



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

Water, Water Everywhere, and Not a Drop to Drink in Iraq **by Michael Tennant**

Iraq War proponents should be blessing the day Barack Obama took office. With his continued disastrous attempts to “fix” the economy, the front pages of mainstream newspapers are mercifully free of stories such as [this one](#) from McClatchy Newspapers:

BAGHDAD — The stench of human waste is enough to tell Falah abu Hasan that his drinking water is bad. His infant daughter Fatma’s continuous illnesses and his own constant nausea confirm it.

“We are the poor. No one cares if we get sick and die,” he said. “But someone should do something about the water. It is dirty. It brings disease.”

Everybody complains about the water in Baghdad, and few are willing to risk drinking it from the tap. Six years after the U.S. invaded Iraq, 36 percent of Baghdad’s drinking water is unsafe, according to the Iraqi Environment Ministry — in a good month. In a bad month, it’s 90 percent. Cholera broke out last summer, and officials fear another outbreak this year....

It is difficult to imagine that anyone’s antebellum definition of success in Iraq would have included the inability to provide safe drinking water in Iraq’s capital six years after the invasion, yet today the war’s cheerleaders would have us believe that as long as Iraqis have the right to vote, only a member of the “blame America first” crowd would point out that failing to meet one of the minimal requirements for a functioning, civil society just might be a sign of failure.

I blame the U.S. government first, last, and everywhere in between for the lack of safe drinking water in Baghdad. The problem is at least a quarter-century old, and for that entire quarter-century, the U.S. government has been the prime, if not the sole, cause of the worsening potable water situation in Iraq.

As the McClatchy report notes, “Baghdad's water network was due to be upgraded in 1984, but Saddam Hussein went to war with Iran instead.” What the report *doesn't* point out is that a major supplier of weapons and other support to Iraq at this time was the United States, whose government had decided that Iraq must win the war at all costs, including turning a blind eye to Iraq's use of chemical weapons. Had the United States not been so heavily backing Iraq, it is entirely possible that Saddam would not have felt emboldened to undertake an invasion of Iran, thus sparing lives and money that could have been used to upgrade the Baghdad water system, as originally intended.

During the Gulf War (an unnecessary war if ever there was one given that Saddam had only invaded Kuwait with the Bush administration's seeming consent) the U.S. military, based on [a report from the Department of Defense](#), deliberately set about destroying Iraq's water-treatment system, which the report noted was dependent on the importation of specialized equipment and chemicals — items that the Iraqi government was trying to obtain, in violation of cruel UN sanctions, in order to preserve its already fragile system. As Scotland's *Sunday Herald* [reported](#) in 2000:

During allied bombing campaigns on Iraq the country's eight multi-purpose dams had been repeatedly hit, simultaneously wrecking flood control, municipal and industrial water storage, irrigation and hydroelectric power. Four of seven major pumping stations were destroyed, as were 31 municipal water and sewerage facilities — 20 in Baghdad, resulting in sewage pouring into the Tigris. Water purification plants were incapacitated throughout Iraq.

Article 54 of the Geneva Convention states: “It is prohibited to attack, destroy or render useless objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population” and includes foodstuffs, livestock and “drinking water supplies and irrigation works.”...

Water-borne diseases in Iraq today are both endemic and epidemic. They include typhoid, dysentery, hepatitis, cholera and polio (which had previously been eradicated), along with a litany of others.

A child with dysentery in 1990 had a one in 600 chance of dying — in 1999 it was one in 50.

After the Gulf War the U.N., largely at American insistence, maintained a policy of sanctions against Iraq, denying it the ability to import the equipment and chemicals needed to repair its infrastructure since such items were considered “dual-use” materials, i.e., ones that

could be used for the purpose of manufacturing weapons rather than purifying water. This led directly to the deaths of perhaps half-a-million Iraqi children, a “price” then-UN Ambassador to the UN Madeleine Albright in 1996 infamously [declared](#) was “worth it” to oust Saddam Hussein from power — an outcome that the sanctions, of course, never effected.

This brings us full circle, back to the current Iraq war and occupation; and no one but the U.S. government bears the blame for that war, seeing as how every one of the premises on which it was based has been totally discredited.

With the water supply already in a disastrous state, the invasion only made matters worse. McClatchy again:

The U.S.-led invasion six years ago led to wide looting of offices and the abandonment of purification systems.

During the sectarian and terrorist strife that followed, it was impossible to start improvements or repairs, much less complete them. Baghdad had to hire security personnel even for water projects. The U.S. military’s troop buildup starting in late 2007 also took its toll: One water pipeline was delayed for nine months because the U.S. built a blast wall across its path.

Since 2003, 500 city engineers have been killed, suspending hundreds of project plans, according to Hakeem Abdulzahra, Baghdad’s chief spokesman. Finding personnel to replace the dead also is never easy, he said.

During the war, displaced people flooded the capital, constructed shoddy new homes or camped out in abandoned government offices. They dug down and tapped city pipes, often using pumps to find water supplies. As a result, 6 million people use Baghdad water daily, but only 5 million of them use it legally....

In the absence of adequate sewers, squatters run pipes from their bathrooms into the street, turning it into a standing cesspool. The water lines are poorly sealed, and as the pressure goes down, raw sewage mixes with drinking water, not only for the squatters but also for anyone who relies on that water main....

The city has a 10-year, \$6 billion plan to fix the problem, which involves shutting down the squatters' settlements. However, there's fear that shutting down the settlements would force families onto the street and reignite sectarian fighting; the settlements are a recruiting ground for Shiite Muslim militias.

Every bit of this must be laid at the feet of the U.S. government. For 25 years our government has, either directly or indirectly, been responsible for ever-worsening conditions in Iraq's water-treatment system. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Iraqis have become seriously ill or died because successive presidents and congresses couldn't mind their own business and, in fact, felt compelled to visit evil upon an innocent populace.

You don't suppose any young Iraqis might come to hate America for this and decide to undertake terrorist attacks against us, do you? Nah, they only hate us for our freedom, as every good red-state patriot knows.

Michael Tennant is a software developer and freelance writer in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

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