

The EU as well as European countries should formulate clear expectations of a return to constitutional order, and promise substantial aid in return



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What can be done?

Tunisia has entered its deepest political crisis since the 2011 revolution. While earlier political crises, in particular the 2013/2014 episode, could be contained by compromise between the main political players, it is these very players who are now being challenged. What is more, there are signs of ideological polarization between the opposing camps along the secular-Islamist division. Regional actors associated with either of these two sides were quick to take advantage. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates stand ready to support an anti-Islamist strongman in Tunisia; Qatar and Turkey, by contrast, have voiced support for Ennahda and their demand to reinstate parliament. On the international stage, the European Union has called on Saied to reopen parliament, while the United States have remained more cautious and have merely stressed respect for the constitution. The Tunisian leader has reacted sharply to perceived external interference, emphasizing Tunisian sovereignty over internal affairs.

While the situation is difficult, not all is lost. Tunisian civil society has helped overcome deep political crisis before. In early November, the president of the Tunisian human rights league, Jamel Msallem, called for a renewed national dialogue modelled on the efforts of the Quartet in 2013/2014. While such attempts yet have to bear fruits, a resolution of the crisis can only come from within.

At the same time, the last thing Tunisia's European friends should do, is to give up. President Saied will not be amenable to bullying and external pressure, yet European countries should use the means at their disposal to support dialogue and compromise, including by offering further economic support. Tunisia is under immense economic pressure with its credit rating downgraded by Moody's in October, while the country continues to negotiate an aid package with the International Monetary Fund. The EU as well as European countries should formulate clear expectations of a return to constitutional order, and promise substantial aid in return. The path toward a transition back to constitutional normality has to be set by Tunisian actors, yet European countries should do everything they can to make such a course of action seem attractive to all parties. ●

Climate activism in Iraq

A dangerous undertaking

By Maha Yassin



The climate in the Middle East and North Africa is warming up twice as fast as the average global temperature rise, but in Iraq, this is happening two to seven times faster. Although drought is a natural phenomenon in the region, global warming is adding to the challenge for people living there to adapt to water scarcity. In its latest report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change marked the region as being extremely vulnerable to climate change, mainly due to rising temperatures and declining water resources. The region's recurrent violence due to political conflicts and wars further complicates an adequate response to these problems.

Climate-induced conflict

A well-known example for a climate-induced conflict is embodied in the 2018 protests which took place in Basra, southern Iraq, where extreme heatwaves eventually led to the deterioration of the water supply in the city's main river, the Shatt al-Arab. The violent protests against the dire situation were led by the youth and culminated into a series of protests across the country known as the Tishreen Movement – grassroots protests started in 2019 and have been demanding major economic, social and political reforms. Climate change is thus not the only culprit that is causing the problems with water supply and the related issues like water pollution and desertification. These problems result from a series of interrelated issues, ranging from poor water governance to institutional corruption.

Despite the recent efforts of the Iraqi government to ratify the Paris Agreement and heighten the ambition at the COP26, the past decades of inaction continues to frustrate Iraqi climate activists. This can be attributed to a preoccupation with armed and political conflicts within the country and the failure to recognize climate change as being a security threat to Iraq. Motivated by concerns about their future, several NGOs and campaigns led by the youth have initiated projects in the field of plantation, monitoring, and raising awareness. However, these efforts are not sufficient to stop the trend of the devastating climate-induced impact which, for instance, wide-spread desertification and salt-water intrusion have on the lives of the citizens of southern Iraq.

In the last twenty years the number of citizens of the city of Basra, the second-largest city in Iraq, has increased to around three million people. Although agriculture is not the largest economic sector in this region, the area of greater Basra hosts numerous farming communities. Because of the desertification these communities find it increasingly hard to survive on the revenues from agricultural activities. Mostly in southern Iraq, the country loses 250 square kilometers of arable lands each year, forcing many farmers to migrate to urban areas.

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Paying a heavy price

Feeling compelled by the urgency of the situation, climate and environmental activists put pressure on the authorities and plea for support from the international community. The activists showcase the effects of climate change on farming communities and urban settings by tracing stories of individuals from the southern parts of the country, including the marshes, and by using simple tools such as mass media platforms. They eventually succeeded in bringing international and local attention to the grave impacts of climate change, but some paid a heavy price for their efforts. Many activists took part in the Tishreen Movement and its call for reforms and, as a result, are being regarded with suspicion by the Iraqi government and non-state armed groups. They have been threatened, sometimes kidnapped, and even killed.

Coupled with limited funds and capacity issues, climate activism in Iraq has become a very harsh undertaking indeed. This situation is blocking the chance of initiating climate adaptation, climate mitigation, and connecting with international donors. In other parts of the world, climate activists often face harsh realities as well, but compared to these other countries, the situation in Iraq is very grim as not only are the activists under threat, but so are their families.

Climate-related migration

Migration to the urban centres in Iraq has been ongoing for decades, driven either by the loss of livelihoods within the farming communities or by declining water supplies in small towns. In recent years this trend has become the norm and it has led to an increase of social and economic tensions between the newcomers and the original inhabitants. Urban centres, like Basra and Baghdad, were already struggling with deteriorating water and power infrastructure making the limited efforts of the local NGOs to guide policies ineffectual. Incidental reports indicate a decline in employment rates among the newcomers which increases the possibility that they gravitate towards criminal or militia groups.

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Indicators of migration towards regions and countries that are less climate-stressed have also been registered despite a lack of data. However, it is unclear whether climate migrants will be able to leave Iraq for Europe and it is unlikely that they will be able to pay human traffickers the hefty amounts required. Nevertheless, recent events such as the desperate attempts of Iraqis to reach the European Union via Belarus, indicate there are many Iraqi migrants who want to build a new future for themselves in Europe. There is a growing uncertainty about how Europe is going to prepare itself for such a climate-refugee influx, especially since populism and semi-authoritarian regimes are on the rise here too. Moreover, the European continent itself is not immune to climate impact, and it might even face situations similar to the ones southern Iraq is having to deal with currently.

It may help if European actors could reinforce collaboration and work with Iraqi civil society as well as with the Iraqi government in setting up early response plans and creating a safe environment for foreign investment in renewable energy. And, most importantly, supporting capacity building in the field of climate activism, ensuring the safety of climate activists and raising awareness with Iraqi politicians. Instead of having to fear for their lives, the Iraqi climate activities should be ensured of support. Climate change is not a partisan issue, but one that affects us all. ●



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