

REPORT

Water, Peace and Security

Water challenges and conflict dynamics in Southern Iraq

An in-depth analysis of an under-researched crisis

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Introduction

Iraq faces an increasingly dire water situation as both the quantity and quality of water continue to decline, impacting the complex dynamics between actors within Iraq's borders, at the federal, provincial, and local levels. Water flows from the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, which together provide up to 98% of Iraq's water supply, have decreased by 30% since the 1980s and are expected to shrink to 50% by 2030.¹ These declining water flows are the combined result of several factors, including intensive water usage by the oil and agricultural industry, the construction of dams by neighboring countries, the impacts of conflict on water infrastructures, and the damaging effects of climate change.²

While most research so far has focused on transboundary developments, this study underlines the importance of subnational trends in understanding the dynamics between water and conflict. This paper analyses three types of conflict that have been identified across Iraq's provinces, namely (1) conflicts between provincial authorities over water

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shares or illegal encroachment of water flows, (2) conflicts between citizens and provincial authorities, and/or the central government, and (3) conflicts between local inhabitants over scarce water resources. This study aims to shed light on the link between water and conflict in Iraq at the interprovincial, provincial, and local levels in the provinces Basra, Missan, Dhi Qar, and Wasit in the south of Iraq.

To understand the linkages between pressure on water resources and conflict risk in Iraq, this study has developed an assessment framework, illustrated in Figure 1. This framework is an anchor point to assess the water and conflict situation and identify key water-conflict patterns³ in the context of Iraq, with different factors influencing one another.

Additional to in-depth desk-based research using a wide range of English and Arabic language sources, various interviews were

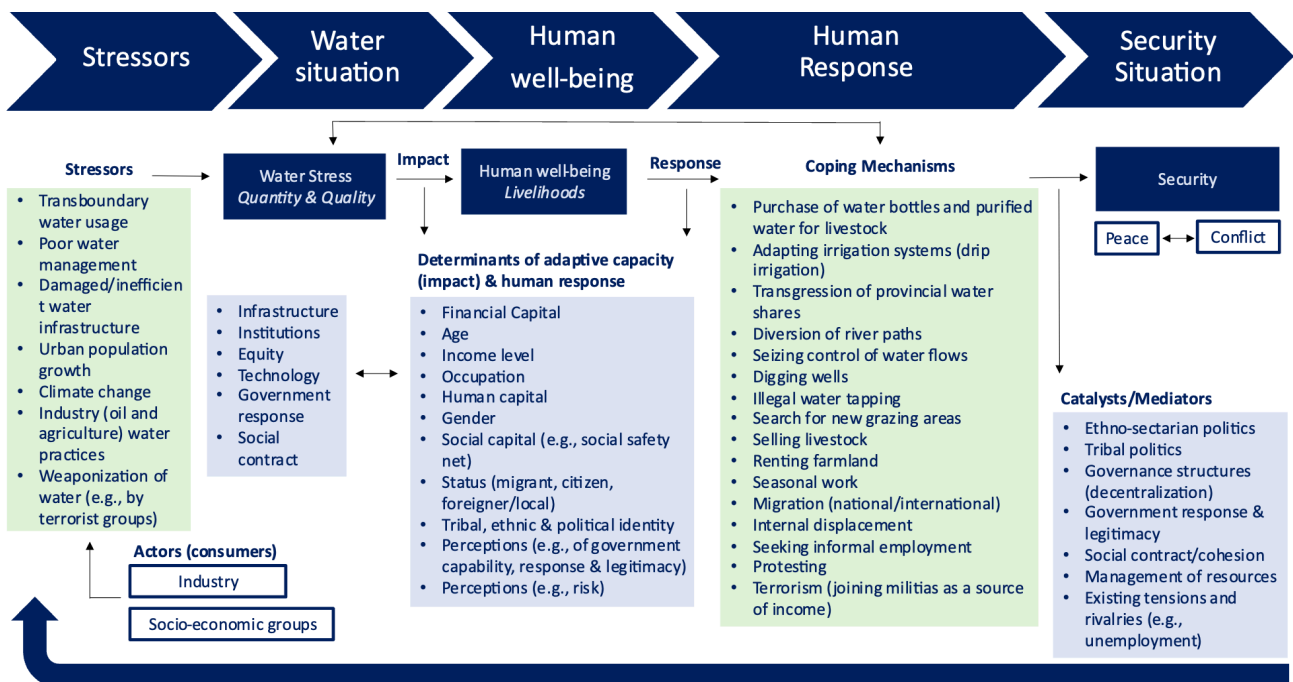
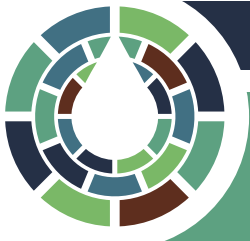


Figure 1. Assessment Framework Water-Conflict Nexus Iraq



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conducted with organizations and experts to gather information, develop better contextual understanding, and verify findings. This study has also drawn on insights from trainings and workshops conducted on behalf of the WPS partnership with Iraqi government officials and experts on water-related issues that served as additional validation for desk-based results.

This study was conducted in three steps, with the first dedicated to identifying the pathways between water-related challenges and conflict in south Iraq. Based on this research, an assessment framework was developed that incorporates the identified relevant factors impacting the water-conflict nexus and the relations between them (see Figure 1). Based on the output of the first step, the second step focused on distinguishing water-conflict pathways at three different levels of analysis: the interprovincial (between provinces), provincial (provincial authorities and citizens) and local (between citizens) levels. In the third step, a set of main findings was extracted, providing an overview of key water-conflict dynamics in south Iraq. Five main findings emerged, with the first three relating to conflict dynamics, while the last two relate to key drivers and mitigators of conflict (see Table 1).⁴

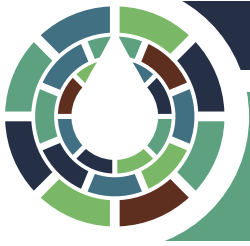
1. Competition and conflict between provincial authorities

Provincial authorities tend to engage in conflict over water shares and accuse each other of transgressing the water quota. With water becoming scarcer, competition between provinces over water resources is intensified, with governorates blaming each other for breaching the water quota or illicitly taking water from across borders and failing to punish citizens for such behavior. This type of conflict is often manifested in the form of political disputes and legal complaints. For example, in November 2017, the council of Missan province announced that it would file a lawsuit against its neighboring provinces Wasit and Dhi Qar for disregarding Missan’s allocated water share, causing material damage and harming citizens.⁵

Water resources in Iraq are distributed between provinces through a quota system whereby the amount of water a province receives is based on their needs. As such, some provinces tend to receive more water than others. Moreover, the allocated water is often insufficient to meet provinces’ needs, triggering conflict between the central government and provincial authorities,

#	Main findings
1	Competition and conflict between provincial authorities. Provincial authorities engage in conflict over water shares and accuse each other of transgressing quota, in the form of political disputes and legal complaints.
2	Conflict between federal, provincial authorities and citizens. Water-related challenges lead to confrontation in the form of protests that can escalate to violence between citizens and the federal government and/or provincial authorities.
3	Inter-communal conflict between farmers, herders, and fishermen. Competition over scarce resources between different socio-economic actors that depend on these resources to sustain their livelihoods and that lack access to government support and conflict resolution mechanisms.
4	Decline of ethnic identity and religion as core drivers of conflict. Ethno-religious sectarianism that has defined conflict in Iraq for decades is declining in influence, as national identity and shared grievances become more prevalent amongst the local population, despite sectarianism’s continued institutionalization and political fervor.
5	(Re)emergence of tribal structures and influence. The tribe and tribalism have (re)emerged in Iraq, gaining an increasingly prominent position vis-à-vis state institutions in water-related conflict dynamics, both in a positive sense through conflict mediation and a negative sense through exacerbating cross-border instability.

Table 1. Main Findings of Study



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and the latter amongst themselves.⁶ Water allocation rights and distribution mechanisms are therefore central to such conflicts, with suboptimal allocation resulting from the lack of sufficient information and coordination between responsible ministries,⁷ as well as the absence of a clear delineation of responsibilities. As a result, governorates receiving lower shares of water resources blame among others, water-intensive agricultural irrigation practices in other governorates for using too much water, subsequently placing them at disadvantage. Such negative sentiments are also targeted towards federal governmental institutions for neglecting their voices and needs. The governor of Dhi Qar, for instance, has blamed the Ministry of Water Resources (MoWR) for not increasing the share of water reaching the province and failing to meet promised water quotas.⁸

The key insight from this type of conflict is that domestic interprovincial hydro-politics in the south is just as salient (and even more so) as the hydro-politics between the northern (particularly Kurdistan) and southern provinces, which tends to gain more attention. The hydro-politics between provincial authorities in the south is likely to become an increasingly contentious issue in Iraqi politics over the next years, with increasing water shortages escalating tensions between provincial authorities, as well as grievances towards the federal government. This has the risk of undermining Iraq's ability to effectively cope with declining water availability and undermine regional and even national stability.

2. Conflict between federal, provincial authorities and citizens

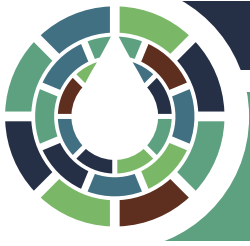
At the provincial level, the south of Iraq has seen several water-related conflicts between authorities at the federal and/or provincial levels, and citizens. These conflicts mainly manifested in the form of protests that escalated to violence and even resulted in hundreds of civilian deaths⁹ by security forces and paramilitary groups under state control.¹⁰ The poor quantity and quality of water and related challenges

featured prominently amongst demonstrations, alongside a range of other issues associated with poor governance, corruption, and high levels of unemployment. Provincial authorities featured less prominently in protest chants, while the central government was held responsible for the dire circumstances in Iraq and the south in particular.¹¹ Protestors recognize (and regret) the control that the central government exercises over provincial authorities, the faltering decentralization process, and the unclear delineation of responsibilities between the central government and provinces. This sentiment is especially strong among the southern provinces,¹² who perceive the central government as a free-rider and intrusive power that deprives them of their own oil, agricultural resources, and wealth.¹³

While the demands and targets of the protests were similar across provinces, the trajectory of these demonstrations differed depending on context-specific factors that either aggregated or mitigated conflict.¹⁴ This depends on the interaction between broader structural conditions at the national level and specific conditions at the provincial level,¹⁵ such as provinces' socio-economic power, the organization (or lack thereof) of protest groups, demographic composition, local political and security structures, and the salience of social formations including tribal groups.

In Basra, for example, the disproportionate levels of violence against protestors stem from its oil rich grounds and the government's dependence on oil revenues. A cohesive model of repression was deployed and became effective due to the tight-knit relations between Iraqi security forces, militia forces, and local tribes in the province.¹⁶ This close relationship can be attributed to the first developments of a now booming oil industry in Basra, solidifying this shared sense of economic and political interest.¹⁷

On the opposite side of the spectrum, Missan experienced lower levels of violence with fewer clashes between protestors and security forces. However, there were instances of inter-militia violence (between Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Sadrist



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movements) that grew amid the chaos of the protests.¹⁸ This drastic difference in violence can be partly explained by Missan's lower economic, and therefore political, stakes compared to oil-rich Basra, consequently lowering the intensity of competitive dynamics and creating a more stable political environment. Missan's relative stability can also be attributed to its status as a Sadrist stronghold that possesses power at the executive and administrative levels of governance.¹⁹ The Sadrist movement, a network of religious, political, military and social organizations provides social and religious support to Iraq's millions of Shia poor. Their relative power and influence kept central government crackdowns in the province to a minimum and balanced tensions between local protestors, provincial authorities, and Iraqi security forces.

While Wasit province featured less prominently in the news in October 2019, it has also seen protests and violent crackdown by government security forces. The protest movement was dominated by youth, mainly university students, that engaged in large-scale strikes, sit-ins, protests at public spaces,²⁰ and destruction of official buildings.²¹ These students primarily demanded better job opportunities for graduates, which is an issue that is indirectly related to Wasit's dire water situation. Given that the main source of income lies in the agricultural sector, the creation of jobs for youth is affected by water scarcity and poor water quality.

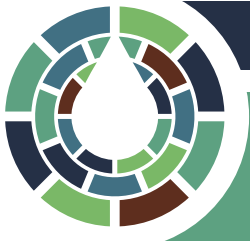
Lastly, Dhi Qar saw amongst the highest levels of protests in October 2019, due to its distinct history and current social, economic, and political conditions. Renowned as an incubator of political resistance movements (*vis-à-vis* Baghdad) throughout Iraq's history, Dhi Qar quickly became the "engine for the protests" in the country.²² Financial resources available to other provinces²³ are lacking in Dhi Qar,²⁴ resulting in the government's reliance on coercive power that contributed to a high rate of casualties and an escalatory cycle of violence.²⁵ However, unlike in Basra, protestors were able to resist the full might of the Iraqi security forces due to the strong presence and cohesion of tribes in the province,

resulting in the movement of protestors from Tahrir Square in Baghdad to Nasiriyeh in Dhi Qar.²⁶ Tribal networks provided widespread support to protestors against the government, creating a safe haven that would enable the continuity of their protests despite government crackdowns.²⁷

What became evident from the conflict dynamics that transpired at the provincial level in South Iraq is that geographical borders become relevant only to the extent that they define the specific economic, socio-political, and security context. Grievances over the various water-related challenges in Iraq served as an intensifier of conflict, with the primary demands of demonstrations transforming from the call for better water services to concerns over deeper and systemic issues in Iraq, such as corruption and unemployment. As noted, an interesting interprovincial dynamic developed whereby protestors strategically moved between provinces and adapted their strategies depending on specific provincial-level dynamics and the impacts thereof on their security and their ability to express demands.

3. Inter-communal conflict between farmers, herders, and fishermen

At the local level, water-related challenges have become a source of conflict between farmers, herders, and fishermen that depend on these resources to sustain their livelihoods. Violent conflict is especially likely given a sufficient degree of political marginalization, polarization, and non-availability of formal dispute resolution mechanisms. The south of Iraq has been politically marginalized for decades, with rural communities in the marsh area having especially limited access to state resources.²⁸ To cope with water stress, people may therefore resort to illegal water tapping, migration, or joining criminal groups that can have direct or indirect impact on others' water situation, further increasing the risk of (violent) conflict.²⁹ For example, in Basra, migration of livestock owners to other arable areas has caused friction over resources, with some herders



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reporting their cattle being shot by community members.³⁰ As conflict moves to more local levels, geographical borders lose relevance and become subservient to customary agreements and informal networks, making socio-political and economic factors the primary drivers of conflict.

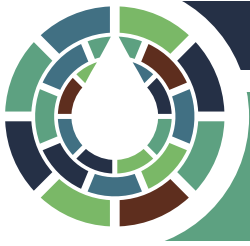
4. Decline of ethnic identity and religion as core drivers of conflict

Ethno-religious sectarianism that has defined conflict in Iraq for decades is declining in influence as ‘issue politics’ takes over. Confrontations between citizens center around differing views on governance failures and the need for systemic change. While Iraq has been marred by protests since its transition to democracy in 2005,³¹ the protest movement in 2019 is notable for rejecting the ethno-religious sectarian narrative.³² The democratic system in Iraq that was formed in the name of sectarian apportionment (known as the *Muhasasa Ta’ifia*) is slowly losing its legitimacy and hold over the population in light of the systems failure to meet citizens expectations, including the provision of basic services such as clean running water and reliable electricity supplies. A thriving bottom-up movement has developed a new narrative that builds on shared grievances and national identity in light of Iraq’s dire water situation.³³ Tribes across Iraq are also downplaying their ethno-sectarian differences and taking on a more unified approach.³⁴ The protests showed a trend away from ‘identity politics’ towards ‘issue politics’³⁵ and addressed challenges that are both directly and indirectly related to water. Water challenges became a trigger that pushed people to the streets, where wide-ranging demands were bundled together until water became ‘one of’ the issues. As trust and legitimacy of the democratic system dwindle, the ability of the central government to effectively address a water crisis becomes increasingly difficult, ultimately resulting in governmental policies having limited impact on the society.

5. (Re)emergence of tribal structures and influence

Tribalism in Iraq has a long history and remains a defining characteristic of Iraqi society, with 75% of the population belonging to one of Iraq’s 150 tribes.³⁶ With the effectiveness and legitimacy of state institutions in decline, these centuries old tribal power structures and dynamics are regaining their prominence, especially in water-related conflict situations. In Iraqi society, the tribe and the state have both distinct and overlapping functions that may be complementary at times and contradictory at others.³⁷ Both formal and informal cooperation and integration between state law and tribal law can be observed, with the latter often functioning as a first responder or filling gaps that are left unaddressed by the state.³⁸ When tensions and insecurity mounts, local authorities may co-opt tribes to intervene on their behalf due to their strong connections and greater influence in the areas with the absence of local policemen. In many instances, they have even served as instruments of cooperation, brokering informal water sharing agreements between communities and ensuring the agreed upon allocation of water in several provinces.³⁹ Their conflict mediation processes can positively impact and, to a certain extent, prevent the escalation of disputes.

At the same time, tribal networks exacerbate cross-border instability given their spread across provincial borders and the penetration of the political system. In south Iraq, water scarcity has instigated tribal conflicts and contributed to pushing simmering tensions between tribes into open confrontation. It is estimated that tribal disputes caused by water scarcity make up 10 % of ongoing disputes that are likely to increase as water becomes scarcer in the future.⁴⁰ In Dhi Qar, for example, water scarcity has contributed to the recent eruption of 20 clan clashes,⁴¹ which the government was unable to address, especially given that most tribes control the flow of water in southern Iraq.⁴² These parallel governance structures and the empowerment of tribal entities and networks



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pose challenges for the implementation of a coherent and effective water governance strategy within and across Iraq's southern provinces. The parallel governance structures also challenge the government's ability to curb tribal conflict and illicit practices due to criminal networks often operating along tribal lines.⁴³

The results of this analysis show that the increasing strength and influence of tribalism present both a threat and an opportunity to water security. Inter- and intra-tribal disputes present a threat to security and stability in Iraq, with the cross-border nature of tribal networks making the confinement of these conflicts complex and difficult. Tribal forces can also have a positive impact, however, due to their embeddedness in society, power, legitimacy, and cross-border nature. Tribal leaders can mobilize their constituencies to enable equitable water allocation that is agreed upon between neighbors and contribute to conflict mitigation and resolution.⁴⁴ In this context, finding the right balance between leveraging the tribes' contribution to stability and limiting further

fragmentation of the security environment is a key challenge for addressing water-related challenges in Iraq in the coming years.

Conclusion

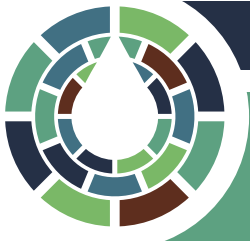
Although geographical and institutional divisions in Iraq can explain some of the conflicts associated with water challenges, their explanatory power remain limited. Rather, the analysis of informal networks, which in Iraq are dominated by tribes, is key to understanding water-conflict dynamics. Formal institutions and informal networks are not dichotomous, creating complex cross-border dynamics that contribute to increased water stress. It is evident that institutional structures interact in complex and crucial ways with informal networks in Iraq. How they contradict and complement each other should be at the heart of further analysis on water-related challenges in Iraq. Addressing these dynamics within Iraq's borders presents an opportunity for Iraq to improve its water situation and more effectively mitigate water-related conflicts.



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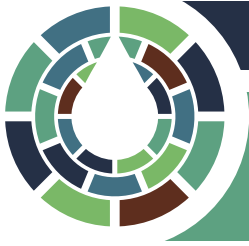


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