



Worsening humanitarian crisis in Syria and Iraq

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Author: Ben Smith

Section International Affairs and defence Section

The plight of civilians in Syria and Iraq may be about to get a lot worse, as drought ravages the region, ISIS takes over much of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and government services threaten to collapse.



Photo: AFP/BBC

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1 Introduction

After more than three years of fighting in Syria, combatants on both sides are increasingly resorting to tactics which harm civilians. There are increasing reports of the Syrian government using barrel bombs – often oil drums packed with huge amounts of explosives – dropped on urban areas, causing enormous damage and civilian casualties. Meanwhile, rebel groups use car bombs and place bombs in tunnels under buildings.

Refugees continue to flood out of Syria. 9.3 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance: 6.5 million of those are internally displaced and 2.9 million have fled to neighbouring countries.¹

With growing sectarian clashes, there were already nearly half a million Iraqi civilians displaced from Anbar province.² With the ISIS takeover of the Iraqi city of Mosul and large areas of northern Iraq, perhaps half a million refugees fled Mosul. Many of these people took refuge in areas controlled by the Kurds but there are reports that many are now returning to Mosul, as life there has returned to relative normality.³ However, there still are 1.5 million Iraqis affected by the conflicts, of whom 1.32 million are internally displaced and 1 million in need of assistance, according to the United Nations.⁴

It is possible, however, that much more widespread suffering is on the way as Syrian food, water, sanitation and health systems approach comprehensive collapse and ISIS threatens to step up its use of water as a weapon in the conflicts in both Syria and Iraq. This may displace far more people than has been the case so far.

While it is already hard to imagine how countries such as Lebanon are coping with refugee populations that already probably amount to more than a quarter of their normal population, it looks as if they will have to manage far more within the next few months.

The UN has an appeal for \$5 billion for Syria, 32% of which has been received, while the UN OCHA has appealed for hundreds of millions of dollars to help with internally displaced

¹ UN OCHA, [Syria Crisis](#)

² 'Threat of disease in Iraq villages flooded by militants', IRIN, 27 May 2014

³ 'Iraq crisis: will the calm in Isis-held Mosul last?', *BBC News Online*, 20 June 2014

⁴ UN OCHA, [Iraq IDP crisis, Situation Report No. 1](#), 4 July 2014

persons in Iraq,⁵ and the UNHCR has a budget of about \$200 million for each of 2014 and 2015 for Iraq to cope with external refugees, mainly from Syria.

2 Water

2.1 Syria

Both sides in the conflict have been accused of using water as a weapon in the conflict. The government has often been accused of cutting off water while laying siege to such towns as Homs. Rebel groups, probably to a lesser extent,⁶ have also used water supplies to try to weaken the government's grip on towns.

In May, after reports that rebel groups had cut the water supply to part of Aleppo, the United Nations warned that such tactics are a 'clear breach' of international law:

The Secretary-General notes that preventing people's access to safe water is a denial of a fundamental human right. Deliberate targeting of civilians and depriving them of essential supplies is a clear breach of international humanitarian and human rights law.⁷

The progressive destruction of sewage treatment facilities is a particular concern. Conflict damage, added to the decreasing capacity of normal government services and the absence of skilled personnel mean that treatment facilities are being rapidly degraded and water supplies are becoming contaminated. This means that waterborne diseases are on the increase, threatening Syria and neighbouring countries with epidemics, as the World Health Organisation has warned:

All the risk factors that enhance the transmission of communicable diseases in emergencies are present in the current crisis in Syria and its neighbouring countries. We are anticipating a number of public health risks from water-borne diseases, specifically hepatitis, typhoid, cholera and dysentery. Given the scale of population movement both inside Syria and across borders, together with deteriorating environmental health conditions, outbreaks are inevitable.⁸

Rainfall over the last few months has been about 50% of the usual in some areas. The conquest by the extremist group ISIS of much of the River Euphrates and low rainfall for several years threaten to take the disaster to a whole new level.

The Euphrates is the source of some 65% of Syria's water supplies. Lake Assad on the Euphrates above al-Raqqah has fallen by 6 metres from its level when ISIS took over the al-Raqqah dam in January. The dam at al-Tabqah supplies 19% of Syrian electricity needs. If the water in it falls another metre, the system will fail and four million people in Aleppo will be deprived of water as well as 1,300 km² of agricultural land losing its irrigation.⁹

2.2 Iraq

Iraq is massively dependent on the Tigris and the Euphrates: it was around these rivers that humans first developed agriculture and urban living. Most Iraqis depend on their water for

⁵ UN OCHA [2014 Strategic Response Plan Iraq](#)

⁶ Amnesty International, [Updated briefing on sieges across Syria](#), 12 June 2014

⁷ ['Syria: Ban warns against targeting civilians after armed groups cut water supplies in Aleppo'](#), UN press release,

⁸ ['WHO warns of increased risk of disease epidemics in Syria and in neighbouring countries as summer approaches'](#), Reliefweb press release, 4 June 2014

⁹ Nouar Shamout, ['Syria Faces an Imminent Food and Water Crisis'](#), Chatham House, 24 June 2014

agriculture: about two million hectares of Iraqi agricultural land are almost entirely dependent on irrigation from the rivers.¹⁰

ISIS has taken control of much of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in Iraq. (The Tigris flows through Mosul and Tikrit and then on to Baghdad.) As well as the dams it controls in Syria, ISIS has taken possession of dams or barrages on the Euphrates as Haditha and Falluja and on the Tigris above Mosul and at Samarra.

ISIS has already used water in the conflict with the Iraqi government, blocking the Euphrates at Nuaimiyah and flooding 200 km² of farmland, particularly around the town of Abu Ghraib. Aid agencies struggled to provide food and hygiene kits to some 40,000 families stranded by the flooding. Agricultural land was contaminated and there was widespread damage.

The main aim of stopping the water was to deprive Shia-dominated southern Iraq and the capital, Baghdad, of supplies and the flooding may have been unintentional. The water has mainly receded in Abu Ghraib now, but ISIS militants could block the Euphrates again at any time. The incident showed the vulnerability of Baghdad and all of southern Iraq to interference with the rivers.



Source: *New Scientist*

¹⁰ Saad Hatem Mohammad, Boubaker Dhehibi, Aden Aw-Hassan, Roberto Telleria, *The impact of Salinity in Iraq: A Socio-Economic Analysis*, International Centre for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas (Undated).

3 Food

Both Syria and Iraq are threatened by sharply increased food shortages. The drought, combined with damage to and neglect of water systems, has resulted in severe reductions in wheat and barley production. Syria's strategic reserve of wheat has now been used up and the harvest is likely to be about one fifth of its normal level this year.¹¹ Food prices climbed by 108% in the year to November 2013.

The Food and Agriculture Organisation has launched an appeal for \$43 million to help Syrians continue producing food.¹² The World Food Programme too has drawn attention to the \$40 million per week that it needs to keep up the work that it is doing to feed the most needy in Syria.¹³ The WFP has also pointed out that the destruction of irrigation infrastructure will take years to reverse, meaning that even if the conflict were to end now, food production would still decline, and take years to recover.¹⁴

Access for humanitarian agencies to areas of Iraq under ISIS control is difficult and some internally displaced persons are sheltering in public buildings such as mosques and schools, in dire need of assistance.¹⁵

4 Health services

The Syrian health service has been devastated by the conflict. The degradation of health services is having catastrophic effects on the health of Syrians. Vaccination programmes have been affected and this has led to an outbreak of polio, which could spread to neighbouring countries with refugees.¹⁶ Iraq has conducted a relatively effective immunisation campaign but that country is increasingly at risk as conflict spreads. Samples have also detected the polio virus in Israel and the Occupied Territories, Egypt and Lebanon.

Other transmissible diseases such as cutaneous leishmaniasis, a disease that causes ulcers, scarring and disability is on the rise. It is particularly susceptible to being spread by movements of people and animals.

In a report in March 2014, the charity Save the Children reported that 60% of Syrian hospitals were damaged or destroyed, nearly half of the country's doctors had fled the country, 93% of Syrian ambulances had been damaged, stolen or destroyed and more people were probably dying from preventable diseases through lack of medication or medical attention than from violence.¹⁷ Save the Children estimated that 80,000 children are likely to be affected by the most aggressive form of polio, unknowingly spreading the disease. The report drew attention to some of the most distressing results of the crisis in health services:

- Children having limbs amputated because clinics don't have necessary equipment for appropriate treatment
- Newborn babies dying in their incubators during power cuts

¹¹ ['Syria: Poor crop prospects reflect the impact of continued conflict and drought conditions'](#), Food and Agriculture Organisation press release, 15 May 2014

¹² ['Syria: Poor crop prospects reflect the impact of continued conflict and drought conditions'](#), Food and Agriculture Organisation press release, 15 May 2014

¹³ ['Syria: Looming Drought Threatens To Worsen Food Crisis'](#), WFP press release, 14 April 2014

¹⁴ World Food Programme, [Special Focus Syria](#), March 2014

¹⁵ UN OCHA, [Iraq IDP Crisis Situation Report No. 1](#), 4 July 2014

¹⁶ ['Polio outbreak in the Middle East – update'](#), World Health Organisation news release, 21 March 2014

¹⁷ ['Millions of Children's Lives at Risk in Collapse of Syrian Health System'](#), Save the Children press release, 9 March 2014

- Patients being knocked out with metal bars owing to a lack of anaesthesia
- Patients undergoing potentially deadly person-to-person blood transfusions.¹⁸

In Iraq, electricity and fuel shortages are increasing, hampering the work of health services, and many who would normally work in health services are absent because of the violence.

5 Humanitarian access

International agencies' access to people in need continues to be a big problem. Valerie Amos, Emergency Relief Coordinator for the United Nations, reported in June that, of the 240,000 people living in siege conditions in Syria, only 2,467 had been reached with food assistance. Amos said that deliberately obstructing humanitarian access and depriving civilians of essential services is unlawful in international law.¹⁹

In spite of a unanimous United Nations Security Council resolution passed in February demanding that all parties, and particularly the Syrian authorities, should allow safe access to humanitarian agencies, access continues to be hindered. Lynn Featherstone, minister at the Department for International Development, said that the UK government intends to take further steps to see that the resolution is respected:

We need to maintain pressure on the regime and its allies. We need to maintain our dialogue with neighbouring countries, regional partners and the opposition. As the resolution makes clear, we fully intend to take further steps if the demands it sets out are ignored; I accept that they are being ignored. We will return to the UN Security Council to consider further measures. It is vital to the credibility of the Security Council that it acts when its will is so clearly undermined.²⁰

6 UK response

The UK has opted to dedicate most resources to helping refugees in the region, but a programme to transport a limited number of refugees to the UK was initiated in January 2014. Several thousand Syrians who had managed to make their own way to the UK have been granted political asylum.²¹

The UK government has committed £600 million to help Syrian civilians, of which £249 million has been allocated to partners within Syria and £292 million has been earmarked for Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt to help with looking after refugees there. The allocations of £59 million are being finalised.²²

£5 million has been pledged to Iraq, as mentioned by Middle East Minister in an answer in Parliament on 7 July:

We have pledged £5 million in direct support to Iraq. This includes funding for food and basic shelter to those affected by the crisis, clean water and sanitation, essential medicine, hygiene kits and basic household items, and protection for vulnerable girls

¹⁸ [‘Millions of Children’s Lives at Risk in Collapse of Syrian Health System’](#), Save the Children press release, 9 March 2014

¹⁹ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, [Statement to the Security Council on Syria](#), 26 June 2014

²⁰ [HC Deb 29 April 2014, c244WH](#)

²¹ See the Library Standard Note [In Brief: Syrian refugees and the UK](#), June 2014

²² Department for International Development, [Syria: UK aid response](#), 24 June 2014

and women through the deployment of dedicated UN safety and welfare teams in key internally displaced person/refugee camp sites and areas.²³

²³ [HC Deb 7 July 2014, c94W](#)