developing green spaces in Al-Bahdalia, on the outskirts of Karbala (center). Villagers in Bou Nahed, Diwaniyah (south) have taken the initiative to ban public smoking and the sale of cigarettes and soft drinks in public areas, aiming for a healthy and environmentally friendly village. The [Bou Shamel](#) tribesmen in Diwaniyah have also banned smoking in their village to safeguard the well-being of its residents. In the Kurdish village of [Kani Tawk](#) in Erbil (north), customary laws have been established to protect the environment, including prohibitions on hunting wild animals and smoking, as well as the promotion of domestic animal breeding. Farmer [Hakar Iskandar](#) from the village of Koura in Dohuk (far north) has undertaken the personal expense of planting a million oak trees to combat desertification in the region, with the support of his wife and children.

toward their new environments. This phenomenon can be described as environmental alienation, which is one of the reasons why environmental movements often face challenges in mobilizing support when certain environments are affected.⁶⁷

Challenges and Risks: Power Structures Limiting Environmental Mobilization

Environmental struggles in Iraq often intersect with political and sectarian divisions, tribal conflicts, and the activities of armed groups. This complex landscape makes it challenging for environmental movements and organizations to receive support and funding at both the national and international levels. The regime and its forces employ strategies to sow divisions and prevent successful rallying around environmental causes.⁶⁸ Many projects that pose threats to the environment⁶⁹ are associated with “violent parties, armed groups, or even the political regime itself”.⁷⁰ The vested interests of power structures in Iraq often result in the complete withdrawal of loyalist populations, undermining mobilization efforts and even helping the dissemination of misleading information that impacts the remaining population, whose environmental interests are at risk due to ongoing environmental violence.⁷¹

Activists and individuals in local NGOs who advocate for the

67 “People need a lot of awareness campaigns. The lack of basic services has impacted their concern for the effects of climate and environmental factors. We also find difficulties in securing environmentally friendly alternatives to harmful consumption behaviors. For example, we would like to launch a campaign promoting the use of paper bags and boxes instead of plastics, but the local market and production factories do not provide such eco-friendly products. Additionally, traditional mobilization tools such as workshops, awareness campaigns, conferences, and seminars have become unproductive over the years, leading to reluctance among people to participate in such initiatives.” Phone interview with the head of an environmental NGO in southern Iraq, 24 February 2023.

68 Saudi Arabia Preparing to Cultivate the Iraqi Desert, Iran’s Allies on Alert, Independent Arabia, 1 November 2022, <https://www.independentarabia.com>.

69 “Bulldozers of Al-Asa’ib Militia Devastates the Tigris of Mosul”, Jummar Media, 22 December 2022, <https://jummar.media/2632>.

70 “Sam River Carries Death to Kirkuk’s Agriculture”, Jummar Media, 26 October 2022, <https://jummar.media/2210>.

71 “Activists: Bombs, Waste, Corruption, Negligence, Ignorance, and Militias Caused Environmental Pollution in Iraq”, Basnews, 26 October 2022.

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environment often face violence and attempts to silence them, including through kidnapping, arrest, threats of imprisonment, and arbitrary prosecution. This unfortunate reality has been experienced by environmental advocates such as Jassim Al-Asadi (Nature Iraq),⁷² Raad Habib (Al-Jbayish),⁷³ and Salman Khairallah (Humat Dijlah).⁷⁴ “Rather than taking decisive steps to solve Iraq’s critical environmental issues,

Iraqi authorities are instead attacking the messenger,” says Adam Coogle, deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch.⁷⁵ “Decimating the country’s environmental movement will only worsen Iraq’s capacity to address environmental crises that affect a range of critical rights.”⁷⁶

Activists and individuals engaged in local environmental NGOs in Iraq encounter substantial challenges and risks due to the conflicting interests of the regime, which undermine environmental advocacy. They frequently experience systematic violence such as kidnapping, arrest, threats of imprisonment, and arbitrary prosecution. These actions are intended to silence and marginalize them, impeding their environmental initiatives and advocacy work.

On 11 December 2019, environmental advocate Salman Khairallah was unlawfully detained for several days for his involvement in the peaceful October Uprising against the regime in the heart of Baghdad. After being released under international pressure, Khairallah was subsequently compelled to leave the country due to a series of threats made against him.

Environmental activist Raad Habib voiced objections to the Ministry of Water Resources for disseminating misleading information about flooding the marshes. In response, the ministry retaliated by taking him to court. In October 2020, the Dhi Qar Federal Court of Appeal ordered Habib to stand trial under Article 434 of the Penal Code, which carried a potential sentence of up to one year in prison. In February 2021, Habib was acquitted by the court. Following his initial acquittal, Ministry representatives filed a second case against Habib under Article 229 of the Penal Code, accusing him of insulting a public servant. This offense carries a potential sentence of up to two years in prison. Despite being acquitted again in December 2022, the ministry officials have persisted in their prosecution of him.

On 1 February 2023, Jassim Al-Asadi, a prominent environmental expert, was abducted on a highway south of Baghdad by an armed group with connections to the government. He was held in undisclosed locations for 15 days as a result of his environmental activities that challenged detrimental investments in the Ahwaz environment. Al-Asadi was released following international pressure on the Iraqi government. He endured physical torture during his captivity.

72 On 1 February 2023, Jassim Al-Asadi, a renowned environmental expert, was abducted by an armed group with close ties to the government while traveling on a highway near Baghdad. He was forcibly held in various locations for 15 days due to his environmental activism, which posed a threat to environmentally harmful enterprises. During his captivity, Al-Asadi endured violent physical torture. Following international pressure on the Iraqi government, he was eventually released.

73 During the droughts in 2019 and 2020, environmental activist Raad Habib openly criticized the Ministry of Water Resources for its policies and inadequate response to the worsening situation. He particularly voiced objections to the dissemination of misinformation by the ministry regarding the flooding of the marshes. In retaliation, the ministry took legal action against him. In October 2020, the Dhi Qar Federal Court of Appeal ordered Habib to stand trial under Article 434 of the Penal Code, which carries a maximum sentence of one year in prison. In February 2021, he was acquitted by the court. However, the ministry representatives filed a second lawsuit against him in December 2022, this time under Article 229 of the Iraqi Penal Code, which pertains to insulting a public servant, council, or official body and carries a maximum sentence of two years in prison. Despite his later acquittal, the ministry officials continue to pursue legal action against him.

74 On 11 December 2019, environmental advocate Salman Khairallah was unjustly arrested for his involvement in peaceful protests against the regime in Baghdad. He was held in custody by the authorities for several days before being released due to international pressure.

The oppressive and arbitrary actions taken by the Iraqi regime against environmental advocates have resulted in NGOs operating under fear and vulnerability and facing security restrictions and risks.⁷⁷ This has led to a retreat from their role as leaders in the public sphere, as they strive to maintain legality in the eyes of the government and seek legitimacy in the eyes of international donors, who often favor organizations aligned with the government rather than those perceived as dissenting.

“Dutiful dissent” refers to a form of public action where

75 Human Rights Watch, “Iraq: Environmentalists Face Retaliation”, 23 February 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/02/23/iraq-environmentalists-face-retaliation>.

76 Ibid.

77 “We are restricted in expressing ourselves freely or publishing information and statistics that are not approved by the state. We operate under the scrutiny of government monitoring by the Department of NGOs, which creates a fear of work license suspension, prosecution, or limitations on our ability to secure external funding. The situation is complex, and it’s not solely about our activities on the ground.” Phone interview with the head of an environmental NGO active in northeastern Iraq, who refused to give any information about the nature of his NGO’s work, 3 February 2023.

concerns and dissent are expressed within the existing institutional framework. This type of opposition involves engaging in networking activities and tacitly supporting institutions and social norms to express resistance to dominant practices, such as the production of fossil fuels and consumerism.⁷⁸

Environmental NGOs in Iraq have yet to establish a comprehensive social-environmental contract that governs the relationship between the government, which is responsible for national interests but sometimes contributes to environmental degradation, and civil society, as a representative of the public sphere. The public action of these NGOs is often constrained by the boundaries set by the regime, limiting their potential for broad impact on government actions. As a result, the extent to which environmental advocacy can influence the policies and practices of the state in addressing environmental issues remains uncertain.

Environmental NGOs in Iraq often refrain from engaging in direct opposition activities such as protests, sit-ins, and strikes, opting instead for dutiful dissent to navigate the challenging political landscape. They justify their activities in the face of a harsh and centralized iron grip, thus protecting the latter's interests. Dutiful dissent involves employing softer methods and procedures within the institutional framework, which falls short of addressing the concerns of affected communities. A notable example is the environmental uprising in Basra in the summer of 2018, which had the potential to bring about radical political change.⁷⁹ While human rights organizations and journalists conducted investigations and reported on environmental issues, many environmental NGOs remained detached and avoided engaging in institutional critique, to avoid potential repercussions or costs.⁸⁰

The absence of institutional critique from civil society organizations in Iraq reflects the implicit politicization of environmental action. More importantly, it indicates the erosion of the public sphere as a space for social activism against the regime's violence and impunity. The reluctance to mobilize local communities for resisting the expansion of polluting energy production, such as the burning of large amounts of gas in oil-rich areas like Basra, is particularly concerning.⁸¹ It indicates a selective approach to environmental mobilization and a bias towards the state's narrative, which prioritizes increased production for job

creation while avoiding discussions about the environmental consequences of oil production and national oil wealth. As a result, the focus is diverted from the environmental disasters caused by production fields.

On rare occasions when environmental NGOs oppose the regime, such as in the Makhoul Dam crisis,⁸² they often seek partnerships with international organizations as a protective measure against potential retaliation. During this crisis, the International Organization for Migration expressed its concern about the lack of dialogue between the authorities and local communities in the region and, in collaboration with the Australian Agency for International Development, initiated a dialogue with the local population, partnering with the Liwan Organization for Culture and Development in Salah al-Din.⁸³ In addition, Save the Tigris and Humat Dijlah produced a report highlighting the potential environmental and demographic impacts of the dam project, including its impact on an Assyrian archaeological site listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site.⁸⁴ Consequently, thanks to successful environmental mobilization and warnings, the authorities canceled the project.⁸⁵ In general, however, environmental NGOs in Iraq often operate within the boundaries set by the state and sometimes align with its approach, which can lead to the politicization of environmental issues.

On the other hand, local activists continue to oppose the regime and defend their communities impacted by environmental degradation. They employ more effective tactics to express their concerns, including protests, sit-ins, and actions such as blocking major transportation routes and closing official buildings. These actions can be seen as "a way of asserting civil authority and power in the social field within the local community, reshaping and reorganizing the landscape of social action".⁸⁶

In 2018, angry communities in Basra directed their frustration and anger toward the local and federal government, leading to a significant disruption of executive structures for several days.⁸⁷ They also targeted the Iranian consulate in response

78 O'Brien, K. et al, 2018.

79 Safaa Khalaf, "Basra Uprising Shaking the Pillars of Iraq", *Orient* 21, 10 September 2018, <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/article2622>.

80 Human Rights Watch, "Basra is Thirsty: Iraq's Failure to Manage the Water Crisis", 22 July 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/07/22/basra-thirsty/iraqs-failure-manage-water-crisis>.

81 Joe Sandler Clarke, "Big Oil's Dirty Secret in Iraq" *BBC* 29 September 2022, <https://projects.unearthed.greenpeace.org/big-oil-iraq/>.

82 "Makhoul Dam: 35 Thousand Families and the Capital of the Assyrian State Face Drowning", *Jummar*, 6 November 2022, <https://jummar.media/2349>.

83 "Liwan Studies Local Views on the Makhoul Dam Project", *Independent Press Agency*, 19 July 2022, <https://mustaqila.com/>.

84 "Makhoul Dam and its Environmental, Cultural and Social Impact", *Save the Tigris Campaign and Humat Dijla Association*, June 2022, <https://humatdijlah.org/>.

85 "Water Resources Authority Recommends Cancelling the Makhoul Dam Project", *Baghdad Today*, 13 February 2023, <https://baghdadtoday.news/>.

86 David Scott, *Refashioning Futures Criticism After Postcoloniality*, Princeton University Press, 1999.

87 Safaa Khalaf and Omar al-Jaffal, "Basra is Burning: The Protests in Basra Governorate 2018", *LSE Middle East Center Paper Series* 54, October 2021, http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/112204/1/Basra_is_burning.pdf.

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to Tehran's hostile water policies. One of the unexpected political outcomes of this movement was the ousting of the ruling Islamist Dawa Party, which had maintained its power over three central governments from 2006 to 2018. The Basran environmental uprising set the stage for a new wave of popular protests organized by locals, eventually culminating in the widespread public protests known as the October Uprising in 2019.

The people of Islah district in Dhi Qar Governorate, inspired by the tactics employed in Basra, rose against the local authorities to protest the unprecedented drought and scarcity of drinking water in the region. Their environmental demands were met with unjustified violence and excessive force.⁸⁸ In response, angry demonstrators took control of civil and security services, detained police officers, closed the local administration building, and established checkpoints in the area.⁸⁹ The communal protest in Islah district reflects the urgency and immediacy of the environmental crisis.

88 "Public Anger Over Drought Met with Bullets", Tareeq Ashaab, 15 March 2023, <https://tareeqashaab.com/>.

89 Islah District in Dhi Qar Falls to Angry Demonstrators, Shafaq, 15 March 2023, <https://shafaq.com/ar/>.

Such protests are difficult to contain within institutional frameworks, nor can they be convinced to adopt the softer tactics often pursued by NGOs and dutiful dissidents. The community's movement is a spontaneous mobilization, driven by both the dire environmental conditions and a lack of trust in organized civil society's ability to represent unorganized communities.⁹⁰ Protests and violent actions, however, represent a form of resistance aimed at survival and preventing further damage, as Michel Alexander argues. Alone, they may not be sufficient to achieve lasting change or create an alternative world.⁹¹

90 Here are some examples of spontaneous, unorganized movements of local communities. There are farmers and affected people who, out of despair, committed suicide due to environmental deterioration in the city of Diwaniyah, and others in [Basra](#). In [Karbala](#), protesters stormed the Water Department. In [Maysan](#), there are continuous protests by farmers and tribes over water shortages. Farmers in [Nassiriyya](#) closed the entrances to the city and the main streets. In [Diyala](#), strategic bridges were blocked. Every time, environmental protesters are met with the regime's violence.

91 Michelle Alexander, "We Are Not the Resistance", New York Times, 21 September 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/21/opinion/sunday/resistance-kavanaugh-trump-protest.html>.

About the Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.



contact@arab-reform.net
Paris - Beirut - Tunis