



# Iraq Economic Review

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# Broken Roads: The Politics of Transport Infrastructure in Iraqi Kurdistan

*Dr. Zmkan Ali Saleem*



The highway between Erbil and Koya.

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<https://avis.edu.krd/iris/publications/broken-roads-politics-transport-infrastructure-iraq>

## Introduction

Every day truck drivers set off from Erbil carrying goods and commodities destined for Sulaymaniyah, and vice versa. Along the way, they travel on narrow and broken roads that make these journeys time consuming, physically taxing, and dangerous. Large segments of the roughly 200-kilometer journey are poorly maintained, single-carriageways with only one lane in each direction. They lack basic safety features such as proper lane markings, traffic signs, and lighting systems. The heavy passenger and commercial traffic, which includes trucks from Iran, Turkey, and the rest of Iraq, causes heavy congestion at chokepoints and damages the road surface, leaving it full of potholes.

The implications are far-reaching: Inadequate transport links between the two largest economic centers in Iraq's Kurdistan Region—Erbil and Sulaymaniyah—prevent the meaningful economic integration of the semi-autonomous zone.<sup>1</sup> It represents a glaring gap in the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) record. Yet, what explains the lack of government attention to this critical infrastructure issue? Why has the KRG continued to struggle to complete the Erbil-Sulaymaniyah highway while similar projects elsewhere in the Kurdistan Region have progressed? This report will argue that the KRG's revenue distribution model has incentivized the emergence of subregional transport networks that correspond with PUK and KDP zones of control.

**“As part of the agenda of the KRG’s Ninth Cabinet, we have placed significant emphasis on building roads and highways as crucial elements of the Kurdistan Region’s economic infrastructure. We have already implemented such projects across all areas of Kurdistan and plan to continue with more.”**

### **- KRG Prime Minister, Masrour Barzani**

Indeed, other road networks in the Kurdistan Region have benefitted from considerable investment. During a September 2022 ceremony to mark the start of construction on the Khalifan-Spilk highway in Erbil governorate, KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani explained the improved road would enhance connectivity and economic growth.<sup>2</sup> “As part of the agenda of the KRG’s Ninth Cabinet, we have placed significant emphasis on building roads and highways as crucial elements of the Kurdistan Region’s economic infrastructure. We have already implemented such projects across all areas of Kurdistan and plan to continue with more,” he said.<sup>3</sup> There are numerous other examples of successful projects that are roughly equivalent in scope and purpose to the Erbil-Sulaymaniyah highway. For instance, the KRG completed a dual carriageway connecting Erbil and Duhok, the Kurdistan Region’s third-largest city, in 2021.<sup>4</sup> It was hailed as one of the regional government’s major achievements, providing greater safety for travelers and facilitating increased trade and tourism. However, this highway is entirely within the KDP’s zone.

## **Overview of the Argument**

Recent debates on economic dynamics in the Kurdistan Region largely focus on disagreements between the KRG and the federal government in Baghdad over budget sharing and oil. KRG officials tend to blame their economic woes on the suspension of oil exports via Turkey—halted since March 2023—and the region’s inconsistent access to the national budget. What is often missing from policy discussions is a frank

examination of the KRG’s uneven record of addressing the fundamentals of trade and economic growth, including transport networks. Improving transport infrastructure is crucial for strengthening economic activity within the region, alleviating the pressure on livelihoods, and enhancing the wellbeing of both citizens and businesspeople.

This report analyses the problematic transport linkages between Erbil and Sulaymaniyah as a case study for the broader economic infrastructure challenges facing the Kurdistan Region. The old and narrow roads between the region’s two largest provinces fail to support efficient trade transportation and pose significant risks to travelers’ safety. With no alternative transportation options, trucks carrying oil and other trade goods—including food, petrochemicals, and construction materials—must use these inadequate roads. This not only slows down transportation, but also contributes to the rising number of car accidents and traffic fatalities.<sup>5</sup>

So why has the KRG neglected this obvious issue, which affects the region’s economic health and puts its citizens at risk? To put it simply, the KDP leverages government financing to develop roads within its core territorial zone (Erbil and Dohuk), while the PUK does the same within its areas of control (Sulaymaniyah). Territories in politically ambiguous zones like those through which Erbil-Sulaymaniyah links travel are left out of this revenue equation, as are the government agencies technically responsible for spearheading region-wide construction projects.

## **Poor roads and protests**

Citizens and businesses across the Kurdistan Region are affected by the poor road conditions between Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. However, protests have centered on Koya, which is situated one hour east of Erbil city on the way to Sulaymaniyah.<sup>6</sup> Angry at the traffic and road damage, residents regularly block the main route through their town by creating sand barriers to prevent heavy vehicles from using the road. A leading

protestor from Koya said during an interview:

Along with the people of Koya, we have blocked the road many times because many people from our town have lost their lives in car accidents on this road. Numerous lorries and tanker trucks travel through this narrow, old road every day, increasing the risk of accidents and fatalities. We want those trucks to use an alternate route.<sup>7</sup>

**“Why doesn’t the KRG complete the highway between Erbil and Koya? Are we not part of this region? Haven’t we sacrificed for Kurdistan and the Kurdish cause?”**

#### - An activist from Koya

With a population of over 95,000,<sup>8</sup> Koya is administratively part of Erbil governorate, which as a whole is dominated by the KDP, but the town itself sits in a sliver of the governorate that is within the political zone of influence of the PUK. This political and administrative positioning leads to inadequate public services in Koya and a pervasive sense of marginalization among many residents. The dangerous drive from Erbil to Koya exacerbates feelings of government neglect and fuels demands for better services. An activist from Koya remarked, “Why doesn’t the KRG complete the highway between Erbil and Koya? Are we not part of this region? Haven’t we sacrificed for Kurdistan and the Kurdish cause?”<sup>9</sup>

Erbil is only an hour’s drive from Koya and is the main hub for education, business, medical, and social activities in the area. For residents of Koya, the lack of a proper highway to Erbil is not only a safety risk, but also a barrier to economic opportunities. A Koya resident with an undergraduate degree in engineering said in an interview that “there have been many job opportunities for me in Erbil, but I had to turn them down because of the risks associated with traveling on the old and narrow highway. I would rather forgo a well-paying job than risk my life in a car accident.”<sup>10</sup>

While the effect of not having a safe and efficient highway is most visible in Koya, the impact is felt across the Kurdistan Region. A truck driver said that “there are no roads we can use. Find us a solution. The Haft-Goond road, Shaqlawa road, and this current road [between Koya and Erbil] all are no longer available to us.”<sup>11</sup> Truck drivers reported that driving times have increased threefold due to poor road conditions, government-imposed restrictions on commercial vehicles, and protests. Both truck drivers and businesspeople noted that the constant delays slow trade and increase transportation costs, as moving goods now takes more time and requires more fuel.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, truck drivers have organized their own protests and blocked highways to voice their anger about the deficient road network.<sup>13</sup>



Highway construction between Sulaimaniyah and Germian



## The continuing failure of the Erbil-Sulaymaniyah highway project

The highway system under examination is a critical piece of infrastructure in the Kurdistan Region. It plays a vital role in trade and commerce by linking Erbil, the region's major economic hub, with Sulaymaniyah, a key population center and crucial transit route for trade with Iran. The current route can be broken down into three interlinked segments:

(1) Starting from Sulaymaniyah and heading west, travelers face few challenges on the first section of the highway, which stretches 67 kilometers between Sulaymaniyah and the town of Dukan. This portion is a dual carriageway with adequate safety features.

(2) After Dukan, travelers transition to a narrow single carriageway. Expansion work is already underway to upgrade this section to a dual carriageway in the parts inside the PUK's zone of influence, specifically from Dukan to the Raparin administration area.

(3) Once the road reaches the vicinity of Koya district, any signs of meaningful construction progress cease. This segment of the highway between Koya and Erbil (known as the "Erbil-Koya highway") remains a narrow single carriageway, slowing down traffic and posing safety risks to commuters. It is here that the road enters the KDP's zone of control.

Between 2011 and 2014, the KRG proposed the construction of a wider and more suitable highway between Erbil and Koya. The KRG's Ministry of Construction and Housing (MoCH) initiated this project as part of the KRG's 2010 master plan to upgrade all major roads that were still single carriageways to dual carriageways.<sup>14</sup> Covering 61.7 kilometers, the project's total cost was estimated at 427.897 billion IQD. After securing funding from the KRG's budget, the MoCH divided the project into five sections and awarded construction contracts to local companies and international contractors from Romania, Turkey, and Iran.

However, work stopped in 2014, with just a fraction of the route completed. Since then, the project has

Sections of the project	Contractor	Length of the section (Kms)	Cost of the section in billion (IQD)	Fund spent on the section in billion (IQD)	Completed part of the section
First section (highway)	Romanian Delta (was later given to a Turkish contractor)	20.6	94.622.795.000	48.023.229.000	51%
Second section (highway)	Sink (local company) & Yousash (Turkish company)	16.26	69.749.328.000	19.605.688.000	28%
Third section (highway)	Iranian Abad Rahan Pars	11.586	44.762.275.000	7.59.811.000	16%
Forth section (highway)	Iranian Abad Rahan Pars	13.25	58.875.935.000	7.570.015.000	13%
Fifth section (Haibat Sultan Tunnel)	Iranian Stratos	4.6 Road & Tunnel	159.886.844.319	10.072.871.170	6.3%
<b>Total</b>		<b>61.696</b>	<b>427.897.177.319</b>	<b>92.331.614.170</b>	

Table 1: Progress on Erbil-Koya highway <sup>17</sup>



been abandoned entirely. (See Table 1 for details on the assigned companies, completed portions, and amounts spent on the project).<sup>15</sup> The KRG had already spent over 92 billion IQD on the project by the time it was abandoned. Officials at the MoCH estimated that an additional 360 billion IQD is needed to complete the job.<sup>16</sup> Yet there are no serious plans to resume work.

KRG officials argued that their inability to complete the project was caused by the region's economic woes, which they attribute to the compounding effects of the ISIS war, Erbil-Baghdad budget disagreements, and the suspension of oil exports. Current KRG MoCH Minister Dana Abdulkareem Hamasalih explained during an interview that: "We view the Erbil-Koya highway as a strategic project and a crucial component of the road network connecting Erbil to Sulaymaniyah. Since 2019, it has been one of our ministry's top priorities, and we have repeatedly requested the KRG's Council of Ministers to allocate funds for its completion. However, the Council has failed to respond positively, citing a shortage of funds due to the persistent financial crisis."<sup>18</sup>

However, pointing to a "financial crisis" as the main justification for not completing the highway project does not hold up under scrutiny. Over the past decade, similar projects have been completed or are currently

underway elsewhere in the region. Since 2019, the current KRG cabinet has reportedly implemented 624 road projects across the region, costing approximately 3 trillion IQD.<sup>19</sup> An activist from Koya said, "We know the government allocates funds to build roads and highways in other parts of the region. The government should stop this discrimination and allocate funds here as well to complete the Erbil-Koya highway."<sup>20</sup> (See Table 2 for the distribution of road projects—both completed and under construction—across the Kurdistan Region under the current cabinet).

The repeated and convenient employment of rhetoric pointing to a "financial crisis" is highly debatable, particularly for the 2019 and 2023 period. One could argue that the current KRG cabinet, formed in 2019, experienced a period of relative financial stability. During this time, the KRG still had access to petrodollars and other funding sources, including but not limited to revenues from independent oil exports (which were halted in March 2023), the KRG's sizable share of the federal budget, domestic revenues from taxation, and customs revenues at international border crossings with Iran and Turkey.

From a purely procedural standpoint, the path forward is clear. The decision to allocate and spend the remaining 360 billion IQD necessary to complete the Erbil-Koya highway rests with the KRG's Council of Ministers, which is dominated by the KDP and the

Governorates & independent administrations	Number of completed road projects	Cost in billions (IQD)	Number of ongoing road projects	Cost in billions (IQD)
Erbil governorate	160	473	49	615
Duhok governorate	47	386	29	205
Sulaymaniyah governorate	137	202	55	420
Halabja governorate	13	1.761	12	130
Soran administration	19	2	13	10
Raparin administration	16	30	22	30
Zakho administration	4	66	--	--
Garmian administration	26	13	18	207

Table 2: Completed and ongoing road projects in the KRI (2019- 2024)<sup>21</sup>

PUK. Specifically, Prime Minister Barzani, who is a senior member of the KDP, and Deputy KRG Prime Minister Qubad Talabani, of the PUK, are key figures in this decision-making process.<sup>22</sup> Why has PUK-KDP consensus on this project remained so elusive? Below, two possible explanations are considered in greater detail: (1) the security and strategic calculations of the PUK and KDP and (2) flaws in the broader revenue-sharing arrangement between the two parties.

## Strategic calculations

A widely held viewpoint in both Erbil and Sulaymaniyah is that security considerations are largely to blame for the poor state of infrastructure between the two governorates. In interviews, citizens and truck drivers pointed to the strategic sensitivity of the area as a reason for the KRG's reluctance to allocate funds for completion of the Erbil-Koya highway. This is reasonable from a historical perspective. By the end of the bloody civil war between the PUK and KDP in the 1990s, the territory west of Koya had emerged as a de facto buffer that separated the two parties' zones of military control. The deepening divides between the PUK and the KDP following the KRG's failed independence referendum in 2017 likely intensified inter-party security fears and distrust.<sup>23</sup> Given these heightened tensions, it is not unreasonable to conclude that party leaders want to maintain physical barriers—such as the narrow and outdated roads—between their respective zones of influence. Under this explanation, the leadership of both parties have chosen to forgo the economic benefits of a modern highway to avoid giving a military advantage to the other side.

**“We view the Erbil-Koya highway as a strategic project and a crucial component of the road network connecting Erbil to Sulaymaniyah. Since 2019, it has been one of our ministry's top priorities, and we have repeatedly requested the KRG's Council of Ministers to allocate funds for its completion. However, the Council has failed to respond positively, citing a shortage of funds due to the persistent financial crisis.”**

### -KRG (MoCH) Minister, Dana Abdulkareem Hamasalih

Given the region's complex military history and the ongoing security division, the strategic-military dimension should not be dismissed, but, at the same time, it should not be overstated. The mayor of Koya, who is a PUK member, discounted this explanation: “The PUK and the KDP are not engaged in a civil war. They are competing economically, with each party using the revenues under its control to develop its own zone.”<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the more plausible explanation for the delay in completing the highway has to do with how funds are distributed across party lines.



The highway between Erbil and Koya.

## A flawed revenue distribution mechanism

The government entity technically responsible for constructing the Erbil-Koya highway is the KRG MoCH. While it has the technical capacity to complete complex road projects, the ministry does not control how it is funded. Put simply, the KRG's finances are controlled by the PUK and the KDP. According to an agreement between the two parties in 2019,<sup>25</sup> the region's revenues are allocated as follows: 57% to the KDP-controlled areas of Erbil and Duhok and 43% to the PUK-controlled area of Sulaymaniyah.<sup>26</sup> This arrangement incentivizes politically motivated allocations of funds, enabling the parties to channel resources into projects within their home areas. Koya's administrative and political ambiguity—as a zone administratively under Erbil, but politically under the PUK—puts it outside the core interests of either party.

An advisor at the MoCH explained in an interview that “the KDP uses its revenues to construct roads and highways in Erbil and Duhok, while the PUK focuses on similar projects in Sulaymaniyah.”<sup>27</sup> Consequently, the MoCH lacks the financial capacity to undertake major projects deemed crucial for the region's overall economic interests, such as the Erbil-Koya highway. The advisor added that “the budget allocated to the MoCH by the PUK and the KDP, which the ministry can access without Council of Ministers' approval, is so minimal that it can only cover minor construction projects and road maintenance.”<sup>28</sup> The lack of financial transparency in the Kurdistan Region further complicates funding for projects that are not considered politically advantageous by the ruling parties. Minister Hamasalih elaborated in an interview that: “The KRG's Ministry of Finance is only aware of some formal sources of regional finances. Financial affairs are divided between two KRG entities, each aligned with either the PUK or the KDP. We lack a budget law, and financial matters are opaque. As a result, funds are allocated to certain construction projects while others, like the Erbil-Koya highway, are neglected.”<sup>29</sup>

The Erbil-Koya highway project remains a casualty of a financial arrangement that caters to partisan interests and is further complicated by the intensifying political rivalry between the PUK and the KDP.<sup>30</sup> Lacking clear justifications for their refusal to fund the highway's completion, PUK and KDP leaders deflect attention from the failed project by engaging in mutual recriminations. A PUK politburo member claimed in an interview that “KDP-affiliated officials at the top of the KRG are withholding finances from Sulaymaniyah to undermine our party.”<sup>31</sup> A KDP leader responded that “the PUK wants to siphon off revenues from Erbil and Duhok, while hoarding finances generated in Sulaymaniyah. This is unacceptable to us.”<sup>32</sup> Bogged down in this rhetorical fight, the two parties have ignored how some critical infrastructure projects in the region can only be built if they cooperate.

Meanwhile, citizens directly affected by the ongoing failure to complete the highway remain skeptical about the parties' claims and counterclaims. One activist from Koya remarked that, “if the two parties can collaborate to sell oil via tanker trucks, why can't they work together to use the revenue from that oil to complete the highway between Erbil and Koya?”<sup>33</sup>

Since the suspension of the KRG's oil exports via the KRG-Turkey pipeline, the KRG has transitioned to exporting oil using tanker trucks to Turkey and Iran. A significant portion of this oil is reportedly exported through Iran, with tanker trucks traversing the old and narrow roads between Erbil and Sulaymaniyah.<sup>34</sup> The regional authorities have failed to provide clear information about where the oil revenue is being allocated, leading activists and opposition figures to accuse the PUK and the KDP of misappropriating the funds.<sup>35</sup>

## Policy Implications

The emergence of separate road networks that align with the political spheres of the KDP and the PUK—and the neglect of areas in between—threatens both economic growth and the overall continuity of



the Kurdistan Region. The leaders of both political parties make every effort to dismiss the notion that the KRG is reverting back to the era of separate administrative areas and reject claims that the region's internal cohesion has deteriorated to the point of no return. Officials insist that the lack of progress on Erbil-Sulaymaniyah transport linkages are simply a matter of money, or the so-called "financial crisis." This justification is contradicted by the facts. Road construction has continued in many areas that are more central to the respective economic and political interests of the two parties.

The highway connecting Erbil to Sulaymaniyah is a crucial infrastructure project. The lack of progress, particularly on the segment between Erbil and Koya,

not only undermines the Kurdistan Region's economic growth, but also jeopardizes the safety of its citizens. Both the PUK and the KDP must make a concerted effort to overcome the political and financial obstacles impeding its progress. Ultimately, the leaders of both parties must reconfigure the current 57-43 revenue distribution arrangement, which has incentivized the emergence of increasingly separate economic regions with poorly connected road networks. Public finances must be allocated towards infrastructure projects that support the broader economic interests of the region and its people. Otherwise, continuing with the current financial arrangement will further entrench divisions along party lines and undermine state-society relations in the Kurdistan Region.

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# Agriculture in Southern Iraq

## Dijlah Agriculture in Southern Iraq: An Interview with Dr. Hussein Mishbak

Dr. Hussein Mishbak is a Research Fellow at IRIS, conducting research on the challenges facing the agricultural sector in Thi Qar province.

### **IRIS: What about your background made you interested in researching the agricultural sector?**

Hussein Mishbak: I'm from Nasiriyah in Thi Qar province. I was born in a rural area called Eldawaya, about 70 kilometers from the city center. It was once the second-largest tomato producer in Iraq. My father is an agricultural investor, so I've always been connected to these issues.

### **IRIS: What are the main crops produced in Thi Qar? Are these crops generating enough market activity to sustain the agricultural sector?**

Hussein Mishbak: In Thi Qar, we have strategic crops like wheat, barley, and rice, which are crucial for food security. The government ensures these crops have their share of water and land, aligning with federal policies. We also grow vegetables like cucumbers, tomatoes, and aubergines, mainly in the Al-Gharaf district, which is considered the food basket of Thi Qar. They produce summer and winter crops, with over 1,000 greenhouses contributing to the market.

### **IRIS: So the government subsidizes strategic crops, while vegetables are driven by the private market?**

Hussein Mishbak: Yes, that's correct.

### **IRIS: How are government agricultural policies shaping these strategic crops?**

Hussein Mishbak: The federal government focuses on food security, especially for strategic crops. They've been implementing strategies, such as the Agriculture Initiative, which ran from 2009 to 2014. This initiative also covered other areas like livestock, with Thi Qar receiving significant support for the livestock sector. There's also a push for modern irrigation systems and agrotech from the government. However, the policies weren't well-promoted or monitored. Farmers were told to submit documents and apply for loans, but there was no real follow-up. As a result, many of these strategies were not sustainable, and there's little to show for them now.

### **IRIS: How does the political instability in Thi Qar affect the agricultural sector?**

Hussein Mishbak: There are several challenges in Thi Qar. Environmental issues, like water scarcity, make things difficult, but political instability is a major factor. Frequent changes in leadership and conflicts over resources, especially water, have worsened the situation. We've documented more than 1,000 conflicts in the last three years, mostly linked to the lack of water. Farmers are frustrated, and the local authorities haven't allocated budgets for strategic agricultural projects. They rely heavily on the federal government to implement these initiatives, but progress is slow.

### **IRIS: We've heard that most 'sustainable farming' and 'modern irrigation' projects in Iraq have struggled to take hold. Is that the case in Thi Qar?**

Hussein Mishbak: Yes, it is. In 2020-2021, we worked on a project funded by the World Food Program and implemented by SWEDO, an international organization. It aimed to promote sustainable livelihoods for rural communities by providing tools



like seeds, drip irrigation systems, and greenhouses. Unfortunately, most of the participating farmers didn't engage with the project long-term. Some sold the equipment, while others didn't take the opportunity seriously from the start. Only about 5% of over 500 beneficiaries continued with the project and started producing vegetables and fruits. Just 5%.

**IRIS: So most of them went back to traditional flood irrigation methods?**

Hussein Mishbak: Yes, sustainable farming wasn't seen as viable economically for them, especially since many rely on other sources of livelihood.

IRIS: Let's go into a bit more detail about the role of government. A little over a decade ago, the Iraqi government transferred the powers and responsibilities of the Ministry of Agriculture to the provincial government. How did that impact regulation and policy implementation?

Hussein Mishbak: The Ministry of Agriculture played a vital regulatory and project implementation role until about 2010-2011, after which power was transferred to the provinces. Since then, the ministry's role has been reduced to providing guidance. The transfer of power to local authorities has had a negative impact because provincial councils are overwhelmed with political issues. They're not prioritizing agriculture or water resources, and as a result, no significant agricultural projects have been implemented at the local level.

**IRIS: How can the government move forward in a more positive direction?**

Hussein Mishbak: Before laying down new policies, the government should involve local authorities, farmers, and other key stakeholders in serious policy discussions about the challenges facing the agricultural sector. We need to include environmental and agricultural experts in the policy evaluation process.

Researchers play an important role as well.

**IRIS: Are there other researchers working on similar issues, particularly at universities or in government?**

Hussein Mishbak: Yes, I've been part of a project focused on water management in the agriculture sector in Basra and Thi Qar. The agriculture faculties in the local universities are trying to enhance their curricula and involve more students in agriculture research. So yes, there's definitely a growing network of researchers interested in this field.

**IRIS: One last question on migration—Thi Qar has seen a lot of farmers leaving their land. What's happening there?**

Hussein Mishbak: We're seeing a phenomenon called climate migration. As farmers lose their livelihood due to water shortages and environmental degradation, they're forced to migrate to other provinces like Karbala and Najaf. Over 9,200 families have migrated since 2020. This creates new challenges, as these migrants don't have the skills to work in other sectors, and some provinces are restricting access to schools for these displaced children, which violates their rights.

**IRIS: Finally, what's the big-picture importance of your research for Iraq's food security and agriculture sector?**

Hussein Mishbak: Food security is a key responsibility of the federal government. Agriculture is still a backbone of Thi Qar's economy, even with the emerging oil industry. Implementing the right strategies for key crops is essential for both political and economic stability. It's important to raise awareness among officials and experts about the gaps in current policies, so we can work towards solutions that will benefit the people of Thi Qar and Iraq as a whole.

# Beyond the Rainy Season: Iraq's Environmental Policy & Economic Implications

*Karam F. Robeil*

Please refer to the online version of this article for all references and citations:  
<https://auis.edu.krd/iris/beyond-rainy-season>

Starting in the spring months of 2024, images of overflowing dams and flooded rivers dominated Iraqi TV channels and social media, a result of this year's abundant rains. Despite the much-needed relief provided by this unusually rainy season, experts are skeptical about the long-term sustainability of this state of affairs. The past 4 years of consecutive drought seasons have pushed Iraqis to question the government's strategies in dealing with protracted water scarcity<sup>1</sup>. The damage of these consecutive drought seasons has cut-down agricultural production and deprived many Iraqis of their basic water rights.

These effects have had disastrous impacts especially on climate vulnerable communities, driving livelihood deterioration, displacement, and grievances over services<sup>2</sup>. In addition to these impacts, water scarcity and mismanagement have left chronic scars on Iraq's rich ecosystems. Around 250 square kilometers of arable land are lost annually<sup>3</sup>, with 60% of Iraq's symbolic palms disappearing during the past 20 years. Moreover, many natural lakes have completely drained<sup>4</sup>, marshes massively shrank, and species such as marsh buffaloes and migratory birds are rapidly on decline.

How do Iraqi officials understand these challenges and the pathways forward? Over the past two years, our research team at IRIS has conducted interviews with government officials in relevant ministries to gain an understanding of their positions, in addition to attending relevant conferences and meetings among Iraqi policymakers. Here I will focus on conversations

I had at the 4th Baghdad International Water Conference (BIWC) earlier this year, as it was a good example of the kinds of cross-governmental dialogue shaping developments in water policy in Iraq. The conference underscored the growing sense among government actors that they must restore trust with the public on securing water resources for the long-term.

**“The government must prioritize efficient water management, ecosystem restoration, and climate resilience, ensuring long-term socioeconomic stability and environmental sustainability.”**

There is no doubt that water and environmental policies impact the basic livelihoods of Iraqis. These impacts include access to drinking water and sanitary needs, as well as the source of income and way of life of many agrarian and marsh communities. At the same time, the profound and multifaceted nature of Iraq's environmental challenges require economic policies and financial resources to mitigate these impacts and adapt to extreme climatic events. For example, the government needs to invest in water treatment infrastructure and use its existing water resources more efficiently. Moreover, the decline in agricultural output and its effects on food security and livelihoods require economic policies that incentivize farmers to transition towards sustainable farming practices. The government must prioritize efficient water management, ecosystem restoration, and climate resilience, ensuring long-term socioeconomic stability and environmental sustainability.

## Necessity is the Mother of Invention

Iraqi officials have long pointed fingers to upstream riparian states, namely Türkiye and Iran, for exploiting their geographic positions to deprive Iraq its water shares while paying less attention to Iraq's internal water management<sup>5</sup>. But interviews with government stakeholders indicate that this emphasis may be changing. Years of failed negotiations have showed Iraqi policymakers that investing in internal water management is no longer avoidable. After all, Türkiye often blames water scarcity in Iraq on water wastage due to using inefficient irrigation methods, weakening the negotiation position of Iraq<sup>6</sup>. Internal water management is starting to matter. During the conference, officials from Iraq's Ministry of Water Resources (MoWR) and Ministry of Environment (MoE) repeatedly emphasized the importance of domestic water management before tackling broader issues like water diplomacy.

This emphasis was illustrated by MoWR officials showcasing water-preserving technologies during the conference, such as covering distributaries with concrete canvas, which improves water flow to reach further downstream. The usage of such technologies come in synergy with the Ministry of Agriculture's slow but notable progress in transforming irrigation from flood to more advanced irrigation systems such as center-pivot irrigation methods<sup>7</sup>. The conference also featured signing a Memorandum of Understanding between the Iraqi MoWR and the Tunisian Ministry of Agriculture, Water Resources, and Fishing along with other discussions with the ministries of water in Egypt and Jordan to exchange technology and expertise in water management.

Furthermore, discussions around transboundary water cooperation replaced the confrontational rhetoric towards Türkiye and Iran that has long been the norm<sup>8</sup>. In his speech, Deputy Prime Minister Muhammed Tamim stated that Iraq must pursue shared water policies with its riparian states. This statement echoed

the recent strategic water framework agreement between Iraq and Türkiye, which was led by the Prime Minister's office and revolved around partnering with Turkish companies in water infrastructure projects<sup>9</sup>.

**“Years of failed negotiations have showed Iraqi policymakers that investing in internal water management is no longer avoidable.”**

While it was certainly a promising step forward to address water as part of a package of other security and economic agreements, government sources indicate that the PMO did not properly involve the MoWR in its design. An MoWR official privately shared their frustration about the lack of involvement of their ministry in many of these diplomatic endeavors. According to some MoWR officials, the lack of a consistent and robust roster of Iraqi technical experts and diplomats in the negotiations with Türkiye weakens the government's ability to leverage technical knowledge and data effectively in these talks.

## From Water Security to Environmental Protection

Water security alone will not be enough to address the years of environmental degradation Iraq has endured. Water scarcity will always be a threat in the long term due to climate change and the lack of transboundary cooperation. The government should invest in enhancing environmental protection, especially for vulnerable communities. This year's rainy season provides an opportunity to restore what has been lost of the Iraqi marshes and build the resilience of their local communities for future drought seasons. Reviving the water infrastructure and ecosystem services of the marshes – thereby supporting marsh communities by improving the means of their livelihood – will help them survive harsh drought seasons in the future and mitigate their incentives to migrate.

The conference showcased several innovative projects that aim to enhance environmental protection in collaboration with international development.



organizations. One such project, “Sustainable Water and Agriculture Management in the Marshes – Iraq,” funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and implemented by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), aims to increase water efficiency in agriculture and enhance the resilience of local marsh communities to climate change through nature-based solutions. Some of the components of the project are constructing artificial wetlands, providing storage units for marshland inhabitants to store dairy products, and opportunities to develop small projects for women to market these products.

To date, these projects benefit a very limited number of localities and do not fit into a broader water and ecosystem infrastructure plan. The extent to which such projects achieve meaningful impact will depend on their implementation, sustainability, and seriousness of the government in scaling them up across wider geographical areas.

In sum, the conference revealed an interest around a more holistic water management approach that incorporates sustainability and resilience elements. The fact that the MoWR is adopting this approach means that it will have to coordinate closely with the MoE to optimize the use of funds and resources. As it stands, the two ministries are often competing over the limited national and international funds rather than coordinating efforts. Despite this lack of meaningful inter-agency coordination, it is promising that the growing interest in climate resilience may open space for more international donors to engage with government agencies to implement sustainability and resilience projects.

## Towards Participatory Governance

While heightened government interest is a step in the right direction, the MoWR and MoE cannot scale up ecosystem resilience without the help of civil society across Iraq. The government should integrate ecosystem projects into its long-term priorities across ministries in a transparent and inclusive manner that involves civil society<sup>10</sup>. This approach will ensure the sustainability of ecosystem restoration efforts and the building of climate resilience in tandem with the needs and realities of local communities.

**“Efficient water management, ecosystem restoration, and climate resilience are all essential needs for Iraq to combat an era of changing climate and deteriorating resources. What these endeavors share is the dire need for greater government support in opening the space for participatory governance...”**

The conference missed adequate representation of local civil society organizations (CSOs). Iraq enjoys a rich variety of active CSOs and activists with long-standing expertise in the field of environmental protection. This missed opportunity spotlights a shortsighted tendency of the government to neglect engagement with civil society in environmental governance. Supporting civil society to lead community-based initiatives that utilize innovative methods such as citizen science and advocacy campaigns will strengthen collective environmental action and bridge the gap in the trust between the government and communities<sup>11</sup>.

Yet, involving civil society in these efforts requires accuracy and transparency in data, which were not addressed during the conference. Nonetheless, multiple participants from local and international

NGOs emphasized the importance of increasing the frequency of data collection, improving coordination in data synchronization between ministries, and sharing data with researchers and the public.<sup>12</sup> The lack of data transparency hampers public participation in environmental accountability and policy making.

During my conversations with government officials during the conference and in previous occasions, they expressed reservations about data transparency. One official noted: “Data about water quantity and quality can be misinterpreted or used maliciously by people who pursue other ends than the best interest of Iraq.

For example, these data can be exploited by Türkiye to harm Iraq’s claims in negotiating water shares.” Such concerns about the diplomatic implications of data

sharing are overstated. The lack of access to data has for long impeded serious efforts in accountability and scientific research in Iraq. It is high time for the Prime Minister’s Office and the Parliament of Iraq to ensure that the appropriate legal mechanisms facilitate data sharing and guarantee citizens’ right for access to information. Efficient water management, ecosystem restoration, and climate resilience are all essential needs for Iraq to combat an era of changing climate and deteriorating resources. What these endeavors share is the dire need for greater government support in opening the space for participatory governance, thereby ensuring that those communities most impacted by ecosystem degradation – and the loss of agricultural livelihoods and income that come with it – are included in establishing the pathway forward.

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## Announcing the Iraq Economic Review (IER) Fellows Program

The IER Fellow Program: is a two-year Program initiative by (IRIS), aimed at developing local economic researchers and policy advocates across Iraq's key provincial economies. Through workshops and training, eight selected fellows receive mentorship and practical experience in economic analysis and advocacy. Each fellow will produce policy briefs and localized advocacy plans, contributing to meaningful economic reforms in Iraq.



**Dr. Hussein Mishbak** is a non-resident research fellow at IRIS, contributing to the Iraq Economic Review with a focus on the local economy in ThiQar province. The research examines existing government policies regarding agricultural strategy in ThiQar, with a focus on strategic crops essential to the province's food security (wheat and barely). The research will evidenced-based recommendation to inform (1) policy frameworks (Governor of ThiQar, local authorities) and (2) investment strategies. Dr. Mishbak earned his Doctor of Philosophy in Biomedical Engineering from The University of Manchester.



**Teeba Aladwan** is a non-resident research fellow at IRIS, contributing to the Iraq Economic Review with a focus on the local economy in Anbar province, her explores both challenges & opportunities for sustainable agricultural &agri-tech projects in Anbar province. The research will make recommendations to the provincial Government in Anbar, Ministry of Agriculture, and relevant Unions (engineers and farmers) regarding the challenges & opportunities for sustainable agriculture projects. Teba hold master's degree inMSc in laser and optoelectronics engineering (optical communication technology) from the Nahrain University.



**Firas Salih** is a non-resident research fellow at IRIS, contributing to the Iraq Economic Review with a focus on the local economy in Nineveh province. Firas will assess the implementation of transportation infrastructure projects in Mosul city during the post-liberation period (between 2018 and the present). His final research will inform Nineveh's Strategic Development plan to make necessary adjustments for future projects that better align with citizen's interests. Firas hold MBA degree from Warwick Business School (WBS).



**Sama Yas** is a non-resident research fellow at IRIS, contributing to the Iraq Economic Review with a focus on the local economy in Basrah province. Sama will assess sustainability (long-term financing and govt capacity) of solar energy projects in Basra -- both oilfields and residential areas. The research will shape the policies of local govt and MoO/MoE towards supporting/financing solar energy projects. Sama holds a Master's Degree in Chemical Engineering from Nahrain University.





**Sangar Salih** is a non-resident research fellow at IRIS, contributing to the Iraq Economic Review with a focus on the local economy in Erbil province. His research investigates economic impact of KRG policies related to regulating migrant workers in Erbil. Sangar's research aims to shape KRG policies towards migrant workers and economic development. Sangar holds master's degree in Sociology from the University of Cincinnati, USA.



**Areen Atta** is a non-resident research fellow at IRIS, contributing to the Iraq Economic Review with a focus on the local economy in Sulaymaniyah province. Areen will investigate challenges and opportunities around standardization of banking, focusing on barriers and opportunities to the adoption of myaccounts in Sulaimani. Her research will show the impact policy frameworks towards banking standardization at level of KRG and Sulaimani Government. Areen hold BA in International Studies the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani (AUIS).



**Qutaiba Yaseen** is a non-resident research fellow at IRIS contributing to the Iraq Economic Review focusing on the local economy in Najaf province. His research assesses the monitoring and regulation of the private healthcare in Najaf (quality control from medical perspective, waste management), which will have implications for the development of this sector. The research will Influence development and regulation of private hospitals in Najaf (principally provincial council health committee, the office of the governor). Qutaibahold a dentistry degree from the Ibn Hayyan University college.



**Maryam Allami** is a non-resident research fellow at IRIS, contributing to the Iraq Economic Review with a focus on the local economy in Baghdad province. Maryam will look at the private sector's capacity in generating jobs for the increasing unemployment rate among the youth in Iraq. Her research's goal is to contribute to reforming the educational system and expanding the space for entrepreneurship to bridge the gap between the job market's needs and graduates' qualifications. Maryam holds MBA degree from Heriot-Watt University.

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The Economy in an Era of Climate Change

