

The Meaning of Water: A Tale of Two Cities

by Mika Thuening.

The Iraq American Reconciliation Project (IARP) contributed to this article



Water-borne diseases are the number one killer of children under five years of age in Iraq. These children at Al-Kufa Kinder Garden⁴ are among the more fortunate, able to have access to clean drinking water, due to filter systems installed by the Muslim Peacemaker Team through the Iraq American Reconciliation Project's Water for Peace Program.

Thirteen-year old Hassan Khalid was suffering from fever, headaches, and vomiting. He had drunk water from a tap and contracted typhoid. Unfortunately Hassan is not alone in falling victim to the unsafe water of Iraq. In 2007, the World Health Organization confirmed over 3,300 cases of cholera, a disease spread through contaminated water that resulted in at least 14 deaths. The number one killer of children under 5 years of age is water-borne diseases?typhoid and hepatitis, as well as diarrhea. Although these diseases are preventable by treating water for human consumption, millions of Iraqis remain at risk due to the lack of access to clean water. According to the Red Cross, 40% of Iraqis lack access.

Currently, almost half of households in Iraq are not connected to the general water network. To get their water, families often must resort to unsafe or unsustainable water sources for their everyday needs. For example, the Tigris River, which flows through the center of Iraq's capital city Baghdad, provides most citizens with their drinking water. However, raw sewage pours from large pipes directly into the Tigris River, which then ends up in Baghdad's drinking water.

But even being connected to the general water network does not guarantee clean water. About 36% of drinking water in Baghdad is unsafe in a good month, and 90% is unsafe in a bad month.

Some affluent families can afford to buy bottled drinking water, while many Iraqis have found themselves spending a third or more of their income purchasing clean water for their families. For the poor families who cannot afford to buy any clean water, the only option is to risk their health by drinking water that smells of human waste and carries multiple diseases.

Why is water in Iraq so bad? Iraq's waste-treatment systems – similar to what we have in the U.S.– are obsolete, and as mentioned here previously, sewage is poured into the country's main sources of water. In addition, Iraq's upstream neighbors Syria, Turkey, and Iran have all built dams reducing the flow of clean water into Iraq. The water supply and sanitation sector has experienced steady, devastating decline.

The country's water infrastructure (treatment plants, pipes, etc.) is in disrepair largely due to the 1991 destruction of the U.S.-led bombings which hit Iraq's infrastructure, and the U.S./U.K.-led U.N. sanctions throughout the 1990s which prevented replacement parts from entering Iraq, followed by the 2003 U.S. bombing and invasion, and the subsequent disruption and violence. In addition, many of Baghdad's engineers were unable to work, were assassinated and/or left the country.

Seven years after the start of the last war, water issues continue to jeopardize the health of Iraqi people. According to a USAID situation report dated May 5, 2010, "significant water shortages due to drought and damaged or insufficient water infrastructure continue to hinder access to safe drinking water or sanitation facilities in Iraq."

While the Iraqi government, Iraqi non-governmental organizations, and international actors have made progress on restoring Iraq's water systems, unclean and unsafe water is likely to remain a significant health risk to Iraqis and a violation of their basic human rights for years to come.

The Water for Peace Project

In response to these concerns, American citizens have taken a stand for the health and well-being of the Iraqi people. Hundreds of American students, families, and community organizations have brought clean water to thousands of Iraqis through the Water for Peace program.

Water for Peace is a joint project of the Muslim Peacemaker Teams (MPT) and the Iraqi and American Reconciliation Project (IARP) that upholds and increases Iraqis'

human right to water by installing water sanitation systems at schools that don't have access to clean water. Rather than requiring Iraqi schools to pay for sanitation systems they cannot afford, MPT and IARP find civil society organizations, school groups, and individuals in the U.S. to sponsor the sanitation systems.

In addition to providing clean water for Iraqis, Water for Peace builds people-to-people connections between Iraqis and Americans. Americans receive photos of the installation and letters from the students of their sponsored school. Water for Peace also provides health education to Iraqis, instructing them on avoiding contracting water-borne diseases.

Thus far, 32 schools and one teaching hospital have received water sanitation units, providing clean water to over 8,000 students and countless patients and doctors in a 200-bed teaching hospital.

One donor, Steve Clemens, feels a special connection to Iraq, having traveled there in December 2002, just a few months before the 2003 bombing of Iraq. He says about his experience, "I visited some of the dysfunctional water treatment plants in southern Iraq where replacement parts were denied entry under sanctions insisted upon by our government. Before the war, Veterans for Peace were trying to repair some of those facilities, one at a time. With the war, even that was stopped. The work that Water for Peace is doing is essential and life-giving. I'm excited to participate."

Water for Peace action is focused in the province of Najaf, population 1.2 million, which lies 100 miles south of Baghdad and has expanded to surrounding areas. Approximately 500 schools, as well as 20 hospitals and clinics in the region are in desperate need of clean water systems.

Minneapolis and Najaf: People-to-People Connections



Sailboat on Lake Calhoun. Since 1940, the Minneapolis has celebrated its water, enjoyed for recreational activities and visual beauty, with a summertime Aquatennial. Photo: Hennepin County Historical Societ.

In the fall of 2009, Minneapolis, Minnesota, officially became a Sister City with Najaf, Iraq. As Sister Cities, Minneapolis and Najaf aim to promote peace by building social, cultural, educational and economic ties, advancing mutual respect, understanding and cooperation.

Minneapolis, the largest city in Minnesota, is known for its abundance of natural freshwater lakes and rivers. In fact, the name "Minneapolis," is derived from the Dakota word for water "mni" which is combined with "polis," the Greek word for city. In July 2010, Minneapolis will hold its 71st annual city-wide event called the Aquatennial, celebrating the city's water bodies, and water culture.

And, on the 18th of July, Minneapolis will celebrate its Sister City relationship at the Aquatennial. During this time IARP will educate Minneapolis citizens about the needs of our friends in Iraq and how each American can help through Water for Peace. Minneapolis, a city so bountiful with clean water resources, has so much opportunity to give to its sister Najaf, a city so much in need of clean water.

Programs like Water for Peace, which bring essential aid while connecting communities, are instrumental in communicating to the Iraqi people that the American people indeed care. As a community, we can face the challenge and take up responsibility to help rebuild the country that has been so devastated in our name. We have the power to bring health, hope and a future to Iraq's next generation.

Water for Peace is sponsored by the Iraqi & American Reconciliation Project (IARP) of Minnesota whose mission is to promote reconciliation between the people of the

United States and Iraq in response to the devastation affecting Iraqi families, society and culture. For more information or to learn how to get involved, please visit www.reconciliationproject.org or contact Mika at mika@reconciliationproject.org for more information.

Mika Thuening has been the Water for Peace Program manager for IARP over the past year. Since January of 2010, she oversaw the collection of funds to provide clean drinking water for another 15 schools in Iraq. Mika's background includes community organizing activities for an NGO in Amman, Jordan and study of the Arabic language. Through IARP she will be helping to coordinate the visit of 10-12 Iraqi delegates to Minneapolis-St.Paul this summer and providing support to summer interns working with IARP.