



Toxic Chaos: The Conflict Over "Environmental Narratives" Between Affected Local Communities and Authoritarian Structures in Iraq

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Introduction

Iraq is facing an active environmental–historical crisis that, over the past two decades, has turned into an existential challenge and a “social problem” subject to ongoing contention. This contention takes place mostly peacefully, and at times violently, between affected local environments and communities that express their grievances through demands, advocacy, support, and protest on the one hand, and expanding authoritarian policies and measures on the other. These policies are driven toward curbing popular grievances, suppressing and neutralizing demands, with the aim of preventing them from developing into an influential “social movement” that could provoke further popular discontent, potentially threatening the stability and survival of the political system.

The basic approach to understanding the nature of the contention and how it is managed requires a general description of the crisis and its effects on those affected, as they are the main stakeholders who possess the legitimacy to make claims, advocate, and protest (claims-makers). Environmental public policies are supposed to be designed on the basis of their demands for redressing grievances, rather than formulating dominant narratives that disregard the crisis and the scale of suffering and place their legitimate struggle in a zone of contention with the state and governance structures. Authoritarian narratives work to portray the mobilization of those affected as “evil” groups seeking to undermine civil peace and strike at national stability, while an analysis of the facts associated with the various forms of the crisis shows that the state, the government, or authoritarian regime structures often recognize these demands as “security threats.” Such a classification leads them to activate coercive interventions against the affected, instead of dealing with their demands as an expression of the deterioration in the quality of services, life, and living conditions. In other words, this constitutes a conditional recognition grounded in a logic of confinement, aimed at justifying the dynamics of repression rather than serving as a starting point for formulating effective remedies. Authoritarian structures generally respond negatively to problems resulting from environmental imbalance, and may at times resort to proposing

stopgap solutions for the sake of “calming” the situation, but their response is invariably surrounded by containment measures that entail further “strangulation and restriction.”¹

This paper proposes an interactive reading and analytical discussion, within the framework of the sociology of social problems, of the conflict over framing “environmental narratives” between affected local communities and the multiple authoritarian structures in Iraq, whether the central government, local governments, interest groups within the system linked to regional actors, or oil industry companies whose activities contribute to the exacerbation of the environmental crisis. The environmental problem and the contention over narratives and their framing appear as a highly intertwined and complex fabric, given other concurrent factors that give the “conflict” dimensions greater than merely a local “social grievance crisis” that would require spaces for negotiation with the authorities, or that would place the blame solely on the practices of regional actors such as the upstream countries of Iran and Turkey. Accordingly, the paper proposes a normative definition of the problem as an entry point for presenting the facts that indicate authoritarian framing and the local counter-responses to it. The study will do so by highlighting three main manifestations:

- First: Forms of contention between the public sphere and authoritarian structures.
- Second: The exchange of roles of accusation and responsibility, from the general central framework to more localized and marginal spaces.
- Third: An analysis of the local community’s capacities to produce differentiated representations of environmental mobilization in order to confront authoritarian restrictive practices.

Based on this, the narration and analysis of facts constitute the function and the basic tool for understanding the methodological framing of this paper.

An Introduction to Understanding and Describing the Environmental Crisis in Iraq

Thermal Extremes

Iraq’s temperature is expected to rise by about two degrees over the next two decades, compared with the projected increase in the planet’s temperature of 1.5°C over the same reference period, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).² This means that temperature change in Iraq will be seven times faster than the global average, according to the United Nations Sixth Global Environment Outlook (GEO-6).³ At the same time, national climate projections indicate a steady increase in temperature of around 0.9°C since 2007, which could reach 3.5°C by 2100.⁴ As a result, most regions of the country are now exposed to intense, scorching solar radiation for more than eight months of the year, with non-standard temperature increases exceeding the threshold of 60°C in summer in southern regions, driven by severe desertification, gaseous pollutants, greenhouse gas emissions, and methane from the oil industry.

Drought and Desertification

Iraq has been ranked as the fifth country worldwide to suffer the most severe and direct effects of climate change, with an expected decline in annual rainfall of about 9% in 2025 and beyond. This coincides with a fiftyfold increase in soil and water salinity levels,⁵ the effects of which have been gradually intensifying since the middle of the last century. At the same time, the Notre Dame Global Adaptation Index (ND-GAIN, 2023) lists Iraq as one of the most vulnerable and environmentally fragile countries, ranking 120th out of 187,⁶ placing it at the heart of the violent impacts of climate extremes and the absolute scarcity of surface and groundwater resources, in addition to excessive heat that causes the loss of about 14.7% of the country's water reserves due to evaporation. All of this comes alongside drought and desertification, combined with low rainfall and increasingly severe dust storms that now extend to up to 220 days per year, with dust deposition rates estimated at around 80mm/month, while rainfall has become far lower than dustfall. This has reduced the area suitable for agriculture to less than 13.5 million dunams,⁷ in contrast to the expansion of desertified land to about 78.7% of the country's total area.⁸

Water Scarcity

As for the regional flows feeding Iraq's historic rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates, they have steadily declined to less than one-tenth of their levels over the past 100 years, bringing the national environment to the brink of collapse. After recording a flow of 1,350m³/s in 1920, it dropped to less than 150m³/s by 2025, particularly since the upstream countries, Turkey and Iran, began monopolizing hydrological resources after 2003. As a result, Iraq has lost an abundant water income estimated at 93.51 billion m³/year, falling in several years to the red threshold of water poverty at 26.07 billion m³/year, with the lowest emergency water reserves in its history, at less than 10 billion m³.⁹

The rapid decline in water assets has placed Iraq 39th on the Water Stress Index (WSI), at dangerous levels of scarcity of 3.7 points out of a total of five. Scarcity is expected to reach 4.6 by 2040,¹⁰ which would mean complete drought, scorching sun, a toxic environment, and desertification devouring vast areas of the country's land at a rate of about 100,000 dunams/year,¹¹ along with a severe contraction of the rural communities' economy for two-thirds of the population (29.7%), which previously contributed around 20% of the labor market and 3% of gross domestic product (GDP). With the cancellation of agricultural seasons year after year and the reduction of cultivated land to only 1.5 million dunams, productive agricultural communities have become threatened with extinction and migration, the disintegration of their social fabric, and the destruction of their classic economic patterns associated with the structure of traditional communities, or even the newer communities that have emerged along the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates as zones of urban-rural economic activity in the context of population growth (46 million people)¹² and the increase in those entering the labor market. All of this signifies agricultural decline and the breakdown of food chains, as well as a noticeable increase in harmful governmental and human activities carried out under the pretext of mitigating the effects of climate change and environmental degradation resulting from the expansion of the hydrocarbon industry.

A Carbon-Intensive Rentier Economy

Despite declining development indicators, the government has continued to pursue increased carbon-intensive production to finance the country's political economy, targeting a planned rise in output to 8 million barrels/day by 2027. The drive to expand a carbon-intensive economy contradicts and undermines the government's environmental narrative and further aggravates the carbon-emissions crisis amid the decline of the green cover required for natural carbon sequestration. Iraq's plans to expand hydrocarbon production reflect the reluctance of its governmental structures to implement effective supply-side climate policies, in response to concerns that reducing production would lead to a decrease in gross domestic product (GDP).¹³

According to the political system's narrative, the oil-based rentier economy is a vital tool for preventing further internal unrest fueled by a context marked by corruption, political patronage, poverty, and unemployment. It is therefore unsurprising that Iraq is among the strongest opponents of the proposal to "reduce or phase out" fossil fuels put forward in the final agreement of the Conference of the Parties on Climate Change (COP 28).¹⁴ Iraq ranks second or third globally in gas flaring, alongside Russia and Iran, with an estimated 17.7 billion cubic meters of gas flared in 2023,¹⁵ rising to 18 billion cubic meters in 2024,¹⁶ equivalent to approximately 300,000 barrels of oil per day.¹⁷ All of this is accompanied by the highest levels of carbon emissions and serious air-quality problems,¹⁸ making Iraq alone responsible for about 13% of the total volume of gas flared globally.¹⁹ This constitutes mobile gaseous emissions that threaten the national and regional environment, with clear indications of a marked deterioration in public health, particularly in Basra and across the south of the country.²⁰ By contrast, the government narrative prepared for local circulation or for international decision-makers is largely devoid of any acknowledgment of pollutants resulting from oil extraction and wasted gas fuels, while the local public sphere is prohibited from circulating information or discussing the impacts of oil and carbon expansion.

The Conflict Over Framing the "Crisis" Between the Public Sphere and Authoritarian Structures

The various Iraqi government structures involved in addressing the environmental problem have not agreed on a comprehensive definition of it, nor on fully recognizing it. The "environment" has been transformed into political capital used to confer additional legitimacy on the regime or to justify its failures, and has become a field of rent-seeking and political consolidation through the expansion of oil extraction, gas contracts, the drainage of the marshes, or the water agreement with Turkey. Most importantly, it has been instrumentalized as a tool of social control to neutralize affected communities through repression or bargaining. Accordingly, and given the political-authoritarian context that frames the problem, it appears as the product of power relations, rent-seeking, and control over resources, as well as a manifestation of a "social problem" and a "contested narrative" between authoritarian structures and affected communities.

National documents, few as they are, continue to ignore the drivers of local environmental degradation, directly linking it to global climate change. The fragmented official narrative

indicates a deliberate government intent to produce climate knowledge that neutralizes the affected public sphere in discussions of hydrological scarcity or the harmful expansion of the hydrocarbon industry, including the destruction of irreplaceable historical habitats such as marshes and wetlands listed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

In politicized environmental contexts, central authorities tend to mitigate their burden of responsibility by entering into limited, formal partnerships with a small and closely aligned group of civil society organizations, viewing them as “dutiful dissenters”²¹ that do not question the existing system but instead adopt government narratives through a cooperative and compliant posture. In return, cooperating organizations are granted space for discussion, the organization of conferences, and the issuance of reports with monitored foreign funding, so that the Iraqi environmental scene appears pluralistic. However, the cost of such environmental collusion turns civil action into a soft instrument for legitimizing narratives and managing environmental discourse, while colluding with the state and donors to obstruct or delay any genuine change.

The political and bureaucratic structures follow a dynamic biased toward “interest groups” within the system, manifested in the government’s disregard for fully recognizing the crisis.²² Authorities often regard public attempts to articulate and diagnose the crisis as merely “clever rhetorical effects,” particularly with respect to the catastrophic damage caused by the oil industry and carbon pollution, deliberately ignoring or obscuring the “material facts and the weight of suffering.”²³ This permanently and structurally obstructs the establishment of a specific, practical “definition” upon which an environmental action agenda could be based.

Obfuscation and oblivion are not limited to promoting the illusion of abundance and regenerative capacity while expanding a discourse of denial; they also aim to obstruct the production of climate knowledge that is directed or mobilized in favor of affected local communities. The regime’s narrative regarding the environmental crisis revolves around a single idea: “recognizing the climate crisis as a global phenomenon while denying local environmental causes,” which we have previously termed a “misguided environmental doctrine.”²⁴ This definition represents the dark side of government-produced climate knowledge, which functions to mislead both the national sphere and international institutions concerned with climate change. The environmental narrative and policies proposed by Iraqi government structures and presented to the international climate change community are based on empty bureaucratic perceptions that bear no relation to the accelerating “severity of environmental impact,”²⁵ and often fall within Iraq’s commitments to submit plans and programs solely in order to evade international blame for the country’s slow response to environmental deterioration.

It can be stated with certainty that Iraq’s bureaucratic environmental commitments in this regard stem from “international pressure” rather than from national perceptions capable of understanding the environmental plight into which the country is falling. This decline is unfolding at a pace faster than bureaucratic remedies, which are themselves affected by political and security turmoil, causing environmental issues to be pushed aside or brought to a standstill. As a result of international pressure as well, Iraq moved after 2003 to establish

formal but fragile national entities and units in response to plans aimed at facilitating the implementation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. The last time Iraq produced a national strategy for environmental protection was in 2013, in cooperation with UNDP; it was supposed to be implemented by 2017 but was neglected for nearly a decade. The initiative was only revived in 2022 through UN-driven action, with the production of a new five-year strategy (2023–2028), without any clear indication of dedicated government funding for its implementation. As a result, government narratives continue to follow the same internationally driven vision in a top-down manner, without a binding timeframe for implementation,²⁶ alongside the prolonged exclusion of local affected actors—whether at the stage of agenda-setting and narrative construction, or when solutions or mitigation policies prove more harmful than beneficial to local communities.

Within the framework of this analytical deliberation in the sociology of social problems, concerning the conflict over “environmental narratives” between affected local communities and the authoritative levels in Iraq, a normative definition of the problem can be proposed as follows: “A general social problem that generates economic stress and pressure, the destruction of historical habitats, and various manifestations of violence, coinciding with rising levels of overall fragility, the disintegration of stable communities, and persistent competition over available services and opportunities. Its multiple dimensions are manifested through the interaction of national environmental factors such as climate change, water scarcity, the expansion of the oil industry, and the carbon economy, alongside limited government response and the absence of forward-looking thinking and planning tools to manage risks amid the challenges of financing national adaptation plans.”

The problem imposed itself, particularly after 2003, at the moment of the collapse of one regime and the rise of another under foreign occupation, as a daily lived reality and an influential factor that could not be ignored. This occurred amid an intensification of pressure on the local population and its direct impact on their livelihood needs, the economic cycles in which they were engaged, and even the types of emerging diseases they began to suffer from. This, in turn, forced an early shift in patterns of social thinking and in the relationship with the authorities during the formative phase of the new political system.

General social injustice first manifested itself in its initial forms of demands beginning in 2010, through widespread protest criticism in the southern governorates, particularly the city of Basra, against the failure of the governing authorities to secure the minimum electricity supply needed to cope with extreme heat during the summer. These protests were met with violent authoritarian repression, resulting in deaths and injuries.

Thus, this early protest moment, which later became a seasonal tradition, shaped the first features of the Iraqi public sphere’s narrative regarding environmental issues. This narrative continued to grow and take shape gradually as additional actors became involved, until it evolved into a complex, multidimensional crisis, beginning with water scarcity, the increasing intensity and duration of droughts, the rising annual exposure to dust and sandstorms, short, destructive, and unexpected rainfall outside normal seasons, and culminating in the growing negative health impacts of hydrocarbon industrial activity.

Taken together, these factors have shaped public discourse around the concept of the “environmental problem” among local residents, who have clearly and actively engaged in seasonal, regional, and sectoral protests over the past two decades to express their deep sense of injustice and its impact on their diverse ways of life. Consequently, the clearest articulation of claims or grievances has tended to place responsibility for the failure to address the problem on the authoritarian bureaucracy, whether local provincial governments or the federal (central) government responsible for setting public policies and agendas and proposing ways to finance them.

The unorganized general force of demands expressed itself over many years as a broad mass movement (macro-level), most notably in the form of the 2018 Basra environmental uprising,²⁷ which nearly brought down the entire political system. However, it succeeded in removing the Islamic Dawa Party (IDP) from its customary grip on the central government since 2005 and drew strong governmental and international attention to an environmental problem that threatens the lives of millions of marginalized people.²⁸ This general demand force also gave rise to more organized and limited forms of activity adopted by smaller representations (micro-level), whether among producers of knowledge such as journalists and independent researchers (the fact-finding team model),²⁹ individual activists belonging to the affected communities themselves (the Hor al-Huweiza residents’ advocacy model), organized civil society groups, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), or rural, agricultural, tribal, and clan communities that delegated representatives, often clerics (the protests in northern Basra model), or that built regional alliances (the Tigris Defenders organization model). These three levels endowed the general demands with greater “legitimacy” and flexibility in confronting the authoritarian narrative, and opened the way for the emergence of “claims-makers,”³⁰ who adopt public social demands and work to define and name the crisis and its causes, including motivating those affected to engage with the “problem” and advance claims concerning it,³¹ toward building a collective movement of solidarity around the shared cause.³² In rare cases, individual claimants have become “negotiators,” managing the course of the conflict with the authorities.

In contrast, a governmental dynamic emerged based on “contradiction” and “deniability,” through fragmented and selective recognition of the problem. This was achieved by dividing it into unrelated “issues” and fragmenting the overall structure of the crisis into marginal levels in order to weaken and disperse it. Moreover, the “problem framing” is politicized through the production of an authoritarian narrative that labels the national “environmental crisis” as a “contextual crisis,” subsumed within the country’s worsening crises. This can be considered a distortion of public policy, as it proposes solutions that generate more complex problems or trade existing problems for new ones,³³ thereby causing the original public demand to erode and collapse over time.

An example of this can be found in the energy sector, where the Iraqi government claims that it is moving toward cleaner energy without acknowledging the national climate crisis, while its narrative and public policies continue to deny the impact of oil-industry pollutants on the local environment. A second example appears in the framing of water scarcity, where scarcity is linked to the global climate crisis as the primary cause, or responsibility is shifted

onto urban populations and agricultural communities for wasteful and irrational consumption, and at times blame is directed outward toward upstream countries—most often Turkey and more rarely Iran—in an attempt to shift the crisis from the national sphere to the regional level when this serves the political interests of groups within the regime.

Accusation and Responsibility: From the Central Framework to the Immediate Sphere

If protest is interpreted as a living and active embodiment of public demands, an influential collective formulation for expressing grievance and rejection, and as necessarily directed against a decisive actor possessing decision-making and governing power—thereby affirming the attribution of blame, the inability to assume responsibility, or the failure of perceived policies to address the crisis—then the Iraqi public sphere has been active for nearly a decade with regard to the environmental problem. It has managed these demands by naming the responsible party and the affected party, presenting itself as a “victim” in opposition to a set of “villains.”

By tracking the timing, frequency, and patterns of protest and analyzing them, it becomes clear that the main protests have often stemmed from a general sense of escalating injustice, particularly with regard to basic services such as electricity shortages and water scarcity and salinization linked to climate extremes and the policies of upstream countries, namely Turkey and Iran. This was reflected in the Basra protests of 2010 and 2015 and in the environmental uprising of 2018. The 2018 uprising paved the way for and stimulated the outbreak of the nationwide uprising in October 2019, which shifted from demands for services to a broad articulation of the need for political change. Within a sociological understanding of the crisis, the dynamic of assigning responsibility is clearly and centrally directed toward the authoritarian bureaucracy, whether local provincial governments, the federal (central) government, or the executive structures of the state. This occurs alongside an absence of, or reluctance toward, holding the Council of Representatives (CoR) accountable for its chronic failure to enact laws to curb environmental degradation or to take effective practical measures to safeguard water rights against regional policies.

In parallel, the ongoing environmental crisis has led the regime and its authoritarian structures to adopt a problematic approach to controlling environmental rebellions, through the launch of a sharply discriminatory strategy based on trade-offs and bargaining between Iraq’s inability to contain the movements of local communities affected by the severity of environmental change³⁴ and fears that Iraq may turn into a climate-hostile region in which investment will be impossible in the foreseeable future.

In some parts of the country, particularly in the south in Basra and the marshland areas (the Hawizeh Marshes in Maysan), the general public is confronting destructive and environmentally hostile activity resulting from the ongoing and silent drying of the marshes in favor of expanding oil operations, without due consideration that these marshes are now threatened with removal from the World Heritage List after losing their environmental uniqueness. The UNESCO World Heritage Centre, in its 2025 periodic review,³⁵ emphasized

that oil projects are incompatible with “World Heritage status.” It is likely that UNESCO will remove Hor al-Huweiza and the rest of Iraq’s wetlands from the World Heritage List in its next periodic review in 2027, based on the findings of the Interactive Monitoring Mission report, particularly in light of the joint recommendation of the Ramsar Advisory Mission, in agreement with the Centre for the Rehabilitation of Iraqi Marshlands and Wetlands (CRIMW), calling for a formula to remove “Huweiza” from the Montreux Record³⁶ due to extraction operations and oil activity.³⁷ The regime has manipulated the narrative of the marshes by including them in its foreign policy agenda in 2016, when this was politically profitable for it. At present, however, it is drawing a veil of secrecy and obscurity over what is taking place in the region in terms of sabotage, drainage, starvation, thirst, and the siege of the remaining population, in what resembles “ecological genocide,”³⁸ in order to force residents to migrate and thus monopolize the region’s oil, after it became clear that erasing it was profitable within the regime’s political economy. In contrast, a courageous counter-narrative of resistance is being advanced by the Ahwari people, who have devoted themselves to social media, international press outlets, and research centers to expose the regime’s practices and to attempt to build a social advocacy network.

The Ahwari narrative has collided with the regime’s dual narrative, which justifies its genocidal practices against them through a dynamic of “victim competition,” meaning that the marshes are exploited to extract more oil in order to maximize public resources directed toward serving the broader national sphere of beneficiaries. This comes at the cost of sacrificing the small remaining numbers of Ahwari people who refuse to have their historic lands confiscated, their roots uprooted, and their cultural identity erased. According to this model, there is an intense conflict between a dominant narrative and a countervailing narrative of resistance.³⁹

With the federal government clearly failing to be held accountable and successfully evading responsibility, the Ahwari communities have devised a new, narrower narrative by holding international oil companies (IOCs) responsible for environmental degradation in the region. As a result, civil society demands have created a direct and immediate target that operates and is active within the communities themselves, rather than directing blame toward the distant federal government in the capital, which local pressure mechanisms have failed to subject to accountability. Accordingly, the scope of accusation has been narrowed from the macro level of political responsibility attributed to the government to the micro level represented by extractive companies. This tactic has proven more effective through the activation of collective bargaining⁴⁰ between residents of affected habitats and areas and the oil companies that benefit from them. However, this does not mean that injustice has been acknowledged, nor that the demands are any closer to being fulfilled.

The production of independent climate knowledge in Iraq—which entails “promoting” the crisis and conveying it to target populations and groups—carries serious risks of restriction, legal and physical persecution, kidnapping, and intimidation⁴¹ for those who can be described as primary definers.⁴² For example, academic researcher Jassim Al-Asadi was kidnapped and tortured for 15 days in February 2023 because of his environmental activities that intersected with oil and industrial investments harmful to the marshlands, as well as

his efforts to produce specialized climate knowledge directed at local decision-makers and international stakeholders. This also applies to the model of field-based knowledge production by environmental activists and their prosecution by government bodies such as the Ministry of Water Resources,⁴³ as well as to the model of local demands for justice, exemplified by the arrest of activist Alaa Al-Bukhatri by the Basra Crime Directorate for demanding water suitable for human and daily use.⁴⁴

Distinct Representations of Environmental Mobilization: Maneuvers to Break Neutralization

Since the government and authoritarian structures no longer have any environmental outputs to offer as solutions to the affected public, or even to the international community—based on what Iraq presented at the Paris Climate Conference (COP21) and subsequent Conferences of the Parties (COP), which rested on a misleading environmental narrative—they have instead moved toward exerting greater pressure on local communities to “mitigate” the crisis. This is framed by the government as consistent with the principle of “adaptation,” without reaching a genuine understanding of, or consideration for, injustice, or even seriously engaging with public demands. This means that the government bureaucracy and its political levels have decided not to address the crisis as an expanding and growing set of demands and injustices, but rather to treat it as a security threat or a temporary contextual political crisis that can supposedly be resolved by factors and actors not currently available. This reflects one of the dynamics of metaphysical thinking in which the Iraqi ruling establishment excels, by merging the country’s social, economic, and environmental problems with the religious inclination that dominates the authorities’ actions and policies, in an attempt to disperse these demands by recasting them as an overwhelming divine challenge that affected communities must accept with greater submission to government policies.

The national government approach has failed to produce climate knowledge or solutions responsive to demands and expressions of injustice, while continuing to neutralize the public sphere and dismantle its tools⁴⁵ through a range of security measures. These include surveillance and censorship, the expansion of “intervention spaces” to impose “environmental repression,” as well as violent physical assaults and invisible threats by armed groups or security structures against activists, researchers, knowledge producers, and affected communities.

As a result of these toxic authoritarian frameworks toward the public sphere and its environmental activity, the dynamics of demanding and expressing grievances are under constant pressure and subjected to daily bargaining. This is evident in areas of oil activity, where residents are bargained into silence: the authorities either offer additional jobs (a former tool that has largely been abandoned due to the rentier economy’s inability to finance the public budget and sustain open clientelism), or subject residents to security repression and displacement (a current tool that has proven more effective than job-based

co-optation), in exchange for increased pollution and the destruction of the agricultural and historical habitat economy.

In general, demands and grievances can be situated within the broad framework of environmental mobilization,⁴⁶ which takes distinct and varied forms in Iraq. The first is an organized and licensed form, represented by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which are themselves divided into organizations operating outside or within the framework of authority, as well as office-based networking organizations that are not active in the field. The second form is embodied in unorganized civil society, such as tribes, clans, and regional solidarities. The third form is represented by individual environmental actors.

Functionally, these forms reflect varying capacities for mobilization, ranging between tools of confrontation, escalation, negotiation, and dialogue with affected communities, and engagement with the authorities through the adoption of their environmental narrative—that is, working from within frameworks of authority rather than outside them. By contrast, unorganized grassroots environmental movements are active in confronting and sharply criticizing government policies. In addition, there is a movement of individual activists who highlight environmental injustice out of a sense of responsibility toward their communities and families, primarily through social media platforms. Ultimately, these forms also generate an organic overlap and a clear tension between the concepts of “cause entrepreneurs” and “claims-makers.” It is evident that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are closer to, or more active in, environmental issues as cause entrepreneurs, given their institutional and organizational nature, while unorganized civil society (tribes, clans, and regional solidarities) and individual environmental actors tend more toward being claims-makers. However, in many instances, the functions of the two concepts overlap, with “entrepreneurs” becoming “claims-makers,” or vice versa, particularly when environmental claims take on the character of long-term conflicts that require intensive mobilization and negotiation efforts and lead to confrontation with the regime’s narrative and its environmental and security power structures.

On another level, international donors do not provide grants or financial support to local NGOs that reject or oppose fossil fuels, or even engage in awareness-raising activities, for two interrelated reasons. Opposition to fossil fuels is not on the agenda of international donors, who also do not support funding for any confrontational activities directly linked to the state’s political economy. Consequently, a narrative shaped by external and non-national conditions emerges. Local environmental actors are therefore compelled to choose environmental activities that are far removed from the extractive sector.

In light of these obstacles and concerns, environmental mobilization undertaken by NGOs has been curtailed and constrained by government repression and the withholding of international funding. As a result, unorganized civil society—composed of independent individuals who are environmentally active and play mobilizing roles—has turned to organizing environmental advocacy campaigns or publicizing the facts of extractive pollution to inform public opinion, as one outcome of “environmental repression” and the silence of NGOs. These campaigns often target the public electronic sphere.

The weak response to individual environmental advocacy campaigns, which are often electronic, points to the fragility of urban communities' capacity to bring about change through peaceful practices outside the power of mass mobilization. This stands in contrast to the relative success of tribal spaces, which are able to draw on spontaneous solidarity among members of the same tribe, or among emerging tribal alliances in areas exposed to climate change and environmental degradation, to organize more challenging and powerful forms of environmental defense. In some cases, these dynamics have forced the authorities to negotiate, as seen in the model of community-tribal mobilization in the areas north of Basra.

In the Iraqi model, inter-networking based on traditional kinship ties (tribal, clan, and regional) enables more powerful change and prompts responses from the authorities. In other words, unorganized civil society possesses more influential tools than organized civil society in the form of NGOs. Multiple layers of influencers within unorganized civil society contribute to effective mobilization, including dignitaries, religious leaders, tribal elders, and educated activists motivated to defend the interests of their tribe or region.

While individual environmental activists often lack the backing of kinship-based support, they strengthen their positionality through the power of argument, factual narratives of environmental degradation and pollution, and their ability to reach larger numbers of sympathetic followers beyond the limited spatial scope of the problem by elevating it to the national level, thereby paving the way for it to be addressed as a matter of public policy.

¹ Emmanuel Henry, *Amiante. Un scandale improbable: sociologie d'un problème public*, Presses universitaires de Rennes, Rennes, 2007, available at <https://books.openedition.org/pur/12719>

² The Guardian, "Climate crisis 'unequivocally' caused by human activities, says IPCC report", 25 August 2021, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/aug/09/climate-crisis-unequivocally-caused-by-human-activities-says-ipcc-report>; and Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, "Climate change widespread, rapid, and intensifying", 9 August 2021, available at <https://www.ipcc.ch/2021/08/09/ar6-wg1-20210809-pr/>

³ United Nations Environment Programme, *Global Environment Outlook 6 (GEO-6)*, 2019, available at <https://www.unep.org/resources/global-environment-outlook-6>

⁴ Iraq's Nationally Determined Contribution on Climate Change, Iraqi Ministry of Environment, with assistance from the United Nations Development Programme, 2022, p. 6.

⁵ Leon McCarron, "The Last of the Marsh Arabs", *Noema Magazine*, 19 October 2021, available at <https://www.noemamag.com/the-last-of-the-marsh-arabs/>

⁶ Global Adaptation Initiative, University of Notre Dame, 2023, available at <https://gain-new.crc.nd.edu/country/iraq>

⁷ الإحصاءات البيئية للعراق (المؤشرات الزراعية)، وزارة التخطيط، الجهاز المركزي للإحصاء، آب/ أغسطس 2022، متاح على <https://cosit.gov.iq/documents/environment/stat/....pdf>

⁸ نسبة الأراضي المتصحرة والمهددة بالتصحّر في العراق، مجلس النواب العراقي – دائرة البحوث، حزيران/ يونيو 2022، متاح على <https://iq.parliament.iq/wp-content/uploads/2023/03....pdf>

الصحراوية في العراق خلال 2024، "روح نيوز، متاح على <https://rojnews.news/ar/?p=249680>

⁹ "العراق يواجه أدنى مستويات مخزون المياه في البلاد منذ 80 عامًا"، *فرانس 24*، 25 آيار/ مايو 2025، متاح على <https://www.france24.com/ar/...>

¹⁰ World Resources Institute, "Ranking the World's Most Water-Stressed Countries in 2040", 2025, available at <https://www.wri.org/insights/ranking-worlds-most-water-stressed-countries-2040>

¹¹ Iraq measures its agricultural areas in dunams, an Ottoman unit of measurement equivalent to 2,500m² in Iraq, which is larger than the equivalent in Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan, which is 1,000m².

¹² نتائج نهائية.. عدد سكان العراق يتجاوز 46.1 مليون نسمة، روداوو نيوز، 26 تشرين الثاني / نوفمبر 2025، متاح على

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