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NAVIGATING THE CHALLENGES OF ENVIRONMENTALISM IN AN INCREASINGLY AUTHORITARIAN IRAQ

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About the author

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This study is part of the Arab Reform Initiative's project *DIRAIA*, "Knowledge" in Arabic, short for "Developing Inclusive Research through Activism and Informed Advocacy". Focusing on fieldwork and multi-method research in Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, and Tunisia, DIRAIA explores how frontline communities and organizations are mobilizing around environmental grievances as they intersect with socio-economic and political injustice across the region. DIRAIA is part of the network of *Knowledge Alliance for Environmental Defenders* (KALLIED), which brings together 32 organizations from 22 countries across the Global South and is funded by Canada's IDRC

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Cover photo: Shatt al-Arab River with flames rising from oil refinery pipes in the background in Basra, Iraq July 2020 - Shutterstock

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CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----|
| 1. Introduction | 4 |
| 2. Methodology | 5 |
| 3. Iraq's Civic Space Post-Tishreen | 5 |
| 4. Framing and Organizing Environmentalism in Iraq | 6 |
| 5. Drawbacks of the Small Projects Approach | 9 |
| 6. How Iraqi Environmentalists Engage with the Private Sector and Government | 10 |
| 7. How Iraqi Environmentalists Engage with Civic Actors | 12 |
| 8. The Role of International Donors | 13 |
| 9. Conclusion and Recommendations | 15 |

2. Methodology

The findings of this report are based on 30 semi-structured interviews carried out in Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Baghdad, and Basra between September and October 2024 with environmental NGOs, or NGOs that have environmental programs, academics, journalists, and activists. In terms of a breakdown, the report draws on seven interviews with actors and organizations based in Sulaymaniyah, one in Duhok, one in Kirkuk, four in Erbil, eight in Baghdad, one in Fallujah, five in Basra, one in Missan, one in Nasiriyah, and one in Samawah. Nine of the organizations interviewed as part of this study work across the country. As discussed in detail throughout this paper, environmental actors often face reprisals and threats for their work in Iraq. As such, the names of all interlocutors interviewed for this study have been anonymized for their safety.

The selection of participants was carried out primarily through purposeful sampling, whereby interviewees were preselected based on the researcher's knowledge of self-identifying environmental actors and organizations in Iraq. The aim was to get a representative sample of the different kinds of actors working across the four geographical areas where interviews were conducted and across the country. The rate of responsiveness from interlocutors approached to be part of this study was around 75%. Additionally, snowball sampling was used during the fieldwork phase to increase the number of participants and limit any biases present in the researcher's networks. The four principal locations in which interviews were carried out were chosen because they are the hubs for civil society activism in north, central, and southern Iraq. While some of the actors interviewed work in western Iraq, data on this region is more limited in this study. During each interview, handwritten notes were taken, which were then collated into a single document and analyzed for common themes.

3. Iraq's Civic Space Post-Tishreen

In October 2019, the political parties that were brought to power on the back of the US- and UK-led invasion of Iraq were faced with the largest uprisings in the country's post-2003 history. Up to a million young people took to the streets of the central and

southern provinces demanding an end to the ethno-sectarian political system.⁴ The protests were among the most significant threats that Iraq's political system has faced since 2003 and signaled a total loss of its legitimacy among large swathes of the public. In the wake of the protests and the 2021 elections that followed, Iraq's ruling parties – increasingly made up of the political wings of militia groups – have reorganized and adopted increasingly authoritarian policies, leading to the rapid shrinking of civic space and the stifling of critical voices.⁵

Environmental movements in Iraq are a relatively new phenomenon and have only begun to gain traction in the last couple of years amid the shrinking of civic space.⁶ While civil society organizations have been active since 2003, in the aftermath of the invasion they focused on the provision of services and on contesting policies and laws brought in by the occupying forces.⁷ The only notable exception is Nature Iraq, an organization established in 2003 to lead NGO efforts to restore the marshlands of southern Iraq. Several of the members of civil society interviewed for this project stated that while they have been active in the NGO space since regime change, at that time there were virtually no organizations working on environmental issues and that interest in the environment began to rise only in the past ten years.⁸ The relative newness of the interest in environmental issues poses a substantial challenge for environmentalists due to the limited awareness among the public, government, and civil

4 Crisis Group, *Iraq's Tishreen Uprising: From Barricades to Ballot Box*, 26 July 2021, available at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/223-iraqs-tishreen-uprising-barricades-ballot-box>

5 Iraq Watch Group, "Suppressing Dissent in Post-Tishreen Iraq", LSE Middle East Centre, 16 October 2024, available at https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/125579/?_gl=1*10a9w2g*_gcl_au*MTU3NTk-0MzEyNi4xNzI3Nzg3NTM3*_ga*MTg2ODY4NTk2NC4xNzMyMT-g5NjMy*_ga_LWTEVFESYX*MTczMzU4MzYzMC43LjAuMTczM-zU4MzYzMC42MC4wLjA

6 Maha Yassin, "The Space for Iraqi Climate Activism Is Dangerously Small, and Shrinking", The Century Foundation, August 2023, available at <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/the-space-for-iraqi-climate-activism-is-dangerously-small-and-shrinking/>

7 Interview with programs manager of NGO in Basra, 18 September 2024.

8 Interview with head of environmental NGO in Erbil, 9 September 2024; WhatsApp interview with head of environmental NGO based in Sulaymaniyah, 2 October 2024.

6 Navigating the Challenges of Environmentalism in an Increasingly Authoritarian Iraq

society of issues around climate and the environment. The novelty of this type of environmental action in Iraq also means that there is no singular unified environmental movement in the country.⁹ Although the rapid rise in oil production in the last 15 years and the increasingly visible effects of climate change and environmental degradation have led to profound transformations, the public and civil society's understanding of them has not reached the level of discursive coherence around other issues, such as corruption and ethno-sectarianism.

Moreover, since 2019, environmental movements and actors have gotten on the radar of the government and associated forces, including militia groups. Increasingly insecure about their position and legitimacy, Iraq's dominant parties have come to see environmentalists as a threat as opposed to partners in tackling climate change and environmental degradation. As a result, there has been a substantial backlash against Iraq's most prominent environmental activists, with many of them having to flee the country altogether. In December 2019, Salman Khairallah, co-founder of Humat Dijlah, was arrested and disappeared for participating in the October 2019 uprisings and later had to escape Iraq on account of his environmental activism.¹⁰ In February 2023, Jassim al-Assadi, the co-founder of Nature Iraq was kidnapped and tortured by a militia group for his work defending Iraq's marshlands – a UNESCO World Heritage site – and accused of affiliation with states hostile to the Iraqi government.¹¹ The coercion faced by environmentalists in Iraq is part of a broader crackdown on civil society, which has seen the dominant parties run campaigns accusing NGOs of supporting foreign interests by working with or receiving funding from international organizations, especially donors that work on gender issues or those from particular states such as the United States.¹²

9 Thank you to Julia Choucrair Vizoso for pointing this out.

10 David Gritten, "Iraqi activist jailed over tweet 'insulting' Iran-backed militia force", BBC 7 December 2022, available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-63890358>

11 Front Line Defenders, "Environmental Human Rights Defender Jasim Al-Asadi Released by his Kidnappers After Two Weeks", 15 February 2023, available at <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/environmental-human-rights-defender-jasim-al-asadi-released-after-2-weeks>

12 Iraq Ultra, "The War of the Ministry of Higher Education Against Civil Society Organizations... Is it Executing Khazili's Statements?", 30 November 2023, available at <https://ultrairaq.ultrasawt.com/-/حرب-التعليم-العالي-ضد-منظمات-المجتمع-المدني-هل-هي->

Although Kurdistan did not see mass protests in 2019, freedom of expression is also limited there, with frequent reports of journalists being arrested and subjected to torture for criticizing the dominant political parties in the region.¹³ Despite this level of coercion, my interlocutors explained there is more freedom to work on environmental issues in this region, and that often when environmental activists faced reprisals in central Iraq, they would take shelter there.¹⁴ Even in Kurdistan, however, activists often receive veiled threats for their environmental work from political parties, especially when they call out activities that might harm these parties' business interests.¹⁵ To illustrate this seeming contradiction, one of my interviewees began by explaining how much safer Sulaymaniyah is for environmentalists compared to other parts of Iraq, before going on to tell me about his escape plan should he be subjected to threats or coercion himself.¹⁶ Thus, while Kurdistan's civic space has not shrunk as much as other areas of Iraq since 2019 there are still tangible, well-founded risks associated with carrying out environmental activism there.

4. Framing and Organizing Environmentalism in Iraq

The literature on social movements posits that groups use framing processes in "the struggle over the production of mobilizing and counter-mobilizing

Daraj, "There is No Longer Gender or Genderization": The War of the Militia State on 'Gender' in Iraq", 16 April 2024, available at <https://daraj.media/بعد-ماكو-جندر-ولا-جندر-ة-حرب-الدولة-الم>

13 See, for example, Amnesty International, "Iraq/KRI: Further Information: Journalist Released After Three Years' Imprisonment: Guhdar Zebari", 26 February 2024, available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde14/7732/2024/en/>

14 Interview with head of environmental NGO in Sulaymaniyah, 10 September 2024.

15 WhatsApp interview with head of environmental NGO based in Sulaymaniyah, 2 October 2024.

16 Interview with environmental activists in Sulaymaniyah, 10 September 2024.

7 Navigating the Challenges of Environmentalism in an Increasingly Authoritarian Iraq

ideas and meanings”.¹⁷ Frames are contested and conditioned by political opportunity structures and constraints, and framing processes are strategic, aimed at achieving specific ends, such as mobilizing adherents or acquiring resources. Frames also have different characteristics, including taking on a “prognostic” form that presents solutions to issues.¹⁸ In line with this literature, the findings of the present study suggest that, due to the risks associated with environmental activism in Iraq and the increasingly limited space for mobilization, environmental actors tend to adopt small, carefully framed initiatives that steer away from topics deemed to be “sensitive” that might harm the interests of the political elites and associated militia groups. Environmental projects tend to provide solutions to issues and are framed in non-adversarial terms as a means of supporting the government in tackling environmental problems. In many instances, issues such as environmental degradation or climate change are secondary aspects of these projects or are tacked onto them, as opposed to being their central focus.

Civil society actors have been a key node of environmental mobilization in Iraq. Some NGOs run environmental programs as part of a broader mandate of human rights and development. These programs are often framed as a means through which to support the government in achieving parts of its overarching agendas. For example, several organizations interviewed for this paper from northern, central, and southern Iraq focus on youth empowerment. Some of these organizations frame their work as being educational to signal that it does not pose a threat to the ruling elites. The organizations work on raising awareness through workshops and education programs, especially among young people in school settings and around issues such as climate change. Other organizations focus on youth, giving out small grants to individuals or organizations that want to run sustainable projects or projects that contribute to solving particular environmental problems. These projects are often framed as being part of the broader goal to diversify the Iraqi economy away from the public sector and toward private sector development through entrepreneurship initiatives. In contrast, the organizations working in western Iraq interviewed for this study focus on initiatives to reintegrate

those who have been displaced or widowed as a consequence of the war on Daesh (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, ISIS).¹⁹ They do this through teaching households to grow their own food and providing them with farming equipment and small plots of land so that they can live sustainably and sometimes even generate an income.

Spotlight 1: IRO Organization for Community Development was founded in 2011 and works on education and awareness-raising initiatives around climate change and the environment in Sulaymaniyah. The organization runs “environmental clubs” at schools with children, young people, their parents, and the school administration. They also they run an interactive mobile theater and hold puppetry shows in schools to teach children about the importance of protecting the environment. In addition, they host “youth cafes” to discuss environmental issues with young people.

The second group of NGOs, which primarily work on environmental issues, frame their projects as supporting the government in tackling high-visibility problems of public concern, such as pollution and environmental degradation. For example, it is common for organizations to run reforestation campaigns aimed at increasing green spaces for citizens and providing shade. The interviews carried out for this project suggest that this is particularly common in the Kurdistan region, where 50% of trees have been lost in the past 70 years, due to illegal tree felling, forest fires, summer droughts, and the operations of the Turkish military.²⁰ Such initiatives are also popular in Mosul, which lost 150,000 trees during the war against Daesh,²¹ and in Basra, where 80% of palm forests have been destroyed since

17 Robert D. Benford and David Snow, “Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment”, *Annual Review of Sociology* 26, (2000), p.13.

18 Benford and Snow, p.615.

19 Interview with head of agricultural NGO in Baghdad, 15 September 2024.

20 The Arab Weekly, “Millions of trees to save vanishing forests of Iraq’s Kurdistan”, 22 August 2024, available at <https://the-arab-weekly.com/millions-trees-save-vanishing-forests-iraqs-kurdistan#:~:text=in%20the%20region,-,‘Almost%2050%20percent%20of%20forests%20have%20been%20lost%20in%20Kurdistan,rainfall%20and%20also%20fire%20incidents’>.

21 +974, “Mosul’s forests struggle with neglect and fires, but reforestation efforts offer hope”, 11 November 2024, available at <https://en.964media.com/27550/#:~:text=Local%20officials%20report%20that%20Mosul’s,from%20ISIS%20control%20in%202017>

8 Navigating the Challenges of Environmentalism in an Increasingly Authoritarian Iraq

the 1980s.²² In addition, another common activity undertaken by environmental NGOs, as well as some temporary informal campaigns, is to clean up lakes and rivers through litter pickup. This is one of the core strands of work being carried out by NGOs such as Humat Dijlah, which, for example, partnered with Save the Tigris and Humat Al-Furat in 2021 to clean up the Euphrates River in Ramadi, the largest city in Anbar province. In this way, NGOs provide solutions to environmental issues faced by citizens, doing the work of the government without directly confronting it for its shortcomings.

Spotlight 2: Hasar Organization is an environmental NGO based in Erbil that seeks to plant one million oak trees in Kurdistan as a means of cooling the climate. They use an online platform, which is freely available to the public on their website, to track the extent of existing canopy coverage in a particular area and then work on ascertaining how many more trees must be planted to obtain optimal coverage. They work predominately with youth volunteers on planting and have a rewards and advancement system for young people involved in their projects. Hasar Organization has been hugely successful in its mission in part because of their framing of their work, which provides a solution to a key environmental issue in Kurdistan of great importance to the public.

There are also think tanks and cultural centers across Iraq that conduct research and outreach programs on environmental issues. These projects are often framed as “neutral” scientific studies and therefore non-adversarial. In Kurdistan in particular, several academics and organizations work on biodiversity, studying the region’s flora and fauna and publishing books and academic articles on these issues. Others work on the protection of wildlife, for example through academic research on the trade routes used to smuggle exotic animals through Iraq and by documenting wildlife through photography.²³ These

projects are framed as increasing the prestige of the Kurdistan educational system and highlighting the region’s wildlife. There are also several think tanks and journalistic outfits that work on publishing short articles on environmental issues as well as on training journalists on how to cover environmental stories and providing them with the necessary equipment to do so. Publications by these organizations tend to engage with topics that are already in the public sphere in a general and often shallow way, predominantly as a means of avoiding attracting attention from the government or associated militias by being overtly critical.²⁴

Spotlight 3: Bait Tarkib is a Baghdad-based arts organisation that runs a program on art and activism. They have worked with the environmental NGO Humat Dijlah to bring in experts to train artists on environmental issues for three months. The artists then produce artwork on this basis which is displayed across Baghdad and in galleries. They are also working in collaboration with Humat Dijlah to make their headquarters and operations sustainable.

Several cultural centers have also begun to use art as a means of awareness raising and critiquing inaction on pollution and climate change, including through publishing comic books, holding exhibitions, and producing street art.²⁵ As an interlocutor from one of these organizations explained, the arts are a useful avenue for environmentalism in Iraq because they allow artists to comment on government actions in an implicit and indirect way, giving “a different face to the issue”, and therefore avoiding direct confrontation with the authorities.²⁶ Several networks work across Iraq on issues such as food sovereignty and the protection of livelihoods, including in the marshes region where droughts, damming, and the activities of the extractive industries have led to the destruction of the marshlands.²⁷ In an interview carried out for this study, the coordinator of one of these networks explained that they too had to frame their messages

22 Harith Hassan, *Eden Denied: Environmental Decay, Illicit Activities, and Instability in Iraq’s Southern Border Area*, Malcom H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Centre, 29 March 2022, available at <https://carnegieindia.org/research/2022/03/eden-denied-environmental-decay-illicit-activities-and-instability-in-iraqs-southern-border-area?lang=en¢re=middle-east>

23 Interview with academic in Sulaymaniyah, 10 September 2024.

24 WhatsApp interview with head of environmental NGO, 30 September 2024.

25 Interview with head of environmental NGO in Sulaymaniyah, 10 September 2024; Interview with artist in Baghdad, 16 September 2024.

26 WhatsApp interview with artist, 16 September 2024.

27 Interview with network coordinator in Baghdad, 14 September 2024.

in cultural terms, particularly in relation to the cultural significance of the marshlands to Iraqi identity, as a means of making their message more legible to policymakers and limiting the likelihood of backlash against activists in the network.²⁸

The only mode of organization that has tended to be more confrontational in Iraq is the informal ad hoc campaign, often launched by environmental actors in the wake of crises that have garnered public attention. For example, in Sulaymaniyah, activists recently launched an informal campaign by the name of “Protect Goizha Mountains” to coordinate efforts to prevent the building of residential complexes on the mountains, which has already led to the deliberate burning of 13,000 pine trees.²⁹ Prior to this, in 2018 activists in Basra launched the “Save Basra” campaign to draw attention to pollution in the province in the wake of the poisoning of 118,000 people due to water contamination, culminating in the biggest environmental protests in Iraq to date.³⁰ In these instances, environmental actors can be more adversarial in their organizing because the public support for, and visibility of, the issues at hand increases opportunities for action and makes it less likely that the government and associated militias will react with overt coercion. It is only in such instances when environmental issues have been successfully framed as crises or as requiring urgent attention, that environmental actors in Iraq have been able to mobilize large-scale movements or activism, which is widely recognized among civil society actors as being crucial for pressuring the Iraqi government into making concessions.³¹

28 Ibid.

29 Farhad Mamshai, “The Politics of Environment in the Kurdistan Region: Unveiling the Crisis of Deforestation and Forest Fires”, *JC3+*, August 2024, available at: <https://iraqclimatechange.org/the-politics-of-environment-in-the-kurdistan-region-unveiling-the-crisis-of-deforestation-and-forest-fires/>

30 Yassin 2023; Human Rights Watch, *Basra is Thirsty: Iraq’s Failure to Manage the Water Crisis*, July 2019, available at <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/07/22/basra-thirsty/iraqs-failure-manage-water-crisis>

31 Interview in with civil society member in Basra, 18 September 2024.

5. Drawbacks of the Small Projects Approach

The small, carefully framed initiatives favored by Iraq’s environmental actors are useful in as far as they allow them to remain operational – which would not necessarily be the case were they to adopt bolder tactics. However, as will be explained in this section, a small projects approach also means that the environmental movement in Iraq lacks autonomy, and that issues considered to be politically sensitive are deemed too dangerous to broach.

The work of environmental movements in Iraq is limited by the extent to which the interests of the political elite and private corporations are intertwined. For example, interlocutors interviewed for this project explained that an organization in northern Iraq working on monitoring pollution levels could not put their devices in areas close to factories and refineries owned by political parties in the area.³² This decision, according to the interviewees, was taken not only because of the danger that revealing elevated levels of pollution might pose to the organization and its members, but also because the organization itself is funded by a local politician. Therefore, rather than producing an accurate picture of pollution in the area and how this might be addressed, the organization works to enhance the image of the local politician in question.

Similarly in central and southern Iraq, the extent of the political elite’s investments in environmentally harmful industries has meant that certain topics cannot be discussed publicly. For example, the Iraqi government has increasingly deployed discourses that work to securitize the oil sector, categorizing it as a “national security issue” because oil revenues make up over 90% of the Iraqi budget.³³ Such a categorization increases penalties for criticizing the pollution from oil extraction or the way it contributes to anthropogenic climate change. The securitization

32 Interview with environmental activist in Sulaymaniyah, 10 September 2024.

33 Interview with head of environmental programs at an NGO in Erbil, 8 September 2024; Interview with head of environmental network in Baghdad, 16 September; WhatsApp interview with environmental activist in Missan, 2 October 2024.

10 Navigating the Challenges of Environmentalism in an Increasingly Authoritarian Iraq

of the oil sector – along with the post-2003 social contract which buys citizen loyalty through the provision of civil service jobs – has worked to create a homogenous narrative. Even environmental activists often told me that nothing could be done to reduce oil production, because otherwise “how would people live?”³⁴ In these ways, environmental actors in Iraq are forced to prioritize small, shallow interventions that do not harm the interests of the political elite, rather than tackle the root causes of environmental degradation and climate change.

Spotlight 4: In Missan province, the Hewizah marshes are experiencing a drought due to a dam installed on the Iranian side of the marsh, lack of water allocations from the Iraqi government, the use of river water by oil companies for the purposes of injecting their wells and low precipitation levels caused by climate change. In response to this, villagers from the marshes, who rely on the wetlands for their livelihoods and for whom they are an integral part of their cultural heritage, have periodically held protests calling for a solution to the drought. Activists from the region have been very successful in bringing media attention to their cause both internationally and on a local level. However, despite this and the fact that the Hewizah marshes are protected under the Ramsar Convention and are a UNESCO World Heritage, they have not been able to produce any substantive results because the interests of so many actors are entangled with the situation in the marshes. This has meant that often their protests and campaigns are met with mass arrests and the use of live fire.

The politicization of certain environmental issues has also led to self-censorship among environmental actors in Iraq. For example, as researchers and journalists interviewed for this paper explained, in 2023 when the Ministry of Environment ran a drive to close unlicensed fishing ponds across Iraq to curb water mismanagement, they could not speak about the issue openly because many of the largest farms are associated with religious figures in Najaf and Karbala.³⁵ In another example, a civil society activist

34 Thanks to Ansar Jassim for this point; Interview with head of environmental network in Baghdad, 16 September 2024.

35 Husam Sobhi, “Satellite Monitoring Reveals the Startling Extent of Iraq’s Water Crisis”, The Century Foundation, Sep-

explained that there are elevated cases of cancer and birth defects in Fallujah, western Iraq, known to have been caused by the use of depleted uranium and white phosphorus by the US army following the 2003 invasion, which led to “the highest rate of genetic damage in any population ever studied”.³⁶ However, because drawing attention to these harms and the post-invasion mismanagement might negatively impact the interests of politicians and bureaucrats in the area – including through highlighting the lack of adequate medical facilities to care for those affected – anyone who addresses this issue online has their social media profiles hacked and is threatened.³⁷ Taken together, the experiences of interlocutors suggest that fear of reprisals has limited their ability to expose environmental harm and hold powerful actors to account for their role in its perpetration or lack of resolution.

6. How Iraqi Environmentalists Engage with the Private Sector and Government

On an individual level, some workers in the private sector, particularly in the oil industry, sometimes collaborate with environmental actors as whistleblowers, clandestinely leaking information to civil society organizations on instances of pollution.³⁸

tember 2023, available at <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/satellite-monitoring-reveals-the-startling-extent-of-iraqs-water-crisis/>; Interview with head of environmental network in Baghdad, 16 September 2024; WhatsApp Interview with head of environmental NGO based in Baghdad, 30 September 2024.

36 Dahr Jamail, “Iraq: War’s Legacy of Cancer”, *Al Jazeera*, March 2013, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2013/3/15/iraq-wars-legacy-of-cancer>; Kali Rubaii, “Birth Defects and the Toxic Legacy of War in Iraq”, MERIP, 2020, available at <https://merip.org/2020/09/birth-defects-and-the-toxic-legacy-of-war-in-iraq/>

37 WhatsApp interview with head of NGO based in Fallujah, 15 September 2024.

38 Safaa Khalaf and Julia Choucair Vizoso, “Mobilizing for the Environment in Iraq”, Arab Reform Initiative, October 2024, available at <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/mobiliz->

11 Navigating the Challenges of Environmentalism in an Increasingly Authoritarian Iraq

These workers have also enabled inspections of pollution in oil fields, which had been stalled by government and company officials. Moreover, private companies, particularly those in the energy sector, are increasingly funding climate and environmental initiatives in Iraq, including projects, research, workshops, and educational programs on the green transition and sustainability.³⁹ For example, some organizations interviewed for this study received funding from energy companies to run programs on the impact of climate change on women in Iraq.⁴⁰ Other self-identifying environmental activists were invited to participate in a long-running program for young policy leaders funded by an oil and gas company, which in its 2024 iteration focused on sustainability and climate change.⁴¹

These private sector initiatives serve several functions. For one, the funding is presented as a form of “social benefit”, which works to enhance the companies’ public image because it suggests that they are giving back to society as opposed to just extracting. Private funding, particularly of research activities, also grants energy companies access to powerful figures in Iraqi society such as decision-makers, politicians, and influential young people, who in turn enable their continued presence in the country. Finally, this cooperation gives the appearance that energy companies are environmentally responsible but comes with strings attached, like the fact that funding recipients cannot work with organizations deemed to be too politically risky by the companies.⁴²

Civil society has also engaged in some collaborations on climate and environmental issues with the government – with a few select individuals from different ministries as opposed to collaboration on a more systematic level. For example, in 2024 some civil servants in the Ministry of Environment vocally supported a youth climate conference, amid

pushback and fears that young attendees might propose recommendations that could compromise “national security”.⁴³ Interviewees also mentioned they had been given land by the government for reforestation projects,⁴⁴ collaborated with civil servants in the Ministry of Education on programs around climate change and pollution in schools and universities,⁴⁵ and worked with municipalities on small-scale wastewater recycling projects.⁴⁶

Yet when asked about relations with the government, interlocutors more often highlighted the lack of cooperation. This was particularly acute around the provision of data on environmental harm, although there were regional variations; according to the interviews, data is more accessible in Kurdistan than in Federal Iraq. One young environmental activist explained that although some ministries keep digital records, they usually direct researchers to their paper files to make it more difficult for them to find what they are looking for.⁴⁷ According to the activist, some environmental data is politically sensitive because it reveals information about the extent of government failings. As another young researcher explained, departments in the same ministry do not even share data with each other, let alone with activists.⁴⁸ Government data is also inaccurate or insufficient. For example, the government does not produce local climate models and instead continues to rely on the global models of the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Moreover, critical information on surface water levels is derived through remote sensing and open-source data, as opposed to more precise fieldwork. These barriers around knowledge production on the environment make it difficult to forge collaborations and to accurately assess and address the country’s environmental challenges.

Government actors also tend to coopt projects seen

[ing-for-the-environment-in-iraq/](#)

39 Interview with co-founder of environmental NGO in Erbil, 9 September 2024; Interview with head of research centre in Baghdad, 14 September 2024; Interview with environmental activist in Baghdad, 15 September 2024.

40 Interview with environmental activist in Baghdad, 14 September 2024.

41 Interview with environmental activist in Baghdad, 14 September 2024; Interview with environmental activist in Baghdad, 15 September 2024.

42 Interview with environmental activist in Baghdad, 14 September 2024.

43 Interview with youth activists in Erbil, 8 September 2024.

44 Interview with co-founder of environmental NGO in Erbil, 9 September 2024; Interview with head of agricultural organization in Baghdad, 15 September 2024; Interview with academic in Basra, 18 September 2024.

45 Interview with head of environmental NGO in Erbil, 9 September 2024; WhatsApp interview with head of environmental NGO based in Sulaymaniyah, 2 October 2024.

46 Interview with head of environmental NGO in Sulaymaniyah, 10 September 2024.

47 Interview with youth activists in Erbil, 8 September 2024.

48 Interview with environmental activist in Basra, 19 September 2024.

to be potentially profitable or that might improve their public image, as suggested by the interviews carried out in this study. For example, Basra's local government initially agreed to support a reforestation project by providing the funds to hire people to plant seedlings that had already been donated or purchased. Instead, the government ended up duplicating the project by hiring a private company with links to a member of parliament to plant 300,000 seedlings at a higher price, allowing the company to embezzle from the government contract.⁴⁹ The government is also trying to take over projects that track pollution levels across Iraq and to integrate them into its own platforms.⁵⁰ While in theory such a collaboration could be productive and allow the government to act on some of the environmental issues facing the country, in reality, the patronage systems through which all of Iraq's civil servants are hired means that is highly unlikely that someone with the necessary competence or interest will run the project and ensure its longevity. There is an additional risk that the government taking over the project might make the data less reliable by, for example, not publicizing instances of pollution that make the authorities look particularly negligent or by not taking the necessary measures to verify sources. Thus, more often than it is cooperating with activists, the government is actively taking over their projects and using them to promote its own interests.

7. How Iraqi Environmentalists Engage with Civic Actors

Several of the mass protests that have taken place in Iraq since 2011 have had environmental triggers, although activists did not frame them in environmental terms.⁵¹ In 2011 and 2015, protests were ignited by the rise in temperatures and

inadequate provision of electricity.⁵² In 2018, protests were triggered in Basra by the rise in temperatures, decreases in water flow, and governmental neglect in monitoring water pollution.⁵³ In 2019, when protesters demonstrated against the post-2003 ethno-sectarian political system installed by occupying forces and exiled politicians, they were also protesting for a more sustainable future.⁵⁴ Smaller protests are also held periodically across Iraq, particularly in the south, demanding employment and services, especially in areas close to oil fields.⁵⁵ As is common in protests organized by marginalized communities, for them environmental justice is conceptualized as including not just the air, land, and sky but also all the resources to which they have historically been denied including employment.⁵⁶ Thus, local demonstrators often argue that because they are most affected by the pollution of the oil industry, they are more entitled to jobs than foreign workers or those from other provinces in Iraq.

The mass protests that have taken place in Iraq since 2011 have also inspired some longer-term environmental activism. For example, many of the young activists in Missan who launched grassroots campaigns to protect the Hewizah marshes also participated in the 2019 protests and continue to be supported by other activists in the province.⁵⁷ For many of them, the 2019 uprising was their first experience of protest, and it taught them about the power of mass mobilization in provoking government action.

Environmental activists have also made limited attempts to forge links with the women's rights movement, including through organizing workshops that address the impact of climate change on women.⁵⁸ However, in these instances, women are

49 Interview with academic in Basra, 18 September 2024.

50 Interview with civil society activist in Baghdad, 16 September 2024.

51 For a more detailed examination of the links between civic and environmental activism, see: Khalaf and Choucair Vizoso 2024.

52 Alkhudary 2023.

53 Human Rights Watch 2019.

54 Khalaf and Choucair Vizoso 2024; Rijin Sahakian, "Extraction Rebellion: A Green Zone of Hope", n+1, 2019, available at <https://www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/extraction-rebellion/>

55 Benedict Robin-D'cruz, "Deleuze & Guattari on protest weakness in Iraq", *Third World Quarterly* 45, (no.10), 2024.

56 Melissa Checker, *Polluted Promises: Environmental Racism and the Search for Justice in a Southern Town*, New York: New York University Press, 2005.

57 Hayder Al-Shakeri, "Iraq's Young Agents of Change", Chatham House, 2024, available at <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/10/iraqs-young-agents-change/summary>

58 Interview with head of environmental NGO in Baghdad, 14

13 Navigating the Challenges of Environmentalism in an Increasingly Authoritarian Iraq

rarely seen as partners in tackling climate change and are often only framed as victims. It is common for organizations to invite only male academics to lead workshops on these issues, instructing the women participants on how they have been affected by climate change.⁵⁹ By not including women as participants, such initiatives risk not only entrenching gender inequalities in attempts to tackle climate change, but also reproducing the problems of climate change through the adoption of policies that focus on technical solutions as opposed to the need to overhaul social relations.⁶⁰

Civil society actors and activists working in the environmental space are also increasingly attempting to unify their efforts across Kurdistan and Federal Iraq, driven by an awareness of the similarity of environmental challenges faced in both regions. In one example of cross-country cooperation, in 2017 Nature Iraq published *Key Biodiversity Areas in Iraq*, a book based on research undertaken by academics from across the country and supported by organizations that work on conservation, including BirdLife International, to identify sites of international significance for their biodiversity and galvanize their protection.⁶¹ It is not just established civil society actors forming cross-country coalitions, but also increasingly young activists. In 2022, a group of young people organized the “Ambassadors of Cleanliness” social media campaign, bringing together volunteers to clean the Tigris River across Iraq.⁶² Based on this collaboration, they proceeded to form Greenspace Iraq, an NGO that works to mobilize young people to act on climate change. These kinds of initiatives reflect the existence of a new generation that is interested in the environment and climate and for whom ethno-sectarian divisions are less relevant than for older generations.⁶³

September 2024.

59 Discussion with women’s rights activist in Baghdad, February 2024.

60 Jennifer L. Rice, Joshua Long, and Anthony Levenda. “Against Climate Apartheid: Confronting the Persistent Legacies of Expendability for Climate Justice”, *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 5 (2), (2022), pp. 625–45, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2514848621999286>, pp.635–636.

61 Interview with academic and member of Nature Iraq in Sulaymaniyah, 10 September 2024.

62 Interview with young activists in Erbil, 8 September 2024.

63 Taif Alkhudary, “From *Muhasasa* to *Mawatana*: Consociationalism and Identity Transformation within the Protest Movement in Federal Iraq, 2011–2019”, *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 30, (no.1) 2023.

Several environmental organizations are also organizing transnationally. For example, Green Space Iraq has a sub-network called the Local Conference of Youth, which is the national component of the Youth Climate Movement (YOUNGO) of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. Its members regularly attend regional climate change meetings, and in 2024 ran the country’s youth climate conference where they produced policy recommendations to the Iraqi government on climate change. NGOs and networks focusing on food sovereignty are also active transnationally. The food sovereignty network Gwez W Nakhl regularly takes farmers from across Iraq to a model farm in Lebanon to exchange ideas about sustainable farming.⁶⁴ Activists in the diaspora who are part of this network and have access to seed banks abroad have brought back to Iraq indigenous seeds that were no longer available in the country. Another organization which runs an organic farm in Samawah that uses permaculture as a means of reviving agricultural land in the area and increasing its resilience to the effects of climate change, tapped into diaspora networks active in agriculture abroad to get seedlings and donations of equipment, and to fundraise.⁶⁵ Other organizations expressed their aspirations to work regionally. The Iraqi Women Environmental Journalists Network, which works on the capacity building of experienced journalists and journalism students to cover environmental stories, is working to expand their mission to Jordan, Syria, and Palestine. Forging transnational connections allows organizations active in Iraq to learn from experiences in other contexts, fundraise, and develop unified stances on issues affecting the entire region.

8. The Role of International Donors

The emergence of environmental actors in Iraq and the adoption of environmental programs in established NGOs have also been shaped by the increase in international funding for tackling climate change and pollution in the country. This shift in funding is not only a reaction to a greater understanding of the climate catastrophe facing Iraq, but also partially a response to the increased crackdown on

64 Interview with coordinator in Baghdad, 14 September 2024.

65 Online interview with head of environmental NGO, 1 October 2024.

civil society post-Tishreen. Since environmental and climate change projects can be designed in ways that avoid clashing with the interests of the political and financial elite or militia groups, they are safer for activists than more overtly political projects that might call for more wide-ranging government reform. In turn, these projects are less likely to be ended abruptly by politicians or militias and more likely to be seen through to completion, making them more appealing to international donors.

Many of the organizations who have received funding from international donors are new to the field and their lack of experience limits their work and their ability to execute their plans.⁶⁶ Donors tend to only fund small projects for short periods, the results of which can be tracked clearly in their reporting, limiting the scope of interventions that can be made.⁶⁷ For example, reforestation campaigns are constantly being initiated in Basra, which has created “green islands” in the center of highways or small gardens in schools. Yet these efforts in no way compensate for the nearly 47 million acres of agricultural land that has been lost due to the activities of the oil industry in the province between 2012 and 2024.⁶⁸ In addition, initiatives that attempt to empower people to live sustainably by growing and selling their own food, especially in western Iraq, seem to fail to consider that the price of imports is much lower than Iraqi-grown produce and therefore locals can in no way compete or make a living from these projects.

Thus, this study suggests that, in addition to the shrinking of civic space, the funding structures of international donors also contribute to the adoption of shallow and ineffective interventions by environmental actors in Iraq. Moreover, the short-term nature of international funding also works to limit the sustainability of environmental initiatives.

66 Interview with head of environment NGO in Erbil, 8 September 2024.

67 Interview with head of environmental NGO in Erbil, 8 September 2024; Five members of youth environmental NGO in Erbil, 8 September 2024; Interview with head of environmental network and artists focusing on environmental issues in Baghdad, 16 September 2024.

68 Green House, “Reforestation Campaign in More than 200 Schools in Basra”, 1 July 2023, available at <https://green-house-iq.com/projects/basra-school/>; Basra Agricultural Directorate, “Table of Agricultural Space Taken over by Ministry of Oil”, 2024.

The piecemeal nature of funding and the extreme dependency of Iraqi NGOs on international donors has also meant that members of civil society are constantly competing for grants to be able to keep their jobs. This has led to the fragmentation of civil society and made it harder to create networks working toward the same goals or able to mobilize mass grassroots action. For example, while carrying out the fieldwork for this study, I came across three separate networks formed to bring together environmental actors across the country, none of which seemed to know of the existence of the others. Moreover, because of the lack of coordination between different environmental actors in Iraq, there tends to be a duplication of efforts, limiting the effectiveness of environmental action. A civil society activist explained that while his organization had already developed an online environmental monitor, another group also received international funding to work on a similar project.⁶⁹ While they had been in touch to discuss joining forces to develop the existing platform, ultimately the other group decided to duplicate the project instead of working together.

Moreover, there was a perception among interviewees that international funding is often monopolized by large established organizations that know how to write successful grant applications and have preexisting links to donor organizations (international donors tend to favor well-known organizations they have worked with in the past).⁷⁰ Thus, newer, younger grassroots organizations and networks that may be more innovative in the way they organize around environmental issues and more experienced in mobilizing direct action, especially among young people, are less likely to get funding than larger organizations interested in the execution of pre-determined projects. Access to funding is also politicized by powerful gatekeepers. For example, as an environmentalist and academic working in Basra explained, in order to get international funding, researchers must get approvals from the government, the university, and the security services.⁷¹

69 Interview with member of civil society, 16 September 2024.

70 Five members of youth environmental NGO in Erbil, 8 September 2024; WhatsApp interview with activist from Nasiriyah, 3 October 2024.

71 Interview with academic in Basra, 18 September 2024.

9. Conclusion and Recommendations

To navigate growing authoritarianism in Iraq, environmentalists tend to adopt small-scale, time-limited initiatives, which they frame as supporting the government in tackling environmental issues as opposed to taking an overtly adversarial stance. This approach has also been shaped by the funding structures of donors, which tend to favor small-scale and time-limited projects.

These dynamics mean that environmental movements(s) in Iraq lack autonomy, which in turn has influenced issue prioritization, limiting environmental work to spaces that do not harm the interests of powerful religious, political, and armed figures and groups. Addressing widespread environmental degradation in Iraq requires broader and more systematic mobilization as well as an understanding of the root causes of the heatwaves, mass public health crises, and droughts that Iraqis are experiencing today. More than this, however, it requires the overhaul of the political system imposed on Iraq through the US and UK-led invasion and occupation, which has allowed the entrenchment of political parties and militias who only serve their own interests, including increasingly through the violent suppression of activism and critical voices.

Considering its findings, this study has the following recommendations for international donors and global environmental organizations:

Funding:

Establish a mechanism to coordinate and mainstream funding to prevent the duplication of projects and to ensure that funding also reaches new organizations led by youth, as opposed to being limited to established organizations that may be less able to mobilize grassroots action.

Consider ways to make funding more sustainable, for example by helping NGOs to set up social enterprises that might allow them to continue funding projects themselves and to pay basic salaries and costs even when donor funding runs out. This could potentially contribute to decreasing competition for international funding and increase opportunities for networking and collaboration between NGOs.

Projects:

Consult local actors active in Iraq's environmental movement(s) on project design and goals, instead of prioritizing projects that make shallow interventions and yield tangible results within short periods. This will work to make projects more effective, as well as ensure that any work undertaken takes the safety of self-identified environmental actors into account.

Set up a knowledge exchange initiative between actors in Kurdistan and Federal Iraq to increase cross-country coordination and share expertise and experiences.

Ensure that all projects funded take an intersectional approach to the issues at hand, including that marginalized groups, including women and people from rural areas, are central to both the development and delivery of projects.

Diplomacy:

Leverage diplomatic power and the protected status of Iraq's marshlands as a UNESCO World Heritage site and under the Ramsar Convention to stop the expansion of extractive industries into the wetlands. This is important for supporting the efforts of activists and grassroots campaigns to save the marshes.

Use connections with ministries and an intermediary position to assist environmentalists to gain access to government data.

Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.



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