

Water, War and Iraq

by Juliette Majot/ International Rivers Network

Waging a war with Iraq necessarily means waging a war against the most scarce and valuable commodity in the Middle East — water.

In this region, where the war over oil has only temporarily eclipsed the war over water, limited freshwater resources are threatened by more than the after-effects of oil fires and spills, and chemical and biological contamination. Water-supply installations, including canals, high dams, and water desalinization plants are military targets. Water sanitation systems are also targets

Iraq's water and energy production and distribution infrastructure were severely damaged during the Gulf War. It has been widely reported that coalition forces bombed Iraq's eight multi-purpose dams during the Gulf war, destroying flood control systems, irrigation, municipal and industrial water storage, and hydroelectric power. Major pumping stations were targeted and municipal water and sewage facilities were destroyed. The US Defense Department has recently claimed that Iraq plans to destroy dams as part of a scorched earth strategy in the event of an invasion.

While piped water reaches most urban homes in Iraq, 65 percent of it is not treated (Oxfam, January 23, 2003). Most rural homes in central and southern Iraq do not have access to piped water at all. Air strikes in 1991 destroyed much of the country's power supply, severely affecting water and sanitation systems. Although most water treatment plants have their own generators, 70 percent of them do not work, according to UNICEF.

Destruction of water sanitation systems has been slow and recognized by the US government as a direct consequence of sanctions against Iraq. According to the United States Defense Intelligence Agency document "Iraq Water Treatment Vulnerabilities" (January 22, 1991), the DIA acknowledges that unless Iraq convinced the UN or individual countries to exempt water treatment supplies from sanctions for humanitarian reasons, water treatment capability would suffer a slow decline, and finally fully degrade. The consequence of this steady degradation is the highest rate of child mortality in the world, with seven of ten infant deaths resulting from diarrhea or acute respiratory infection linked to polluted water or malnutrition.

Water shortages in Iraq have been worsened by one of the most serious droughts in recent history. Water resources are now less than half normal levels. According to UNDP, recent droughts may have affected up to 70 percent of all arable land. In addition salination affects more than 75 percent of land in Iraq and is one of the major causes for desertification (UNDP 2003).

In addition to the immediate impact of renewed fighting in Iraq on irrigation and industry, the destruction of the region's already limited water resources will diminish the likelihood of lasting peace settlements in the region. In particular, relations between Israel, Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq — already strained in the area of fresh water allocations — are likely to further suffer.

Conflict between Syria, Turkey, and Iraq has long centered on competition over the waters of the Euphrates, which flows from southern Turkey, through Syria and Iraq before emptying into the Persian Gulf. Dams built, under construction, and in the planning stages in Turkey are considered by Iraq to directly threaten its water supply.

According to Peter Gleick of the Pacific Institute, behind-the-scenes discussions were held at the beginning of the Gulf War to discuss using the Turkish dams to deprive Iraq of a significant fraction of its fresh water supply. While no such action was taken, the military value of what Gleick refers to as a “water weapon” is clear.

The humanitarian tragedy of war in Iraq would extend far beyond the period of direct conflict as a consequence of intentional environmental destruction.

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