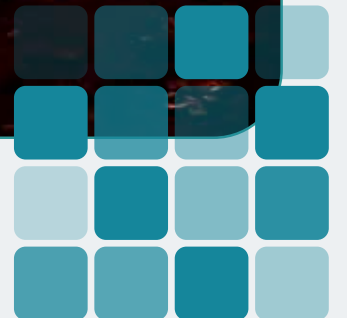


WHAT IS GOING ON IN IRAQ'S RICH, ARMED AND WATERLESS PROVINCE BASRA?



LINA MUSAWI





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Introduction

On July 8, 2018, protests broke out in Basra, Iraq's richest province. In Basra, where about 80 percent of Iraq's total oil production is provided, the people have expressed their displeasure for the lack of basic vital needs such as intentional neglect towards their province, deterioration of services, widespread unemployment, electricity problem in the province with the highest temperature in Iraq and lack of suitable water resources for public use. All these did not happen in a short time. Behind the protests in Basra in August 2015, there exists a major neglect in terms of services in the province after the decision by the central government to adopt an austerity policy and the expenditure because of the war against ISIS, as well as widespread government corruption especially in the field of public service. Later on, the protests became a tradition repeated every year to express the displeasure of the people of Basra.

The sparks of the protests where hundreds of people poured into the streets to announce their demands in Basra in February 2016 continued in the province even in 2018, and also spread to other provinces such as Najaf, Misan, Dhi Qar, Karbala and Baghdad. The demonstrations,

which lasted for more than a month in Basra, did not stop during the Greater Eid in August, and the Basra people spent the whole Greater Eid week in hospitals, not in the mosques, as about 15,000 people were diagnosed with poisoning due to the pollution in the potable and domestic water. According to the Health Control Branch Office in Basra, the chemical pollution rate in provincial water has reached 100% and the percentage of bacteria in the water is approximately 50%, and this risky situation has not existed in any Iraqi province before. While this humanitarian catastrophe is taking place in Basra, we witness the political controversies, mutual accusations and condemnations among government officials. Because of these set of tragic events, it is necessary to ask a number of questions to the real responsibility for this catastrophe. Is there a water problem and pollution in Basra, Iraq's oil production city, and to what extent? Is it possible that separatist voices like the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government can arise due to the situation in Basra and how will the government react to it?

The press and social media are at the forefront of the conflict between civilians, on the one hand, and activists on the other. In the meantime, there are debates among the



authorities of the Ministry of Water Resources, the Ministry of Health and Environment, the Basra local government under Asad al-Eidani's leadership, the Basra Health Department and the Ministry of Municipalities and Public Works on the causes of this humanitarian disaster. Well, who is responsible for this humanitarian disaster?

Following the ongoing crisis, the responsibility is first of all on the Ministry of Water Resources, the sole institution responsible for waterworks in Basra. The Ministry of Water Resources is responsible for the construction of water networks and desalination plants.

on the grounds that he did not fulfill his duty.

Basra Governor Asad al-Eidani stated that a period of one year was needed to overcome the causes of this humanitarian catastrophe and that two to three billion dinars were required for the construction of eight desalination plants and that there were not enough funds to cover all these. Basra Health Director announced the number of injured as fifteen thousand people afterwards. Furthermore, other states have provided assistance for the elimination of the water problem. Basra Governor Asad Al-Eidani, who took office in 2017, rejected the equipment aids, especially the generator, from Kuwait in a

“Protests broke out in Basra, Iraq's richest province. In Basra, where about 80 percent of Iraq's total oil production is provided, the people have expressed their displeasure for the lack of basic vital needs such as intentional neglect towards their province, deterioration of services, widespread unemployment, electricity problem in the province with the highest temperature in Iraq and lack of suitable water resources for public use.”

Likewise, the Ministry of Municipalities and Public Works is responsible for the establishment of water treatment mechanisms. Both ministries are unable to fulfill their duties, and thus, share responsibility. In a similar vein, Health Minister Adeela Hammoud is also accused of intentional neglect of the water pollution in Basra. In addition to qualifiable hospitals, health personnel and medicines, treatments in hospitals may reduce the share of Minister of Health upon this catastrophe. Although a large number of patients have spent the night in the hospital corridors due to the lack of beds, 1000 patients who come to the hospital every day with a diagnosis of poisoning are a big figure even according to the facilities of the state hospitals in Basra. However, the Ministry of Health has tried to address this crisis. Basra Health Director Riyadh Abdulemir has refrained from answering openly the questions posed to him and has been requested to resign by the citizens

covert manner on the grounds that they had been used before and thus the arrival of the equipment was delayed. On the other hand, Governor Asad al-Eidani made a special meeting with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on the issue of dirty water disaster and Erdoğan promised to not to keep water for one more year before Turkey started to hold water in the Ilisu Dam. The Basra problem is not related to the amount of water coming from Turkey. Considering that the province is just next to the Gulf of Basra and the Arabian Sea and is therefore the only province with alternative water sources outside the Euphrates and the Tigris, there is abundant water in Basra, but it seems that these resources are not taken advantage of.

It would have been possible to complete large water treatment plants in a rich province like Basra the yearly budget of which reached 13 trillion Iraqi dinars in 2014 and to find a real

solution to this crisis, which had been spreading since the 1980s. However, the reasons such as the wasting of financial resources due to the widespread corruption and formality projects which were in fact not required have become a real obstacle to the reforms. The responsibility for this humanitarian and environmental catastrophe is on the Governorate, the Ministry of Municipalities and Public Works and the Ministry of Water Resources after 2003. Likewise, the bad policies of the central government directly affect the lives of the citizens and deepen the crises. The problem of water pollution is an accumulation of various problems that are not seen in the rest of the provinces and that Basra is trying to solve all alone.

The problems are so deep ... Water pollution is the simplest

Regarding the water problem, regional and global eyes have turned to the Basra province. But this problem is not the only problem that

should be solved in Basra. The problems encountered did necessitate to ask why the standard of living in the province declined. In fact, the problem has become the only thing that people need. It is said that as people's ignorance increases, their demands decrease. This is exactly what happens in Basra. Some of the problems in Basra are the problems that already existed before 2003. Other problems which are more dangerous have arisen since the collapse of the old regime. These problems should be considered in two ways. Firstly, these problems are related to the political controversies within the province. All Iraqi political parties which have their own armed groups in the province have established permanent centers and camps for their military wings, and these armed groups hang around in the streets of Basra with light, medium and heavy weapons. The presence of armed elements that wave their own flags under the roof of the state and clash with each other have delivered the oil arteries of Iraq to those who have made the riches of Basra the



source of their private finances. Moreover, in addition to that these groups receive bribes and commissions, the assignment of tasks to those who fail to serve citizens is an obstacle to the development of the province. The parties carry out unimaginable actions such as the acquisition of certain shares in exchange for granting official approvals to the companies seeking to invest in Basra for investment projects.

The second aspect of the conflicts in Basra is the tribal conflicts that prevent the people from getting rid of ignorance and poverty. The power and influence of the tribes have been influential on the people of Basra for a long time. Tribes and tribal leaders or sheiks are not only respected in Basra but in all Iraq. However, now the situation in Basra is that the tribes are divided among themselves and that untrained and incapable people are put into religious power as sheiks in the divided parts

to the former Iraqi army but now controlled by a tribe in the marshlands during the improvement process of the marshlands. The chaos caused by the tribes has had a significant negative impact on the civilian life in Basra, despite the existence of an educated class who refuses the dangerous practices of tribalism. Sometimes there are armed conflicts among tribes due to incredible difficulties, such as a dispute over a football match, and the security forces and the central government are seen to stay inactive in the face of these situations. What's more, some tribes are charged here with keeping the economy under control, setting the conditions and demanding funds from foreign companies that want to invest in certain areas in Basra.

Fearing the loss of the feeling of independence in their souls, the people of Basra believe that the continuation of chaos in their province is better than the regional interventions. There are

“There is still an unprecedented chaos in Basra and the tension is still continuing. The weakening of the security forces and the tendency of the protesters to violence have laid the groundwork for events to escalate and for some protesters to attack the police forces. If this crisis is not stopped immediately and negotiations with the protesters are not carried out, the people of Basra may bear arms against the police forces.”

of some of the great tribes. These new sheiks exacerbate disputes within the tribe and among other tribes. The armed power of the tribes in Basra demonstrates the weakness of the state and the absence of the rule of law when an armed conflict breaks out between the tribes since the government forces are unauthorized to arrest a particular member of any tribe. For the tribal rules are applied among the tribes and the state government knows it. The tribes in Basra have heavy and developed weapons. In 2006, the Iraqi Army, in cooperation with the US and Danish forces, even found tanks which belonged

also issues that can be discussed, including the presence of influential arms dealers who think that the provision of stability in Basra is not consistent with their interests. The current drug trafficking and the spread of drugs in Basra lead to the deterioration of the security situation in the province. All of these are the main reasons for the dirty urban water crisis, which is simpler than other problems. These are the main threats that need to be addressed. That is why there is a need to talk about the interconnected problems such as water pollution and electrical failure. So what are the causes of other problems?

Basra region... between realism and imagination

There are always calls for the construction of Basra or its departure from Baghdad. However, these calls for separation have not been able to turn into a powerful and effective tool in the field. All that is seen is the anger of the people of Basra, towards the central government... There are threats that the oil sent to Baghdad will be cut off if the complaints and claims that the people of Basra cannot benefit from the incomes transferred to Iraq. Political corruption played an important role in the inability to benefit from the incomes generated from Basra. However, when we consider the rebellion of the great tribes in Basra, it is understood that the local people have another view on this issue, which takes us away from Basra to northern Iraq. The northern Iraqi region imposed on the Kurdish tribes which have a desire for vengeance against the Iraqi government that they were marginalized and ignored and reminded that they had the power and the characteristic to leave Iraq. The armed tribes in Basra may turn the crisis into a catastrophe as they have a large number of members with advanced weapons.

If the situation continues like this, the chaos in the south would make the idea of the “Basra Region” (as a self-governing territory) possible. The Iraqi political forces are urged to preserve the territorial integrity of the country instead of preserving the next ruling positions in the upcoming government.

Latest Developments

On September 4, 2018, thousands of people from Basra participated in the protests and the tension in the province continues. These protests were held not for the improvement of public services, but for protesting the violence by security forces. The firing upon the people at the funeral ceremony of Yasir Mekki, who was killed on Monday, September 3, provoked the people of Basra. For this reason, it was called on Monday (September 3) to protest against the police forces. As a matter of fact, during the demonstration, there was a conflict between the police forces and the protesters. While 15 police officers were injured, 5 of the protestors lost their lives and more than 30 were injured. In the city center of Basra, the government buildings and the bureau of the Dawa Party were set on



fire by demonstrators and the fires were barely controlled. The security forces responded to the protestors with harsh practices and increased the tension. The government sent additional security forces from Baghdad to Basra to back up the security forces in the area. However, this did not prevent demonstrators from continuing the protest and more than 135 protestors were injured in the demonstrations organized on Tuesday (September 4). Furthermore, on Wednesday morning, September 5, the road to the oil field in the west of the Kurna district was closed by protesters. In the meantime, according to the reports in Iraq, Haider al-Abadi is told to re-visit Basra due to the incidents together with the cabinet to review the situation in the city and to appease the demonstrators. What is more, Abadi, temporarily serving as Prime Minister, Abadi demanded the commencement of an investigation for the death of some protestors.

There is still an unprecedented chaos in Basra and the tension is still continuing. The weakening of the security forces and the tendency of the protesters to violence have laid the groundwork for events to escalate and for some protesters to attack the police forces. If this crisis is not stopped immediately and negotiations with the protesters are not carried out, the people of Basra may bear arms against the police forces. It is noteworthy that these protests were realized simultaneously on the days when the struggle of the blocks, which proclaimed the largest block in the first session of Iraq's elected parliament. This ongoing chaotic situation in Basra will be a final factor in the establishment of a new government. The continuation of events in this way may result in the declaration that Basra is a province where no control has been provided.

Conclusion

The province of Basra is not the only province that has witnessed poor services such as the lack of potable water. The Hamrin region, which is located in the north-eastern part of Baqubah and consists of various agricultural villages only a few hundred meters from the Lake Hamrin, that

has strategic water reserves in the province of Diyala, has encountered such problems as well. Although it has been over seventy years since its foundation, there is no potable water in the town. However, in addition to the mass protests that have taken place ever since, contemporary media and communication channels have exacerbated the situation in Basra. Basra has, on the one hand, gigantic oil reserves and on the other huge health, economic, political and security problems that the next government needs to address immediately and that cannot be solved out overnight. The difficulty of providing public services is experienced not only by Basra but by all provinces of Iraq, with the very exception of KRG. The campaigns aimed at saving Basra may be considered as "ostensible" solutions, which are similar to those of earlier processes, such as the one that argued, "the problem of the polluted water depends on the treatment facilities or strong networks that would bring water to the city". The most significant results we have had are as follows:

- 1- The Ministry of Water Resources and the Ministry of Municipalities and Public Works shall undertake all civil and moral responsibilities for the water pollution crisis starting with those who served in the Ministry from 2006 till 2018. The 2014 government is not the sole responsible, and for that reason, it will not be fair for this government to account for full responsibility. For in the past years, a large amount of funding has been allocated to the Basra province, but these resources have not been used to provide real solutions to service problems.

- 2- The political corruption in Iraq leads to disasters that directly affect citizens. The lives of future generations are threatened by the fact that the sustainable development interrupted as a result of the complete waste and exploitation of the material and natural resources of the state.

- 3- The Ministry of Health is not responsible for the water pollution crisis. The task of the Ministry is to provide adequate medicine and

hospitals for patients. The number of patients that have applied to hospitals is far above the designated bed capacity. If the state hospitals in Basra were sufficient, the Ministry would, of course, benefit from these to save the patients, just as the other states did in the time of disaster and crisis. At this point, we must remind ourselves of the different initiatives in the various regions of Basra that several specialist (family health, internal medicine, pediatrics) physicians affiliated to the Ministry of Health have opened the clinics for appropriate treatment that is free of charge. This shows that the Ministry and its employees bear a moral responsibility for society, even in a limited way.

4- The anger and rage of the Basra population towards the central government may turn into a separatist call, especially since we face an armed society in Basra, even if it does not cause a crisis in the short-term.

5- It has been proven that the central government has no plan such as an environmental emergency plan to deal with catastrophes and emergencies that take place in the country. The water issue was a small problem that showed what might happen when Iraq faced an emergency. Given the fact that Iraq shares a geographical boundary with a nuclear power, Iran, a disaster similar to the Chernobyl accident in Ukraine can be experienced in an environment where Iran has been blockaded and has the irregular equipment. At this point, the government that sees that even the water pollution problem causes such a chaos - no

matter which government - must consider what it can do when it faces such big crises.

6- The power of the rebel tribes does not only threaten the social security in Basra, but also prevents any effort to attract investment to Basra and to develop the city. There are about 4 million people who live in Basra and desire a contemporary and innovative life. Even if there is a government that can fulfill these demands, the tribes or their leaders - who are thirsty for money and blood - will stand up against any reform initiative that will dispossess them of power and influence.

7- The executive agencies of the government have difficulty in determining the purpose of their establishment. The "We Will Never Get Thirsty" campaign initiated by the Minister of National Education to deliver water to Basra is an insolent situation against the people of Basra and, in general, all Iraqis. Every minister has his/her duties and authorities. The task of collecting donations for water is not the responsibility of the Minister of National Education but the responsibility of civil society organizations. Besides, the people of Al Anbar donated one million bottles of water to Basra without a political mediator, not minding the political disputes, political roles, and authority quotas. For this reason, the situation in Basra can be used positively for the integration of Iraq. Otherwise, what has happened in Basra has the power and competence to destroy all political, security, economic, environmental and social structures in Iraq.

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