# Water Quality in Basra: Towards a National Policy and (Inter)national Cooperation

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The water quality in the Shatt al-Arab remains one of the most important issues regarding water in Iraq. It is a problem that requires both technological and political solutions. Though engineering and technological solutions can lessen the strains on Basra’s water provision, these are local solutions. A new desalination plant which will be built in Basra, by 2017. This will reduce the salt level in the drinking water of Basra, which is as we know the main water problem in Basra. However, the root causes of the problem lie outside of Basra governorate, and require regional, national and even international solutions. For instance, in 2013 the decrease of the fresh water levels of the Shatt al Arab led to troubles with neighboring governorates, when officials in Dhi Qar province decided to direct waters resulting from rain towards the lands of Al-Basra, withholding fresh water. The governorate of Basra said they might reciprocate by cutting off gasoline and fuel from Dhi Qar. Next to that, there is the issue of the Ilisu dam, which is scheduled for completion in 2014. The dam will endanger ecosystems and cultural heritage of the Tigris River Valley. Fresh water levels in the Tigris River and the Shatt al-Arab will be even further reduced, exacerbating the existing water problem in Basra. This occurred before with the Euphrates River, when Turkey built several dams in the 1990s.

Fresh water-issues with neighboring governorates and the issue of the Ilisu dam are evidence of the fact that the main causes of Basra’s water problems lie outside of its governorate borders, and should be addressed politically, through a national water policy.

The Save the Tigris and Iraqi Marshes campaign was established in order to support this process, by raising awareness among Iraqi citizens and the international community about the socioeconomic, natural and cultural impacts of the Ilisu Dam in Iraq, and to advocate on the national and international political level. The Save the Tigris Campaign had events in Tunis, Jordan and participated in global solidarity with Ilisu dam affected communities in Turkey. The campaign had several awareness lectures in Basra, Amara, Missan, Dhi Qar and Suleimaniya, Iraq, with speakers from academia, civil society and international activists.

In 2012 our campaign released a statement in which we demanded the Iraqi government to establish a water crisis group that includes water and environment experts, government, parliament and civil society representatives to work for immediate negotiations with Turkey, in order to suspend construction of this dam until a thorough study is made concerning its impacts in Iraq. We continue to advocate for the Iraqi government to build a concrete national water management policy, which involves all governorates, to negotiate between regions and governorates within Iraq, and to bring to attention to the Turkish government and international opinion the violation of international custom law by the Turkish government, as it unilaterally constructs huge dams with disastrous consequences for Iraq.

While the Iraqi government in a 2006 report considered the Ilisu dam project to be a disruption of international principles and rules, it has not acted according to its words. The Save the Tigris Campaign has a large network and several tools to spread the issue, but in order to reach the Iraqi government we need more help from within Iraq. Turkey does not take the issue seriously, and this is partly due to the fact that a thorough impact assessment is lacking. Such a study could oblige the Iraqi government to get actively involved at the same time provide them with an important tool to negotiate, hereby strengthening Iraq’s position vis-à-vis Turkey. That is why the Save the Tigris Campaign calls on scientists to collect in a thorough study future projections/scenarios for water provision in Basra, and other governorates, to present to the Iraqi government, so that factual, evidence-based, scientific research can be used to address the problem at the highest political level, between Turkey and Iraq.