



Season 2 Episode 4
Conflict, Climate, and the Environment. Part 2: Iraq and Yemen
Episode Transcript

Marc: This podcast contains content that may be alarming to some listeners. Listener discretion is advised.

Dina: The communities were very clear about conflict and climate. They understand it well, they know it is one of the biggest issues that they face, it is a conflict trigger. And if there is not a conflict because of climate yet, there is a serious risk of future conflict happening in the country.

Teaser Clip: Every day 100 civilians are killed in conflict and countless more are harmed, yet their perspectives are often missing from the stories we tell about war. This is the Civilian Protection Podcast. A monthly podcast produced by CIVIC and PAX.

Marc: Hey everyone, this is Marc Garlasco, Military Advisor from PAX.

Annie: ... and I am Annie Shiel, Senior Advisor for the United States at Center for Civilians in Conflict, or CIVIC. Our organizations work in conflicts around the world to protect civilians caught in war.

Marc: In our second episode of this season, we explored the ways that the war in Ukraine is damaging the environment, and the short- and long-term costs of looming environmental disaster for civilians – both in Ukraine and in other wars around the world.

Annie: Today, we are back for part two of our exploration of the relationship between conflict, climate and the environment – but this time, we will bring you to Iraq and Yemen to explore the reverse: how climate change can serve as a driver of conflict, and in turn, affect civilians.

To understand this linkage, I sat down with two of my own colleagues: Ali Al-Assaf, CIVIC's Iraq Country Director, and Dina El Mamoun, our Yemen Country Director, both of whom have been exploring and documenting the ways that climate is already affecting civilians in their countries, what the future might hold, and what we can do about it.

Dina: I am Dina El Mamoun, and I am Yemen's Country Director for Civilians in Conflict.

Ali: I am Ali Al-Assaf, the Country Director of Iraq, at the Center for Civilians in Conflict.

Annie: So both of your programs have recently completed research into the connections between climate change and conflict. And, of course, by extension, the protection of civilians in Iraq and Yemen. Now, when most people think about climate change, I do not think that is a very obvious connection, the connection between climate change and conflict. So can you start by talking about that linkage? What do we know about that link? And what were you seeing in Iraq and Yemen that led you to this research?

Ali: So when CIVIC in Iraq started looking into the protection of civilians issues, climate change-related issues was not part of this horizon, or not part of the package of issues that we were trying to address and tackling. However, through engaging with communities, to empower them to be the advocate of their own protection, CIVIC found that civilians and communities in most parts of Iraq – Iraq which is already in a fragile, post-conflict state – those civilians and communities stand to suffer from intensified outbreak of violence, increased protection of threats, and inter- and intra-communal tensions as a result of the multiplier effect of climate change.

Dina: Yes, similar to Iraq, often in Yemen, when we discuss the conflict situation, we often talk about the parties to the conflict, the armed actors, etcetera. And then we separately speak about the humanitarian response, we speak about water scarcity, the need for water, the issues around landmines, etcetera. However, the connection between those elements have not been made until we started to look into the research. And to be honest, I mean, I have worked on Yemen for more than 20 years: it had not struck me as one of the most glaring issues, the issue of climate change and how it is impacted by conflict. But definitely now that we have done this research, we have found the two are linked to a very large extent. The climate change and conflict are linked in the sense that they feed into each other and they also exacerbate each other.

So for example, what we have found, that given this deterioration in the country situation of eight years of conflict, it meant that nothing or little is being done around climate, little is being done about the environmental devastation. But then also at the same time, the conflict has led to a large influx of IDPs into areas, into host communities. And that then led to situations where there is inter conflict between the communities and the IDP communities as well. And that then puts us in a situation where we now understand that at least 4,000 people a year are killed due to conflict on land and water issues only. And we are not counting those killed and injured in the conflict itself. So by far, it is now set to be the second biggest killer or cause for injury and harm amongst the population. So in that sense, we are saying that they exacerbate each other, but then also they are feeding into each other. And we end up with a vicious circle, where conflict and climate change are feeding into each other.

Annie: I think that for a lot of people climate change is this thing that we think about as happening in the future. But what I see in a lot of both of your research is that climate change is already something that civilians in Iraq and Yemen are experiencing and feeling the impact of. So you have spoken a little bit about that, but can you talk a little bit more about the impact that civilians are experiencing now from climate?

Dina: When to sort of discussing, you know, this issue, I just wanted to first put how climate change has affected Yemen generally. I mean, we have known that the temperatures in Yemen have increased about 1.8 degrees Celsius over the last 50 years. We also know that there have been severe floods, droughts, etcetera. And we have spoken to authorities that have told us that in some areas, not even a drop of water, they are not even able to get a drop of water. And that sometimes they get floodings, etcetera. So this is, you know, happening in all areas of Yemen. I mean, in the north, for example, in Sanaa areas, people in the past used to dig 180 meters to get water. Now they dig to 1,000 meters and they are not able to get water. So the water scarcity is getting worse.

Now, how this then impacts people's lives is that we have seen that people are facing additional vulnerabilities: we are seeing that women who usually are the ones who fetch water, they travel longer in order to fetch water. And this also means that some of them are younger girls, which means that they travel for longer and they miss out on school. And this again means it feeds into issues around early marriage that we know, already, this is an existing issue in Yemen for a long time, that has been exacerbated by all these conflict issues.

Ali: When CIVIC established the community protection groups specifically in Nineveh and Kirkuk, we started empowering them to work for the protection issues that they are facing.

Annie: And as a quick aside, the community protection groups that Ali is describing are civilian community groups that CIVIC supports in Iraq and other conflict-affected countries as part of what we call community-based protection work. That work is based in the fundamental belief that civilians are not just victims of conflict, but people with agency and expertise about the conflicts they are living in and what they need to be safe – so CIVIC helps establish and works with these groups to advocate for their protection needs with warring parties.

Ali: Part of those issues that we were trying to support them to address was the people that are still unable to return back to their areas of origin. And when we dug more on the reasons behind what is preventing them from returning back, we found that lack of water and lack of arable lands and the good lands, as part of this, and also a lack of livelihood. When we dug more, we found in areas where minorities are living with the rest of the segments of the community, we found that some of the powerful security actors are supporting A or B segment of the community to make use of the good lands, which originally belonged to some of the minorities, leaving them with no livelihood or with no access to any livelihood. And this is because of climate change and because of the shortage of water resources in Iraq. So the powerful or some of the security actors, they are using this in order to gain more power and to gain more revenues.

Ali: Can you both speak a little bit more to what you found in terms of how those changes you described are, you know, possibly leading to or could lead to in the future, more conflict and, of course, more harm to civilians?

Ali: As I said that the climate change, which occurs in Iraq in tandem with low water levels resulting from drought and also resulting from the international resource conflicts, but mainly because of the chronic domestic mismanagement of natural resources. These are all contributing to security vulnerabilities for civilians because of the effects of climate change. But most notably, the change in livelihood and immigration patterns: The immigration from rural areas moving to the city is really triggering a lot of conflict and intra- as well as inter-communal tensions between the newcomers and the communities there over resources, over the already fatigued systems that the towns and cities are suffering. We met villagers, farmers, boys, women and girls in towns and rural areas, and we were eyewitnesses on how climate change impacted their lives.

Annie: Our teams have spoken with many civilians across Iraq and Yemen in an effort to understand how they have been impacted by climate change. Here is the experience of one civilian farmer in Iraq.

[Fragment of an interview with an Iraqi farmer starts playing]

Marc (voiceover): We suffer from a lack of water. Several years passed with not much rain, and that has negatively affected the farmers and the economic sector as the lack of rain caused the drying up of groundwater.

Lack of water has caused conflicts between countries. The water of tributaries of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers depends on the sources of the river that are located in neighboring countries.

We are facing a lot of problems. Farmers started moving from villages to cities. It even affected animal husbandry, as agriculture and animal husbandry are co-related sectors. Those who used to have cows, cattle and camels, they sold them and moved to cities.

[Music fades out]

Ali: Again, through working with communities and in the conflict affected governorates, when CIVIC and the community protection groups were meeting, were discussing, were raising awareness with the community, usually boys and men were sharing with us a lot of stories on how their lives changed due to the climate change, and why they left the farming or the animal herding and joined formal or informal security sector roles. When we discussed with other organizations that are working with gender-based violence and working with girls and young women on the earlier marriage issue, we found that and also we hear from the community about it, we found that it is rising as families struggle with decreased economic capacity. What we were hearing from villagers and farmers is that climate change is increasing the security vulnerability for specific groups, and specifically, minorities and girls and women.

Dina: I think you know, now we are in the situation in Yemen, where it is the largest humanitarian crisis in the entire world, and has been now for quite a few years. Most of the support is going towards supporting really basic assistance. And as important as it is, not tackling climate issues will mean that those climate issues will only get worse, as well as the conflict issue, conflict-related aspects of it will also get worse. And what we have seen as well is that, because of the lack of livelihood, that I think Ali has just touched on, it is also what we are seeing in Yemen is that it is leading to more recruitment into armed groups, because, you know, young men are struggling to either farm their lands or even stay in their own communities. And the easiest job that there is at the moment, in Yemen, is to join an armed group or an armed force. So that now has entered the cycle of violence as well and could also mean that we find further issues down the line.

The other issue is the lack of awareness of the state as well, in terms of climate change, and the need to address it or put in place something now also means that this is likely to be exacerbated further. And also I think, in terms of the fatigue of the donors, I think that is something that is quite possible in Yemen. What we have now, yes, we have some response but even that response could whittle down, and if it whittles down, the little that is being distributed is going to be even less, and that will in itself lead to further conflict at community levels.

Marc: Wow, okay, if I understand Dina and Ali correctly, it seems like climate change is already having a very real and direct impact on conflict dynamics. Climate change is making parts of Yemen and Iraq practically uninhabitable and is decreasing communal resources, leading to conflict over resource scarcity. And they are also seeing related gendered impacts like an increase in early marriage of girls and increased recruitment of boys and young men to armed groups when climate change renders traditional agriculture and herding jobs impossible.

Annie: Exactly. And while this is not a connection that is necessarily receiving a lot of attention globally, Dina and Ali told me that for many Iraqi and Yemeni communities it is actually a very present and pressing issue.

Dina: I think, you know, one thing that struck me, while the research was ongoing, is that when we spoke to communities, the communities were very clear about conflict and climate. They understand it well, they know it is one of the biggest issues that they face. Actually one of the IDPs in Ma'rib in Sirwa District, he framed it really well. He said, "It is a conflict trigger and if there is not a conflict, because of climate yet, there is a serious risk of future conflict happening in the country." So I think what is happening is that the communities understand it; governments, international community, etcetera, have less awareness of it. At the same time, although the communities know about it, they have little tools to use in order to address it. And I think that circle needs to be squared in the sense that (a) our awareness as an international community, as INGOs, and also of the Government of Yemen, needs to be clear in terms of conflict and climate. And then also in terms of the communities, we need to make sure that we are giving them some tools to see how they can actually address some of these issues as well because at the moment, what we are seeing is just that this is an ever expanding problem.

Annie: And that actually, you know, brings me to the next question. You know, you are talking about the tools that are missing, you know, what can be done? I mean, after doing this research, what are our initial recommendations, what are the responsibilities of states and armed actors in this situation?

Ali: State and armed actors should be part of the solution. However, the communities themselves, their resilience should be strengthened, their capacity should be strengthened in the way that they can face the consequences of climate change on their safety and security and as well on the livelihood side. Because we need to acknowledge that climate change is shaping the future of conflicts, not only on the regional level, but also on different local levels. And these multi-layer intra- and inter-communal tensions, a big part of it is related to climate change. We in Iraq, we are an eye witness on this and we in CIVIC, we are looking at community-led solutions and how we can support these solutions for adaptation, and we are supporting the communities to strengthen their resilience when it comes to addressing the root causes of climate-related protection threats.

Dina: I think one thing in relation to Yemen, I think the focus has been on securing sustainable peace, which is very important as a first step. And also the other element was what I mentioned earlier around a humanitarian response. But I think you know, what needs to happen now is what Ali was talking about earlier, is the working together element. And I think that is something within CIVIC, we think that climate crisis, particularly in relation to Yemen, is an opportunity for international and local actors to work together towards building a sustainable, you know, resource management, governance, and also putting in place systems in relation to climate change, and also environmental devastation, degradation. So I think, you know, it is important that for the Yemeni government and the security actors to first sympathize themselves to the issues on climate change, have an action plan, a national action plan for climate issues, and then also they need to establish mechanisms or systems in order to address some of the issues around food, water, livelihoods, etcetera. And then also the climate change, as well. I think also for, in relation to peace, I think, also for the Envoy, it is important to prioritize and address the impact of climate change and conflict as well, as part of the bigger picture that he is looking at.

Marc: Dina is referring to the United Nations' Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, who is tasked with providing support to the Yemen peace process.

Dina: I think for us, at CIVIC, I think it is very similar to what Ali mentioned, we, given our unique relationship with security actors and armed forces, etcetera, what we need to do is to ensure that they understand the issue and synthesize them to it and then also somehow work with them to train them if conflict then erupts between communities, how they can deal with it in a way that protects civilians, how they can ensure that PoC, protection of civilians, guidelines are adhered to. Because the last thing we want is that then, now these inter-communities violence are happening, then the security forces come into it, and then they make it worse. So the idea is that CIVIC needs to come in at the

right moment in order to avoid that situation from escalating or worsening. I think also, it is important that we help and support community protection groups, etcetera to understand, you know, when something is happening, they need to be able to somehow raise the flag, you know, and press the alarm button, if some issue of climate related is taking place. And I think that then brings us into having in place, an effective early warning system, that allows communities to be outspoken in terms of their own issues, and then have their own agency around it as well. And I think there is a lot of work that we as CIVIC can actually do in this regard.

Annie: And what do you both see as the consequences of inaction here?

Dina: In Yemen, I think it is most probably in other areas as well, we are already seeing the consequences of inaction. It is happening in communities, the impact is there. People are talking about it, they are letting us know that this is happening. So we are not speculating here in terms of the impact or consequence of inaction. I think what we are talking about here is further inaction could devastate matters more. We could easily find ourselves in a situation where a country like Yemen could become completely dry of any water, and then what will we do? So I think it is really the scale of the issue that we will be facing if inaction continues.

I think also, we can also see that Yemen could be an example for other countries for the rest of the world of what the future may hold, if climate change is not addressed, because we are already seeing the impact of it. And I think that on the other hand, it is also an opportunity for everyone to work together as well. And we can see how we can then tackle climate change, environmental degradation, together as an international community, community leaders, civil society, and governmental entities as well.

Marc: Wow, Annie, I have to say that those last remarks by Dina really hit me hard. She was saying that the problems and reality of climate change is already there in Yemen – and in Iraq, and elsewhere – and that all we can do at this point is not let its consequences get any worse than they already are.

Annie: Yeah. And there is actually a really striking quote from the CIVIC researcher who wrote our Yemen climate report, Niku Jafarnia. She said, “Even if the conflict in Yemen were to end today, Yemenis will have to prepare for another battle: the fight against climate change.” And of course, the longer the war does continue, the harder that battle will be. So the climate-conflict link is real, and it is having real impacts already in Yemen, in Iraq, and so many other conflict-affected places.

Marc: And PAX has seen similar trends – in Ukraine, as we covered in an earlier episode, where environmental damage from the war will be felt for generations; and in South Sudan, where climate change is already contributing to serious humanitarian need and conflict over resource scarcity.

Annie: That is it for this episode. Next up on the Civilian Protection Podcast, we will speak to people in South Sudan about their needs and expectations for protection, about how local authorities are and are not meeting those needs, and the self-protection options that people turn to in the absence of state protection.

Marc: The civilian protection podcast is brought to you by Center for Civilians in Conflict and PAX – two NGOs working to improve the lives of civilians caught in conflict. Today’s episode was written by Annie Shiel with assistance from Erin Bijl, Marc Garlasco, Tate Musinahama, and Hajer Naili. It was produced by the Podcast Guru. Hajer Naili and Tate Musinahama made sure we are online. We would like to thank Ali Al-Assaf and Dina El-Mamoun of CIVIC for joining us as guests.

Annie: You can find us on Spotify or anywhere you get your podcasts. We want to hear from you: share your thoughts on this episode or topics you would like us to cover by emailing civilianprotectionpod@gmail.com. Follow us on Twitter and Instagram at ProtectionPod to stay up to date on our episodes and guest speakers, and to get behind-the-scenes content like full interviews. You can also find behind-the-scenes content and interviews on our YouTube channel, as well as civiliansinconflict.org/podcast and protectionofcivilians.org. Thanks for listening.