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MOBILIZING FOR THE ENVIRONMENT IN IRAQ

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Cover photo: A view of air pollution in the city of Baghdad, Iraq - October 2024 - Murtadha Al-Sudan / Anadolu Images

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1. Introduction

Climate change increasingly figures in the production of knowledge on Iraq. The contention that Iraq is the fifth most vulnerable country in the world to climate change is repeated in most recent publications by think tanks and international organizations.¹ Global indices that predict responses to climate change also give Iraq a low score in terms of readiness to meet the challenges of climate change,² such as rising temperatures, less rainfall and salinity, rising sea levels,³ and recurring dust storms.⁴ Like much

literature on climate change generally, these studies emphasize the future, painting a bleak picture of what awaits. Yet the effects of climate change are already acutely felt in Iraq's present. In recent years, Iraqis have experienced severe heat waves, prolonged droughts, more frequent and intense sandstorms, and persistent water shortages. In 2022, thousands of people were hospitalized for urgent treatment for respiratory diseases after sandstorms enveloped vast swaths of the western and central regions of the country, grounding flights, and shutting down schools and public offices.⁵ As sociologist Zeinab Shuker puts it, climate change for Iraq "is not an abstract future threat; it is a measurable process that is already dragging down the country."⁶

Despite its direct impact, climate change is not the primary cause of the environmental conditions that most afflict Iraqis today. Decades of war, sanctions, and occupation have left behind a toxic landscape of heavy metal contaminants in soil and water, while also destroying the physical and human infrastructures that could mitigate their harm.⁷ The dominance of oil extraction in the country's political economy zaps critical water resources while producing the polluting mix of benzene, carbon dioxide, methane, and black soot that residents and researchers alike attribute chronic illnesses to.⁸ Vital electricity and

1 Most publications misattribute this ranking to the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), implying it is authoritative and recent. Yet it is from least from 2009 and originates in the Climate Change Vulnerability Index (CCVI) developed by Maplecroft, a British risk analysis consultancy, which assesses 193 countries based on their exposure to climate related natural hazards; the sensitivity of populations in terms of concentration, development, agricultural dependency and conflict. According to the CCVI, five of the top ten countries most exposed to the impacts of climate change are in the Arab world: Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Morocco, and Somalia. Source: Mohamed Abdel Raouf Abdel Hamid, "Climate Change in the Arab World, Threats and Responses," in *Troubled Waters: Climate Change, Hydropolitics, and Transboundary Resources*, eds. David Michel and Amit Pandya, The Henry L. Stimson Center, 2009: 45-46. <https://www.stimson.org/2010/troubled-waters-climate-change-hydropolitics-and-transboundary-resources/> (See page 45 of UNEP's 2016 GEO-6 Global Environment Outlook: Regional Assessment for West Asia to trace the reference: <https://www.unep.org/resources/report/geo-6-global-environment-outlook-regional-assessment-west-asia>)

2 The Notre Dame Global Adaptation Index (ND-Gain) lists Iraq as 154 out of 192 countries most ready to meet the challenges of climate change. Source: University of Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative, 2021. <https://gain.nd.edu/our-work/country-index/rankings/>

3 Iraq and Egypt are the two countries in the Middle East and North Africa most prone to sea level rises, because of their deltaic areas: the Tigris and Euphrates delta and the Nile River delta, respectively. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Climate Change and Vulnerability in the Middle East*, July 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2023/07/climate-change-and-vulnerability-in-the-middle-east?lang=en#iraq>

4 Iraq's Ministry of Environment warned in April 2022 that over the next two decades, Iraqis could endure an average of 272 days of sandstorms a year. Source: Rudaw, "Iraq to Face Tenth Dust Wave in Two Months", 29 May 2022. <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/29052022>

5 Shawn Yuan, "Sandstorms Hit Iraq, Sending Thousands to Hospital", *The Lancet* 399(10340), 28 May 2022. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(22\)00972-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(22)00972-2)

6 Zeinab Shuker, *The Deep Roots of Iraq's Climate Crisis*, The Century Foundation, 11 July 2023. <https://tcf.org/content/report/the-deep-roots-of-iraqs-climate-crisis/>

7 Omar Dewachi, *Ungovernable Life: Mandatory Medicine and Statecraft in Iraq*, Stanford University Press, 2017, Kali Rubaii, "Birth Defects and the Toxic Legacy of War in Iraq", *MERIP* 296, 22 September 2020. <https://merip.org/2020/09/birth-defects-and-the-toxic-legacy-of-war-in-iraq/>; Eric Bonds, "Legitimizing the Environmental Injustices of War: Toxic Exposures and Media Silence in Iraq and Afghanistan", *Environmental Politics* 25(3), 2016: 395-413.

8 United Nations Environment Programme, *Global Environment Outlook GEO-6: Regional Assessment for West Asia*, 2016: 78. <https://www.unep.org/resources/report/geo-6-global-environment-outlook-regional-assessment-west-asia>

water infrastructures have collapsed in many parts of the country, especially in Basra where the sewage system has also broken down and created water-borne diseases. The post-2003 political system has done nothing to reverse infrastructural collapse, which among other effects, is largely to blame for the most pressing challenge: access to clean water.⁹ In only two decades, Iraq has gone from water-abundant to water-stressed.¹⁰

Considering these conditions, scholars of Iraq are increasingly drawing attention to how environmental degradation intersects with infrastructural, political, and social degradation to affect all aspects of life in Iraq. Omar Dewachi refers to the “toxicity of everyday survival” in examining how depleted uranium from the US wars has penetrated the quotidian realities of life in Iraq.¹¹ Zahra Ali argues that analyzing “structural toxicity” – defined as the structural conditions of everyday life and livelihoods such as health and sanitary infrastructures and environmental conditions – is crucial to understanding “the polarization between the elite and the people”.¹² Juliette Duclos-Valois observes that summers that extend over seven months in many parts of the country, with temperatures that exceed 50°C,¹³ are not merely backdrops, but a fundamental aspect of residents’ existence, reorganizing their social life and

politicizing their situation.¹⁴

In the spirit of these contributions, this paper turns to how environmental harm and degradation are animating *political mobilization and contestation* in Iraq. We find that environmental issues are increasingly shaping grassroots and, in some instances, national demands for change and the patterns of confrontation and engagement with Iraq’s decision-makers. The fact that demands for clean water and electricity have triggered multiple waves of mass protest at the national level in the last decade is especially noteworthy. As hundreds of thousands of Iraqis explicitly connect demands for clean water to demands for political and economic change, environmental degradation becomes a visceral symbol of Iraq’s failed social contract.

We also take stock of smaller, localized mobilizations that have voiced the environmental grievances of specific populations, such as agricultural workers, rural communities, Indigenous inhabitants of the marshlands, or the unemployed residents of areas adjacent to oil fields. We find that environmental degradation is having severe repercussions on the livelihoods and health of vulnerable and marginalized communities, but – in the current repressive climate – their grievances are not yet being channeled into political and social movements. Likewise, though environmental issues have been central to protest movements in Iraq, the new political parties that emerged from them have not prioritized environmental issues.

The study also turns to the efforts of civil society actors who self-identify as environmental and climate activists, highlighting some discursive and organizational gaps between the grassroots spaces that have expressed environmental grievances, and the professionalized space of environmental activism populated by networks of individual activists and NGOs.

We also highlight the main ways that Iraq’s decision-makers have responded, situating Iraq’s contemporary environmental landscape as a consequence of the political economy of war, oil production, and patronage. We argue that Iraq’s post-2003 political system not only disincentivizes

9 Karam F. Robeil, Shivan Fazil, Mac Skelton, “Addressing Challenges in Water & Environmental Governance: The Role of Iraqi Youth in Fostering Accountability”, Institute of Regional and International Studies, April 2024. <https://www.auis.edu.krd/iris/publications/addressing-challenges-water-environmental-governance-role-iraqi-youth-fostering>

10 Natasha Hall and Caleb Harper, “Local to Global: Tensions Course through Iraq’s Waterways”, 12 May 2023. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/local-global-tensions-course-through-iraqs-waterways>

11 Omar Dewachi, “The Toxicity of Everyday Survival in Iraq”, *Jadaliyya*, 13 August 2013. <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/29295>; Kali Rubaii, “Birth Defects and the Toxic Legacy of War in Iraq”, *MERIP* 296, 22 September 2020. <https://merip.org/2020/09/birth-defects-and-the-toxic-legacy-of-war-in-iraq/>

12 Zahra Ali, “From Recognition to Redistribution? Protest Movements in Iraq in the Age of ‘New Civil Society’”, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 15(4), 2021: 532.

13 World Bank Group, *Climate Change Knowledge Portal: Iraq*, 2021. <https://climateknowledgeportal.worldbank.org/country/iraq>

14 Juliette Duclos-Valois, “Under the Baghdad Sun”, *Anthropology News* website, 7 February 2024. <https://www.anthropology-news.org/articles/under-the-baghdad-sun/>

Iraq's decision-makers to halt environmental degradation but also incentivizes them to violently repress environmentalist mobilization, as we can see from examples from the oil, water, and knowledge production sectors. Finally, the paper concludes with some reflections that situate Iraq's environmental mobilizations in a global context.

In terms of research methodology, this work includes a thorough desk review of primary and secondary literature on environmental degradation in Iraq as well as Iraqi media reports about specific sites of harm. It also surveys primary accounts and social media accounts of groups involved in three different protest waves in Iraq between 2015 and 2020, as well as the electoral platforms and messaging of the new political parties that emerged from the 2019 popular mobilizations. We also conducted thirty interviews with researchers who work on environmental issues and actors who self-identify as environmental activists. Finally, the work incorporates our observations from informal meetings and discussions with researchers and activists as well as our participation in regional climate justice convenings with Iraqi environmentalists and youth activists.

2. Who Counts as an Environmentalist in Iraq?

When we think of environmentalism and environmental mobilization, the actions and identities that naturally come to mind are the activism and advocacy efforts of civic actors who self-define as environmental activists, climate activists, or human rights activists concerned with the environment. In a previous study published by the Arab Reform Initiative, Safaa Khalaf delves into the history and current landscape of this type of environmental mobilization, mapping the work of Iraqi civic actors who are organized into professional networks and NGOs.¹⁵

15 See Safaa Khalaf, "Environmental Mobilization in Iraq: NGOs, Local Actors and the Challenge of Climate Change", Arab Reform Initiative, 25 May 2023, <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/environmental-mobilization-in-iraq-ngos-and-local-actors-and-the-challenge-of-climate-change/>

Here we make the case for a broader understanding of environmental mobilization. First, we include the actions and concerns of individuals and collectives who do not explicitly identify as environmentalists but who have voiced grievances about policies that impact the environment as a source of their livelihood. As political ecologists and geographers have argued, including this type of environmentalism – what is sometimes referred to as the “environmentalism of the poor” – is critical to recognizing the environmental dimensions of critical social and distributional conflicts and the material context of environmental mobilization.¹⁶ Second, we include the actions and concerns of communities who again may not identify as environmentalists but who voice grievances and demands about the public health consequences of environmental degradation. Such an approach allows us to incorporate the realities we observe across the Middle East and North Africa, where the predominant model of environmentalism focuses predominantly on tackling health-related issues and whereby people mobilize around environmental problems that have a direct impact on their well-being.¹⁷ Moreover, although the environment has not been a priority for the region's governments, when they have turned to it, they have often done so under the rubric of public health. In Iraq, the existence of the Ministry of Health and Environment until 2023 is a testament both to how politicians did not deem the environment a priority to merit its own ministry, but also to their association of the environment with health. Even after the two portfolios were split ministerially in 2023, the relevant parliamentary committee is still called the Environment and Health Committee.¹⁸

A broader understanding of what constitutes environmental mobilization expands our gaze to how environmental grievances have been at the heart of many of Iraq's mass protests over the

16 Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier, *Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South*, Earthscan, 1997; Juan Martinez-Alier, *The Environmentalism of the Poor: A Study of Ecological Conflicts and Valuation*, Northampton, MA, Edward Elgar, 2002; Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2011.

17 Jeannie Sowers, "Environmental Activism in the Middle East and North Africa", in *Environmental Politics in the Middle East*, ed. H. Verhoeven, Oxford University Press/Hurst Publishers, 2018: 27–52.

18 We thank Taif Alkhudary for this observation.

past decade, as well as how they are animating marginalized communities in both urban and rural areas – in addition to what environmentalists in the more conventional understanding of the term have been doing. Table 1 provides a summary of the

different identities, issues, and activities associated with environmental mobilization in Iraq in the past decade, which will be discussed in greater detail in subsequent sections.

Table 1. Varieties of Environmentalism in Iraq

Identities of actors	Main grievances and actions
Participants in mass protest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demand access to clean water. • Demand accountability for public health harms.
Rural residents Farmworkers Pastoralists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demand access to clean water. • Access and sustain land and livelihoods. • Protect arable land.
Urban marginalized groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to water and electricity. • Avoid harm from oil refineries.
Indigenous residents of Iraqi Marshlands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protect the land, culture, and ecology of the territory. • Restrict oil exploration and extraction in the territory. • Avoid harm from oil production.
Workers in oil fields	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate access to pollution inspections. • Whistleblowing on environmental harms.
Professional environmental or climate activists Public intellectuals, scientists, engineers Artists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Launch international advocacy campaigns to save environmentally vulnerable sites (e.g., the Iraqi Marshes).¹⁹ • Raise awareness among the public, policymakers, and local stakeholders about climate change through educational and performative tools. • Create environmental education opportunities for the public (e.g., workshops for children on plastic pollution or biodiversity loss). • Serve as a bridge between international environmental programs and Iraq's policymakers. • Propose solutions to policymakers, often on water issues (e.g., re-naturalization of rivers and constructing small semi-natural ponds instead of new dams and reservoirs). • Monitor and gather data about pollution (air, water, soil), waste, and animal health. • Promote eco-tourism to change attitudes by reconnecting people with nature. • Organize reforestation campaigns and tree planting. • Launch small-scale recycling initiatives and facilities. • Promote a culture of cycling.
Environmental journalists, independent journalists, and non-partisan media organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disseminate environmentalist findings. • Investigate polluting industries like oil. • Publicize the repression and human rights violations of environmentalists and social movements.

19 Save the Tigris, "Letter from Save the Tigris to the UNESCO World Heritage Centre: Concerns and Requests regarding the Ahwar of Iraq". <https://savethetigris.org/letter-of-save-the-tigris-submits-to-the-unesco-world-heritage-centre-concerns-and-requests-regarding-the-ahwar-of-iraq>

3. Protesting the Environment

3.1. The Environment in National-Level Protest

In October 2019, the largest protests in Iraq's history erupted. Hundreds of thousands took to streets and squares across the country, where they persisted for months in the face of ferocious violence by the regime that left around 500 protesters dead and over 20,000 injured in the first six months.²⁰ The protesters ultimately dispersed due to the intensification of violent repression, partial governmental concessions that demobilized some participants,²¹ and the COVID-19 pandemic, which like elsewhere in the region “came not only as a public health threat but also as a counter-revolutionary turn of events”.²²

Most of the analysis of what became known as Thawrat Tishreen (the October Revolution) places it within the political and socioeconomic frame of the Arab uprisings of 2011. This perspective emphasizes that protesters chanted the regional uprisings' familiar demand, “The people want the fall of the regime,” and demanded wholesale reform of the ethnosectarian quota system known as *muhasasa* in place since the 2003 US-led invasion. Yet Thawrat Tishreen can also be seen through another prism. In addition to its more familiar political and socioeconomic dimensions, the uprising can also be seen as an ecological rebellion, as Rijin Sahakian

argues.²³ Young protesters across regions, sects, and ethnicities demanded clean water, organized to clean city streets, and asserted they were creating an alternative Green Zone in Baghdad. In Baghdad's Tahrir Square, protesters “produced a material, discursive and affective space in which they could meet, live together and negotiate an alternative social contract and new codes of conduct, put forward public commons, and experience a different social order”.²⁴ In Basra, demonstrations threatened to halt oil production and disrupt port activity. When a UN official expressed “grave concern” over “threats/closures of roads to oil installations, ports causing billions in losses”,²⁵ protesters responded with a mural depicting an oil rig in a raised middle finger with the words “HERE IS YOUR OIL, WORLD”. As Sahakian states, “the protesters' rallying cry — ‘We Want a Country’ — is, first and foremost, a demand by Iraq's youth for a *sustainable* future”.²⁶

Moreover, 2019 was not the first year that mass national-level protests expressed grievances related in part to environmental conditions. The famous ‘We Want a Country’ that came to characterize the 2019 uprisings first emerged in the summer of 2018 in the southern city of Basra, during what is to date the largest protest in Iraq's history focused explicitly on environmental issues. The demonstrations first spread when two peaceful protesters were killed in July 2018 in front of the oil field near the district of Qurna, 75 km northwest of Basra City, where they had been demanding, among other things: that the government address Basra's high rate of unemployment in the oil and other industries; improved access to desalinated water since Basra's potable water is heavily salinized during the summer; and increased access to electricity particularly during the hot summer months.²⁷ The

20 OHCHR, “Human Rights Violations and Abuses in the Context of Demonstrations in Iraq October 2019 to April 2020,” United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, August 2020: 6. <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/IQ/Demonstrations-Iraq-UNAMI-OHCHR-report.pdf>

21 International Crisis Group, *Iraq's Tishreen Uprising: From Barricades to Ballot Box*, Report No. 223, 26 July 2021. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/223-iraqs-tishreen-uprising-barricades-ballot-box>

22 Rima Majed, *Lebanon and Iraq in 2019: Revolutionary Uprisings Against ‘Sectarian Neoliberalism’*, Transnational Institute, 27 October 2021. <https://www.tni.org/en/article/lebanon-and-iraq-in-2019>

23 Rijin Sahakian, “Extraction Rebellion: A Green Zone of Hope”, *n+1*, 26 November 2019. <https://www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/extraction-rebellion/>

24 Zahra Ali, “Theorising Uprisings: Iraq's Thawra Teshreen”, *Third World Quarterly* 45(10), 2024: 1584. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2022.2161359>

25 Jeanine Hennis, 6 November 2019, <https://x.com/JeanineHennis/status/1192035729687416832>

26 Rijin Sahakian, “Extraction Rebellion: A Green Zone of Hope”, *n+1*, 26 November 2019. <https://www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/extraction-rebellion/>

27 Safaa Khalaf and Omar al-Jaffal, “‘Basra is Burning’: The Protests in Basra Governorate 2018”, LSE Middle East

Basra protests escalated when only a month later, a public health crisis erupted with 118,000 people ending up in the hospital due to water contamination. Protesters linked demands for clean water to wider grievances related to power cuts, unemployment, and corruption.²⁸ They turned their frustration and anger not just toward offices of the local and federal government but also the Iranian consulate,²⁹ in response to Tehran's water policies and their effects on water scarcity and pollution in the critical Shatt al-Arab waterway, the main source of drinking water for the population of Basra Governorate.³⁰ Security forces and armed militias shut down the demonstrations through a widespread campaign of surveillance, arrests, and violence, in which they injured 190 protesters and killed at least 15 who came to be called *shuhada' almiah* or water martyrs.³¹

Summer in Basra is now known as the “season of protests” after recurrent demonstrations in which residents demand clean water, electricity, jobs, and an end to corruption. Intellectuals and professional activists involved in the protests have voiced demands related to the environmental pollution crisis, the salinity of water, and the spread of various types of cancer.³² In the summer of 2015, for the first time, protesters linked demands for basic resources and services to their rejection of the politicization of

communal identity under the post-2003 settlement, foreign interference in domestic politics, corruption, and violence.³³ The protests had first broken out around the issues of electricity provision. When police fatally shot 18-year-old Muntadhar Ali Ghani Al-Hilifi.³⁴

Iraq's 201011- protests also originated in Basra before spreading to other areas. Once again, the provision of water and electricity featured along with accountability for corrupt politicians, job opportunities, and the redistribution of oil revenues among Iraqi citizens.³⁵

3.2. Localized Environmental Protest

Water access has also featured in localized protests and grassroots demonstrations by rural communities – most often, farmers who rely on intensive irrigation. Between 2021 and 2023, several southern Iraqi governorates witnessed large-scale demonstrations of farmers targeted at local offices of the Ministry of Water Resources for imposing water quotas. In the Dhi Qar governorate, in March 2023, residents of the Islah district mobilized against the local authorities

Center Paper Series 54, October 2021. http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/112204/1/Basra_is_burning.pdf

28 Zahra Ali, “Iraqis Demand a Country,” *MERIP* 292/3, Fall/Winter 2019. <https://merip.org/2019/12/iraqis-demand-a-country/>

29 “Protesters Set Fire to Iranian Consulate in Basra,” *Guardian*, 7 September 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/07/protesters-set-fire-to-iranian-consulate-in-basra>.

30 Khayyun Amtair Rahi, “Salinity Management in the Shatt Al-Arab River,” *International Journal of Engineering and Technology* 7(4), 2018: 129. <http://dx.doi.org/10.14419/ijet.v7i4.20.25913>.

31 Azhar Al-Rubaie, Michael Mason, and Zainab Mehdi, “Failing Flows: Water Management in Southern Iraq,” LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series (52), Middle East Centre, LSE, London, UK, 2021: 10. <https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/110973/>; Human Rights Watch, *Iraq: Security Forces Fire on Protesters*, 24 July 2018. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/07/24/iraq-security-forces-fire-protesters>

32 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

33 Rima Majed, “Contemporary Social Movements in Iraq: Mapping the Labor Movement and the 2015 Mobilizations,” Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, October 2020. <https://www.rosalux.de/en/publication/id/43223/contemporary-social-movements-in-iraq>; Taif Alkhudary, “From Muhasasa to Mawatana: Consociationalism and Identity Transformation within the Protest Movement in Federal Iraq, 2011–2019,” *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 30(1), 2024. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13537113.2023.2230712>

34 Rima Majed, “Contemporary Social Movements in Iraq: Mapping the Labor Movement and the 2015 Mobilizations,” Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, October 2020. <https://www.rosalux.de/en/publication/id/43223/contemporary-social-movements-in-iraq>; Taif Alkhudary, “From Muhasasa to Mawatana: Consociationalism and Identity Transformation within the Protest Movement in Federal Iraq, 2011–2019,” *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 30(1), 2024. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13537113.2023.2230712>

35 Taif Alkhudary, “From Muhasasa to Mawatana: Consociationalism and Identity Transformation within the Protest Movement in Federal Iraq, 2011–2019,” *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 30(1), 2024. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13537113.2023.2230712>

to protest the scarcity of drinking water.³⁶ When they were met with force, they took control of civil and security services, detained police officers, closed the local administration building, and established checkpoints in the area.³⁷ In February 2022, also in Dhi Qar, residents of al-Azrej and Khafajah villages closed the northern public entrance in the capital Nasiriyya, demanding solutions to the water scarcity endangering the agricultural season.³⁸ In July 2021, farmers in Karbala stormed the Water Resources Department to protest water cuts affecting their crops.³⁹ Farmer protests over water shortages have also been recurrent in Maysan.⁴⁰

Farmer protests are a response to policies by the ministries of water resources and agriculture that place the onus of water conservation on farmers. These include enforcing strict water quotas or switching to more efficient irrigation techniques, under the threat that “no farmer will be supported who does not use modern irrigation and agricultural techniques”.⁴¹ Such policies pose a heavy economic burden on farmers who are already drowning in debt and need to supplement their income from other activities beyond agriculture. According to a survey conducted in 2021, among the 22 percent of households that currently farm in Basra, Dhi-Qar, and Maysan governorates, only 8 percent report revenue solely from this type of employment.⁴² According

to affected farmers, the primary causes of lower agricultural production are not enough water supply and water salinization issues.⁴³

There is a pervasive sense within the Iraqi agricultural community – farmers, livestock breeders, fish farmers, and rural residents – that they are “unfairly blamed for water losses that are happening across the irrigation network long before water reaches the farm level” and that “the government agencies involved in water governance are mired in corruption and failing to reduce water loss across the broader irrigation/drainage system – both before and after water reaches the farm”.⁴⁴ To appease water protesters in one area, the Ministry of Water Resources sometimes diverts water allocations from other areas – a short-term measure that does nothing to address the problem.⁴⁵

In addition to agricultural workers, another collective disproportionately affected by environmental degradation is the Ahwaris or Marsh Arabs, the Indigenous people of the Marshes, located on the floodplains of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. Once the largest wetlands in the Middle East and Western Eurasia, the Marshes ecosystem and its inhabitants were subjected to large-scale destruction during the Iraq-Iran war and to “one of the world’s worst environmental disasters”⁴⁶ when the Iraqi government systematically drained over 90% of the Marshes in a brutal counterinsurgency campaign of mass killing and forced displacement following the March 1991 uprising.⁴⁷ During the US-Anglo war and

36 توتر أمني في ذي قار: محاولات اغتيال واعتقالات تطال متظاهرين، 18 مارس، 2023. <https://almadapaper.net/285684/>

37 Crisis 24, “Iraq: Clashes between protesters and security forces in Al Islah, Dhi Qar Governorate,” 15 March 2023. <https://crisis24.garda.com/alerts/2023/03/iraq-clashes-between-protesters-and-security-forces-in-al-islah-dhi-qar-governorate-march-15>

38 AlSharqiya, “Demonstration in Dhi Qar Protesting the Water Scarcity,” 21 February 2022. <https://www.alsharqiya.com/en/news/demonstration-in-dhi-qar-protesting-the-water-scarcity>

39 العراق: متظاهرون يقتحمون مبنى دائرة المياه في كربلاء، السبيل، 12 يوليو 2021. <https://assabeel.net/news/2021/7/12/>

40 العراق: تظاهرات لمزارعي ميسان احتجاجاً على أزمة المياه، 3 أكتوبر 2021. <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/economy/>

41 السوداني: لن يتم دعم أي فلاح لا يستخدم تقنيات الري الحديثة <https://www.rudawarabia.net/arabic/business/250120233>

42 International Organization for Migration, *A Climate of Fragility: Household Profiling in the South of Iraq: Basra, Thi-Qar and Missan*, 2022: 18. <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/climate-fragility-household-profiling-south-iraq-basra-thi-qar-and-missan>

[basra-thi-qar-and-missan](https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/climate-fragility-household-profiling-south-iraq-basra-thi-qar-and-missan)

43 International Organization for Migration, *A Climate of Fragility: Household Profiling in the South of Iraq: Basra, Thi-Qar and Missan*, 2022: 20. <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/climate-fragility-household-profiling-south-iraq-basra-thi-qar-and-missan>

44 Mac Skelton, “Competing Over the Tigris: The Politics of Water Governance in Iraq”, Institute of Regional and International Studies, November 2022. <https://auis.edu.krd/iris/frontpage-slider-publications/competing-over-tigris-politics-water-governance-iraq>

45 Hayder Al-Shakeri, “Tackling Barriers to Climate Reform in Iraq”, Chatham House, 1 March 2024. <https://kalam.chathamhouse.org/articles/tackling-barriers-to-climate-reform-in-iraq/>

46 United Nations Environment Programme, *The Mesopotamian Marshlands: Demise of an Ecosystem, Early Warning and Assessment*, 2001. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/465842>

47 Ariel A. Ahram, “Development, Counterinsurgency, and

occupation, restoring the Marshes became one of the justifications for the war, and their destruction was one of the crimes charged to Saddam Hussein.

In the past few years, due to the combination of climate change, upstream damming, water management policies, and oil production, the marshlands have suffered a loss of almost half of their surface water.⁴⁸ Two of the largest oilfields in the world lie in what were formerly wetlands. As the marshes dry up, communities that rely on livestock, mainly water buffalo and goats and dairy products made from their milk, have suffered as the local aquatic ecosystem no longer provides their animals with the food and water they need.⁴⁹ Local activists question water allocation decisions and decry the lack of communication from the authorities.⁵⁰ Oil prospecting is also galvanizing grassroots resistance against new oil fields in the dried or drained areas of the Marshes.⁵¹ Exacerbating the situation, Iraqi authorities, backed by paramilitary groups, are driving water management in the area towards the goal of avoiding the land proposed for oil development be submerged during the flood season. Which parts of the marshes get drained, which parts get less water shares, and why outlets needed to allow polluted water are not being constructed – all are driven by oil production considerations.⁵²

the Destruction of the Iraqi Marshes,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 47, 2015.

48 Save the Tigris, “Environmental Activists of Hawizeh Marshes Decry Poor Management of Iraq’s Wetlands”. <https://savethetigris.org/environmental-activists-of-hawizeh-marshes-decry-poor-management-of-iraqs-wetlands/>

49 Roger Guiu, “When Canals Run Dry: Displacement Triggered by Water Stress in the South of Iraq”, *Social Inquiry*, February 2020:14. <https://www.internal-displacement.org/publications/when-canals-run-dry-displacement-triggered-by-water-stress-in-the-south-of-iraq/>

50 Save the Tigris, “Environmental Activists of Hawizeh Marshes Decry Poor Management of Iraq’s Wetlands”. <https://savethetigris.org/environmental-activists-of-hawizeh-marshes-decry-poor-management-of-iraqs-wetlands/>

51 Ansar Jasim, “Iraq’s Environmental Struggle against Foreign Rapacity and Local Greed”, Heinrich Boll Stiftung, 26 April 2024. <https://lb.boell.org/en/2024/04/26/iraqs-environmental-struggle-against-foreign-rapacity-and-local-greed>

52 Stephen Lonergan, “Don’t Be Afraid for the Marshes,”

Ahwari activists have faced arrests and violent coercion. In February 2023, Jassim Al-Asadi, a prominent environmentalist and founder of the local nongovernmental organization Nature Iraq which focuses on raising awareness of the threats facing the southern wetlands, was abducted by an armed group with close ties to the government, while traveling on a highway near Baghdad and forcibly held in various locations for 15 days during which he endured violent physical torture.⁵³

The Ahwari cause has become part of the annual Ashura rituals of mourning, when millions of Shi’a gather in the southern city of Karbala’ to commemorate the martyrdom of the Prophet Muhammad’s grandson Hussein and mark the themes of political injustice, oppression, resistance, and solidarity. In the summer of 2023, environmental activists carried skeletons of water buffalos to protest the loss due to the drought of these integral animals to the economy and ecosystem of marshland Arabs as well as the human rights violations in these areas.⁵⁴

4. Organizing for the Environment

As the discussion of protest over the past decade shows, environmental issues have become core to the forms of claim-making expressed by popular mobilization in Iraq. If we turn to the question of organizational frameworks and movement-building that emerged from the different protest movements, environmental issues have not figured as prominently.

AlJazeera, 4 May 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/longform/2024/5/4/dont-be-afraid-for-the-marshes-the-battle-to-save-iraqs-waterways>

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

54 Zeinab Shuker, “Ashura Rituals in Iraq Highlight Environmental Crisis”, *New Lines Magazine*, 15 August 2023. <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/ashura-rituals-in-iraq-highlight-environmental-crisis/>; Samya Kullab, “Salt, Drought Decimate Buffaloes in Iraq’s Southern Marshes”, *Independent*, 23 November 2022. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/iraq-ap-turkey-saddam-hussein-ankara-b2231105.html>

Individual environmental activists did take part in the protest movements of 2015, 2016, and 2019. Yet we cannot speak of an environmentalist group when we describe the composition of the protest movements, in the same way that we can speak of leftist and communist parties, women and feminist organizations, labor unions, student and youth groups, or the Sadrists.⁵⁵

Environmental issues were also not central features of the new political formations that emerged from the protests of 2019. The Tishreen Movement, as it came to be known, birthed several new political parties ahead of the 2021 elections. Of the most prominent new parties, four ended up boycotting the 2021 election: Al-Bayt al-Watani (National Home), al-Bayt al-Iraqi (Iraqi Home), the Grouping of Opposition Forces, and the 25 October Movement. Three parties fielded candidates across several governorates: Imtidad, Nazil Akith Haqi (Coming to Take My Rights), the National Awareness Movement, the Fao Zakho Grouping, and the National October Grouping.⁵⁶ Only two of these new parties found their way into parliament: Imtidad with 16 seats and the Fao Zakho Grouping with one seat.

None of the new parties of the Tishreen Movement have identified explicitly as environmentalists or featured explicit climate change goals. Instead, their engagement with the environment has taken three forms. First, the Imtidad Movement's electoral platform, released in March 2021, included bullet points on "agriculture and irrigation" as number 18 of 19 action areas. The focus of reform in this area was heavily on "modernizing" irrigation techniques to improve agricultural yields and reduce water waste; contracting international companies to help modernize agriculture; investing in very large agricultural projects; raising tariffs on agricultural imports to ensure food sovereignty; restricting the hunting of certain species; and "improving the

environment of the Marshes".⁵⁷ Second, two of the parties – Imtidad and Nazil Akith Haqi – signed on to the "Water is Our Right" campaign launched by Basra activists in August 2021 to urge the federal government to find solutions to the deteriorating water quality and rising salinity.⁵⁸ Finally, Imtidad also voiced its opposition to Turkish water policy and their effects on Iraq, using language and framing consistent with that of the government.⁵⁹

Seen in this light, the discourse, affect, and conduct of the Tishreen uprisings that inspired one observer to refer to them as "the vanguard of global climate change activism",⁶⁰ have not yet translated into the political organizations that emerged out of them. We can point to many factors to explain the weakness in movement-building in the current moment. For one, we have seen internal divisions and crises within the new parties. Imtidad has been unable to form meaningful opposition alliances and has hemorrhaged members due to internal leadership disputes, arguments over the party's principles, and resignations over accusations of corruption.⁶¹ Yet more important is the broader political context since 2021, which has seen a massive crackdown on civic space and any dissent, in a context that was already dangerous for members of opposition political parties or groupings. The threats and dangers from state-affiliated militias and paramilitary groups help explain why activists dissociate themselves from party politics in Iraq; they see party politics not simply as corrupt and unappealing but also as dangerous.⁶²

57 حركة امتداد، ميثاق العمل الجزء 18: الزراعة والري،

<https://www.facebook.com/emtidadiraq/photos/pb.100068845135493-2207520000/118263520252437/?type=3>

58 حملة شعبية وتحذير من العطش.. ما هي أسباب تلكؤ مشاريع المياه في البصرة؟ 25 أغسطس 2021. <https://ultrairaq.ultrasawt.com/>

59 حركة امتداد: <https://www.facebook.com/emtidadiraq/posts/>.

60 Rijn Sahakian, "Extraction Rebellion: A Green Zone of Hope", n+1, 26 November 2019. <https://www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/extraction-rebellion/>

61 Marsin Alshamary, "The New Iraqi Opposition", The Clingendael Institute CRU Report, August 2023, 13-14. <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/202308/The%20New%20Iraqi%20Opposition.pdf>

62 Rima Majed, "Contemporary Social Movements in Iraq: Mapping the Labor Movement and the 2015 Mobilizations", Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, October 2020: 43-44. <https://www.rosalux.de/en/publication/id/43223/contemporary-social-movements-in-iraq>

55 For a discussion of progressive social movements in Iraq, see Rima Majed, "Contemporary Social Movements in Iraq: Mapping the Labor Movement and the 2015 Mobilizations", Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, October 2020. <https://www.rosalux.de/en/publication/id/43223/contemporary-social-movements-in-iraq>

56 Marsin Alshamary, "The New Iraqi Opposition", The Clingendael Institute CRU Report, August 2023. <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/202308/The%20New%20Iraqi%20Opposition.pdf>

The discontent among rural communities that has engendered grassroots demonstrations against the government's water distribution policy has not been channeled into strong rural movements or strong unions of agricultural workers. No movement has emerged to voice the common vantage point of farmers: that "the Iraqi government is wrong to continually emphasize water loss due to on-farm irrigation practices while failing to maintain the broader irrigation/drainage network for which the state is responsible".⁶³ It is interesting in this context to return to Imtidad's vision for agricultural and irrigation reform in Iraq and note that it too puts the onus on farmers needing to modernize their techniques and excludes mention of state-led infrastructural maintenance and improvement.⁶⁴

Instead – in addition to the localized, disconnected protest events directed at ministries that we discussed above – the pattern is one of resource competition between farmers, armed conflict between rural communities over water quotas, abandoning of agricultural activities, and displacement to other areas. By putting the onus of water policy on rural communities – requiring farmers, livestock breeders, fishers, and rural residents to implement agricultural and irrigation techniques as well as efficient water technology to promote climate-resilient production – and threatening to withhold support if they do not comply, the government's policies lead to intra-rural competition and tensions. Farmers of small plots believe that politically connected agricultural conglomerates are hoarding subsidized agricultural equipment and government investments in water infrastructure. Many are abandoning agriculture altogether. In the southern districts, almost one of every two farmers who report experiencing an impact related to the environment has abandoned agriculture within the last five to eight years.⁶⁵

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63 Mac Skelton, "Competing Over the Tigris: The Politics of Water Governance in Iraq", Institute of Regional and International Studies, November 2022. <https://auis.edu.krd/iris/frontpage-slider-publications/competing-over-tigris-politics-water-governance-iraq>

64 حركة امتداد، ميثاق العمل الجزء 18: الزراعة والري، <https://www.facebook.com/emtidadiraq/photos/>

65 Social Inquiry, "Farmer, Where Art Thou? Exploring Agricultural Trends in Iraq Amidst Economic and Environmental Crises", March 2023. <https://www.social-inquiry.org/reports-1/2023/3/7/farmer-where-art-thou> See also, Alex Simon, "A Flood of Concrete: Iraq's Construction Boom Threatens Its Food", Synaps, 22

The Mid-Euphrates and southern regions are experiencing armed conflicts between local governments and clans over water quotas, with dozens of incidents recorded daily.⁶⁶

5. Professionalizing the Environment

Since 2004, Iraq has also witnessed the advocacy efforts of a small network of civic actors who self-define as environmental activists, climate activists, or human rights activists concerned with the environment, working mostly within the structure of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In a companion paper, Safaa Khalaf details the parameters and challenges of this professionalized type of activism in Iraq.⁶⁷ Here we limit ourselves to distilling four major trends we observe in professional environmentalism in Iraq.

First, compared to other issues that civic actors formally coalesce around, environmentalism is still a minority concern. Registered NGOs and other organizations working on the environment are only 2 percent of all registered organizations.⁶⁸

Second, NGOs are heavily dependent on international funding, which creates dynamics that hinder effective environmentalist action. One problematic

July 2024. <https://www.synaps.network/en/post/Iraq-concrete-urbanization-agriculture>

66 Safaa Khalaf, "Climate Change and Water Scarcity Are Turning Iraq into a Land of Turmoil", The Century Foundation, 30 August 2023. <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/climate-change-and-water-scarcity-are-turning-iraq-into-a-land-of-turmoil/>; <https://almadapaper.net/208057/>; <https://www.aljazeera.net/politics/2022/11/9/>; <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2018/02/water-security-iraq-tribal-conflicts>.

67 Safaa Khalaf, "Environmental Mobilization in Iraq: NGOs, Local Actors and the Challenge of Climate Change", Arab Reform Initiative, 25 May 2023. <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/environmental-mobilization-in-iraq-ngos-and-local-actors-and-the-challenge-of-climate-change/>

68 Safaa Khalaf, "Environmental Mobilization in Iraq: NGOs, Local Actors and the Challenge of Climate Change", Arab Reform Initiative, 25 May 2023. <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/environmental-mobilization-in-iraq-ngos-and-local-actors-and-the-challenge-of-climate-change/>

consequence of this trend is that programs and priorities are accountable to donors rather than locals and therefore may focus on those efforts that are not necessarily the most responsive to local needs but that can produce quantifiable results in the short term.⁶⁹ In a more pernicious dynamic, one environmentalist intervention led by international development agencies – the reflooding and conservation of Iraq’s southern marshes – also served as an opportunity for oil companies seeking to prospect for oil.⁷⁰ The linking of environmentalist agendas in the marshes with oil prospecting is particularly perverse given the direct harms of oil production and refining on the area. The north Rumaila oil field alone has, since the 1950s, caused 800 km² loss of the Marshlands.⁷¹ Moreover, according to activists employed at different NGOs, competition for foreign funding creates incentives for individual branding and visibility rather than collaboration across organizations.⁷² Initiatives to create federations of environmental NGOs or umbrella organizations for members to operate under common institutional frameworks towards specific action plans have not been successful. Nevertheless, we do see the emergence of networks for knowledge exchange such as the Basra Forum for Climate, Environment and Security in which seven organizations participate in open and closed roundtable discussions, workshops, and publications on the topic of climate security.⁷³ Another example

of multi-institutional knowledge collaborations is a fact-finding report on the water pollution and poisoning in Basra in 2018.⁷⁴

A third characteristic of professional environmentalism in Iraq is that it rarely uses protests, strikes, or other forms of contentious or disruptive action to raise environmental concerns or to pressure the government to act. Instead, actions take the form of small-scale local projects, campaigns, and activities focused on research or raising awareness among communities and officials alike (which as activities that are easily run, managed, and reported, are therefore particularly amenable to the incentives and funding structures of NGOs).⁷⁵ A notable consequence is that environmental NGOs in Iraq are not visible or active in the episodes of popular protest over environmental conditions, with these different spaces of mobilizations remaining disconnected. During the water crisis in Basra in the summer of 2018, environmental NGOs were conspicuously absent from the spaces of popular mobilizations and refrained from making institutional critiques about the causes of and solutions to the crisis.

Finally, though there is a willingness on the part of professional activists to engage more with state representatives as a way to strengthen environmental governance – and though officials make themselves available for meetings and engagements with activists – activists routinely evaluate the actual policy-making outcomes as unsatisfactory.⁷⁶ The inability of activists to effect policy change is a matter of debate in Iraq. One recent response by academics

69 Safaa Khalaf, “Environmental Mobilization in Iraq: NGOs, Local Actors and the Challenge of Climate Change”, Arab Reform Initiative, 25 May 2023. <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/environmental-mobilization-in-iraq-ngos-and-local-actors-and-the-challenge-of-climate-change/>; Dobrośława Wiktor-Mach, Marcin Skupiński, and Kaziwa Salih, “‘We want to have a positive impact’: Fragile ecologies and the Iraqi Kurds’ dutiful environmentalism”, *Journal of Political Ecology* 30(1), 2023: 202. <https://doi.org/10.2458/jpe.5377>

70 Bridget L. Guarasci, “The National Park: Reviving Eden in Iraq’s Marshes”, *The Arab Studies Journal* 23(1), 2015.

71 Conflict and Environment Observatory, *The Past, Present and Future of the Mesopotamian Marshes*, September 2021. <https://ceobs.org/the-past-present-and-future-of-the-mesopotamian-marshes/#4>

72 Safaa Khalaf, “Environmental Mobilization in Iraq: NGOs, Local Actors and the Challenge of Climate Change”, Arab Reform Initiative, 25 May 2023. <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/environmental-mobilization-in-iraq-ngos-and-local-actors-and-the-challenge-of-climate-change/>.

73 Planetary Security Initiative, *Basra Forum for*

Climate, Environment and Security. <https://www.planetarysecurityinitiative.org/basra-forum-climate-environment-and-security>

74 معهد نيسان للوعي الديمقراطي، تقرير عن الوضع الانساني في البصرة، 23-19 ايلول 2018. <https://www.nissan-ngo.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/.pdf>

75 Dobrośława Wiktor-Mach, Marcin Skupiński, and Kaziwa Salih, “‘We want to have a positive impact’: Fragile ecologies and the Iraqi Kurds’ dutiful environmentalism”, *Journal of Political Ecology* 30(1), 2023: 202. <https://doi.org/10.2458/jpe.5377>

76 This theme emerges across interviews and resonates with Wiktor-Mach et al.’s findings from the Kurdistan Region. Dobrośława Wiktor-Mach, Marcin Skupiński, and Kaziwa Salih, “‘We want to have a positive impact’: Fragile ecologies and the Iraqi Kurds’ dutiful environmentalism”, *Journal of Political Ecology* 30(1), 2023: 202. <https://doi.org/10.2458/jpe.5377>

and civic actors assumes that progress could be made if activists themselves better understood the intricacies of policymaking. The Institute of Regional and International Studies at the American University of Iraq Sulaimani has organized workshops between youth activists and high-level government officials to try to “close the knowledge gap on interagency government dynamics (i.e., the roles and responsibilities of different water and environmental government agencies)” on the assumption that it can empower young activists to engage stakeholders effectively.⁷⁷ In July 2024, IRIS and PAX launched a citizen science project for environmental monitoring to “strengthen collaboration between the government and communities in environmental monitoring and create the necessary buy-in from the relevant stakeholders for community involvement in environmental action in Iraq”.⁷⁸ Since these projects are incipient, it remains to be seen whether engagements of this kind can generate positive change in Iraqi policymaking on the environment.

6. Confronting Power

Thus far we have focused our discussion on identifying, categorizing, and documenting the different types of grassroots environmental mobilization in Iraq, with some mention of how decision-makers have responded. In this section, we turn expressly to the response from above and to the power structure that governs contestation in Iraq.

By explicitly linking their demands for better environmental conditions to aspirations for an entirely different political-economic system, Iraqi protesters reveal a fundamental reality: Environmental degradation is structural and systemic; it is not simply a negative externality but

another symptom of the corruption, patronage networks, foreign interference, and political violence that characterize Iraq’s postwar political system.

Iraq’s current political structure rests on the ability of its various political parties to extract state funds to support different forms of patronage and clientelism, and to maintain their corresponding armed forces. When Iraqi protesters condemn *fasad*, they do not mean corruption in the sense of direct bribes or commissions by public officials. Instead, Iraqi references to “corruption” summon a systemic and structural form of state capture, in which state institutions are stacked with partisan supporters, each party runs rackets to extract resources from the state institutions it controls, and all parties collude in complicity and violence to protect this network of plundering.⁷⁹ In this way, and unlike other contexts, speaking about corruption in Iraq does not sideline discussions of inequality and distribution.⁸⁰ According to some estimates, \$551 billion of public money has been lost to corruption since 2003.⁸¹ As social scientists have shown, the competition over extracting assets to maintain power is not neatly organized along ethnosectarian lines (defying assumptions around post-2003 politics in Iraq), but instead exhibits fierce and volatile intersectarian competition as well, usually at the subnational level.⁸²

Violence against dissent is a core element of this system. As discussed throughout the paper, dissent in Iraq has been met with very high levels of violence,

77 Karam F. Robeil, Shivan Fazil, Mac Skelton, *Addressing Challenges in Water & Environmental Governance: The Role of Iraqi Youth in Fostering Accountability*, Institute of Regional and International Studies, April 2024. <https://auis.edu.krd/iris/publications/addressing-challenges-water-environmental-governance-role-iraqi-youth-fostering>

78 Institute of Regional and International Studies, American University of Iraq Sulaimani, *Strengthening Collective Climate and Environment Action in Iraq*. <https://www.auis.edu.krd/iris/projects/strengthening-collective-climate-and-environment-action-iraq>

79 Zahra Ali, “Theorising Uprisings: Iraq’s Thawra Teshreen”, *Third World Quarterly* 45(10), 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2022.2161359>

80 In Lebanon, for example, neoliberal narratives of corruption abound. See: Fawwaz Traboulsi, *Social Classes and Political Power in Lebanon*, Heinrich-Böll Foundation Middle East Office, 2015. https://lb.boell.org/sites/default/files/fawaz_english_draft.pdf; Karim Merhej and Sintia Issa, “Anti-Corruption: A Neoliberal Strategy to Breathe New Life into Lebanon’s Spoils-Sharing System”, 12 April 2021. <https://thepublicsource.org/anti-corruption-lebanon>

81 Renad Mansour, “The Deadly Greed of Iraq’s Elites”, Chatham House, 29 September 2022. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2022-10/deadly-greed-iraqs-elite>

82 Mac Skelton and Zmkan Ali Saleem, *Iraq’s Political Marketplace at the Subnational Level: The Struggle for Power in Three Provinces*, Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK, June 2020. <https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/105184/>

with the systematic and targeted killings of hundreds of protesters on the street, and with the abduction and torture of prominent environmentalists. Paramilitary groups have been increasingly normalized as part of the political process. Their participation in the general parliamentary elections in May 2018 meant that paramilitary forces and militias are now members of the parliament despite being responsible for the threatening, kidnapping and killing of civil society activists.⁸³ Since 2021, because of the new political coalition that took to power after that year's elections, there has been a massive crackdown and tightening of civic space in Iraq.

We turn now to three sectors – oil, water, and knowledge production – as case studies of how Iraq's political economy structures the boundaries of what is permissible and viable for environmentalism mobilization.

6.1. Environmentalism in an Oil-Dependent State

In the struggle between Iraqi political factions over assets for the distribution of material rewards, oil-based revenue streams are critical. As the world's fourth-largest oil exporter and the second-largest crude oil producer in the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), Iraq is one of the most dependent countries on oil in the world. Over the last decade, oil revenues have accounted for more than 99 percent of exports, 85 percent of the government's revenue, and 42 percent of GDP.⁸⁴ Revenues from oil sales are distributed to party-controlled ministries, security agencies, and provincial governments. Oil production also generates secondary sources of revenue: service contracts, public and private employment, and smuggling, which are also controlled by political parties and their militias.⁸⁵ The biggest corruption scandal in Iraq's history has to do with oil revenues

when billions of dollars from oil sale profits ended up in the private accounts of Iraqi politicians and international corporate actors.⁸⁶

The centrality of oil production creates two main effects for environmental mobilization. First, given the importance of oil to reproducing power in Iraq, the red lines around discussions of its potential environmental harms are harshly guarded. Though responsible for monitoring violations of industrial waste and emissions limits, the Ministry of the Environment lacks the political weight or will to demand sensitive data on air emissions and the use of freshwater from the far more powerful Ministry of Oil.⁸⁷ Until 2023, the Environment did not even have its own ministry and was a sectoral department under the Ministry of Health that lacked its own funding stream. When the Environment Ministry has documented the harmful environmental impact of gas flaring, it has been unable to enforce payment of fines by the Basra Oil Company.⁸⁸ The office of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi prohibited government officials from revealing any information about the relationship of oil production to pollution, according to BBC Arabic.⁸⁹ In November 2021, the government announced the establishment of a higher committee to reduce environmental pollution in Iraq.⁹⁰ This committee held a few meetings and then disbanded amid the political turmoil that swept the country following the early general elections.

Meanwhile, despite the government's pledges to incentivize oil companies to report emissions within transparent and reliable frameworks – such as in the Nationally Determined Contribution on Climate Change (NDC) – or its announcements to launch

83 Zahra Ali and Safaa Khalaf, "Southern Discontent Spurs an Iraqi Protest Movement", *Current History* 117(803), December 2018: 338–343.

84 The World Bank, "The World Bank in Iraq", 1 June 2022. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/iraq/overview>

85 Mac Skelton and Zmkan Ali Saleem, *Iraq's Political Marketplace at the Subnational Level: The Struggle for Power in Three Provinces*, Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK, June 2020. <https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/105184/>

86 Bamo Nouri, *Elite Theory and the 2003 Iraq Occupation by the United States*, Routledge, 2022.

87 Mac Skelton, "Iraq's Climate Change Agenda Must Prioritize Health—for Humans, Animals, and Plants", *The Century Foundation*, 30 August 2023. <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/iraqs-climate-change-agenda-must-prioritize-health-for-humans-animals-and-plants/>

88 Zeinab Shuker, "Water, Oil and Iraq's Climate Future", *Middle East Report Online*, 29 March 2023. <https://merip.org/2023/03/water-oil-and-iraqs-climate-future/>

89 Jess Kelly, Owen Pinnell, and Esme Stallard, "BP in oil field where 'cancer is rife'", *BBC News*, 30 September 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/in-depth-63136485>

90 Iraq News Agency, 3 November 2021. <https://ina.iq/eng/15198-a-supreme-committee-headed-by-al-kadhimi-to-reduce-environmental-pollution.html>

campaigns to measure methane emissions⁹¹ – oil companies have been able to avoid reporting on their full emissions with transparency.⁹² Oil spills are also not reported officially.⁹³ According to Walid al-Hamid, head of southern Iraq's environmental agency, many of the fines for environmental damage have never been paid.⁹⁴

Local officials who have pursued information have themselves faced reprisals. The head of Basra's Environment Directorate Radhi Muhammad Radhi was arrested on corruption charges in May 2024, only one month after his appointment and mere days after he filed a lawsuit against the oil companies operating the Majnoon oil field on the border with Iran. Prior to his arrest, Radhi had been trying to organize visits to oil production sites but security companies and other groups working for the oil companies had prevented the entry of environmental inspection teams.⁹⁵ To demonstrate the sensitivities surrounding oil production, the case Basra's environment director can be contrasted to that of another local official: the mayor of the district of Baquba in the province of Diyala, who has been active in demanding that cell phone towers – to which residents attribute a rise in cancer cases – be removed from residential areas. His efforts to document cancer rates in his district and his demand that the government conduct a comprehensive and objective evaluation of all telecommunications towers in Diyala, prompted the telecommunication company to file lawsuits against him in July 2023 on charges of defamation and incitement.⁹⁶ Two months later, however, the

company removed one of the cell towers,⁹⁷ and a month after that, the government announced it was implementing a program to examine the frequencies of telecommunications towers in 18 administrative units, to be run by a joint committee from environment and communications ministries.⁹⁸

Trying to document the potential links between pollution from oil production and associated gas burning and public health consequences, especially cancer rates, is especially sensitive and an active battlefield in Iraq. According to an Iraqi Parliament report, the Iraqi Cancer Council affiliated with the Ministry of Health confirms that the prevalence of cancer in Iraq has increased significantly between 2003 and 2020.⁹⁹ Basra, the hub of fossil fuel production, has a rising yearly infection incidence of 7.38 percent per 100,000 people. Furthermore, the city had the country's highest infection incidence among children under the age of 15, at 14.93 per 100,000. The Office of the High Commission for Human Rights in Basra revealed in October 2023 that 9,000 people acquire cancer per year, with 60 percent of them residing near the city's oil fields.¹⁰⁰ Researchers insist, however, that much more research is needed to substantiate the causal link between specific toxins and specific types of cancer in different parts of Iraq.¹⁰¹

Since the 2019 uprisings, researchers and activists say it has become more difficult to access data gathered by governmental bodies or obtain authorization to access polluted sites or governmental institutions. Because they cannot access data from the government or do not trust it, civic actors and investigative journalists undertake

91 العراق يباشر بالتقييم البيئي لانبعاثات غازات الميثان، شفق نيوز، 29 أكتوبر 2023. <https://goo.su/rnwE>

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

93 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>

94 Sara Manisera and Daniela Sala in Al Khor, "Iraq's oil boom blamed for worsening water crisis in drought-hit south," *The Guardian*, 3 June 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/jun/03/iraqs-oil-boom-blamed-for-worsening-water-crisis-in-drought-hit-south>

95 عن "السرطان" ومافيات النفط.. مصدر لـ BSR365: قبل اعتقاله بأيام.. مدير بيئة البصرة رفع دعوى ضد شركات مجنون. <https://bsr365tv.com/archives/19745>

96 Baghdad Today News, 15 September 2023. <https://goo.su/eA6n8e>

97 ديالى.. «آسياسيل» ترفع برجها «المسرطن» من «المفرق»، شفق نيوز، 09-09-2023. <https://shafaq.com/ar/>

98 ديالى تطلق خطة «الأبراج الآمنة» في 18 وحدة إدارية، كوردستان TV، 2023/10/07. <https://kurdistantv.net/ar/news/204407>

99 حجم إنتشار السرطان في العراق للمدة ما بين 2003-2020، دائرة البحوث والدراسات النيابية، 2023. <https://iq.parliament.iq/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/pdf>

100 البصرة.. أكثر من 9 آلاف إصابة سنوية بالسرطان بسبب الحقول النفطية، المركز الخبري الوطني، 5 أكتوبر 2023. <https://nnciraq.com/230142/>

101 Mac Skelton, "Iraq's Enduring Challenges: Environmental Damage and Public Health in a Post-Conflict Landscape" [Webinar], Arab Reform Initiative, 16 July 2024. <https://www.arab-reform.net/event/iraqs-enduring-challenges-environmental-damage-and-public-health-in-a-post-conflict-landscape/>

independent investigations – the most famous case being 2022 BBC News Arabic’s documentary “Under Poisoned Skies” which follows Shukri Al-Hassen, an environmental specialist at the University of Basrah, as he measures pollution levels from gas flaring, the first time public data on pollution levels has been recorded in these communities.¹⁰² Environmental scientists, epidemiologists, journalists, and researchers who have spoken out about oil residues have become targets of intimidation and threats by different armed groups.¹⁰³

A second effect of Iraq’s oil dependence on the dynamics of environmental mobilization is how it challenges conventional ideas of who is an environmentalist. In Iraq, oil-related jobs are not necessarily seen as incongruous with environmentalist concerns. Some workers in Iraq’s oil fields are also members of environmental NGOs like Humat Dijlah and will post the environmental harms they witness on social media or share the information with environmental organizations. Often it is also these workers acting in their individual capacity who collaborate with the government bureaucrats tasked with inspections and the ones who let them into the fields.¹⁰⁴ In their fieldwork on environmental activists in the Kurdistan Region, Wiktor-Mach et al. find that oil-related careers are attractive for ambitious youth and professionals, and do not, from their perspective, contradict their concern for the environment.¹⁰⁵ These observations about the role of energy sector workers are consistent with research that shows that engineers working in the energy sector in Basra are sidelined by local rent-seekers and multinational corporations and their expertise is marginalized.¹⁰⁶

102 BBC, “Under Poisoned Skies”, 28 September 2022. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p0d34rtt/under-poisoned-skies>

103 Mac Skelton, “Iraq’s Climate Change Agenda Must Prioritize Health—for Humans, Animals, and Plants”, The Century Foundation, 30 August 2023. <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/iraqs-climate-change-agenda-must-prioritize-health-for-humans-animals-and-plants/>

104 We thank Taif Alkhudary for these observations.

105 Dobrosława Wiktor-Mach, Marcin Skupiński, and Kaziwa Salih, “‘We want to have a positive impact’: Fragile ecologies and the Iraqi Kurds’ dutiful environmentalism”, *Journal of Political Ecology* 30(1), 2023: 202. <https://doi.org/10.2458/jpe.5377>

106 Hind Abdulraheem Akooly, *A Graveyard for Expertise: Post-Invasion Iraq and the Death of Techno-Politics*, thesis, American University of Beirut, July 2020. <https://>

Additionally, environmental grievances have surfaced in the regular protests of unemployed people demanding jobs in the oil sector, which although the biggest contributor to Iraq’s GDP, employs only around 1 percent of the labor force.¹⁰⁷ When protesters routinely gather outside the major oil fields in Basra to demand jobs in the sector, they do so, as Taif AlKhudary observes, on the basis that they, as residents of the area are vulnerable to the pollution and public health hazards of the industry and therefore especially deserving of, or entitled to, being employed.¹⁰⁸ During these events that are primarily about jobs – 25 percent of Iraqis live below the poverty line and almost 20 percent are unemployed (almost 40 percent of the youth)¹⁰⁹ – protesters also demand access to clean water or improvements in infrastructures that affect environmental wellbeing and public health.¹¹⁰

Protesters demanding jobs in oil or better conditions as oil workers will sometimes stall and disrupt projects. As we discussed in the section on protest, the mass demonstrations of 2018 and 2019 also sought to disrupt oil production. Yet the aims of such disruptions – protesting the terms of oil rent distribution and interrupting business as usual – are naturally different from the resistance to extractive projects we see in many parts of the world, wherein communities try to stall and disrupt projects in order to keep as much oil, coal, and natural gas as possible in the ground – what Naomi Klein refers

scholarworks.aub.edu.lb/bitstream/handle/10938/21930/The%20Death%20of%20Techno-politics_AkoolyH_2020.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

107 International Labour Organization, “Factsheet: The ILO in Iraq”, 20 January 2016. <https://www.ilo.org/publications/ilo-iraq>

108 Taif Alkhudary, “Iraq’s Enduring Challenges: Environmental Damage and Public Health in a Post-Conflict Landscape” [Webinar], Arab Reform Initiative, 16 July 2024. <https://www.arab-reform.net/event/iraqs-enduring-challenges-environmental-damage-and-public-health-in-a-post-conflict-landscape/>

109 International Labour Organization, *Iraq Labor Force Survey 2021*, 5 July 2022. <https://www.ilo.org/publications/iraq-labor-force-survey-2021>

110 Aref Mohammed, “Iraqis Protest at Oilfields to Call for Jobs and Basic Services”, *Reuters*, 12 July 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/iraqis-protest-at-oilfields-to-call-for-jobs-and-basic-services-idUSKBN1K21NS/>

to as “blockadia”.¹¹¹ In the case of Iraq, grassroots resistance against oil prospecting has been very limited to date and concentrated in the Marshes areas as discussed in Section 4.

6.2. The Infrastructural Roots of the Water Crisis

Iraq’s water crisis – one of the most discussed policy issues in Iraq – provides another lens through which to see how the core components of the political system are both responsible for environmental degradation and the main hurdle to possible solutions. The quantity and quality of water resources in these governorates are highly vulnerable to climate-triggered effects – rising temperatures and decreasing rainfall – and the water policies of Iran, Syria, and Turkey such as building dams to preserve their own water supply.¹¹²

However, the choice by Iraq’s decision-makers not to maintain and extend severely degraded water and wastewater physical infrastructures – including treatment plants, freshwater canals, and piping networks – plays an outsized role in the water crisis. In Basra, for example, up to 40 percent of water is lost in leakages and illegal tapping before it reaches water plants, and experts argue that upgrading the Bada’a canal would be the single most important change to improve water supply.¹¹³ Underlying the protest of agricultural workers in Iraq’s agricultural areas of the south, discussed earlier, are critical water infrastructures that lie in a state of disrepair.¹¹⁴ In its negotiations with workers in the agricultural sector, the government has focused on banning specific crops, threatening to cut off water quotas, and imposing water-saving irrigation methods without

providing the needed financial support to farmers.¹¹⁵

Moreover, the fact that different ministries and agencies are under the influence of different political parties hinders the information sharing and collaboration necessary for effective water governance, sometimes with immediate, dire public health consequences.¹¹⁶ During the 2018 water and health crisis in Basra, for example, “the provincial water department’s laboratories generated faulty readings and failed to communicate warning signs with health authorities, who in turn failed to work with the local government to alert and advise the populace on ways to avoid contaminated water.”¹¹⁷

Like in the case of oil, though to a lesser extent, access to information is difficult. The Right of Access to Information bill presented to the parliament in February 2024 carves out exceptions that work against accountability for water governance. Because it specifically prohibits citizens from obtaining any information that “affects the negotiations with other countries”, it can encompass water given the transboundary negotiations with neighboring countries.¹¹⁸

115 هجرة من القرى صوب المدن جراء نقص المياه وتقليص مساحات الزراعة، روداوو عربية، 25 أكتوبر 2023. <https://goo.su/feaXol>

116 Mac Skelton, “Iraq’s Climate Change Agenda Must Prioritize Health—for Humans, Animals, and Plants”, The Century Foundation, 30 August 2023. <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/iraqs-climate-change-agenda-must-prioritize-health-for-humans-animals-and-plants/>

117 Mac Skelton, “Iraq’s Climate Change Agenda Must Prioritize Health—for Humans, Animals, and Plants”, The Century Foundation, 30 August 2023. <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/iraqs-climate-change-agenda-must-prioritize-health-for-humans-animals-and-plants/>

118 Karam F. Robeil, Shivan Fazil, Mac Skelton, “Addressing Challenges in Water & Environmental Governance: The Role of Iraqi Youth in Fostering Accountability”, Institute of Regional and International Studies, April 2024: 13. See also, “Iraq: Withdraw Problematic Draft Right to Information Act,” Article 19, 23 July 2023. <https://www.article19.org/resources/iraq-withdraw-problematic-draft-right-to-information-act/>

111 Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, Knopf, 2014.

112 Zeinab Shuker, “Water, Oil and Iraq’s Climate Future”, *Middle East Report Online*, 29 March 2023. <https://merip.org/2023/03/water-oil-and-iraqs-climate-future/>

113 Azhar Al-Rubaie, Michael Mason, and Mehdi, Zainab, *Failing Flows: Water Management in Southern Iraq*. LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series (52), Middle East Centre, LSE, London, UK, 2021. <https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/110973/>

114 Mac Skelton, “Competing Over the Tigris: The Politics of Water Governance in Iraq”, *Institute of Regional and International Studies*, November 2022. <https://auis.edu.krd/iris/frontpage-slider-publications/competing-over-tigris-politics-water-governance-iraq>

6.3. The Battle for Knowledge

Production

As the discussion about oil and water so far has illustrated, a core component of the Iraqi state's response to environmental pressures has been to control information and knowledge. When asked about the challenges confronting environmental action, researchers and activists in Iraq routinely mention the need for basic information gathering, monitoring, and knowledge exchange on current environmental conditions—as a baseline and necessary first step to holding polluters and the government accountable.¹¹⁹ Knowledge production in Iraq faces structural, political, and infrastructural challenges that are a product of decades of war and the sanctions system, which dismantled educational and scientific institutions (along with all major public health and utility infrastructures) and led to the exodus of the country's most educated and skilled population.¹²⁰

We interviewed 20 researchers across four Iraqi universities (both in academic departments and in affiliated research centers) about the conditions under which they produce their work. Of the 20 researchers, 17 (85 percent) said they did not feel free to produce knowledge on climate and environmental conditions without interference from administrators or higher decision-making bodies in the university or in the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, or without fearing being subjected to interrogations by security agencies or armed groups. They also said that, should threats arise, they did not feel confident their departments or universities would come to their defense or provide institutional protection or backing on the principle of academic freedom. Some researchers confirmed they were subjected to intimidation and verbal threats from security agencies compelling them to stop collecting and publishing information about pollution levels in

Basra linked to hydrocarbon extraction activities.

More than once, I received phone calls from the National Security Service¹²¹ and the Popular Mobilization Forces¹²² warning me of the consequences of continuing to collect information about oil pollution levels related to crude oil production and gas-burning sites in Basra. They said my research activity is tinged with suspicion of passing information to foreign bodies that are working to undermine the stability of the government or harm the state's investments. So, I was asked to stop engaging in actions that harm national security.¹²³

Other researchers we interviewed pointed to restrictions inside their own universities imposed on them within the administrative chain of command. These restrictions took the form of withholding authorizations to initiate field research projects aimed at measuring levels of pollution, the effects of climate change, the causes of national water scarcity, or the possible links between the proliferation of cell phone towers in residential communities and the emergence of unusual types of cancerous tumors. A doctoral researcher affiliated with the University of Baghdad told us they were reprimanded by their research supervisor and the administrative managers at the university for trying to track levels of non-ionizing radiation from the radiofrequency waves transmitted by cell towers – which are often installed in residential neighborhoods without environmental approvals.¹²⁴ The National Communications and Media Commission of Iraq, the governmental authority responsible for regulating the telecommunications sector, refused to provide the researcher with the results of its measurements

119 For example, “Iraq’s Enduring Challenges: Environmental Damage and Public Health in a Post-Conflict Landscape” [Webinar], Arab Reform Initiative, 16 July 2024; Dobroslawa Wiktor-Mach, Marcin Skupiński, and Kaziwa Salih, “‘We want to have a positive impact’: Fragile ecologies and the Iraqi Kurds’ dutiful environmentalism”, *Journal of Political Ecology* 30(1), 2023: 202, 211. <https://doi.org/10.2458/jpe.5377>

120 See publications and proceedings of the Critical Studies of Iraq program. <https://sasn.rutgers.edu/critical-studies-iraq>

121 The Iraqi National Security Service is the main intelligence service that operates across the country.

122 The Popular Mobilization Forces are a state-sponsored paramilitary network of around 60 armed groups that coalesced to combat the Islamic State in 2014 and estimated to include between 60,000 and 140,000 fighters. Source: Renad Mansour and Faleh A. Jabar, “The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq’s Future”, Carnegie Middle East Center, 28 April 2017. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2017/04/the-popular-mobilization-forces-and-iraqs-future?lang=en¢er=middle-east>

123 Phone interview with a university researcher, 28 October 2023.

124 The issue of cell phone tower placement is very controversial in Iraq, with residents demanding the removal of towers from their neighborhoods, to which they attribute the rise in cancer cases in the province.

of radio frequencies, or of whether they violated national standards, on the basis that this information is “non-shareable”.¹²⁵

Outside universities, activists and communities who have tried to generate their own information on environmental indicators have in recent years risked intimidation, harassment, judicial prosecution, and even kidnapping – also symptoms of the shrinking of civic space after the 2019 uprisings. When Raad Habib Al-Asadi, head of the environmental organization Chabbayish Organization, voiced objections to the Ministry of Water Resources for disseminating misleading information about flooding the marshes, the ministry retaliated by taking him to court in October 2020. Despite his acquittal, ministry officials have continued to pursue legal action against him.¹²⁶ The head of an environmental NGO active in northeastern Iraq said his organization was restricted in “publishing information and statistics that are not approved by the state because of fears that their license would be suspended, that they would be prosecuted, and that this would limit their ability to secure external funding.”¹²⁷ Citizen science efforts by local communities to test pollution levels in their neighborhoods – because they do not trust the official pollution testing carried out – have had their equipment and data stolen.¹²⁸ Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) – one of the only international organizations working on environmental health surveillance – announced in July 2023 the suspension of operations due to “lengthy, complicated, and opaque official procedures”.¹²⁹

As a result of these dynamics, independent knowledge on the environment produced by researchers, activists, and even local officials find itself in an openly antagonistic and high-risk

relationship with decision-making in Iraq. The absence of basic indicators and scientific research on environmental harm and well-being has become a source of collective frustration for citizens with what they perceive as the decline of an Iraqi state that once had high standards of science (from the 1960s to 1980s).¹³⁰ Just like environmental degradation has become an emblem of the dysfunction and capture of the Iraqi state, so has knowledge production about it.

7. Conclusion: Environmental Mobilization in Iraq in the Global Context

Environmental degradation and harm are increasingly animating grassroots mobilization in Iraq, as expressed through generalized protest as well as individual, collective, and institutionalized forms of environmental activism. Although we cannot yet speak of an Iraqi environmental movement akin to the other movements in the progressive space in Iraq – such as the labor or women’s movement – environmental mobilizations have become a core element of contestation over the terms of the country’s political economy. Like in other countries, the field of environmental protection has become an arena for continuous and emerging conflict, competition, and negotiation between the state and civil society.

The fact that grievances related to environmental conditions have triggered waves of national-level protests is especially significant. In only one other country in the region – Lebanon – have environmental grievances transcended the local to become a focal point for mass national-level mobilization against the toxicity of the reigning political-economic system.¹³¹

125 Phone interview, 28 October 2023.

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

127 Phone interview, 3 February 2023.

128 Taif Alkhudary, “Iraq’s Enduring Challenges: Environmental Damage and Public Health in a Post-Conflict Landscape” [Webinar], Arab Reform Initiative, 16 July 2024.

129 Médecins Sans Frontières, “MSF halts key medical activities in Mosul due to administrative obstacles”, 5 July 2023, <https://www.msf.org/iraq-msf-halts-key-medical-activities-mosul-due-administrative-obstacles>

130 Mac Skelton, “The Long Shadow of Iraq’s Cancer epidemic and COVID-19”, *MERIP*, 2 December 2020. <https://merip.org/2020/12/the-long-shadow-of-iraqs-cancer-epidemic-and-covid-19/>

131 See the case study on Lebanon as part of this series. Julia Choucrair Vizoso, “Lebanon’s Environmentalists and the Fight for Nature: Reflecting on Successes

Like in Lebanon, protesters have explicitly connected the environmental crises that affect their quotidian lives to broader socioeconomic crises – and have likewise struggled to turn the revolutionary elements of uprisings into long-term change. Nevertheless, despite the disappointing immediate outcomes, these moments are still politically significant on their own terms given how they shape and transform political imaginaries.¹³²

The dynamics of Iraq's environmental activism can also be put in conversation with other contexts of environmental struggle, where the model of accumulation is based on the extraction and export of natural resources. As discussed, with some exceptions – namely, the grassroots resistance and advocacy around limiting oil production in the Marshes – present battle lines around oil production in Iraq center on socioeconomic distribution and social justice rather than on environmental justice or a post-extractive transition. In Latin American contexts, when progressive governments have come to power, they have had to grapple with the challenges and contradictions of intensifying extraction in the present to enable important forms of socioeconomic inclusion for the masses, simultaneously undermining more radical transformations away from an extractive economy.¹³³ In countries such as Ecuador or El Salvador, scholars argue that local resistance to extractive projects (mining and oil sectors, and in response to large-scale infrastructure and energy projects) is vital in the push for “deeper economic transformation at the national and regional levels, from a model based on extraction to one that prioritizes social and environmental reproduction”.¹³⁴ Seen in this light, the contours of the environmental struggle in Iraq are likely to be critical in any future transformation of its political economy.

Finally, the restricted and dangerous space that Iraqi environmentalists are forced to operate in has parallels with other repressive settings. Unlike the case of Iraq, in some highly repressive contexts, environmental civil society actors have been able to operate with a degree of freedom and capacity not afforded to similar actors in other fields – in part because they have been distinctive in their capacity to build up cross-organizational networks and broad coalitions.¹³⁵ The Arab Reform Initiative will produce a series of country reports and case studies from across the region to examine how civic actors resist elite pressures and navigate the spaces for action in severely asymmetrical power relations. In a forthcoming paper in this series, Taif Alkhudary zooms in on the space available in Iraq, with a focus on spatial, temporal, and issue-based differences as well as coalitional constraints and opportunities.

and Failures of Recent Mobilizations”, Arab Reform Initiative, 4 January 2024. <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/lebanons-environmentalists-and-the-fight-for-nature-reflecting-on-successes-and-failures-of-recent-mobilizations/>

132 Jeffrey G. Karam and Rima Majed, *The Lebanon Uprising of 2019: Voices of the Revolution*, I.B. Tauris, 2023.

133 Thea Riofrancos, *Resource Radicals: From Petro-Nationalism to Post-Extractivism in Ecuador*, Duke University Press, 2020.

134 Thea Riofrancos, “What Comes After Extractivism”, *Dissent*, Winter 2019. <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/what-comes-after-extractivism/>

135 Fengshi Wu and Ellie Martus, “Contested Environmentalism: The Politics of Waste in China and Russia,” *Environmental Politics*, 30(4), 2021: 493-512. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09644016.2020.1816367>

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