

# Water hyacinth pest chokes Iraq's vital waterways

Author:

Asaad Niyazi with Ali Allaq in Kut | AFP

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AL-BADAA: The broad leaves and delicate purple flowers floating on the Euphrates look breathtaking – but they are suffocating the waterways of Iraq, celebrated as the “land of the two rivers.”

The water hyacinth, nicknamed the “Nile flower” in Iraq, is an invasive plant native to South America’s Amazon basin that has ravaged ecosystems across the world, from Sri Lanka to Nigeria.

The fast-spreading pest poses a special risk in Iraq, one of the world’s hottest countries that is already suffering from regular droughts and shrinking water resources due to overuse, pollution and upstream river dams. The exotic flower was introduced to Iraq just two decades ago as a decorative plant, but now the mighty Tigris and Euphrates rivers are being choked by its rapid spread.

Its glossy leaves form a thick cover, absorbing up to five liters (1.3 gallons) of water per plant a day and blocking sunlight and oxygen vital to the aquatic life below.

That has made the hyacinth a formidable floral foe for Iraq’s fishermen, who sell hauls of river carp in local markets to those cooking “masgouf,” a national delicacy.

Because of the infestation, carp are dying and fishing nets get caught in the tangle of flat leaves, roots and flowers that also hampers boat travel.

“Our livelihoods are gone, all because of this Nile flower,” said Jallab Al-Sharifi, a fisherman in the southern province of Dhi Qar who makes his living on the Euphrates.

Another fisherman east of Baghdad who works the Tigris said his haul had dropped by as much as half.

The hyacinths have also impacted Iraqi farmers who already struggle with low water levels due to a series of dams built further upstream in Turkey and Iran.

The thick floating vegetation draws down water levels and clogs irrigation channels leading to agricultural fields.

“During this harvest, our vegetable sales in the local market were down by a third,” said Ahmed Yasser, a farmer in a village near Kut, east of Baghdad.

The hyacinth causes another type of pressure – a 100 square meter (1,000 square feet) patch can weigh up to five tons, putting major strain on dilapidated riverside infrastructure, Iraqi officials warn.

In the village of Al-Badua, the thick columns of a brick bridge that once spanned a wide stretch of the Euphrates are now covered by hyacinths.

A dam further upstream encloses a swamp-like patch of land also covered by the plant.

If the flowers are not removed, “the bridge and dam of Al-Badua will

collapse,” said Jalil Al-Abboudi, the village sheikh.

“And if they collapse, the whole water supply system will collapse.”

That would deprive vast regions – all the way to Iraq’s southernmost province of Basra – of the fragile water resources their ecosystems and economies rely on.

Iraq’s oil-dependent economy is already projected to shrink by nearly 10 percent this year, according to the World Bank.

And a health crisis sparked by a shortage of safe drinking water in the south hospitalized some 100,000 people in 2018.

Locals blame authorities for what they say have been years of neglect and insufficient maintenance.

“The lack of action by the ministry of water resources, and the fact that there have been no renovations of infrastructure, caused an invasion that reached potable water reserves,” said Abboudi.

But Saleh Hadi, head of research at Dhi Qar’s agriculture directorate, insisted the ministry was well aware of the dangers and working hard to mitigate them.

“The ministry of water resources is working to combat this plant mechanically by uprooting it from irrigation channels,” he told AFP.

The perennial predicament has been made even worse this year because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Under normal conditions, Iraqi villagers along the banks of the Euphrates pluck out the plants by hand instead of using a chemical agent that would destroy the delicate ecosystem.

But this year, a countrywide lockdown imposed to stem COVID-19 infections has allowed the hyacinth to spread mostly unhampered.

Some vigilantes, however, are defying the curfew to fight the parasitic flower which they see as a bigger threat to their livelihoods than the pandemic.

While villagers are sneaking out to uproot the plants by hand, Mohammed Kuwaysh, an environmental activist and member of a farming cooperative, is thinking even bigger.

His collective raised about \$800 from local farmers to equip small speedboats to clear waterways by cutting hyacinths en masse.

“The government isn’t listening, which allowed this flower to spread like wildfire,” Kuwaysh said.







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## [UAE tests over one-third of population for COVID-19: Health minister](#)

Mon, 2020-06-22 19:51

DUBAI: The UAE has carried out more than 3 million tests for the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), representing nearly a third of its 9.89 million population, Health Minister Abdul Rahman Mohammed Al-Owais said.

The country started tracking cases in early January before the World Health Organization (WHO) had even announced a serious outbreak, the minister told a webinar summit of world governments on COVID-19 response.

“Residents and citizens came together during the coronavirus pandemic,” which was one of the reasons behind the UAE’s effective response, Al-Owais added,

along with the government's cooperation with the private sector.

In April, UK-based Deep Knowledge Group ranked the UAE among the world's top 10 countries for treating COVID-19 cases. Also on the list were Germany, China, South Korea, Austria, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, Israel, and Japan.

The UAE has been reporting a decreasing number of daily cases, with the latest figures showing 392 new patients on Sunday. The country has so far recorded a total of 44,925 COVID-19 cases, with 302 deaths and 32,415 recoveries.

Meanwhile, WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, told the webinar gathering that "the coronavirus pandemic is still accelerating globally," and he called for global preparedness which was "not a one-time investment" but a continuous effort.

The Swedish, Norwegian and Emirati ministers of health stressed the necessity of learning to live with COVID-19 and developing a new normal.

The sentiment was echoed by WHO's envoy on COVID-19, David Nabarro, who said: "The coronavirus is not going away, it is up to all of us to change our behavior to live with this virus."



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UAE COVID-19 cases up by 412 after health ministry tests over 32,000 UAE's Sharjah to reopen cinemas, gyms and other public areas

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# Libyan figures welcome El-Sisi support

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CAIRO: Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi has stressed Egypt's readiness to support the citizens of Libya.

"In Egypt, we have great respect and appreciation and have not interfered in your affairs and are always prepared to provide support, to help with the stability of the country," El-Sisi said on Saturday in a televised speech. "We are solely interested in Libyan security and stability. Sirte and Al-Jafra crossed a red line. We are ready to help and aid in the protection of Libya," he added.

"Libya is a great country and its people are fighters. The line that the current forces have reached, whether from the eastern region or western region, are all Libyan citizens and we are talking to the Libyan people and not one party against another," El-Sisi said.

The Libyan city of Sirte is 1,000 kilometers (km) from the Egyptian border, and is halfway between Tripoli and Benghazi on the Libyan coast. It is located 450 km from the capital Tripoli and 600 km from Benghazi. It opens the way for controlling oil ports in Libya's "Oil Crescent" in eastern Libya, which includes the largest oil reserves in the country.

## Opinion

This section contains relevant reference points, placed in (Opinion field)

Sirte is the main operations room for the Libyan National Army (LNA) and a link between the regions of eastern and western Libya. The city's airport and seaport is one of the most important gateways in Libya.

Al-Jafra also has major significance because it is located in the center of the country which is 650 km southeast of Tripoli. It is the link between the east, west and south. Controlling Al-Jafra's base means controlling the entire center of the country.

"Our goals will be to protect the western borders, and support the restoration of security and stability in Libya, as it is part of Egyptian national security," El-Sisi added.

His address was met with widespread Arab support. Saudi Arabia stressed that Egypt's security was an integral part of the security of the Kingdom and the entire Arab nation, noting that Riyadh stood alongside Cairo in its right to defend its borders and people from extremism.

The UAE also supported the statements made by the Egyptian president and

reiterated its position calling for an immediate cease-fire in Libya and a commitment to a political solution, stressing that it was the only acceptable way to end the conflict.

In a statement, the UAE's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation affirmed its solidarity and support for Egypt to protect its security and stability.

The head of the Diwan of the Supreme Council of Sheikhs and Dignitaries of Libya, Muhammad Al-Misbahi, said that the Libyan people were calling for the joint Arab defense agreement to be enacted, praising the words of El-Sisi. He pointed out that the Libyan people felt "that Arab dignity has begun to recover from Egypt's June 30 revolution," calling for an urgent move by the Egyptian government to resolve the conflict.

He pointed to the military intervention of Turkey in Libya as a key strategic issue, and warned that it could attract mercenaries and escalate the situation in the country if Turkey was permitted to continue its operations. The council of sheikhs and dignitaries declared that Egypt's intervention in Libyan affairs was a legitimate intervention according to the Joint Arab Defense Treaty. "Egyptian-Libyan history has proven the significance of joining forces in standing together against the foreign enemy throughout history, either in the Libyan jihad against the Italians, or the strong support Libya provided to Egypt in the 1973 October War," it said in a statement.

"President El-Sisi raised morale and sent a strong message that Egypt is present," Khaled Al-Mahjoub, director of the Department of Moral Guidance in the Libyan Army, said.

"The situation with Turkey is about looting of wealth and the deployment of mercenaries, which is what constitutes a threat to the region. Today Turkey has a clear-cut message from El-Sisi," Al-Mahjoub added.

"The Egyptian state is capable of facing any threats to national security regarding the Libyan crisis," assistant secretary of the Future Party of the Egyptian Homeland, Essam Hilal, said.

He pointed out that Libya "is living a critical stage in its history in light of (Turkey's President Recep Tayyip) Erdogan's ambitions about Libyan oil, his possession of many terrorist militias in Libya, and his attempt to impose a fait accompli policy on Egypt."

Hours after the Egyptian president's speech, Erdogan made a phone call to Emir of Qatar Tamim bin Hamad. The Qatar News Agency stated that the call discussed strategic relations between the two countries and ways to support and develop them, in addition to discussing a number of regional and international issues of common concern.

The mobilization of LNA forces continues in Sirte, and the eastern city of Misrata. The Government of National Accord, led by Fayez Al-Sarraj, rejected the Egyptian invitation to hold an emergency meeting of the Arab League to discuss the latest developments.





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MWL stands with Egypt to protect its borders, preserve security

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## [UN denounces recent escalation in Yemen, says threatens cease-fire](#)

Sun, 2020-06-21 21:09

RIYADH: The UN on Sunday denounced a military escalation in Yemen, which it said jeopardizes a cease-fire.

UN Special Envoy to Yemen, Martin Griffiths, called on all sides to reduce tensions, particularly "the recent increasing hostilities in the governorates of Ma'rib and Al Jawf."

"I once again urge the parties to take serious measures to de-escalate, give peace a chance, and continue to engage constructively with the UN efforts to reach an agreement," Griffiths said. "I hope they will refrain from the misguided quest for territorial gain by force, which can only bring more violence and suffering to Yemen."

Griffiths denounces the military escalation across [#Yemen](#)



particularly in Marib&Al Jawf that goes against the spirit of the UN-facilitated negotiations. He urges the parties to de-escalate &engage constructively with the UN efforts to reach an agreement<https://t.co/VpgCmfY2uo>

– @OSE\_Yemen (@OSE\_Yemen) [June 21, 2020](#)

According to the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, hundreds of thousands of displaced Yemenis are based in Marib, an area that has been relatively calm over the past five years.

The surge in clashes between the Iran-backed Houthis and forces loyal to the internationally recognized government come as the country is battered by COVID-19.

Griffiths said increased fighting “impeded efforts to respond to the COVID-19 outbreak devastating the country.”



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# Tunisians protesting over jobs clash with police after arrest of activist

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TATAOUINE: Protesters demanding jobs in Tunisia's energy sector blocked roads with blazing tyres on Sunday after the arrest of an activist, as security forces responded with tear gas.

For weeks, demonstrators have erected a protest camp in the southern Tataouine region demanding authorities make good on a 2017 promise to provide jobs in the gas and oil sectors to thousands of unemployed.

They have blocked roads around the El-Kamour pumping station to prevent tanker trucks from entering the facility but so far the protest had been largely peaceful.

On Sunday, however, it turned violent after the arrest of an activist "wanted" by the authorities, the governor of Tataouine, Adel Werghi, told a local radio.

The activist, arrested the night before, was identified as Tarek Haddad, the spokesman for the protesters.

An AFP correspondent said demonstrators set tyres ablaze in Tataouine and pelted security forces with stones demanding his release.

Security forces responded with tear gas and the situation remained tense in the afternoon, with intermittent clashes taking place.

The governor said it was "illegal" for protesters, who have been demonstrating for more than a month, to block roads with tents "which they have set up in the middle of streets".

In 2017, protesters had blockaded the El-Kamour pumping station for three months demanding jobs.

The sit-in ended after the employment minister signed a deal with representatives of the protesters, brokered by the powerful Tunisian trade union confederation UGTT, pledging to invest 80 million Tunisian dinars a year (almost \$28 million) in Tataouine.

The UGTT said the promise was never kept.



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