

Viewpoint

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Iraq's chronic water crisis won't be fixed by rain gods

Prolonged drought conditions left Iraq dealing with a water crisis, which was interrupted by heavy rainfall in late February. Overjoyed spectators argued that water reserves, bled dry by upstream irrigation schemes and irregular rainfall, had been replenished – or perhaps this was merely an illusion of drought recovery.

Behind the mirage lurks the recent memory of parched earth cracking because of a lack of moisture, particularly for its cultivators, farmers and a population dependent on the replenishment of its twin rivers. The loving words of late Iraqi poet Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri: "Tigris of abundance," "mother of orchards" sharpen the contrast.

"The Tigris has resigned in its capacity as one of Iraq's twin rivers," wrote Mustafa al-Awsi on Facebook, days before a downpour transformed Iraq into a temporary Venice of the Arab world.

Dry conditions, water abstraction activities and man-made regulation schemes by riparian states – Turkey, Iran and Syria – with which Iraq shares its water, have devastated agricultural and aquatic life and the rural economy, which employs 20% of Iraq's workforce. The crisis is not new but has grown in the years following the US-led invasion of resource-rich Iraq.

Blame has been assigned to numerous actors. Activists uphold the ruling elite's demonstrable lack of expertise and mismanagement as one cause. Others accuse the hydraulic diversions led by Iraq's neighbours.

Levels remain low, despite assurances from Iraqi Minister of Water Resources Hassan al-Janabi. In an interview with Al-Baghdadia TV, Janabi explained that four consecutive days of heavy rainfall compensated the country for "the depletion of strategic summer reserves" to remedy crop failure. Despite Janabi's optimism, there is no quick fix.

While fingers of blame criss-cross the Iraqi Twittersphere, explanations appear confused at best. However, no rain god can reverse the damage wrought by a crippling blend of political mismanagement and stubborn ecological factors.

Drought episodes in Iraq are recurrent and vary in magnitude from one year to the next. Particularly severe are the drought conditions in Diyala Basin, shared with Iran, during the June-September dry season.

The worst spell struck in 2008, settling "heavily over the fertile crescent region," NASA, the US space agency, at the time wrote, due to climatic changes, reduced rainfall, searing summers and land degradation. The recent torrential rain may have temporarily reversed the deficit threatening future water wars but offers no blueprint for how to manage Iraq's impaired river flow.

A more insidious force at play – dam construction by countries whose geographic placement allows them to control the headwaters of shared water basins – must first be overcome. The twin rivers from which Iraq derives its ancient moniker are shared systems extending beyond its territory. Iraq, as denoted by the term "Meso" for middle and "Potamia" for rivers, is the land in between. This fact encouraged the cultivation of sophisticated 1,000 year-old irrigation systems.

The completion of Ilisu, the \$1.46 billion dam project in southern

Turkey, is exacerbating water scarcity. Although 15 dams have been built in the country, the effects of Ilisu on biodiverse lands, the ancient city of Hasankeyf and its 3,700 largely Kurdish inhabitants will be the most significant.

The flow of water has fallen 40%, Janabi told Reuters in December.

Hydroelectric dams are but one piece of the riverine puzzle.

The unsanctioned digging of wells by farmers and the Iraqi government added a layer of complexity. It has sucked difficult-to-replenish groundwater reserves dry.

Water infrastructure battered in the last decade has strained the operating capacity of facilities and services, resulting in the near total failure of Iraq's sewage systems.

The situation is complex and the need for a resolution cannot be overstated. Article 110 of the Iraqi Constitution reads: "The federal government shall have exclusive authority in planning policies relating to water sources from outside Iraq." However, calculated deception by Iraq and its neighbours is not being adequately addressed.

Frustrations have been expressed in articles published by activists aligned with the "Save the Tigris" campaign. One piece argued that "postponement of Ilisu Dam Reservoir is not a success!" Turkey, they said, "continues to suggest falsely that the dam's work is being delayed" and that "the Iraqi government is aware of this deception... but continues to mislead" its people.

Denial of the scale and magnitude of Iraq's water crisis works against the vested interests of those in power. Given that 80% of Iraq's water is at the mercy of upstream neighbours, the risks are known but left to fester as populations remain unshielded from the dam-building sprees of co-riparian states.

Water deficit-inspired disputes between tribal communities that dot vegetated lands are set to rise if deception, inaction and irresponsible spending persist.

Iraq seeks timetable for foreign troop pullout



'Adjustment' ahead. A US Army soldier is seen in rural Anbar, on January 27.

(AP)

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Iraq's parliament passed a resolution calling for the government to draw up a plan for the withdrawal of foreign troops from the country.

"The Iraqi parliament expresses its gratitude to all countries that supported Iraq in its fight against Daesh (the Islamic State) and calls for the government to draw up a timetable for the withdrawal of foreign troops," it said in a statement.

Washington in October 2014 forged a 74-country coalition to assist Iraqi forces in a fightback against ISIS, which had seized large parts of Iraq and posed a military threat to Baghdad.

The coalition announced in February that it was "adjusting" its force levels in Iraq downward as it shifted from combat operations following ISIS's expulsion from all Iraqi urban centres.

US Army Brigadier-General Jonathan Braga, the coalition's director of operations, said "an appropriate amount of capabilities" would be kept in Iraq in addition to the forces needed to train, advise and equip the Iraqis.

Such a presence would be coordinated with the Iraqi government, said the coalition, whose main force is made up of 5,000 US soldiers in Iraq.

US forces occupied Iraq for eight years, between a 2003 invasion that toppled President Saddam Hussein and their withdrawal in December 2011. Three years later, ISIS seized one-third of Iraq, sweeping aside Iraqi security forces.

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi said coalition force numbers were "very limited" and stressed it was "out of the question to give them a base on our territory."

"There is no base or airport controlled by foreign forces... No

aircraft lands or takes off without our authorisation," he said at a news conference.

Abadi declared victory over ISIS in December but the militants have reverted to a guerrilla-style insurgency and attacks on selected targets.

The Iraqi parliament's demand underscores the balancing act Abadi must conduct between the United States and Iran, his two biggest military allies who are themselves adversaries.

There are no Iranian regular forces in Iraq but there are Iran-backed Shia militias allied with Abadi's government.

In October, Abadi strongly defended the Shia militias, after comments from US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson that foreign fighters and Iranian militias in Iraq should "go home." Abadi said they were Iraqi volunteer fighters who had played a major role in the military defeat of ISIS.

The parliament vote, backed by all but a handful of the 177 lawmakers present, was sponsored by lawmakers from the ruling Shia Muslim bloc in parliament.

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"The timing of the vote, right before the election, is a message from pro-Iran parties that they do not want American troops in Iraq forever," political analyst Ahmed Younis told Reuters. "They are achieving two things – pressure on Abadi's government to expel foreign troops, as well as scoring political points before the election."

Abadi is seeking a second term in parliamentary elections scheduled for May.

A spokesman for the coalition told Reuters the presence of its troops hinged on Iraqi government approval.

"Our continued presence in Iraq

will be conditions-based, proportional to need, in coordination with and by the approval of the Iraqi government," said US Army Colonel Ryan Dillon.

The coalition said it was switching from focusing on retaking territory to consolidating gains. It has trained 125,000 members of the Iraqi security forces, including 22,000 Kurdish peshmerga fighters who helped retake Iraqi territory from ISIS.

The coalition has drawn criticism for the number of civilian casualties resulting from air strikes. At least 841 civilians had been killed as of January 2018. The coalition said it goes to great lengths to avoid civilian casualties.

A report by refugee aid groups accused Iraqi authorities of forcing thousands of displaced people to return to their home areas despite the risk of death from booby-traps or acts of vigilantism.

The Danish Refugee Council, the International Rescue Committee and the Norwegian Refugee Council said the drive came as Iraqi officials suggested they would like to see people move back to vote in the May 12 elections because it was not possible to vote in displacement camps.

The report said many of the returns "are premature and do not meet international standards of safety, dignity and voluntariness."

The war with ISIS displaced nearly 6 million people and about 2.6 million people are still uprooted.

The Iraqi government denies forcing internally displaced families to return against their will.

"Though the government policy and main goal is to encourage a quick return of displaced families to their areas of origin, this must be voluntarily and not by forcing them to do so," government spokesman Saad al-Hadithi told the Associated Press.

Abadi said that some forced returns may have taken place but that they were "individual cases" and the result of decisions by specific provincial governors as opposed to federal government policy.

The Arab Weekly staff and news agencies.



Precious commodity. An Iraqi girl carries water at a camp for internally displaced people in Hammam al-Alil, last year. (AFP)