



COMMON WATER CHALLENGES IN IRAQ

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Excerpts from slides prepared for Water, Peace and Security tailor-made capacity development activities in Iraq. Please attribute authors when using materials.

Water (in)security in Iraq

- **Decreasing water quantity**
 - The Tigris and Euphrates rivers provide up to 98% of Iraq's water supply
 - Since the 1980s, water **supply** flowing through the two rivers has gone down by 80%
- **Decreasing water quality**
 - Water pollution and salinisation impact the supply of freshwater and decrease arable land
- **Natural and anthropogenic causes**
 - Climate change
 - Outdated and damaged infrastructure
 - Inefficient water use
 - Deficient water governance
 - Transboundary challenges
- **Increasing water demand:** population growth and urbanization

Water governance as a stressor and obstacle to resilience

1. Insufficient implementation of strategic/action plans
 - Ministries often seek quick-fix solutions
 - Reactive rather than proactive policies
 - Need more flexibility to accommodate changing water needs
 - Current allocation framework does not incentivise innovation in water management
2. Dysfunctional coordination and integration of responsibilities
 - Decentralisation
 - Inter-agency and inter-ministerial coordination

Key observations about water-conflict links in Iraq

Levels of conflict:

1. Interprovincial level
2. Provincial level
3. Local level

Drivers and/or Mitigators:

4. Tribalism

Adaptation mechanism:

5. Migration



1. Interprovincial-level analysis

- **Conflict between federal-provincial authorities and provincial-provincial authorities**
Disputes over the **fair allocation and use of water resources**
- In the form of **non-violent disputes**
 - **Legal complaints**
 - **Political accusations**

Conflict Between Provincial Authorities	
Governorate	Example
Basra	In 2018, there were disagreements between the federal government and the governorate authorities in Basra about the construction of a dam near Abu Flous Port.
Missan	On 24 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
Dhi Qar	The province of Dhi Qar accused its northern neighbor province of Wasit of breaching water shares , resulting in shortage of water in Dhi Qar that negatively impacts the income and wellbeing of Dhi Qar's agriculture-dependent population. The province of Wasit denies these accusations. Dhi Qar has also started a legal complaint against the governorate of Wasit over a reduction in water flow.

2. Provincial-level conflict

- **Conflict between federal and provincial authorities & citizens**
- **Rarely exclusively** about direct water-related demands
- Interprovincial **spill-over** of instability
- **Targets:** governorate, government, oil companies, foreign meddling (Iran)
- **Catalysts:**
 - Perception & existing relations
 - Excessive use of force (by government forces)
 - Tangled power structures

Conflict between Provinces & Citizens	
Province	Example
Basra	Iraqis took to the streets in July 2018, denouncing unemployment, corruption, and poor governance. This escalated to violent protests in September 2018 as a result of the Basra water crisis due to scarce and polluted water, which caused a major health crisis.
Missan	Protesters gathered in Qal'at Saleh, Missan, in June 2021 to demonstrate against power outages and were fired at by security forces.
Dhi Qar	Dhi Qarians swept the country in October 2019, demanding job opportunities, political reform, improved provision of public services, and an end to corruption.
Wasit	A demonstration took place in October 2020 in the capital of Wasit, commemorating the anniversary of the October 2019 demonstrations, which demanded social justice, economic development, and political reform.

3. Local-level conflict

- Direct water-related challenges at **the local level** between **socio-economic actors** (e.g., farmers, herders), based on threat to livelihoods
- Geographical borders & ethnic/religious divisions limited impact, and not drivers of conflict



Local-level conflict between socio-economic actors	
Province	Example
Basra	Migration of livestock owners in Basra to other arable areas has caused friction over resources, with some herders reporting their cattle being shot.
Missan	There are reports of a tribal sheikh in Missan controlling water flows, with local authorities refusing to take action against this.

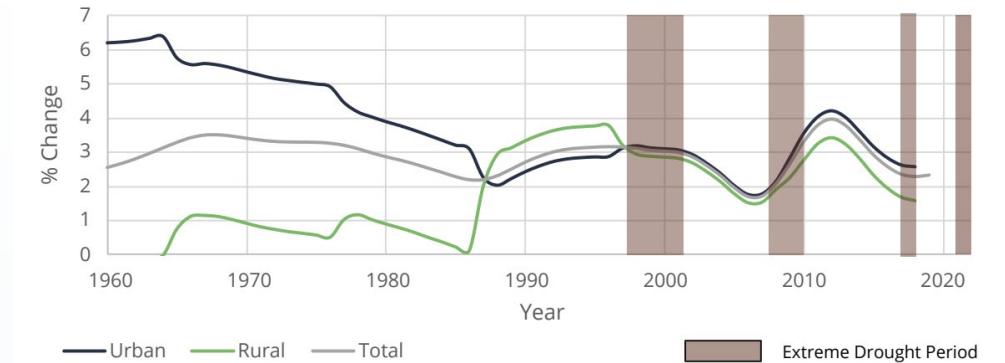
4. Tribalism: a driver and/or mitigator of conflict

- Historical relevance and influence
- Today, **75% of the population** belonging to one of Iraq's 150 tribes
- Influence increasingly in **urban areas**
- **Driver & mitigator** of conflict
 - Tribal politics
 - Traditional conflict resolution mechanisms to deter outbreak or escalation of conflict
- Tribal conflict over water issues are occurring, **pushing latent conflict** into open confrontation

Conflicts between Tribes in Iraq	
Governorate	Example
Basra	The regression of the marshes' water during drought season has spurred disputes between two tribes in the Al-Chibayish marshes, which are part of Dhi Qar and Basrah governorates, in the past.
Missan	In Missan, water-related challenges are also intensifying tribal conflicts and instability. Recent water-related disputes between 2 tribes resulted in the death of at least twenty-five people.
Dhi Qar	In Dhi Qar governorate, 20 clashes erupted recently between clans due to water scarcity.

5. Urban migration as an adaptation mechanism

- **76% of Southern Iraqi farmers** are affected by water insecurity:
 - decreases in economic livelihood
 - rising food insecurity
- Lack of financial means to modernize farming and irrigation equipment
- In **absence of resilience** and alternative coping mechanisms:
 - farmers may choose to migrate
 - drivers: income source or protest
- **Social instability** can increase:
 - rising internal migration
 - violent protest
 - local competition over resources



Population Growth Rates in Iraq. Source: World Bank.