



Field Report, 20 April 2022

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These Field Reports are prepared by the field staff of UNAMI’s Development Support Office (DSO), who are based in Iraq’s governorates, where they coordinate with local government officials, NGOs, community groups, and other development actors. They also monitor socio-economic and development trends to improve the UN’s understanding of events in Iraq.

1. Basra – Are Dust Storms the New Normal?



Environmental damage after years of conflict and poor management of natural resources have recently caused more severe and frequent dust storms blown into southern Iraq. The dust storms have been exacerbated by climate change. Drought has also aggravated the situation, particularly this year, as water shortages made the land dry out and become more dusty.

Alarm is growing over the increasing frequency and intensity of sand and dust storms and their negative economic, social, and environmental impacts. Dust storms have a significant impact on the economy, reducing visibility, interrupting supply chains, destroying crops, and overwhelming hospitals.

In Basra, hundreds of people sought medical help after one of the worst a week-long dust storms that swept across the region in March 2022. Cases of respiratory illness, suffocation, along with skin and eye irritation have increased.

“The windblown dust goes everywhere, through windows and doors, to coat all the furniture,” said Amjad, a father of two asthma-suffering daughters while seeking medical help in Basra General Hospital. “It goes from daylight to total darkness in only few minutes. If healthy people can't breathe, how can the children and the elderly cope?”

Some people expressed the need for active early warning systems in the country. This would at least prepare people for severe dust storms, giving them time to take cover, seal doors, vacate the streets, and avoid travel. Basic service providers and health facilities could also surge capacities in advance.

According to an environmental expert, Alaa Al-Badran, statistics from the Ministry of Agriculture show that desertification has affected 80% of arable land in the South due to water scarcity and climate change.



Huge cloud of dust descending on Basra city @ local media

Increasing population and human activities that have swept away agricultural lands in different areas have made things worse. Al-Badran added that over the years there have been many government statements and proposals to increase green lands and reduce dust storms.¹ However, it will require international cooperation to introduce modern technology to combat desertification.

Today, many neighboring countries have strengthened their defense strategies against this environmental threat with green belts of trees that are resistant to drought and harsh environments.

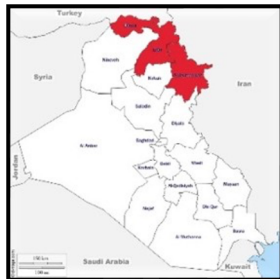
In 2021, Kuwait financed a project implemented by UN-Habitat that helps reduce the amount and frequency of transboundary sand and dust storms stretching from the Muthanna and Thi-Qar deserts in Iraq.

¹ The Mesopotamia Revitalization Project, and Garden of Eden reforestation program are among other project proposals that the Iraqi governmental White Paper introduced in 2021 to address regional climate-change impact mitigation issues. These projects are still only ink on paper and have not yet started.



There is a need to bolster these projects and advocate at the national and local levels to create policies, scale-up sustainable land management practices, and use the latest science to develop and implement effective mitigation policies.

2. Ibrahim Al Khalil – Kurdistan’s Main Gate to Europe



On a typical day at Iraq’s busiest border crossing, Ibrahim Al-Khalil, thousands of trucks cross over from Turkey into Iraq carrying food and processed products from Turkey and Europe. In the other direction, a similar number of almost empty trucks return from Iraq to Turkey to pick up more products to meet the demand of Iraqi consumers.

The Director of Customs at the crossing, Farsat A. Mohammed, says this imbalance in the flow of goods is due to Iraq’s weak manufacturing base and lack of goods to export. Crude oil is Iraq’s most substantial export – almost 10 tankers cross over into Turkey daily – in addition to plastic and empty cartons destined for recycling.

The border crossing, also commonly known as Harbor Border or the Frontier Gate, is one of the most important strategic border crossings in Iraq. Situated 208 kilometers from Erbil in Iraq’s Kurdistan region, it is the biggest land border crossing point between Turkey and Iraq and a getaway point to Europe.

Activities at the border crossing are beyond the control of the federal government. In fact, the lack of direct control of this very important revenue earning facility is partly responsible for the unresolved budget dispute between KRG and the federal government. Among other things, Baghdad insists on receiving border-crossing revenue in order to release KRG’s full share of the national budget.



The Ibrahim Al- Khalil Border crossing © DSO-KRI Team

When asked about the number of trucks and how much revenue is collected annually at Ibrahim Al Khalil, Mohammed said that that the daily count is 1,000 to 1,500 trucks, but the revenue information is with the Ministry of Finance and not shared with him.

In the absence of published data, the Head of the Iraqi Border Crossing Board, Kadhim al-Iqabi, was once quoted to have estimated the annual customs income collected at Ibrahim Al Khalil by the Kurdistan Regional Government at \$5 billion.² He also said that 2,500 to 3,000 containers enter through the crossing every day, a volume much higher than the 1,500 cited by the director.

The border crossing attracted intentional attention in late 2021 as thousands of Syrian refugees, Kurds, and Iraqis crossed into Turkey looking for a better future elsewhere. Many of them ended up on the border between Belarus and Poland, creating violent scenes of desperate migrants.

² Quoted in Ekurds.net daily news, September 2019.



In August 2021, 28,834 individuals were recorded crossing in both directions at Ibrahim Al-Khalil border point, the highest number in two years and 14 times more than the number (2,073) in the same period of 2020. According to the DTM, returning home and shopping in both directions make up almost 76 percent of the given reasons for travel.

The total data collected between December 2021 to February 2022 at Ibrahim Al-Khalil border point is 78,137 travellers. This figure includes 40,017 individuals entering Iraq (incoming flow) and 38,120 individuals exiting to Turkey (outgoing flow).³

The Director of Residence and Passports in the customs office, retired Brigadier General Shavan Ramadha, confirmed that thousands of migrants, mainly from Iraq, Kurdistan, and the Middle East are passing through the border. He emphasized that even though the number of those crossing has significantly increased, the department's responsibility was limited to facilitation, so long as the travelers had the required documentation.

He went on to say that almost 10,000 people, including truck drivers, cross every day from both sides. Sixty percent of them are petty traders, peddling goods from both sides of the border. He mentioned some recurring challenges such as people smugglers, narcotics peddlers, the absence of sophisticated machinery to detect contraband items, and sheds for both truck drivers and passengers to wait in during document processing. Also needed is training of staff to keep them up to date with new technologies.

Khalil Al-Ibrahim is the biggest employer in the region, with more than 15,000 people employed both directly and indirectly. In the wake of the covid pandemic (2020), an additional 3,000 truck driver jobs were added. There is a wide range of opportunities such as service sector catering, administrative support, clearing and forwarding, drivers, porters, hospitality businesses, hotels and dormitories, and the security sector.

The booming economic situation around the border point does not reflect the economic situation in the rest of the Kurdistan region. The volume of activities at the border crossing are continuously expanding, so are the economic prospects it offers. Even during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, a lot of goods continued to be shipped through the border, and it remains open for business.

3. North-Central Iraq – Clearing Explosives to Promote Returns



In Mosul, four years after liberation, the Tigris River remains littered with remnants of war. Ninewa Governorate has an estimated 13 million tons of explosives lying around, waiting to claim their next victims.

The United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) says that Iraq is one of the most mine-contaminated countries in the world. It will take decades to clear all the booby-traps that prevent people from returning to their homes, businesses, or farmlands.

In Kirkuk, the High-Level Roundtable for Durable Solutions revealed that unexploded ordnance is the main obstacle hindering returns. The Government Returns Committee surveyed that 2 million donums (20,000 acres) of agricultural lands are blocked by landmines.

³ Iraq cross border monitoring, Iraq IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) 2022 iraqdtm.iom.int/Remap



Regrettably, incidents are increasing. In 2021, 110 children were maimed or killed in Iraq, which is more than in 2020. Until clearance is completed, children and parents need more risk education to understand that bombs and grenades are not toys to play with.



War remnants litter the west bank of Mosul. Their bright colors attract children, who mistakenly think these are toys that they can play with. © iNews.

The few organizations active in mine action suffer from a shortage of staff. According to Aladdin Moussa, Manager for Global Clearance Solutions in Mosul, the volume of explosives contamination is just too high. The development community in Kirkuk has been struggling with mine-clearance delays after the departure of UNMAS, the Danish De-Mining Group, and Optima in 2020 due to lack of funding. Only TetraTech is still performing de-mining activities in Kirkuk.

At request of the Government of Kirkuk, UNAMI-DSO asked the Directorate for Mine Affairs⁴ to improve assessments, demining activities, and risk education. As a result of DSO's advocacy, a Gubernatorial Focal Point for Mines was appointed, Quality Assurance Officer, Neshtiman Fattah.

Fattah immediately convened a series of meetings with all stakeholders. At the first meeting, she focused on the delays of obtaining mine-clearance certificates with military, UN, and NGO actors. At the second meeting, Fattah debriefed the Office of the Prime Minister, the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Center, and the Ministries of Defense and the Interior. At the third meeting, she made a presentation to NATO and European Union Members.

With professionalism and personal conviction, Fattah facilitated a visit by the Minister of the Environment and the Director-General for Mine Affairs, Jassim Abdul Aziz al-Falahi, who announced that Kirkuk will become a priority area in 2022. The Directorate for Mine Affairs will open an office to entice NGOs and companies to resume de-mining operations in Kirkuk. With their homes cleared from explosives, people will be able to return.



The Minister for the Environment chairs the first Technical Meeting for Mine Affairs and officially appoints a Focal Point in Kirkuk. @ NMAA.

⁴ The Directorate for Mine Affairs is part of the Ministry of Environment because explosives are seen as 'contamination.' It has been argued whether this administrative structure is efficiently positioned. The Ministry of Defense has most expertise on explosives, while the Federal Police De-Mining Unit reports to the Ministry of Interior.



4. Basra – Business Incubators a Step Towards Youth Empowerment



Basra University, in partnership with the Central Bank of Iraq and WFP, launched the first business incubator to promote economic growth in Basra. The initiative supports youth entrepreneurship with small and medium scale start-up businesses.

Business incubators started in the 1950s and evolved gradually with technological and social changes. They are designed to help start-up businesses grow and succeed by providing free or low-cost workspaces, mentorship, expertise, access to investors, and in some cases, working capital in the form of a loan.

DSO attended the launching event and met Dr. Sajid, the Vice-Chancellor of Basra University. Sajid says that the university's traditional role has changed from teaching to a focused approach for economic growth using research, innovation, and entrepreneurship.

Joining an incubator is almost like joining a college program. "You have to apply, be accepted, and then follow a schedule in order to meet benchmarks set by the University," he added.

Qasim Al-Fahad, a representative of the Central Bank of Iraq, said that the structured environment of the incubator can help new business focus and grow in the right direction. The Central Bank recently allocated loans ranging from five million to half a billion IQD (\$3,400 – 340,000) to successful applicants for setting up businesses and new enterprises.

"We focus on fostering partnerships with incubators, accelerators, and investors, offering a startup toolkit to solve payments. We always encourage the private sector to take part in supporting this initiative," Al-Fahad said.



Learning about Business Incubation © Basra University

Huda Khazal from the Ministry of Industry's Directorate of Industrial Development, says that the Ministry supports not only fledgling companies and newly established industries, but also trade, technology, services, and construction. Through networking and services, small businesses can reduce the high transaction costs of doing business. However, the lack of insurance companies and expertise in this field hinders the smooth growth of small businesses in Iraq.

Many startup companies and individual entrepreneurs made use of the resources and services, including workspace, technical expertise, management mentoring, business plans, technical support, business networking, and advice on intellectual property.

Ahmed Adel, age 24, one of the beneficiaries, said, "I always wanted to develop a business website and a mobile application to engage with customers. Through working with the business incubator, I'm able to get valuable feedback on my business model and financial support, which allowed me to bootstrap my project."

5. Wasit – “Winter Without Flooded Roads”



“Winter without flooded roads!” said Ibtesam Al-Silmawi, a resident of Al-Hai, one of the main cities in this central governorate. She added that it was one of the services that the people demanded years ago. Stagnant rainwater mixed with the sewers remains on the roads for a long time.

“The district suffered from not having a proper sewer system and wastewater treatment station. It has an old open drainage sewer system that covers only the downtown area, where it channels wastewater to the waterways directly,” said Kadhum Kareem, the Director (Qaimaqam⁵) of Al-Hai District. He added that clearing the flooded roads from accumulated rainwater and other wastewater takes a long time using the limited number of tanker vehicles in the district.

The accumulation of wastewater on the roads, especially during winter, causes serious damage to pavement and houses. The continuous presence of moisture, not to mention the health consequences caused by untreated and accumulated wastewater, creates an environment for germs and disease to spread.

On 8 December 2021, the Wasit local government inaugurated a sewage treatment plant and networks in Al-Hai District. The newly completed project includes a central treatment plant with a designed capacity of 30,000 m³/day built on an area of 160 acres, with heavy sewage and rain networks extending 216 km, including seven lifting stations.

“The project serves over 100,000 residents of Al-Hai District,” said Kareem, adding that it is one of the infrastructure projects that contributes to improving services and the environment. It also helps environmental sustainability by providing large quantities of treated water suitable for agricultural irrigation use. “It a project with multiple benefits, and it will have a big impact on making our district cleaner.”

The project was approved within the Development of Regions Plan of 2012 and assigned to the China Gezhouba Company (CGC), a Chinese construction company, at a cost of IQD 111 billion, about \$75 million. The works were stopped several times because monetary installments from the Ministry of Finance were not released during the ISIL crisis, when all the government’s funds were directed to support liberation efforts.



Wasit Governor launches the Operational Works at Al-Hai Central Sewage Treatment Plant© Al-Hai District Sewers Directorate



The precipitation Basins-Al-Hai Central Sewage Treatment Plant© Al-Hai District Sewers Directorate

⁵ The Qaimaqam is a term referred to the highest government position of a provincial district, which can be translated to the “Director” but because many positions in the district hold the title of Director.



According to the Senior Engineer, Ali Hani, the Head of the Resident Engineering Department for the project, the basic design of the project divided the district into four sectors to collect heavy sewage and rainwater. The project has a modern digital controlled central treatment plant with a highly efficient processing capacity. The treated wastewater will be drained into the Gharraf River to be used again for many purposes.

“It will help improve the quality of life in the city,” said Dr. Abdul Amir Erhaima, the Director of Al-Hai General Hospital and a resident of Al-Hai City. Erhaima indicated that there are health and environmental hazards associated with the old open drainage sewers in the city, including groundwater contamination, polluted vegetables and crops with pathogens that become unhealthy for human consumption, and spread disease.



Mixers Works at the Precipitation Basins-Al-Hai Central Sewage Treatment Plant© Al-Hai District Sewers Directorate