



One of about forty canals in Basra city. Many of them are littered with trash, including plastic bottles. (Tom Peyre-Costa/Norwegian Refugee Council/2018).

## Basra Fact Finding Mission Report #1

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### Executive Summary

The recent social unrest in Basra is a product of the intersection of longstanding grievances towards political corruption, government neglect and unemployment, as well as the socioeconomic impact of a chronic water crisis. A lack of access to clean water in Basra governorate has generated a public health crisis, fuelling public anger. In addition, a gradual reduction in the water flow to Iraq's marshlands has also contributed to migration from rural areas to the cities, heightening competition over jobs in the cities of southern provinces, and also contributed to fuelling social unrest. Tribal dynamics have shaped the allocation of jobs in the oil sector in Basra, fuelling further resentment and competition over employment opportunities.

### Key Recommendations:

- The Norwegian Refugee Council should conduct additional field visits and use this opportunity to consider programming that bridge humanitarian-development divide. NRC should leverage both its global expertise as a displacement agency and extensive experience in WASH programming in both urban and rural displacement settings to pilot innovative programming that address the emerging needs in Southern Iraq.
- Donor governments should scale-up support to civil society with support and partnership with international agencies.
- Displacement agencies should begin tracking displacement as a result of economic and climate considerations across Iraq, starting with Iraq's southern province.

## Background

The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) conducted a fact-finding mission to Basra City from 26 to 29 August 2018. The intention of the mission was to develop a more robust understanding of the recent developments in Basra Governorate which included sustained public demonstrations through July and August 2018 over lack of jobs, corruption, and poor services, particularly water, which has led to a public health crisis. The mission also sought to identify needs that can be addressed through NRC's Core Competencies and Advocacy. NRC staff met with UN personnel involved in humanitarian coordination, held a focus group discussion (FGD) consisting of 11 members representing various youth-based local organizations, as well as the chairman of the planning committee of the Basra Provincial Council, which informed the findings of this report.

## Context

Basra Governorate is located in Southern Iraq, bordering Kuwait to the south and Iran to the east and has a population size of 4.5 million people. The majority are Shia-Muslims Arab with a considerable Sunni and community and small Christian population. Basra holds a significant amount of Iraq's oil reserves, which account for around 95% of Iraq's state revenue at current production rates. In spite of being resource-rich, Basra suffers from chronic unemployment and poverty, as well as poor public services and decaying infrastructure, which many believe has been fuelled by poor governance and corruption. According to UNDP, 16% of the population live below the poverty line of \$2.50 USD per day.<sup>i</sup> Youth unemployment stands at around 18%, with more than half of the population in the country overall under 24 years old.<sup>ii</sup>

### *Basra and the 2018 Parliamentary Elections*

Voter turnout at a national scale for this year's parliamentary elections was relatively low, with Shia majority areas in the south, including Basra, experiencing some of the lowest turnout numbers.<sup>iii</sup> Only 14.4% of Basra's eligible voters went to the polls.<sup>iv</sup> Nonetheless, the Iranian supported, pro-PMF Fatah Alliance came in first place in Basra governorate, followed by the Sairoon Alliance, and Prime Minister Abadi's Nasr Alliance in third.<sup>v</sup>

### *Recent protests*

Initially sparked by an electricity shortage after Iran decreased its supply to Iraq and water shortages over the summer,<sup>vi</sup> in mid-July 2018, Basra residents began demonstrating in large numbers against poor service provision and political corruption.<sup>vii</sup> Complaints of government neglect and poor services are nothing new in Basra. Demonstrations around similar grievances have occurred before; however, the drop in oil prices in the last four years and a redirection of government resources and attention to central and northern provinces in the battle against the Islamic State group (IS) are believed to have exacerbated long standing resentment against the government and dominant political parties. Finally, with a plan to build 22 dams along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, this summer Turkey started filling the Ilisu Dam, which the Iraqi Ministry of Water has said is to blame for the reduced water flow to Iraq this summer,<sup>viii</sup> and has exacerbated the situation.

This summer's protests have been largely made up of youth. Some analysts believe that the return of former Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) members who heeded calls in 2014 to support the Iraqi military's fight against IS to poor services and unemployment may also fuel tensions. When the protests first began, the government responded by shutting down internet and social media in Iraq in an effort to quell protests and prevent images of the protests from being widely disseminated. Demonstrations in Basra subsided in August and intensified again during the first week of September 2018. As the protests continued, Iraqi security forces and allied, Iranian-backed paramilitary groups responded with force, including live ammunition,<sup>ix</sup> resulting in the deaths of at least nine protestors and hundreds of injuries, fuelling further anger against the authorities. In addition, there have been a number of arrests of human rights activists and protest leaders over the course of the summer.

NRC's field mission to Basra indicates that the recent social unrest is a product of the intersection of longstanding grievances towards political corruption, government neglect and unemployment, as well as the socioeconomic impact of a chronic water crisis. The grievances are compounded by added pressures from urbanization and recent migration patterns as a result of decreased availability of water and livelihood opportunities. Discussions with

diplomats, UN, NGOs, and youth in Basra and throughout Iraq indicate that the situation is likely to deteriorate further.

## Key Findings

### 1. Lack of access to clean water has generated a public health crisis, contributing to recent social unrest.

While Basra residents have been known not to drink tap water for the past 15 years, the FGDs NRC conducted indicated that the catalyst of the current situation is that tap water this summer became unsuitable for cleaning or agricultural purposes. In northern areas of the governorate, public water is affected by contamination as the watershed of Iraq and by unregulated deposits from oil companies. In southern areas of the governorate, public water is also affected by salination, the product of decreasing levels of river water ceding territory for sea water to encroach inland. According to Basra Health Directorate, approximately 17,500 cases of water-borne illnesses have been treated in Basra hospitals during a two-week period.<sup>x</sup>

Several factors have contributed to water availability and contamination:

- New dams and irrigation plans in Turkey and Iran have contributed to lower water levels for the Tigris River or tributaries that feed into it, which in turn has allowed sea water to encroach inland in Basra Governorate.
- As sewage spills into the Tigris and Euphrates rivers upstream, water treatment plants down the watershed in the governorate do not have the capacity to treat such high volumes of contamination. According to the FGDs, water treatment plants in Basra Governorate are equipped to treat pure river water, not salt water. Most treatment plants are either outdated or not well maintained since they were built in the early 1990s.

While the government's concessions to protestors included a desalination plant, this will take months to build, and significant planning is needed to ensure its efficacy. Both local NGO representatives and the chairman of the planning committee of the Basra Provincial Council confirmed that the central government has reserves of clean water it is maintaining for crisis in other locations. While all agreed that releasing reserves to Basra would only be a temporary solution, the position supports a narrative believed by many Basra residents in which the governorate is not prioritized by the federal government. Meanwhile, bottled water has proved to prohibitively costly for many families at 25,000 IQD per ton of water, according to the FGDs.

Local NGO representatives informed NRC that doctors at public hospitals may be giving cholera medication as a preventative measure to prevent an outbreak, given the vulnerability of the situation as it stands. However, this information could not be independently verified. According to FGDs conducted by NRC, hospitals are quite overcrowded and often lack adequate or up-to-date equipment. Moreover, anecdotal reports through the FGDs indicate that hospitals do not have the capacity to treat anything beyond basic medical needs. For example, cancer patients or those that need inpatient treatment travel abroad to seek adequate care, if they can afford to do so. FGDs also noted that they believed cancer was on the rise in Basra,<sup>xi</sup> due to air pollution from by-products of oil production. The issue is not as acute in Basra City as it is not near the oil sites.

### 2. A reduction in the water flow to Iraq's marshlands has also contributed to migration from rural areas to the cities, heightening competition over jobs in the cities of southern provinces.

While social unrest in Basra has recently gained national media attention, it is interconnected to a number of different socio-economic dynamics localized to Basra governorate. Water levels of Iraq's rivers have dropped significantly over the last years, pushing many to migrate from rural areas to the cities. The inability of the Iraqi government to manage the country's resources, particularly water, have exacerbated the effects. Recently, the Deputy Governor of Dhi Qar announced that 1200 families left their homes for the cities due to the drought.<sup>xii</sup> It is important to note that 80% of Iraq's water resources are used for agriculture purposes and about a third of the population relies on agriculture as a source of livelihoods. For example, in the Abu Khaseeb district, one of the areas in Basra that witnessed protests over the last months, one FGD participant said that about 30-40% of the communities rely on agriculture, livestock, and fishing activities as their main source of income.

These dynamics have exacerbated tensions in the rural parts of the governorate. For example, according to FGDs, the local council of Zubair Sub-District in Basra began a campaign this summer to identify families not native to the area and are employed by oil companies as a result of the current situation.

Overall, the governorate has experienced demographic shifts due to economic migration over the past 15 years, poor governance and lacking urban planning for a population that nearly doubled in that time and growing public resentment that the social contract as the petroleum hub of the country is not being honoured.

#### *Other population movements*

According to the FGDs, many Iraqis from other provinces migrated to Basra in search of economic opportunities in the private sector, mainly oil. After 2006, demographics within the city began to shift as original residents emigrated and residents from rural areas and neighbouring governorates, many with strong tribal linkages, began to dominate in terms of population.

Since 2014, some 10,000 IDPs from northern governorates came to Basra, with their various humanitarian needs. The displacement resulted in a small but sizable humanitarian presence that has since scaled down.

In 2017, following the conclusion of major military operations against IS, a sizable portion of PMU fighters returned to their homes in Basra governorate, in need of jobs and livelihoods, and reintegrated into their original tribal networks. Contrary to popular belief, returning fighters do not come home to bolster their respective PMUs, but take up positions again as members of their tribe, having a further effect on intra-tribal dynamics.

### **3. Tribal dynamics have shaped the allocation of jobs in the oil sector in Basra, fuelling further resentment and competition over employment opportunities.**

There is significant frustration around the impact of oil companies on the surrounding environment without having any sufficient benefit to the population. According to the UN, though oil production accounts for the largest portion of Iraq's GDP, only 1% of the local labour forces is employed by the oil industry. <sup>xiii</sup>

While oil production from Basra makes up a significant portion of state revenue, this has not manifested in adequate public services. Furthermore, one of the primary grievances held by protestors is that oil companies are not recruiting locally and not recruiting enough. Many oil fields are located in areas dominated by strong and even armed tribes and oil companies are known to hire influential tribal figures to settle disputes with tribes as well as reserving different positions for their members. The practice acts as a sort of insurance policy for the companies. According to the FGDs, many view the jobs as being allocated to appease local tribes but effectively excluding other Iraqis from higher paying, more technical positions within the companies. Jobs for Iraqis at oil companies are typically characterized as blue collar: security, guarding, janitorial, or others that do not require skilled labour. Irrespective, protestors noted that the government's response grew more intense only after demonstrations began targeting the oil companies or the roads leading to them, highlighting the primacy given to the companies as major contributors to the government's budget.

Respondents at the FGD mentioned that tribal clashes constitute the main source of violence in Basra Governorate, not issues between PMUs or criminality. Moreover, tribal clashes with oil companies tend to involve the hiring of their members. Basra tribes are known to be well armed. Government campaigns to disarm tribes have not been successful in the past.

#### *Other Issues*

According to the FDS, Basra tribes are also known to trade female members as a form of arbitration between them, although the practice has recently died down. Multiple female members are traded at the same time and it is assumed that they enter into forced and/or under-age marriages. A scandal broke out three years ago regarding this practice that drew national attention and condemnation, however FGD reported that they are confident the practice remains but is only less visible.

## Information Gaps

Given the preliminary nature of the fact-finding mission, significant information gaps still exist. These gaps may be addressed by subsequent missions to Basra by NRC or other humanitarian actors, civil society organizations, and/or donor governments. The continued relevance of the findings of this mission is highlighted by the recent escalation in events in Basra during the first week of September 2018. The information gaps include:

- More concrete assessment and evaluation of needs in terms of WASH, Health, Livelihoods, or other sectors.
- Understanding of operational risks involved in operating or not operating in Basra
- More definitive contextual awareness in terms of access or security considerations
- Concrete figures of displacement due to economic or climate considerations
- A more robust understanding of contextual developments and needs in rural areas of Basra and other southern governorates

## Conclusions and Recommendations

While the most recent developments have not resulted in significant displacement patterns in a short period of time, displacement and migration seems to have been occurring at a gradual pace and unrelated to a singular event. Building a network in southern Iraq at this point in time will help NRC develop its capacities and systems when in the future such displacements become more relevant and pronounced. In the past weeks, and frequency and intensity demonstrations against local authorities have been on the rise despite some budgetary re-allocations and infrastructure projects announced by the federal government, signalling a strong chance that the situation will deteriorate further.

### The Norwegian Refugee Council:

- Immediately conduct additional field visits to Basra and other southern provinces given the indication of significant needs of communities who are losing critical livelihoods resources and are denied access to clean water. While the scope of NRC's August mission was limited to Basra City, additional visits and potentially assessments in field locations may yield more concrete information regarding the presence of needs. Initial findings indicate that the most relevant Core Competencies that may address current needs are WASH, cash/livelihoods, and youth/education programming.
- NRC should leverage both its global expertise as a displacement agency and extensive experience in WASH programming in both urban and rural displacement settings to pilot innovative programming that address the emerging needs in Southern Iraq. NRC should also include NRC's livelihoods, youth and education programming.
- NRC should use this opportunity to bridge the humanitarian-development divide and pilot programming addressing mixed migration patterns in Iraq. This is in line with NRC's 2018-2020 strategy to focus on shifting from early recovery to transitional programming.

### International donor governments and UN agencies:

- Scale up support to local NGOs and civil society entities through direct funding partnership and advocacy. With support and partnership with international agencies, civil society organizations in Basra have the capabilities to both address the growing needs of vulnerable communities and hold local authorities and government to account.
- Water scarcity resulting in further migration and/or reduced economic opportunities may fuel further instability in Iraq's southern region. The international community should remain attentive to the developing context in Basra and Iraq's other southern provinces. This should include engaging Iraq's neighbouring countries to adopt strategies that ensure more sustainable use of water resources and encourage cooperation.
- Displacement from rural to urban areas due to the effects of water scarcity appears to be on the rise in the South. Displacement agencies should begin tracking displacement as a result of economic and climate considerations across Iraq, starting with Iraq's southern provinces. This should help support an understanding of the needs and their geographic locations and function as an early warning mechanism for donors and NGOs in Iraq.

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**Endnotes**

- <sup>i</sup> UNDP, 2015, <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/basra-compact-flagship-partnership-revive-economy-southern-iraq>.
- <sup>ii</sup> "Basra Fury Spreads to Baghdad," *The New Arab*, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2018/7/19/The-Iraq-Report-Basras-fury-spreads-to-Baghdad>.
- <sup>iii</sup> Iraqi elections shock political class, *Al-Monitor*, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/05/iraq-election-sadr-fateh.html>; Iraqi elections 2018: Live updates, *The National*, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/iraq-elections-2018-live-updates-1.729551>.
- <sup>iv</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/protests-southern-iraq-intensify-instability-follow>.
- <sup>v</sup> Iraqi elections shock political class, *Al-Monitor*, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/05/iraq-election-sadr-fateh.html>.
- <sup>vi</sup> "No water or electricity: why southern Iraqis are at a breaking point," *France 24*, 24 July 2018, <http://observers.france24.com/en/20180724-water-electricity-iraq-south-basra>.
- <sup>vii</sup> These developments come coincide with an announcement that the US will reimpose sanctions against the Iranian government. This is expected to have economic and security-related ripple effects in Iraq. Some analysis argue that Iran cutting the electric line to Basra was likely a political decision, in response to US sanctions.
- <sup>viii</sup> "Why water is a growing faultline between Turkey and Iraq," *Financial Times*, 4 July 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/82ca2e3c-6369-11e8-90c2-9563a0613e56>.
- <sup>ix</sup> *Amnesty International*, July 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/07/iraq-security-forces-deliberately-attack-peaceful-protesters-while-internet-is-disabled/>.
- <sup>x</sup> "Iraq Sees Spike in Water-Borne Illnesses," *Voice of America*, 29 August 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/iraq-sees-spike-water-borne-illnesses>.
- <sup>xi</sup> There are also many older reports available of rise of cancers cases in Basra and Fallujah following the 2003 US invasion. See "Iraq sees alarming rise in cancers, deformed babies," *Reuters*, Suadad Al-Salhy, 1 December 2009, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-iraq-health-war/iraq-sees-alarming-rise-in-cancers-deformed-babies-idUKTRE5B01I320091201>.
- <sup>xii</sup> نزوح المئات من مناطق ينتظرها "الموت البطيء" بجنوب العراق  
*Kurdistan 24*, <http://www.kurdistan24.net/ar/news/c8dace28-a93e-4512-bab0-baad7bbf9749>.
- <sup>xiii</sup> UN Iraq Country Profile, [http://www.uniraq.com/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=item&layout=item&id=941&Itemid=472&lang=en](http://www.uniraq.com/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&layout=item&id=941&Itemid=472&lang=en).