



Student washing his hands at a school in central Basra. (Tom Peyre-Costa/Norwegian Refugee Council/2018).

## Basra Fact Finding Mission Report #2

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### Executive Summary

The objective of NRC's second mission was to better identify specific needs and areas of intervention to both help prevent the deterioration of the crisis in Basra and respond to the emerging humanitarian needs, in particular as they relate to the water crisis.

In the immediate term, affordability is a key barrier facing vulnerable households in accessing clean water. Conditions of water and sanitation facilities in schools with the start of the new academic year is a key concern for Education Directorate officials in Basra. On a broader scale the Government of Iraq lacks the technical capacity to respond to the complexity and scale of the current water crisis. Specifically, reduction in water flow rates have resulted in saline incursion upstream beyond the directorate's capacity.

Displacement and forced urban migration in marginalized areas is leading to heightened tensions and competition over resources such as water. If not addressed, this could give rise to further tribal disputes and become a key driver of conflict. Many residents in Basra and in a village NRC visited on the outskirts of the city repeatedly told NRC that threatened livelihoods security of marginalized communities continues to fuel recruitment into armed military groups.

## Recommendations

- The humanitarian community should immediately conduct a WASH response to prevent the spread of water-borne diseases like cholera. This can include interventions in schools, including public hygiene education programs, ahead of the start of the new academic year.
- The humanitarian community should immediately conduct multi-sectoral needs assessments to better understand both the root causes of recent social unrest and gradual displacement, as well as potential measures to prevent the spread of disease and further displacement in Basra and other southern governorates.
- Donors should support long-term efforts by the Iraqi government to improve water infrastructure by providing technical and financial support to line ministries. This can include scaling up support to the Ministry of Water Resources' 20 Year Plan to bolster the country's water infrastructure.
- The Iraqi government should develop a national water management policy that takes into account the country's depleted water resources and reduction in water flow from neighbouring countries.

## Mission Objectives

As a follow up to the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) fact-finding mission to Basra City during the last week of August, a team conducted an assessment mission to Basra from 15 to 18 September 2018. The objectives of this mission were to:

- Collect more in-depth information and analysis on the humanitarian needs and gaps in services
- Continue to build a strategic network and contact base that NRC can call upon in the future
- Contribute to improved contextual understanding of recent developments in Basra

The assessment team was comprised of five NRC staff: Area Manager, Security Coordinator, WASH Advisor, WASH Coordinator, and Advocacy Officer. The team met with local NGO representatives, youth, and senior staff of both the Education and Water Directorates. The team also conducted two focus group discussions (FGDs) consisting of 14 community members, various local organizations, human rights activists as well as a *mukhtar* and local community leaders in Doua village in Qurna District. These discussions informed the key findings of this report. The mission also included a visit to an affected primary school in Basra City.



Figure 1: Map showing location of Al-Qurna District in Basra Governorate.

## Key Findings

### **1. In the immediate term, affordability is a key barrier facing vulnerable households in accessing clean water.**

According to the FGDs, water pollution and water shortage are affecting households of all socio-economic classes. Bottled water in Basra is prohibitively expensive for the most marginalized households, placing them at heightened risk of contracting water-borne diseases. Apart from it being expensive, many are also suffering from skin problems caused by the pollution level of the water they buy from water stations. In Qurna village, for example, interviewed residents mentioned spending a minimum of 60 USD per household every month on drinkable water from private vendors (who also filter the water). In addition, residents reported spending another 60-80 USD per month for water that is clean enough for personal hygiene, laundry, and other non-potable uses. This means an average household may need to spend between 120-140 USD per month on water. While NRC was unable to obtain concrete figures on average household income in this particular area, residents said that a school teacher earns approximately 330 USD per month, making current costs of potable water unaffordable for many. While those who can afford the costs do purchase water for laundry and showering, those who cannot afford it reportedly often suffer from skin rashes, diarrhoea and other negative effects such as flees, scabies, and other infections.

### **2. Water and sanitation facilities in schools with the start of the new academic year in October is a key concern for ministry education officials.**

According to the Education Directorate, there are over 800 schools in Basra with deteriorating infrastructure, including water and sanitation facilities. Officials from the Education Directorate expressed concern that poor water and sanitation facilities could lead to conditions like diarrhea, irregular school attendance, and potentially school drop outs. Children affected by this, but who remain in school, are often fatigued, resulting in lower levels of concentration and a reduced ability to learn. This can lead to low learning attainment. In the challenging economic environment, officials also mentioned parents increasingly relying on children to contribute to income generation for the household due to a combination of rising prices (e.g. of water) and lack of job-opportunities for the general population.

The Education Directorate acknowledged that international donors and humanitarian agencies were likely unable or unwilling to invest or play a large role in enhancing infrastructure; however they appealed to NRC and other humanitarian agencies to help improve the WASH facilities and access to drinking water in the worst affected schools in Basra.

It was also discussed with the Water Directorate that establishing Parent/Teacher Water Committees (PTWCs) in schools, to help coordinate this response and build community ownership, could be an effective approach. These committees would comprise of people able and motivated to manage cash-grants for tailored solutions to water purification and upgrading the schools WASH facilities.

Solutions could be some form of water purification tools, including the provision of water storage. Furthermore, government-run hardware components should be implemented along with relevant hygiene promotion sessions to mitigate the risks of large outbreaks of water borne diseases (such as cholera).

### **3. Displacement and forced migration from rural areas is leading to heightened tensions and competition over resources such as water. If not addressed, this could give rise to further tribal disputes and key driver of conflict in the country.**

OCHA has reported that 630 families or 3,780 individuals have been displaced from their homes due to water shortages and poor water quality in August 2018 alone.<sup>i</sup> NRC's assessment also included a field visit to the village of Doua in Qurna District, an area that has received a number of IDPs from surrounding governorates over the years due to water shortages. In FGDs with village residents, access to clean water was identified as a key source of tensions. Residents also reported localized violence over resources and land-pasture rights for livestock. In one case, displaced persons reported that their water buffalos were shot at by host community members for grazing in areas farmed by local residents. There were also anecdotal reports of armed violence along tribal fault lines over the same issues.

Large scale displacement as a result of drought in Iraq has occurred several times in the last ten years. For example, in Diyala earlier this year 35,000 people were at risk of fleeing their homes due to deteriorated living conditions as a result of lack of electric power and reduced availability of drinking water.<sup>ii</sup> During a drought between 2007-2009, about 40 per cent of the country's croplands and production of livestock was reduced and around 20, 000 rural residents were displaced in search of resources and livelihood opportunities.<sup>iii</sup>

#### **4. The Government of Iraq lacks the technical capacity to respond to the complexity and scale of the current water crisis.**

The water crisis facing Basra and Iraq's southern governorates is a result of a combination of 1) reduced flow rates in the rivers due to upstream damming by Turkey and Iran 2) saline intrusion without the infrastructure to treat it, 3) increased chemical and biological contamination of upstream water sources, 4) general lack of maintenance and capital investments, and 5) years of drought without policies in place to mitigate impact. In meetings with Basra's Water Directorate, officials indicated that Basra was seeing the worst water shortages in 80 years.

A reduction in water flow rates have resulted in saline incursion upstream beyond the directorate's capacity. According to directorate officials, the Water Directorate is only able to decrease the salinity of the water, but not completely treat it. In addition, reduced flow rates and the dumping of faecal and chemical waste into river courses upstream has led to significant increase in contamination and the possibility of increased health risks. General failure to ensure maintenance and capital investments has exacerbated the issue.

The Water Directorate General informed NRC that the government is considering construction of industrial-scale desalination and reverse osmoses plants (similar to other Gulf countries). However, these are long term plans and the rehabilitation of water treatment plants and installation of reverse osmosis units will not immediately guarantee that the most vulnerable people will access safe and sufficient drinking water at the household level. This challenge can be addressed in the short term, at least partially, by humanitarian agencies providing safe and easy-to-use water purification tools and water storage materials at schools in marginalized neighbourhoods.

There is a growing dependence on an emerging, unregulated privately owned network of water vendors utilising small Reverse Osmosis Plants. Combined with the costs of filtering and transportation, the delivery of this water becomes extremely expensive for already marginalized households. Before the Government's projects described above come on line and in view of the current crisis, there is an important role for NGOs to improve the private sector's supply of water, particularly for vulnerable groups and schools in marginalized areas, in coordination with local authorities.

#### **5. Threatened livelihoods security of marginalized communities fuels recruitment into armed military groups.**

Residents who participated in FGDs emphasized that the unemployment situation has worsened over the past years, and that armed groups are often the only available employer. With agriculture being a primary source of income for more than a third of the country, water shortages without viable alternatives threatened the livelihoods of households in rural areas. This has both triggered, but also contributes to ongoing cycles of violence. Residents emphasized is extremely difficult to find work, even as day-laborers. Residents reported that university graduates were seeking opportunities as daily workers for a lack of better options. Participants in the FGDs pointed to multiple examples of youth joining Popular Mobilization Units because they lacked other means and sources of income, dispelling a myth that recruitment occurs on an ideological or political basis.

#### **Information Gaps**

Information gaps identified by NRC's second Basra mission illuminate key questions related to direct intervention in the immediate term. These knowledge gaps will be addressed through successive missions to Basra by NRC in the weeks and months to come, potentially including multi-sectoral needs assessments with other organizations. In NRC's next mission, the team will conduct programmatic baselines including a market assessment by the WASH team. NRC is also engaging relevant authorities to better understand navigating access requirements. Other Information gaps include, but are not limited to:

- More robust multi-sector needs assessments especially in terms of WASH, Education, Livelihood, or other sectors in order to target caseloads in order to immediately
- Lack of comprehensive monitoring data especially as this relates to displacement trends and patterns and public health indicators
- Establishing support from local authorities and/or administrative bodies in order to mitigate operational risks and secure access

#### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Information and analysis gathered through NRC's second mission to Basra Governorate, including Qurna District, has started to further identify the causes of the water crisis, unpack some of the drivers of displacement and forced migration in rural

areas, and identify areas where the support of humanitarian organizations may be useful in both responding to immediate humanitarian needs and preventing the situation from deteriorating.

It is the responsibility of the Iraqi government to ensure access to basic services, however due to the government's lack of capacity to respond to the scale of the issue, there is a critical role to play the international community, including humanitarian actors, in supporting these efforts, and immediately preventing a larger scale humanitarian crisis. As the international community supports the Iraqi government in developing and operationalizing post-IS recovery and reconstruction plans, plans to mitigate the impact water insecurity and climate-related security risks must be included. Coordinated efforts through security, stabilization, as well as humanitarian actors to ensure this issue is not overlooked.

### **The Government of Iraq**

- Ensure that considerations about the impact of climate-induced displacement and disaster risk reduction are integrated into post-IS group recovery and reconstruction plans across the country. Water scarcity is quickly emerging as one of Iraq's most significant challenges to ensuring stability and security in the country. Without coordinated efforts to address this, the impact of Iraq's water insecurity risks being overlooked.
- Develop a national water management policy that takes into account the country's depletion in water resources and reduction in water flow from neighbouring countries and incorporates sustainable agricultural practices.
- Immediately accelerate support and investment in large scale water infrastructure works and ensure that this is prioritised by the incoming government.

### **Donors governments and wider international community**

- Support long term efforts by the Iraqi government to improve water infrastructure by providing technical and financial support to Iraqi line ministries. In particular, scale up support to the Ministry of Water Resources' 20 year plan to bolster the country's water infrastructure.
- Support UN agencies and NGOs to address immediate humanitarian needs and prevent spread of water-borne diseases. While the government of Iraq must fulfil its responsibility to ensure that citizens have adequate access to basic services, including by investing capital in critical infrastructure, the humanitarian community in Iraq also has a critical role to play in the immediate term.
- Provide support and facilitate regional dialogues that work towards developing a framework that supports a more equitable sharing and distribution of water resources between countries in the region. Iraq is largely reliant on water that flows downstream from neighbouring countries, making it more vulnerable to the impact of instability in the region in regards to water supply.

### **The humanitarian community**

- Work in coordination with Iraq's private sector to improve the quality and quantity of water supply and linkages with end users. This should include working to decrease costs and price points, particularly in marginalized neighbourhoods.
- Conduct an intervention to address current humanitarian needs through an integrated program approach. An integrated approach is critical to both responding to immediate needs and reducing the risk and preventing the spread of water borne-diseases and further social unrest. This must include:
  - An immediate WASH response to prevent the possible spread of water-borne diseases like cholera, using schools as an entry point. Examples of immediate high impact programming includes WASH in schools, including public hygiene education, ahead of the start of the new academic year; and provision of safe, familiar and easy to use water purification tools and water storage materials at school.
  - An immediate cash response to help vulnerable households better afford clean water and prevent potential spread of illnesses in the short term.
- Prioritize prevention-focused WASH & livelihood interventions on southern governorates where most recently displaced persons cite as their place of origin.
- Partner and support local civil society organizations already operational in Basra, including through direct funding partnerships, to better reach the most vulnerable households.

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<sup>i</sup> OCHA Bulletin, 31 August 2018, accessed on 21 September 2018:

<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/OCHA%20Iraq%20Humanitarian%20Bulletin%20-%20August%202018.pdf>. Note: this is not believed to be a comprehensive figure.

<sup>ii</sup> <http://1001iraqithoughts.com/2018/03/08/iraqs-water-crisis-a-threat-to-national-security/>

<sup>iii</sup> Iraq: Climate related security risk assessment, August 2018, Expert East-West NGO