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مركز المنصة للتنمية المستدامة  
Platform Center for Sustainable Development



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Policy Briefs

# The National Water Council as a Solution to Iraq's Water Pollution Problem

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## A brief overview of the Iraq Policy Program

The Iraq Policy Program aims to bridge the gap between youth elites and decision-makers by training young elites to effect positive change through influencing the decision-making process. The program aims to empower participants to prepare policy papers and propose policy alternatives aimed at enhancing system performance and supporting its legitimacy. This program enables participants to communicate with decision-makers and understand the main difficulties and problems affecting the implementation and follow-up of public policies. Additionally, the program seeks to provide participants with a realistic understanding of the decision-making environment in Iraq, as well as an understanding of the opportunities and challenges of change.

## The program stages

**Preparation:** Assisting participants in acquiring the fundamental skills to prepare policy papers and effective advocacy campaigns. **Discovery:** Clarifying important public policies in Iraq by experts through stakeholder engagement, frameworks and institutional procedures, practical realities, and discussions surrounding each public policy, as well as reform prospects. **Engagement:** Training participants to develop promotional campaigns and coordinate meetings with government officials to initiate their campaigns. **Enrichment:** Supervising participants to prepare a policy paper in their area of interest to enrich dialogues, develop policy alternatives, which can help address current challenges.

## About the Center

The Platform for Sustainable Development is a registered center with the Non-Governmental Organizations Department at the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers under the number (1S2106012). It serves as a space for thought, dialogue, and action towards positive change.

## Vision

We seek to establish a platform for dialogue and policies that contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in Iraq.

## Mission

Filling the gap between the state and society to ensure the essence of democracy by engaging citizens in the decision-making process through training, monitoring, analysis, research, awareness, and advocacy.

## Strategic Goals

- Preparing a youth elite that rises to its social responsibilities through studying problems, proposing policy alternatives, and working towards their implementation.
- Utilizing knowledge outputs and encouraging youth to work towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals
- Presenting statistics and issues that occupy the political arenas and societal circles to reflect a deeper understanding of the Iraqi reality.
- Creating a network of active, informed, and committed citizens dedicated to the project of building the Iraqi government.



Environmental challenges are among the most serious issues facing Iraq on national, health, food, and societal levels. Water problems have been discussed in various parliamentary sessions and ministerial meetings, but real and effective efforts to address the issue have been lacking. Furthermore, there are multiple question marks surrounding the project to establish the National Water Council, which has been approved more than three times by successive governments but without clear implementation and achievement. It is undeniable that a densely populated country like Iraq, with over 40 million inhabitants, is susceptible to all types of pollution due to the absence of necessary government oversight.

Some environmental surveys in Iraq indicate that, in general, 60% of Iraq's water is not suitable for consumption. Industrial wastewater is the primary source of pollution, with an estimated annual concentration of salts at 320,000 cubic meters. Only 9% of this wastewater is properly treated, while 38% remains untreated and contains sewage water. The remaining water is contaminated with high levels of phosphates, ammonia, chlorine, organic materials, and other pollutants. These pollutants primarily originate from agricultural runoff, which is a significant source of river pollution in both the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. These pollutants are estimated to range between 6,000 to 20,000 parts per million, and around 3.2 million cubic meters are discharged annually.

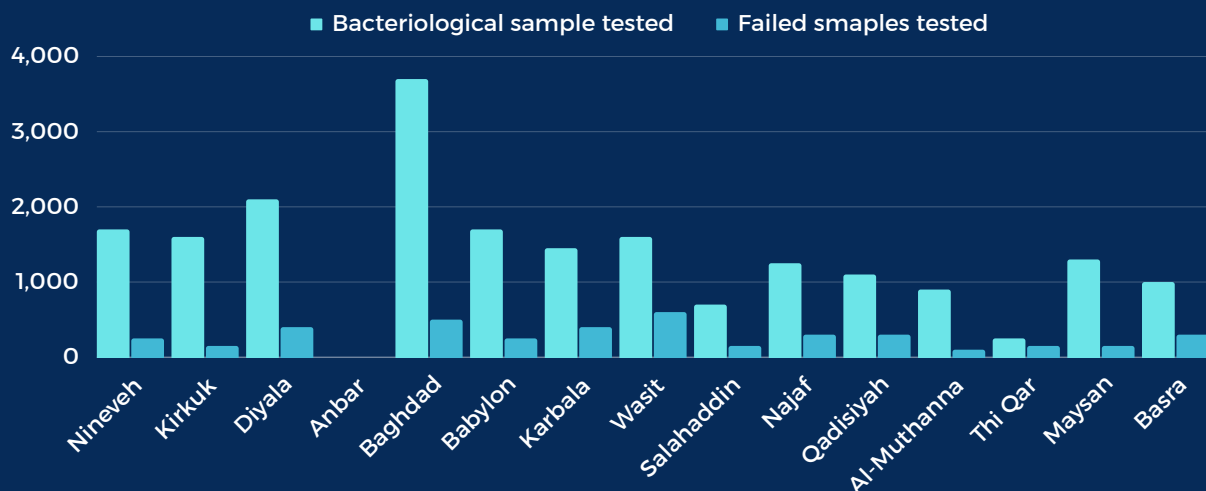
Hospital waste is among the most dangerous types of waste due to its potential to carry diseases. It can cause various diseases such as viral hepatitis, amoebiasis, and others. Statistics from the Ministry of Planning indicate that daily consumption of this water is around 7.8 million cubic meters, with 75% of it returning to surface water bodies, carrying industrial and waste pollutants. The construction of large dams by neighboring countries has caused a decrease in the water level and increased pollution, resulting in waterborne diseases such as typhoid, hepatitis, kidney and bladder infections, among others, putting extra pressure on Iraq's healthcare facilities and affecting public health



Untreated and non-sanitized waste that is dumped into rivers daily has not decreased. As freshwater sources continue to decline, the negative impact of this pollution on humans, fisheries, and plants becomes increasingly severe. Additionally, the fluctuation in the quantity of potable water available to citizens exacerbates the problem, especially in the face of urban expansion and housing encroachments.

Bacteria present in sewage water can lead to the contamination of water sources, as these bacteria consume the dissolved oxygen in water, depriving fish of the oxygen necessary for their survival. This has a negative effect on Iraq's fisheries, as demonstrated by the incident in Al-Hillah in 2018. Figure 1 below illustrates the number of microbiological samples tested and failed for drinking water in different provinces in 2021.

Table 1: Number of Microbiological Samples Tested and Failed for Drinking Water by Province in 2021



In conclusion, Iraq faces a significant water pollution problem, affecting public health, the environment, and its fisheries. To address these challenges effectively, the establishment of the National Water Council is imperative, and robust efforts are needed to improve water treatment and sanitation, monitor water sources, and reduce industrial and agricultural pollution. Additionally, measures should be taken to ensure the safe disposal of hospital waste to prevent further water pollution and protect public health. The root causes of the water pollution problem in Iraq can be attributed to two main categories: institutional and circumstantial factors.



- **Institutional Causes:**

**1.Failure of the Post-2003 Iraqi State**

**Model:** After 2003, the new Iraqi state model failed to establish a robust environmental policy with institutional and legal frameworks. This policy should have played an active role in raising public awareness, penalizing environmental violators, and taking legal action against those who damage the environment, such as those involved in deforestation, wetland encroachment, and the dumping of industrial and chemical waste into rivers.

**2.Delayed Legislation for the National**

**Water Council:** There has been a significant delay in passing legislation to establish the National Water Council, despite its approval by successive governments. This council is essential for managing Iraq's water resources effectively.

**3.Population Growth:** Iraq's rapidly growing population has put immense pressure on natural resources and the environment.

**4.Salinity and Water Scarcity:** The worsening problem of salinity and water scarcity is a result of the policies of neighboring countries that share water resources with Iraq.

**5.War-related Pollution:** The aftermath of consecutive wars in Iraq, including the use of weapons and military equipment, has led to environmental destruction and pollution.

- **Circumstantial Causes:**

**1.Industrial Pollution:** Industrial pollution, particularly from the increasing industrial activities, poses a significant threat to Iraq. Baghdad alone hosts more than 65% of the country's industrial establishments, with 55% of the industrial workforce engaged in these industries.

**2.Overexploitation and Pollution of**

**Water Resources:** Various sources of pollution, such as industrial and waste discharges, heavily impact water bodies along river courses. Every cubic meter of industrial and waste-polluted water contaminates 40-50 cubic meters of natural water.

**3.Encroachments on Water**

**Resources:** There are numerous encroachments on water resources by local communities, especially in areas where rivers originate. This has led to inequitable water distribution, with some provinces monopolizing water resources.



The establishment of the National Water Council, comprising experts from relevant ministries and agencies, is a critical step toward addressing these challenges. The council should play a pivotal role in creating policies and long-term strategies to safeguard Iraq's water environment. Additionally, strategic cooperation with neighboring countries like Turkey, Syria, and Iran is necessary to manage shared water resources effectively.

The council can also coordinate and plan for emergencies, helping Iraq confront water-related threats. Addressing Iraq's water problem requires long-term policies and measures to combat pollution, reduce wasteful irrigation practices, and protect water resources. The formation of the council represents the first step in crafting such policies and ensuring the sustainability of Iraq's water resources.

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