

US envoy meets Libyan commander to push for elections

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By SAMY MAGDY | AP

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Wed, 2021-08-11 17:04

CAIRO: The US ambassador to Libya met Wednesday with a Libyan military commander amid international efforts to salvage a UN-brokered roadmap to elections in the North African country later this year.

Richard Norland met with Khalifa Haftar, commander of the self-styled Libyan Arab Armed Forces, in the Egyptian capital of Cairo. The meeting was part of US efforts to support Libyan parliamentary and presidential elections in December, the US Embassy said.

Norland "continues to focus on the urgency of supporting the difficult compromises necessary to establish the constitutional basis and legal framework needed now in order for the elections to take place on Dec. 24," the embassy wrote on Twitter.

"The United States supports the right of the Libyan people to select their leaders through an open democratic process and calls on key figures to use their influence at this critical stage to do what is best for all Libyans," it said.

The meeting came amid growing tensions between Haftar and the transitional government. Haftar announced earlier this week the promotions of military officers without consulting or getting approval from the ruling Presidential Council. The council's head serves as the supreme commander of Libya's fragmented military.

"Your military will not be subjected to any authority except one elected by the people," Haftar told his troops Monday in a ceremony celebrating the foundation of the Libyan military.

Libya has been wracked by chaos since a NATO-backed uprising toppled longtime dictator Muammar Qaddafi in 2011. In the years that followed the uprising, the oil-rich country split between a UN-supported government in the capital, Tripoli, and rival authorities based in the country's east, each backed by armed groups and foreign governments.

Haftar, an Egypt ally, was aligned with the former east-based government. In April 2019, Haftar and his forces launched an offensive to try and capture Tripoli from armed groups loosely allied with a UN-supported but weak government there.

His 14-month-long campaign, however, collapsed after Turkey stepped up its military support of the Tripoli-based government with hundreds of troops and thousands of Syrian mercenaries. That led to the October cease-fire and roadmap to elections adopted in Tunis a month later, which included a transitional government.

Last month, the UN special envoy for Libya, Jan Kubis, accused "spoilers" of trying to obstruct the holding of crucial elections in December to unify the divided nation. He told the UN Security Council that many key players in

Libya reiterated their commitment to the elections, but "I am afraid many of them are not ready to walk the talk."

The Security Council has warned that any individual or group undermining the electoral process could face UN sanctions.

The Libyan Political Dialogue Forum, a 75-member body from all walks of life, has so far failed to agree on a legal framework to hold elections. The forum met online Wednesday to consider four proposals for the constitutional basis for elections, according to the UN support mission in Libya.

The forum's "lack of ability to reach an agreement (on the constitutional basis) risks resulting in depriving once again the Libyan people of their right to democratically elect their representatives and restore the long-lost legitimacy of Libyan institutions," Kubis told the forum.

Another major hurdle is the presence of thousands of foreign forces and mercenaries, and the failure to pull them out as required under last October's cease-fire agreement that ended the fighting in the oil-rich country.

The UN mission, meanwhile voiced concern late Tuesday about the abduction and disappearance of a government official in Tripoli earlier this month.

Rida Faraj Fraitis, chief of staff for the first deputy of the prime minister, and a colleague were abducted by armed men after Fraitis' visit to government offices in the capital Aug. 2, the mission said. Their fate was unknown.

The UN mission said it was concerned about the further targeting of people supporting the democratic transition. Such targeting "has serious implications for the peace and reconciliation process and for the full unification of national institutions," the mission said.



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Italy FM tells Libya: 'We are at your side' Qaddafi's son wants to restore lost unity of Libya

[Soaring drug addiction blights lives in Iraq's war-shattered Ramadi](#)

Wed, 2021-08-11 21:25

RAMADI, IRAQ / BOGOTA, COLOMBIA: Ramadi was liberated by Iraqi security forces in the closing days of 2015 after several months under Daesh control. Since then, the people of this war-shattered provincial capital 110km west of

Baghdad have struggled to rebuild their lives in the face of severe economic hardship.

After decades of war, occupation and neglect by central government, the people of Ramadi are barely scraping by, with high rates of unemployment, sluggish post-war reconstruction and the twin threat posed by Daesh remnants and pro-Iran militias.

In the vast desert province of Anbar, bordering Syria to the west, conditions are ripe for exploitation by terror cells and criminal gangs trafficking in people, weapons and drugs.

Having long been used as a transit route to shift merchandise overland, the province now offers a ready market for many illicit items, particularly Captagon.



Iraqi government forces gather in the area of Khalidiya, east of Ramadi, the capital of Anbar province, during the fight against Daesh. (AFP/File Photo)

Captagon, an amphetamine also known by its street name "0.1," is one of the most commonly used drugs on Middle East battlefields. Combatants addicted to the narcotic say it helps them stay awake for days and numbs their senses, giving them stamina for long battles and allowing them to kill with abandon.

Ahmed Ali refuses to give his real name because he is ashamed of his drug habit. The 23-year-old started using Captagon recreationally after the defeat of Daesh, but quickly came to depend on the little yellow pills to stay alert during his punishing work hours.

"I started taking Captagon in 2017 when a friend gave it to me. I was curious. I just wanted to try it," Ali told Arab News from his home in Ramadi. "It is the most popular drug here. Most of the young people take it."

Owing to its energizing and mood-lifting effects, Captagon has become a popular recreational drug in the wider region. "People think it makes them feel better. But for me, I use it to stay alert because my job requires me to stay awake for a long time," Ali said.



Ahmed Ali, not his real name, started using Captagon recreationally after the defeat of Daesh in his native Ramadi, but quickly became addicted. (AN Photo/Meethak Al-Khatib)

"There are not many job opportunities here, so when you have a job, you have to stick to it. If you lose your job, you might not have another for many years. The longest I have stayed awake with no sleep is three days."

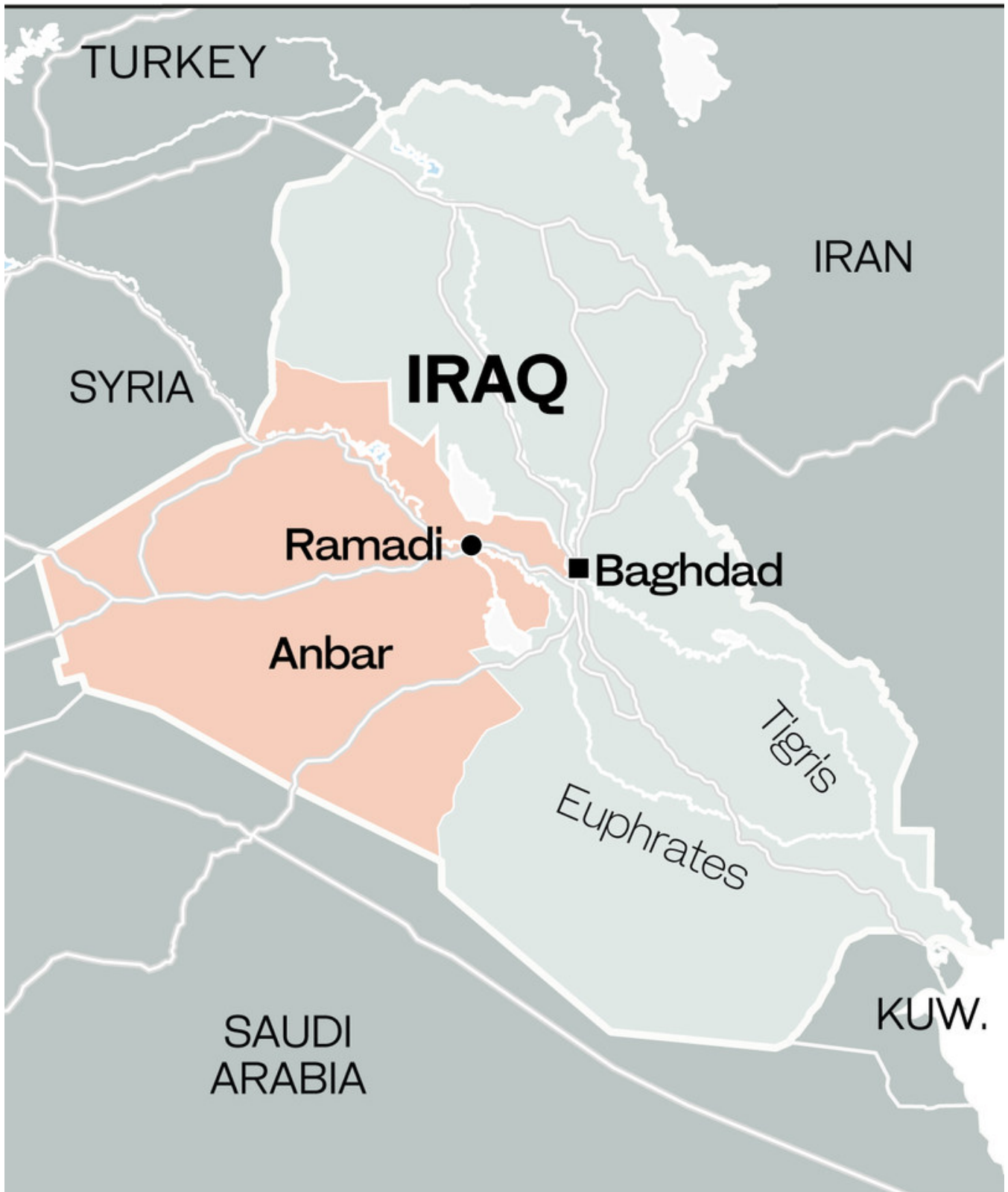
Captagon is popular among students who use it to study through the night in the misguided belief they will achieve better grades as a result. In practice, Ali found it had quite the opposite effect.

"Once I had an exam and I took two and a half pills at once. My body started to shake. I could not write anything. My hands were very shaky. This was the largest amount I have taken at once."

The street value for two Captagon pills in Ramadi is 5,000 IQD (\$3.43). As smugglers are able to move millions of these tiny pills concealed inside shipments of legitimate goods, dealers stand to profit immensely from a reliable base of local addicts.

IRAQ'S WAR-SCARRED ANBAR

After decades of war, Ramadi is barely scraping by



Source: AFP

ARAB NEWS

Anbar police declined to speak to Arab News about their fight against Captagon, but recently trumpeted their success in several raids, which led to 19 arrests and the seizure of 134,589 pills between April and July of this year.

Nevertheless, Captagon continues to spread throughout Anbar and into neighboring provinces. Many are now urging authorities to change tack and to treat drug users as patients in need of rehabilitation rather than criminals and moral deviants.

Noureddine Al-Hamdani, 28, volunteers with Peace Forum, an independent group founded in 2017 to address the many social ills blighting the lives of Ramadi residents, from domestic violence to civil rights violations.

Noureddine regularly joins his team of volunteers in the city's bustling Anbar Bazaar to distribute pamphlets about drug addiction. He believes the spread of drug use can be linked directly to the psychological impact of war.

"The war with Daesh was one of the main reasons for the spread of Captagon here," Noureddine said.



Noureddine Al-Hamdani, 28, volunteers with Peace Forum, an independent group founded in 2017 to address the many social ills blighting the lives of Ramadi residents. (AN Photo/Meethak Al-Khatib)

As a result, the province has not only become a major regional conduit for drug trafficking but also a lucrative market. "Anbar is a strategic area bordering several countries where drugs are moved into the country. But now Anbar has become an area that consumes drugs," he said.

Noureddine believes the local police are fighting a losing battle and that resources could be far better spent on providing rehabilitation services, which might help to reduce demand for Captagon.

“There are no health institutions that can help drug addicts in Anbar. That means users are scared to tell people they are users or to go to the authorities to tell them they are users and that they want medical help. The authorities see them as criminals. Because of this, drug use is increasing.

“Users are not criminals. Unfortunately, the authorities jail users with criminals and people accused of terrorism and other crimes.

“We want the government to provide health care for users where they can get help and beat their addiction. Despite our many calls to local and central government, we are not getting any response.”



Anbar police display packets of Captagon pills and a suspect seized during a

recent drugs bust. (Supplied)

Under Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein drug offenses carried the death penalty. Since his ouster in 2003, the Iraqi justice system has softened, but continues to jail people for even minor drug offenses.

Law No. 50 on Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, issued in 2017, allows courts to issue jail terms of one to three years and impose hefty fines for the import, production, or possession of narcotics. Article 288 of the same law stipulates life imprisonment for those found guilty of setting up drug dens.

Hamid Ali Jasim, an attorney in Ramadi who specializes in narcotics cases, believes the system doesn't work. "Before 2003, Iraq was always a drug-transit country, where drugs were trafficked from Iran to Syria, Gulf states and Lebanon. Iraq was not a drug-consuming or producing country until after 2003," Jasim said.

"Before 2003, anti-drugs laws were so harsh that possessing just a few narcotic pills could mean a death sentence. Then, in 2017, a new drugs law was issued in Iraq, which also classified Captagon as a psychoactive drug."

But when authorities realized dealers and users were not deterred, they imposed even tougher sentences. Now, possession of a hundred Captagon pills can carry up to six years in prison and a minimum fine of 10 million IQD (\$6,850).

"The court believed heavy sentences would mean the consumption of drugs would fall, but this was wrong," Jasim said. "We do not have any health institutions that can offer treatment to convicted drug users and the authorities believe locking people will solve the drug issue."



Hamid Ali Jasim, an attorney in Ramadi who specializes in narcotics cases, believes Iraq's counter-narcotics policy is not working. (AN Photo/Meethak Al-Khatib)

Jasim believes the epidemic of drug use is also made worse by corruption within the prison system. "After 2003, many police officers – I don't say all, but the majority – were not satisfied with their pay rates, so they started to look for other sources of income such as providing phone calls or other things to inmates for money, including Captagon," he said.

Jasim also alleges properties are frequently raided without a valid court order, that suspects are often denied their right to have a lawyer present during questioning, and that torture is commonplace in police custody.

"In most cases, police use illegal methods during the interrogation to find out where the suspect got their supply," Jasim said.

Others are alleged to have extracted bribes from drug dealers in exchange for reduced prison terms. "In some cases, dealers make 'an arrangement' with the authorities to be sent to court as users, not as dealers, to get a lower sentence."

Because of the massive backlog of cases, investigations are often rushed, evidence filed incorrectly, and sentences handed down without due process. "Drug trials here take no more than 15 minutes," Jasim said. "Many people have been unfairly prosecuted."



Iraqi security forces protect Peace Forum volunteers in downtown Ramadi. (AN Photo/Meethak Al-Khatib)

For Captagon users such as Ali, too frightened to speak out openly, the system is broken. “I wish there was a rehab clinic here. I would go if there was one,” he said.

But before Iraq’s legal and medical infrastructure can adapt, the language around drug addiction and mental illness must change. “People think if you take illegal substances, you are a dangerous person,” Ali said.

“You find depressed young people everywhere in Iraq. Life here is not normal. But people are afraid to go see a psychologist. Customs and traditions prevent them from doing this. People would think you’re crazy.

“Young people here are scrolling on social media and can see what life is like outside of Iraq and how it’s better. That makes them depressed. It can give them a reason to use Captagon.”

Twitter: [@meethak55](https://twitter.com/meethak55) / [@RobertPEdwards](https://twitter.com/RobertPEdwards)



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Lebanon's drug trade booms with help from Hezbollah's Captagon connection
Muslim World League chief Al-Issa calls on religious leaders to play role in fight against drugs

[Israel investigating May barrage that killed 6 civilians in Gaza](#)

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Wed, 2021-08-11 01:45

JERUSALEM: After initially finding no grounds for disciplinary action, the Israeli military later opened an investigation into an artillery bombardment that killed six Palestinian civilians, including an infant, in the Gaza Strip in May.

To date, no soldiers or senior officers have been punished for the errant fire, which witnesses say came without warning.

Human rights groups have long accused the Israeli military of having a poor record of investigating the conduct of its troops, and the Haaretz daily last week accused the army of covering up the incident.

The shelling during the latest war between Israel and Hamas militants in Gaza took place in the night of May 13. It came ahead of an Israeli bombardment targeting Hamas's underground tunnel network. Ahead of the tunnel strikes, Israeli artillery bombarded the northern Gaza Strip and struck near a cluster of dilapidated homes belonging to a Bedouin community outside the town of Beit Lahia.

Nasser Abu Fares, 50, a local resident, said relatives were visiting to mark the Eid, and he was standing near his home when the shelling began. "The first shell fell on my house in this area, and the dust rose, and we ran until we were 100 meters away," he said.

While the Israeli military often issues warnings to residents ahead of large-scale operations, Abu Fares said: "No one warned us."

The barrage killed six people, including three of his daughters and his nine-month-old grandson.



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Human Rights Watch: Israeli war crimes apparent in Gaza war
Israel strikes Gaza after Hamas launches incendiary balloons

[Gunmen in Iraq assassinate mayor of Karbala](#)

Author:

Tue, 2021-08-10 23:41

LONDON: Abeer Salim Al-Khafaji, the mayor of Karbala, a city southwest of the Iraqi capital, Baghdad, has been assassinated on Tuesday after being shot with three bullets to the chest.

Al-Khafaji was killed by gunmen while supervising a municipal campaign accompanied by security forces to stop abuses in the Al-Mamlji area, Iraq News Agency reported.

Earlier, a security source said Al-Khafaji was shot along with two municipality employees by individuals who opposed the removal of abuses, adding that the accident occurred on Al-Hur Road near Al-Safwa College in Al-Zahraa residential neighborhood.

Since the uprising of popular protests in Iraq in October 2019, more than 70 activists have been subjected to assassination attempts, while dozens of others have been kidnapped.



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Areas of Iraqi province lose power after attack on pylons
Saudi and Iraqi foreign ministers discuss boosting regional stability

[UN climate report strengthens case for wise management of Middle East groundwater reserves](#)

Tue, 2021-08-10 21:41

NEW YORK CITY: A landmark UN study on climate has sounded a stark warning about the impending irreversible changes to the natural environment and the catastrophic consequences for humanity that a failure to act could entail.

In its report, released on Monday, the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on

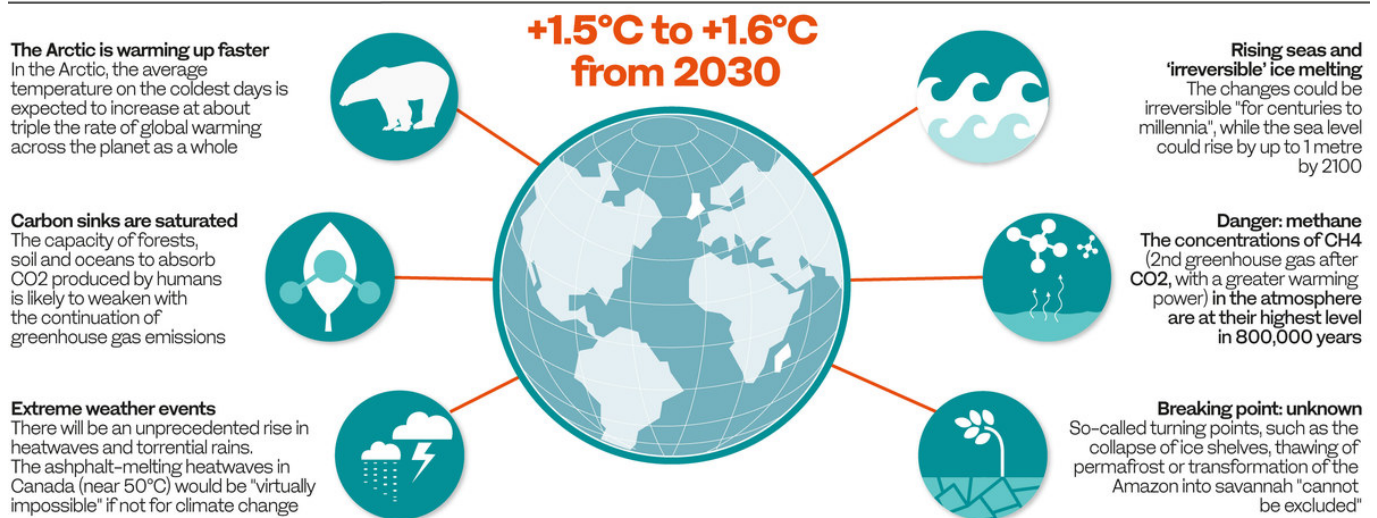
Climate Change (IPCC), said: "Climate change is widespread, rapid and intensifying, and some trends are now irreversible."

Among the approaching changes are the well-documented warming of the atmosphere, rising sea levels, severe and unpredictable weather and catastrophic damage to natural life on land and in the sea.

But one less acknowledged, but perhaps equally existential, effect of climate change is the rapid decline in the availability of fresh and drinkable water through groundwater reserves – and for the hot and arid countries of the Middle East, the threat is particularly acute.

CLIMATE: KEY POINTS OF THE UN ASSESSMENT

In all of the scenarios considered, the global temperature should reach +1.5°C or +1.6°C above pre-industrial levels around 2030. That is a decade earlier than projected



Source: IPCC

ARAB NEWS

"Climate change is intensifying the natural production of water – the water cycle. This brings more intense rainfall and associated flooding, as well as more intense drought in many regions," the UN report added.

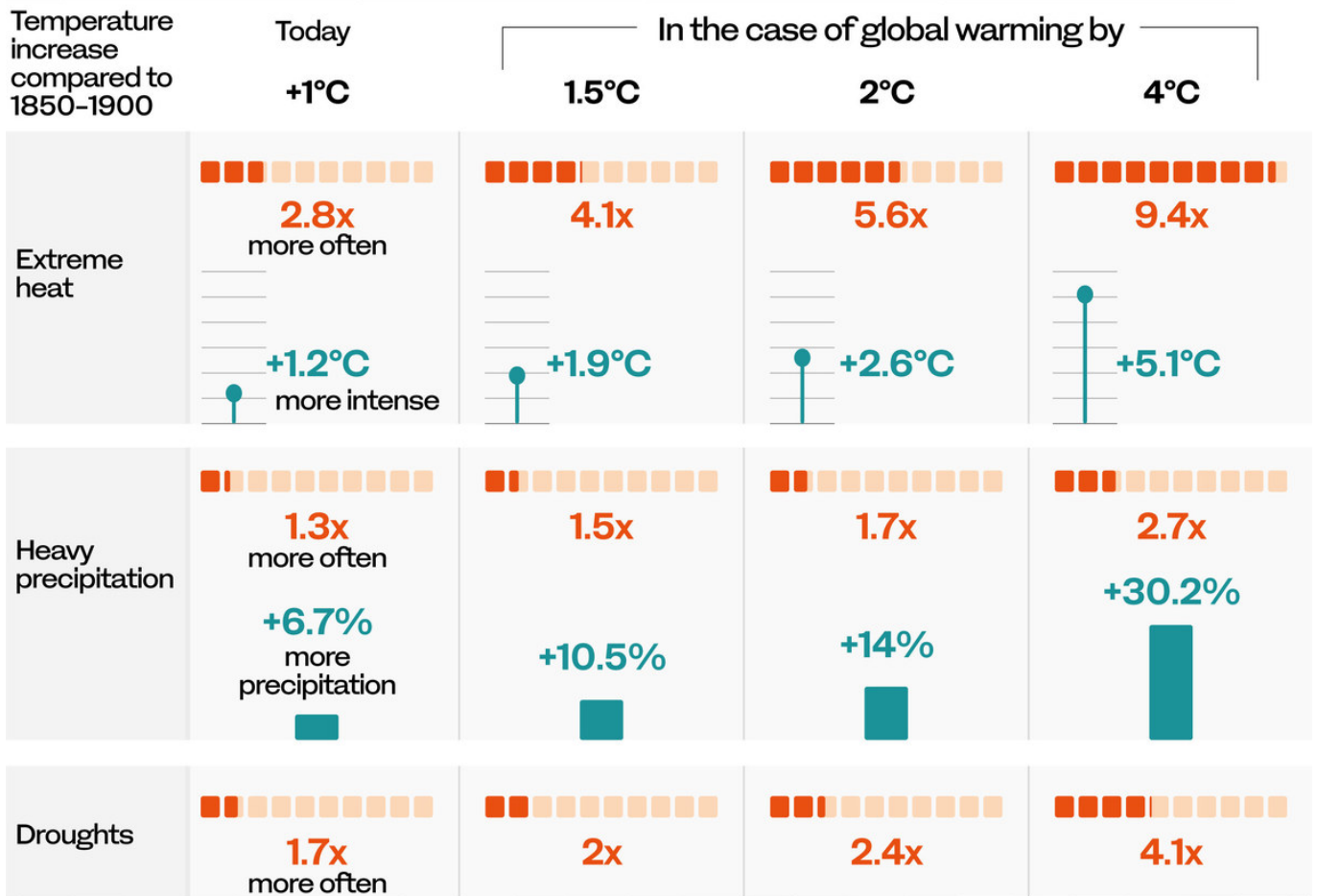
In the Middle East, mismanagement of groundwater – particularly in Syria, Iraq, Turkey and Iran – could have catastrophic environmental and knock-on political consequences.

Groundwater is the term used for the massive reservoirs, known as aquifers, of fresh water available beneath the earth's surface, which formed naturally over millions of years. Similar to the reservoirs that are drilled into for the extraction of oil, they are finite – and dwindling fast.

"Increasing global freshwater withdrawals, primarily associated with the expansion of irrigated agriculture in drylands, have led to global groundwater depletion," said the UN report, adding that the massive extraction of groundwater was so severe that it was contributing to rising sea levels – and ushering in all the associated complications that came with it.

GLOBAL WARMING: FREQUENT AND MORE INTENSE EXTREME EVENTS

For events that had a probability of occurring once every 10 years before the onset of global warming (1850–1900), the increase in the probability and intensity



Source: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)

ARAB NEWS

The consequences of groundwater extraction are more immediately obvious on a local level than globally.

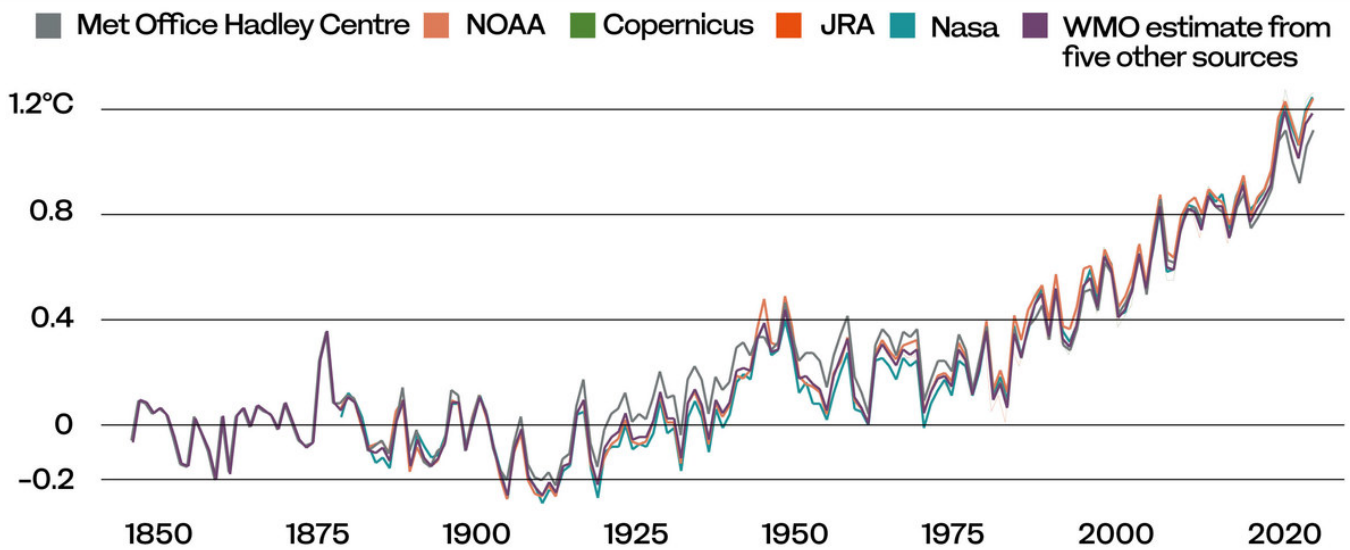
Water scarcity, particularly in the Middle East, is not a new problem, and countries such as Saudi Arabia have been ramping up efforts to produce fresh water, for example through desalination plants that remove salt and other harmful materials from seawater to ultimately process it and make it safe to drink and useful in agriculture and everyday life.

While desalination does not come without its own challenges, it has alleviated reliance on groundwater and reduced the pressure of economic growth and human needs on fragile groundwater systems.

However, Jay Famiglietti, executive director at the Global Institute for Water Security and one of the senior authors of a study that the UN drew on for Monday's report, told Arab News that such forward-thinking water management was scarce at best – or non-existent at worst – in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey.

2020: ONE OF THREE HOTTEST YEARS ON RECORD

Temperature progression compared to the pre-industrial level average



Source: UN/World Meteorological Organization, data as of Oct 2020

ARAB NEWS

“About a third of the world’s population relies on groundwater as their primary water source,” he said, adding that groundwater usage “depends on your resources.” Where there was less rain and surface water available, such as rivers and lakes, states were more likely to pump it from deep reservoirs, many of which were too deep to be replenished with rainwater.

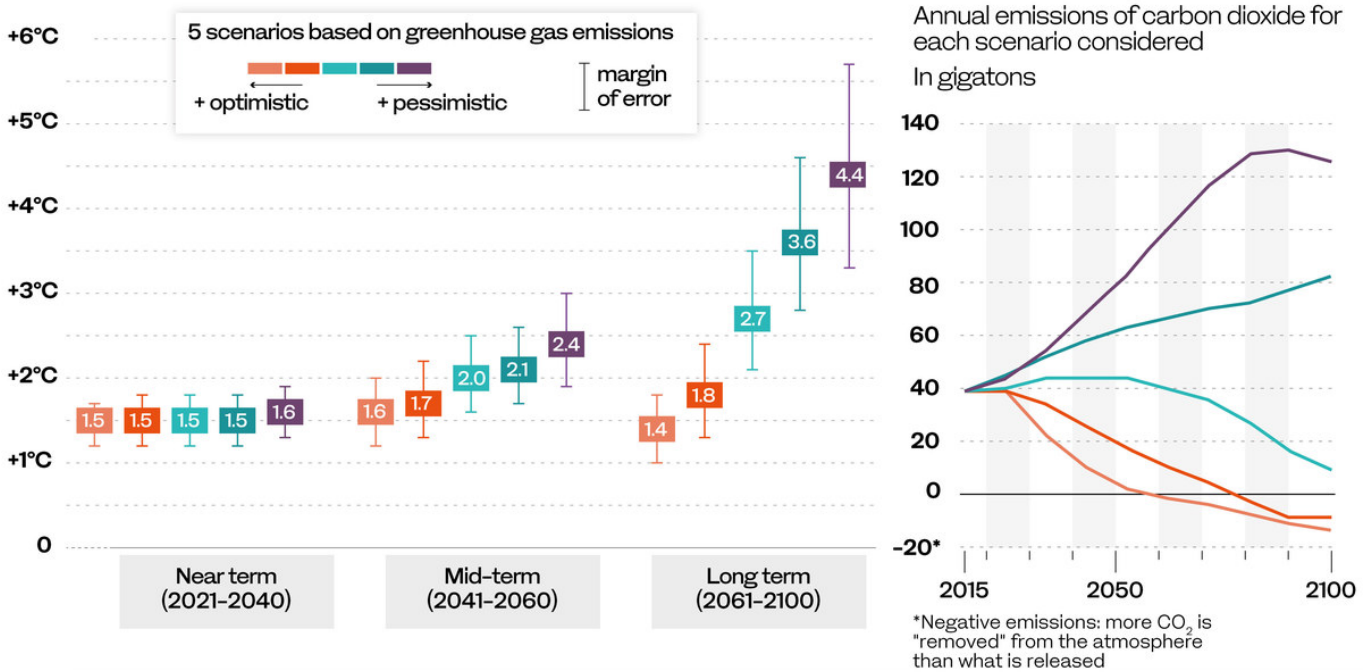
“Regions that have groundwater access – they use it. They should be balancing their surface water use with groundwater, but in fact they pull water out of the ground like it’s free money – literally. But this is the norm,” Famiglietti said.

He noted that a huge amount of groundwater was used for agriculture but pointed out that this should not be condemned. “We need to eat food.”

The only solution to the problem of managing the fast-dwindling supply of groundwater reserves with the need for food and economic growth, he added, was through international cooperation.

GLOBAL WARMING SCENARIOS

Increase in global temperatures, in °C compared to pre-industrial levels (1850–1900)



Source: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)

ARAB NEWS

In Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey, this is absolutely critical because of their significant reliance on groundwater as a result of the short supply of surface water.

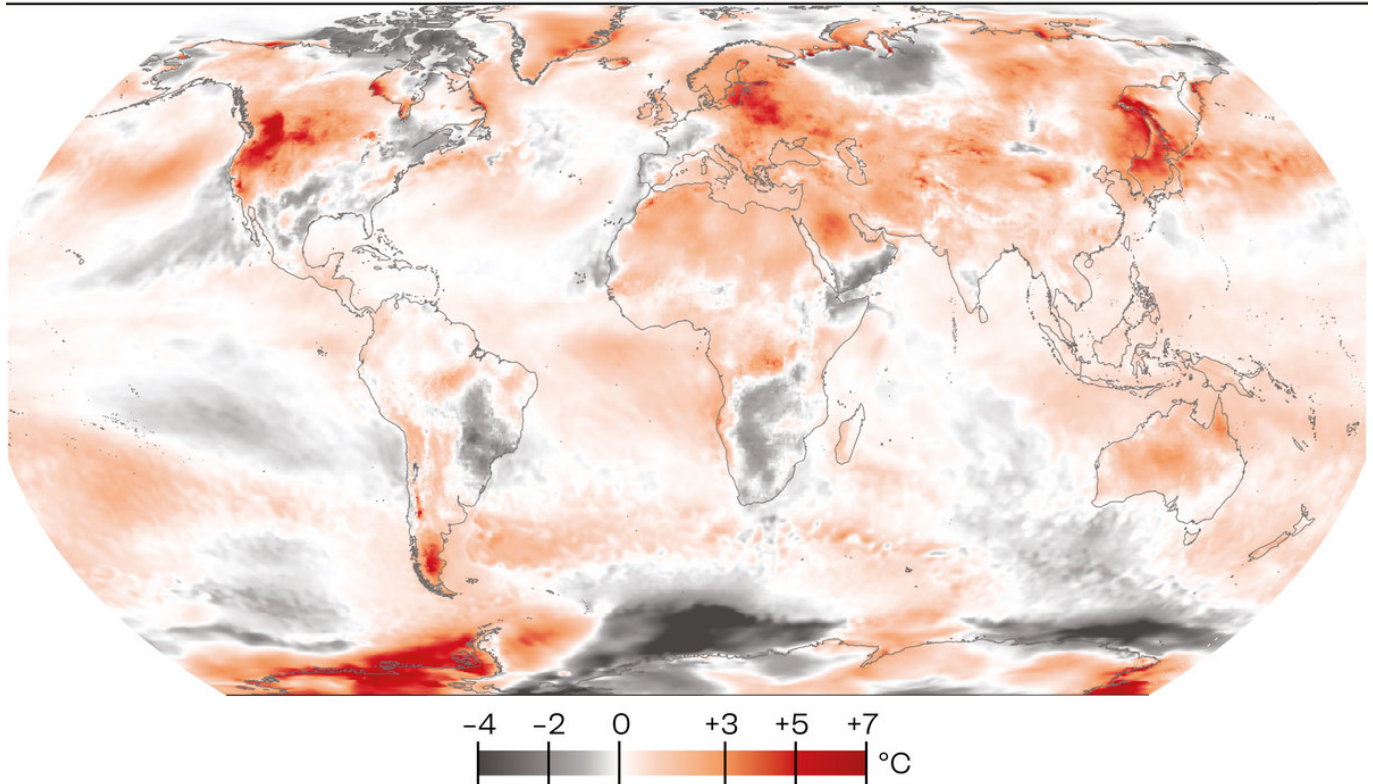
“These aquifers that are running out of water are so big now that they cross over political boundaries – whether they are international or intranational,” Famiglietti said, adding that the issue presented a political challenge as well as an opportunity for progressive cooperation.

“Imagine pulling together a group of Lebanon, Israel, Egypt, and Syria to cooperate – it’s really, really hard. But that is the only way forward. We have to switch what has been a vehicle, a trigger for conflict – water – for something that becomes a vehicle for collaboration and cooperation. Monday’s report makes that crystal clear,” he said.

The political pitfalls of failing to reform water management have recently become abundantly clear in Iran.

WORLD'S THIRD WARMEST JULY

Temperature difference in July compared to the July average from 1981 to 2010



Source: Copernicus C3S/ECMWF

ARAB NEWS

The country's southwestern Khuzestan province was recently convulsed by weeks of violent protests spurred by a lack of clean drinking water. Human rights groups have verified that at least nine people were killed by security forces during the demonstrations.

A police officer was also killed, and the violence prompted a rare admission of guilt by then-President Hassan Rouhani.

People were incensed by the authorities' mismanagement of their water, which pushed the province, the water-wealthiest in Iran in terms of natural resources, into what has now become known as a state of "water bankruptcy."

Those protests that started because of water shortages in Khuzestan province quickly turned into anti-regime chants in Tehran – crystallizing the destabilizing potential of water mismanagement.



An Iraqi man walks past a canoe sitting on dry, cracked earth in the Chibayish marshes near the southern Iraqi city of Nasiriyah. Marsh areas in southern Iraq have been affected since Daesh started closing the gates of a dam on the Euphrates River in the central city of Ramadi, which is under the group's control. (AFP/File Photo)

Ilan Berman, senior vice president of the American Foreign Policy Council, said: "In Iran in particular, the water crisis is a political one, because it is intimately tied to, and exacerbated by, longstanding regime neglect and mismanagement. That's a situation that's unlikely to change in the near future, unfortunately."

Despite repeated warnings from the UN about climate catastrophe, as well as from Iranians who took to the streets in July, Berman said, Tehran did not appear to have taken on board the existential threat posed by water mismanagement.

"In fact, Iran seems to be headed in the opposite direction, because we're now seeing a consolidation of the hardline clerical status quo around new President Ebrahim Raisi.

"All that makes Iran unlikely to pivot toward regional cooperation of the sort that the UN report envisions, or to invest in technologies, like desalination, that have helped other regional states, such as Saudi Arabia, turn the corner on their hydrological issues."

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Humans responsible for 'irreversible' climate change, UN warns
Saudi Arabia reiterates its commitment to fight climate change