

Iraq's position on the issue of Climate Change

One of our researchers



مركز المنبر للدراسات والتنمية
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How do the inhabitants of the Middle East view the phenomenon of climate change during the month of March?

According to data published by Axios, 2024 is expected to be alarmingly hotter than 2023¹ and this is despite the fact that in 2023 the world witnessed weather conditions which were often deadly.

As far as the Middle East region is concerned, it is one of the regions in the world most affected by climate change, with rising temperatures, a decrease in rainfall, rising sea levels and the inundation of coastal areas, receding snow and ice and changes in weather patterns. All these changes have led to numerous negative effects. Amongst them has been the increase in political tensions between countries over shared water resources because of the scarcity of rain and rising temperatures, which have significantly impacted

¹ Scientists unnerved by record shattering 2023 temperatures .<https://www.axios.com/2024/01/12/climate-change-hottest-year-record-2023>

agriculture, livestock, and rural livelihoods. In the period between 1980 and 2022, temperatures across the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region rose by an average of 0.46°C every decade, well above the global average of 0.18°C. Rainfall patterns in the MENA region countries have also changed dramatically, exacerbating water scarcity, with droughts occurring in Morocco in 2022 and Tunisia in 2023. Meanwhile, at the opposite end of the spectrum, the United Arab Emirates, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman and Yemen experienced severe flooding in 2022².

The combination of low rainfall and severe global warming have contributed to the occurrence of severe droughts. The average sea level is expected to rise at a rate similar to global estimates. This poses serious challenges for coastal infrastructure and agriculture and may also lead to the salinization of coastal aquifers³. In this way, drought destroys farmland and causes rivers to dry out. Sandstorms also contribute to the destruction of coastal areas. In addition to the human toll, climate change in the Middle East also carries with it high economic and social costs. According to the World Bank, by the year 2050, it is estimated that climate change could force up to 216 million people to become internally displaced, with internal migration hotspots beginning to emerge as early as 2030 and then spreading and gradually worsening⁴.

The unprecedented urgency and scope of this challenge requires countries to learn quickly from each other, to adapt to their new circumstances and to have the courage and fortitude to implement policies that will reduce emissions and improve livelihoods. Over the past three decades, the changing patterns of temperature and rainfall have led to a decline in real incomes and have dramatically changed production and employment patterns. A recent IMF study shows that fundamental economic disruptions caused by climate change not only jeopardize food security, but also undermine public health, with a multiplier effect on poverty and inequality, displacement, political stability, and regional conflict. Previous climate disasters have resulted in lasting GDP losses of 5.5 per cent in Central Asia and 1.1 per cent in the MENA region. It is predicted that disasters of this nature will become even more frequent⁵.

² Climate resilience is key to energy transitions in the Middle East and North Africa .
<https://www.iea.org/commentaries/climate-resilience-is-key-to-energy-transitions-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa>

³ Climate Change and Weather Extremes in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East .
<https://agupubs.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1029/2021RG000762>

⁴ Climate Change .<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/climatechange/overview>

⁵ How the Middle East and Central Asia Can Better Address Climate Challenges .
<https://www.imf.org/en/Blogs/Articles/2023/11/29/how-the-middle-east-and-central-asia-can-better-address-climate-challenges>

It is predicted that in the coming decades, the south of Iraq, known as the Garden of Eden in olden times, will become a scorching hot wasteland, with the inhabitants already having to endure temperatures in excess of 55 degrees Celsius. During the previous year of 2023, and in the years preceding it, the country witnessed heat waves with temperatures in excess of 50 degrees Celsius⁶. The extreme temperatures caused frequent power outages, a drop in the water level of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers – coupled with food shortages, a sharp drop in labour productivity due to the extreme heat and an increase in the frequency of sandstorms.

Turkey's policy of restricting the flow of water into the Tigris and Euphrates rivers has exacerbated the water management challenges facing some of the downstream countries, particularly Iraq, and more specifically in and around the southern city of Basra. Since the eighties, the Iraqi government has failed to regulate and manage the water flowing into Basra's rivers and canals⁷.

The 2003-2011 U.S. invasion of Iraq and the subsequent terror campaigns by ISIS resulted in the lack of maintenance and neglect of essential infrastructure. The Turkish GAP project further exacerbated an already dire situation, greatly reducing the flow of water downstream of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. In addition, Iraq has experienced reduced rainfall and changing weather patterns. The combination of all these factors has led to a significant deterioration in the infrastructure which normally provides people with access to clean water, particularly in Basra, a city which for a long time has suffered from corruption, mismanagement, and instability. Case in point, in 2018, nearly 118,000 people were hospitalized in the region due to water-related diseases.⁸

At an annual demographic growth rate of 2.3%, the population of Iraq is expected to rise to nearly 80 million by 2050⁹. This will undoubtedly further exacerbate the situation and may increase social, economic, and political unrest.

In the Middle East, traditionally associated with security challenges, the climate crisis has become a major concern for countries in the region and may become a factor in the eruption of violence, in fuelling regional instability and migration. There is also the

⁶ Temperatures to exceed 50°C (122°F) in 13 governorates in coming 4 days .

<https://www.iraqinews.com/iraq/temperatures-to-exceed-50c-122f-in-13-governorates-in-coming-4-days/>

⁷ Climate Change and Regional Instability in the Middle East .

https://cdn.cfr.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/Climate%20Change%20and%20Regional%20Instability%20in%20the%20Middle%20East.pdf?_gl=1*1kzpm84*_ga*MTQ0NjEwMjY5LjE3MDExNzA0MDY.*_ga_24W5E70YKH*MTcwNjYwODU2NC4xNi4xLjE3MDY2MDg2NDcuNTguMC4w

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Climate Risk Profile Iraq .

https://weatheringrisk.org/sites/default/files/document/Climate_Risk_Profile_Iraq_8.pdf

prospect of food shortages in a region with high birth and consumption rates and an agricultural sector facing new threats, with agriculture contributing 13% of regional GDP and accounting for 19% of exports and 50% of employment for the region's population¹⁰. These are all indicators of the enormous challenges which the climate crisis has left for the region. This development threatens not only regional stability, but also wider global stability.

At the same time, the World Bank's Climate Change Roadmap for the MENA region, designed to be implemented between the years 2021 and 2025, focuses on several key areas, including: food systems transformation, water security, energy diversification, and sustainable finance. In the three years between 2021 and 2023, the World Bank provided US\$6.3 billion to finance climate change initiatives for the MENA region and is on track to meet a US\$10 billion target by 2025¹¹.

In addition, many countries in the Middle East are taking measures to reduce or limit the adverse effects of climate change. For example, most countries in the region have improved water management practices, and several countries are taking steps to reduce their carbon footprint, from fossil fuel subsidy reforms in Jordan to solar projects in the United Arab Emirates and Qatar¹². Therefore, in the coming years, it is anticipated that the Middle Eastern governments will act in concert to align their climate change adaptation goals and reduce their overall contribution to global warming.

The World Bank has also integrated climate into all its activities across the MENA region, aligning new businesses with the goals of the Paris Agreement¹³.

Despite this significant support from the World Bank, the MENA region remains the smallest recipient of climate finance worldwide, and the current regional vulnerabilities and ongoing conflicts have put additional pressure on the resources of many of these countries. In order to protect the climate in the coming years, countries in the Middle East need to make progress on climate action, focus on long-term reforms, and prioritize

¹⁰ MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA. <https://www.fao.org/3/Y1860E/y1860e05.htm>

¹¹ Climate and Development in the Middle East and North Africa . <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/mena/brief/climate-and-development-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa#:~:text=In%20the%20last%20three%20years,%2410%20billion%20for%20FY2021%2D2025.>

¹² How the Middle East and Central Asia Can Better Address Climate Challenges . <https://www.imf.org/en/Blogs/Articles/2023/11/29/how-the-middle-east-and-central-asia-can-better-address-climate-challenges>

¹³ Driving Transformation: A Climate Roadmap for the Middle East & North Africa . <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2022/01/24/driving-transformation-a-climate-roadmap-for-the-middle-east-north-africa>

resilient investments in the economy which rely on low-carbon energy sources and therefore produce minimal greenhouse gas emissions into the atmosphere, specifically carbon dioxide.

Ultimately, climate change could threaten the security and prosperity that the Tigris and Euphrates rivers have historically provided to the region, but this threat is accentuated and exacerbated by the mismanagement of the Iraqi, Syrian and Turkish governments, mainly due to their lack of proper water management, both within and outside their borders. Therefore, there is a need for strategies that address climate change and the adoption of international standards on the sharing of water resources.

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