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Arab Civil Society Actors and their Quest to Influence Policy-Making

Country: Iraq

Civil Society Organizations and Water Crisis in Iraq

| Falah Khalaf Kazem Al-Zuhairi |

COUNTRY'S GENERAL CONTEXT

For many years, Iraq has been facing successive and complicated crises and challenges, some of which are political, represented in reinforcing political system, sustaining the momentum of democratization, setting public policies, internally and externally, and other economic challenges caused by the economic crisis afflicting Iraq due to the low oil prices, the need to provide services to citizens and social challenges represented in need to strengthen national cohesion and social solidarity, in addition to cultural challenges represented by the need to refine the cultural and intellectual system due to the deviant and depraved ideas that have afflicted it. These challenges required strenuous efforts at the governmental and public levels to overcome them or reduce their risks and future results. Hence, the main idea of civil society organizations' work emerged in forming a community lobby that puts pressure on the political authority in Iraq to amend their policy related to development, improving the social and political reality and providing services.

BACKGROUND OF THE CASE

For many years, Iraq has been going through a real water crisis, represented by a decline in water level in the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, after Turkey and Iran sought to establish a group of irrigation projects and huge giant dams, which affected the percentage of water that reaches the two rivers and damages the agricultural and environmental reality. This coincided with the phenomenon of rain shortage during the past years, and the problem worsened as a result of the government's failure to deal with the issue and its dimensions.

In the past years, Iraq used to have almost 30 billion cubic meters from Euphrates water, and almost 20 billion cubic meters from the Tigris River, in addition to the tributary waters that flow into the Tigris River in Iraq and reach 40 billion cubic meters, with which agricultural lands are irrigated.

Turkey sought to control the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and use water as a means of political pressure to search for a regional role that would help it in enhancing its future domination. This was implemented in a plan for irrigation and energy production projects on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, known as the "Southeastern Anatolia Project" (Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi - GAP). The latter includes 22 dams and 19 power plants, including 14 dams on the Euphrates River, the most important of which is the Ataturk Dam, and 8 dams on the Tigris River, the most important of which is the Ilisu Dam. The real danger of this project lies in depriving Iraq of its natural rights to water, as after starting the filling of the Ilisu Dam earlier in June 2018, the water level decreased and reached almost 10 billion cubic meters for the Tigris River and almost 12 billion cubic meters for the Euphrates River. According to these figures, one can imagine the size of the disaster that threatens Iraq.

METHODOLOGY

The researcher adopted the descriptive and analytical approach in the present study to confirm the relevant authorities' statistical data and use them according to regular cases to address each paragraph of the study. Thus, this approach demonstrates the effectiveness of the performance of civil society organizations in this issue.

PROBLEM'S TIMELINE

The period of study of the crisis has been defined from 2003 until now.

FRAMING THE CASE

Numerous treaties and agreements have been concluded to regulate water rights among Iraq, Turkey, and Syria, starting with the "peace treaty" in Switzerland in July 1923 between Turkey and the friendly arrangement countries, known as the "Treaty of Lausanne". This treaty called for protecting Iraq's rights in the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates; then the "Treaty of Friendship and Good Neighborly Relations" was signed between Iraq and Turkey in 1946 in which Turkey agreed to inform Iraq of the special projects that it decided to establish on the Tigris and Euphrates or their tributaries to avoid the potential effects and damages on Iraq that may result. Furthermore, an agreement was signed between Iraq and Syria in 1989 and divided the waters of the Euphrates by 58% for Iraq and 42% for Syria, and the "Algiers Treaty" was signed in 1975 between Iraq and Iran and called for a comprehensive survey of land and river navigation rights in Shatt al-Arab River before it was annulled in 1980 on the eve of the Iran-Iraq war.

INDICATORS OF CRISIS ESCALATION

The lack of water in the Tigris River and the visibility of the riverbed (see the attached picture) are among the most prominent indicators of crisis escalation, in addition to the high salinity level in the Shatt al-Arab (the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates) and the impact of the city of Basra in this case. Some of the marshlands on the Tigris River and some surfaces have also dried up permanently, which led to the displacement of many Iraqi agricultural families due to their damage and the death of their livestock, and for fear of the spread of diseases and epidemics, after the harmful insects that live on the river's ruins increased. According to the reports of the Iraqi Ministry of Water Resources, the decline in the Tigris level was the first of its kind in history, and it is now possible to walk back and forth inside the river without the water level reaching the knees. More than 16 Iraqi cities have been affected by the crisis of lack of water, most notably the capital, Baghdad, the cities of Kut, Qurnah, Amara, Madain, Al-Kahla, Al-Majar, Qalaat Saleh, Al-Numaniya, Al-Hay, Badra, Samarra, Tikrit, Baiji, Baquba and Mosul. This coincided with Iran cutting more than 11 tributaries in the Tigris in northern Iraq, and the low level of the Euphrates River significantly, and its transformation into something similar to a medium-sized water wheel in the cities of southern Iraq. In addition, the Water Resources Management Center at the Ministry of Water Resources announced a decrease in Iraq's water reserve from 27 billion to 17 billion cubic liters, and the average of precipitations of the Tigris River from the source dropped from 300 to 90 cubic liters per second. Global water indicators, most notably the "Water Stress Index", predict the likelihood that Iraq will turn into a land without rivers by 2040 and that the rivers will not reach the final route in the sea. After 2025, severe drought features will be strongly evident in Iraq, with the Euphrates River completely draining to the south and the Tigris turning into just a small waterway with limited resources.

CRISIS EVOLUTION

The crisis evolved and intensified due to the governorates' fear of a lack of access to water, which led to disputes and conflicts escalation between the governorates, accusing each other and filing lawsuits against each other under the pretext of not adhering to the water quotas established according to the sharing system currently in effect to distribute water among Provinces.



THE INVOLVEMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY REPRESENTATIVES IN THE CRISIS

Civil society organizations are considered a civilized necessity and indicate the progress and renaissance of peoples; thus, states are interested in establishing and supporting them. The period following the events of 2003 witnessed the establishment of hundreds of civil society organizations in Iraq, despite some of them' ineffectiveness. There is no doubt in the great role of the international organizations operating in Iraq to help many organizations by training and preparing cadres through courses inside and outside the country, financing programs and activities that significantly contributed to building these organizations, which were able within a short period to perform significant and basic roles that included providing humanitarian aid to victims of war and acts of violence, providing legal support to marginalized and vulnerable groups, spreading and consolidating principles of peace, peaceful coexistence, a culture of human rights, gender equality, empowering women, combating corruption, monitoring parliamentary and provincial elections and interacting with environmental and health crises.

Iraqi activists chose the town of Chibayish, in the city of Nasiriyah, in southern Iraq, as a starting point for their awareness campaigns about the drying up of the Tigris River, especially that the signs of drought are widely evident in the region, where the two rivers meet through the marshlands of Maysan and Nasiriyah. In this context, a member of the “Tigris River Protectors Association” stated that their work focuses on preserving the water of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and the rights of countries from water, and maintaining the water of the marshlands, rationalizing its usage and protecting it because it is the main supporter of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and the ideal storage for the two rivers, especially that the recent crisis pushed them to work continuously to inform the residents in the person of the effects on their economy and their lives. The effort exerted by civil society organizations aimed at generalizing the big problem’s size, especially that many people are not fully aware of its risks and impacts. “We are trying, through meetings with those affected by the water crisis in Iraq, to obtain international solidarity, because it will enable us to obtain a quantity of water that saves the Tigris River and the marshlands that depend on it”, added the activist in the association. In addition, another activist confirmed that the drought in the Tigris River will not only affect the marshlands but all regions of Iraq and that the level of the Tigris River has decreased during the past month by almost 40 centimeters, i.e., by almost a centimeter per day, which indicates that the river will be completely dried in the coming months, particularly in the southern governorates, if the situation remains the same. He also pointed out that Turkey’s failure to aid Iraq with sufficient water waves to meet the river’s natural needs would lead to a great disaster for the country and the displacement of more southern families to other regions, thus incurred great economic losses and demographic change. He considered that the presence of the active teams in the field of water and the environment results from the seriousness of the water crisis, the possibility of not including the marshlands on the World Heritage List, the government’s preoccupation with political rivalry, and neglect of nature reserves and water care.

INTERNATIONAL INITIATIVES AND WATER ISSUE

The US embassy’s efforts are among the most prominent international initiatives related to the crisis, as the embassy indicated in a statement that it would continue its support to find short and long-term solutions to the water problem in Iraq and Basra in particular. US Embassy water resources expert, Barney Austin, discussed the water situation in Basra and developed a comprehensive assessment of the problem in various publications. On the other hand, the US embassy advisor for economic affairs, Larry Memo, said, “The United States is engaged in negotiations with Iraqi and Turkey over water resources and Iraq’s shares. The issue is subject to the two neighboring countries, and we are only playing an auxiliary role”. In October 2018, the US Embassy and USAID hosted key members of the international community and actors in responding to the water crisis in Iraq and Basra. They worked to find quick and urgent solutions to it.

STRATEGIES AND METHODS

The signs of a decline in the Tigris River’s water level, and the cessation of its flow in some Iraqi cities and villages, cast a shadow over the activity of the Iraqi street and some civil society organizations interested in environmental issues. Many hashtags spread on social media platforms, such as #Save_Tigris (أنقذوا دجلة), #Drought_Tigris (دجلة جفاف) and #Tigris_tigging (دجلة تستغيث), Twitter’s users participated in mourning of the river after its flow stopped in the Maysan Governorate in southern Iraq, amid government’s discontent and anger and its inadequacy in handling the responsibility of the drought and wasting the water rights of the country. In contrast, other neighboring countries build dams on the river and obtain their country’s running water share. Some

bloggers described the Tigris River as a dry children’s soccer field. With the crisis escalation and its effects clarity, some actors in civil society organizations, academics, engineers and people interested in water affairs proposed some solutions to this problem, including the proposal to establish dams on the Shatt al-Arab that block water instead of leaking it into the Gulf, and establish a canal between the Tigris and the Euphrates at an approaching area of the two rivers in southern Baghdad, as well as the private sector investing in agriculture and working on rationalizing water use in agriculture.

Some organizations used traditional media outlets to define their various activities and effectiveness, such as posters, flyers, and pictures tackling water and environmental pollution issues, specifically in some southern Iraq and Basra regions, in addition to using the method of seminars and lectures to introduce the effects and risks of the crisis, noting that some of these efforts and initiatives were spontaneous, driven by a sense of danger as to what might lead in the future. Civil society organizations were also active in using social media technologies and stimulating public interaction, specifically regarding the inclusion of marshlands on the World Heritage List, as well as their role in urging the relevant parties to reconsider investing Iraqi water inputs from their sources in Iran and Turkey, and urging these parties such as the Ministries of Water Resources and Foreign Affairs on the necessity of establishing Iraq’s water rights with the international parties, particularly the riparian states, by concluding agreements that guarantee the rights of all parties. In this context, the peasants of Iraq formed a delegation to meet with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and explain the dangers of Iraq’s situation, which led to the delay of filling the Ilisu Dam for three months. The organizations also demanded that Parliament undertake the required role and form parliamentary diplomacy in coordination with the Iraqi Foreign Ministry and the relevant organizations to ensure Iraq’s rights and reduce the risks that it is exposed to in the water field.

INFLUENCING FACTORS

The relationship of the political system with civil society organizations can be clarified according to significant frameworks: Does the ruling authority finance, protect, or develop these organizations’ work? Note that these frameworks are the keys to understanding that relationship and its future. In fact, what happened in Iraq is a focus on building state institutions more than building civil society capacities, while rebuilding these institutions after 2003 required building the capacities of civil society organizations, especially that the general framework for that process is the democratic transformation that requires an active and influential civil society and a partner for state institutions to be more effective and influential. However, the political system did not deal with the problem as required due to its preoccupation with the priorities of establishing security, providing services and combating corruption. Nevertheless, the government issued statements restricting some news received about the effects of the future water crisis on the Iraqi situation, while some religious forces contributed to providing assistance and solutions to the water problem that worsened in Basra due to the decrease in the water of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

ROLE ANALYSIS

The idea of civil society organizations operating in areas such as the environment and water remains unattractive to many categories of organizations, perhaps because they need careful understanding and specialization to organize and participate in these activities. In other words, civil society organizations' priorities and the scope of their movement have not focused on issues such as water until now, due to their belief in the existence of more urgent topics, cases and issues, which was negatively reflected on the work of these organizations. The objective analysis of civil society's roles in the water crisis in Iraq shows a clear weakness and a limited role in dealing with the effects of this problem on the future of the Iraqi economic and social situation. There may be a set of interrelated reasons behind this weakness, including:

- The recent emergence of the effects of the problem on the economic and social situation, especially that the acceleration of the decrease in the amount of water in the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, astonished the Iraqi citizens, leaving a bad impression about the future and how the government will deal with these effects, which is also reflected on civil society organizations that have interests in this case, as the rapid and sudden emergence of the effects of the crisis confused their performance in how to deal and conduct ways to clarify its results.
- In important aspects, this crisis is of a technical and operational nature, which needs organizations with cadres of knowledge and specialized information to develop their activities, organize their ranks, and take appropriate steps to address these effects. It seems that this is what civil society organizations in Iraq are missing.
- The enormity of the solutions and measures that the government is supposed to take requires capabilities, huge funds and long-term plans. This is what some of those organizations interested in this issue are aware of.
- The external dimension represented by the responsibility of some neighboring countries (Turkey and Iran) for the outcome of matters in water issue, which contributed to some organizations' reluctance in dealing with this problem.
- The reflection of weak funding of civil society organizations on their performance, effectiveness and activities.
- Although the 2005 Constitution stipulates in Article 45 the necessities and importance of these organizations, Iraq lacks legislation and laws for civil society organizations organizing their work, programs, and funding sources, which contributed to the weakening of their roles and the alienation of many citizens to belong to them.
- Weak state support and encouragement for these organizations' activities, especially that the political institution has not yet attached much importance to this issue, perhaps due to the instability of the political, security and social conditions in Iraq, which weakened the role of these organizations and confused them.
- Attempts to politicize some organizations or restrict and dominate them by some political forces made them lose their independence, making them suspicious of the citizen and losing their confidence, which determined their outcome and paralyzed their movement.

EXPECTED RESULTS

Despite all the security, political and economic obstacles, civil society organizations were active and interacted with the events directly, had an escalating framework, and found interaction among Iraqi society through their efforts to confront the escalating water crisis and its serious repercussions on Iraqi society. Thus, civil society organizations are expected to continue working with an increasing frequency and influential actors.

LESSONS LEARNED

First, civil society organizations after 2003 supported state institutions in providing services to many classes of Iraqi society. In other words, these organizations contributed through their efforts and work to fill some gaps and deficiencies in government performance, but their role was not influential in the issue of water.

Second, civil society organizations contributed to diagnosing many failures of government policies, particularly in the service field. These contributions served as a tool for the legislative authority to issue many legislations on civil society organizations' activities, particularly issues of environmental and health affairs that water crisis was an essential resource in it.

Third, although the Iraqi Constitution regulates the activities of civil society organizations in their activities (albeit under the name of non-governmental organizations), and grants them wide scope for their movement, there is a need to provide financial coverage and support the activities and work of civil society organizations, as a positive indicator for the employment of civil society organizations in serving the state's policies and implementing its strategic plans, otherwise, its activities will remain superficial and have limited impact.



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BREAKING THE MOLD PROJECT

In mid-2018, the "Civil Society Actors and Policymaking in the Arab World" program at IFI, with the support of Open Society Foundations, launched the second round of its extended research project "Arab Civil Society Actors and their Quest to Influence Policy-Making". This project mapped and analyzed the attempts of Arab civil society, in all its orientations, structures, and differences, to influence public policy across a variety of domains. This research produced 92 case studies outlining the role of civil society in impacting political, social, economic, gender, educational, health-related, and environmental policies in ten Arab countries: Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Yemen, and the Arab Gulf.

Over two dozen researchers and research groups from the above countries participated in this project, which was conducted over a year and a half. The results were reviewed by an advisory committee for methodology to ensure alignment with the project's goals, and were presented by the researchers in various themed sessions over the course of the two days.

THE CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS AND POLICY-MAKING PROGRAM

at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at AUB, examines the role that civil society actors play in shaping and making policy. Specifically, the program focuses on the following aspects: how civil society actors organize themselves into advocacy coalitions; how policy networks are formed to influence policy processes and outcomes; and how policy research institutes contribute their research into policy. The program also explores the media's expanding role, which some claim has catalyzed the Uprisings throughout the region.

THE ISSAM FARES INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS AT THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut (AUB Policy Institute) is an independent, research-based, policy-oriented institute. Inaugurated in 2006, the Institute aims to harness, develop, and initiate policy relevant research in the Arab region. We are committed to expanding and deepening policy-relevant knowledge production in and about the Arab region; and to creating a space for the interdisciplinary exchange of ideas among researchers, civil society and policy-makers.

Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs
American University of Beirut
P.O.Box 11- 0236

📍 Riad El-Solh / Beirut 1107 2020, Lebanon, Issam Fares Institute Building, AUB

☎ +961-1-350000 ext. 4150 / Fax +961-1-737627

✉ ifi.comms@aub.edu.lb

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