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America's War for Oil and the Great Mesopotamian Dustbowl

It was one of the fabled rivers of history and the Marines needed to cross it.

In early April 2003, as American forces sought to wrap up their conquest of the Iraqi capital, Baghdad, and take strongholds to its north, the Marine Corps formed “[Task Force Tripoli](#).” It was commanded by General John F. Kelly (who would later serve as Donald Trump’s White House chief of staff). His force was charged with capturing the city of Tikrit, the birthplace of dictator Saddam Hussein. The obvious eastern approach to it was blocked because a bridge over the Tigris River had been damaged. Since the Marines assembled the Task Force in northeastern Baghdad, its personnel needed to cross the treacherous, hard-flowing Tigris twice to advance on their target. Near Tikrit, while traversing the Swash Bridge, they came under fire from military remnants of Saddam’s regime.

Still, Tikrit fell on April 15th and, historically speaking, that double-crossing of the Tigris was a small triumph for American forces. After all, that wide, deep, swift-flowing waterway had traditionally posed logistical problems for any military force. It had, in fact, done so throughout recorded history, proving a daunting barrier for the militaries of Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon and the Achaemenid Cyrus the Great, for Alexander the Great and Roman Emperor Justinian, for the Mongols and the Safavid Iranians, for imperial British forces and finally General John H. Kelly. However, just as Kelly’s stature was diminished by his later collaboration with America’s only openly autocratic president, so, too, in this century the Tigris has been diminished in every sense and all too abruptly. No longer what the Kurds once called the *Ava Mezin*, “the Great Water,” it is now a shadow of its former self.

Fording the Tigris

Thanks at least in part to human-caused climate change, the Tigris and its companion river, the Euphrates, on which Iraqis still so desperately depend, have seen alarmingly low water flow in recent years. As Iraqi posts on social media now regularly [observe](#) in horror, at certain places, if you stand on the banks of those once mighty bodies of water, you can see through to their riverbeds. You can even, Iraqis report, ford them on foot in some spots, a previously unheard-of phenomenon.

Those two rivers no longer pose the military obstacle they used to. They were once synonymous with Iraq. The very word Mesopotamia, the premodern way of referring to what we now call Iraq, means “between rivers” in Greek, a reference, of course, to the Tigris and the Euphrates. Climate change and the damming of those waters in neighboring upriver countries are expected to [cause](#) the flow of the Euphrates to decline by 30% and of the Tigris by a whopping 60% by 2099, which would be a death sentence for many Iraqis.

Twenty years ago, with President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney, [two oil men](#) and climate-change denialists, in the White House and new petroleum finds dwindling, it seemed like the most natural thing in the world for them to use the 9/11 horror as an excuse to commit “regime change” in Baghdad (which had no role in taking down the World Trade Center in New York and part of the Pentagon in Washington, D.C.). They could thereby, they thought, create a friendly puppet regime and lift the U.S. and U.N. sanctions then in place on the export of Iraqi petroleum, imposed as a punishment for dictator Saddam Hussein's 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

There was a deep irony that haunted the decision to invade Iraq to (so to speak) liberate its oil exports. After all, burning gasoline in cars causes the earth to heat up, so the very black gold that both Saddam Hussein and George W. Bush coveted turned out to be a Pandora's box of the worst sort. Remember, we now know that, in Washington's “war on terror” in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, the U.S. military emitted at least [400 million](#) metric tons of heat-trapping carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. And mind you, that fit into a great tradition.

Since the eighteenth century, the U.S. has put

[400 billion](#) — yes, billion! — metric tons of CO₂ into that same atmosphere, or twice as much as any other country, which means it has a double responsibility to climate victims like those in Iraq.

Climate Breakdown, Iraqi-Style

The United Nations has now [declared](#) oil-rich Iraq, the land on which the Bush administration bet the future of our own country, to be the fifth most vulnerable to climate breakdown among its 193 member states. Its future, the [U.N. warns](#), will be one of “soaring temperatures, insufficient and diminishing rainfall, intensified droughts and water scarcity, frequent sand and dust storms, and flooding.” Sawa Lake, the “pearl of the south” in Muthanna governorate, has [dried up](#), a victim of both the industrial overuse of aquifers and a climate-driven drought that has reduced precipitation by 30%.

Meanwhile, temperatures in that already hot land are now rising rapidly. As Adel Al-Attar, an Iraqi adviser to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) on water and habitat, [describes it](#), “I’ve lived in Basra all my life. As a boy, the summer temperature never went much beyond 40C (104 °F) in summer. Today, it can surpass 50C (122° F).” The climate statistics bear him out. As early as July 22, 2017, the temperature in Basra reached 54 °C (129.2° F), among the highest ever recorded in the eastern hemisphere. Iraqi temperature rise is, in fact, two to seven times [higher than](#) the average rate of global temperature rise and that means greater dryness of soil, increased evaporation from rivers and reservoirs, decreasing rainfall, and a distinct loss of biodiversity, not to mention rising human health threats like heat stroke.

The American war did direct harm to Iraq’s farmers, who make up [18%](#) of the country’s labor force. And when it was over, they had to deal with staggering numbers of

[explosives](#) left in the countryside, including landmines, unexploded ordnance, and improvised explosive devices, many of which have since been dangerously covered by desert sands as a climate-driven drought worsens. An article in the journal of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences observes that when it comes to [military disruptions](#) of waterways, “Displacement, explosions, and movement of heavy equipment increase dust that then settles on rivers and accumulates in reservoirs.” Worse yet, between 2014 and 2018 when the guerrillas of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, whom the American war helped bring into existence, took over parts of northern and western Iraq, they blew up dams and practiced [scorched-earth tactics](#) that did \$600 million worth of damage to the country’s hydraulic infrastructure. Had the U.S. never invaded, there would have been no ISIL.

Dust and More Dust

As Al-Attar of the ICRC observed, “When there’s not enough rain or vegetation, the upper layers of earth become less compact, meaning the chance of dust or sandstorms increases. These weather events contribute to desertification. Fertile soil is turning into desert.” And that is part of Iraq’s post-invasion fate, which means ever more frequent dust- and sandstorms. In mid-June, the Iraqi government [warned](#) that particularly violent dust and thunderstorms in al-Anbar, Najaf, and Karbala provinces were uprooting ever more trees and flattening ever more farms. In late May in Kirkuk, a dust storm [sent hundreds](#) of Iraqis to the hospital. A year ago, the dust storms came so thick and fast, week after week, that visibility was often obscured in major cities and thousands were hospitalized with breathing problems. In the late twentieth century, there already were, on average, 243 days annually with high particulate matter in the air. In the past 20 years, that number has reached 272. Climate scientists predict that it will hit 300 by 2050.

A little over [half](#) of Iraq’s farmed land relies on rain-fed agriculture, mostly in the north of the country. Iraqi journalist Sanar Hasan [describes](#) the impact of increasing drought and water scarcity in the northern province of Ninewah, where yields have shrunk considerably. Ninewah produced 5 million metric tons of wheat in 2020 but only 3.37 million in 2021 before plummeting by more than 50% to 1.34 million in 2022. Such declining yields pose a special problem in a world where wheat has only grown more expensive, thanks in part to the Russian war on Ukraine. Thousands of Iraqi farming families are being forced off their lands by water shortages. For example, Hasan [quotes](#)

Yashue Yohanna, a Christian who worked all his life in agriculture but now can’t make ends meet, as saying, “When I leave the farm, what do you expect me to do next? I’m an old man. How will I afford the cost of living?”

Worse yet, southern Iraq’s marshlands are turning into classic dust bowls. The Environment Director of Maysan Governorate in southern Iraq recently [announced](#) that its al-Awda Marsh was 100% dried up.

The marshes at the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers have been storied for thousands of years. The world’s oldest epic, the Mesopotamian tale of Gilgamesh, is set there as it describes a hero journeying to an enchanted garden of the gods in search of immortality. (Echoes of that epic can be found in the biblical story of the garden of Eden.)

Our addiction to fossil fuels, however, has contributed significantly to the blighting of that very source of life and legend. It was there that marsh dwellers once hauled in a majority of the fish eaten by Iraqis, but the remaining wetlands are now experiencing increasingly high rates of evaporation. The Shatt al-Arab, created where the Tigris and Euphrates flow together into the Persian Gulf, has seen its water pressure drop, allowing an influx of [salt water](#) that has already destroyed 60,000 acres of farmland and some 30,000 trees.

Many of Iraq's [date palms](#) have also died owing to war, neglect, soil salinization, and climate change. In the 1960s and 1970s, Iraq provided three-quarters of the world's dates. Now, its date industry is tiny and on life support, while Marsh Arabs and southern farming families have been forced from their lands into cities where they have few of the skills needed to make a living. Journalist Ahmed Saeed and his colleagues at [Reuters](#) quote Hasan Moussa, a former fisherman who now drives a taxi, as saying, "The drought ended our future. We have no hope, other than for a [government] job, which would be enough. Other work doesn't fulfill our needs."

Water as Women's Work

Although it was mostly men who planned out Iraq's ruinous wars of the past half-century and set their sights on burning as much petroleum, coal, and natural gas as possible for profit and power, Iraq's women have borne the brunt of the climate crisis. Few of them are in the formal job market, though many do work on farms. Because they are at home, they have often been given responsibility for providing water. Because of the present drought conditions, many women already [spend](#) at least three hours a day trying to get water from reservoirs and bring it home. Water foraging is becoming so difficult and time-consuming that some girls are dropping out of secondary school to focus on it.

At home, women are dependent on tap water, which is often contaminated. Men who work outside the home often gain access to water purified for Iraqi industry and its cities. As farms fail owing to drought, men are emigrating to those very cities for work, often leaving the women of the household in rural villages scrambling to raise enough food in arid circumstances to feed themselves and their children.

Last fall, the International Organization for Migration at the United Nations [estimated](#) that 62,000 Iraqis living in the center and the south of the country had been displaced from their homes by drought over the previous four years and anticipated that many more would follow.

Just as people from Oklahoma fled to California in droves during the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, so now Iraqis are facing the prospect of dealing with their own dustbowl. It is, however, unlikely to be a mere episode like the American one. Instead, it looms as the long-term fate of their country.

If, instead of invading Iraq, the American government had swung into action in the spring of 2003 to cut carbon dioxide output, as one of our foremost climate scientists, Michael Mann, was [suggesting](#) at the time, the emission of hundreds of billions of tons of CO2 might have been avoided. Humanity would have had an extra two decades to make the transition to a zero-carbon world. In the end, after all, the stakes are as high for Americans as they are for Iraqis.

If humanity doesn't reach zero carbon emissions by 2050, we are likely to outrun our "[carbon budget](#)", the ocean's ability to absorb CO2, and the climate will undoubtedly go chaotic. What has already happened in Iraq, not to speak of the dire [climate impacts](#) that have recently left Canada constantly aflame, U.S. cities smoking, and Texans broiling in a record fashion would then seem like child's play.

At that point, in short, we would have invaded ourselves.