

Kawa Hassan Addresses NATO Study Day on Iraq's Climate Related Security Risks

Dear all good morning,

Thank you very much for the kind invitation, I am delighted to address you about the climate related security risks in Iraq and its impacts on regional peace and security. This presentation is based on a policy report that I co-authored last August for the Expert Working Group on climate related security. The Swedish Minister of Foreign Affairs used key findings and recommendations of the policy report during deliberations at the United Nations Security Council in July 2018.

To begin with, contrary to the conventional wisdom that limits Iraq's political and security challenges to threats associated with terrorism, the country is struggling on three security fronts: ISIS, corruption and unprecedented environmental challenges. While the first two have received considerable attention, the climate-related security risks facing Iraq have only recently begun to move up the agenda. Due to its unique hydrological limitations – located in a downstream, arid region – Iraq is one of the Middle East's most climate vulnerable countries.

Prolonged drought and water pollution have led to a decline in agricultural capacity and thus limited access to food, hydropower and livelihoods. In tandem, Saddam Hussein's authoritarianism and reckless wars resulted in mismanagement of water, insufficient modernization of dams, neglect of agriculture, inadequate waste water management, corruption and destruction of the 5000-year iconic Mesopotamian Marshes in the south of the country. Since Saddam, successive governments have continued and compounded these policies, further reducing Iraq's capacity to absorb the challenges associated with conflict and climate change. The precariousness of the situation is further exacerbated by dependence on Turkey, Iran and Syria for almost 91 percent of Iraq's water. At present, there is a severe lack of bilateral and regional arrangements to support equitable, fair water sharing.

Post-ISIS Iraq is literally at an environmental crossroads- the country faces five major climate-related security risks.

First, diminished agricultural livelihoods may increase local support for terrorist groups and militias. Despite the fact that agriculture is the second largest employment sector after oil, the Ministry of Agriculture receives one of the smallest allocations from Iraq's national budget, in 2017 just USD 558.1 million from a total budget of USD 85.2 billion. Currently, a large part of the agricultural budget is allocated to budget items such as salaries and pensions, as opposed to necessary infrastructure investment. Livelihood conditions are being undermined by increasing water scarcity, leaving people in ISIS-liberated areas vulnerable to becoming dependent on terrorist groups for access to basic resources. ISIS could capitalize on this situation, leading to a risk of increased local support for ISIS and other terrorist groups. But also provinces in the South suffer from water shortages.

Second, rampant corruption of ruling elites is weakening capacities to address and cope with climate and climate shocks. Systemic and structural corruption is Iraq's public enemy number one. Weak, corrupt governance and insufficient critical infrastructure means that the Iraqi population and economy are increasingly susceptible to conflict and climate shocks. The Ministry of Water Resources has an ambitious 20-year plan that covers the period from 2015–to 2035, also known as the Strategy for Land and Water Resources in Iraq (SWLRI), to modernize Iraqi infrastructure. But the ministry lacks the financial means and capacity to implement the USD 160 billion plan (or USD 8 billion/year).

Third, Iraq is a downstream recipient of water, which makes it dependent on water flows from neighbouring countries. As climate change causes more erratic rainfall in the region, Iraq is becoming more dependent on regional stability to maintain its access to water. Partly as a result of dam projects in Iran and Turkey, Iraq is

currently suffering its worst water shortage crisis for 80 years. If neighbouring countries are destabilized—by reduced rainfall or conflict—Iraq will be further exposed. To date there are no official agreements or frameworks in place to support equitable sharing of vital water resources in the region.

Fourth, mass displacement due to climate change related security risks is a serious risk for Iraq and the entire region. The combination of increased rainfall variability and dam projects in neighbouring countries could increase the risk of displacement and forced migration along Iraq's populous rivers. Seven million people live along the banks of the River Tigris. In combination with erratic rainfall, if water is diverted by Turkey, people in downstream Iraq will not have access to water for drinking or agriculture. This would increase the risk of displacement. The downstream Kurdistan region faces similar risks if water is diverted by Iran. The livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of people would be affected, potentially causing displacement and forced urban migration.

Fifth, climate change is presenting Iraq with erratic precipitation and increased temperatures, including a heightened risk of more regular and prolonged periods of drought. This increases the risk of communal tensions over food and water. Diminishing incomes, and food and water insecurity, put pressure on remaining scarce resources, risking increased tensions within and between communities. This is particularly the case in rural and marginalized communities where sufficient adaptive and mitigation policies have not been put in place. For example, in southern Iraq diminishing water resources have already led to demonstrations and local clashes over water rights.

Within Iraq, the capacity to address climate-related risks is limited. The government's capacity to address environmental challenges is low, and the cascade risks associated with conflict and displacement are not systematically considered. Current UN support focuses on short-term crisis management linked to access to basic resources such as food, water and shelter. Some projects have begun to consider agricultural restoration, water diplomacy and sustainable water management, but the approach is fragmented and does not consider the interplay with Iraq's peace and security as well as its impact on regional security.

A dry, barren, saline, polluted and thirsty post-ISIS Iraq will experience environmental fragility, poor economic viability, low recovery capacity and tenuous political stability. This prospect offers an opportunity for ISIS and post-ISIS apocalyptic groups to regain strength. Environmental governance is part of good governance and is a precondition for a stable and prosperous regional order that provides incentives for cooperation on the most precious resource – water. This is demanding but doable – the alternative is a volatile level of instability within and beyond Iraq.

Click here to download the report co-authored by Kawa Hassan "Iraq, Climate Related-Security Risk Assessment": <https://www.eastwest.ngo/sites/default/files/iraq-climate-related-security-risk-assessment.pdf>

Click here to download the report of the NATO Strategic Direction South HUB ("The Hub") open study day "Impacts of Climate Change on Stability in North Africa & Middle East": <https://thesouthernhub.org/publications/nsds-hub-publications/study-day-on-impacts-of-climate-change-on-stability-in-mena->