The Marshes of Southern Iraq and the Marsh Arabs: Ecocide and Genocide

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Introduction and Background

My knowledge of the marshes of southern Iraq and the Marsh Arabs stems from two roots. First, my family acquired a reasonably-sized property of 25 hectares in the heart of the Marshes. We used to visit our land, sometimes spending two seasons of the year enjoying the fishing and supervising the harvests. Above all, we enjoyed the time spent among the people there who were as unique as their marshes. They possessed a way of life and a dedication to hospitality that we lacked in the city. For us, this pleasant experience lasted from the late 1960s until the late 1970s.

In the beginning of the 1980s, with the start of the Iran-Iraq War, the Marshes became a refuge for rebels, resistance fighters, army deserters, and military factions opposing the government. Soon, the area became a dangerous zone of military operations, and ordinary people could no longer safely enter it. In addition, my family's land was confiscated in a fierce battle between rebels and the ruling regime. In that fight, my cousin and his son were killed in the crossfire.

My second root in the Marshes goes back to the 1980s when I was enrolled at Basrah University as a lecturer in marine biology. Among the course requirements was a field visit to the Marshes to study the flora and fauna of their unique environment. For me, it provided another opportunity to see the Marshes. By this time, however, the University had to arrange visits through the military authorities, who would strictly specify where and when we could enter. This restriction lasted through the 1980s. Even so, marine biology students could still enjoy some of the unique environment, the rich habitat, the distinctive culture of the Marshes and, above all, they could experience the warm hospitality, openness, dignity, and self-possession of the Marsh Arabs.

Through these personal experiences, I can claim some knowledge of the geography and scientific attributes of the Marshes and the social life of the Marsh Arabs.

Geography and History

In the context of southern Iraq, I use the term *marsh* to mean a flat, low-lying landscape where excess water from nearby rivers, channels, irrigation systems and rainfall gather to form a network of lakes of various lengths and depths connected to each other by narrow water channels known locally as *gahins.*
These *gahins* are relatively deeper than the marshes, and because no vegetation grows in them, they seem to be very well-defined and persistent among the watery fields of reeds and lagoons that have remained essentially unchanged for thousands of years. The *gahins* make up the main waterways for Marsh Arab travel, whether from village to village or out to the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers and then on to the cities along their shores. For that reason, the marshes of Southern Iraq are also called "The Eastern Venice" or "The Arab Venice."

The Marshes form a large triangular region bounded by three major southern cities: Nasiriyah to the west, Amarah to the northeast, and Basrah to the south. Their huge area covers 20,000 square kilometres of open water, and includes both permanent and seasonal marshes. Three major areas - the al-Hammar, Central and al-Hawizeh Marshes - form the core of the Marshes, which is centred on the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.

The al-Hammar Marshes lie south of the Euphrates and are fed by that river. At Qarmat Ali, the water drains into the Shatt al-Arab channel that eventually flows into the Gulf. The al-Hammar Marshes are the largest of the three major areas, approximately 120 kilometres long and 25 kilometres at the widest point.

The Central Marshes lie upstream of the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates and are bounded by those rivers. These marshes are at the heart of the Mesopotamian wetland ecosystem. They are fed mainly by the Tigris distributaries and cover an area of approximately 3000 square kilometres.

The al-Hawizeh Marshes lie to the east of the Tigris, straddling the Iraq-Iran border. They extend approximately 80 kilometres from north to south, and 30 kilometres from east to west, covering an area of at least 3000 square kilometres (Partow 2001).

The marshes of southern Iraq were the heart of the old kingdom of Sumer, the earliest civilisation in the world. Sumer even predated the old Egyptian empire. Today in the marshes, men still pole canoes called *mashoufs*, of the particularly graceful design represented in early Sumerian carvings and in the silver model that Sir Leonard Woolley found in the ruins of Ur. Water buffaloes, too, first lumbered into Iraq from India about 3500 BC; their milk is still the Marsh Arabs' main source for yoghurt.

The Marshes are inhabited by genuine Arab tribes, among them Malik, Tamin and Assad, who emigrated from the Arabian Peninsula and settled in these fertile regions hundreds of years ago. Gavin Young (1980) spoke of the virtues the Marsh Arabs inherited from the eighth-century influx of tribes from the Arabia of Khalid bin Waled -- thrift, hard work, courage, simplicity, generosity and reverence.

Among the Marsh Arab tribes are the Ma'dan. Some theorize the Ma'dan might be the descendants of the Sumerians, due to similarities they share in their primitive way of life. In his film *Cradle of Civilisation*, Michael Wood describes some recognizable designs that are seen in Sumerian carvings 5000 years ago. After the First World War, travelers to the region, who were mainly British, brought a new awareness of the unique culture of the Ma'dan to the outside world. In the 1930s, Freya Stark published photographs...
of this "enchanted country unlike anywhere else in the world." In the 1950's came Wilfred Thesiger and Gavin Maxwell, followed by Gavin Young who made an excellent film about the Marshes for the British Broadcasting Corporation in 1977.

From relatively old records, the population of Marsh Arabs is estimated at half a million. This number increased dramatically during the Iran-Iraq War when large numbers of Iraqis who opposed the war, as well as military deserters, sought refuge within the Marshes' vast expanse of towering reeds. The population increased again soon after the Gulf War ceasefire in March 1991 when Iraqi troops retreated from defeat in Kuwait and the Iraqi regime began to crush the civilian uprising in the South.

The Destruction of the Marshes and Their Inhabitants

The most recent alteration and destruction of the Marshes and their environment started during the 1980s when the government diverted and drained some of the surface water from the Central and al-Hammar Marshes to create a watery barrier against the advance of the Iranian military forces. As a consequence, the water level in those marshes dropped sharply. This permitted salt water to enter from the ebb and flow of the connecting Gulf, causing the salinity of water in the al-Hammar Marshes to rise. This in turn caused a major change from a fresh soft water ecosystem to a brackish one, accompanied by changes in the composition of flora and fauna there. Basrah University's Marine Science Centre conducted intensive studies of this disaster and reported its findings to the Ministry of Higher Studies and Scientific Research, but there was no reply, and the excuse for inaction was "military priorities."

Another alteration to the Marshes was the construction of a military road across the al-Hammar and Central Marshes, parallel to the main Basrah-to-Amarah route. This led to the drying of a large area of those marshes. During that period, the people of the Marshes found it difficult to accept this alteration in their native land, but they accepted it reluctantly for the sake of the war effort (although their acceptance or refusal meant nothing to the brutal regime!). The people adapted as best they could and relocated their houses within the Marshes. And they were good fighters in that war, as mentioned by explorers Gavin Young (in his book, Return to the Marshes, about his last visit to the region in 1984) and more recently by Michael Wood in his two visits during the summer and Christmas of 1989.

The Marsh Arabs were regarded as heroes during the Iran-Iraq War, but after the uprising in 1991, the government newspaper al-Thawra began to publish pieces attacking them for their Shi'ism and their way of life. They called them "traitors," and went so far as to insult their customs and racial ancestry. As elsewhere in Iraq, such insults were a prelude to government attacks on the way of life, religions and cultures of any citizens who did not give strict allegiance to the State. In this case, the government's destruction of this unique culture, environment and landscape and the heavy loss of life occurred after the 1991 Gulf War when huge numbers of people in the South fled into the Marshes, where they tried to escape the brutality and cruelty of the regime, and then supported the popular uprising in March of that year.

During that period, there was a huge military operation against the marshes. Despite losing the invasion
of Kuwait, all kinds of weapons were left at the disposal of the defeated regime; it used them to attack the Marsh Arabs. In the months that followed, large numbers who sought refuge were killed, while others barely escaped with their families across the Iranian border. In 2000, I visited some of them and delivered humanitarian assistance. These refugees were living in very appalling conditions, in concentration-like camps.

Due to their ancient way of life, culture and needs, the indigenous Marsh Arabs tried to stay in the Marshes despite all sort of losses and uncertainty. More tragically, the Iraqi regime poisoned the water with huge quantities of chemicals, depriving more than 500,000 besieged Arabs of any type of food or water. Essentially, the people were forced to surrender to the government's ruthless security forces or die.

The Ba'ath National Council met on April 18, 1992 to discuss what it called "the pacification of the South." It discussed the relocation of what would be left of its population who were under constant bombardment by guns, missiles and helicopters, just as it had earlier planned and executed the destruction of 4000 villages in Kurdistan and the forcible relocation of that population. (As a result, up to 200,000 Kurds were murdered in the so-called "al-Anfal" operations in northern Iraq.) The Council also discussed imposing an economic stranglehold on the Marshes so that food, water and medicine could not reach the inhabitants.

It is important to remember that the typical Marsh Arab had no active interest or involvement with national or party politics, but lived on a day-to-day basis, fishing, cultivating fields, tending livestock and weaving mats. They were subjected to government atrocities only because they were Shi'a Muslims and because their bountiful environment provided sanctuary to others escaping the regime's brutality.

Early in 1992, a United Nations report on human rights abuse in Iraq depicted the government's counter-insurgency campaign against Shi'ite rebels and army deserters in the eastern marshes. This campaign affected most of the Ma'dan and, according to the report, more than 200,000 people were said to be marooned in the marshes and subjected to daily attacks. The report concluded, "The situation is grim."

In 1993, a report from the Middle East Watch mission stated that approximately two-thirds of the Marshes, representing the bulk of Iraqi traditional marshland, had already been drained. It said that unless this was swiftly halted and reversed, by the summer of 1993, the damages would likely to be irreversible, with disastrous results.

On November 24, 1995, Mr. Max van der Stoel, the United Nations Rapporteur on Human Rights in Iraq, delivered a report in which he mentioned that the economic situation was deteriorating so phenomenally that children were seen begging in the streets of southern Iraq and families were having to sell their possessions to survive. He added that the suffering of thousands of Iraqi people in the Marshes and in other places as a direct result of the regime's brutal and barbaric action had been coupled with that of millions more people in the country who were afflicted with starvation, malnutrition and disease. (As reported on December 2, 1995, seventy people had died from cholera and roads to Baghdad were closed.) The report concluded that millions of people were being held hostage by the Saddam Hussein
regime that had refused to accept U.N. Resolution 986, which allowed the regime to sell Iraqi oil in exchange for humanitarian assistance, food and medicine.

Over the years 1991 to 1996, I gave several talks at Scotland universities and at Amnesty International where I tried to highlight the environmental disaster and human miseries facing the marshes and the Marsh Arabs. Clearly, the government’s huge drainage works were for the purpose of drying the marshes and driving away the inhabitants. Further, this destruction was closely monitored and photographed from space; in 2001, this imagery was published in a comprehensive report by the United Nations Environment Programme (Partow 2001).

The Problem of Timely Response

I feel that there were two reasons for the lack of sympathy towards the plight of the Marsh Arabs during the 1990s. First, there was insufficient media coverage during the start of the crisis during 1992 and 1993. To my knowledge, there were only a few articles in the British press and a single BBC television broadcast on October 26, 1993 of Michael Wood's important documentary, *Saddam's Killing Fields*. This was probably due to the facts that the Marsh Arabs reside in an almost inaccessible region, and that the regime was not going to give foreign journalists an opportunity to witness the killing and damage that was occurring. Another reason, which might be political, is that the unfortunate people in question were the West's traditional bogeymen - the Shi’a - who were portrayed throughout the 1980's to the typical Western family as crazed Muslim fanatics who committed kidnap and murder. Thus, the lack of Western sympathy could have been due to an inaccurate stereotype rather than indifference to poor people facing real genocide and ecocide.

Nevertheless, there still are questions to ask and answer on behalf of thousands of people who suffered through one of the worst periods in human history: What was the world's response to these crimes? What excuse can there be for the world's indifference and/or inaction to the crimes of a ruthless dictator? What did the United Nations do about these crimes? What support should Western powers now give these people?

Surely by not decisively challenging tyranny, the United Nations and the West betrayed their standards and beliefs in justice and human rights for all people. This will also encourage other dictators to commit barbaric crimes against their innocent citizens. Further, the lack of response has fuelled suspicion and ill will among the Iraqi people towards the United Nations and the world community.

Conclusion

With few exceptions, only in the past year have scientists, organizations and governments outside Iraq begun to commit themselves to restoring the marshes of southern Iraq and reopening the region for Marsh Arabs and others who may choose to live freely in a world of quiet water and sheltering reeds. Thus it took twelve years for the world to recognize its debt to this ancient and sustainable culture and to its valuable resources of global significance. I feel the time is due for repayment. Let us welcome and
grasp the opportunity to work together and give hope to those who lost everything.

We acknowledge that the marshland of southern Iraq is the intimate realm of the Marsh Arabs, who, over thousands of years, learned to live there amidst a unique combination of natural and man-made forces, fertility and hardships. We also know that the region is physically mostly within the bounds of present-day Iraq. But it is also a sizable ecosystem with its own right to exist as part of the whole planet Earth, thus neither the sole property of the Marsh Arabs nor the exclusive domain of Iraq, especially not to plunder, destroy or leave as wasteland. The region deserves to be restored and improved as part of humanity's cultural, ecological and historical heritage. With good will and dedication, this lifeless land could again become a Garden of Eden.

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