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Eden Denied: Environmental Decay, Illicit Activities, and Instability in Iraq's Southern Border Area

Harith Hasan

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Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
Publications Department
1779 Massachusetts Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20036
P: + 1 202 483 7600
F: + 1 202 483 1840
CarnegieEndowment.org

Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center
Emir Bechir Street, Lazarieh Tower
Bldg. No. 2026 1210, 5th flr.
Downtown Beirut, P.O.Box 11-1061
Riad El Solh, Lebanon
P: + 961 1 99 15 91
F: + 961 1 99 15 91
Carnegie-MEC.org

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Summary

Iraq's Basra Governorate, on the border with Iran, has endured environmental degradation due to conflict and a reduction of water flows into the Shatt al-Arab waterway. The ensuing decline in agriculture has led to rural migration, unemployment, poverty, a flourishing of informal and illicit economies, and the growth of violent groups. Iran's dominant influence in Iraq has sustained this situation. Unless these problems are addressed, instability in Basra will increase and will have long-term consequences for Iraq and the Middle East.

Key Themes

- The Basra border zone is facing a crisis caused by a reduction in water supplies, pollution, and climate change. This has devastated agriculture, which was once the region's principal economic activity.
- Iraq and Iran have failed to adopt a transboundary approach to environmental degradation. Instead, their disputes over water, their development choices aimed at increasing oil revenues, and their war during the 1980s have made matters worse.
- The decline of agriculture due to environmental devastation has transformed social conditions in Basra.
- Instability in Basra Governorate has been driven by rural migration, unemployment, poverty, expansion of the informal and illicit economies, and the spread of violent tribal and paramilitary groups.
- This situation has been sustained by an uneven relationship between Iran and Iraq, in which border relations favor Iran. These relations are being defined by Tehran's drive for supremacy, mainly manifested in its ties with Iraqi nonstate and parastate armed groups.

Findings and Recommendations

- Iraq and Iran must collaborate to address the common challenges in the border zone and reprioritize socioeconomic and environmental needs over other considerations. Such collaboration could begin with working on a common policy to address water shortages and climate change.
- Illicit trade and smuggling, especially of narcotics, have become a key threat to stability in Iraq and require serious action by both Iraq and Iran. This requires a change in Tehran's support for nonstate or parastate actors in Iraq who have benefited from illicit trade and have contested Baghdad's sovereignty over its border.

- Beyond reconsidering its support for Iraqi armed groups, Tehran's view of its border with Iraq as a passage through which it can export its military and economic power, as well as its ideology, is likely to lead to an increasingly contentious relationship with Iraq over border issues.
- Iraq and Iran would benefit from agreeing to a new definition of security in their border zone. National security needs to be reconceptualized to include human security and environmental sustainability.

Introduction

In his famous poem *The Rain Song*, the Iraqi poet Badr Shakir al-Sayyab (1926–1964), who was born in a village of Basra Governorate, which is located along the Iraq-Iran border, wrote that “not a year has passed without hunger in Iraq.”¹ The melancholy tone at the heart of Sayyab’s poem is still relevant, as southern Iraq, once one of the most fertile regions of the Middle East, in a land that is rich in oil and other natural resources, is facing dire environmental degradation.

For millennia, the region—identified as the site of the mythical Garden of Eden—was characterized by arable land, thanks to an abundance of rivers and waterways that turned it into a cradle of civilization. Today, however, the border zone around Basra is facing a severe crisis, caused mainly by a decline in water supplies and expanding desertification, which has devastated agriculture, once the region’s principal economic activity.

Several factors have contributed to this situation, including climate change and an overall rise in global temperatures.² However, human activity has also been acutely destructive. This includes the long dispute between Baghdad and Tehran over territory and water resources near the border, as well as a lack of coordination and a common transboundary approach, to governance and water management (see map 1). Conflicts between Iraq and Iran, the two countries’ focuses on security, their policies of centralization, and their pursuit of hegemony at different times have contributed to the systematic mismanagement or negligence of the areas around Basra, with their unique topography. In addition, the degradation has been accelerated by the adoption of environmentally unsustainable policies aimed at development, particularly a shift toward oil production as the main source of income and the prime determinant of the region’s importance.

This situation has had profound social, economic, and political consequences for Iraq. With peasants abandoning agriculture and many migrating to urban centers, unemployment and underemployment in Basra have been rising, feeding participation in the informal economy and smuggling as well as recruitment into armed groups engaged in rent-seeking activities and political violence. The outcome has been increasing lawlessness and persistent instability.

An underlying factor in this deterioration has been the uneven relationship between Iraq and Iran. Iran’s regional ambitions, like the considerable influence it has gained in Iraq since the U.S.-led invasion of 2003, have helped to bolster the close ties between Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Iraqi nonstate and parastate armed groups.³ Iranian dominance hinders collaborative efforts to address the multiple challenges Iraq and Iran face in the border area while also reinforcing factors favoring long-term instability. There are few indications that this situation will change in the coming years.

MAP 1

An Outlook of Eastern Basra Area and Its Border With Iran



Basra-Khuzestan: The Unraveling

If the Iraq-Iran border area around Basra had many prerequisites for prosperity—including an abundance of water; a location on a national (and previously imperial) boundary that facilitated profitable exchanges; and the presence of hydrocarbons—then these advantages have also turned it into a historically contested place. Iraq and Iran have adopted policies over time that have aggravated conditions in the border area, accelerating its economic and social breakdown.

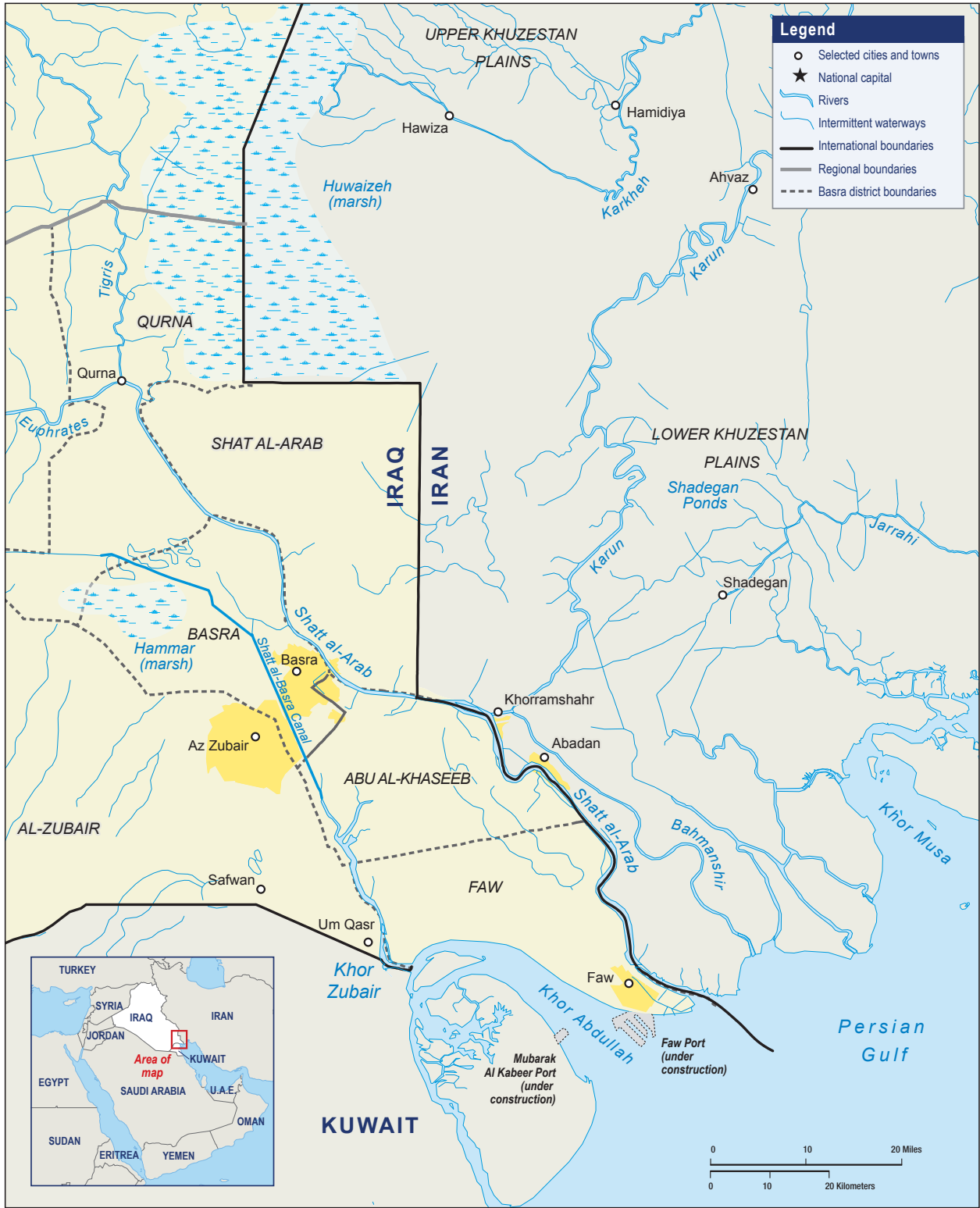
The districts north and southeast of Basra, which include Qurna, Shatt al-Arab, Abu al-Khaseeb, and Faw, have been tightly interconnected in an ecosystem formed by the confluence of several rivers, tributaries, and marshes.⁴ The Euphrates and Tigris Rivers meet in Qurna, from where they flow into the Shatt al-Arab waterway (also known as Arvand Rud in Persian).⁵ The Shatt al-Arab is located at the northern entrance of the Persian Gulf, into which it flows.⁶ Two other rivers, the Karun and the Karkheh, originate in Iran and discharge into the Shatt al-Arab, providing about 30 percent of its fresh water.⁷ Additionally, the Hammar marshes, located northwest of Basra and connected to the Huwaiza marshes, flow into the Shatt al-Arab. The Shatt al-Arab is about 192 kilometers long and its width varies between 250 meters at Qurna and 750 meters at its mouth at Ras al-Bisha.⁸ Its stream network provides a basic irrigation and drainage system for an even larger area. Furthermore, the Shatt al-Arab has been the main source of drinking water for the population of Basra Governorate.⁹

Historically, the abundance of water resources in the area attracted human settlements and economic activities centered on agriculture, the food industry, fisheries, and animal domestication. Ancient city-states such as Ur, Kish, Uruk, and Susa emerged in or near the area. Fertile lands in Basra and Khuzestan, the Iranian province that borders Iraq's Basra Governorate, produced crops that were critical for the national economies of their countries, such as wheat, barely, rice, dates, and vegetables. The area around the Shatt al-Arab, with large numbers of date palms, was one of the world's leading suppliers of dates.¹⁰

The sociocultural connections between Basra and Khuzestan were also very strong. Centuries ago, Arab tribes migrated from the Arabian Peninsula to the present border region and settled there (see map 2).¹¹ Khuzestan is the province where a majority of Iran's Arab minority is located, which explains its close ethnic, religious, and linguistic ties with Basra's inhabitants. Furthermore, Khuzestan and parts of southern Iraq were ruled by the same Arab dynasties. Two regions that could have been part of the same country instead found themselves separated by a modern border. A place that should have been shaped by common interests was, instead, defined by antagonism.

Over several centuries, the Ottoman Empire and the dynasties ruling Persia, whether the Safavids or the Qajars, engaged in disputes along the present border. The two sides signed a succession of treaties and protocols to demarcate their boundaries. Among these was the second of the Treaties of Erzurum in 1847, which placed the entire Shatt al-Arab under Ottoman jurisdiction. After the Ottoman Empire's collapse, Iraq inherited control of the waterway, but divergences over the border with Iran resurfaced occasionally, particularly over navigation issues.¹²

Shatt al-Arab Basin, Rivers and Tributaries Flowing Into It, and the Northern Gulf



During the last century, Baghdad and Tehran have frequently sought to assert sovereignty over their own border areas and sometimes even to expand them. For example, the military campaign of Iranian leader Reza Shah Pahlavi during the 1920s, which was conducted to enforce central authority over Khuzestan, initiated a new phase in which the Iranian state was much more present in the region. Centralization policies aiming to enhance security were used to counter separatist movements operating among the region's Arab population.¹³ Security concerns also led to frequent cycles of tension between the two countries, which they tried to address by signing the Algiers Agreement in 1975. The agreement ended Iranian support for a rebellion by Iraq's Kurds, in return for which the Iraqi government recognized the thalweg, or the middle of the navigable channel of the Shatt al-Arab, as the border with Iran. This granted Iran sovereignty and a right of navigation over part of the waterway, even if disagreements persist today over where to situate the thalweg in some places.¹⁴

After the Iranian Revolution of 1979, then Iraqi president Saddam Hussein abrogated the Algiers Agreement and invaded Khuzestan, taking advantage of Iran's post-revolutionary chaos. However, the Iranians drove the Iraqi army out of Khuzestan in 1982 and even occupied the Faw District southeast of Basra in 1986.¹⁵ As the eastern part of Basra Governorate became a key front in the Iraq-Iran War (1980–1988), the military conflict had major repercussions on the population and inflicted much damage to agriculture and traditional lifestyles. More than half of the inhabitants fled the districts of Shatt al-Arab and Abu al-Khaseeb, relocating to other parts of Basra and southern Iraq. About 90 percent of Faw's population left, and environmental conditions and soil quality deteriorated greatly due to the military operations.¹⁶

The damage continued in the 1990s after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Once Iraqi forces were expelled during the Gulf War of 1991, an insurgency broke out in southern Iraq that was followed by the government's draining of the marshes. While there is disagreement over the motives behind this,¹⁷ it served to deny the insurgents a haven. The United Nations Environment Program estimated that 90 percent of marshlands had disappeared by 2000, which also meant a decline in the flow of fresh water into the Shatt al-Arab and, therefore, an increase in salinity levels.¹⁸ Despite attempts to revive the marshes after the U.S.-led invasion of 2003, they had lost about 50 percent of their predrainage area and are projected to lose more in the upcoming years due to new dams, the diversion of rivers in Turkey and Iran, and climate change.¹⁹

In addition to the impacts of military conflict and the security-driven reengineering of the region's environment, the development models adopted by Iraq and Iran also played a role in aggravating environmental conditions. These models were dictated by the two states' goals of maximizing profits by increasing the output of specific agricultural products, urbanization, and industrialization. This led to the overexploitation of natural resources, as authorities gave limited attention to ecological and cultural considerations.

One manifestation of this development approach was the building of dams and the diversion of rivers. In the past four decades, both Turkey and Iran, as upstream countries, have undertaken projects that have had a major impact on downstream countries and areas such as the Shatt al-Arab.²⁰ Turkish dams have reduced the water flow of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers to historically unprecedented levels, while projects in Iran to regulate and divert the hydraulic structure of the Karun and Karkheh Rivers have further decreased freshwater flows into the Shatt al-Arab.²¹ Between 2011 and 2017, five dams were erected on the Karkheh tributary and a megadam, the Gotvand, was built on the Karun tributary,²² which was responsible for roughly 20 percent of Basra Governorate's water consumption.²³

These projects, on top of the pervasive drought and rising temperatures in the area that increased evaporation, led to a deterioration of the Shatt al-Arab's water quality. Salinity levels increased to an unprecedented degree, especially as seawater began flowing into the waterway because of a reduction in its outward flow toward the sea.²⁴ A study has shown that in the Shatt al-Arab near Faw, the concentration of total dissolved solids increased from 1.25 grams per liter in 1977–1978 to 26.3 grams per liter in 2017–2018.²⁵

The harmful effects of the top-down modernization approach adopted by Iraq and Iran were reflected in oil production as well. The two countries' dependencies on oil as the main sources of national income were a major factor in their neglect of the environmental impact. Southern Iraq and Khuzestan contain some of the largest oil reserves in the world, including shared fields such as Majnoon and Fakhah.²⁶ Since the beginning of oil exploitation in the two provinces at the start of the twentieth century, Baghdad and Tehran have prioritized expanding oil production there, especially as the sea's proximity facilitated exportation.

One fallout of the oil industry has been the increasing pollution of the Shatt al-Arab and river channels. A study in 2020 found that the byproducts of oil production were a major factor in the elevated levels of heavy metal contamination.²⁷ Other anthropogenic effluents have included fertilizers, sewage sludge, and discarded material from metal welding workshops. The pollution provoked the illness and hospitalization of at least 118,000 locals in Basra in 2018, which led to violent protests by the population.²⁸

The Iraqi government has sought to resolve the problem by finding alternative sources of drinking water. This has provided some relief but has not led to substantial change. The reason is Iraq's failure to convince Turkey and Iran to increase water inflows, as well as the rampant corruption in Iraqi state institutions and endemic mismanagement of water resources.²⁹ In fact, Iran has been facing a similar problem, especially in Khuzestan, where protests erupted in July 2021 due to the severe water crisis caused by drought and the diversion of water to other regions.³⁰ Furthermore, besides oil extraction, industrial projects and the mass production of nonnative crops, such as sugarcane, have resulted in high pollution levels and created an environmental crisis in Khuzestan.³¹

Despite facing similar challenges and a transborder ecological catastrophe, Iraq and Iran are very far from elaborating a shared policy to deal with, let alone prioritize addressing, threats to the environment. Their concerns in the border zone are other and include increasing oil production and building a railway between Khuzestan and Basra. Furthermore, Iran has augmented its influence in Iraq through its alliances with Iraqi paramilitary groups, whose presence has ultimately weakened the Iraqi state, thereby limiting its ability to challenge Iran's restriction of water flows from across the border.

This border zone, once famous for its fertile land and agricultural wealth, has been profoundly transformed by the shift toward an oil-based economy, centralized and ecologically devastating modernization, and conflicts between Iraq and Iran over territory and resources. In a few decades, the area has become a zone of ruin, which is having profound consequences for Iraqi society today.

The Elements of Long-Term Instability in Basra

Environmental devastation in the border area around Basra has transformed social conditions in southern Iraq, which in turn has had a highly negative impact on sociopolitical stability. This has taken place in a broader context of shifting Iraq-Iran relations that have altered the balance of power along the border to Iran's advantage, complicating efforts to resolve the most salient problems in the governorate. This situation is destined to grow worse as Baghdad and Tehran pursue very different priorities in the area.

The most noticeable consequence of the multiple conflicts and environmental degradation in Basra Governorate has been the waning of agriculture. This has resulted in massive dislocation, rising unemployment and poverty, deepening social uncertainty, and violent competition over resources. During the Iraq-Iran War in the 1980s, much of the population of the eastern areas of the governorate was displaced. Almost 90 percent of the inhabitants of Faw fled the city in 1986, and no less than half of the population migrated from the districts of Shatt al-Arab and Abu al-Khaseeb. Some villages were completely wiped out in the fighting.³² Most farmers who lived near the border deserted their lands and relocated to the outskirts of southern urban centers. The government's attempts to securitize the area inflicted major damage to palm groves, which were seen as potential sanctuaries for Iranian forces. Some 8 million palm trees were either removed or destroyed during the war. Overall, around 80 percent of the palm groves surrounding the Shatt al-Arab were ruined because of the conflict, water shortages, and the rising salinity of the waterway.³³

Even after the ceasefire in 1988, not all those who were displaced have returned to their homes. For example, to this day no more than 10 percent of the population of Faw has gone home.³⁴ Other districts recovered better, but they also underwent shifts in their demographic makeup. Many of their inhabitants settled in southern cities where they had taken refuge during the conflict and were replaced by newcomers who had migrated away from other areas, such as the marshlands.³⁵ The Gulf crisis of 1990–1991 also discouraged people from returning, given Basra's proximity to Kuwait, which the Iraqi army had just invaded. The impact of these successive conflicts helped to provoke the uprising of 1991 that followed the military defeat in Kuwait, which was ruthlessly crushed by regime forces.³⁶

The international sanctions imposed on Iraq during the 1990s led the government to take steps to revive agriculture and achieve self-sufficiency in food. Even the drainage of the marshlands was, arguably, motivated by an old project to open up millions of hectares of land for agriculture, while the state also created a drainage canal to carry away polluted irrigation water.³⁷ This period was characterized by a revitalization of agriculture, albeit not enough to significantly break with a decades-long pattern of rural migration. In 1947, about 60 percent of Iraqis lived in rural areas, while today the percentage is less than 30 percent.³⁸ In fact, rural migration accelerated after 2003 with the resumption of oil exports, as well as the indifference shown by successive Iraqi governments toward developing agriculture and enabling farmers to compete with imported agricultural products. Repeated droughts and the substantial reduction of fresh water only reinforced this trend.³⁹

Since the 1970s especially, there have been several ways in which the districts of eastern Basra have been impacted by the growing dependency on oil and the neglect of agriculture. First, Basra became a key center for oil production and, consequently, was among the areas most affected by pollution. Three of Iraq's largest oil fields are located in or near there—West Qurna, Majnoon, and Halfaya.⁴⁰

Second, oil revenues, particularly when oil prices were high between 2005 and 2013, helped Iraqi governments to stabilize and raise the value of the Iraqi dinar at a time when neighboring countries such as Iran and Turkey saw the value of their currencies plummet.⁴¹ This galvanized an import-oriented economy. Cheap agricultural products were imported from Iran and Turkey while local crops became less competitive, further encouraging the abandonment of agriculture.⁴²

Occasionally, the government tried to impose restrictions on importing certain products, such as tomatoes and other vegetables, in order to support local farmers.⁴³ But with the absence of other guarantees for farmers (such as providing fertilizers and technical support, ensuring sufficient quantities of water, and purchasing unsold surpluses), as well as outdated irrigation techniques, water shortages, and increasing water salinity, it proved difficult to reenergize the agricultural sector. Furthermore, in 2021 these poor conditions caused a rise in vegetable prices, leading residents and local officials to protest and demand the opening of the Shalamchek border crossing with Iran in the Shatt al-Arab District to allow for the importation of tomatoes, a key ingredient in Iraqi cooking. The government had to ease border restrictions and allow the entrance of certain quantities of tomatoes.⁴⁴ Whereas agricultural activities declined on the Iraqi side, the Iranian government sought to increase its agricultural exports in an effort to raise revenues at a time of U.S.-imposed sanctions.⁴⁵

Third, the dependency on oil transformed economic opportunities in ways that made agriculture less appealing. Many people migrated to urban centers in search of jobs in the public sector, the security forces, or services.⁴⁶ In addition, large numbers of volunteers from peasant families in Basra joined paramilitary groups that fought the self-proclaimed Islamic State after 2014.⁴⁷ They would subsequently remain in these groups, some of which have engaged in illicit activities.⁴⁸

What can be called the “militiazation” of Iraqi society, especially in Basra and southern Iraq, cannot be detached from the broad processes of social dislocation, the breakdown of rural lifestyles, and the rise of oil rentierism. In the context of a weak state, militias and paramilitaries not only tried to fill the vacuum but also become economic enterprises using violence as a tool of extortion. As the governorate with Iraq’s largest oil supplies and the only port, and one that also borders Iran and Kuwait, Basra was ideal for those able and willing to exploit its sources of wealth. That is why, since 2003, it has become a place where paramilitary groups and militias have flourished. This has deepened its instability and has had consequences for border areas and cross-border relations.

The deterioration of rural areas has also had other repercussions, not least a transformation in the ways rural populations have exploited their lands. Even many families that remained on their land have either built up their properties or sold them to construction or housing companies for development, despite the fact that Iraqi law prohibits transforming agricultural land into residential property.⁴⁹ As a result of this, about 20–23 percent of arable land in the Shatt al-Arab District has been converted into residential or commercial property.⁵⁰ This reflects the limited number of options available for dealing with demographic growth in the area and the state’s inability to enforce its own laws or offer alternatives. It has also created another source of conflict due to disputes over lands that often have not been legally registered or whose owners fled Iraq long ago.⁵¹

As a result of these dynamics, two overlapping processes have been visible in Basra Governorate, which have increased sociopolitical instability. The first is what longtime urban dwellers in Basra call the “ruralization of the city.” This refers to collective migration from rural areas and marshlands to urban centers, where the

migrants bring their rural culture with them.⁵² Such migration has also increased pressure on already over-loaded urban centers suffering from poor public services. The quality of these services has sometimes led to protests, including those that lasted for several weeks in 2018.⁵³

The second process is the random urbanization of rural areas in eastern Basra Governorate, characterized by the growing exploitation of agricultural lands for residential and commercial purposes. One outcome of turning the countryside into built-up expanses is that, once again, it has overwhelmed the region's inadequate infrastructure. In the Shatt al-Arab District, for example, people have improvised ways of discarding their sewage into rivers, increasing pollution and making water undrinkable.⁵⁴ Another is that the increasing abandonment of agriculture, which is a productive activity, has pushed more people to engage in the already saturated services sector and the informal economy.

As a consequence of these developments, some tribal groups that collectively migrated from the marshlands and settled on the outskirts of the city of Basra and other districts have developed highly dubious means of securing revenues. For longtime residents, the migration of the marsh tribes to districts such as Shatt al-Arab unsettled the social fabric and accelerated the random urbanization of its rural areas.⁵⁵ Some of these tribes have engaged in armed conflict with other groups to control territory or gain access to water resources.⁵⁶ They have even threatened oil companies in order to secure jobs or contracts for members of their tribe, a practice also embraced by powerful paramilitary groups.⁵⁷ New modes of extortionist practices have been evolving, expanding the informal and illicit economy. This has fed sociopolitical insecurity, planting the seeds of future conflicts.

At the heart of the illegal activities carried out by armed groups has been smuggling. There are two types of smuggling activities, one conducted through the sole formal border crossing between Basra and Khuzestan, namely the Shalamcheh crossing, and the other through informal border points. Shalamcheh is located in the Shatt al-Arab District and is one of the largest and most active among the seven official border crossings between Iraq and Iran. For a sense of the volume of movement through the crossing, thousands of Shia pilgrims cross through Shalamcheh on a regular basis to visit religious shrines in the two countries. In 2021, about 600 cargo trucks passed through it daily, often carrying Iranian goods to be sold in Iraqi markets.⁵⁸

After the collapse of the former Baath regime's security apparatus following the U.S.-led invasion of 2003, Iraqi armed groups backed by Iran's IRGC began to establish strongholds in Basra and the border area, including the Shalamcheh crossing.⁵⁹ Even after the restoration of governmental control over the crossing, these groups maintained a large degree of influence there. For instance, the Iraqi Border Guards (IBG), which is under the authority of the Interior Ministry, is heavily infiltrated by members of the Badr Organization, the oldest and largest IRGC-backed paramilitary group.⁶⁰ Many leading figures in the organization lived for decades in Iran, including the current head of the IBG, who was a member of Badr.⁶¹ The same applies to the current commander of the IBG section responsible for Basra Governorate and the maritime border. Several security officials who operate at the Shalamcheh crossing or in nearby areas are also connected to the Badr Organization or to other armed groups that are close to Iran, such as Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Kataib Hezbollah.⁶²

The Iraqi authorities have implemented some measures to reduce the armed groups' influence over border crossings, including by unlinking the national Border Crossings Department, which manages the crossings, from the Interior Ministry, over which Badr has sway, and turning it into an independent body supervised

by the prime minister.⁶³ This led to the appointment of a new director of the Shalamcheh crossing in 2020, one who has no connection with the armed groups.⁶⁴ Yet, despite these measures, the IRGC-backed groups continue to use the crossing in ways that serve their interests. In doing so they have taken advantage of their own hybrid character. They are part of the Iraqi state in belonging to the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), an umbrella organization of paramilitary groups that receives salaries from the government; at the same time, they are outside the state's authority and follow their factional leaders who coordinate with the IRGC, independently of the Iraqi state.⁶⁵

But the armed groups' activities are not limited to military matters. They have also established partnerships with private companies in Basra, to which they provide protection and facilitate the importation of goods in exchange for financial benefits.⁶⁶ One such company, which specializes in construction, appears to have been awarded several important projects in the governorate and has potentially benefited from its connections with political parties and armed groups.⁶⁷ In addition, some travel agencies that transport pilgrims across the border are allegedly either owned by or connected to the IRGC and allied armed groups.⁶⁸ Even companies that provide services for large infrastructure construction projects, such as Faw Port, are sometimes connected to these groups. For example, one such company is believed to be linked to Asaib Ahl al-Haq and another to the Sadrist Movement.⁶⁹

The second type of smuggling activities, namely those that take place through informal border crossings, are usually carried out by criminal networks, some of which are connected to armed groups. There are several smuggling points between eastern Basra Governorate and Khuzestan, mostly in the Shatt al-Arab, Abu al-Khaseeb, and Qurna districts, in addition to maritime smuggling points in the Faw District (see map 3).⁷⁰ The smuggling activities are diverse and can involve narcotics, weapons, counterfeit currency, livestock, motorcycles, medicines, and foreign currencies such as U.S. dollars.⁷¹

The narcotics trade from Iran to Iraq has intensified in the past few years.⁷² In the 1990s, Iraq was primarily a transit country for narcotics coming from Iran before they were distributed to other countries, particularly in the Gulf. The Baath regime oversaw this trade, regarding it as a way of earning profits during the period of international sanctions.⁷³ While it remains a transit country for narcotics, Iraq today is also a destination country, including for hashish, crystal meth, and Captagon.⁷⁴ Official and unofficial reports indicate that the use of narcotics in Iraq has become so widespread that it is now considered a key security threat.⁷⁵ The border area of Siba in Abu al-Khaseeb District is identified as one of two primary entry points for narcotics.⁷⁶ Consumption in southern Iraq has rapidly increased during the past few years, especially of cheap drugs such as crystal meth. Additionally, residents reported narcotics cultivation in some areas in southern Iraq, especially Maysan.⁷⁷ Unemployment, destruction of old lifestyles, thriving of militias and criminal organizations, and the weak rule of law are often blamed for the rise of consumption.⁷⁸

Whereas the smuggling of narcotics had been carried out in the past by individuals, especially pilgrims who brought small quantities either for sale or personal consumption, it has become a more complex business today, controlled by organized crime networks and militias. Increasingly, the region stretching from Afghanistan to Iran, Iraq, and Syria, and to Lebanon on the Mediterranean coast, seems to have evolved into an interconnected territory for the production, trafficking, and consumption of narcotics.⁷⁹ A member of the Iraqi judiciary has stated that he is aware of at least one case in which the Lebanese Hezbollah party has been involved in the smuggling of narcotics across the Iraq-Iran border.⁸⁰

Shalamcheh Border Crossing and Some Identifiable Smuggling Points



Locals in Faw have pointed out that most of the big drug dealers in their district are affiliated with ruling parties and paramilitary groups.⁸¹ They operate in the district because it is easier to smuggle narcotics through its informal ports, and they are also able to escape to the adjacent Iranian city of Abadan if they are pursued by the security forces.⁸² Some Iraqi commentators have gone so far as to claim that Islamist political and paramilitary groups are deeply involved in the narcotics trade because some Islamic jurists do not prohibit consumption or trafficking and because narcotics can be useful to politically demobilize and control youths.⁸³ However, a more convincing explanation is that narcotics are simply profitable due to state weakness, the collapse of previously dominant economic activities, and the multiplication of rent-seeking armed groups.

Basra and Maysan have become the main entries for narcotics coming from Iran. Locals reported that armed groups such as Asaib Ahl Al-Haq (AAH) are heavily involved in this illicit activity. Indeed, rivalries between armed groups in southern Iraq were partly triggered by their attempts to control smuggling and racketeering in the border area of the two governorates. Occasionally, those rivalries turned violent and resulted in reciprocal assassinations, especially between AAH and the Peace Brigades (PB), a powerful militia affiliated to the Sadrist movement. In February 2022, the Maysan chief anti-drug judge was killed, allegedly by an AAH-affiliate.⁸⁴ This happened in a context where federal and local authorities seemed to favor PB in the competition with AAH. The tension between the two groups reached a high point in that month, leading their leaders to intervene and de-escalate out of the fear of the break out of a full-blown conflict between the Sadrists and AAH and its allied Iranian-backed paramilitaries.⁸⁵ Evidently, militiaization went hand in hand with the decline of agriculture and the environmental decay, whereas the state not only was unable to provide alternatives but was also deeply infiltrated by the same armed groups that contested its authority.

Moreover, these dynamics are linked to the broader geopolitical context shaping political and security realities in eastern Basra. While the region, with neighboring Khuzestan, was a place of rival territorial claims between Iraq and Iran, after the 2003 invasion the geopolitical equilibrium shifted sharply in Iran's favor. This was facilitated by years of chaos in Iraq, internal conflicts, and the disintegration of governing institutions. Iran initially supported the Shia armed groups that fought the U.S.-led occupation, and later, starting in 2014, the establishment of the PMU to fight the Islamic State.⁸⁶ Many of the armed groups that emerged from these conflicts were deployed in the border area, whether as part of formal institutions, such as the Interior Ministry or the PMU, or without the government's permission. Strong Iranian influence over the groups created a situation that one Iraqi commentator described as "Iranian management of the two sides of the border."⁸⁷ The reality is more nuanced and complex, given the existence of other formal institutions and the increasing autonomy that some Iraqi armed groups have gained from the IRGC, because they were able to build independent resource bases through state salaries, contracts, business networks, and illicit trade.⁸⁸ However, the tendency to think of the border in this way reflects the scope of Iran's influence. To a large extent, Tehran has begun to view the border not as a boundary to be defended but as a passage through which it can export its military and economic power, as well as its ideology. This is confirmed by the way Iran has systematically sought to secure land access to the Mediterranean and expand the reach of the so-called Resistance Axis, an informal alliance of states and militias led by Tehran whose principal aim is to oppose the policies and even the regional presence of the United States and Israel.⁸⁹

Members of Iraqi armed groups frequently cross the border into Iran, sometimes to escape Iraqi arrest warrants. They reportedly often receive protection from Iranian authorities.⁹⁰ One example involved members of an Iraqi cell affiliated with an Iran-aligned militia in Basra who were accused of killing Iraqi activists. The protestors were allegedly accused by Iran-allied groups of collaborating with the United States.⁹¹ In addition, the movement of Iranian weapons across Shalamcheh and other border crossings, especially the Shib crossing in Maysan Governorate, often takes place without the knowledge or the approval of the Iraqi Armed Forces Command,⁹² for reasons related to the geopolitical agenda of the Resistance Axis.

Iranian officials have used the border with Iraq to advance their interests and make sure that Iraq will never again threaten Iran's national security.⁹³ However, this has left little room for addressing the needs and priorities of local communities in Basra. Furthermore, it has empowered Iraqi nonstate and parastate actors who have engaged in unlawful activities and gained from the fragmentation of Iraqi state institutions and the

weakness of the rule of law, thereby perpetuating instability. This has not only compromised Iraqi sovereignty, but it has also stirred up tensions tied to the aggressive actions and internal rivalries of the paramilitary groups. These developments could again turn the border into a place of strife between Tehran and Baghdad, especially if Iraq comes to be ruled by a government with strong nationalistic tendencies.

For now, Iraq has not shown that it can alter this situation. The Iranian mode of managing and securitizing its border crossings and customs agencies is characterized by a stronger level of discipline and control than the Iraqi side.⁹⁴ The multiplicity of security and administrative actors in Iraq and the lack of a unified vision regarding the nature of the relationship and exchanges with Iran have produced a great degree of disorder. Even simple processes such as administering the passage of pilgrims sometimes appear to be chaotic.⁹⁵

Given this discrepancy in power, Iran has not found it necessary to be responsive to Iraqi complaints regarding the diversion of rivers away from Iraqi territory. This has had a negative impact not only on Basra but also on other governorates as well, such as Diyala, where water is scarce and which has been facing major droughts. The Iraqi Ministry of Water Resources has repeatedly complained that Iran has refused to take Iraq's freshwater needs into consideration.⁹⁶

At the same time, Iran has been more interested in increasing its exports to the Iraqi market, with the aim of reducing the impact of U.S.-imposed sanctions.⁹⁷ Iranian officials have stated that they are aiming for a target of \$20 billion in the volume of annual trade with Iraq, although the coronavirus pandemic and the accompanying closure of border crossings have made that goal more difficult to reach.⁹⁸ In the first eight months of 2021, the total value of Iranian exports to Iraq stood at \$6.1 billion.⁹⁹ So far, agricultural products account for 23 percent of Iranian exports to Iraq.¹⁰⁰ In addition, whereas rising salinity and pollution in the Shatt al-Arab waterway has harmed Iraqi fisheries, Iran has increased its fish exports to Iraq. Approximately one ton of Iranian fish enters Iraq through Shalamcheh daily, which is noteworthy since Iraq has many fish farms of its own.¹⁰¹ The rise in Iranian exports is due to the decreasing competitiveness of Iraqi farmers. This is partly a result of the falling value of Iran's currency and partly to water scarcity and mismanagement in Iraq. In light of this, Iran, which faces water shortages of its own, has no incentive to help Iraqi farmers.

One of the ways Iran has sought to increase its exports is by trying to persuade Baghdad to establish a Shalamcheh-Basra railway connection.¹⁰² There are two declared objectives in this project. The first is to facilitate the passage of pilgrims between Iran and Iraq, thereby enhancing religious and cultural ties between the two countries.¹⁰³ The second is to connect both countries to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, in that way opening a corridor for goods from Asia to the Mediterranean and Europe.¹⁰⁴ The second objective is often framed as a geopolitical pivot of sorts, in which Iran and its Iraqi allies seek to reinforce and benefit from economic ties with China as a way of weakening U.S. influence.¹⁰⁵

What is clear is that Tehran is more interested in the project than Baghdad. In December 2021, Iran's transport minister announced that during his visit to Iraq the two countries had signed an agreement to build the railway.¹⁰⁶ Iraqi officials offered conflicting statements on the matter,¹⁰⁷ but it seems that Baghdad is inclined to back the project in exchange for Iranian help in restricting IRGC-backed militias and in playing a more constructive role in Iraqi affairs.¹⁰⁸ However, the project, which will facilitate the movement of people and goods between the two countries, will likely increase the dependency of Iraqi markets on Iranian products, further harming Iraq's farmers and producers.

Indeed, critics of the project make precisely that point, arguing that the railway will serve Iranian ports on the Persian Gulf, including the port at Bandar Imam Khomeini in Khuzestan, which could become the main receiving point for goods from Asia to the Middle East. Accordingly, the Shalamcheh-Basra railway will reduce the benefits that Iraqis had expected from the construction of Faw Port, a project that officially began in 2020. The port is being built by South Korea's Daewoo and is intended to become the largest port in the Middle East. Presumably, it would help to diversify Iraq's economy and boost economic growth, making the country a regional trade route linking Asia, the Mediterranean, and Europe.¹⁰⁹ Tehran's insistence on accelerating the construction of the Basra-Shalamcheh railway could be motivated by the desire to link it to Bandar Imam Khomeini first, thereby ensuring a less central role for the Faw Port.

The Shalamcheh-Basra railway could transform the Iraq-Iran border zone and transborder relations. It would do so by providing economic opportunities and employment, reducing the impetus of many people to engage in illicit activities. It could also create incentives for Iraqi-Iranian collaboration on other issues, including managing water scarcity. However, less encouragingly, the railway could become instead just another centrally planned project that ignores environmental conditions in the region, adding to its discontents. Furthermore, if it is done mainly to satisfy Tehran's strategic interests, despite concerns in Iraq about the implications, it would represent another manifestation of a relationship that has been shaped by hegemony rather than equal partnership.

Conclusion

The environmental deterioration of Basra Governorate and the contentious relationship that has prevailed on the Iraq-Iran border for decades have together created a perfect storm of socioeconomic volatility. This has been based on a combination of factors—rural migration, unemployment and underemployment, the emergence of an economy characterized by illicit and rent-seeking activities, and the perpetuation of violence. Furthermore, this has been sustained by a lopsided relationship between Iraq and Iran, in which border relations are largely tilted to Iran's advantage. These relations are being defined by security concerns and Tehran's aspiration for supremacy, which is mainly manifested in the partnership between the IRGC and Iraqi nonstate and parastate armed groups.

However, common challenges in the border zone may also provide a basis for rectifying this relationship and reprioritizing socioeconomic and environmental needs over other considerations. If Iraq and Iran were to view transborder environmental degradation as a motive for collaboration and translated this awareness into a common plan for economic development, one based on shared interests, this could lead to a more mutually beneficial approach to the border.

Such an approach could begin with working on a common policy to face freshwater shortages and climate change. Baghdad and Tehran might also work together to exchange expertise and technology to address the environmentally harmful effects of the oil industry. Basra and Khuzestan are facing dire threats due to water scarcity and pollution. Years of militarization have only made conditions worse. Now would be the

right moment to agree to a new definition of security in the border zone, where joint efforts to preserve the environment and revive agriculture and traditional lifestyles could help reverse the destructive dynamics visible today. National security needs to be reconceptualized to include human security and environmental sustainability.

The likelihood of this happening in the foreseeable future is not high. But for Iraq there is urgency in the need to break out of the cycle of instability that is shaping events in Basra. Without finding the means to reverse environmental, and ultimately social and economic, decay in the governorate, the Iraqi state will only aggravate its own vulnerabilities, guaranteeing continued insecurity and increasing social unrest, thereby undermining its national interests. For a country that has faced multiple conflicts over questions related to its border, this is not a situation that Iraqi officials can afford to disregard.

About the Author

Harith Hasan is a nonresident senior fellow at the Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, where his research focuses on Iraq, sectarianism, identity politics, religious actors, and state-society relations.

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**MALCOLM H. KERR
CARNEGIE MIDDLE EAST CENTER**

Emir Bechir Street, Lazarieh Tower | Bldg. No. 2026 1210, 5th flr.
Downtown Beirut, P.O.Box 11-1061 | Riad El Solh, Lebanon
P: + 961 1 99 15 91

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