Position Paper on
Climate Change and Environmental Activity in Iraq
for the Climate Prospects Campaign

A report by
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Iraqi Women's Network
Al-Tawahhuj organization for development and human rights

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Introduction

The impacts of climate change in Iraq have become evident across various levels and sectors, casting shadows on the environment and public life. These effects have worsened due to the country's unstable conditions and deteriorating infrastructure. According to the sixth report of the Global Environment Outlook for West Asia (GEO-6), Iraq's climate deterioration, especially in the past decade, has exacerbated the fragility of the national situation. Iraq is now ranked as the fifth most affected country globally by water scarcity, food shortages, extreme heat, and related health issues.

Iraq urgently needs to develop and implement an adaptation plan addressing the impacts of climate change on vital sectors. This plan should align with existing national and sectoral strategies, such as water, agriculture, and biodiversity strategies, along with the national framework for integrated drought risk management. In response to these challenges, environmental activists, civil society organizations, and volunteer teams have been working to adapt and mitigate the profound effects on various aspects of public life. Simultaneously, environmental initiatives in Iraq face numerous challenges hindering their efforts to achieve sustainable climate outcomes.

Iraq's environmental crisis has led to nation-wide protests, including 2018 protests in Basra against water shortages and, more recently, 2023 protests in Dhi Qar against unwarranted violence and excessive use of force against those raising awareness of droughts and mismanagement that has contributed to water scarcity in the region.

Background:

This position paper was created for the Climate Prospects Campaign by the Continuous Women’s Capacity Development Organization, Iraqi Women’s Network and Al-Tawahhuj organization for development and human rights as part of a project with the Innovation for Change MENA Hub and the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR). The main objective of this advocacy campaign is to increase public awareness of the rights of climate activists and protecting the rights of environmental activists and peaceful protesters to publicize and campaign against the issue of climate-induced forced displacement and denounce serious human rights violations such as targeted attacks on climate activists in Iraq during peaceful protests, while encouraging Iraqi authorities to support the rights to freedom of expression and assembly. This campaign also actively engages in advocacy aimed at supporting national efforts to formulate a comprehensive national strategy to address climate change issues through the development of this position paper engaging policymakers, community leaders, and environmental experts.
This position paper was created following consultations and social media campaigns as follows:

- Carried out two online awareness campaigns in Iraq, reaching over 16,000 people to increase the general public's understanding of:
  - The climate-induced forced displacement issue,
  - The increased need to formulate a national strategy addressing related climate change issues and
  - Denounce serious human rights violations such as targeted attacks on climate activists in Iraq during peaceful protests while encouraging Iraqi authorities to halt these deliberate practices.

The exchange of ideas has been occurring freely on social media without interference. Staff from members of parliament have been speaking with the campaign group about the campaign goals, encouraging dialogue between civil society and the government.

- Conducted two online consultation meetings with local authorities, civil society organizations, and environmental activists in Iraq to raise their awareness and gather their support and engagement in the formulation of a position paper that effectively addresses climate change challenges in Iraq and the protection of environmental activists and peaceful protesters. At the first session in September, 30 participants discussed climate change and its implications for civil society, and recommendations were given to support the policy and position papers.
On 29 September, the Climate Prospects Campaign held its second-panel discussion session titled (Climate Change: The Crisis of the Era) which spoke about climate change and its effects, as well as addressing the reality of climate change in Iraq and appropriate solutions to confront this phenomenon and support environmental activists working in this field, the session also focused on discussing the link between climate justice and human rights. The session was attended by 37 individuals representing specialized academia, workers in governmental institutions, a number of environmental activists, and some representatives of environmental organizations. The discussion included a number of recommendations for laying down appropriate and feasible solutions to support environmental activists, as well as solutions that civil society can cooperate with the government to reduce the effects of dangerous climate change in Iraq.

- Developed an interactive platform (map) for documenting and closely monitoring instances of forced displacement triggered by climate change. The platform will enable comprehensive analysis and visualization of the issue, fostering greater awareness among the public and policymakers and shed light on the human rights violations that result from climate change issues in Iraq.

**Recommendations:**

Accordingly, the Climate Prospects Campaign partners assert the following:

1. The Iraqi government must bear responsibility for the decline in Iraq's water shares from neighboring countries, particularly Turkey and Iran. It is imperative that Iraq invests all legitimate means to defend its acquired rights in the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The continued decline in Iraq's water supply rates threatens massive environmental disasters, leading to increased unemployment and negative migration to cities.

2. The Iraqi government should uphold the principle of justice, balancing industrial activities that cause environmental disasters with environmental responsibility.

3. The Iraqi government is responsible for providing legal protection to environmental activists and organizations, enabling them to carry out their activities freely and without threats. This includes their right to express their opinions and participate in environmental activities without intimidation.

4. There is a need to enhance and enforce legislation related to environmental protection and climate change, including imposing stricter penalties on violators and companies causing environmental harm.
5. Transparency and accountability should be emphasized. The government must be transparent in its efforts to protect the environment, providing regular reports on progress made and challenges faced in this field.

6. The Climate Prospects Campaign partners emphasize the necessity of revealing the results of investigations resulting from violent and arbitrary actions against environmental defenders in Iraq.

7. The government and public authorities must intervene internally to minimize the impact of climate change and address the causes of environmental displacement, particularly in marshland areas and agricultural provinces such as Muthanna, Qadisiyah, Diyalah, and others. Appropriate measures must be taken to ensure Iraq's fair share of water, allowing for the recovery of green cover, reducing the impact, and opening avenues for extensive agricultural work.

8. The Iraqi government must regulate the country’s oil industry to prevent environmental pollution. The unnecessary burning of associated gas causes pollution and represents a double threat: environmental pollution and the waste of Iraq's national wealth. Medical reports indicate severe damage to villages and individuals in Basra due to the oil industry, causing thousands to suffer from serious diseases, including cancer.

9. The Climate Prospects Campaign partners affirm their support for all environmental activists and environmental organizations working in Iraq. They seek programs, initiatives, and solutions to adapt to or mitigate the impacts of climate change, whether on the environment or human rights in general.

10. Environmental organizations have not yet established a comprehensive environmental social contract regulating the relationship between the state/government and the civil society, which undermines environmental policies causing environmental destruction. These organizations still operate within the circles of donors, limiting the space granted to them by the state/power authorities. Consequently, the wide-ranging impact of environmental defense activities on state actions has not yet been clarified.

11. The absence of dialogue with civil society in the environmental decision-making process has led to further alienation of these communities from their environmental crises. Wars and their catastrophic effects have effectively destroyed environmental systems, leading to migration and displacement, causing populations to disconnect from their natural environments. This can be categorized as a level of "environmental alienation," an added factor to the lack of widespread mobilization among these affected communities when their environments are influenced.
12. Emphasizing the Iraqi government's international and national commitment to prevent exacerbating environmental displacement. The Iraqi Constitution, in Article (33), grants every individual the right to live in a healthy environment. The state must protect the environment and biodiversity, and preserve them in collaboration with regions and non-governorate provinces. Law No. 27 of 2009 aims to protect and improve the environment, removing existing damage or changes, ensuring public health, natural resources, biodiversity, and cultural heritage, in collaboration with relevant authorities to guarantee sustainable development and achieve international and regional cooperation.

13. It is crucial to prioritize the environmental file among the top priorities of the parliament and the government. Immediate action is required, following a national strategic plan developed in partnership between federal and local legislative and executive bodies, environmental activists, environmental organizations, specialized academics, and research centers.