
Iraq's Climate Crisis is a Human Rights Crisis

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Summary : Today, water scarcity, extreme temperatures, and desertification threaten an astonishing percent of Iraq's agricultural land, resulting in increasing rates of crop failures. In a 2023 study by the Norwegian Refugee Council, 60 percent of farmers interviewed said they cultivated less land or had to use less water due to extreme drought. In 2023, Iraq reported a decline in the harvest of 8 out of the top 10 crops, including vegetables and legumes.

By any metric, Iraq's environment is under severe pressure. Lakes, rivers, and marshlands are shrinking, and in some cases entirely [disappearing](#). [Sandstorms](#) are increasing in frequency and severity, resulting in hospitalizations and the grounding of flights. Decades of [conflict-related pollution](#), a de-prioritization of environmental policy [weak environmental protections](#), and [mismanagement of natural resources](#) have decimated Iraq's landscape.

The harmful effects of climate change in Iraq are undeniable and [will increase](#) in the coming decades. Iraq is [already experiencing](#) more frequent and severe heat extremes and an agricultural drought caused by the breakdown of the global climate. There is a reason the UN has ranked Iraq as the fifth [most vulnerable](#) country to global warming.

Collectively, these environmental challenges create a precarious situation for millions of Iraqis, many of whom already face socio-economic hardships. Our health and well-being are inextricably tied to the health and well-being of the environment we live in. And when the environment suffers, we do too.

For example, in 2018, Basra's water crisis caused the hospitalization of close to [120,000 people](#) and led to thousands of citizens joining [mass protests](#) against local and federal government authorities. The authorities [responded](#) by shutting down the internet and social media in Iraq; using excessive force against protesters, killing at least nine and injuring hundreds; and conducting arbitrary arrests, before ultimately releasing protesters without charge.

Today, water scarcity, extreme temperatures, and desertification threaten an astonishing [percent](#) of Iraq's agricultural land, resulting in increasing rates of crop failures. In a [2023 study](#) by the Norwegian Refugee Council, 60 percent of farmers interviewed said they cultivated less land or had to use less water due to extreme drought. In 2023, Iraq reported a [decline in the harvest](#) of 8 out of the top 10 crops, including vegetables and legumes.

Crop failure pushes up the price of livestock feed, and [small-scale farmers](#) and [nomadic communities](#) are the least able to absorb the shocks to their incomes this creates. They also often end up the most heavily affected by and vulnerable to poverty.

As arable land for farming shrinks and waterways for fishing evaporate, among other economic factors, increasing numbers of Iraqis are [moving to cities](#) in search of work. As of March 2024, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) recorded over [140,000 Iraqis](#) who remain displaced in the context of drought and land degradation. If the needs of migrants and internally displaced people are not adequately addressed, this may increase pressure on services, push up food prices, and exacerbate social tensions, leading to protests and even violence.

Yet even as Iraq reels from the worsening effects of the climate crisis, it continues to contribute to its cause. Iraq is the world's sixth largest oil producer, but is second only to Russia in [gas flaring](#), a wasteful process of burning methane gas during oil extraction. Flaring emits CO2 and methane into the atmosphere and Iraqi flaring accounts for nearly [10 percent](#) of the flaring emissions of greenhouse gases worldwide. Despite [a long-standing government approach](#) to not speak about any health impacts from the country's oil industry, Iraq's (then) environment minister [publicly acknowledged](#) in 2022 that pollution from oil production is the main reason for increases in cancer rates in nearby communities.

To avert the worst impacts of climate change and preserve a livable planet, global warming needs to be limited as much as possible – ideally, to within [1.5 degrees](#) of pre-industrial averages. Globally, this requires an immediate and fair phaseout of fossil fuels. But what does this phaseout mean for a country like Iraq, where fossil fuels provide the [vast majority](#) of its government revenue?

Revenue derived from fossil fuels pays for public servants' salaries, services like education, health care, and electricity, and investments in infrastructure projects. Replacing this revenue and the energy fossil fuels provide will require large-scale economic diversification and investment in renewable energy. Such a transition could have immense benefits for the Iraqi

job market. Although the fossil fuel industry dominates Iraq's economy, it only [represents](#) 1 percent of total employment in the country. There is a path for a rapid and just transition that will build a fairer fossil fuel-free economy that improves the rights of all Iraqis.

At the same time, Iraq needs to begin remediating existing environmental degradation and adapt to the anticipated harms of climate change. This is a daunting agenda but could include investments in climate-smart infrastructure; equitable land and water management systems and policies; sustainable and diversified livelihood opportunities; as well as early warning systems and disaster preparedness. These efforts are crucial for reducing vulnerabilities and building resilience at both the local and national levels. Though the situation looks dire, there is cause for hope.

In recent years, the government of Iraq has increasingly prioritized the environment. In March 2023, Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani [promised](#) sweeping measures to tackle climate change, including plans to meet one-third of its electricity demands using renewable energy and in September 2024, the government [launched](#) a new National Strategy for the Protection and Improvement of the Environment in Iraq. The government has vowed to [eliminate gas flaring](#) by 2027; increased [public scrutiny](#) of the issue may help ensure that this time, the pledge actually reduces flaring emissions.

Globally, the climate crisis is also a human rights crisis. Dealing with environmental degradation and the climate crisis in Iraq is a herculean task, but quite simply, Iraq cannot afford to sit idly by. The well-being and human rights of people in Iraq depend on it.