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Rethinking Narratives On Environmental Migration

The Case of Iraqi Marshes

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Abstract

The growing discourse on environmental migration is bringing attention to the issue of human mobility related to climate change. As a multicausal process, the theorization on climate migration should grasp from the current academic debate on the socioecological crisis in the Anthropocene era. The intersection of these two fields is essential to innovate the discussion on concepts such as adaptation and refuge while reshaping the field of human migration as we know it.

In line with the interdisciplinary approach of Environmental Humanities, this work relies on the insights from critical studies that problematize contemporary narratives on migration and climate change. Drawing upon the current anthropological claim for a situated storytelling on socioecological crisis, this research investigates the context of the Iraqi Marshlands and their dwellers in the 1990s. The drainage of the marshes serves as a case study to analyze imaginaries on human-nature relationship, environmental degradation, and related human movement. The narrative level constitutes the core of this inquiry to understand how the international community perceived the situation during the 1990s, and whether their perspective prioritized an anthropocentric or eco-centric point of view. Building on the work of Anna Tsing and Elisabeth Povinelli, the discourse unfolds on the concepts of ancestral catastrophe and ecological simplification, helpful to make emerge power relations which characterizes the marshland case. On the other hand, criticisms on climate migration discourse serve as a tool to discuss human movements and adaptation strategies within the marsh dwellers community. In this study, we motivate the need to construct new narratives to deepen our understanding of human mobility and its relationship to environmental crisis.

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Introduction

The well-established scientific consensus regarding the increase in global temperatures and its anthropogenic origin is increasingly stimulating several areas of academic and public debate. The year 2023 has been confirmed as the “warmest calendar year in global temperature data records going back to 1850”¹, with a global average temperature increase that nearly reached the limit set by the Paris Agreement in 2015. On the other hand, recent events have shown that data and measurements alone are not sufficient to disclose processes of recognition (Ghosh, 2017), nor to activate collective and political action. Several processes do indeed intervene between scientific data and their reception. As observed in cases like climate change and COVID-19, pure scientific knowledge may prove to be ineffective or even trigger mechanisms of rejection, such as disavowal and denialism (Weintrobe, 2021). The recognition of this shaded zone has led academia to turn its attention to the humanities in search of tools to develop effective and engaging storytelling on climate change. Nonetheless, the necessity of problematizing scientific knowledge involves academia beyond the scope of divulgation and engagement. This is evident in the debate surrounding the Anthropocene, which, after being scientifically defined as a geological era, has sparked a significant discussion about its epistemological and ethical significance. In other words, social theory poses questions such as: What do we make of this data? What meaning does it produce? What does it tell us about power relations? How does it influence our understanding of climate change?

In the specific case of the Anthropocene, the term has generated a wide range of counternarratives expressed in terms such as Capitalocene (Moore, 2017), Chthulucene (Haraway, 2015), and Wasteocene (Armiero, 2021). Their first criticism of the term lies in the absolutism of ‘we’ intended as the human species, which denies any distinction in terms of responsibility and inequalities, presenting a universal *façade*, behind which unfolds a various range of differences that determines

¹ See Global Climate Insight provided by Copernicus: <https://climate.copernicus.eu/copernicus-2023-hottest-year-record>

access to the human as it counts (Braidotti & Hlavajova, 2018). The second critique addresses the aspect of CO2 emissions as the central and defining element of the Anthropocene, which, despite its scientific relevance, obscures the complexity of the socioecological crisis and the ways it unfolds among human communities and ecosystems. Conversely, the counternarratives of the Anthropocene claim the need for situated, contextualized and specific knowledge, where concepts are embodied in specific historical and geographical roots.

One of the subcategories of this debate involves the junction of human mobility and how it is reshaped under the biopolitical lens, in the era of climate change. The freedom, rights, necessity, or the impossibility of movement reveal themselves as gatekeepers of power relations and traces of the system of values which regulate them. In particular, the matter of mobility justice in the context of climate change has triggered a fervent debate in recent years around the need to add complexity to the climate and mobility nexus in opposition to climate reductionism (Hulme, 2011) and apocalyptic scenarios (Baldwin & Bettini, 2017).

It is on this background that my research unfolds, prompted by an initial insight that I gained in a place where mobility has a direct impact on the people who cross it. During my traineeship near the asylum seekers' camp in Corinth, I had the chance to speak to an Iraqi man who told me about the environmental degradation of his country and the issues in managing transnational waters, particularly with Turkey. His passion and awareness have spurred my interest in the matter, and soon, I found myself delving into research on the environmental context in Iraq. Within a short time, this led me to the specific issue of the marshes, which captured my attention as an exemplary case of environmental degradation, community adaptation, and human forced migration. Nevertheless, in light of the premises outlined above, I had to face a significant question of positioning: How was it possible for me to speak about a context so remote in time and space, that I had never personally encountered? How was it possible to speak for someone else without falling into the trap of universalism and presumed objectivity? It was not. For this reason, the first and most important premise to clarify is that this work is not intended as ethnography. For the description

of the context, I relied on secondary sources, in the attempt to acquire a perspective as close and specific as possible. However, this work can never achieve the accuracy of fieldwork in describing the context of the actors and their interactions. Instead, what I aim to do is to focus on what this story could say about me and the methods of analysis that pertain to my background. In my home region, in north Italy migration is primarily understood either as an event belonging to our ancestors (in the form of out-going migration) or as a phenomenon affecting countries in the Afro-Mediterranean area, relative to recent decades (in the form of incoming migration). The context I am speaking from can be defined as belonging to the area known as the "Global North." More precisely, concerning the migration realm, my background has been shaped within a specific time and space defined by the institutions and concepts of the European region, which think of itself as a receiving actor. Current debates in European migration research face challenges of representation concerning issues such as their 'Northern-ness' and the tendency to reproduce the categorizations (such as migrant/citizen) originating from political language (Amelina, 2022).

After clearing the field from any attempt at imitating an ethnographic work, it is essential to specify the framework where this research can be situated. One of the objectives of this work is to propose an analytical exercise within the interdisciplinary framework of environmental humanities, working on the dialogue between current and past analytical tools. A driving principle of this research is the recognition of environmental migration as a crucial and dynamic field that embodies the potential to serve as a nexus. As such, it facilitates a critical examination of two interconnected areas: migration studies and environmental discourse. Furthermore, it offers the chance to unfold their respective risks to be too anthropocentric and too naturalized. Traditionally, migration studies have focused primarily on social, economic, and political factors driving human movement, not only overlooking the environmental dimensions but sticking to an anthropocentric view. One risk, among others, is to reduce environmental migration within a linear cause-effect scheme depicting climate migrants as those escaping natural disasters like earthquakes, floods, and droughts.

Combining these two areas within a shared conceptual framework may help to overcome oversimplistic narratives and consider the multiple interconnections present in migration and environmental phenomena. One of the bonds that exemplify the need to cross those domains lies in narratives that, diverging from empirical data, prompt the proliferation of apocalyptic scenarios regarding environmental refugees and mass climate migration. As explained further, this tendency unveils a double problem. On one side, it stands as a representation of the lack of engaging storytelling around climate change, while on the other, it stands as a confirmation of the northern and racial representation of migration as an invasion. Rather than large-scale and cross-border migrations, environmental-related movements predominantly involve internal displacement within countries or regions. On this premise, the field of environmental migration needs a variety of studies and examples to navigate the discourse toward nuanced understanding.

Therefore, one of the goals of this research is to examine a migration case that occurred in the 1990s when the debate on this topic was less intense than nowadays. On the one hand, I investigated how the local marshland community adapted and which role migration played. Additionally, I explored how the migration phenomenon was perceived and understood within the narrative frameworks of that era. My analysis lies on the assumption that Mesopotamian marshes and their local community, rather than being victims of a sudden catastrophe (the drainage plan of Saddam Hussein), have been forced to face several versions of domesticating infrastructures and diverse manifestations of the slow impacts of Anthropocene. This assumption brings me to explain the second framework this work draws upon, hence the theoretical framework of Environmental Anthropology, particularly in the contributions of Anna Tsing and Elizabeth Povinelli. Anna Tsing's work has been influential due to its emphasis on understanding the dynamics and structures specific to the Anthropocene era. The concept of the patchy Anthropocene (Tsing et al., 2019) is particularly significant for my research as it challenges the prevailing notion of the Anthropocene as an all-encompassing phenomenon and highlights the fragmented and localized nature of its dynamics while establishing connections between common paradigms and infrastructures.

Facing phenomena like climate change, rising global temperatures, and greenhouse gas emissions can be challenging to grasp at the local level. However, their consequences often disproportionately affect local communities while exacerbating existing vulnerabilities. The concept of the patchy Anthropocene offers a valid alternative that reconciles different scales—global and local—by providing a lens that organizes these complexities. This approach retains historical roots and addresses issues of colonialism, invasion, and domestication practices, both historically and politically.

On this background, I bring together two different scales: the global dimension of climate change processes and the localized context. Additionally, I sought to highlight some of the key trends associated with the current environmental crisis, such as overpopulation and organization within the Iraqi context. Therefore, throughout my research, I consistently referred to reports reflecting the current environmental situation in Iraq and connected them with the specific case analyzed, which unfolded within the 1990s.

This work is structured into three parts. The first chapter focuses on gathering the theoretical framework that has inspired and guided the research. It delves primarily into two main themes: narratives of environmental migration and the contextualization of the Anthropocene within a colonial framework. Particular attention is given to concepts such as ancestral and future catastrophe, slow violence, and other theories that problematize the impacts of climate change beyond the perspective of sudden disasters.

The second chapter aims to broaden the scope to the environmental situation in the region and the migratory situation in Iraq. First, I provided a background on wetlands, focusing on their relations with species and their role in ecosystems. As a second step, I focused on the functioning of Iraqi marshes and their river basin. Finally, I provided an overview of Iraqi human migration, highlighting the main drivers and trends.

In the final chapter, the focus shifts to the issue of the Iraqi marshes, primarily examining the context of the 1990s on three levels. Firstly, it explains the circumstances leading to the central government's drainage plan. Then, attention

turns to describing the community of marsh dwellers. Finally, the main narrative modes of the events are examined through the contemporary actors of that time.

Theoretical frameworks

Introduction

The attempt to integrate various disciplinary fields is what characterizes the positioning of Environmental Humanities and implies the management and awareness of various analytical tools and frameworks. This initial chapter provides an overview of the concepts that have inspired my research while moving on a double level. First, I will present the main issues relevant to the critical debate on environmental migration, referring to recent studies while also attempting to trace back the origins of concepts relevant to current discourse. I explore the controversial nature of the term 'refugee' and consider the diverse terminology, specifically 'environmental' or 'climate-induced' migrant/refugee. Communication on human mobility, which is currently gaining increasing attention within academic and institutional debates, is an open field that still provides the opportunity to identify theoretical frameworks to describe and activate responses.

Second, I will focus more specifically on the anthropological debate within Environmental Humanities. In particular, exploring the concept of 'catastrophe' in relation to the impacts of the Anthropocene will be particularly useful for the work that follows in the other two chapters. In approaching this work, one of the most crucial themes for me revolves around contemplating the distinction between future and ancestral catastrophes and their respective positioning toward colonialism. In other words, the challenge of imagining scenarios beyond apocalyptic and catastrophic events does not pertain to a mere linguistic matter but holds power to either prolong or break down non-operational paradigms and racial legacies.

The concepts I will discuss in the upcoming paragraphs are not intended to be directly applied to the specific case, and vice versa. In my view, the context of the Iraqi marshes serves as a living example of the new paradigms related to the Anthropocene. Instead, in this initial phase, I bring together the concepts and critical perspectives that have inspired my research and have, in some way, raised a question related to it. One of the initial goals of this work is to blend and intermingle one discipline with another. My intention is to experiment with concepts from different fields, showcasing the parallels and congruences I have found without forcing their application.

1.1 Critical issues in the environmental migration debate

1.1.1 Environment, migration, and climate change

‘Environmental migrant’ is widely conceived in academia as one of the most controversial categories (Armiero, 2021; Ionesco et al., 2016)). Conventionally born in the 1970s within a report of the UN Environment Program (Bettini, 2017), the term entered academia in the 1990s when the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) recognized human migration as one of the significant future impacts of climate change (IPCC & WMO, 1992). Specifically, migration was discussed in the context of populations most exposed to natural hazards, arid zones, and suburban areas. The novelty of the term lies in arguing that modifications related to climate change could trigger substantial human movements, impacting communities and social stability over the years. Additionally, the IPCC's perspective from 1990 stressed the potential for large-scale migrations from the most vulnerable areas to environmental challenges, which laid the foundation for the current debate.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the interest in environmental migration and displacement (EMD) emerged as an interest in academia related to famines and natural disasters in Africa and Asia. According to McLeman, the subsequent emphasis on climate change within the UNFCCC process and IPCC reports encouraged a more systematic

examination of EMD by scholars (McLeman and Gemenne 2020). The British government and the European Union contributed to the accelerated expansion of EMD research in the early 2000s through substantial funding for extensive, multi-year research initiatives. One of the most prominent studies of this time is Normann Myer's prediction of 200 million climate migrants by 2050 (Myers, 2002). It highlights a similarity with the current data provided by the World Bank, which foresees up to 216 million people interested in internal movement driven by climate change (World Bank, 2023).

As a last remark in rooting the mobility and environmental degradation nexus, it is essential to note that the context in which it was developed was not neutral. Raised within the background of Western environmentalism and policy of the 1970s, the link between ecological conditions and mobility is deeply entangled in northern discourses. “It is not a secret that environmental discourses beginning in the late 1960s –of which the UN Conference on the Human Environment and the Brundtland Report were key landmarks– problematized and pathologized population in the global South” (Bettini, 2017, p. 196). Bettini blames a “fixation over the danger” and the neo-Malthusian tendency that has characterized the first phase of conceptualization, which framed environmental migration as a ‘problem to be solved’, opening ethical questions around racialized postures on environmental migration understanding, as I further analyze in following paragraphs.

Nowadays, the discussion often starts from the controversial definition provided by IOM in 2007, with the intent to serve as a tool in the absence of legal frameworks for this category:

Environmental migrants are persons or groups of persons who, predominantly for reasons of sudden or progressive change in the environment that adversely affects their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their habitual homes, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad.

(IOM, 2007, p. 1)

IOM, from its side, justifies the width of this definition by pointing at the complexity and diversity of environmental migration forms, stressing the fact that the definition needs to include the several manifestations of environmental migration (e.g., forced/voluntary movements, temporary/permanent, internal/international, individual/collective). The nature, duration, and scale of environmental migration also depend on whether it occurs in the context of slow-onset events and processes (such as sea-level rise, increasing temperatures, land degradation, etc.) or sudden-onset events and processes (such as floods, cyclones, storms, etc.) exacerbated by the adverse effects of climate change and environmental degradation. Additionally, this definition takes into account the interaction between environmental migration and other socio-economic, cultural, and political factors influencing the decision or necessity to move. Nonetheless, aside from its ambivalent connotations, the term ‘environmental migrant’ also raises doubts within the academic and non-governmental arenas due to its tendency to reduce the multidimensional nature of migration to a single cause (Ionesco et al., 2016; McLeman et al., 2015)). Indeed, by enlightening one particular cause of movement, the term could lead to an oversimplification and a loss of understanding of the multiple and interconnected factors at play in the human migration process. On the contrary, such a complex and multicausal process as environmental migration is hard to define as a negative or positive outcome: many studies tried to assess whether environmental-related migration could represent a source of empowerment for households and communities (Brandano et al., 2023), and analyze the impacts that it has on sending and receiving communities (Gemenne & Blocher, 2017) amplify existing vulnerabilities, or enable individuals to build resilience (Brown, 2008).

According to IOM, the term "climate migration" emerged as a more specific subcategory within the broader context of environmental migration (IOM, 2019). It was coined in response to the increasing recognition of climate change as a significant driver influencing migration patterns. Although not defined by a single international legal framework, the term has gained prominence in discussions concerning the impact of climate change on displacement. The need to introduce the category of “climate migration” could represent an indicator of a wider recognition of the likelihood of

increased migration due to extreme weather-related events and changes in precipitation and temperature patterns predicted for the 21st century.

A recent report by IOM focused on the interconnection between migration, climate change, and the environment, sheds light on a paradigm shift in the discourse and in the stronger attempt to keep together the multicausal relationship between climate change, the environment, and migration, as well as related economic and social elements (Brandano et al., 2023)). While examining the context of the Italian Apennines, the study operationalizes a perspective on migration not only as an outcome but also as a multiplier of adaptive capacities within a contextualized research framework. The predisposition of the region to hydrogeological instability, landslides, and floods, coupled with the socio-economic vulnerabilities of its inhabitants, accentuates the challenges posed by climate change.

Rooted in the 1970s, the nexus between the environment and migration gained further attention in the discourse of the 1990s and remains central in the current debate in defining cases like above one. This debate involves legal and ethical questions about the possibility of movement, reclaiming a place, and the ability to adapt and take action. Defining these interactions is an open field in mobility studies, bringing up new challenges about the patterns used so far, such as the use of the vulnerability category (Butler, 2016). McLeman points out that the term vulnerability, as used today in the context of climate change research, originates from ecopolitical approaches to the study of natural hazards (McLeman, Faist, and Schade 2015). As described by IOM, vulnerability is “the limited capacity to avoid, resist, cope with, or recover from harm,” which depends on individual, household, and community relations as well as on structural elements (IOM, 2019, p. 229). Despite vulnerability being a crucial element around which to structure the discourse on environmental migration, it is essential not to fall into the association of vulnerability equating to victimization. A community, especially if characterized by subsistence economies or lifestyles based on agriculture and dependent on an isolated or restricted region, may be more vulnerable to environmental degradation or climate changes affecting its context. However, firstly, one could discuss what constitutes this vulnerability and what it is derived from. One

might argue, for instance, that even a thriving community relying solely on tourism, for example, can be considered extremely vulnerable to extreme events. In any case, vulnerability runs the risk of becoming victimized, especially as it is often associated with contexts of poverty, only to perpetuate a risk of naturalizing the causes, as is often the case in relation to natural disasters. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize that vulnerability as exposure and potential loss tell us little, if not considered, together with elements of climate injustice and inequality.

1. 1. 2 The 'refugee' in environmental-related movements

The concept of a refugee has been long criticized on the basis of its dual connection with the national institution -and the inherently privileged status reserved for citizens within national borders- and its consequential process of othering and victimization. According to Agamben, the figure of the refugee becomes the paradigmatic example of those excluded from legal rights and suspended in a state of permanent exception (Agamben, 1998). Agamben sees the refugee as a symbol of the complex problems that arise from the denial of rights and the creation of a marginalized and excluded category in a state of limbo. On one side, the refugee is a subject of law that the State has spontaneously agreed to protect over the failure of another State in guaranteeing the security of its citizens. As a consequence, matters of recognition and categorization emerge as dynamics of power performing essential roles in people's social and juridical positions (Long, 2013; Sredanovic, 2019). Playing in national state-bounded territory, recognition processes contribute profoundly to identity formation. When absent, they can lead to structural forms of exclusion and restrict access to the 'opportunity structure' (Suárez-Orozco, 2004).

Nonetheless, as the idea of refugee was ratified in the Geneva Convention of 1951, it has to be intended as a historically determined concept that carries with it a series of consequences and meanings, which privileges political and ideological values over economic and ecological ones (Gallien, 2018). Based on this assumption, some scholars have discussed the epistemology of refugees as rooted in colonial histories and perpetuating forms of technocracy and management dominated by Western institutions (Caminero-Santangelo Byron 2019; Nixon 2011; Abuya, Krause, and Mayblin 2021).

The Convention faced criticism from various quarters for its Eurocentric bias and for not providing a truly global framework for asylum. The discontent of decolonized states led to the adoption of regional conventions, such as the Organization of African Unity (OAU) Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa in 1969, the Bangkok Principles on Status and Treatment of Refugees in 1966 for Asian and North African states, and the Cartagena Declaration in 1984 for Central American states, Mexico, and Panama (Abuya et al., 2021).

The depiction of refugees as victims is also criticized as restricting their agency and self-determination, positioning them as subaltern subjects due to their perceived inability to govern themselves and participate in democratic citizenship (De Genova, 2015). Consequently, countries of arrival are turned into sanctuaries, embodying a privileged position and assuming the right to distribute their privileges. This mechanism enables what De Genova called the “obscene of inclusion,” referring to a form of inclusion that perpetuates power dynamics of discrimination and oppression.

The spectacles of migrant ‘illegality’, practically and materially enacted through various forms of border and immigration law enforcement, rely significantly upon a constellation of images and discursive formations, which may be taken to supply the scene of ‘exclusion’. And yet, the more that the Border Spectacle generates anti-immigrant controversy, the more that the veritable inclusion of those incessantly targeted for exclusion proceeds apace. [...] What is at stake, then, is a larger sociopolitical (and legal) process of inclusion through exclusion, labour importation (whether overt or covert) premised upon protracted deportability.

(De Genova, 2013, p. 1184)

When it comes to refugees, "obscene inclusion" can be understood as the protection offered by the state becoming a privilege extended to people who are not citizens, which creates a power dynamic where those excluded must either adapt or be controlled (Bettini, 2019).

The concept of refuge was extended to the realm of environmental mobility, starting from the introduction of the term 'environmental refugee' in 1985 by Essam El-Hinnawi, officially recognized within the UNEP context. While early research, largely conducted

by entities nonspecialized in the migratory field, popularized the term, scholars and legal experts have been cautious, pointing out the difficulty in defining 'environmental refugees' within the existing international refugee framework established in 1951 (McLeman and Gemenne 2020). Those advocating for the use of the term "climate refugee" argue that it emphasizes agency and the assertion of a claim for protection in cases where the state fails to ensure adequate environmental conditions (Kent & Behrman, 2018). Moreover, other voices claim that resistance to expanding the refugee definition to environmental causes is related to the fear that such recognition would imply providing the same protections as political refugees, which is a precedent no nation has been willing to set (Brown, 2008).

However, it is true that when it comes to environmental degradation and climate change, the concept of refuge becomes even more problematic. As a first matter, the political premise of persecution, founded in the Geneva Convention, turns out to be insufficient to encompass the circumstances of individuals forced to move due to environmental degradation, bringing the discussion to questions like: "Can nature be considered guilty?" and shedding light on many existing challenges regarding the ability to prove vulnerability, which already raises several questions within the current asylum system about the performativity of stories and testimonies. In other words, if in the current framework, where refuge is mainly limited to the principle of vulnerability, many contradictions emerge regarding the search and availability of evidence to demonstrate the most vulnerable condition possible, how can this mechanism be translated into a context that includes global and local processes, anthropogenic impacts, and natural disasters? Furthermore, the consequences of the climate crisis inherently transcend political borders, thereby challenging one of the foundations upon which the asylum system is built, not to mention the ethical issues that undermine the concept, such as dynamics of othering, as well as biopolitical concerns where the management of life and death expands to an environmental dimension, becoming an expression of areas and communities considered overwhelmed by the environmental catastrophe (Giuliani, 2020)). In De Genova's terms, this represents the "border spectacle" that, by exposing human migrants as the victims, erases the kind of agency that might count as self-determination and puts these subjectivities in a subaltern position due to their

incompetence for self-government and democratic citizenship (De Genova, 2015). In addition, another danger of the victimizing process enforced upon human migrants and refugees is the depoliticization of causes that are usually carried with it. De Genova describes the process of “displacing ‘illegality’ from its point of production- the processes of lawmaking to the so-called ‘scene of the crime’ (De Genova, 2015, p. 109). Particularly, in the case of climate-induced migration, “the very idea of a climate change ‘refugee’ risks turning those who move into victims of natural disaster [...] downplaying the significance of transnational processes and relationships (for example, those involving the historical inequities of CO2 emissions)”(Caminero-Santangelo Byron, 2019, p. 265). This process can be appreciated within the terminology used in the migration field: media and politics often describe incoming migration in terms of liquid metaphors (flows, floods, inundations, etc.), which overlook the journey risk, thereby turning it into a process of start and stop rather than fluid. On the other side, by emphasizing the exchanging nature of the sea, this terminology feeds a narrative of normalization through the image of migrants as ‘bodies of the sea’ (Cox et al., 2020). Concerns are present in both the academic world and the organizations themselves. In 2008, the IOM's posture on using the term "refugee" highlighted the inaccuracy of its application under international law. As the term traditionally pertains to those fleeing persecution, IOM noted that such a definition would be insufficient to encompass the majority of climate-displaced individuals, who typically move within their own borders, categorizing them as "internally displaced persons" (IDPs). Current IOM positioning is even more precise and refers to a general agreement, supported by organizations like IOM and UNHCR, that using terms like "climate refugee" or "environmental refugee" should be avoided as labels do not have a legal basis in international refugee law and do not catch some of the nuanced of environmental related movements, which for instance, are not necessarily forced².

While the discussion mainly focuses on terminology, IOM stresses the need to prioritize the concept of "vulnerability" in addressing environmental migration, recognizing that

² See IOM Environmental Migration Portal: <https://environmentalmigration.iom.int/environmental-migration>

the most at-risk individuals may be those who cannot or choose not to move, often referred to as trapped populations (IOM, 2019).

1. 1. 3 Migration as adaptation

The notion of migration as an adaptation strategy has often been read as a valuable option to escape from the victimizing and residual logic of understanding climate migrants, providing a way to restore agency. The concept of adaptation, originating from evolutionary biology as a dynamic and long-term phenomenon, extended beyond its biological context and became pertinent in the fields of social and political sciences when, in 1987, Chhetri applied the concept of adaptation specifically in those domains (Chhetri, 1987). By 2010, studies witnessed what is called the “Copernican revolution in migration studies” (Ionesco et al., 2016), which pointed out a substantial element of novelty by raising up a new perspective of migration as an adaptive strategy while enforcing the attention on climate-induced migration. Particularly influencing this shift was the “Foresight Report on Migration and Global Environmental Change” and its massive impact on media and research. While emphasizing the harmful consequences of population growth and climate change on future migration, the report also presents migration as a ‘transformational adaptation’ and an ‘extremely effective way to build long-term resilience’ (The Government Office for Science, 2011).

In a report of 2023, IPCC shifts the terms of the analysis and states:

Increasing adaptive capacities minimizes the negative impacts of climate-related displacement and involuntary migration for migrants and sending and receiving areas (high confidence). This improves the degree of choice under which migration decisions are made, ensuring safe and orderly movements of people within and between countries (high confidence)

(IPCC 2023, p.25)

This translates into a broader range of choices for migrants and encourages safer and voluntary movements. In other words, the document highlights the potential for migration to serve as a dynamic response, enabling individuals to navigate the challenges posed by climate change. Furthermore, recent studies affirm the potential of

migration as an adaptive strategy, providing economic benefits and contributing to the overall resilience of sending and receiving communities in the face of climate change challenges. Recently, IOM studies on climate change, environment, and migration nexus, as an example, shed light on migration as a potential adaptive strategy for both receiving and origin communities, particularly focusing on internal migration, which is generally understudied in academia (Brandano et al., 2023). Remittances, highlighted as reliable capital flows, have a positive effect, increasing essential needs consumption and financing the acquisition of various forms of capital. Moreover, returning migrants play a crucial role in improving the adaptive capacity of origin areas by transmitting knowledge, consolidating social networks, and transferring valuable skills.

Nonetheless, the academic discourse on migration as an adaptation strategy is characterized by a polarized opinion, with scholars presenting contrasting views on its merits and shortcomings. On the one hand, the term has entered the international organization debate, enlightening the adaptive capacities enhanced by migratory movements of communities by providing opportunities for economic growth, knowledge exchange, and exposure to diverse environments. They highlight the potential benefits of migrants contributing to recovery after environmental shocks and increasing resilience. On the other hand, critics express concerns about migration's potential costs and negative impacts on the communities of origin, such as the loss of skilled labor and social disruption. The discussion revolves around whether the advantages, such as remittances and the transfer of skills, outweigh the disadvantages, including brain drain and social fragmentation. Nonetheless, as other voices claim, climate change emerges as a force that reduces communities' adaptive capacities, contributing to increased poverty and food insecurity and, consequently, a trapped population (McLeman and Gemenne 2020). Individuals with higher climate-sensitive livelihoods (such as farmers and agricultural-dependent households) find themselves less capable of adapting, trapped in precarious conditions with limited opportunities for decision-making. The call to enable local environments for sustainable development aligns with the recognition that climate change creates immobility traps, blocking communities from effectively responding to environmental challenges.

This debate underscores the complexity of evaluating migration as an adaptive strategy and emphasizes the need for a nuanced understanding that considers various perspectives and contextual factors. Moreover, despite the potential of this perspective in giving back some agency that the previous approaches had denied, scholars highlight the dangerous aspects of migration-as-adaptation discourse. Some fear that this perspective would feed the apocalyptic narratives on climate change and the defensive mechanisms of national politics (Ionesco et al., 2016). Foremost, some argue that the concept of the adaptive and resilient migrant appears to hide a potential wave of neo-liberalization within environmental policy. This trend aims to select and control well-managed migration, giving preference to economic, internal, and temporary forms while bypassing the promotion of a borderless agenda. In this context, the neoliberal and economized nature of the approach is opposed, as it places emphasis on generating remittance flows to fund the self-adaptation of migrants, portraying them as entrepreneurs of their own destinies. The criticism extends to what is defined as a trend of 'individualizing' climate policy that risks excluding the most vulnerable who may not be capable of becoming resilient; in this sense, the entire approach contributes to the production of governable populations under neoliberal principles, leaving refugees as the residue of those who do not adapt, labeled as unfit and potentially dangerous to the system (Baldwin, 2017; Bettini, 2014). Consequently, the refugee becomes the residue of a lack of adaptability, subject to discrimination and potential exclusion from the benefits of migration and adaptation policies. This concern is well justified, as demonstrated by UK Foresight. With its emphasis on the advantages of well-managed migration, the document insists on the adaptive migrant as a solution for the climate-induced migration crisis. The following paragraph provides a broader discussion of how a narrow or wide definition of environmental migration can lead to threatening scenarios, thereby reinforcing a fear-based reliance on control.

1. 2 Situating Anthropocene: where to place the gaze

1. 2. 1 Apocalyptic narratives and the monsters of Anthropocene

On a mediatic level, critical social theories and migration studies have shown how the imaginary of invasion has long characterized narratives on incoming migration in Europe (De Haas, 2008; Giuliani, 2020), a process that can be read as part of the broader and colonial phase of othering, which some claim is embedded in the Anthropocene era (Armiero, 2021; Giuliani, 2020). Because it is perceived as producing crises for something conventionally thought of as the ‘normal’ social fabric, the multiplication of the various legal statuses of migrants has generated new demands for administration and institutions of migration and border management (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015). Critical studies on migration have argued how the fear of an ‘unruly Other’ dismantling Western society’s pillars of rationality and legibility, double bound with the nature of the modern State (Scott, 2020), lies at the core of policies and social discussions on migration. In the European context, this emerged clearly in relation to the so-called “refugee crisis” of 2015 and the consequent reinforcement of the Fortress Europe strategy. The mediatic attention that migration has raised since 2015 has offered the perfect framework to turn the Mediterranean into a natural border and to build up an imaginary of unruly masses threatening civilized Western society. The return of the excluded, the vulnerable, and the non-adaptive has been read as a symptom of the globalized world (Bettini, 2019) that faces the “broken promises of unilinear social evolutionism” (Eriksen 2016). Based on such an essentialist grasp of identity, the European asylum policy represents a specific case of biopolitical construction, in tension between a securitarian project and a quite unclear frame of detention.

One could hypothesize that the increasing attention on the so-called refugee crisis around 2015 brought to light what Giuliani calls figures of race, meaning those representations of colonial alterities, which are built on standards of monstrosity, naturalization, and vulnerability (Giuliani, 2020). This, combined with the perception of migration as a large-scale movement originating from a stereotyped and simplified view of the less developed part of the world, provides the ideal ground for creating apocalyptic scenarios within the context of Climate Change. Consider as an example the

photography exhibition “Postcards from the Future”³ exhibited at the Museum of London and later at the National Theatre in 2010–11. The whole collection is officially declared to “challenge our daily preconceptions of the world around us” by associating future scenarios and contemporary visual images. One of the most iconic pictures, titled “Buckingham Palace Shanty,” depicts the building engulfed by a vast informal settlement. The short description linked to the picture says: “The climate refugee crisis reaches epidemic proportions. The vast shanty town that stretches across London’s center leaves historic buildings marooned, including Buckingham Palace.”

At first glance, the picture conveys a straightforward message about the overwhelming effects of the environmental crisis. In spite of this, closer inspection makes it clear the picture conveys a much deeper message that is explicated in the description: the crisis is an “epidemic,” and the historic building has been “marooned.” Migrants are presented as an inescapable and widespread invasion resulting from climate change. The juxtaposition with Buckingham Palace further suggests the failure of power over an enormous mass of indistinct people (Baldwin, 2016).

In conclusion, apocalyptic narratives pose at least three problems. Firstly, they bring to light what Baldwin refers to as ‘white affect’, which reveals a “cultural fascination in liberal democracies with climate change futures and impacts”, revealing a racialized aspect specific to the cultural context of climate change (Baldwin, 2016). The second is the victimizing perspective which enacts a double operation of reduction of agency and naturalization of the causes: apocalyptic narratives put impacted people into a state of automatic victimization, portraying them as the non-adaptable and left outside their protective state. Thirdly, a temporal misalignment emerges within apocalyptic narratives, where catastrophe is consistently projected into the future. This temporal framing contributes to a sense of impending doom, creating a narrative where the catastrophic event is continuously postponed (Baldwin, 2016).

As a final observation, it is worth noting who the subjects in these scenarios are and how narratives affect the spaces they move. In this regard, the author Carol Farbotko

³ See the exhibition website <https://www.postcardsfromthefuture.com/>.

provides an interesting point of view on how certain narratives are constructed in different ways depending on subjects and places. Specifically, she criticizes the tendency to label contexts placed in the Global South as inevitably uninhabitable in the context of climate change (Farbotko et al., 2023). Foremost, she underscores how the “assumptions about inevitable uninhabitability” reveal a political stance that values certain regions at the expense of others and implicitly denies self-determinations or alternative narratives (Farbotko et al., 2023). As an example, she compares the cases of Tuvalu Island and the Netherlands, highlighting how the two cases reflect disparities in perceptions and approaches to the issue of sea-level rise-induced uninhabitability. Despite both places facing the same danger, the author notes how in the second case, the issue of uninhabitability is not even touched upon, despite the danger being real and requiring radical adaptations. Conversely, Tuvalu's adaptation efforts have been overshadowed by a dominant narrative of uninhabitability and the need for resettlement. This example reminds us how narratives have a tangible impact on the lives of both human and non-human communities and on the strategies acquired in response to climate change. Faced with the same issue, indeed, a specific narrative can change the way we perceive, understand, and react to a phenomenon. Moreover, it also shows how the issue of mobility unfolds under power relations. As performative regimes, mobility or immobility take on different meanings depending on those to whom they are connected and are understood as "embedded in the governance and control of all forms of mobility and dwelling" (Sheller, 2023).

1. 2. 2 Slow and sudden catastrophes

In her book "The Future as a Catastrophe," Eva Horn (2018) distinguishes between a modern concept of catastrophe, symbolically traced back to the 1755 Lisbon earthquake, which pertains to sudden and tangible events, and the contemporary disaster, which is rather challenging to grasp and imagine, lacking a clear rupture and diversified in its manifestations. The challenge of the imaginary in the Anthropocene era, as Horn argues, lies not in depicting the aftermath of a catastrophic event but in

envisioning possible scenarios of the event itself. In a word, a catastrophe without an event (Horn 2018).

To understand the concepts of slow catastrophe and sudden catastrophe, it is helpful to refer to Rob Nixon's book "Slow Violence," which offers critical insight into the conventional understanding of catastrophe as an immediate and spectacular event (Nixon, 2011). Nixon introduces the notion of slow violence, a form of violence that unfolds gradually over time and lacks the characters of immediacy and spectacle associated with traditional notions of violence. On the contrary, slow violence is characterized by its distribution in time and space, as well as its capacity to cross different scales. Nixon underscores that different forms of violence receive varying media coverage as catastrophic events capture huge media attention, while slow violence is not inherently media-worthy, often presenting complex and unresolved narratives. The progressive nature of slow catastrophes, marked by moments of drama and suspensions, requires a nuanced storytelling that detaches from a linear cause and event resolution chain and engages in a more staying-with-the-trouble mindset, to say it with Haraway. As Tsing and Haraway suggest (Haraway, 2016; Tsing et al., 2019), quite often, the escape route from catastrophe is represented by a "zombie version of modernist hope," hence, a positive outlook on technological power that places full trust in the progress of humankind and ultimately takes "the shape of a hopeful politics of technological transcendence" (Tsing et al., 2019, p. 192). The alternative to a fictitious and one-sided solution lies precisely in the challenge of Anthropology to keep together the different scales in which the conflict of the Anthropocene unfolds, highlighting specificities and at the same time daring more than "the voice of parochial alterity" (Tsing et al., 2019, p. 187). The dual challenge lies in dismantling misleading and hegemonic universal ideas while simultaneously going beyond the mere presentation of the "otherwise."

Conversely, the impacts of slow violence, including slow catastrophes, are not equally distributed. As a second step of his reflection, Nixon indicates how slow violence disproportionately affects the poor, vulnerable communities and nations. This notion aligns with the perspectives of many authors who highlighted the unbalanced way in

which injustices and inequalities persist, protracting colonial dynamics (Chakrabarty, 2008).

Drawing upon the same questions, Anna Tsing introduces the concept of the "patchy Anthropocene" as a tool to problematize the analysis and shed light on the infrastructures and nature of human-environment interactions (Tsing et al., 2019).

The concept of a unified and homogeneous Anthropocene makes it challenging to incorporate anthropological insights about differences and inequalities among humans. In contrast, such insights are key to the conceptualization of the "patchy Anthropocene." Patches show us histories of genocide, displacement, exploitation, and oppression—together with the ecological consequences of these programs.

(Tsing et al., 2019, p. 194)

The concept of 'patches' is thus conceived as an instrument to understand the Anthropocene and to maintain awareness of its heterogeneous and unequal manifestations.

Elizabeth Povinelli's discourse on future and ancestral catastrophe can be related to this current (Povinelli, 2021). Based on the elaboration of biopower, which aims to take into account the more-than-bios sphere, the work of Povinelli illuminates how the ecological challenges faced by marginalized communities are not isolated events but are deeply entangled with a historical path rooted in colonial power structures. The link to colonialism becomes a crucial aspect of Povinelli's framework, emphasizing the persistent impact of historical injustices on contemporary and future environmental narratives, creating a layered and complex narrative of slow and ancestral violence.

Ancestral catastrophes are past and present; they keep arriving out of the ground of colonialism and racism rather than emerging over the horizon of liberal progress. Ancestral catastrophes ground environmental damage in the colonial sphere rather than in the biosphere.

(Povinelli, 2021, p. 3)

Such an observation arises from the inversion of the four axioms of existence. Before delving into Povinelli's operation in detail, let me briefly comment on the central idea emerging from Povinelli's discourse: contrary to what narratives commonly suggest, the

catastrophe is not projected into a distant future and does not manifest itself as a singular event. In order to theorize the catastrophe, we need to be aware of where to put the focus. After tracing the four axioms of existence (the entanglement of existence, the unequal distribution of power, the collapse of the event as essential to political thought, and the legacies of racial and colonial histories), Povinelli highlights the weight of the order they are considered. The four axioms pertain to the key concepts that have emerged from the Western⁴ critical theory of the past decade and represent for Povinelli the shared foundations upon which much of the theory has found consensus. The sequence in which these axioms are conceptualized and discussed is not merely a matter of structure but involves a “different approach to truth, power, and history” (Povinelli, 2021, p. 3). In other words, before claiming the entanglement of existence as a leading feature of contemporary ontology, one should consider the previous stage, namely the legacies of racial and colonial histories. In simpler terms, the matter is whether we focus on the coming catastrophe or the ancestral one (Povinelli, 2021).

The ancestral catastrophe is better understandable as uneven and patchy impacts, multiplied in a series of connected infrastructures, historically and geographically characterized and spread. However, as suggested by Povinelli, these conclusions have no meaning if not taken into the big picture, which involves relations of power and original violence that move across time and geographies. Just as the notion of the Plantationocene, which highlights the colonial aspect of Anthropocene infrastructures but should not be confined solely to colonial areas, Povinelli's reflection on ancestral catastrophe is based on the racial affect but acknowledges the results of its naturalization. The discourse on slow violence and ancestral catastrophe has the merit of illuminating the importance of power relations and the enduring impact of original violence across time and geographies. Yet, in considering the big picture, the question arises whether it is possible to export these concepts, deeply rooted in post-colonial contexts, beyond those specific realities and dynamics. The next paragraph is dedicated

⁴ The term "western" paired with critical theory underscores its Western origin and development, as sustained by Raewyn Connell in “Why is Classical Theory Classical?”. She argues that classical sociology emerged within the Western liberal bourgeoisie during the imperialistic era revealing a critical awareness of the Western cultural and historical influences on critical theory.

to the analysis of this topic, which particularly benefits from the reasoning on Anna Tsing's concept of Plantationocene.

1. 2. 3 Overpopulation, neo-Malthusianism and neo-Darwinism

The concept of overpopulation is very present in the discussion about climate change as the growing population is recognized as a significant factor impacting resource consumption, land use, and urbanization (Eriksen, 2016). The extraction, production, and consumption of these resources contribute to environmental degradation and greenhouse gas emissions. Indirectly, overpopulation can be implicated in processes such as deforestation, land consumption, and the consequent loss of biodiversity.

The ideas of social Darwinism and Malthusianism have played significant roles in understanding both migration and environmental issues in social theory (McLeman & Gemenne, 2020). On one side, social Darwinism suggests that social behaviors evolve through competition for resources, suggesting that societies adapt to environmental conditions through natural selection. Under the social Darwinian point of view, migration embodies an evolutionary response to environmental stimuli, with groups seeking new territories in competition for vital resources. On the other hand, Malthusianism addresses the issue of overpopulation and its negative consequences, such as resource scarcity and conflicts. In this view, migration represents a spontaneous way to balance the dynamic between pressure on resource requests and offers. Among the works that shed light on Darwinist and Malthusian currents, Paul Ehrlich's work stands out, renowned for discussing the idea of an overpopulation crisis (Ehrlich, 1989). Nevertheless, this occurred during a period influenced by the significant impact of the "Limits to Growth" report and a growing awareness of the limited nature of resources, themes that characterized environmental discourse from the 1970s onwards (Meadows et al., 1972). In 1987, the United Nations Commission on Environment and Development published the report "Our Common Future," when population growth was discussed as a reason for an increased demand for natural resources and a consequent challenge in production (United Nations, 1987). On the other hand, the idea of large-scale environmental displacement and potential refugee crises found later support in works by the World Watch Institute (Jacobson, 1988) and ecologist Norman Myers

(Myers, 2002). They foresaw imminent challenges, such as ozone depletion, rising sea levels, and climate change, contributing to resource-related conflicts and food scarcities. The ongoing debate revolves around the role of environmental events in causing violence, conflict, and subsequent forced displacement, with security researchers viewing environmental problems as potential 'threat multipliers' in politically unstable regions (McLeman & Gemenne, 2020).

The neo-Malthusian and Darwinist perspectives have entered the current debate on migration, and more specifically, it has reemerged prominently with the rise of the discourse on environmental migration. As a cross-cutting theme involving resource availability and human movements, those theories represent a critical point in the debate, dividing studies between a shared acceptance of the issue of overpopulation as a hot topic in climate change and those highlighting potential criticisms and racial connotations when such interpretations are applied within the migratory context. In this perspective, in the following chapters, I will delve into Iraqi migration, focusing on the Marsh Arabs case. While analyzing the debate within international organizations in the 1990s, I will trace whether the neo-Malthusian current has influenced the discourse and whether the ideas consolidated during the decades of the 1980s and 1990s regarding mass migration have shaped the perception of events in Iraq.

1. 2. 4 Colonial roots of Anthropocene (Plantation and Geontopower)

Within the critical debate on the Anthropocene shared in social theory, biopower has been inactivated to critically examine the Anthropocene and how power relations are embedded in it (Agamben, 1998; Mbembe, 2003). Besides recognizing the theoretical and geological value of the term, scholars claim to denounce the controversial features such as extractivism, heteronormativity, and capitalism that lays behind the neutral and universal *facade* of the Anthropocene (Hubbell & Ryan, 2021)). The argument of race and colonial responsibility has gained attention as a valuable tool for problematizing responsibilities and keeping the terms of investigation within a political perspective (Povinelli, 2021). Authors like Tsing and Povinelli have particularly explored power dynamics entangled with space and colonialism, examining the infrastructures that manifest power in territories, the environment, and social structures (Povinelli, 2002;

Tsing et al., 2019). Through her critical examination of biopower, Elizabeth Povinelli explores the consequences of colonialism on indigenous people, highlighting the power dynamics that emerge as subtle nuances of colonial domination woven into the fabric of the Anthropocene era. Even beyond the timeframe of colonialism, some infrastructures stand as witnesses of colonial practices that endure in both the societal and environmental landscapes and manifest as the deprivation of natural and territorial resources, serving as one of the deep roots of the Anthropocene. What in her early work “Economies of abandonment” (Povinelli, 2011) is portrayed as the action of invaders, in the following works, is more widely conceptualized as Geontopower, which Povinelli proposes as a broader lens to understand the epistemology and the governance of contemporary. Nonetheless, by saying so, one should not intend that the perpetuation of unequal hierarchies associated with race, gender, and social class have to be limited to colonial borders. What Geontopower means to bring up is one way to understand and organize the world, which has served Western society and has been exported into colonies. In this sense, it could be helpful to juxtapose and dialogue with the works of Povinelli and Tsing at the same time in order to better understand the elastic contingencies of Geontopower and its capacities to stretch in time and spaces.

Consider the case of Plantationocene, proposed as an alternative term to Anthropocene, which is able to keep together more specific and historically grounded qualities of the current socioecological crisis (D. Haraway, 2015; Tsing, 2015). Plantationocene informs the evolution of a domination dispositive of human and nonhuman resources characterized by scalability and interchangeability: a model that eventually exceeded the mere field of agriculture and shaped a whole of complex relations across social and ecological spheres. Specifically, its key features include the global circulation of people and plants, the simplification of plantation landscapes, and the role of long-distance capital investments in such processes of homogenization and control (Haraway et al., 2015).

Plantations create monocrops to make it possible for coerced and alienated labor—and more recently, machines - to tend crops without the care that farming otherwise requires. Contemporary plantations thus continue to carry histories of slavery and

the displacement of indigenous communities. This “modular” simplification has spread around the world together with human coercion as plantation labor; this regimentation of human and nonhuman life must be thought together. Plantations attempt to reduce the number of living things in an area to just one kind [...] Such simplifications have social and ecological effects beyond alienation: diseases are nurtured and spread around the world. These latter are our “feral proliferations.”

(Tsing et al., 2019, p. 189)

In a nutshell, plantations are large-scale agricultural operations characterized by cultivating a single crop, often for export. Specialization and monoculture represent, therefore, two of the basic features of Plantations, which allow for an increase in efficiency and profits and reach large scales of production increased through high levels of mechanization and sectionalization of the work organization. As a paradigm of social organization, plantations exceeded the field, having a significant impact on the social structure of the regions in which they were located. In many cases, they led to the displacement of indigenous communities and the disruption of traditional ways of life, taking under control most parts of life forms through the implantation of land-capital-labor nexus (Li & Semedi, 2021). But how to apply the same paradigm that characterized colonial events to the analysis of the current situation? While describing "invasion" as one of the four detonators (Capital, Empire, Invasion, Acceleration) of the Anthropocene,⁵ Anna Tsing provides an answer that involves the widening of the understanding of Plantationocene:

And we don't say that just happened 500 years ago, because it is still happening in the present. Not only because indigenous people are still being displaced, like for example, in Australia, but also because of the continuing ways that colonialism as a set of institutions, world-making practices, and ideas continues to rule.

⁵ Detonators are historical conjunctures, infrastructures that rise, marking transitions that matter. As such, invasion is historically interpreted as the invasion by Europeans of the New World, which resulted in murders and displacements, and the desecration of native ecosystems and native peoples as part of the same process. Like plantations, the concept became a paradigm of colonization, exceeding its historical and context specificity.

(Tsing & Bazzul, 2022, p. 317)

Both plantations as an organizing paradigm and invasion as one of its detonators can thus be traced and grounded in specific contexts but not restricted to one in particular. They have exceeded time and space and combined in different contexts and eras. Despite a quite controversial meaning, scholars of *Feral Atlas* argue that invasion is a good term for rendering the violent history of conquests and the entanglement between humans and non-human beings that lies in its history. Invasion means more than just a stranger species entering an environment: “species have always moved and evolved, but the infrastructures of human conquest and industry have qualitatively changed the state of play” (Tsing & Bazzul, 2022). The reactivation of invasion as an Anthropocene detonator thus aims to make the relations of power and the social infrastructure that permit power reproduction socially and ecologically emerge. Once the plantations’ functioning is taken into account, it is hard to understand this paradigm as limited to within colonial boundaries. According to Anna Tsing and her interlocutors, the ‘plantation condition’ has turned into a naturalized paradigm that has expanded and affected human and non-human relations through dynamics of discipline and ecological simplification (Tsing and Bazzul 2022). Many of its features have slightly adapted and can be traced in contemporary modes of production, such as the domination of corporations and capital over locals and the large use of forced labor. Analogously, the modes of description and governance presented by Povinelli in her reflection are not confined to the strictly colonial space and time but produce consequences and meanings that shape the interactions and frames for both human and non-human life involved.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have discussed environmental migration and climate migration, which have been at the center of recent discussions in academia. The term "climate migration" emerges as a specific subcategory within the environmental migration realm, and it refers to the movement of people due to the impacts of climate change. Conceived in the

framework of the 1970s, the nexus between environment and mobility seems to receive the influence of its era in the form of a sensibility for population rise and mass migration. In addition, the ideas of social Darwinism and Malthusianism have played significant roles in understanding both migration and environmental issues in social theory, picturing mobility as a response to balancing the dynamic between pressure on resource request and offer. Currently defined under broad definitions, the term "environmental migrant" is widely accepted as the most valuable and inclusive label, and yet still faces criticism regarding its association with vulnerability. As mentioned in the chapter, vulnerability is a crucial point of debate in this field, seen as essential for defining and analyzing migration without naturalizing it, yet also risky as it may portray migrants as victims. On the other hand, the criticism that involves the term 'refuge', takes a cumulative form when it comes to environmental-related issues. Having emerged in the late 1980s, the term environmental refugee has been proven a sterile attempt both ethically and legally. Just as the category of refuge has been considered inadequate and distorted by many theorists and entire countries in the past, so the category of environmental refugee faces criticisms from all sides.

In the second part of this chapter, I focused on the narratives of the Anthropocene and the anthropological debate surrounding the need to contextualize perspective. What particularly emerges is how environmental migration and its theorization are deeply connected to critical issues of the Anthropocene, such as practices of othering, the construction of apocalyptic scenarios, which involve colonial dynamics and call for a reexamination of the underlying white affects shaping our understanding of the Anthropocene.

The challenge, as highlighted by many anthropologists such as Povinelli, Armiero, and Tsing, in imagining future scenarios that differ from apocalyptic ones is directly reflected in the realm of environmental migration. Too often, it remains confined within inadequate frameworks to address current challenges. Migration has intertwined with the narrative surrounding climate change to underscore the deficiencies revealed by this combination. As recent media and academic discourses demonstrate, when viewed in the context of climate change and the Anthropocene, discussions on refugees become entangled with Westernized apocalyptic imaginaries associated with climate. The

mixture of these two elements has created fertile ground for fostering white fears of invasion and the impending catastrophe of climate change, contributing to a pessimistic view of the future. Critical migration studies and other research shed light on the unproductive white fear that can only produce climate-apocalyptic scenarios and racialized perspectives about invasion.

2. Iraqi and regional background

Introduction

This chapter serves as a presentation of the scene and the actors at play in building and facing the ancestral catastrophe. At the beginning of this research, I was determined to find the predominant factor responsible for Iraq's environmental issues. However, the diverse nature and the wide range of factors at play made it evident soon how inappropriate it would have been to focus on a unilateral cause rather than embracing a multilateral approach to comprehend both the sudden and the slow impacts of the Anthropocene over the Mesopotamian region. For this reason, this chapter presents the combination of different lenses. First, I combined a large and a small scale, trying to give a specific perspective without losing the global picture. In doing so, I considered the global dimension of wetlands and the challenges they face, as well as the understanding of those entities in international environmental law. I begin with a global perspective, offering a framework for the status of wetlands worldwide and providing a descriptive overview of their connection with humankind and the impacts of human activities through the lens of ecosystem services.

The second section focuses on Iraq and its neighboring countries involved in managing transboundary waters. In this context, it becomes evident that an environmental perspective, which emphasizes regional climatic conditions and resource management, needs to overlook national boundaries. For this reason, the second paragraph defines Mesopotamia as the focal point of this study, including the intricate network of waters, channels, and rivers, as well as the interconnected ecosystems, that embody the Iraqi marshlands.

Finally, the third section overviews historical migration trends in the country. My intention is to set the stage with a cross-cutting perspective that brings together

historical insight and recent theoretical frameworks within which the discourse on human movements and the environmental state of Iraq evolves. The present-day context is particularly intriguing as it marks the integration of environmental concerns into the discourse on human mobility. The Iraq situation is complex, and while this short section cannot fully capture the complex relationship between the environment and migration or displacement, it is intended to give a basic understanding of the present situation.

2. 1 Wetlands

2. 1. 1 Definitions and status

Protectors of biodiversity, resting places for birds, and refuge for human and non-human beings, wetlands represent uneven landscapes, hard to define into scientific and institutional categories. They function as nature's sponges, filtering sediments from incoming streams, storing water on the surface and in aquifers, and facilitating the gradual release of purified water. In doing so, they also serve as a barrier against the devastating effects of extreme floods as well as ensure climate regulation of their surrounding areas. Moreover, they foster the creation of thriving habitats that support a rich tapestry of biodiversity (Brander & Schuyt, 2004; Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, 2018)

In order to define what a wetland is, research commonly refers to the definition provided by the Ramsar Convention⁶, which is renowned for adopting an inclusive posture labeling as wetlands a wide range of water formations and ecosystems. Based on attributes such as salinity, durability, and deepness, Ramsar defines wetlands as “areas of marsh, fen, peatland, or water—whether natural or human-made, permanent or

⁶ Formally known as the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, the Ramsar Convention is a multilateral and binding treaty dedicated to the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands. Signed in Ramsar (Iran) in 1971, it represents a pillar in wetlands conservation and management.

temporary, with water that is static or flowing, fresh, brackish or salt, including areas of marine water the depth of which at low tide does not exceed six meters.” (*Convention on Wetlands of International Importance Especially as Waterfowl Habitat*, 1971)

Despite its controversial nature, such an inclusive definition was initially meant to ensure the protection and management of a wide range of ecosystems and widen the range of places that could potentially become ‘Ramsar sites,’ ensuring the effectiveness of the convention.⁷ For a deeper and more detailed understanding of wetlands, most of the studies normally categorize them into artificial/natural, saline/fresh, and coastal/inland wetlands.

According to data, global wetlands cover an estimated 12.1 million square kilometers, with the highest concentrations in Asia, followed by South America and North America. When considered under a broad lens, including lakes, rivers, marshes, and coastal areas up to a depth of 6 meters, wetlands are estimated to cover an area larger than the United States by 33% (Finlayson et al., 2005). While inland wetlands constitute the largest portion (approximately 44%), including marshes, peatlands, and lakes, coastal wetlands cover about 34% of the total area and include diverse ecosystems like mangroves, tidal flats, and seagrass beds (Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, 2018).

Inland wetlands are further divided according to water coverage and flow. Wetlands along rivers like floodplains and deltas experience seasonal inundation, while palustrine wetlands have more permanent water sources, as well as swamp forests and lacustrine wetlands (Shine & Klemm, 1999).

Besides being very diverse in their nature, wetlands sustain biodiversity, as they are involved in a wide range of heterogeneous processes and interconnections with living and non-living beings. As a result, studies often refer to wetlands with the term "organic supermarkets" to represent their high-level productivity in terms of biodiversity and ecosystem services. Amphibians, reptiles, fish, insects, and other invertebrates are all referred to as 'wetlands-dependent species.' They rely on these habitats for their lifecycle, reproduction, and nourishment, which often happen to be endemic,

⁷ To become a Ramsar site, wetlands need to be designed by one of the member parties and examined on the basis of specific criteria, which label them as areas of international importance

particularly in the case of internal freshwaters. They can be either directly reliant on wetlands, like those species that spend most of their lives in wetland environments, or indirectly reliant, such as species that do not inhabit wetlands but require them during specific phases of their life cycles. For example, migratory birds depend on wetlands as places to rest during their migrations but do not build their nests there. Similarly, some species may deposit their eggs in marshes while living in other habitats for the most part of their lives. Humans can be considered as a directly or indirectly dependent species, depending on the considered era. Despite that, the entanglement between wetlands and human activity stands out as a constant throughout millennia, in an intricate relationship that has its roots in the prehistoric era (Maltby & Acreman, 2011)

Nonetheless, particularly since the 1970s, wetlands have been interested in a heterogeneous but continuous degradation process, which has raised academic and international attention. Research indicates that up to 87% of global wetlands have been lost since the eighteenth century, with accelerated rates of loss in recent decades. Such a decreasing trend can be even more accurately portrayed through an average over time that begins in 1970 and ends in 2015, as this period has been analyzed under the WET index developed by the Ramsar Convention since 2014, which includes classifications of regions and types of wetlands.

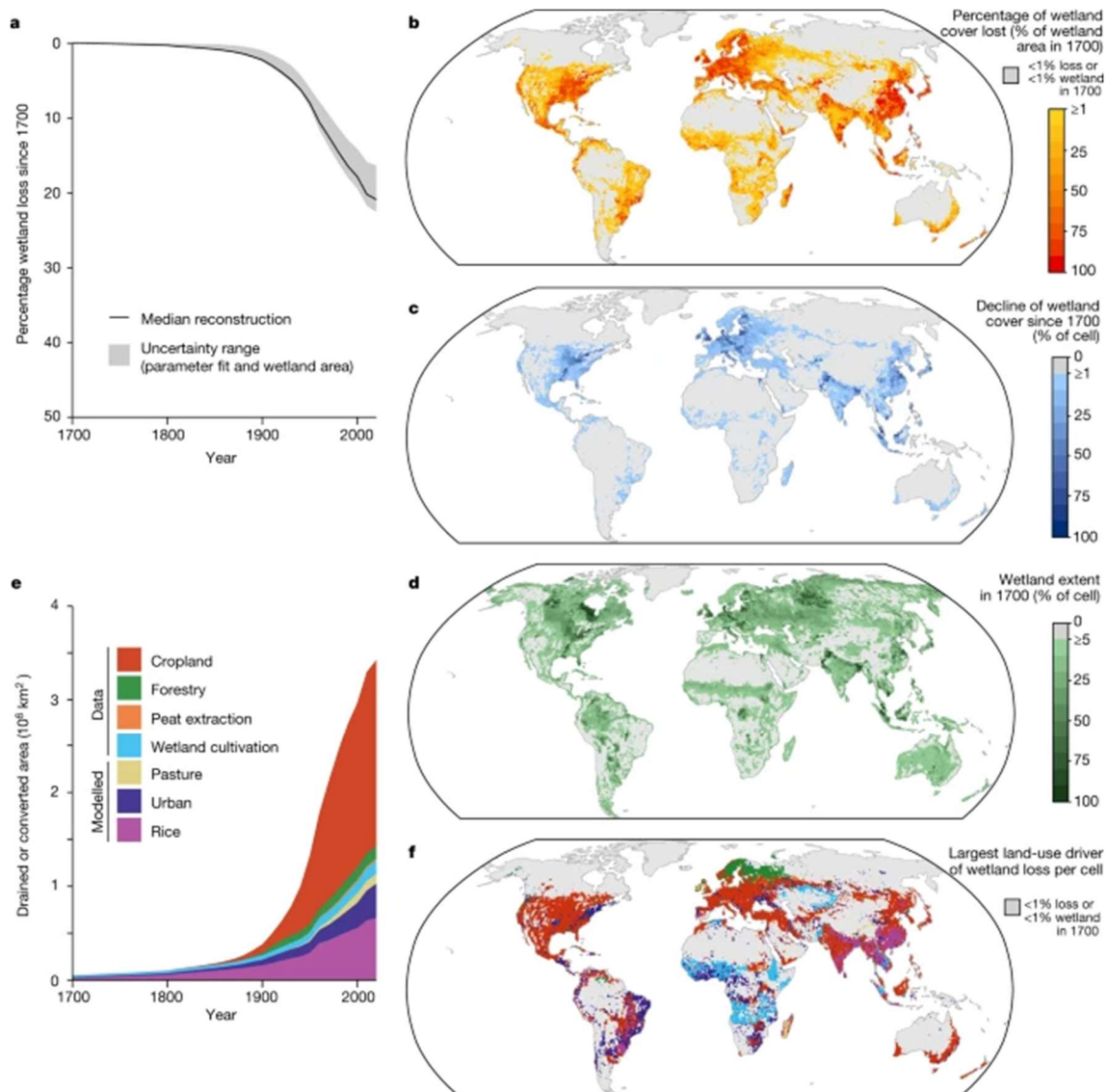


Figure 1 Drained, lost, and converted global wetlands between 1700 and 2020, (Fluet-Chouinard et al. 2023)

Data aggregation based on the index has shown that while the annual natural wetland loss rate is -0.78%, human-made wetlands, including reservoirs and rice cultivation, have significantly expanded in their extent (Convention on Wetlands, 2021). Further research has explored the implications of this loss for ecosystems and both human and non-human elements (Convention on Wetlands, 2021; Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, 2018). More specifically, according to the Ramsar Sites Information Services (RSIS), the global database that collects and shares information about special wetland areas, over 50% of Wetlands of International Importance are affected by activities associated

with agriculture and animal farming. These activities include deforestation, discharge of pollutants, intensive cultivation, and the related high water consumption. As shown in Figure 1, the main part of the drainage or conversion of global wetlands is due to croplands and rice.

According to the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, the loss of wetlands and their dependent species is attributed to four primary anthropogenic factors: artificial infrastructure, land conversion, water resource usage, and pollution. In the coming decades, climate change is predicted to become the foremost factor, while currently mentioned as a stressor that will aggravate the situation in the following years, contributing to events such as sea-level rise and precipitation pattern variations, which will negatively impact wetlands. Dams and industrial water usage have significantly altered river flow (reduced by around -20%), affecting, among other things, sediment transport crucial for sustaining and forming wetlands. Being at the center of a very rapid expansion, particularly in the MENA region, dams constitute a controversial issue, being caught in the middle between technological advancement and sustainable renewable resources and posing significant environmental concerns. Large-scale dams, especially, have disrupted river ecosystems and sediment flow, which are essential for wetland health. Land conversion for agriculture is established as the primary cause of inland wetland loss, while coastal wetlands face substantial challenges from coastal ecosystem development, river diversions, and nitrogen concentration.

Ultimately, while land conversion practices, such as draining wetlands for agriculture, have led to significant losses in inland wetlands, coastal wetlands are first damaged by urban and industrial expansion, river diversions, and an increase in nitrogen concentration. Studies on wetlands generally agree on the fact that these sites have been endangered primarily due to anthropogenic activities, especially those related to land use. This suggests a widely shared tendency to underestimate wetlands as unproductive lands that should be transformed into more profitable areas. Globally, the production and land use way of thinking emerges as the main enemy of wetlands, which have been drained, covered, converted for centuries, and treated as wastelands.

2. 1. 2 Ecological value and ecosystem services

A deep understanding of the human-wetlands relationship requires navigating through the overlapping narratives concerning human-nature relationships and technological advancements. Very often they are biased by contemporary concerns about climate crises or by references to a "golden age" when humanity lived in harmony with nature and did not rely on technology to alter it. In the following paragraphs, we will explore the specific impact of these narratives, particularly in the context of Mesopotamia's history and the rise of civilization. The human-wetlands relationship is ancient and has fluctuated between wetlands offering independent, direct, or indirect services to humans and human activities altering wetlands through practices like drainage and irrigation. The academic and political considerations of wetlands have evolved over the years. Traditionally, research concentrated on different types of individual elements of an ecosystem and, most of all, to consider them strictly on the basis of their scientific and economic value (Maltby & Acreman, 2011). Thanks to increasing environmental awareness and the integration of policies (Maltby & Barker, 2009), this trend has taken a turn in recent years, leading to a progressive understanding of the multifaceted functions and values of wetlands.

The rationale of protecting not just individual wetlands but entire networks marked a significant advancement in acknowledging the necessity to safeguard breeding, over-wintering, resting, and feeding sites that compose complex life cycles.

(Maltby & Acreman, 2011, p. 1346)

In this section, I will hold on to this approach, summarizing the key elements of wetlands' ecological aspects and ecosystem services. In order to keep together the interaction between human and wetlands activity, it is helpful to consider the category of ecosystem services. Initially coined to shed light on the importance of conservation for society (Westman, 1977), the concept of ecosystem service privileges a human-centered perspective and emphasizes the valuable benefits and resources that ecosystems provide to people (Assessment, 2005).

As outlined by the 2006 Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, ecosystem services are further categorized into four main groups: supporting, provisioning, regulating, and cultural services. Supporting services, such as nutrient cycling and soil formation, are

those transversal services that enable the other three categories to function (Reid, 2006). Provisioning services include material resources like food and energy sources. Regulating services involve environmental control, including water and air purification, carbon sequestration, and waste decomposition. Cultural services hold those non-material benefits that humans take from ecosystems, such as cultural, spiritual, and recreational goods. The types of ecosystem services provided or derived by wetlands include all four types, as illustrated in the following figure (Figure 2).

Services	Comments and Examples
Provisioning	
Food	production of fish, wild game, fruits, and grains
Fresh water ^a	storage and retention of water for domestic, industrial, and agricultural use
Fiber and fuel	production of logs, fuelwood, peat, fodder
Biochemical	extraction of medicines and other materials from biota
Genetic materials	genes for resistance to plant pathogens, ornamental species, and so on
Regulating	
Climate regulation	source of and sink for greenhouse gases; influence local and regional temperature, precipitation, and other climatic processes
Water regulation (hydrological flows)	groundwater recharge/discharge
Water purification and waste treatment	retention, recovery, and removal of excess nutrients and other pollutants
Erosion regulation	retention of soils and sediments
Natural hazard regulation	flood control, storm protection
Pollination	habitat for pollinators
Cultural	
Spiritual and inspirational	source of inspiration; many religions attach spiritual and religious values to aspects of wetland ecosystems
Recreational	opportunities for recreational activities
Aesthetic	many people find beauty or aesthetic value in aspects of wetland ecosystems
Educational	opportunities for formal and informal education and training
Supporting	
Soil formation	sediment retention and accumulation of organic matter
Nutrient cycling	storage, recycling, processing, and acquisition of nutrients

^a While fresh water was treated as a provisioning service within the MA, it is also regarded as a regulating service by various sectors.

Figure 2. Ecosystem Services Provided by or Derived from Wetlands (Finlayson et al., 2005)

As the shallower regions of wetlands trap sediment and organic matter, they can provide nutrients for several small organisms and, consequently, food sources for fish. Nonetheless, the supporting activity of wetlands extends further as a portion of fish migrates through estuaries, deltas, and mangrove areas, creating a mechanism of biomass spread that provides an amount of two-thirds of deep-sea fisheries (Mitsch &

Gosselink, 2015; Shine & Klemm, 1999). The regulating capacity of certain wetlands is exemplified by their role in providing security and protection services to coastal communities. One of the most remarkable examples is the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, which served as a case study to demonstrate the crucial role of mangroves in mitigating coastal floods. In this instance, studies revealed how anthropogenic influence, through the removal of mangroves, had functioned as a multiplier of the risks for coastal livelihoods and the environment while maintaining a higher density of mangroves could have significantly reduced water flow by more than 90% (Danielsen et al., 2005). The water purification activity is one of the most intriguing services provided by wetlands. It involves the ability to retain both organic and chemical-industrial sediments, which are among the principal water pollutants. Specifically, marshes can play a role in reducing and preventing eutrophication, as their vegetation stores nitrogen and phosphorus in the subsoil (Maltby and Barker, 2009). Ultimately, the function of maintaining climate stability provided by wetlands operates both at the micro level, such as local humidity preservation, precipitation maintenance, and other functions related to the water cycle (Bacon, 1999), at the macro level, as wetlands also referred to as 'carbon sinks,' undertake a significant role in carbon dioxide (CO₂) retention, serving as regulators of greenhouse gases (Shine and Klemm, 1999).

2. 1. 3 The international recognition of wetlands in environmental law and policy

Over the years, the global community has increasingly acknowledged the importance of wetlands, primarily due to the rising worries about the impacts of human activities such as population growth, water resource overuse, and industrial production on freshwater availability.

One of the first and most important moments in this recognition process is represented by the establishment of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, through which wetlands entered the very early stage of the international discourse on the environment. Signed by 18 countries in a small city placed on the north coast of Iran, this agreement represented one of the first attempts to address natural conservation on the global level (Matthews, 1993). Defined as an era of 'coexistence more than cooperation' (Fisher, 2017), the

1970s are indeed characterized by those first attempts at international dialogue on the environment, which nonetheless proved to be still highly influenced by a 19th-century-inspired method. Besides, diplomacy and the related central role played by the nation-state are only sometimes compatible with environmental problems, which inherently transcend borders and specialized domains. Despite that, the Ramsar Convention manages to find a balance between these two aspects. On the one hand, it weighs the roles of individual countries, while on the other, it addresses the transversal nature of environmental issues by involving a heterogeneous range of parties and providing a comprehensive definition of the covered matter.

As mentioned above, one of the features of the Ramsar Convention lies in the provision of the first and inclusive definition of wetlands (*Convention on Wetlands of International Importance Especially as Waterfowl Habitat*, 1971).

Based on principles of sustainability and on the consideration of the relationship with human activity, the Ramsar Convention establishes a framework for the protection and sustainable management of wetlands worldwide by recognizing the diverse nature of wetlands and stressing the need for their preservation. It sets three primary obligations for Contracting Parties: the conservation and wise use of all wetlands, the designation and conservation of at least one Wetland of International Importance (Ramsar Site), and cooperation across national boundaries on transboundary wetlands and shared species.

The so-called era of 'global environmental consensus' (Fisher, 2017) gathered the international community on the basis of a collective enthusiasm for sustainable development, which was able to keep together a certain grade of environmental protection without questioning the capitalistic mode of production. Despite its controversies, this moment introduced a more anthropocentric perspective, thereby helping to slightly modify the previously neutral, conservative, and sector-focused view. The peak of this trend was reached with the Rio Declaration, signed by 178 countries, and the work of relatives COPs. The contribution of the Rio Declaration to the field of wetlands emerges at the intersection of two key aspects: the formal recognition of the essential role of natural ecosystems in sustaining human life, as exemplified by the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and its relevance to wetland conservation (Shine and Klemm, 1999). The involvement of the CBD in the Ramsar Convention lies

in its binding nature, which does not overcome the dominant role of national sovereignty but rather channels it into fostering a natural protection virtuous circle.

States have, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and the principles of international law, the sovereign right to exploit their own resources pursuant to their own environmental policies and the responsibility to ensure that activities within their jurisdiction or control do not cause damage to the environment of other States or of areas beyond the limits of national jurisdiction.

(Convention on Biological Diversity 5 June 1992, Article 3)

This principle proves to be particularly effective once considered that wetlands are often located in border areas and whose functioning has fundamental repercussions on global climate regulation and the maintenance of biodiversity (Shine and Klemm, 1999).

Among the international legal frameworks on wetlands, it is necessary to mention the research project known as the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, conducted from 2001 to 2005, involving more than 1,360 experts from around the world (Assessment, 2005). As a global research project, the assessment had the merit of shedding light on the critical connection between biodiversity and human well-being, informing policies and decision-makers, and raising public awareness. Characterized by an interdisciplinary approach and a vast range of stakeholders, it aimed to provide a scientific basis for understanding the relationship between ecosystems and society. Regarding the field of wetlands, the assessment contributed to stressing the crucial role of wetlands in relation to human well-being, providing a more anthropocentric yet eco-systemic perspective and marking a turning point in the general understanding of wetlands' functions and values. As it emerges from this brief overview, the academic and institutional posture toward wetlands is progressively embracing a holistic approach that privileges the interplay between humans and the environment.

2. 2 Iraq marshes under political and environmental perspective

2. 2. 1 Iraq and MENA region environmental overview

According to the UNEP definition, climate change is the result of long-term variations in temperatures and weather patterns (United Nations, 2022), which involves both a temporal and spatial scale. Therefore, looking for more localized responsibilities on a smaller scale concerning climate change does not imply doubting its scientific value, impacts, or existence but rather involves a choice of approach in the storytelling. Most studies agree that climate change plays a significant role in worsening desertification processes and droughts through rising temperatures, changing precipitation cycles, and modifying soil composition (Adamo et al., 2018; Price, 2018). While remaining aware of the profound interconnection of these factors and their simultaneous impacts in different places and scales (Eriksen 2016), one of the aims of this research is to scale down and contextualize the patches of Anthropocene and its local impacts (Tsing, 2005).

In this regard, the Iraqi case positions itself in a way that makes it challenging for studies to attribute its environmental situation to a single, specific cause. The picture of the country, indeed, includes a realm of several elements, which encompass conflicts, regional warming, international infrastructure projects, riparian countries relations, technopolitical history, and local resources mismanagement, as well as the conditions that derive from the positioning within the MENA region. Iraq is part of a region predisposed to arid conditions, characterized by arid and semi-arid climates, where water scarcity is a persistent challenge. The MENA region has recently received attention as a climate change hotspot and is already experiencing entangled vulnerabilities, especially in terms of food and water resources (Daoudy et al., 2022). Notably, since 2000, the Eastern Mediterranean region has registered a growing frequency of intense events such as prolonged heatwaves (Kuglitsch et al. 2010), which culminated in extreme temperature levels and increasingly frequent sudden events such as dust storms. Since the 1970s, Iraq has experienced a significant increase in its average annual temperature, which studies assessed from 1-2 degrees (Price, 2018) to

2.5 degrees between 2018 and 2020 (Aziz et al., 2022). Drought, agricultural, and water resource losses are presented as associated with rising temperatures, which registered a peak in 2021, reaching 52 degrees in cities such as Basra and Baghdad (Aziz, et al., 2022). Overall, the MENA region has experienced a trend of rising temperatures and water scarcity, reaching a critical turning point with the drought of 2008 that profoundly affected Syria and neighboring countries. Such a crisis captured academic attention and led research to take into account the entanglement between climate impacts and society, leading many studies to establish the climate change-water-security nexus. These studies assume that climate change acts as a stressor or a threat multiplier, thereby amplifying the impact of “preexisting insecurities linked to other causes” (Daoudy et al., 2022). In addition, according to the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), in 2022, Iraq was one of the areas that recorded “less than normal precipitations” based on the scale of relative anomalies in precipitation⁴ (WMO, 2022). Changes in precipitation patterns have been observed in Iraq since the 1950s, with intensified rainfall, especially during the winter months. Moreover, all this needs to be considered in a context that by nature relies on the fluctuating flow of the Euphrates and Tigris River basin for its water supply and, therefore, is dependent on an inherently unstable and fluctuating system.

On the other hand, regarding the Mesopotamian marshes in particular, the anthropogenic cause is the most accredited. More specifically, “the variation of rainfall amounts causes changes in the land vegetative cover through both numbers of dry years or seasons resulting in very long drought periods” (Adamo et al., 2018). Unusual climatic conditions, under the form of rainfall anomalies in the north and desertification in the south, have affected agriculture and food production (Adamo et al., 2018; ICRC, 2021; Salih, 2021), particularly affecting cereals and grain crops, which have been assessed as having decreased by around 70% in the northern area during 2021 compared to the previous year (Aziz et al., 2022).

Besides global warming, another critical factor that has a powerful impact on countries like Iraq or Egypt that have delta regions is the rising sea level. Areas at shallow sea level altitudes, such as the Shatt al-Arab area, are naturally highly vulnerable to flooding. Consequently, water salinization is becoming an issue in southern regions where the reduced flux of Tigris and Euphrates combines with the rise in sea levels.

As the water levels in the two rivers decrease, seawater infiltrates inland through the irrigation channels into the Shatt Al Arab area, impacting agriculture and livestock (ICRC, 2021). In addition, the two rivers' reduced flow no longer fulfills its annual cleansing function of the downstream area from salt and impurities, thereby impacting water and soil quality (Lahn & Shamout, 2015).

As mentioned, it is important to note that this discussion needs to combine global causes with a more downscaled perspective of climate change. The whole MENA region faces significant challenges related to unsustainable water use, especially in the agricultural sector. The prevalent issue of water scarcity in this region is worsened by the gradual decrease of both underground and surface water resources due to excessive exploitation. As a final remark, as reported in the next paragraph, it is important to highlight the dominant upstream vs. vulnerable downstream relationship in Iraq's hydrological situation (Partow, 2001). This means that Iraq finds itself in a particularly vulnerable geopolitical position as its hydrological resources are shared with bordering countries, which control the upper extent of these water sources. In this relationship, countries such as Turkey and Iran have significant influence over the flow of rivers like the Tigris and Euphrates. The naturally vulnerable position that Iraq must deal with is made even worse by the absence of international agreements and synergic policies, which are very often overcome by unilateral actions taken by individual countries. In the following paragraph, a deeper overview of the transboundary management of the Tigris and Euphrates basin and its related problems can be found.

2. 2 Mesopotamian Marshes system

Until a few decades ago, what was once the largest wetland system in the Middle East used to include the three Mesopotamian marshes, Al-Hawizeh, Hammar, and Al-Qurna, which stretches along the border between Iraq and Iran. Described as a 'complex' of diverse wetland forms, this system included both permanently and non-permanently inundated areas such as superficial and deep-water lakes, slightly salted seasonal lagoons, and lands that are annually inundated by channels discharging in Shat al-Arab River (Al-Handal & Hu, 2015; Ghadiri, 2006).

Covering a surface ranging from 15,000 to 20,000 square kilometers, primarily located in the southern region of Iraq and partially extending into southwest Iran, the three marshes are part of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers system. The three marshes are distinguished not only by their geographical location but also by their ecological characteristics, size, and water salinity.

The Al Hammar Marsh is located to the south of the Euphrates, near Nasiriya, and extends to the area surrounding Basrah. Its surface varies from 2,800 to 4,500 square kilometers on a seasonal basis. Al Hammar is a shallow lake with slightly saline water due to its proximity to the Gulf (Figure 3).

The Central Marshes are situated between the two rivers, very close to where the Tigris and Euphrates converge. Fed mainly by freshwater, it covers an average of 3,000 to 4,000 square kilometers. Lastly, the Al Hawizeh Marshes, east of the Tigris, include both permanent and non-permanent marshes, with their size fluctuating between 3,000 and 5,000 square kilometers.

While the Euphrates serves as the primary water source for the largest of the three marshes, the Al-Hammar marsh, the Tigris mostly supplies water to both the Central marshes and Al-Hawizeh (Al-Handal and Hu 2015). Regarding their formation and functioning, there are three factors to be considered: the flat nature of Tigris and Euphrates plain, the sediment transport from Zagros mountains, and the quantity of irrigation channels. First of all, the Tigris and Euphrates valley is defined as an “exceptionally flat alluvial plain due to the very low slope of both rivers” (Partow, 2001). Consequently, in their final section, these rivers tend to form channels that eventually spread into a delta. Particularly, the area involved by the marshes is the one between Nasiriyah and Al Qurnah, where the Euphrates, fed by a lower number of

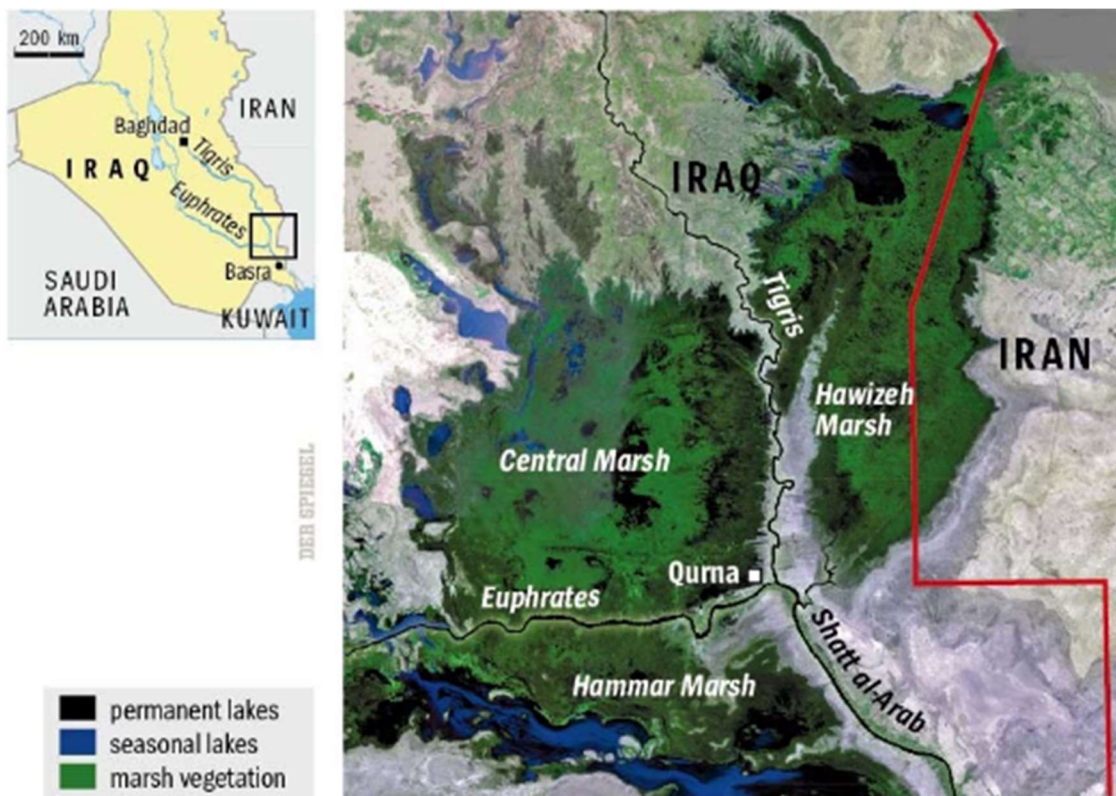


Figure 3 Mesopotamian marshland of south est Iraq, (Marghany et al. 2016)

inflowing waters, temporarily vanishes before rejoining Tigris. The second factor that plays a significant role in marshes' formation is the combined action of some of the rivers that come from the Zagros mountains, such as Karkheh e Karun, which, by carrying a large amount of sediment, deviate and make the Tigris and Euphrates runoff non-linear. The third element to mention is the high quantity of irrigation channels, particularly concentrated in the central area between the two rivers, which nudge the formations of internal branches.

From this brief overview, it is possible to observe how deeply the marshes complex depends on the broader Tigris and Euphrates River basin and how fundamental it is to consider the bigger picture of the basin's hydrology and the international forces at play. Both originating in the southern Anatolian mountains in Turkey, the Euphrates and the Tigris unify in Basra, at the Shatt al-Arab, to end up in the Persian Gulf after 200

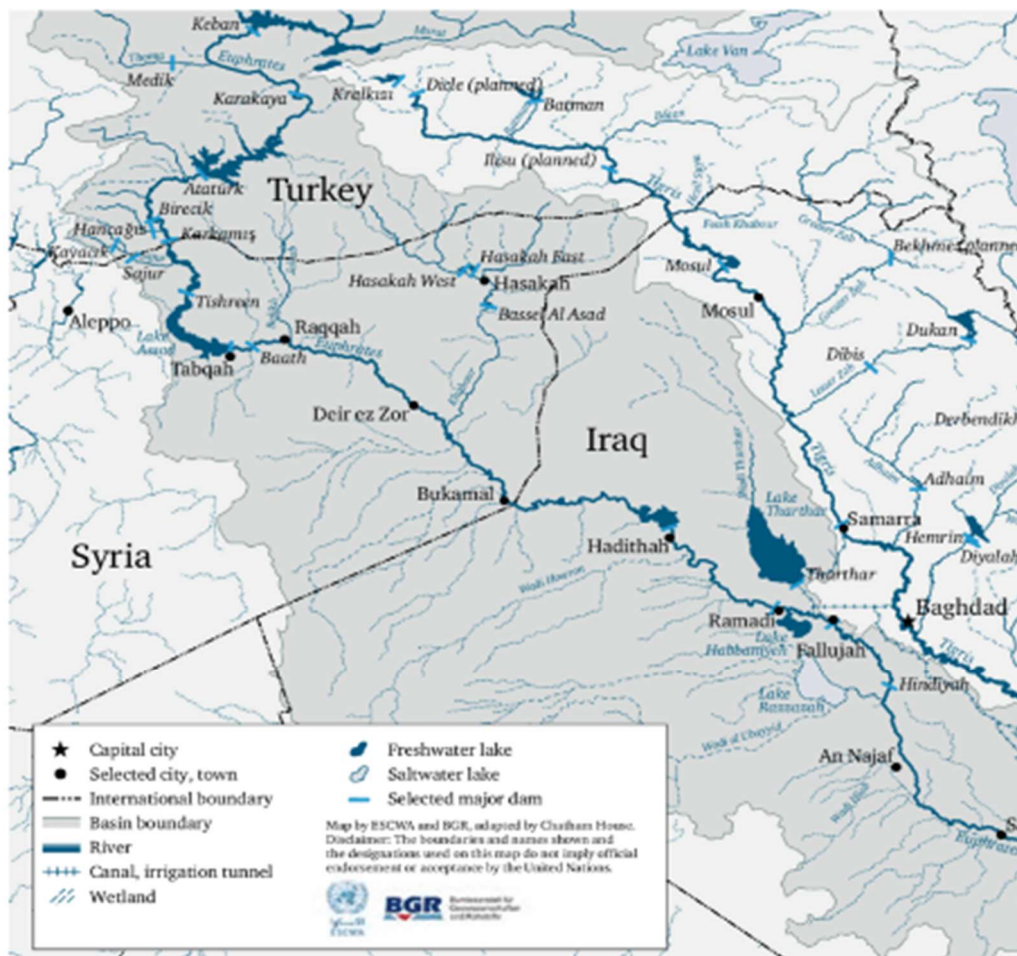


Figure 4 Tigris and Euphrates basin. Transboundary waters. UN-ESCWA 2013

kilometers (Figure 4). The Euphrates, 2760 kilometers long, crosses southeastern Syria and then enters Iraq, while the Tigris, 1900 kilometers long, only touches Syria for 44 kilometers and is split between Turkey and Iraq, which involves around 80% of its course (Issa et al., 2014). The functioning and the positioning of the Tigris and Euphrates River basin create a geopolitical complexity among the involved countries: first, these rivers cross multiple countries, causing what is defined as the ‘dominant upstream vs vulnerable downstream relationship’ (Partow, 2001) referring to a common situation that arises among countries sharing a river basin: the country that includes the upstream region often happens to have significant power over the water flux and, consequently, over international water resources. In the case of Tigris and Euphrates, their geographical division impacts the political dynamics among riparian countries, with Turkey controlling the upper reaches of both rivers, while Syria, Iraq, and Iran rely on these rivers for their water supply. Another factor to consider regarding the river basin hydrology in relation to the marshes is the irregularity of precipitation, which is primarily caused by the distribution of seasonal rainfall and that, on the other side, is one of the key factors contributing to the hydrological and environmental complexity of the Tigris and Euphrates River basin. Since the Zagros Mountains serve as the primary source of water supply for the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, during springtime, when the stored water accumulated during winter is released, the massive drainage results in substantial floods and causes periodic flooding of the alluvial plain.

2.3 Iraqi Migration

2.3.1 Migration environment in Iraq: current trends

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has recently identified several key drivers of displacement linked to environmental and climate change in Iraq: persistent drought and water scarcity have been recurrent since the 1970s, resulting in the loss of

livelihoods, food insecurity, increased pollution, and health risks, particularly in the southern regions (IOM, 2023).

Overall, studies have been paying increasing attention to Iraqi and MENA region's environmental conditions as well as how environmental degradation is affecting communities (Mikhail, 2012; NRC, 2021). In the region, it has been registered an increasing frequency of dust storms, spreading desertification, facing problems of water and soil pollution, while climate change, conflict, and social and economic unstable situations are framed as drivers of food insecurity (FAO, 2023; O'Donnell & Newland, 2008).

In this framework, Iraq is facing serious challenges due to climate change, marked by rising temperatures and a growing water crisis, which places it as the fifth most vulnerable country to climate breakdown (UNEP, 2019). Summer temperatures are increasing rapidly, reaching over 50°C more frequently, leading to extreme heatwaves and dust storms. A 2°C increase in the average annual temperature is expected by 2050, with severe impacts on water security and soil fertility (Seyuba et al., 2023). Environmental degradation and climate change are increasing pressure on agriculture, causing crop reductions and driving up food prices, contributing to economic and social instability.

In addition, Iraq is considered the third country with the highest number of internally displaced people in the Middle East and North Africa in 2022, with 32,000 displaced by conflicts and violence and 51,000 by disasters. Environmental migration and displacement in Iraq and the MENA region have gained attention in academic discourse and discussions with international organizations in recent years: the academic trend of the past decade is evident as voices about disasters-drove mobility appear increasingly often in reports and databases (IOM, 2022b, 2023; Seyuba et al., 2023; NRC & IDMC, 2020). The loss of cultivable land and crop failures are recognized as growing causes of Iraqi migration, which is primarily acknowledged as internal, shifting from rural to urban areas. One of the exemplary cases is the city of Basra, which has been involved in a huge movement of incoming migration from rural surroundings due to limited economic opportunities, water scarcity, and environmental degradation, which characterized the southern region. This internal movement often leads migrants to settle

in urban slums characterized by poor living conditions and pre-existing social challenges (Seyuba et al., 2023).

According to the last Global report on internal displacement, in 2022, drought and wildfires triggered a significant displacement crisis in the MENA region, with 69,000 displacements recorded, the highest since 2016. Iraq witnessed a significant number of these displacements, counting more than 50,000, primarily affecting the southern regions. One of the most severe instances was recorded in Thi-Qar, specifically in the Nassirya region, which involves a portion of the marshland. The livelihoods of water buffalo herdsman in this region were severely impacted by the loss of livestock due to droughts, poor water management, and upstream dam constructions, triggering movements across the country concentrating mainly in the area of Missan, at the Iranian border (NRC and IDMC 2023).

In the assessment conducted by IOM from January 2016 to October 2022 in 9 Iraqi governorates, climate change, and environmental degradation have been identified as the main causes of the displacement of 13% of the original population in central and southern Iraq. The report attributes some political factors, such as ineffective water management and upstream governorates' responsibilities, to the unequal access to water resources (IOM,2022a). Besides contributing to making livelihoods in the southern regions extremely challenging, those issues raise social and regional inequality. IOM agrees in assessing that southern Iraq, particularly the governorates of Basra, Missan, and Thi-Qar, stands out as the most affected region, where “more than 1 in 10 people originally residing in these locations have displaced” between 2016 and 2022 (IOM, 2023, p. 10). Since households in those areas are mainly reliant on agriculture, environmental-related issues are very likely to become economic challenges and, ultimately, reasons for the abandonment of villages. According to IOM, the five main drivers for climate-induced displacement include water issues, food insecurity, access to infrastructure, reliance on land, and adoption of mitigation (or adapting) strategies, which, in most cases, include “sending a household member to another location to make money” (IOM, 2023, p. 11). Among those, water issues are the primary driver, mainly taking the form of reduced rainfalls and water quality, which are common in most areas, and damming projects, which represent a very easily identifiable and direct driver to

displacement. On the other hand, the report mentions the risk caused by rising sea levels, which threatens households, particularly because of its potential impacts on flooding and water salinity.

Interestingly, the IOM report discusses the dual side of the impact of migration on moving households, receiving communities, and communities of origin. Rural depopulation is becoming a growing concern, particularly due to the migration of farming families in terms of social capital loss, security, and reduction of job opportunities, aside from depopulation being a push factor itself (IOM 2022). Inequality and vulnerability are further emphasized at the local level, as the decision to move is not always made by the most impacted families:

In contexts where climate change and environmental degradation are worsening living conditions and making traditional livelihoods less sustainable, displacement from these areas serves as a strategy to cope with deteriorating environmental conditions. Given the resources required to move, however, people who are displaced by environmental factors are not necessarily those most impacted or those with the greatest needs or vulnerability. Families who remain behind may lack the means to relocate, forming a potential ‘trapped population.’

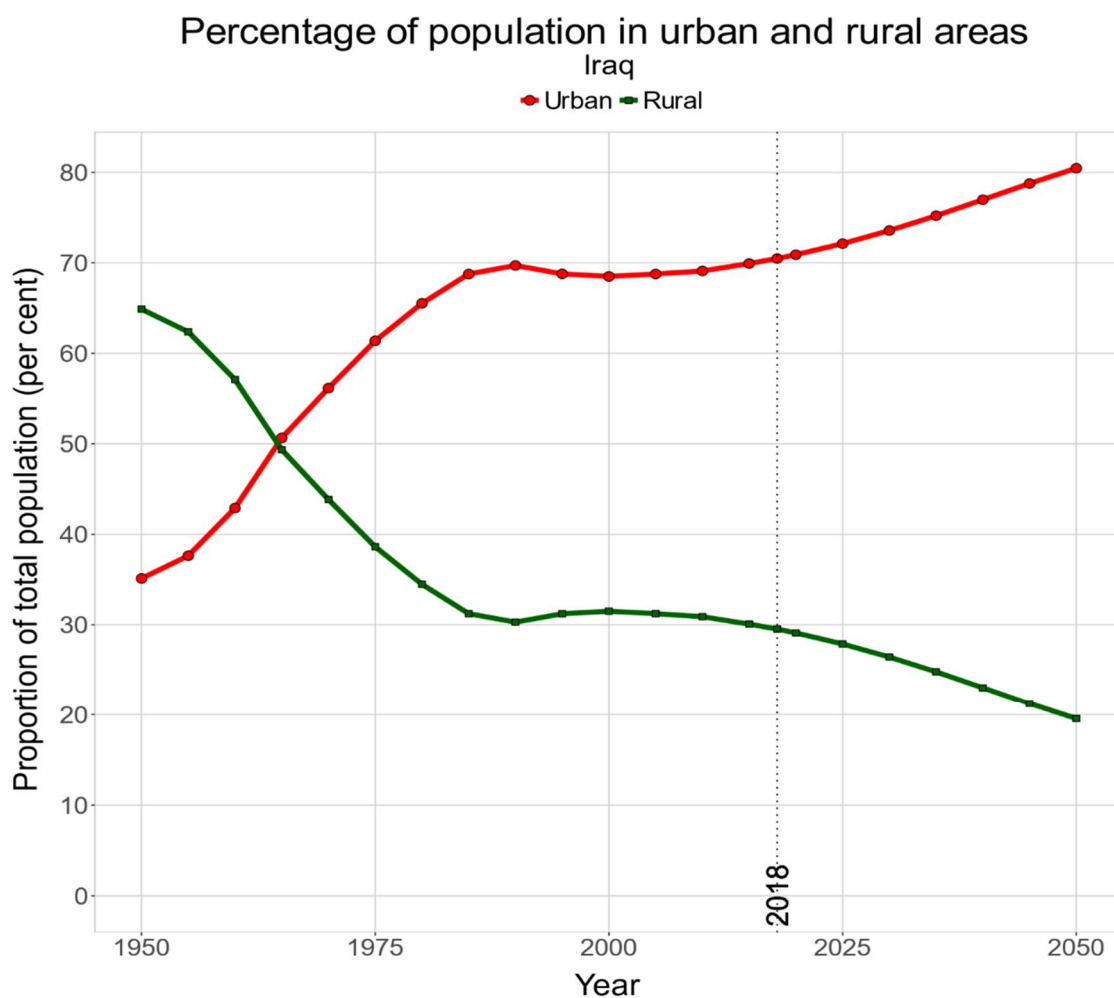
(IOM 2023, p. 3)

This observation informs on the complex and multi-causal framework of the migratory process, which often emerges as the final outcome after a long series of adapting alternatives, collective decisions, and structural elements influencing the process.

2.3.2 Rural to urban movements

Rural-to-urban migration is a growing trend in Iraq, and the challenge of urban population growth is becoming a focal point tied to the broader and long-standing concern of urbanization. The city of Baghdad stands as an example: over the past 70 years, from 1950 to 2020, Baghdad has encountered significant population growth, reaching an exponential increase and currently hosting over seven million people (Al-Hameedi et al., 2021). During the past decades, the urbanization process was already recognized and attributed to economic and political reasons. Some studies highlight

Iraq's rapid urbanization process, tracing its origins to the period following World War II, with the urban population rising from 39.2% in 1957 to 63.5% in 1977 (Hassan, 2023; Sethom, 1983). Among the factors causing urbanization, research mentions a combination of a high natural growth rate and a massive and continuous rural-to-urban migration, driven in part by economic opportunities. The rapid growth of urbanization has been generated since 1950 when the oil industry accelerated economic development and attracted the population to the cities through new job opportunities offered (Hassan 2023). However, a movement toward cities was already in progress in the 1930s when the consolidation of the feudal system encouraged social inequalities by centralizing power in the hands of landowners and forcing farmers into an economic migration toward cities.



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Figure 5 Portion of original population displaced due to environmental factors according to the 2023 IOM report

The information from the 2018 World Urbanization Prospects, sourced from the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, clearly shows that the trends of people moving to cities and rural areas losing population have deep roots in Iraq and have been following a constant trend since the 1950s. Nowadays, the process of urbanization is increasingly associated with environmental factors. A study by IOM conducted among the governors of Basra, Thi-Qar, and Misan observes how urbanization and population growth are recalibrating certain dynamics within these areas. Migration occurs on a highly localized scale and not always on a rural-to-urban scale but also from urban-to-urban or rural-to-rural areas. Environmental degradation is significantly impacting rural

communities, mainly reliant on agriculture. This influences the predisposition for migration due to a growing awareness of the causes of lower agricultural production. Among the impacts experienced by farmers and herders declared as reasons for reduced production and the abandonment of rural areas are water scarcity, salinization, and unpredictable climatic events. and studies are also investigating the reverse scenario, hence, the impact of urban expansion on the environment and countryside (IOM, 2022a)

Moreover, urban growth also often expanded into agricultural areas, leading to challenges in water and food resources production and management. Also, while pushing people toward urban environments, environmental challenges have created sustainability issues in urbanization (Hassan 2023). On one side, then, urbanization is mentioned as one of the indicators for environmental degradation: “Expansion of non-agricultural land increases the pressure on agricultural land elsewhere, potentially prompting reclamation of marginal land area and/or increasing environmental damage. In this sense, such expansion is an indirect land degradation process that affects Iraq’s food security” (Jabbar and Zhou 2013, 2205)

On the other hand, there is growing awareness of the potential inequalities driven by the chain of environmental and rural degradation and consequent movement to the cities. According to IOM, urbanization in Iraq represents a conflict driver, along with water scarcity. While indeed environmental degradation and water scarcity are driving tribal conflicts in rural areas, particularly in the southeast regions, they are at the same time increasing the movement towards urban centers where residents and newcomers may experience heightened tensions due to perceived pressure on municipal services and housing, leading to blame for increased crime or negative economic changes. Recently, NGOs like IOM have been raising recommendations for more inclusive cities, recognizing urbanization as a multiplier for inequality both in the rural and cities (IOM 2022). Consider the example of Basra: as the biggest city in southern Iraq, it constitutes one of the most exemplary cases and has been recently analyzed by IOM to highlight how people moving due to climate issues could lead to informal cities and more inequality (IOM and Social Inquiry 2021). Basra serves as a critical example of how climate-induced migration worsens informal urbanization, inequality, and social

fragility in a vulnerable urban setting. Historically recognized as a hub for migration inflows in the region, Basra is now acknowledged as the center of an incoming movement of environmental migration due to the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation significantly affecting agricultural productivity in the area. According to IOM, only a tiny portion of the people arriving in Basra come from other cities, while the majority come from rural areas, specifically from Misan, other parts of the Basra region, and Thi-Qar—areas particularly affected by microclimatic alterations and environmental degradation.

These observations on local movements, particularly in southern Iraq, provide an overview of the situation in rural areas and their specific exposure to water-related issues and environmental degradation. As we have seen, resulting migration patterns prove to be complex and not directly attributable to a particular direction or specific drivers. What emerges is a variety of interconnected factors that impact each other, with significant roles played by rural abandonment, urbanization, and water crisis. Whether this phenomenon is directly linked to the consequences arising from the specific case of the desiccation of the Iraqi marshes would require more in-depth attribution studies. However, what can be noted is that research generally agrees in attributing the current environmental degradation to a dual cause of climate change and water resource management (IOM, 2022a, 2023). As a last remark, environmental degradation and internal migration patterns seem to connect with the colonial history and the rise of the oil industry, which have been significantly reshaping social and exceptional dynamics within Iraq. In the following section, I present a brief overview of the historical trends of human movement within Iraq in order to retrace some of the patterns that could further clarify both the current situation and set a background for the analysis of the specific case of the marshland community.

2.3.3 Historical trends and understandings

The history of migration in Iraq has long been associated with conflict-related movements both in public and international organization debates (Kaloti & Diab, 2022; UNOHCI, 2003). Many people may find it challenging to remember a narrative about

Iraq unrelated to war or political instability. Additionally, one could suggest that the so-called refugee crisis of 2016 did not contribute to a more nuanced understanding of movements from Arab countries. Instead, it may have consolidated the notion of a straightforward and linear connection between conflict and international migration. Speaking in terms of narrative, the rising numbers of arrivals into Europe combined with the spreading of political instability in Arab countries may have consolidated the predisposition to think about conflict as the primary and direct driver of migration. In 2016, IOM identified the primary push factors driving Iraqi migration to European countries as the worsening security situation and a lack of political stability and social justice (IOM, 2016). The tendency of framing conflict as one of the first drivers of Iraqi migration does not surprise once considered that the past four decades of Iraqi history have been marked by various forms of political instability, structuring a chain of "war and post-war crises"(Sirkeci, 2005).

On the other hand, some studies have tried to problematize further the connection between mobility and conflict by looking beyond the simple push-and-pull factors line. One example that prioritizes the ethnic perspective is the concept of an 'environment of insecurity.' This concept aims to emphasize conflict as a stressor factor for internal ethnic tensions, which characterize and shape migration, arguing that the decades of conflict, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, have played a role in triggering internal ethnic tensions (Sirkeci, 2005). Furthermore, researchers are trying to understand the many factors linked to prolonged conflict impacts that may cause people to move while considering both individual and household decision-making processes, factors like decision timelines, access to resources, information, and available routes that challenge a straightforward view of the relationship between conflict and migration (Ozaltin et al., 2020). Overall, the complexities involved in migration dynamics require a more nuanced understanding beyond a simplistic cause-and-effect relationship with conflict, and the specific case of Iraq serves as a notable case study due to the intricate web of political violence, internal ethnic conflicts, and international conflicts.

In offering an overview of the historical context of Iraqi migration, it is essential to highlight the kinship with neighboring countries as a factor that defined migration

movements during past decades. Ethnolinguistic, socio-political, religious, and identification processes combine in the so-called 'forces of regionalism,' which play a crucial role in shaping regional migration patterns. Consider the example of the migratory movements between Iraqis and Syria, particularly in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion of Iraq: historically, the two countries have experienced fluctuating relations, influencing the openness of their borders. The peak in Iraqi migration to Syria was reached after 2003. Sophia Hoffman sustains that Syria's historical cosmopolitanism, adherence to pan-Arabism, and tradition of accepting refugees facilitated the reception of Iraqis. The Syrian government took an "open door" policy, allowing Iraqis to settle and avoiding camp detention policies (Hoffmann, 2016).

Another example is Iran, which stands as a constant among the central receiving countries for Iraqi migrants in almost each of its phases. The Ba'athist regime's expulsion of Shiite elites and middle-class members led to a significant influx of Iraqi people into Iran. The historical and cultural ties, alongside ethno-linguistic and religious common ground, facilitated the movement of Iraqi migrants into Iran. At the same time, the Iranian regime responded by offering relatively open reception possibilities, including options for citizenship or refugee status (Chatelard 2009).

As demonstrated by the theory of forces of regionalism and the cases of Syria and Iran, ethnic issues play a significant role in shaping the dynamics and networks of Iraqi migration. However, these ethnic considerations are not only crucial in cross-border dynamics but also in the internal context of Iraq. Specifically, as this work aims to concentrate on the marshes area and its inhabitants, it is crucial to consider ethnic dynamics as they have played an essential role in shaping various episodes of Iraq's history. The Shi'a Muslims, constituting around 55% of the total population and primarily concentrated in southern Iraq, historically faced economic, political, and social disadvantages. The rise of Shi'ism as a political movement coincided with the Ba'ath party's rise to power in 1968, resulting in a clash that mirrors the Islamic revolution in Iran. The Shi'a opposition movement, al-Da'wah, radicalized by the Iranian revolution, engaged in guerrilla tactics against the regime and exploded once again right after the Gulf War of 1991 in the Kurds and Shi'a uprising. As explained in

the following paragraphs, this moment represented a crucial turning point in the history of Iraqi human movements, both internal and international.

First, let us take a step back and give a brief overview of the pre-1990 migration framework in Iraq, which involved both internal and international movements. Despite various factors influencing outgoing Iraqi migration before the 1990s, one could summarize it as forced migration for political reasons, with authoritarian regimes serving as the main push factor. Besides a small portion of economically driven migration indeed, during those decades, the country was favoring from a relatively successful economic position primarily based on oil production (Ozaltin et al., 2020). In this sense, Iraq appears to align with the widespread trend of significant internal labor migration in the Mediterranean in the post-war period, accompanied by international economic migration towards Northern Europe. On the other side, during the middle of the twentieth century, ethnic and religious identities were already at play in triggering human movements, as shown by the case of one of the earliest migratory events that unfolded in the 1950s, involving the Jewish population relocating to Israel after its formation. Nonetheless, colonial connections still exerted influences, particularly directing a portion of high-skilled economic and political migration, which, in the case of Iraq, was shifting towards London (Chatelard 2009). However, the most notable aspect emerging in Iraq as early as the 1960s is linked to the authoritarian regime, specifically the management of population movements as a system of control and security maintenance. The government's inclination to manage citizen movements was already evident in the pre-1990s era, when “forced displacement was to ensure political and economic control” (Ozaltin, et al., 2020, 593).

In the 1960s, when the Ba'ath Party took power, a violent persecution of communist sympathizers led to a cultural and politically driven migration, with many seeking political refuge primarily in Italy and France. The government acknowledged this prevailing trend and attempted to control it by implementing two distinct measures: the imposition of highly restrictive policies for obtaining passports and the enforcement of surveillance measures on potential emigration endeavors among citizens, including the ominous specters of incarceration or torture.

Meanwhile, the government also implemented strategies to attract expatriates back to the country in an attempt to reverse this outbound migration. Certain studies attribute policies of secularization within the nation, including concessions in women's rights, as a calculated effort to render the country more appealing to its citizens and stem the phenomenon commonly referred to as "drainage." Nonetheless, in the 1970s, the strategy of mass resettlement became evident as a part of a government strategy. The Kurdish areas near Kirkuk held oil reserves, prompting the government to initiate a process of Arabization. This involved the deportation of 45,000 Shiite Kurds to Iran, while Arabic-speaking populations moved towards Kirkuk (Ozaltin et al., 2020).

Moreover, the collective nature of forced migration serves as a reminder that it was not undertaken voluntarily but was induced by government actions targeting social and ethnic groups, as exemplified in the cases of Kurds and Shiites, which are among the most well-known examples. Some scholars underline a shift after the 1960s, when the Iraqi army took up a decisive role in movement management, as in the case of around 200,000 families deported in Iran during the Iran-Iraq war for political control (Marr, 2018).

The following phase of Iraqi migration is marked by the critical moment of the uprising between August 1990 and mid-1991. Despite the launch of the Desert Storm operation in 1991, where President George Bush publicly urged Iraqis to overthrow Saddam Hussein, and the administration's awareness of the longstanding grievances of these ethnic groups, the rebellion was eventually overlooked and led to failure in the total absence of a plan to address the resulting humanitarian consequences (Galbraith, 2003). The invasion of Kuwait by Iraq in 1990-91 during the Persian Gulf War resulted in a significant rise in emigration from Iraq, both in terms of migrants, refugees, and IDPs. According to MPI, between 1990 and 1991, the majority of IDPs and refugees were concentrated at the Iranian border, which the policy brief presents as a consequence of the failure to comprehend Iraq's realities by the Allied coalition, which mainly affected the Kurds and Shi'ites (Galbraith, 2003). The total number of Iraqis living in irregular situations until 2002, particularly in Jordan and Turkey, was estimated to be around 600,000 (Chatelard, 2009).

Overall, according to UNHCR, from 1991 to 1995, 2.4 million Iraqi asylum applications were submitted, and approximately 212,000 asylum-seekers were granted asylum under the Geneva Convention, while around 1.7 million requests faced rejection, resulting in an overall Convention recognition rate of 11 percent (Centre for Documentation and Research, 1996).

According to UNHCR, during the 1990s, Iran hosted around 600,000 Iraqis, which included three main groups. The first one, around 70,000 Iraqis, included people expelled during the Iraq-Iran war (1980-1988) due to suspected Iranian origins, primarily residing in Western Iran. The second, approximately 160,000 Iraqi Kurds, who left Iraq in 1988 and 1991 following the suppression of the Kurdish rebellion and failed uprisings, settled in Western and Central Iran. Lastly, a group of about 33,600 Iraqi Shi'ite refugees located in South-Western Iran included those who arrived during the Gulf War in 1991 and others who sought refuge between 1993 and 1995. As explained by UNCHR, some of these Shi'ite refugees were displaced from the marshlands in South-Eastern Iraq, affected by Saddam Hussein's drainage programs and military attacks (Centre for Documentation and Research 1996). According to MPI, the first Gulf War produced an amount of two to three million Iraqi refugees, the most part being Kurds and Shiites (Galbraith, 2003). The report by MPI attributes the primary responsibility for the mass migration to the Saddam Hussein regime, affirming that, as a consequence of its demise, "An effective alternative administration—whether by the US military, the UN, or a new Iraqi government—should enable IDPs and refugees to return to their homes." (Galbraith, 2003)

In 2002, the migratory situation for Iraqis was marked by significant numbers seeking refuge worldwide. Approximately 550,000 Iraqis held refugee status globally, with a notable concentration of 350,000 registered refugees in Iran. This group included 100,000 individuals who sought refuge before the Gulf War and an additional 250,000 who arrived in the subsequent years. Another 20,000 were awaiting resettlement, primarily in nearby Arab countries and Turkey. Beyond the official refugee count, an estimated 600,000 Iraqis lived in irregular situations, particularly in Jordan and Turkey, either having entered irregularly or exceeding the expiration of their visas or residence

permits. Among them, the UNHCR identified 450,000 in a "refugee-like situation," lacking protection and assistance from their host states or international organizations. Notably, a third of the migrants who left Iraq between 1990 and 2002 chose to settle in Western countries, often seeking asylum.

In summary, it emerges how ethnic considerations, rooted in historical ties and shared identities, have been primarily considered within academia and play a pivotal role in shaping migration patterns both within Iraq and across its borders. The Iraqi government actively influenced citizen movements from the 1960s onward, employing strategies like mass relocations. The invasion of Kuwait in 1990 marked a pivotal moment, shifting Iraq from attracting foreign workers to experiencing mass emigration. The Gulf War significantly impacted the demographic landscape. The historical framework of Iraqi migration underscores the influence of kinship with neighboring countries, with Iran and Syria being significant recipients of Iraqi migrants. Geographical proximity and networks, rooted in kinship and shared identities, played a critical role in shaping migration patterns during this period (Chatelard, 2009).

Conclusions

The first section of this chapter provided an overview of wetlands ecosystems from an ecological and political perspective. Starting on a large-scale perspective on the global status of wetlands and the leading causes of their degradation, I provided an overview of primary wetlands ecosystem services and the international recognition of their importance. Wetlands are multifunctional environments that act as natural sponges, and hold a key role in climate regulation and extreme events mitigation. Wetlands support a wide range of biodiversity and play an important role in supporting species interactions, which is why they are referred to as "organic supermarkets."

Currently, wetlands are suffering a constant process of degradation, with accelerated global loss in recent decades due to anthropogenic causes such as soil conversion for agriculture, urban and industrial development, and climate change, which jeopardize their survival and their ability to provide crucial ecosystem services.

The second section provided contextual information on the regional environmental aspects. In the attempt to follow a rhizomatic method and maintain a discussion that considers the interplay of various elements, I explored the climatic and ecological conditions of the region, taking into account both global and regional anthropogenic factors.

From the analysis of the environmental migration situation in Iraq emerges a complex and continuously evolving picture. The main drivers are persistent drought and water scarcity, leading to loss of livelihoods, food insecurity, increased pollution, and health risks, especially in the southern regions. Migration movements primarily concentrate in the southern regions, such as Basra, Missan, and Thi-Qar, which coincide with the marshland areas. The trend of rural-to-urban migration is on the rise, with urban population growth increasingly associated with environmental factors.

Keeping in mind this overall framework, the next chapter will delve into the specific case of the Iraqi marshes, aiming to understand if and which aspects mentioned here can help us add complexity to the narrative of the marshes' desiccation in the 1990s.

The case of Iraqi marshlands

Introduction

As explained in Chapter 1, one of the main objectives of this work is to consider narratives and imaginaries surrounding environmental migration as part of a broader picture linked to climate change and the Anthropocene.

When considering the decline of the Iraqi marshes, the first name that comes to mind when listing the causes of this significant ecocide is Saddam Hussein and his violent operations against the rebels. Most studies report his campaign as the most impactful event, the turning point between a before and an after in marshland history. Despite not doubting the responsibility that Saddam's campaign had in destroying the marshes' ecosystem, my assumption is that this dividing event and its attribution to one single responsible, should be contextualized to avoid oversimplification. In the following paragraphs, I will provide some highlights of Iraq's marshes history to demonstrate how the 1990s episode was just the peak of a much broader and ancient tradition of domestication infrastructure. To do that, I explore the environmental history of Mesopotamia under a double lens: on one side, I aim to analyze how the imaginary of the “cradle of civilization” has been reactivated in different ways through historical moments; on the other side, I propose an interpretation of some historical moments of Mesopotamia under the lens of late liberalism dispositive.

In the last section, I delve into the particular situation of the Marsh Arabs in reaction to the drainage of the marshes, examining the key figures that have shaped the perception and studies of this community. This part is dedicated to presenting the community with a critical view of the prevailing narrative tendency. My attempt is to critically examine

the rhetorical figures most commonly associated with the marsh community, in search of a perspective that could be more productive and practical for contemporary theoretical frameworks. For what is possible while working with secondary sources, I offer an interpretation of the context through the lens of multispecies relations, attempting to overcome the narrative impasse originating from the separation of humans and nature, which often leads to a crossroads between the faith in technology and nostalgia for a lost harmony and symbiosis between the two worlds.

In the third section, I analyze some perspectives of international organizations during the 1990s to understand the main narrative frameworks, commonalities, and differences. The goal is to grasp the elements that were given more importance and examine the assumptions and biases under which the issue was presented: how much weight was given to the humanitarian aspect compared to the environmental one? Were the two issues seen as connected or separate? How did international organizations approach the specificity of the marshlands situation? While international organizations may not represent the entire public imagination and media landscape, especially in the context of human mobility and vulnerability, they often serve as an on-the-ground empirical element and the primary communication driver responsible for creating and circulating a vocabulary related to the situation. My assumption is that studying their debate in the 1990s could expose some of the significant factors that shaped the narrative on the human-environment-mobility nexus during that time and, subsequently, now.

3.1 Mastering nature through technique

3.1.1 Technological Domination and Dualism in Historical Narratives

The idea of mastering nature through technology is one of the fundamental patterns in how history is narrated, at least in the Western world. The imaginary of continuous technological advancement towards a horizon of linear improvement is part of what Latour calls the ‘modern divide’ (Latour, 1993) referring to the European assumed and

naturalized separation between human forces and natural forces which is rooted in a long-established epistemological tradition.

Such binarism, however, is not limited to creating a distinct separation between culture and nature but proceeds in creating dualisms (Plumwood, 2003) and hierarchies at several levels, a scale of values that can be considered inside the realm of biopower (civilized/wild) or in the bigger picture of Geontopower (Life/Nonlife) (Åsberg & Braidotti, 2018; Povinelli, 2016).

In the context of Mesopotamia, this narrative and its contradictions find one of its most illustrative examples. Mesopotamia is conceived as the place where humanity triumphed over its own animal nature, establishing an identitarian and territorial nexus that continues to serve as the theoretical foundation of Western civilization. Although recent studies have raised numerous controversies and arguments about an oversimplistic perspective, the self-representation of Western civilization uses to intending its own genealogy back to the transformative shift marked by the transition from nomadic lifestyles to settled agriculture, which includes the origin of domesticating practices over the natural environment. The domination over nature, indeed, does not involve the sole domain of agriculture: the management of water resources in the Mesopotamian basin is also normally rooted back to the ancient Sumerians and Babylonians, whose civilizations were based on a hydrological system of channels that transported water from the Euphrates to their cities, managed flood protections and irrigations (Altinbilek, 2004). This case exemplifies that specific relationship which sees at play human and non-human beings and involves technique as the primary tool of domestication over the non-human forms.

Another example of this dynamic can be traced back to the Persian world, renowned for embodying a human-nature relationship built on domination and a pursuit of perfection. The recent academic interest in environmental-related perspectives pushed studies to examine Persian culture and its dominant religion, Zoroastrianism, through the lens of their relationship with nature. At first sight, Zoroastrianism seems to satisfy some current desperate search for new ecological meanings, as it offers a fertile ground made of non-human figures and symbology and deep respect for the natural world. However, upon closer examination, it becomes evident how Zoroastrianism and, by extension,

Persian culture are disseminated of paradigms and concepts that are situated at the foundation of Western culture rather than providing a completely alternative and exotic view (Foltz & Saadi-Nejad, 2007). Some of the most well-known examples include the concepts of paradise and hell, purification and sacrifice, and, overall, the pervasive dualism that governs the entire cosmos and creates hierarchies among pure and non-pure beings (Foltz, 2010). Besides dualism, the Persian understanding of nature presents another defining character: conceived as the historical and cultural opposition to the values of the Greek world, it embodies one of the most ancient examples of an ethos of technological domination over nature.

While the Greek ethos is based on the values of measure and limit, stressing the need to respect the natural world as the space dominated by the divine, the Persian highest model is embodied in the iconic image of Xerxes' yoke, symbolizing human power that, through technology, manages to domesticate even the divine force of the sea. A similar principle applies to the case of Persian gardens: in a mainly arid landscape, like the one of the Persian empire, water was channeled through intricate structures capable of sustaining fruitful gardens meant to recreate an ideal of perfect nature. These enclosed Persian gardens included those selected species of plants and animals that, according to the dualistic doctrine of Zoroastrianism, were considered pure (Amanat, 2016; Gharipour, 2011). Those examples show how the concept of mastering and perfecting nature finds a strong historical justification in the very early stages of human history, revealing a significant narrative consistency between the modern celebration of technology and progress and what is conceived as the birthplace of civilization.

When it comes to the Iraqi marshes, the dualism between technology and the environment takes on an even deeper meaning. The struggle to subjugate the marshes' territory, to make it productive and controllable, and to adapt it to human needs is a recurring theme throughout history. As Ariel Ahram writes, "During long intervals when hydrological infrastructure fell into disrepair, the water would flow unencumbered, washing out precious cropland and feeding the marshes." (Ahram 2015) Due to their morphological nature and their indefinite, muddy characteristics, the marshes increasingly embodied the idea of a territory that was challenging to subjugate, govern, and control. Over time, this evolved into a proper battle between techno-politics and a

muddy, unreachable world which “have long stood out as an indomitable ecology immune to state control.” (Ahram, 2015) This world is understood as pure, mysterious, ancient, and resistant—resistant to any form of ownership and domestication. The next chapter will delve specifically into some of the most impactful moments experienced by the marshes, such as Saddam Hussein's marshland campaign, while this paragraph is dedicated to unveiling that dualism and showing how it serves as a *fil-rouge* in Iraqi history, particularly since the 20th century. The ecological perspective presented by Ahram underscores the profound impact of decisions related to hydrology and agriculture on both local populations and the environment. It offers an alternative to the traditional historical and political views by emphasizing the interconnectedness of natural and social factors. In essence, it argues that ancient rulers used to enforce multilevel technological knowledge and reshape the human ecology through their development policies. Specifically, the manipulation of water resources and the transformation of rural areas have consistently played a key role in Iraq's socioeconomic structure and the dynamic interplay between humans and their environment (Ahram, 2015).

One of the first attempts to systematically manage the hydropower in the area can be rooted in the end of the 18th-century Ottoman land reform, which aimed at transforming marsh dwellers into farmers able to manage remunerative crops for the government and trade. The reform relied on a massive plan concerning the whole region for river and irrigation channel development called the Willcock's plans. Sir William Willcocks' plans stand not only as the cornerstone for British hydrological planning during the first decades of the century but also as a shining moment of ecological conscience. In this project, indeed, he advocated for the restoration of the ancient equilibrium rather than drainage for industrial and economic use. During the first decades of the 19th century, during the British mandate over Iraq, the colonial power attempted to establish a transport line in the area north of Basra, revisiting the Willcock's plan under a more invasive approach. These domesticating attempts were only the first stages of a technopolitical approach that persisted until the 1950s, characterized by the aspiration for modernization through techno-politics. Under the neo-imperial British power over the formal national independence, this approach involved collaborative efforts between

the Iraq Development Board and international agencies, whose goal was to redirect water away from the marshes, with the aim of enhancing agricultural irrigation practices and expanding the amount of cultivable land (Ahram, 2015).

In general, the comparison of the Ottoman, British, and Iraqi governance periods during the 19th and 20th centuries shed light on how, despite differences in terms of methods, hydrological engineering projects continued to play a crucial role throughout the three phases. What was later defined as an engineering and bidimensional approach (Warriner, 1962) was nothing but one of the first steps in a long history of domesticating efforts on the marshlands.

3.1.2 The dams' era and the international perspective

Going further in rooting historical passages in which technology has been used to try to domesticate unsettled lands such as the Mesopotamian marshlands, the massive construction of dams represents one of the activities that characterized the second half of the twentieth century. In a nutshell, since the 1950s, significant alterations to the upper reaches of the two rivers, particularly Euphrates, through the construction of dams mainly within Turkish territories, led to a substantial reduction in the volume of water flowing downstream and consequently to the interruption of the annual flooding cycle which used to feed the marshes. As previously mentioned, a significant consequence of the reduced water flow in the rivers is land salinization, which occurs when the river is no longer able to wash away the salt present in the soil. In regular conditions, when river flow is higher, it enables a cleansing mechanism, carrying away excess salts and preventing their accumulation in the soil. Conversely, in reduced flow regimes, salt levels in the land rise over time, negatively impacting soil and water quality as well as agricultural productivity (Lahn & Shamout, 2015).

Overall, the dams are usually at the edge of positive and negative environmental outcomes and raise opposite judgments from different social groups and perspectives. On one hand, dams are valued as development tools, hydroelectric power, irrigation channels, and flood control. Also, in many cases, hydroelectric projects become symbols of broader meanings on a social and political level. The correlated

shortcomings, such as communities' relocation, fertile lands submersion, and the loss of cultural and historical sites, are often presented as the necessary payment for a higher value, which involves nationalistic sentiments and higher productive levels. One of the most famous examples of all those multifaceted perspectives on dams coming together is the case of the Yangtze River Dam in China. Decades of debates on this project have been built on the two poles of nationalism and development on one side and local communities, biodiversity, and cultural heritage advocacy on the other. The goals and benefits of huge reservoirs like the Three Gorges Dam include flood control, navigation improvement, and electric power generation, while the shortcomings, which in many cases seem to have an impact limited to local communities, are easily overlooked: in this case, local communities have been ignored for long periods, before being treated under policies of resettlement or payback compensation (Dai et al., 1998).

A similar example is the case of the Aswan High Dam in southern Egypt, which further underscores some of the themes found in dam construction processes, including their connection to colonial history, nationalist sentiments, and local and international issues. The Aswan Dam, in particular, has its roots in colonial history, which took the form of several dam projects and rebuilding, particularly since the beginning of the twentieth century, due to the rising demand for cotton cultivation. In the dedicated chapter "Building the Past: Rockscapes and the Aswan High Dam in Egypt," Nancy Reynolds argues that "building the High Dam shaped domestic, regional, and international politics for the coming decades" (Reynolds, 2012, p. 183). Once again, in this case, the project involved a huge debate for the relocation of people and cultural heritage from the area interested in the dam reservoir. Nonetheless, the most interesting character of the Aswan Dam construction is the process of raising consent around the project among civil society and how it took advantage of the specific context of the 1960s-70s as the symbol of redemption from colonialism, "catalyst for economic development and national renewal" (Reynolds, 2012, p. 188).

In the case of Mesopotamian marshlands, dams started to play an important role not only in flow regulations or in regional livelihood and energy management but also in international scenarios. As already mentioned, the wetlands system involves an interconnected chain of marshes and lakes, which is fed by the cyclical spring floods,

mainly caused by the snowmelt from the Zagros mountains (Partow, 2001). As already mentioned, in Mesopotamia, water management and irrigation practices have a longstanding tradition. However, the shift that occurred in the middle of the twenty-first century involved the passage from a practice focused on drainage and controlling excessive floodwaters to the construction of huge dams with reservoirs, water storage, and hydroelectric projects (Partow, 2001). Currently, a total of 32 major dams crosses the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, with a vast complex reservoir capacity. Altogether, the gross storage capacity of all existing hydraulic works on the Euphrates is 143.19 billion cubic meters (BCM), which is five times the river's average annual flow.

Before the dam's era, the hydrograph of the Euphrates River at Hit-Husaiba showed a significant peak in April/May, representing the annual flood, which was essential for the survival of the marshlands in the lower basin. However, after the construction of the dams (1974-1998), this peak decreased by more than two-thirds, and the river's flow pattern shifted to a more uniform pattern. This alteration in the river's flow disrupted the crucial annual "pulse" of water that the marshlands depended on for their existence.

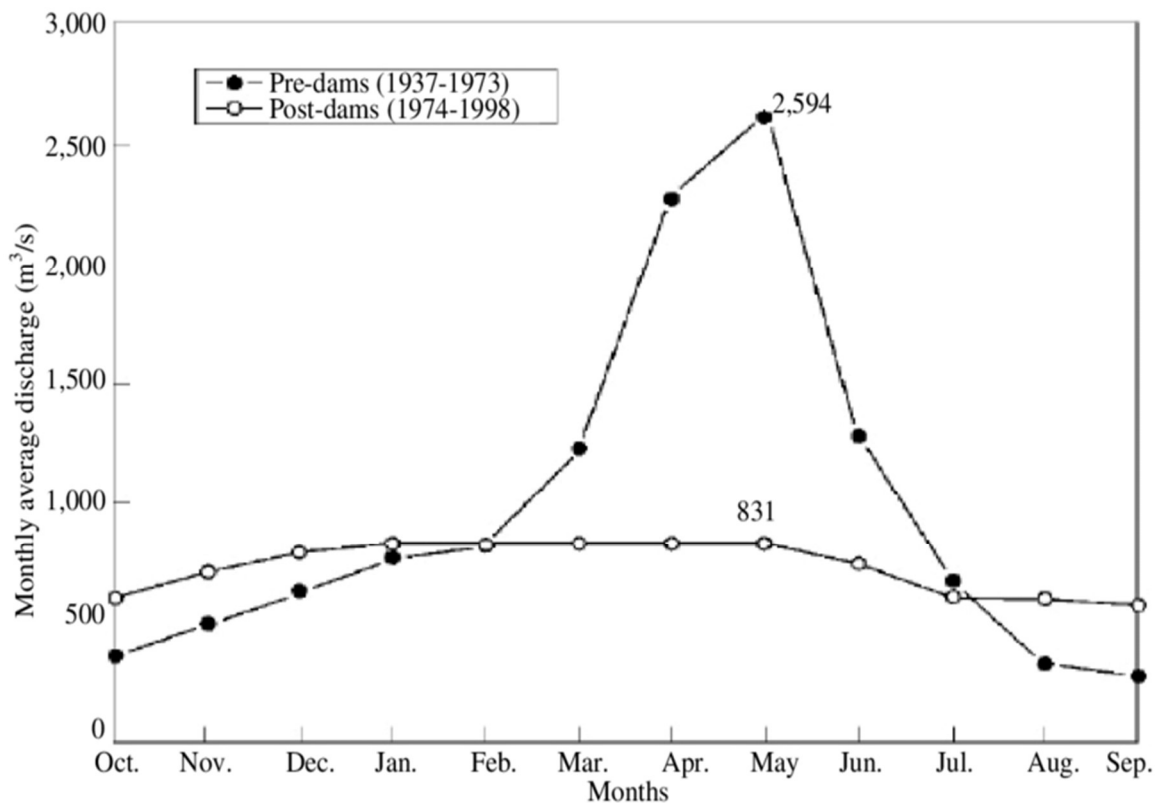


Figure 6 Euphrates flow comparison before and after dams construction, (Partow 2001)

This pattern is clearly illustrated in the chart (Figure 6), showing the difference between the situation before and after the construction of the dams. Spring floods have decreased dramatically, leading to the disappearance of the marshlands (Partow 2001).

The trend continued into the 1960s and 1970s, with the Turkish Southeast Anatolia Development Project (GAP) launched in 1977, which integrated numerous water management schemes on the Tigris and Euphrates, initiating large-scale dam and hydroelectric projects. However, Turkey's role in the 1970s and the launch of the GAP project truly transformed the river basin's development trajectory, ultimately influencing its hydrology and ecosystem. The Ilisu Dam is one of the most controversial yet emblematic projects, which has raised many controversies at national and international levels, as it involves social, environmental, and cultural matters. The dam's construction indeed involves flooding vast land areas, including the archaeological site of Hasankeyf, an ancient city with a rich cultural heritage.

On the other hand, the project has been promoted by Turkish authorities as a source of clean and renewable hydroelectric energy, contributing to the country's economic growth and energy independence. The dam would also provide better control over seasonal river floods, which have caused significant damage in the past.

Geopolitical studies have primarily highlighted how transboundary water management plays a crucial role in regional security, contributing to international trade and economic development and underlying how dams are at the center of international and civil conflicts in the MENA region. However, this perspective was not satisfying enough, as testified by several researchers who try to find other meanings behind the transboundary management of resources and related conflicts. Concepts such as 'virtual water,' 'water energy-land nexus (WEL), or "water-energy-food nexus" (WEF) have been conceived as more than an analytical framework, rather as a tool able to reveal the ' the complex and interrelated nature of our global resource systems, on which we depend to achieve different social, economic and environmental goals' (FAO, 2014). According to research that applies the WEF nexus, at the core of the three elements of food, water, and energy stands human security, which is dependent on the balance of those three (Zarei, 2020) and highlights how shared water resources can be both a source of cooperation and a potential cause of conflicts among nations (Endo et al., 2017). Success in managing transboundary rivers, like the Tigris and Euphrates, hinges on the ability to navigate this ambivalence and negotiate agreements that address the needs of all riparian countries while mitigating the adverse impacts on both people and ecosystems.

3.1.3 Mesopotamian marshes drainage

During the 1980s, the authoritarian turn taken by the Iraqi government impacted the marshes. The revolution in Iran, indeed, not only alarmed the Sunni Iraqi government but also increased tensions between the central power and the Shiite Iraqi population, which traditionally lived in the marshes. Once again, the marshes took on a political role as a hiding place, a borderland, a land of conquest, difficult to control. The first phase of the deportation of the marshes community took place in the 1980s under the façade of a peace operation, as the marshes were seen as potentially dangerous

territories where rebellion and dissent could thrive (Ahram, 2015). After the Iran-Iraq war started, the violence and control by the Iraqi authorities over the marshes gradually intensified throughout the decade, partly due to attacks coming from the Iranian side. In 1988, the conflict came to an end, but the campaign against the marshes continued with a reduction of 1,500 square kilometers in the Al-Hawizeh marsh and heavier military control over the area.

However, considering the period before the war can lead to further problematizing this version. The persecution of the local population and the militarization of the area, which took shape during the war, was the consecution of what had initially been presented as a development project and justified as the reconstruction of the ancient fertile heritage of the Marsh Arabs as detectors of Arab authenticity. The plan was to settle the marsh dwellers against their nomadic nature, modernizing the marshes and their populations, but did not initially include violent measures, as happened during the escalation of the 1980s.

Some voices have claimed that Saddam Hussein's actions in draining the marshes could be seen as a realization of the plans proposed by the British engineer Frank Haigh in the 1950s (Ahram, 2015), drawing from the existence of a documented plan titled "Plan of Action for the Marshes" from 1987 seems to link the hydrological strategy of the regime to the previous one.

This hypothesis makes sense only if Saddam's intentions to drain the marshes are considered as previous to the Gulf War conflict. The construction of a drainage plain through the so-called 'Third River' is attested as started in 1953 and related to the resolution of water salinization. In this regard, it is evident that the political explanation of a 'war against rebels' does not suffice to justify an entire hydrological engineering strategy.

Furthermore, the dominating and controlling attitude of the regime over the marshes became evident in the 1970s. In the setting of a comprehensive plan for industrialization and the transformation of the relationship between citizens and the environment across the entire country (Ahram, 2015), the regime implemented the importation of foreign factories, compulsory education, and large-scale projects involving irrigation and

hydroelectric power plants. It is in this scenario that the project of the third river turned its reasons on marshes bonification and drainage (Partow, 2001).

In my opinion, the logic of ‘user-usable land’ can be used to summarize the way in which marshlands have been perceived and exploited over time. In this context, the marshes shifted from being a potential source of productive agricultural land, as proposed by the British plans, to becoming a tool for political control and security, as evident in Saddam's plan. The shared element in both scenarios is the view of land as a resource to be exploited for various purposes, even with diverse motivations and outcomes. Saddam's plan to drain the marshes aimed to make them more controllable and eliminate their historical role as a refuge for dissidents. Overall, the Iraqi regime had multiple reasons for draining the marshes, and all of them reflect a different type of "use" of the land, focused on maintaining authority, suppressing opposition, and improving production. In conclusion, this case stands as more than a humanitarian crisis and more than an environmental disaster. It has indeed been described as an ‘ecocide’ to underline the attack on both an ethnic group and their surrounding ecosystem. Following the *fil rouge* of technological and technopolitical domination that characterized the area since the ancient era, what emerges is a tension between the marshland ecosystem and continuous external attempts to force their wilderness into productive paradigms. Following a linear and nearly uninterrupted trajectory, this domestication infrastructure has grown through time, prioritizing unidirectional and specialized relationships, resulting in a loss of biodiversity and ecological complexity (Tsing et al. 2020).

3. 2 Marshlands community

3. 2. 1 Marsh Arab community in a multispecies setting

Environmental humanities scholars assess three main ways of understanding indigenous cultures. The first one assumes that indigenous communities have historically practiced sustainable environmental methods, and their traditional ecological knowledge can be utilized to devise solutions to environmental challenges at local, regional, and global scales. The second one aims to investigate indigenous issues, such as land rights and resource management, and integrate indigenous perspectives into analyses of contemporary culture. Thirdly, research can involve indigenous peoples as active participants and incorporate ethical principles to safeguard their traditional knowledge (Hubbell & Ryan, 2021).

Regarding the Marsh Arabs, one might think that studies tend to emphasize the first of those trends since, in most cases, Marsh Arabs are presented through the framework of their ancient way of life. One of the first elements that emerges in sources describing them is their lineage with the ancient Sumerians, a claim asserted by the Marsh Arabs themselves (Mccarron, 2021). Many sources attribute the Marsh Arabs to be one of the world's oldest surviving civilizations (Dellapenna, 2003; Kazmi, 2000) and claim, based on archaeological findings, that the general ecology and life organization of the marsh dwellers in the 1990s was similar to that of ancient civilizations (Ochsenschlager, 2004). Fishing, rice cultivation, and buffalo breeding are the core activities that make up their livelihood. Furthermore, ethnographies mention barley and wheat cultivation, as well as orchards of date palms (Alkhoury & Aditi, 2021; Coast et al., 2002; Ochsenschlager, 2004; Salim, 2021).

My general impression, reading the sources, has often been to encounter a nostalgic view of the Marsh Arabs, which I assume is, in many cases, influenced and structured as an antithesis to the description of the disaster in the 1990s. Frequently, the life of the community is depicted as ‘untouched,’ a place where ‘wildlife and people lived in harmony’ (PBS, 2010). Others describe them as a flourishing population which lived there for more than 5000 years (Lewis et al., 2013). The connection with Mesopotamia or the Garden of Eden is almost always stated at the beginning of each description of the Marsh Arabs community, making it hard not to stipulate a connection with the concept of “primitive wisdom” or at least with the idea of an identity uncorrupted by modern times (Milton, 2002). In the following section, I will analyze more in detail the

meaning and the differences between those two figures, which are so recurrently associated with marshlands.

The primary focus of this analysis is to highlight the prevailing narrative that portrays the Marsh Arabs as being in perfect harmony with their surrounding natural environment. A significant insight into the pillars of the imagery towards the entire Iraq and the population of the marshes can be found in a documentary from the 1950s documenting some stages of English colonization in Iraq (Graham, 1954).

In the opening moments of the video, certain recurring themes are introduced, beginning with the title "Ageless Iraq." The video portrays Iraq as an "ancient land" where the earliest civilizations were born. A further critical element lies in how the narrator calls Iraqis "the citizens of one of the most ancient nations" when, on the contrary, different communities inhabited different areas of Iraq before the delineation of borders and the invention of a nation in the area. Besides that, in analyzing this document, my aim is to focus on the opposition between ancient and modern promoted by the language used. The contrast between "ancient heritage" and the construction of a "new life and a modern state" is repeated on multiple occasions. The images depicting the passage of trains and planes over the Iraqi plain testify to the message that "Ageless Iraq is no longer a remote and isolated country" since "the twentieth century has come to Baghdad, steel, and concrete, with shining cars and white streets." What is granted to the people of Iraq, apart from being willing citizens to embrace the modern state, is the preservation of their best traditions, hence the art of craftsmanship.

In this case, as well, the document does not miss to reaffirm the connection with the Garden of Eden, which becomes particularly interesting as it is directly linked to the description of a *locus amoenus*, rich in dates and palms, naturally abundant thanks to the "water miracle." Except for a minimal part of primitive wisdom that allows the inhabitants of Iraq to weave carpets and shape vessels, the possibility of survival has fortunately come to these populations from the natural conformation of the surrounding environment, saving them from the desert. Southern Iraq, in particular, is portrayed as the cradle of the earliest civilizations and the cities of Uruk and Babylon, whose glory has been lost. The image of the Marsh Arabs is juxtaposed with the works of modernization, irrigation, and oil extraction that unfold throughout the duration of the

documentary. In short, what emerges is a narrative that unfolds in three stages. A glorious past, where civilizations thrived in the Mesopotamian area; an intermediate phase of regression, where the desert regains space, and all that remains is a primitive and unconscious relationship between humans and nature—a direct and immediate connection based on the survival of the earth's fruits. Finally, a present in which, thanks to the modern state, technology triumphs again through major works of social modernization, irrigation, and oil extraction.

The alternative to this perspective is, as already mentioned, the emphasis on primitive wisdom as an ancient and sustainable way of life, which restitutes a higher level of agency to indigenous communities but at the same time reiterates the dualism between civilized and non-civilized way of life. While it is true that local knowledge informs on the accumulated practices of indigenous cultures that have been passed down through generations, through concepts such as primitive wisdom, the discourse risks falling in the research for a stable and traditional identity, which most of the times happens to be not true or not effective, without taking into account patterns of change, adaptation or self-determination and change for the native community. To say it with Povinelli, “being ancestral in the right way is crucial to existence in late liberalism” (Povinelli, 2016, p. 71). In Australia, where Povinelli’s research is based, the debate over essentialist and constructivist perspectives on indigenous identity is particularly relevant within the multicultural context. Povinelli's work reveals the paradoxical nature of this viewpoint.

Frantz Fanon and members of the school of Subaltern Studies have suggested how colonial domination worked by inspiring in colonized subjects a desire to identify with their colonizers. The Australian example suggests that multicultural domination seems to work, in contrast, by inspiring subaltern and minority subjects to identify with the impossible object of an authentic self-identity.

(Povinelli, 2002, p. 6)

The expectation of authenticity and the evaluation based on rigid criteria create a contradiction, as indigenous cultures have frequently experienced alterations due to historical occurrences, some of which are connected to colonialism. One example is the case of *terra nullius*, the principle that is used to justify land appropriation and regulate

Aboriginal land rights. It was abolished only in 1992, with the first recognition of an Aboriginal native title. There is no doubt that the Australian multiculturalism case is very different from the one of the Marsh Arab community in Iraq. While the latter involves a legal doctrine endorsing land expropriation, the former does not. However, examining the Aboriginal experience in light of essentialist interpretations of identity provides insights into the perception of indigenous communities and their historical ties to colonial legacies. In addition, the approach of the Iraqi central government, as well as that of the colonial authorities preceding it, is not so far removed from the foundational concept of *terra nullius*.

In attempting to find an alternative way to describe the community of marsh dwellers, I chose to focus on the relationships they forge with the elements of the surrounding environment. As emphasized by authors such as Tsing and Haraway, the attempt to move away from a binary view of humans and nature, founded on domestication through technology, reveals an interspecies human nature made of relationships that impact each other reciprocally (Haraway, 2015; Tsing, 2005). In this view, it is possible to consider the interactions between marsh dwellers and the surrounding species from a different perspective. Consider the three main elements that are entangled with the marsh Arab community: water buffaloes, reeds, and water. When viewed as companion species, whose existence intersects with the lifestyle of the Marsh Arabs, influencing and being influenced by them, they turn into interrelated entities that exchange needs, behaviors, spaces, and meanings, emphasizing performative practices and relations rather than essentialist identities.

Buffalo is the primary source of livelihood for Marsh Arabs as they provide essential resources such as meat and milk while supporting local livelihood through crafted items. On the other side, buffalo play a crucial role in maintaining the ecological balance by grazing on vegetation and preventing overgrowth, which could otherwise lead to an unbalanced food chain and harm the marsh ecosystem (Qar & Governorates, 2007). Their grazing activities also create open spaces that allow for the growth of a diverse range of plant species, which in turn supports a variety of other marshland fauna. In other words, the practice of guiding and moving buffaloes around shape routes that impact the movement of both human and non-human species while simultaneously promoting the

health of the soil. Moreover, the way buffaloes reproduce and migrate in accordance with the seasons has a profound impact on the cyclical transformations that occur throughout the year and the way in which humans plan their daily activities.

In essence, the multispecies bond with water buffaloes profoundly shapes the marsh dwellers' life, economy, and the marshland environment.

The second element is reeds, which are crucial to many aspects of the life of Marsh Arabs. Integral to their lifestyle, reeds are abundant, affordable, and easily accessible building materials (Ochsenschlager, 2004). Utilizing traditional construction methods and communal efforts, each family owns a private dwelling. As analyzed in the following sections, the building material becomes an element to describe the shift in the habits of the Marsh Arabs, illustrating how the community has come into contact with external infrastructures. As well as reeds, elements like water and mud become integral parts of the social infrastructure of the community. Marsh Arabs construct their homes on platforms or artificial islands in water-dominated spaces (Ochsenschlager, 2004).

In the third place, date palms represent a cornerstone of both the economic and ecological systems of the region, providing nourishment while also contributing to local life in a variety of ways. In the human realm, date palms provide a crucial food source, with dates consumed directly or processed into various products, supporting local economies. Additionally, they serve as a sustainable building material and fuel source, with different parts of the palm repurposed for construction and energy needs. In the ecological context, date palms contribute significantly to biodiversity by providing habitats for various wildlife forms. Their presence offers shade and protection for other fruit trees, fostering a balanced ecosystem (Al-Dafar, 2015).

The water level is something that directly affects the ecosystem and livelihood in the marshes, as anticipated in the second chapter. In addition to water salinization, agriculture, and human health, the water level and its quality directly impact the subsistence and economy of the Marsh Arab community. The water level and seasonal flow significantly impact fishing practices and human interactions with fish in the marshes of southern Iraq. As spring arrives, the water level rises, leading to an increase in fishing activity as fish move into shallower areas, which allows fishers to make use of techniques like nets and spears. In the summertime, when the water levels of the

Tigris and Euphrates rivers and canals decrease, the water warms up, causing fish to migrate to the deeper parts of lakes and marshes to find cooler conditions. To take advantage of this phenomenon, riverbank villages often construct small mats on the water, creating shelters to collect fish (Al-Dafar, 2015).

From this brief description, I do not claim to be exhaustive nor to replace an ethnographic study. However, what I aim to illustrate through these small insights is how the marshland community demonstrates a high and intricate level of adaptation to the surrounding environment and knowledge of the territory. In contrast to the narrative that often infantilizes and naturalizes indigenous communities, as found in the aforementioned document, human survival in the marshes occurs through an extremely sophisticated multispecies relationship that is far from being arbitrary or romantic. As Al-Dafar suggests in his work, the marshes of southern Iraq have the capacity to offer substantial resources, enabling the establishment of a self-sustained governmental structure (Al-Dafar, 2015).

3. 2. 2 Longstanding a slow change: non-remote community and the impacts on women

Before examining some of the slow impacts on the Marsh Arabs community during the last decades of the twentieth century, let me lay down briefly some historical background. As already mentioned, due to political plans of development, from the 1960s-1980s, the region experienced transformations from broader society, which involved economic migration movements (Human Rights Watch, 2003). Despite some advancements in education and health services during the 1970s, the Marsh Arabs found themselves increasingly marginalized by the surrounding community that viewed them with a mix of derision and discrimination. During a conference titled “Nature Iraq” at the World Affairs Council of Houston, the Iraqi environmentalist Azzam Alwash explains the wide shared prejudice that used to label the marsh Arabs community: “When I was growing up in Iraq, we looked down upon the Marsh Arabs. We viewed them the way you all view Appalachia. We considered them backward people”.

Alwash' statements reveal a form of discrimination that extends beyond mere cultural or ethnic prejudices. The comparison between the Marsh Arabs and Appalachia evokes the idea of "sacrificed zones," a concept rooted in the era of atomic testing, which has entered contemporary environmental discussions to describe regions or communities that have been wasted due to industrial activities or political decisions. Since the nineteenth century, the Appalachian region has suffered from severe environmental degradation due to foreign companies' coal extractions. By extension, inhabitants of degraded areas often become the targets of discrimination, originating a vicious cycle of depopulation, impoverishment, and the reinforcement of stigma. The historically and geographically marginal position of the Iraqi marshes and their inhabitants places them within this dynamic, which can be reversed through a narrative revision and an analysis of historical causes and responsibilities.

The Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s turned the marshes into a battlefield, with Iranian troops using them for war strategies. As Shia-Muslims, the Marsh Arabs were suspected of sympathizing with the invaders, and the marshes became objects of Iraqi bombings. The aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War witnessed a rebellion by Shia Muslims against Saddam Hussein, triggering brutal repressions from the regime (Adriansen, 2004). At the time, international organizations raised concerns about the adverse conditions resulting from the sanctions imposed to the regime by the UN and how they would disproportionately affect the marginalized marsh dwellers in the southeastern part of the country. A 1997 estimate by the AMAR Foundation raised concerns about their high nutritional risk, arguing how repressive policies coming from the central government intensified the difficulties faced by the locals, which were mostly dependent on food rations (Coast, Nicholson, and Clark, 2002).

As emerged in Chapter 2 and as I will discuss further in the next section, the mainly shared historical narrative on the desiccation of the marshes is defined in two predominant ways: either the marshes and their inhabitants are portrayed as victims of an environmental disaster, regardless of the history and causes, or (even more often) as victims of a humanitarian one. In both cases, the narrative seems to suggest a sudden rupture occurring in the 1990s within a linear, untouched, monolithic trajectory of the lives of the Marsh Arabs and the surrounding environment and species. An interesting

example of an alternative perspective that sheds light on the gradual transformation of the marshes and its associated impact on the community arises from the ethnography conducted by Edward Ochsenschlager between 1968 and 1990. Particularly, he underlines how the draining of marshes has allowed, more or less directly and more or less intentionally, a closer connection with nearby cities, as seen in cases such as the link between Tell al Hiba and Shatra (Ochsenschlager, 2004). The establishment of new connections seems to have followed a long process, rooting decades precedent to the 1990s. This led to a noticeable transformation in the marsh communities, fostering increased interaction with the rest of Iraq, as well as significant social changes within the community. A noticeable example lies in the prices of construction materials: As anticipated in the previous section, examining the construction material market offers insights into the circulation of commodities, their availability, and price fluctuations. It provides insights that can challenge the rhetoric of a life lived in harmony with nature, revealing instead the gradual and enduring changes to which the community has adapted.

In 1968 the cheapest constructions were made of reed, the middle range were mudbrick and mud, and the most expensive were backed brick or cement block. In 1990, the drying up of the marshes had caused the giant reeds to all but disappear, and with the access provided by the building of new roads, the cheapest construction material, cement block, was easily obtainable everywhere, and the most expensive was reed.

(Ochsenschlager 2004, p. 102)

The passage illustrates a significant shift in the economic and environmental landscape of the Iraqi marshes. In 1968, the availability and cost of construction materials were directly tied to the local environment, with reed being the cheapest, mudbrick and mud in the middle range, and cement block as the most expensive. However, by 1990, two elements had occurred. First, the drying up of the marshes led to the near disappearance of giant reeds, altering the availability of traditional construction materials. Simultaneously, the construction landscape was influenced by increased connectivity, as new roads facilitated access to other materials, making them available and cheaper.

A similar perspective comes from a study published by the AMAR Foundation in 2001, which endorses the thesis of a progressive and long-rooted change that impacted the marsh Arabs' way of life as well as their movements:

The twentieth century saw a relative social stabilization and economic prosperity. Iraq's oil wealth has led to several changes. People from the Marshlands drifted to the cities of Basra and Baghdad, Mosul and Kirkuk. The series of poor rainfall events in the 1950s accelerated this drift. At the same time the modern world was penetrating the Marshlands. Schools and clinics and even factories were challenging traditional patterns of life.

(Coast et al., 2002)

Under this light, the idea of a static and closed society that is not influenced by time and the external world becomes increasingly hard to picture. On one side, it remains clear that the marshland context is characterized by a unique social and geographical configuration that makes it resistant to the processes of standardization and modernization that more easily occur in urban settings. Despite this, change did eventually come to these areas, albeit in different times and forms than what was seen in urban environments. In both cases, Eriksen's concept of "clashing scales" (Eriksen, 2016) can be relevant to problematizing the slow changes in Iraqi marshlands during the 1970s in terms of their relationship with the rest of the world. During that time, the growing interconnectedness between the marshes and the nearby urban areas resulted in an encounter between various levels of social and economic structures. The introduction of new infrastructure and technologies, along with increased trade, posed a challenge to the social dynamics of the marsh communities. From the passages, it is reasonable to deduce that during the 1970s, the marshes experienced a heightened moment of tension and more forceful interaction with the external world. Government policies, domesticating nudges, and stronger connections to urban areas likely altered the dynamics that previously shaped the relationships between the marshes and nearby areas. Such a perspective is interesting as it shifts the rupture point further back in the timeline and allows us to contextualize it. However, even more interesting is to notice

how this process of clashing scales has altered meanings even within the marshland community.

As a last remark, I want to take a look at how changes in the context of the marshes have impacted social roles, particularly those of women. In the marshes, traditionally, women play fundamental roles both in the household economy and work activities. Their responsibilities extended beyond the household, and they actively participated in community and outdoor activities. Their involvement in community tasks, such as building houses using traditional methods, showcased their significance in preserving cultural practices. Moreover, they used to work alongside men, engaging in various activities such as buffalo breeding, reed gathering, as well as contributing to domestic dynamics by producing handcraft and taking care of household needs. During the aftermath of the 1991 uprisings, when some men were imprisoned or executed, women continued to manage daily tasks, ensuring community healthcare. The marshes' demise has caused a change in women's status and living conditions as they have seen a reduced need to work outdoors, as well as a deterioration in literacy rates (UNOHCI, 2003).

Fieldworks have report shift in women's roles, with many describing themselves as primarily having domestic responsibilities post-desiccation. The suspension of economic activities, including fishing and farming, led to a decline in women's participation in outdoor tasks. The interruption of their daily routine, as depicted in the study, showcased a significant drop in their contribution, particularly in mat-weaving (Al-Mudaffar Fawzi et al., 2016). From this example, it emerges how the environmental changes not only damaged the ecosystem but also impacted the cultural fabric of the Marsh Arab community.

3. 2. 3 Marsh Arabs migration

Estimating the number of Marsh Arabs who have moved beyond the marshlands is significantly challenging for more than one reason. In the first place, the area has been subjected to guerrillas, tensions, and government detention for years, making field research and data collection challenging. Secondly, marsh dwellers' movements include, probably in the majority of cases, internal movements within the country, or in other

words, internal displacement. Counting internally displaced people (IDPs), especially in such an unruly region, proves to be more challenging than counting refugees who have crossed international borders. Nevertheless, through text and data tracking efforts, it is possible to gain an understanding of the population distribution in and outside Iraqi marshes. One of the earliest and most widely acknowledged pieces of information regarding the demography of the marshlands comes from Salim's ethnography conducted in the 1950s. This study, considered a milestone in the field of Marsh Arabs, serves as a foundation for many subsequent research, providing one of the first estimations of the marsh population, which is assessed at around 400,000 (Salim, 2021). The Human Rights Watch briefing paper in 2003 attributes a substantial population decrease from the 1960s to the 1980s, reaching around 250,000 by 1991, to economic migration (Human Rights Watch, 2003). In 1993, they estimated that the rural population of the marshlands was about 200,000, considering the influx of army deserters and political opponents seeking refuge after 1991. After that, only a small fraction, possibly 20,000 of the original inhabitants, remains in the marshlands, while the majority has fled or migrated to Iran and other locations (Human Rights Watch, 2003).

According to the assessment provided by the UN Office for the Humanitarian Coordination for Iraq, at the beginning of 2003, less than 10% of Marsh Arabs were still able to support their traditional way of life. An estimated 100,000 to 200,000 have experienced internal displacement, while up to 100,000 have fled as refugees to other countries. Around 40,000 were estimated to be in Iran and frequently crossing the border (UNOHCI, 2003).

In addition, as previously highlighted, the practice of the Iraqi government using mobility control as a political tool played a role in the case of the Marsh Arabs. Forced resettlement, as indicated in the UNOCHI assessment, has long been a policy employed by the Iraqi government to relocate people without their consent. Specifically, during the 1990s, the government implemented forced resettlement for the Marsh Arabs, displacing thousands from the southern marshes to northern cities. Overall, the situation of Marsh Arabs since the 1990s has been described as a collective and forced migration. As a last remark it is necessary to mention the plea contained in the UNEP document of

2001, which claims for a recognition of the Marsh Arabs as ‘environmental refugees’:
 “Given that the flight of the Marsh Arabs was triggered by massive environmental deterioration, there is a strong case for them to be considered as environmental refugees.” (Partow, 2001) in absence of a relative juridical framework to sustain it, this claim did not produce effective consequences. Sources referring to the marsh dwellers as environmental refugees always refer to this document, which has no legal value.

Servestan camp, located on the central coast of Iran, approximately 10 kilometers from the nearest town, has served as a crucial site for collecting data on Marsh Arab refugees. Predominantly including Marsh Arab inhabitants, the camp data have provided demographic estimations on Marsh Arab population and the features of their movements. The depiction of population characteristics highlights that the majority of household heads have origins in the marshes in Iraq (56.8%), and there is stability in the residence of the Marsh Arabs over recent decades.

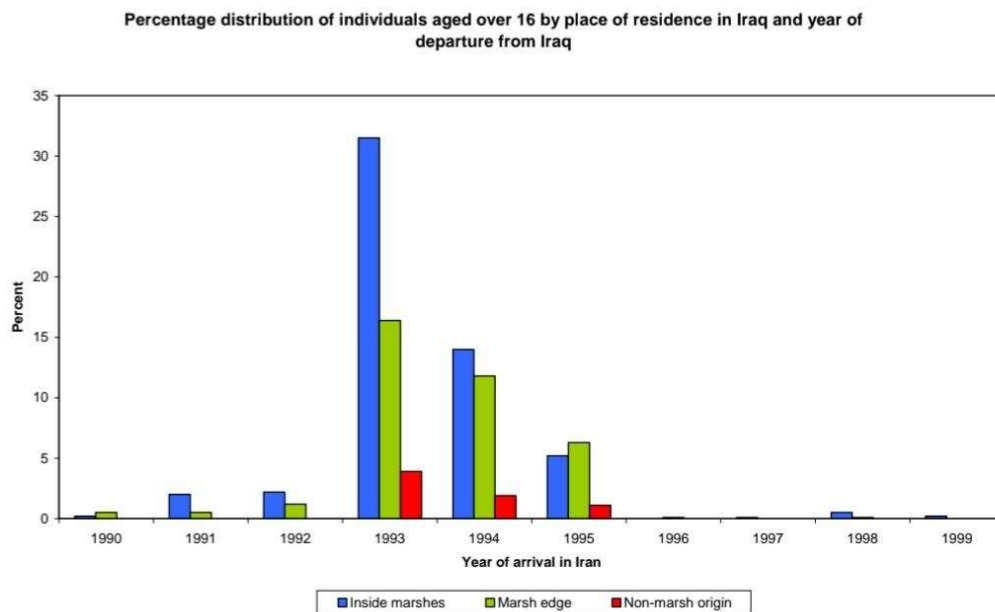


Figure 7 (Coast, Nicholson, and Clark 2002)

The graph, based on the survey conducted in the camp, shows that migration began in 1990, peaked in 1993, and sharply declined from 1996 onwards, from which one could

hypothesize a correlation with the movements from the marshes (Figure 7). Furthermore, it can be deduced that people from outside the marshes began arriving only in 1993, indicating that conditions outside the marshes were relatively better than those inside the marshes.

A different perspective comes from the ethnographies of anthropologists who visited the marshes in the years before 1990. When combined with reports from international agencies, these works reveal some discrepancies or deliberate choices in what is emphasized. One significant ethnography was conducted by the anthropologist and archeologist Edward L. Ochsenschlager between 1968 and 1990 in the area near Al Hiba. Although this study does not cover the turning point of the drainage in 1992, it brings to light many aspects supporting the thesis of a longstanding tradition and systemic deterioration of the marshes' ecosystem. It argues that environmental deterioration had been ongoing since the sixties due to "private irrigation projects of sheiks and landowners" (Ochsenschlager, 2004, 11). Over the following decade, the implementation of dams and channels increased, justified as a development project for irrigation and flood prevention. Concerning the specific issue of human movements, it is interesting to note that the author emphasizes multiple times throughout the book that it is curious how many sources consistently attribute the marsh dwellers outgoing migration from the marshes solely to the Shia rebellion against the regime in 1991. From the author's perspective, having lived there, it becomes evident that this process was underway for over a decade before the rebellion.

According to this study, marsh drying was described as a gradual process that occurred throughout the entire period between 1968 and 1990. Additionally, it is highlighted that the Ma'dan people were not the sole groups affected. As a result of these changes, the Bedouins, who were semi-nomadic and used to go to marshes during their annual migration movements, stopped visiting marshes. The outcome seems to suggest that by the 1980s, almost none of the neighbors were present in the area surrounding Al Hiba. Furthermore, the study provides a more intricate understanding of the processes involved in this change, revealing the interweaving of social, economic, and even global factors that affected the marshes communities (Ochsenschlager, 2004).

3. 3 Analyzing narratives on the Iraqi Marshlands: Trends, Messages, and the Role of International Organizations

In this section, I focused on the analysis of discourses that have described and accompanied the issue of the marshlands and their community, examining common aspects, key trends, and more prominent emerging messages. As a first step, I will consider the thesis of Hanne Adriansen, professor of human geography and anthropologist at Aarhus University, Denmark. In my opinion, her discourse provides one of the most interesting analyses to summarize the communicative trends around the Iraqi marshes from the 1990s onwards. Secondly, I have taken into account some of the key voices of the time, comparing discourses from the early 1990s with some more recent ones from the post-2002 period. I primarily focused on documents and reports related to international organizations, both because they constituted an important part of the public debate of those years and because I assumed their role as crucial in creating imaginaries and promoting the circulation of related terminology. In my analysis, I delved into the quantitative aspect of the attention devoted to the Iraqi marshlands issue, examining the volume of discourse over time. Additionally, I explored the qualitative dimension, investigating whether there was a predominant emphasis on the environmental or humanitarian aspects. The temporal dimension of both these aspects was a crucial focus of examination.

3. 3. 1 The Shift in Narratives: From Mesopotamia to the Garden of Eden in the International Discourse

According to Adriansen, the mediatic and public perspective surrounding the marshes takes up two distinct narratives, which are represented by the Mesopotamia discourse and the Garden of Eden discourse. In his article, "What Happened to the Iraqi Marsh Arabs and their Land?" published in 2004, she describes a shift in the narrative from the

first paradigm to the second that occurred between 2002 and 2003. Not only for Adriansen, this turning point marked the rise of international attention on the marshlands case, which had been rarely investigated before, but it also prompted the start of the paradigm that would have led the narrative for the following years. As further explained in the following paragraphs, according to Adriansen, the shift that occurred was rooted in the transition from a focus on the human side, overlooking the environmental aspect of the matter. The Mesopotamia discourse, in general, is based on the focus on the historical connection with the ancient region of Mesopotamia, emphasizing the link between civilization and that place as an uninterrupted continuum for millennia. As the 'cradle of civilization,' Mesopotamia represents the moment when humans separated from the primitive stage and manipulated the wilderness by settling, inventing cultivation, and domesticating animals. However, as already mentioned, the metaphor of Mesopotamia presents some inconsistencies, as it is based on a misalignment that obscures part of the parallelism and glorifies only one aspect of the discourse. On the one hand, it emphasizes the break from a pre-civilization state and the manipulation of the environment through settlement and agricultural practices. On the other hand, the romanticization of Mesopotamia depicts it as a place of inherent ecological harmony and wisdom.

Within the history of international organization communication, Mesopotamian discourse is traceable in the 2001 UNEP report, which places itself in the trace of the environmentalism of the 1990s not only because it indirectly refers to the primitive ecological wisdom as mentioned earlier but also for a vision of the environment and ecology portrayed as apolitical. The document extensively focuses on details regarding the ecological impact, describing the MOD project and the third river plan with accuracy and examining both the political water management aspect and the technological implementation of the project. Moreover, it addresses the loss of biodiversity, highlighting the impact on species due to the desiccation of the marshes and the resulting ecosystem imbalances. However, notably, throughout the entire report, neither the regime nor Saddam Hussein is ever named, despite the in-depth coverage of water management issues in the Tigris and Euphrates basin (Partow 2001). On the other hand, the Garden of Eden discourse, emerging after 2002, is aimed at emphasizing the

wilderness, amenity, and authenticity of the marshes (Adriansen 2004). In this regard, Adriansen argues that the discourse on the Garden of Eden is particularly effective in portraying Saddam's actions negatively, depicting him as the one who ruined an earthly paradise.

When articles state that Saddam Hussein is responsible for the destruction of the 'Garden of Eden' the reader is left with the impression that Saddam Hussein is the devil personified. In this way, the discursive construction of environmental destruction can be seen as part of the legitimizing process for the 'liberation of Iraq.

(Adriansen 2004)

Through this operation, the international discourse, particularly that of the coalition, would have constructed a figure of the dictator and a justification for their attack, which has become one of the most sensitive points in the Iraqi issue, as it relied on motivations largely acknowledged as unsubstantial by historians. In essence, Adriansen highlights the existence of a shift in narratives: while during the nineties, the limited discourse addressing this matter predominantly presented a more pronounced environmentalist perspective, since 2002, new narratives have emerged as a consequence of international escalation, shifting the focus to humans and human rights, making the plight of the Marsh Arabs the central point of discussion (Adriansen, 2004).

From this juncture, given the international context and the imminent pressure on Iraq and the regime, Saddam Hussein's role in the degradation of the marshes was perceived as central and emphasized as an almost unidirectional cause.

As a first remark and a proof that some shift happened in quantity terms of attention in 2002, I will consider the meeting hosted by the U.S. Institute of Peace on November 11, 2002, where the matter was defined under the human rights violation frame and Saddam Hussein was pointed as the main responsible of genocide against the Marsh Arabs.

Professor Joseph Dellapenna from Villanova University Law School was one of the leading voices in the legal sector, framing Hussein's action as an ecocide and meanwhile linking the destruction of livelihoods to the one of the marshes ecosystems.

What is unique about this instance of ecocide, and what sets it apart from other instances of ecocide, is that the destruction was for the purpose of destruction and not for some, arguably beneficial purpose such as economic development. Here ecocide was adopted as a deliberate mechanism for bringing about genocide.

(Dellapenna, 2007)

Dellapenna's analysis reflects a dual awareness of the consequences of ecocide. Firstly, his discourse makes a growing ecological awareness emerge concerning the destruction of ecosystems, emphasizing the interconnectedness between the environment and human communities.

However, this perspective ultimately shifts the focus from the ecological aspect to the human dimension. Despite acknowledging the environmental devastation, the attention is redirected to Saddam Hussein as the central figure responsible for these actions, focusing on the humanitarian crisis as a consequence of his actions, placing the spotlight on the deliberate actions of individuals and their implications on human rights.

Nonetheless, for what concerns the shift in terms of contents depicted by Adriansen, I did not find substantial evidence in my research to support the significant clear-cut she described around the two paradigms. Despite the distinction between Mesopotamian and Garden of Eden discourses, and their relatively conveyed messages remain valuable, my impression is that the whole discussion on the marshes has been predominantly read through an anthropocentric and humanitarian lens. As I am going to sustain, most of the early sources present discourses around Marsh Arabs as a humanitarian crisis, emphasizing the ethnic and persecutory aspects of the issue (Goldstein 1992).

3. 3. 2 Anthropocentric Perspectives and human rights Trends in International Organizations' speeches

While analyzing the speeches of international organizations, I mainly asked three questions. First, considering that the events occurred in a historical period long before the rise of a multispecies perspective, I assumed that it is possible to identify a

positioning of the texts on a more anthropocentric side or on a more environmentalist side. In other words, I tried to understand whether the speeches tend to give more weight to the humanitarian situation or to the environmental impacts. Secondly, I look for who was pointed at as responsible for the draining of the marshes and the impacts on the community in general. I looked into how deeply the historical roots of major engineering projects in southern Iraq are evaluated and examined how the figure of Saddam Hussein emerges and in what terms. Lastly, I aimed to identify how the people involved were characterized, the level of victimization, and the political and legal framework in which they are described. To do this, I have drawn upon the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which I have considered particularly effective for my purpose. Particularly focused on revealing the underlying ideological dynamics and power relations in the texts, CDA permits the critical examine the semiotic dimensions of power, injustice, and socio-political changes. One of the main assumptions of this method is indeed that discourses are not mere linguistic expressions but actively contribute to constituting and conditioning social reality (Wodak, 2014).

One of the earliest contributors was Middle East Watch, which was established as a branch of Human Rights Watch in 1989. The examined document is fieldwork conducted through interviews with Iraqi refugees in rebel-controlled areas and neighboring countries. Notably, in contrast to the UNEP's report a few years later, the MEW study begins with a focus on Saddam Hussein (Goldstein, 1992).

The MEW's fieldwork, developed in the report titled "Endless Torment, the 1991 uprising in Iraq and its aftermath," is an in-depth examination of the double uprisings in north and south Iraq and its consequent persecutions of Kurds and Shia. The report documents the suffering experienced by these communities under Saddam Hussein's regime.

In the south, the plight of the Shi'a is no less dire, although less well-known, because the area remains virtually closed to scrutiny by outside observers. Thousand of Shi'a, including hundreds of clerics, have been imprisoned without charge or have disappeared in state custody since the uprising [...]. In southeastern Iraq, thousands of Shi'a civilians, army deserters, and rebels, primarily from cities of Basra, al-Amara, and al-Naziriya, have sought precarious shelter in remote areas

of the marshes that straddle the Iranian border. Iraq's security forces, unable to quell the low-level resistance emanating from this region, have reportedly shelled and launched military raids in the area in an indiscriminate fashion, wounding and killing unarmed civilians.

(Goldstein 1992, 2)

The text reveals an immediate focus on the violation of human rights in describing the challenging situation of Shia in southern Iraq. The key term "plight" conveys a sense of suffering and difficulty, emphasizing the critical condition of the individuals involved. The phrase "imprisoned without charge" highlights the lack of formal procedure and the consequent abuse of legal rights, drawing attention to the violation of fundamental rights and personal freedom. The use of "disappeared in state custody" further underscores the state's responsibility in individuals' disappearance, raising serious concerns about the safety and integrity of those detained.

Despite the low level of rebel activity, the government seems determined to eliminate resistance in the region. [...] the government appears to be employing a combination of coercion and incentives to resettle marsh dwellers in more accessible locations outside the marshes or on their periphery. Rebels also alleged that the Iraqi army was draining the swamps and building roads through them so that its tanks and heavy artillery could operate more effectively in the area.

(Goldstein 1992, 22)

The initial focus on the government's strength compared to the relatively low rebel activity sets the stage for examining power dynamics and political motives. A notable aspect is the brief mention of the government's environmental actions in the marshes. However, it overall prioritizes the government's central role highlighting the mix of coercion and incentives to relocate marsh dwellers and control the area. In general, the entire fieldwork heavily focuses on human rights violations by the Iraqi regime and the international community. It calls for the immediate cessation of the Oil-for-Food program imposed by the United Nations, which is denounced for worsening vulnerabilities and exacerbating inequalities, causing a rise in the prices of essential

commodities. It extensively discusses ethnic persecution, the entanglement between Shiite repression, rebel actions, and their significance in the marshes.

Another example is provided by the report on human rights published by Amnesty International in 1994, which extensively describes the situation and persecution of the Marsh Arabs. As expected, the report focuses on human rights violations and the actions of the central government towards the Kurdish and Shia ethnicities. However, it is interesting to note that rather than attribute the issue to ethnic persecution, it places the cause of the drainage, displacement, and persecution in the need for the securitization of the marshland.

The attacks were part of the government's efforts to secure control of the vast marshland area located between Basra, al-'Amara, and al-Nasiriya, which has traditionally served as a hiding place for government opponents and army deserters. Up to 8,000 people had fled the southern marshes by the end of the year as a result of military attacks on villages, the draining of large stretches of marshland, and the destruction of the local economy.

(Amnesty International 1994, 168)

The alarming register warns about problems with human rights and the environment due to the government's actions in gaining control over the marshlands. Even though the impact on the ecosystem is mentioned, the main focus remains on how the attack affects the local people. The use of phrases like "hiding place for government opponents and army deserters" suggests political reasons behind the attacks, raising concerns about human rights and people's safety as well as questioning if the government's actions are really necessary and applied in the right proportion. However, the report aligns with other voices in assigning responsibility to Saddam but also focuses on a strictly anthropocentric and humanitarian interpretation (Amnesty International, 1994).

Additionally, during this period, the AMAR Foundation was established as a non-profit organization founded by Baroness Emma Nicholson with the aim of addressing the humanitarian crisis affecting the Marsh Arabs. In its early stages, the AMAR Foundation focused on documenting the negative impacts of environmental change on the lives of Marsh Dwellers in southern Iraq. In 1994, AMAR commissioned a report

titled "An Environmental and Ecological Study of the Marshlands of Mesopotamia," which emphasized the unique biodiversity and the self-sustaining way of life of the community. The six-year-later study "The Iraq Marshland: A Human and Environmental Study" aimed to raise international awareness for establishing water resource management and the responsibilities of the Iraqi government, neighboring governments, and international agencies (Coast, et al., 2002).

The construction of dams, forcible migration of communities, the draining of the Marshlands that was carried out in the 1990s was an extension of earlier trends. However, an obsession with security drove the agenda. By depopulating the Marshlands, by reducing the area to desert, the region was no longer able to provide a sustainable refuge for dissidents. Saddam Hussein was able to impose his own will on the refractory people of the Marshlands. [...] The plight of the Marsh Dwellers is part of the plight of the Iraqi people as a whole who have been hostages of a regime that has one of the worst human rights records of any modern government.

(Coast et al., 2002)

First of all, as mentioned above, the AMAR Foundation's discourse acknowledges some of the longstanding patterns which have led to the drainage of the marshes. The study previously mentioned how the first conceiving of draining the marshes for agricultural issues was prompted by the British and that the Saddam Hussein project was built upon those plans. The basis of the AMAR discourse seems to acknowledge and express the interconnectedness of environmental and humanitarian issues in the region. However, the narrative ultimately portrays these problems as a consequence of Saddam Hussein's free will and authoritarian rule. Nevertheless, based on the text, the crucial moment appears to be linked to the emphasis on security. This perspective aligns with a broader narrative that portrays Saddam Hussein as the direct and intentional force behind the suffering of the Marsh Arabs, reinforcing the foundation's emphasis on the political aspect of the environmental crisis. The discourse effectively combines environmental and humanitarian concerns while ultimately attributing responsibility to Saddam Hussein's actions and decisions.

All the discourses examined so far fall within a timeline preceding the UNEP document that Adriansen describes as a trace of the Mesopotamian discourse. In this sense, the discourse of the Garden of Eden, which Adriansen connects to an effort to attribute blame to Saddam Hussein as the destroyer of the Earth paradise, does not appear to be relevant to the post-2002 period.

As mentioned above, the most prominent example of the eco-centric perspective on marshland destruction is the report titled "The Mesopotamian Marshlands: Demise of an Ecosystem," written by Hassan Partow. The purpose of the report is to assess the early warning and assessment of the Mesopotamian Marshlands ecosystem, highlighting its decline and the threats it faces. The register of the report is formal and informative, providing scientific information and analysis about the Mesopotamian Marshlands and the Tigris-Euphrates River system. Besides looking at the environmental degradation and demise of the marshlands, the report has the merit of zooming out the field, calling for the need for international and regional cooperation to address and manage the whole river system.

The demise of the Mesopotamian Marshlands is attributed to two main causes: upstream dam construction and engineering works implemented to drain the marshlands. The construction of dams upstream has led to a decrease in freshwater flows, seawater intrusion, and disruption of the complex ecology of the Shatt al-Arab estuary. Additionally, the reduced amount of sediment reaching the sea has slowed the accretion of the coastal delta. Engineering works specifically aimed at draining the marshlands have further contributed to their loss. These human actions have resulted in the transformation of the once thriving wetland ecosystem into a salt-encrusted desert.

In summary, I believe that the definitions of the two discourses bring out several elements of reflection such as the peak of attention in 2002, the connection of the narrative with the need to justify the war and the vilification of Saddam, the simplification of the Marsh Arabs' story under mere ethnic causality. Even Dellapenna's discourse, although it has the merit of linking the environmental issue to the political one by making ecocide a means for genocide, ultimately is limited to a response based on unilateral causality and a single responsible party. This suggests, in my opinion, a hierarchy of values and the inability to frame the issue outside the terms of persecution

and human rights violations. Also, the mainstream perspective frames the issue within the context of human rights and persecution against the Marsh Arabs as an ethnic group. In this narrative, the destruction of the land and the human component are acknowledged as parallel but ultimately perceived and treated as two separate matters.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have delved into the specific case of the Iraqi marshes and their community. Through the analysis of the historical background, a pattern of long-term adaptation emerges. While the dominant narrative often portrays the marshes as untouched by the outside world, ethnographic studies reveal multiple instances of community adaptation. This perspective is valuable for deconstructing an essentialist view of the local community and moving beyond the stalemate between rhetoric emphasizing harmony with nature and triumph over it through technology. Instead, what becomes evident is a community with a long and consistent history of adapting to the landscape and its alterations, with migration emerging as one of the options.

The examination of the Marsh Arabs community revealed certain constraints: the marsh dwellers, their way of life, and their movements do not benefit from a robust tradition of documentation, as demographic data, figures, and destinations of Marsh Arabs' movements are inherently challenging to gather due to the intrinsic characteristics of the region. Firstly, the historical and geographical marginality of the marshes has not allowed space for a tradition of censuses or demographic awareness. Secondly, Iraqi migration, particularly during the 1990s and the 2000s, takes on distinctive features, spreading in heterogeneous movements rather than following the pattern of asylum seekers and reception camps. Thirdly, the large portion of internally displaced people, which remains the most challenging to trace, does not facilitate the processing of data. Mostly, traces of community practices and how they have changed through time are scattered in ethnographies (Ahram, 2021; Al-Dafar, 2015; Ochsenschlager, 2004; Salim, 1961), while data are mainly provided by organizations that have operated in the area (Goldstein, 1992; Human Rights Watch, 2003; Partow, 2001; UNOHCI, 2003). I have

tried to balance these two types of sources, which have sometimes proven to be in disagreement.

Regarding the narrative level, two factors come to light. Firstly, studies on Iraqi migration align with the 1990s trend of complicating migration theories by considering multiple levels, from macro to micro, from individual to collective. The sensibilities of the time also favored the ethnic and political aspects of human movements, while the environmental framework only began to emerge in the past decade.

When it comes to the specific case of the Marsh Arabs, my impression throughout the research has been the predominance of a humanitarian perspective. Even studies, like those conducted by Dellapenna and the AMAR Foundation, which recognized the relevance of the environmental discourse, ultimately fixed it towards an anthropocentric view, emphasizing at every step the violation of human rights of the indigenous community. Despite the value of these concerns being acknowledged, the emerging perspective, in my opinion, is simplistic and dualistic, as it falls into a direct relationship between the actions of the regime and the persecution of an ethnicity. The prevailing view, likely influenced by the delicate international situation, has consistently blamed the personality of Saddam Hussein without broadening the perspective to consider the posture adopted by both the colonial history and neighboring countries towards the Iraqi marshes. On the other hand, the Marsh Arab community has been confined to an often stereotyped and two-dimensional view, depicting them as a primitive residue whose value almost exclusively lies in their ancestral existence. Their traditional distance from state control and the distinctiveness of their situation, however, is reflected in adaptation strategies to environmental degradation, including migratory movements. Yet, these movements have taken forms once again unofficial and unchanneled, ultimately leading to the failure of attempts to classify the Marsh Arabs under the framework of climate refugees.

Conclusion

One of the pillars of this research has been to hybridize the study on environmental migration with a situated yet interdisciplinary perspective, considering the need to problematize climate migration and situate narratives on climate change. In doing so, I endeavored to integrate the theoretical and critical issues surrounding the debate on Anthropocene and environmental mobility focusing on the context of Iraqi marshlands. This research explored the Iraqi political and social context of its migratory landscape, leading to an analysis of the drying-up of the Iraqi marshlands and the perception within the international narrative.

Wetlands have proved to be a privileged point for analyzing how global and local environmental processes such as climate change, land conversion, water management, and pollution can interact and contribute to environmental degradation. The contribution provided by the Rio Declaration to the realm of wetlands underscores a crucial step as it shows the institutional recognition of the importance of natural ecosystems in sustaining human life. Furthermore, the principle of the Convention on Biological Diversity of 1992 stands as a reminder of how the institution of the national state remains an essential factor in ensuring the functioning of environmental law. At the same time, the uneven structure of wetlands shows how states are inherently incapable of addressing environmental issues that cross national boundaries.

A further remark regards the construction of dams, which stands as one of the most controversial trigger of wetlands degradation. While being representative development projects which often involve nationalistic meanings, they reduce river flow and sediments transportation which are fundamental for sustaining wetlands. The combination of those elements is what influenced the degradation of the Iraqi Marshes in a pattern that originated long before the 1990s and is deeply rooted in colonial history. Few sources reported how British colonialism implemented plans for the entire region's hydrological development. Attempts to domesticate the southern provinces intensified in the 20th century, under a paradigm of technopolitical advancement.

On the other side, the fate of the whole marshlands is dependent on the management of the Tigris-Euphrates water basin, which also involves riparian countries such as Turkey and Syria. In this sense, the trend of building large dams affecting the MENA region since the 1970s has permanently altered the pulsating flow pattern of the water basin, which ensured floods in the southern provinces of Iraq.

In summary, what emerges is a long tradition of repeated attempts to domesticate and simplify the marshland environment, fostered by different actors but under similar nationalist impulses. Under the current critical perspective, Iraq marshes can be understood as wastelands. For decades, these areas have been addressed by efforts of land conversion by plans involving ecological simplification and political control. Overall, the environmental degradation of the marshes stands as an example of slow violence, rooted in long-term and colonial processes. When viewed through the lens of ancestral catastrophe, the degradation of the wetlands takes on meaning and reveals the underling power dynamics.

For what concerns environmental migration and displacement in Iraq, the current representations depict the entire MENA region as an endangered zone due to an increasing frequency of dust storms, desertification, water and soil pollution. In this framework, Iraq emerges as one of the most vulnerable countries to climate breakdown and key drivers of displacement. The loss of cultivable land and crop failures are recognized as growing drivers of Iraqi migration, which is primarily acknowledged as internal shifting from rural to urban areas. Water-related issues raise social and regional inequality, particularly in the governorates of Basra, Missan, and Thi-Qar. Establishing a direct connection between the drainage of the marshes in southern Iraq and the ecosystem alterations currently affecting the region is outside the scope of this research. However, it remains noteworthy to observe how the southern areas in Iraq continues to be the most affected by ecosystem imbalances, impoverishment, and the need for adaptive practices.

However, related analyses and discourses in the 1990s fail to reflect this lineage. From the documents taken under consideration, it emerges how they framed the natural disaster not as a cause but rather as a consequence of the regime's actions. This

manuscript specifically analyses those discourses involved in the issue of marshlands and their community, examining common aspects, key trends, and more prominent emerging messages. Speaking of causes and drivers of migration, the academic debate primarily focuses on the insecurity created by the 1991 uprising and the subsequent attack by the central government. Environmental degradation and uninhabitability is more often framed as a corollary and tool of Saddam Hussein's deliberate actions rather than the reason for the Marsh Arabs' movement. In addition to the nationally recognized context of insecurity, the migration of inhabitants has been attributed to the increasing use of the marshes as a battlefield.

Moreover, Saddam's figure assumes an overwhelming position that obscures any other complexity, while channeling the displacement of the marsh dwellers into a predominantly humanitarian framework. Consequently, their migration is approached with terms that prove ineffective in capturing a phenomenon that presents the characteristics of an environmental migration. The attempt to trace the movements through investigations on refugee camps, for example, fails to intercept the internal movements that characterized the marsh community. Similarly, the attempt to classify them as 'environmental refugees', informally proposed in the UNEP document, remains an appeal that falls on deaf ears and demonstrates how the asylum system could not respond to an issue triggered by different characteristics than conflict or persecution.

Expanding the definition of refuge to include environmental causality can be intended as an initial step towards examining the impact of environmental degradation on human communities, but it cannot be a solution. As confirmed by the case of the Iraqi marshes, in most instances, movements caused by environmental disasters occur locally and do not even enter the asylum-seeking process. Moreover, the category of refuge itself tends to oversimplify the issue to a single causality and perpetuates the view of the applicant as a victim.

As the dominant debate in the 1990s demonstrated, the humanitarian framework is insufficient to capture the nuances of environmental migration as it has been presented so far. Further works on the topic should consider the many possible adaptation scenarios among which migration is only one possible solution. Ultimately, there is a

need to construct narratives that transform places of disaster into places of climate injustice by highlighting the power relations and inequalities that impact local communities.

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