

THE MARSHLANDS OF SOUTHERN IRAQ

CASE STUDY

DESTRUCTION OF THE ENVIRONMENT

AND

FORCIBLE RELOCATION OF INDIGENOUS POPULATION

by

MOHAMMAD HUSSAIN ALNAJAFI*

SEPTEMBER, 1996



**M.B.A., Former lecturer at Al-Mustansirya University, Iraq; author of books and articles in Business Administration; member of Iraqi Civilian Aid, London, Campaigning to save the Marshlands.*

INTRODUCTION

The southern Iraqi Marsh Arabs are undergoing comprehensive and intense destruction in a campaign perpetrated by the Iraqi government. The life-sustaining marsh environment is being decimated by a huge drainage project. The Marsh Arabs are being persecuted through shelling, burning of villages, undeclared economic embargo and forced displacement.

The international community has great responsibility and interest in seeing that this bloody reprisal against the innocent civilians ceases immediately and that the United Nations should provide protection and comfort for the indigenous population of the Marsh Arabs. This will include human rights monitors and relief agencies to operate freely in compliance with United Nations' Resolutions 688, 706 and 712.

In this article, the author will give some historical background about the Marshlands of Southern Iraq and a description of the unique lifestyle of its inhabitants. Also, the author will detail the evolution of the social and political events that led to the destruction of the once-considered "Garden of Eden". In summary, the author will offer some recommendations which could outline a suitable framework for beginning rescue efforts.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The world's first civilization began in Iraq at approximately 4,000 B.C. The southern part of Mesopotamia, the ancient name of Iraq, witnessed the rise of Sumer. It is also believed to be the site of the "Garden of Eden". The Mesopotamians' contributions to civilization were plenty. The development of the written language, the use of the wheel, Sumerian mathematics (with square roots and logarithmic relations), the first accurate calendars (based on the twelve month year), and an efficient method to tell time (a cycle of sixty minute hours and twelve hour blocks of time) were all contributions from ancient Iraqi people.(1)

On the edge of this civilization there are the Mesopotamian marshes. These marshes cover an area of 6,000 square miles in a rough triangle formed by the towns of Amara, Nasiriya and Qurna where the Tigris and Euphrates join above Basra to form the "Shatt al Arab".

LIFE IN THE MARSHLAND

The Marsh Arabs usually live in small clusters of two or three houses kept slightly above water. They reach from one to another is possible only by canoe. The Marsh Arabs make their living mainly by fishing, herding buffalo, cultivating rice and selling reed mats. They have been living this way for nearly 5,000 years without any significant change in their lifestyle.

Mr. Wilfred Thesiger, the British author of The Marsh Arabs, visited the marshes many times and lived among the Arab peoples there in the fifties of this century. He described the Marsh Arabs as, "...cheerful and friendly and I liked the look of them. Their way of life, as yet little affected by the outside world, was unique and the marshes themselves were beautiful."(2)

The life of the Marsh Arabs has never been easy. It is physically severe. Extreme hot summers with uncomfortable, high humidity and swarms of mosquitoes in the reed beds; the danger of seasonal floods or drought; wild animals; blood feuds between tribes and families; and the absence of basic health care and schools contribute to the harshness of Marshland life.

It is not a luxurious life, but the people like it and they don't want to it be changed. They are very much attached to their religious faith, culture, ethics and traditions. They follow their tribal leaders. They have their own social and legal systems. They arbitrate their disputes through religious men and clan chiefs. They love the unlimited space and the view of the golden reed surrounded by the peaceful waters. They enjoy the quietness of the natural surroundings and the absence of intruders. Above all, they are free people and they love and value their freedom.

UNWELCOME INTRUDER

In the late 1970's, then Vice-President of Iraq, Saddam Hussein, visited different parts of the country. That was a tour to prepare himself and the people to become the President of the Republic of Iraq. In every area he went, he tried to dress himself to look like one of the local people. When he visited the marsh area, he noticed that the people were very much isolated from what was going on in the rest of the country. He even noticed a portrait of General Qasem, the Iraqi President who was killed fifteen years earlier. Above all, few people recognized Saddam. The

government was expanding its bases to control people and their minds. This was not happening in the Marsh areas. The first action the Vice-President took was to donate a television set to each village. When he received the news that the majority of these villages had no electricity, he ordered the extension of electric power to the villages. The bad news was, the only picture the villages could receive were broadcasts from neighboring Iran. The Vice-President mandated the extension of television broadcasting to include the Marsh area.

The government also tried to penetrate the Marshlands by opening schools and small clinics. Thus, while attempting to provide public services, it is clear that the government remained anxious about the Marsh Arabs. Government officials realized the difficulties of controlling this intractable area with its history of the people challenging authority and providing refuge to the rebellious.

GENOCIDE IN THE GARDEN OF EDEN

Like all Iraqis, the Marsh Arabs were very much disturbed and affected by the tragic end of the Spring, 1991 uprising. There were massive, bloody reprisal operations against the cities liberated by the people, brutal attacks on the holy sites in Najaf and Karbala, shooting of civilians and widespread arrests of religious scholars and students in Najaf, Karbala and the rest of the country.(3)

Amnesty International believes that the Iraqi government took punitive measures against large sections of the Shi'a Muslim population in the south because of their imputed political sympathies.(4) Amnesty International also reports that the Marsh Arabs have been specifically targeted since the uprising. Miss Laurie Mylroie, a political consultant for the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, stated that the Iraqi government warned the Kurds during the negotiations that they had killed three hundred thousand people in the south by the end of March, 1991.(4)

In April, 1991 a series of editorials in the official newspaper "Al-Thawra" described the Marsh Arabs as, "inferior people", "un-Iraqi", "monkey-faced", and "so accustomed to breeding buffalo that they have become indistinguishable from them".(5)

Many thought the Iraqi government's campaign against the Marsh Arabs was an act of revenge and punishment for their support and protection of the rebellions in 1991. The truth is that this government campaign had been planned for many years earlier. One of the most significant documents captured by the Kurds in Erbil after it was liberated offered a detailed "plan of action" against the people of the Marshes. It was dated January 30th, 1989. The memo said that emphasis should be placed on the "plan of action" for the Marshes, which was adopted in 1989 and approved by the President and Commander-in-Chief. Here are the main features of these instructions:

- Carry out security operations by using poisoning, explosives and burning of the Marsh Arabs' houses,
- Grant pardon to the deserters who agree to assassinate hostile elements,
- Impose economic blockade by cutting the food supply and banning the sale of fish,
- Regroup the Marsh villages on dry land, which will render them easier to control,
- Open roads and points of access deep inside the Marshes.(6)

Based on these instructions and many others, the government adopted the plan of the "Third River". The "Third River" project is a major water diversion program involving the expertise of three important ministries: the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Agriculture and the Interior Ministry. The main objectives are to have an easy access to the area of the Marshes and to force the indigenous people to abandon their homeland.

Dr. Hussain Shahrستاني, former nuclear scientist, and his wife, Berniece, work actively to help Marshland victims. Their experience and eye witness to the atrocity and brutality of the Iraqi government is sad and tragic. One atrocity came described in a press release on March 24th, 1994. Dr. Shahrستاني wrote that Lieutenant General Mezher had laid down an ultimatum to the Marsh people via their tribal leaders. Lt. Mezher read to them a government decree which stated that all people in the Chekka and Musharrah must surrender to the army before sunset of Tuesday, March 22, 1994. Tribal leaders were told that if the people didn't comply they would be slaughtered. Marsh people need no convincing that the government will carry out its threats.(7) (See appendix (1) and (2) for a list of tribes and villages affected by this policy.)

Mr. Max van der Stoep, the "Special Rapporteur" of the Commission on Human Rights for the United Nations, wrote in detail in his interim and final reports. He described violations of civil rights, bombardment of civilian settlements, casual killings, arbitrary arrest and detention and forced displacements. While the Special Rapporteur's findings cover all parts of Iraq, he was more concerned and alarmed by the special situation of human rights violations in the southern Marsh area. (8, 9)

The deliberate destruction of the Marshlands has cost the indigenous Marsh Arabs dearly. Close to sixty thousand of them have been exiled as refugees in southern Iran since the April, 1991 uprising. About ten thousand of them crossed the border since June, 1993, when the Iraqi government plan to dry the Marshes started to have a significant effect on their lifestyles. (See appendix (3) for a detailed distribution of Iraqi refugees by camps and towns in Iran.)

THE ECOLOGICAL DESTRUCTION

The beauty of nature was the talk of every traveler who visited the Arab Marshes in the past. Mr. Maxwell, the author of People of the Reeds, was astonished by the scenes during his visit to the area in the mid-1950's. He described one of his journeys when he left "Abumilih" village in the early morning and meandered through "narrow, blind watercourses with high mud banks. On either side the land beyond the bank stretched away desolate and bare, the dead, grey mud of cultivating land where no green showed nor any water lay, but in front of us palm trees showed a mile or so ahead, and soon we turned into a wider channel whose beauty was breathtaking. Again and again I noticed it in the marshes and in the cultivating land around them how enormously the impact of colour and verdure is heightened by the contrast that has gone before it, so that a single orange homespun blanket spread to dry on the side of a reed house may take on the splendour of an imperial robe, a single green tree hold the glory of a thousand returning springs, the mystery of eternal forests. To no part of the earth can spring bring transfiguration as it does to the flatlands of the Tigris and Euphrates. The waterway into which we turned now seemed Eden itself. On either bank grew groves of date palms, and in the spaces between them a riot of blossom spread against a sky of unbroken turquoise.

Feathery golden acacia made a lattice-work against that blue, the vivid flowers flaxing in the slant of a sun that was not yet high, and low over the water that reflected the sky with the sheen of enamel trailed weeping trees, some with a crimson flower and some with a white. It was the simple primary colours stippled upon the background of green growth that made the perfection".(10) Mr. Maxwell was so fascinated with the beauty that he wanted to build a reed house on that bank to live in it.

Mr. Michael Spencer in his visit to the marshes in the 1980's noticed little changes in the Marsh Arabs due to the extension of electricity and the introduction of television in their lives. Nevertheless, the Marshes were still lovely to him. "There were lakes large enough to lose sight of land on, and areas in which the reeds were so thick and high that it was impossible to see more than a few yards ahead. Villages dotted the marshes in clusters of anything from half a dozen to zoo dwellings; and wildlife, especially birds, was plentiful".(11)

The southern marshes gained the attention of the Iraqi government during the decade of the Iraq-Iran war. The rich oil fields in Majnoon Island and the Shi'a-populated marshes near the politically and militarily vital border with Iran, led the government to draw major plans to build new highways, canals and dams. The drying of the marshes would allow easy access to the area and to the borders of neighboring Iran. The collapse of the uprising that followed the Gulf War in 1991, and the withdrawal of some of the rebellious to the marshes accelerated the government's plans for total destruction of the area, including forcible relocation of its people.

On December 7, 1992, the Iraqi government celebrated the opening of the "Third River", a three hundred thirty-nine mile canal running from al-Tharthar Lake to Kawr Abdullah. The original purpose of the project, which was begun in the 1950's, was to reclaim land rendered barren by salination. The Iraqi government denied that its main objective was to drain the marshes. Maps captured from an Iraqi engineer detailed the project. In addition to the Third River, there is also the "Fourth River Project", the "River Banks Project" and the "Division of the Marshes Project". Together these projects are capable of compartmentalizing and draining vast tracts of land. The captured blueprints, reinforced by eyewitness accounts and satellite pictures, uncover the deliberate policy of desertification. Any economic benefit of desertification of the marshes is outweighed by the economic and social deficit.(12)

According to Middle East Watch, Iraqi engineers have diverted almost the entire flow of the Euphrates into the Third River which flows to the sea. On the Tigris, they have built locks and sluices to regulate or halt the flow into tributaries while raising the banks of the main distributors to stop their water from reaching the marshes. Water from these rivers has been channeled into a heavily embanked canal that runs for more than fifty-four miles west of the Tigris. Satellite images show the continuous decline of the Southland Marshes in this area. (See figures 1, 2 and 3 at end of text.)

The Third River Project was originally designed in the early 1950's by British engineers working for the Iraqi government. The project is to build an array of sluices, embankments and canals on the lower reaches of the Tigris and Euphrates that would be needed to "reclaim" the marshes. Parts of the Third River, which runs from Baghdad to Basra, were begun under British supervision in 1953. Work was completed in the 1960's under the supervision of the British consultancy of Murdoch MacDonald, now Mott MacDonald. "We did the early design work for the Third River", said Bill Pemberton. "We will build our bit, about twelve miles at Dalmaj. The rest they now seem to have done themselves." At the time, the purpose of the Third River, Pemberton stresses, was to drain saline waters from waterlogged farmland north and west of the marshes, not to drain the marshes themselves.(13)

The result of these plans was immediate and comprehensive. Mr. Kazaz, member of Iraqi Civilian Aid, London, in his last visit to the Marshes in 1993 noticed that a lot of marshes were visibly dried-up. He saw fish and wildfowl had died on the dried land or floated on top of water whose level had seriously diminished. He noticed the shallow water that once was potable had turned green, tasted extremely bitter and smelled rotten.(14) (See appendix (4) for an environmental impact report.)

A new environmental study was published at the beginning of May, 1994 by the "Amar Appeal" led by British MP, Emma Nicholson.(15) The study was based on research conducted by the Wetland Ecosystems Group at Exeter University. The British scientists found in their study that the destruction of the marshes is becoming the worst ecological disaster of its kind in modern times. They have concluded that the region could turn to desert in a decade, with catastrophic consequences not only for the 5,000 year old way of life of the indigenous people, but for the wildlife as far away as the Arctic Circle and Southern Africa. They note the population has dropped from 250,000 to only 10,000 and nearly 60% of the Marshes have vanished since 1984.

The British study reveals that the impacts on climate and biological diversity are comparable to those of the destruction of huge tracts of tropical rainforest in South America. Spectacular wildlife, such as the smooth-coated otter, Indian crested porcupine and grey wolf are thought to have become extinct in the Marshlands. Many other species are threatened, including some which evolved in the Marshes over a period of millions of years. Birds such as the Iraqi babbler (bul-bul) and Basrah reed warbler are unique to the area. Also at risk are millions of wildfowl and wading birds, some from western Siberia who spend their winters in the Marshes.

The Wetland Ecosystems Group report says the lives of the Marsh Arabs have depended for thousands of years on a landscape that provided them with fresh water, fishing, hunting and easy communications between villages through interconnecting waterways. All these features now will be lost in the drainage program of the "Third River". Richard Porter, head of species protection at the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, said, "This is the most important wetland in the Middle East and one of the top ten in the world. To lose it would be a great tragedy."(16)

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The mass abandonment of the Marshlands wouldn't have happened spontaneously. The Marsh Arabs are escaping a comprehensive governmental plan to destroy them through the construction of the Third River and continuing economic embargo, bombardment of peaceful villages, arbitrary arrest and detention, casual killings and forced displacement to control them.

Although there is no quick-fix solution, international organizations, such as Iraqi On Exile, should work toward achieving the following recommendations:

1. Establish a committee to represent the Marsh people in exile. This committee could be the people's voice to present the case to the international community, so as to better communicate their suffering and problems. The Marsh Arabs should take part in any future decisions about their lands and they should be continuously consulted about their affairs.

2. Bring a halt to the Third River project and reverse the draining to reflood areas previously drained. If the Iraqi government refuses to do so, forcible means to undo the project should be carefully considered.
3. Enforce Security Council Resolution 688 which calls on the Iraqi government to stop human rights abuses against the people. Empower the United Nations' monitors to station and communicate freely with the people of Iraq without official escorts.
4. Declare the south of Iraq a safe haven protected by the Allied Forces similar to the successful experience in the North. If the Iraqi government rejects the idea, the international community should implement forcible means to expel the Iraqi forces from the area entirely.
5. Activate the role of UN refugee agencies to get more involved in helping thousands of needy refugees in Iran, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Jordan. Refugee conditions should be monitored in these countries. The refugees should be allowed to communicate and travel freely. Passports and exit visas should be available to them to choose the country for their exile.
6. Amend Security Council Resolutions 706 and 712 to reduce the share of the financial obligation toward Gulf War victims and to reduce the cost of UN administration from 30% to 5% for a period of at least two years. This will lead to faster recovery. It will also be good incentive for the Iraqi government to sell \$1.6 billion worth of oil to buy food, medicine and other humanitarian goods. Distribution should be supervised by the United Nations to secure fair geographic allocations of supplies. Priority should be given to the most suffering areas in the north and in the south. The implementation of SCR's 706 and 712 should always be conducted with an emphasis on human rights improvements.

The author urges the international community to do everything possible to guarantee basic human rights for the Marsh Arabs and to immediately stop the ecologically devastating destruction of the Marshlands in Iraq.

APPENDIX 1

List of towns villages affected and population numbers

Al-Jada	7,000	Abu Ajl	600
Al-Kasreh	800	Abu Saboor	5,000
Al-Jard	3,000	Al-Fowar	800
Bahre	2,500	AlHajjya	4,500
Abu Shaibeh	1,200	Al-Mozar	8,000
Abu Ashreh	9,000	Um Al-howah	20,000
Al-Mafsal	4,500	Rafiyyeh	1,500
Al-Shtreh	2,000	Um Al-Rejlayn	1,800
Al-Khamas	6,000	Al-Shadhriyyeh	2,500
Al-Akar	6,000	Abu Jawathl	5,000
Al-Shain	10,000	Al-Mesrah	4,500
Al-Kabab	8,000	Al-Tafsha	3,500
Al-Jadidi	7,000	Abu Mahlah	1,500
Al-Tar	3,000	Al-Nakarah	23,000
Al-Saykal	20,000	Al-Medhalib	1,500
Al-Kobayba	6,000	Gharamliyyeh	20,000

APPENDIX 2

Tribes affected by shortage of water in the Amarah marshes.

Al-Fartusi
Al-Shafanyya
Al-Frayiat
Al-bughanaam
Al-bupchayt
Bayt Khaddad
Al-Buslayma
Al-Nawafil
Aal-Ezciy
Al-Amshan
Aa-Fctla
Aal-Hessima
Al-Sawa'ad
Bayt Nasarallah
Al-Maswawiyah
Al-Ja'ara
Al-Sawe'din
Aal-Hmayd

Total population figure for these tribes is 200,000.

**Refugees from southern Iraq in Iran
since the failed uprising (April, 1991)**

<u>Place /name of camp</u>	<u>No. of refugees</u>
Khozestan Province:	
Camps:	
Ashrafi Isfahani	8805
Motahhari	1800
Beheshti	729
Be'that (Shushter)	3002
Bani Najjar (Shuster)	2500*
Ansar	4102
Khoramshahr	1250*
Himmat (Border Crossing)	850
Jahrom (Shiraz -Fars province)	5400*
Sarvestan (Shiraz-Fars province)	750
Azna (Luristan province)	2920*
Um al-Na'aj Lake (Howeiza Marsh)	750
Towns and villages:	
Border towns and villages	10292
Tehran	1898
Qom	7550
Total	<u>52598</u>

22nd July, 1994

* 2500 750
 1250 920 New Arrivals
 3400 2000 Since June, 1993.

APPENDIX 4

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

The Marsh Arab are unique societies have lived in the Marshlands since 3000BC. The Marshes themselves constitute a unique environment and a complete ecological food-web. The drying out of the Marshes will have the following effects:

REEDS AND BAMBOO

The reeds have been used since time immemorial for the construction of houses. They also provide food for the buffalo and fuel for the people. Bamboo is also used for construction and also provides fuel and a variety of foods for the people. In addition the majority of rice production in Iraq comes from the Marshlands area.

BIRDS

The Marshlands contain a wide selection of birds with up to 250 species being unique to this area. These include the Bull bull and warbler. There are also many rare species of heron.

FISHES

There are at least 20 species of fish that are unique to the Marshlands, mainly carp and cat-fish. The area is also an essential breeding ground for fishes coming from the Gulf. It goes without saying that fish is an essential food resources for the people.

MAMMALS

Buffalo are only found in Iraq in the Marsh area. These are essential part of the local economy, being used for dairy production and meat. They are also a source of fuel and are used for transportation. The area contains a wide selection of mammals, including otters, weasels and foxes as well as many rare rodents.

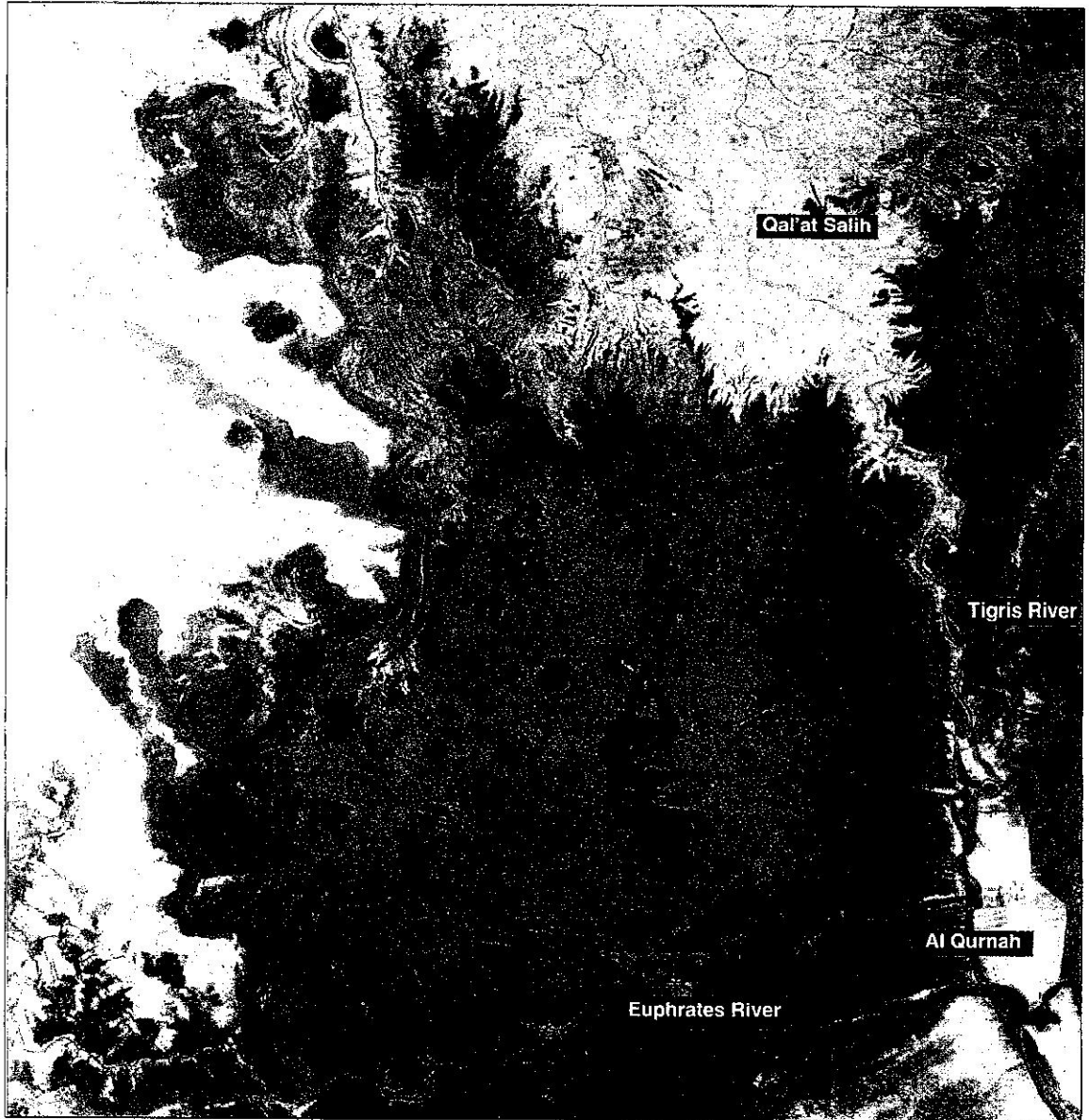
HEALTH

The draining of the Marshes will result in many stagnant pools on which poisonous algae can grow. It will also constitute a rich breeding ground for mosquitos. One can expect the lack of water will lead to severe outbreaks of infectious diseases among the children due to problems of sanitation.

- (1) Phebe Marr, The Modern History of Iraq, Westview Press, Boulder, 1985, page 14.
- (2) Wilfred Thesiger, The Marsh Arabs, New York, Dutton, 1964, page 51.
- (3) Minority Rights Group, The Marsh Arabs of Iraq, MRG, London, June, 1993, page 8.
- (4) Michael Wood, "Saddam's Killing Fields", Television Documentary Report, London, October, 1993.
- (5) Minority Rights Group, Ibid., page 5.
- (6) Human Rights Watch/Middle East, Bureaucracy of Repression: The Iraqi Government in Its Own Words, New York, February, 1994.
- (7) Gulf War Victims, Press Release, March, 1994.
- (8) Max van der Stoel, "Interim Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Iraq", United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Geneva, November 18, 1993.
- (9) Max van der Stoel, "Final Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Iraq", United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Geneva, February 25, 1994.
- (10) Gavin Maxwell, People of the Reeds, Harper, New York, 1957, pages 188 - 189.
- (11) Michael Spencer, "The Marsh Arabs Revisited", Aramco World Magazine, March - April, 1982, pages 31 - 36.
- (12) Tim Hancock, "The Destruction of Eden: Saddam's Atrocities in the Marshes and Options for Response", Safeworld Newsletter, Bristol, December, 1993, page 2.
- (13) Fred Pearce, "Draining Life From Iraqi Marshes", Iraqi Issues, July, 1993, page 3.
- (14) Mohammad Kazaz, "Visit to the Marshlands of South Iraq", Iraqi Civilian Aid Newsletter, London, November, 1992.
- (15) Sean Ryan, "Saddam Kills Off Marsh Wildlife in Eco-disaster", The Sunday Times, London, April 17, 1994, page 16.
- (16) Ibid. page 16.

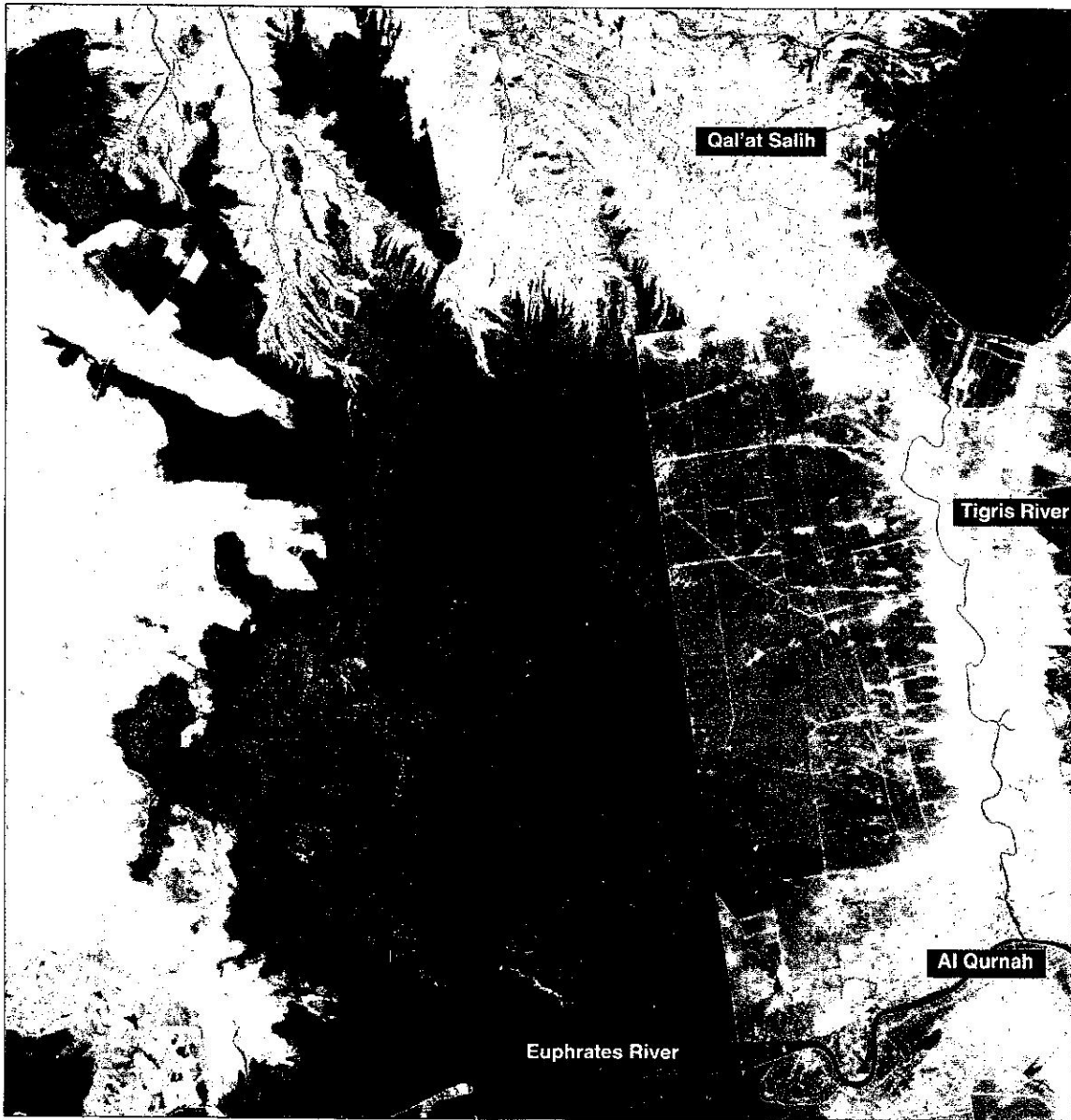
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- (15) Sean Ryan, "Saddam Kills Off Marsh Wildlife in Eco-disaster", The Sunday Times, London, April 17, 1994, page 16.
- (16) Ibid. page 16.

Figure 1
Southern Marshes West of the Tigris River, Iraq



Marsh area as it existed in the 1970's.

Figure 2
Southern Marshes West of the Tigris River, Iraq, 1991/1992.



Causeway construction during the Iran-Iraq war resulted in loss of the eastern section of marsh.

Figure 3
Southern Marshes West of the Tigris River, Iraq, December, 1993.



New canal diverting water from the marshes to the Euphrates River.