

Lily Gumbinner  
A.W. Dreyfoos School of the Arts  
West Palm Beach, FL  
Iraq, Conflict

## **Iraq: How Conflict Has Caused Food Insecurity**

Iraq is a country located in the Middle East, between Iran and Kuwait, and borders the Persian Gulf. It has a total land area of 437,367 square kilometers, but only 18 percent of that land is arable due to the country's large desert area and climate. Iraq has a current population of around 39 million people, with about 70 percent of the population living in urban centers, mainly located around the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. The official religion of Iraq is Islam, with over 65 percent of Muslims being Shia. Conflict has arisen between the Muslim sects, Sunni and Shia, but the current main conflict is between foreign based terrorist groups (Central Intelligence Agency, 2018). The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is a transnational Sunni terrorist group primarily operating in western Iraq and eastern Syria. In 2014, ISIL overtook Iraq's second largest city, Mosul. This was the beginning of what has caused over three million Iraqis to flee their homes and take refuge in neighboring countries and camps within Iraq (Britannica, 2018). Because of the ongoing conflict, since the Iraq war ended in 2011 through the current situation with ISIL, food security has become a large issue for the Iraqi. The only way to assist in supplying food to the millions of Iraqis in need of proper nourishment is to create sustainable food sources and to ultimately end the civil war against ISIL.

A typical family in Iraq is multigenerational, and family is seen as the basic unit of society. There are typically 6-7 people living in a single household. It is a patriarchal society, and while women have equal rights, they are seen as vulnerable and in need of protection. Since the beginning of civilization, agriculture has been the primary economic activity for Iraq, cereals being their staple crop (Metz, 1988). Iraq's rich cuisine is a staple of the culture. Some typical dishes include kebabs, grilled meat on a stick; dolmi, spiced rice covered in grape leaves; biryani, rice with spiced vegetables and meat. Because a majority of the population is Muslim, pork and alcohol are forbidden due to religious limitations. Lamb, goat, chicken, and beef are all popular meats and common exports (IRFAD, 2014).

Petroleum accounts for 93 percent of Iraq's exports, totaling \$84.3 billion a year. A majority of jobs in Iraq are in the oil industry and construction, with the average salary being \$4000 (OEC, 2016). Education is highly valued, but there is a high academic standard with low resources. Since 2014, three million children have had their education interrupted due to attacks on schools (UNICEF, 2018). Healthcare is also an issue in Iraq. Before the war, healthcare was readily available, but now there is very limited access to vaccines and medical appointments. There is also a high number of war-related injuries, like amputated limbs and post-traumatic stress disorder (Register, 2011). Another reason for the lack of good healthcare is the low availability of clean water, sanitation, and electricity. Less than half of Iraq's population has access to potable water due to system failures and broken pipes. Sanitation is also a major concern, with

less than 10 percent of the population connected to sewage systems (UNICEF, 2018).

With the amount of unclean living conditions, improper sanitation, low wages, poor infrastructure, and most importantly, a constant state of conflict, providing food for families is a very difficult task in Iraq. Since 2014, over three million Iraqis have been displaced due to the occupation of ISIL. Each month, 10 million people in Iraq need humanitarian assistance and 800,000 people need food assistance. In addition, around 250,000 Syrians have taken refuge in Iraq, which places even more strain on resources (WFP, 2018). With the crisis in Iraq continuing to worsen, 53 percent of populations in urban and rural areas as well as 66 percent of internally displaced peoples are vulnerable to food insecurity (UN, 2017). Iraq's poor agricultural production due to conflict leaves children and refugees the most vulnerable to food insecurity, and they make up a majority of the population. Over 75 percent of children in Iraq are working to help get food on the table for their families, which means that they have to put a hold on their education in order to survive (WFP, 2017).

The environment also takes a toll on the food crisis, as water is in high demand for Iraq and surrounding countries due to a recent drought. The current situation with ISIL has intensified the demand, which makes irrigation for crops very difficult and costly (WFP, 2017). As the violence and political instability continue, the food crisis will continue to worsen as the population grows. The population of Iraq is growing at a rate of three percent annually, which means the demand for food will increase along with it (World Bank, 2018).

The first step to solving the food crisis in Iraq is ending the civil war between Iraq and ISIL. Between the Iraq-Iran War, the Gulf War, the Iraq War, and the current civil war against ISIL, the country has not had a break from war and conflict in many years, making it difficult for the country to get back on its feet and feed the population. Once ISIL is no longer occupied in Iraq, the country can start moving the refugees back to their homes where they can start working again to pay for food. Non-profit organizations need to work together in order to raise awareness and funds for food programs and agriculture production. The only way to end conflict is to send troops from around the world to prevent further destruction by ISIL. The United States cannot work alone to stop this force, the UN needs to develop a concrete plan to take out members of ISIL. Once the majority of conflict has ceased and refugees are able to leave the camps, schools should be the first priority on getting rebuilt. Educating the future generations is the most important part of creating political and agricultural sustainability.

There are many non-profit organizations around the world that are trying to help the population of Iraq get food. One organization, the World Food Programme (WFP) provides food assistance to the most vulnerable refugees, which is about 1.5 million people. They do this through a cash assistance program and monthly family rations. WFP is the world's largest food assistance program and has been assisting Iraq since 1968 through its times of crisis (WFP, 2018). Another organization striving to end hunger in

Iraq is the United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF). They specialize in providing relief and support for children around the world that are in need. Over 1.4 million children are displaced because of the violence in Iraq, and UNICEF is working around the clock to provide food, clean water, and education to those children (UNICEF, 2018). Finally, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) is working with other programs to help improve the production of livestock, poultry, vegetable crops, and cereal crops in Iraq. All these organizations are dedicated to helping end the food insecurity issue in Iraq and providing relief to displaced families.

In 1996, The United Nations Security Council started the Oil-for-Food Program in Iraq to sell oil to pay for food and other humanitarian goods, which were scarce after the first Gulf War. While the program had good intentions, Saddam Hussein exploited it and pocketed \$1.7 billion through surcharges and kickbacks, and \$10.9 billion through illegal oil smuggling at the expense of suffering Iraqis. Because of its corrupt nature, the Oil-for-Food Program was shut down in 2003. (CFR, 2005). Now that Iraq is still in a state of crisis and struggling to pay for food again, a more effective version of the Oil-for-Food Program could be implemented. Previously, the program was funded solely by the proceeds of oil exports, and involved nine UN organizations (FAO, UNESCO, WHO, ITU, UNICEF, UNDP, WFP, UNOPS, UN-Habitat). Seventy two percent of the proceeds of Iraqi oil exports went to the program, but they had to use large percentages to pay the government for equipment (UN, 2018). It would not cost the Iraqi government anything to restart the program, and would be supported by non-profit organizations, primarily the UN. Allowing it to be run and managed by non-profit organizations would help prevent the government and its leaders, like Hussein, from pocketing the money earned. It would allow the country to use their most abundant resource to feed the population and supply goods that are needed for survival. The reimplementation of a failed program with more structured regulations would save millions from hunger and give Iraqis a second chance at a better quality of life. Because of the current conflict, implementing this may be difficult, but overall, the availability of food should come first. Oil has always been abundant in the middle east, and it is still being processed even during these times of conflict. The refugees will die of hunger before they die at the hands of ISIL, so they should begin working on improving the food sources before worrying about the conflict. It is hard to fight a terrorist group on an empty stomach.

Another issue with feeding Iraq is the lack of agriculture and arable land. Since the country is two-fifths desert, much of it is not cultivable land. With many years of drought and not enough funds to support modern irrigation systems, providing proper irrigation to crops is a struggle. A dam recently built in Turkey has caused a water flow crisis in the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, reducing water flow into Iraq by 80 percent, and it continues to decrease (Wilson, 2017). In Australia, Sundrop Farms is in the middle of the desert and grows tomatoes with nothing but sun and seawater. This hydroponic greenhouse does not require fossil fuels, soil, groundwater, or pesticides. The farm can grow over 17,000 metric tons of produce annually (Klein, 2016). This type of technology would be perfectly suited to produce food for Iraq; it does not require fresh water, arable land, or fossil fuels, which are all things that the country struggles to supply. Although this type of farm costs \$200 million to build, it will pay off since it does not use fossil fuels. The amount of foreign aid predicted to be sent to Iraq in 2019 is just under \$200 million

(Foreign Assistance, 2018), so instead of spending that money on food they could use it to start a hydroponic farm, similar to the one in Australia, that could potentially produce food for thousands of families.

In order to sustain these solutions for food insecurity in Iraq, there needs to be ample support from non-profit organizations and surrounding countries. Non-profit organizations need to continue their work by supplying families with food, water, and other humanitarian goods. The Oil-for-Food program should be reassessed and brought back temporarily until the country can start cultivating their own food. To keep this program from falling apart again, the UN needs to manage the budget of oil production and ensure that the funds are solely going to food and other necessities. Finally, for hydroponic farms to become sustainable, Iraq needs to receive enough foreign aid in order to afford the construction. Once it is built, its limited number of needed resources will make it easy to uphold and grow food without having to spend money. Many Iraqis seek refuge in Australia, and in 2014 there were 63,860 Iraqi born people living there (Home Affairs, 2016). Because of the large Iraqi population in their country, Australians may be willing to assist Iraq in starting the hydroponic farms and learning their technology, as well as helping manage the conflict by sending troops to the country. The conflict in Iraq is an issue that may never resolve itself, as it seems to be an ongoing cycle throughout the years. ISIL has taken a toll on the government, the infrastructure, and the people. The entire country is in shambles. If the UN comes together and fights this as an international issue, one terrorist group should not stand a chance against the entire world. While it will be impossible to pulverize the entire group, getting it to a manageable size should be enough for Iraq to get back on its feet and start feeding its people.

Overall, hunger in Iraq is an issue that may never resolve itself, especially with the current state of conflict and violence. The occupation of ISIL has caused the displacement of millions of people from their homes without access to food and clean water. There are many people and organizations that are attempting to help families and refugees in the country get proper food and nutrition, but the problem will not improve unless sustainable solutions are implemented. Once the conflict has been ceased, with non-profit organizations continuing to donate food, supplies, and money, refugees will be able to get proper nourishment without costing the Iraqi government. Bringing back the Oil-for-Food Program and adapting the policies to avoid corruption will allow the country to use their most abundant resource to feed the population. Lastly, installing hydroponic farms on non-arable land through the assistance of foreign aid will supply a sustainable food supply without draining resources. The food crisis due to conflict is a difficult issue that has no easy answers, but a few changes can make a big difference.

#### Works Cited

Britannica, T. E. (2018, April 11). Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. Retrieved April 19, 2018, from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islamic-State-in-Iraq-and-the-Levant>

Country profile - Iraq. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/about/reports-publications/research-statistics/statistics/live-in-australia/country-profiles/iraq>

Foreign Assistance: Iraq. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.foreignassistance.gov/explore/country/Iraq>

Helen Chapin Metz, ed. *Iraq: A Country Study*. Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1988.

Iraqi Research Foundation for Analysis and Development. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.irfad.org/>

*In Iraq, years of violence and conflict leave 4 million children in need*. (2018, February 11). Retrieved from [https://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/media\\_102592.html](https://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/media_102592.html)

Klein, A. (2016, October 14). First farm to grow veg in a desert using only sun and seawater. Retrieved from <https://www.newscientist.com/article/2108296-first-farm-to-grow-veg-in-a-desert-using-only-sun-and-seawater>

Otterman, S. (2005, October 28). IRAQ: Oil for Food Scandal. Retrieved from <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/iraq-oil-food-scandal>

Regester, K., et al. (2011). *Iraqi Refugee Health Cultural Profile*. Ethnomed. Retrieved from <http://www.ethnomed.org/culture/iraqi>

The Observatory of Economic Complexity. (n.d.). Iraq. Retrieved from <https://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/profile/country/irq/#Exports>

The World Factbook: IRAQ. (2018, April 10). Retrieved April 19, 2018, from <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/iz.html>

UN Office of the Iraq Program - Oil for Food: About the Program. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/Depts/oip/background/>

Urgent action needed to stave off 'hunger crisis' in Iraq – UN food relief agency | UN News. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://news.un.org/en/story/2017/04/555082-urgent-action-needed-stave-hunger-crisis-iraq-un-food-relief-agency>

Wilson, R. (2017, October 17). Water-Shortage Crisis Escalating in the Tigris-Euphrates Basin. Retrieved from <http://www.futuredirections.org.au/publication/water-shortage-crisis-escalating-in-the-tigris-euphrates-basin/>

World Bank Population growth (annual %). (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.GROW>

World Food Programme: Iraq. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www1.wfp.org/countries/iraq>