

# Trawling Iraq's threatened marshes to collect plastic waste

Author:

Thu, 2022-05-19 23:12

CHIBAYISH: Iraq's vast swamplands are the reputed home of the biblical Garden of Eden, but the waterways are drying out and becoming so clogged with waste their very existence is at risk, activists warn.

"For 6,000 or 7,000 years the inhabitants have protected the marshes," said Raad Assadi, director of Chibayish Organization for Ecotourism, who this week began work on a boat to try to clear some of the worst areas of trash.

"But we have reached a stage where the marshes are threatened with extinction."

The swamps, nestled between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, are one of the world's largest inland deltas.

The wetlands barely survived the wrath of dictator Saddam Hussein, who ordered they be drained in 1991 as punishment for communities protecting insurgents and to hunt them down.

But after Saddam was toppled, Iraq pledged to preserve the ecosystem and provide functional services to the marshland communities, and they were inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2016 both for their biodiversity and their ancient history.

Tourists have returned, but one of the main visible sources of pollution in the area are visitors who throw away their "plastic waste," said Assadi.

After decades of brutal war, Iraq lacks structures for the collection and disposal of waste, and 70 percent of its industrial waste is dumped directly into rivers or the sea, according to data compiled by the UN and academics.

A team of 10 joins the boat, cruising the maze of narrow waterways to collect the piles of plastic bottles filling the channels, and erecting signs urging people to "respect our land," and not to litter.

But it is far from the only threat: Iraq's host of environmental problems, including drought and desertification, threaten access to water and livelihoods across the country.

The UN classifies Iraq "as the fifth most vulnerable country in the world" to climate change, having already witnessed record low rainfall and high temperatures in recent years.

The water level of the marsh is falling, a phenomenon accentuated by repeated droughts and by the dams built upstream of the two rivers, among Iraq's upstream neighbors, Turkey and Iran.

“There is a threat to this ecosystem, which has significant biodiversity,” said French ambassador Eric Chevallier, at the launch on Thursday of the French-funded boat project.

Chevallier called for “much greater mobilization, Iraqi and international, to meet all the challenges” that a heating planet is causing.

A string of sandstorms in recent weeks have blanketed Iraq, with thousands needing medical care due to respiratory problems.

The Middle East has always been battered by dust and sandstorms, but they have become more frequent and intense in recent years.

The trend has been associated with overuse of river water, more dams, overgrazing and deforestation.

The rubbish collectors are not the only unusual team in the marshes: earlier this year, the Iraqi Green Climate Organization launched a veterinary ambulance to help farmers treat their water buffalo.



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Iraqis turn to budding ecotourism to save marshesIraq’s vast marshes, reborn after Saddam, are in peril again

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# US military review of civilian casualties in Syria flawed, claims Human Rights Watch

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LONDON: Internal US military reviews of operations resulting in civilian harm remain “fundamentally” flawed and require urgent redress despite pledges made last year, Human Rights Watch said on Thursday.

On Tuesday, the US Department of Defense released a public summary, but not the full report, of an airstrike it conducted against Syria in 2019 in which it acknowledged faults for the handling of the operation but found no one accountable.

Sarah Yager, Washington director of Human Rights Watch, said: “It’s disappointing but not surprising the DOD has once again refused to hold itself accountable for civilian deaths.”

She added: “In addition to resolving obvious flaws in its investigative process, the US military should publish the full review, as a show of respect to the victims’ families and to prevent future abuses.”

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin initiated the review after a November New York Times article condemned an initial investigation for its failure to acknowledge that dozens of civilians had been killed by the strike on Baghouz in March 2019 and alleged individuals within the DOD had sought to cover up the extent of civilian harm.

Despite Austin’s intervention and pledge to create a Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response Action Plan, HRW said this latest review failed in its commitments to transparency, lacked information from witnesses, used “an overly elastic definition of combatants” and did not provide amends for the civilians harmed.

The NGO claimed the DOD classified all adult males as combatants, regardless of their participation in hostilities, contravening international humanitarian law standards on distinguishing between civilians and combatants; relied on incorrect Syrian allies, rather than properly verifying information received; and provided no evidence of interviews with people outside the US military.

In a statement, HRW said: “Instead, it appears that the military reviewers relied upon the same incomplete information in the review that they relied upon to conduct the airstrike.”

Yager pointed to the failure to investigate as proof that the US Congress needed to intervene to urgently address the military’s handling of civilian harm.

“We had high hopes for Secretary Austin’s commitments earlier this year to

reform, but the many missteps in this inquiry leave us deeply concerned that the US military hasn't gotten the memo," she said.



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Pentagon finds no wrongdoing in 2019 Syria strike that killed civilians  
Syrian interpreter left in asylum limbo for two years  
attempted suicide

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## [Outrage, shock among Fatah members over Birzeit University student election loss](#)

Author:

Thu, 2022-05-19 22:11

RAMALLAH: The crushing defeat of the Fatah-backed bloc in Birzeit University student council elections this week has caused shock and outrage among members and supporters of the movement, which is aligned with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

In the wake of the defeat, one of its heaviest, Fatah says it will form a

committee to study the cause of the loss and draw lessons.

The Fatah bloc's rivals, a Hamas-linked activist group, won a landslide victory in the poll at the flagship West Bank university on Wednesday, a result that some observers believe signals a possible shift in Palestinian public opinion.

The loss is believed to be Fatah's biggest since its defeat by Hamas in the 2005 legislative elections.

Fatah has led the Palestinian struggle since its launch in 1965 and formed the ruling party of the Palestinian Authority since its establishment in 1994.

However, the Fatah bloc gained the lowest number of votes and seats since the start of the university elections in 1996, prompting the head of the Fatah movement in Ramallah and Al-Bireh, Muwafaq Suhwail, to resign.

Other members of the Fatah leadership in Ramallah are expected to quit in coming days amid demands for an inquiry into the defeat.

Suhwail called for an investigation into the election result, claiming the movement was filled with "mercenaries and intruders."

Hamas, meanwhile, said that its victory sends "a message to the Palestinian Authority that security coordination will not bring rights to the Palestinian people."

The group said that the "broad support confirms that it has become a leader of the national project, and resistance has become the choice of the Palestinian people."

The Fatah loss will discourage the PA from organizing legislative or presidential elections of any kind from now on. The last legislative elections were scheduled in early 2005.

Hamas' Al-Wafaa' Islamic bloc won the Birzeit University election by a large margin, claiming 28 seats on the student council, the first time its candidates have gained control of the body. The Fatah movement won just 18 seats.

Fatah is reportedly trying to distance itself from the PA.

However, the movement's supporters blame the election loss on the authority's mistakes, as well as its policies regarding Israel and Palestinian citizens.

In an online post, former Hamas minister Mohammed Al-Barghouti wrote: "It is no longer convincing at all to try to convince people, especially university students, that the Palestinian Authority is one thing and the Fatah movement is another, especially since the head of the Fatah movement – the president of the Palestinian Authority – and the head of the Palestine Liberation Organization is the same president."

Al-Barghouti said that all the “negatives and misfortunes of the PA are borne and paid for by the Fatah movement.”

In return, he said “all the privileges and benefits of the PA go to a few beneficiaries, most of whom are not from the Fatah movement and have never been among its cadres.”

Fatah needs to take bold decisions and develop a well-thought-out structure if it wants to restore its image and build confidence, he said.

One of the leaders of the Fatah movement in the West Bank, Walid Assaf, a former head of the Wall and Settlement Resistance Commission, wrote: “When the successful are held accountable, and the failures are rewarded, the price will be heavy on Fatah and the national project.”

Ahmed Ghuneim, a prominent Fatah leader in East Jerusalem, told Arab News: “Fatah cannot continue in this way. It is time for a decisive and courageous decision to be taken to stop this collapse and that the central committee bears responsibility for the weakness of Fatah.”

He added: “We in Fatah are paying the price for the failed decisions in the political, governmental, organizational and economic performance of the Palestinian Authority and leadership. This leadership knows and realizes that it is a problem, but they insist that they remain in power and lead us from defeat to defeat.”

However, Lt. Gen. Jibril Rajoub, Fatah central committee secretary-general, told Arab News that a committee meeting on Saturday will review the defeat and take necessary decisions.

“Our experience with this leadership is that they do not assess any loss, and if that happens, they do not take measures but blame the lower levels of the movement for their mistakes.”

Nasser Al-Kidwa, the former Palestinian foreign minister dismissed from Fatah by Abbas after criticizing the PA leader’s policies, told Arab News from his home in France: “The votes that went to Hamas do not necessarily mean that they support its policy, but rather to punish Fatah, which deserves punishment because it has committed enough mistakes to turn Palestinian public opinion against it.”



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Hamas-backed bloc wins West Bank student elections  
Palestinian local elections might give a small boost to Fatah

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## [Escalating cost-of-living crisis hits Lebanese hard just days after parliamentary elections](#)

Author:

Thu, 2022-05-19 22:22

BEIRUT: The cost-of-living crisis in Lebanon has escalated, less than 48 hours after the results of parliamentary elections held on May 15 were announced. The value of the local currency has fallen to 30,000 Lebanese pounds to the dollar for the first time in the five months since the Central Bank intervened to regulate the market.

Some shops were forced close to avoid losing money while goods were repriced

to reflect the shifting black market exchange rate. Queues for gas returned, even though the price of a 20-liter canister is almost equivalent to the minimum wage.

People are also once again queuing for bread, with some stores selling a bread bundle for 30,000 Lebanese pounds on the black market as bakeries run out of flour.

Doctors and health workers have again warned of medicine shortages amid a lack of subsidies, with cancer medication particularly badly affected.

Meanwhile, power company Electricite du Liban announced further rationing "to avoid falling into total darkness," pending the arrival of a shipment of fuel on Friday. It blamed the decision on "the rapid consumption of fuel stocks during the days leading up to and following the parliamentary elections."

It emerged that the main reason for the failure to deliver fuel was a delay by the Central Bank in providing dollar credit amid the likelihood that subsidies on fuel, and possibly wheat, could be lifted. As a result, importers stopped delivering fuel pending the transfer of dollars at the Central Bank's Sayrafa exchange rate of 23,700 Lebanese pounds to the dollar.

The crisis affected domestic gas-distribution companies, which waited for the Ministry of Energy's new price list on Thursday and then began selling gas cylinders for 400,000 Lebanese pounds each.

The Ministry of Economy has set the price of a large bundle of bread at 16,000 Lebanese pounds – though, as noted, some stores are charging much more – justifying the decision by highlighting "the significant rise in fuel prices, which directly affects the cost of flour production, bread production and transportation, in addition to the rise in the wheat prices worldwide amid the Ukrainian crisis."

Some predict that Lebanon will be hit by a wheat crisis in the coming weeks amid the lack of funds.

In response to the various crises, public transport drivers took to the streets and blocked roads leading to the ministries of interior and transport with waste containers in protest against the high price of gasoline and the worsening dollar exchange rate.

Hussein Wehbi Mogharbel, head of the Federation of Employees and Workers Union in Nabatiyeh Governorate in southern Lebanon, criticized authorities for their failure to listen to the cries of the poor.

"They manipulate the exchange rate and no one dares to stop them," he said. "Employees cannot attend their workplaces because their salaries are equal to two gasoline canisters."

Citizens' concerns "are increasing and the officials are idly watching," Mogharbel added.

As the financial noose continues tighten for citizens, elected MPs remain

preoccupied by their political power games. Each faction is convening to discuss the election of a new parliamentary speaker, deputy speaker, cabinet and heads of committees.

The term of the current parliament ends on May 21 and the mandate of the newly elected authority is due to begin the following day. The current government of Prime Minister Najib Mikati's government will transition to caretaker mode as of May 22.

Samir Geagea, the head of the Lebanese Forces party, which is the largest Christian bloc in parliament following the election, said on Thursday: "The result of the elections was resounding, with Hezbollah and its ally the Free Patriotic Movement losing their parliament majority."

He said that the current speaker of the parliament, Nabih Berri, who leads the Amal Movement, "does not meet the requirements we seek in the new speaker."

Geagea added: "This position requires a serious candidate who pledges to implement the parliament's bylaws literally and adopts electronic voting; someone who would not paralyze parliament and would work on giving the strategic decision back to the government. This is why we will not vote for Berri."

Hassan Nasrallah, the secretary-general of Hezbollah, admitted on Wednesday evening that "no party has a majority in parliament."

He added: "The many economic and living crises in the country cannot be handled by one team, even if it obtains the majority. When no one has the majority, everyone is responsible and no one is allowed to abandon their responsibilities."

"The current composition of the parliament may delay electing a speaker and designating a prime minister to form the government."



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'Elections did not undermine Hezbollah but gives Lebanon chance to reorganize' says spokesman for the American Task Force on Lebanon  
Hezbollah chief Nasrallah acknowledges loss of Lebanon parliamentary majority

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## [Second flight lands at Sanaa airport as Yemen parties pressured to extend truce](#)

Author:

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AL-MUKALLA, Yemen: A second commercial flight carrying dozens of passengers landed at the Houthi-held Sanaa airport on Wednesday as international mediators and world powers continue to pressure Yemen's warring parties to extend the two-month truce.

The plane took off from Amman in the morning and landed at Sanaa airport at 2

p.m., further boosting hopes of the resumption of flights to other destinations, and the strengthening of the ceasefire.

Hans Grundberg, the UN's Yemen envoy who had helped to negotiate the peace pact, announced the departure of the second flight from Jordan's capital.

"A second commercial flight took off from Amman to Sanaa carrying Yemeni passengers at 10:30 a.m. today, as per the terms of the truce agreement and is scheduled to return back from Sanaa to Amman with Yemeni passengers at 4 p.m.," Grundberg tweeted.

The first commercial flight since 2016 took off from Sanaa airport on Monday after the Yemeni government allowed passengers with passports issued by the Houthis to leave the country.

The resumption of the flights from Sanaa is one of several terms of the truce that came into effect on April 2. Under the agreement, the Yemeni parties would stop fighting on all fronts, allow fuel ships to enter Hodeidah seaports, and work with the UN to open roads in Taiz and other provinces.

At the same time, the UN envoy said on Wednesday that he resumed his meetings with Yemeni economists, politicians and security figures in Amman to produce ideas for his peace plan.

"The UN envoy for #Yemen resumes today his consultations to identify economic, political & security priorities for the multi-track process. Today he meets with a diverse group of Yemeni public figures, experts & civil society actors," his office tweeted.

In his remarks to the press after his closed briefing to the UN Security Council on Tuesday, Grundberg said that he discussed extending the pact with various Yemeni parties. "Yemenis can't afford to go back to the pre-truce state of perpetual military escalation and political stalemate. I continue to engage the parties to overcome outstanding challenges and to ensure the extension of the truce," he said, adding that the Houthis have not nominated their representatives for a meeting with the Yemeni government that would discuss ending their siege on Taiz.

Tim Lenderking, the US' envoy to Yemen, also urged the warring factions to uphold and extend the truce, and to jointly work on opening roads in Taiz.

"We hope the resumption of flights to & from Sanaa brings relief to Yemenis. We must ensure the freedom of movement of people & goods, incl opening roads to Taiz. We call on the parties to adhere to & extend the @UN truce," Lenderking tweeted.

In the besieged Taiz, residents have intensified their campaigns on the ground and on social media to draw attention to their daily suffering.

"This siege has turned the city of Taiz into a large prison and caused a real human tragedy. They opened Sanaa airport and ports and ignored Taiz's suffering from the siege," Ahmed Al-Qaidhy, an activist from the area, told Arab News.



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First commercial flight in six years leaves Sanaa for AmmanUN envoy says talks to extend Yemen truce are ongoing