**Climate emergency in Iraq**

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It was one of the fabled rivers of history and the Marines needed to cross it. In early April 2003, as American forces sought to wrap up their conquest of the Iraqi capital, Baghdad, and take strongholds to its north, the Marine Corps formed “Task Force Tripoli.” It was commanded by General John F Kelly (who would later serve as Donald Trump’s White House chief of staff).

His force was charged with capturing the city of Tikrit, the birthplace of dictator Saddam Hussein. The obvious eastern approach to it was blocked because a bridge over the Tigris River had been damaged. Since the Marines assembled the Task Force in northeastern Baghdad, its personnel needed to cross the treacherous, hard-flowing Tigris twice to advance on their target. Near Tikrit, while traversing the Swash Bridge, they came under fire from military remnants of Saddam’s regime.

Still, Tikrit fell on April 15 and, historically speaking, that double-crossing of the Tigris was a small triumph for American forces. After all, that wide, deep, swift-flowing waterway had traditionally posed logistical problems for any military force. It had, in fact, done so throughout recorded history, proving a daunting barrier for the militaries of Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon and the Achaemenid Cyrus the Great, for Alexander the Great and Roman Emperor Justinian, for the Mongols and the Safavid Iranians, for imperial British forces and finally General John H Kelly.

However, just as Kelly’s stature was diminished by his later collaboration with America’s only openly autocratic president, so, too, in this century the Tigris has been diminished in every sense and all too abruptly. No longer what the Kurds once called the Ava Mezin, ‘the Great Water’, it is now a shadow of its former self.

Thanks at least in part to human-caused climate change, the Tigris and its companion river, the Euphrates, on which Iraqis still so desperately depend, have seen alarmingly low water flow in recent years. As Iraqi posts on social media now regularly observe in horror, at certain places, if you stand on the banks of those once mighty bodies of water, you can see through to their riverbeds. You can even, Iraqis report, ford them on foot in some spots, a previously unheard-of phenomenon.

Those two rivers no longer pose the military obstacle they used to. They were once synonymous with Iraq. The very word Mesopotamia, the premodern way of referring to what we now call Iraq, means “between rivers” in Greek, a reference, of course, to the Tigris and the Euphrates. Climate change and the damming of those waters in neighboring upriver countries are expected to cause the flow of the Euphrates to decline by 30 per cent and of the Tigris by a whopping 60 per cent by 2099, which would be a death sentence for many Iraqis.

The United Nations has now declared oil-rich Iraq, the land on which the Bush administration bet the future of our own country, to be the fifth most vulnerable to climate breakdown among its 193 member states. Its future, the UN warns, will be one of “soaring temperatures, insufficient and diminishing rainfall, intensified droughts and water scarcity, frequent sand and dust storms, and flooding.” Sawa Lake, the “pearl of the south” in Muthanna governorate, has dried up, a victim of both the industrial overuse of aquifers and a climate-driven drought that has reduced precipitation by 30 per cent.

Meanwhile, temperatures in that already hot land are now rising rapidly. As Adel Al-Attar, an Iraqi adviser to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) on water and habitat, describes it, “I’ve lived in Basra all my life. As a boy, the summer temperature never went much beyond 40 degrees C (104 degrees F) in summer. Today, it can surpass 50 degrees C (122 degrees F).” The climate statistics bear him out.

As early as July 22, 2017, the temperature in Basra reached 54 degrees C (129.2 degrees F), among the highest ever recorded in the eastern hemisphere. Iraqi temperatures are, in fact, two to seven times higher than average global temperatures, and that means greater dryness of soil, increased evaporation from rivers and reservoirs, decreasing rainfall, and a distinct loss of biodiversity, not to mention rising human health threats like heat stroke.

The American war did direct harm to Iraq’s farmers, who make up 18 per cent of the country’s labor force. And when it was over, they had to deal with staggering numbers of explosives left in the countryside, including landmines, unexploded ordnance, and improvised explosive devices, many of which have since been dangerously covered by desert sands as a climate-driven drought worsens.

An article in the journal of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences observes that when it comes to military disruptions of waterways, “Displacement, explosions, and movement of heavy equipment increase dust that then settles on rivers and accumulates in reservoirs.”

Worse yet, between 2014 and 2018 when the guerrillas of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, whom the American war helped bring into existence, took over parts of northern and western Iraq, they blew up dams and practiced scorched-earth tactics that did $600 million worth of damage to the country’s hydraulic infrastructure. Had the US never invaded, there would have been no ISIL.

As Al-Attar of the ICRC observed, “When there’s not enough rain or vegetation, the upper layers of earth become less compact, meaning the chance of dust or sandstorms increases. These weather events contribute to desertification. Fertile soil is turning into desert.” And that is part of Iraq’s post-invasion fate, which means ever more frequent dust- and sandstorms. In mid-June, the Iraqi government warned that particularly violent dust and thunderstorms in al-Anbar, Najaf, and Karbala provinces were uprooting ever more trees and flattening ever more farms.

In late May in Kirkuk, a dust storm sent hundreds of Iraqis to the hospital. A year ago, the dust storms came so thick and fast, week after week, that visibility was often obscured in major cities and thousands were hospitalized with breathing problems.

In the late 20th century, there already were, on average, 243 days annually with high particulate matter in the air. In the past 20 years, that number has reached 272. Climate scientists predict that it will hit 300 by 2050.

A little over half of Iraq’s farmed land relies on rain-fed agriculture, mostly in the north of the country. Iraqi journalist Sanar Hasan describes the impact of increasing drought and water scarcity in the northern province of Ninewah, where yields have shrunk considerably.

Excerpted: ‘After War, Iraq Now Faces the Climate Emergency’.

Courtesy: Commondreams.org