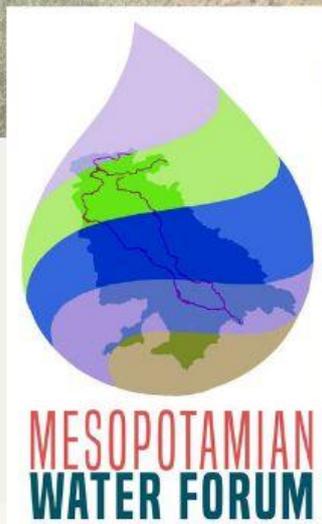


## Mesopotamian Water Forum

### Virtual Assembly

16-17 May 2020

## “Discussing Water in Times of Corona”



Saturday 16 May & Sunday 17 May 2020

Iraq time: 3:00–5:00pm

Turkey time: 3:00–5:00 pm

Syria time: 3:00–5:00 pm

Iran time: 4:30– 6:30 pm

Central European time: 2:00–4:00 pm

Mesopotamian Water Forum • Mezopotamya Su Forumu

کۆرپه‌ندی ئاوی میزۆپۆتامیا • منتدى المياه اللقلمی • گردهمایى آب بین النهرین

An alternative civil society forum on water resources  
Promoting water as a tool for sustainable peace in Mesopotamia

# MESOPOTAMIAN WATER FORUM VIRTUAL ASSEMBLY REPORT

16-17 MAY 2020

*From 16-17 May 2020 the Virtual Assembly of the Mesopotamian Water Forum took place online. 1 year after the first Mesopotamian Water Forum held in Sulaymaniyah (Kurdistan Region of Iraq) water movements and civil society organizations from Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran – the four states of the Tigris-Euphrates basin – took part in 2 days of discussion and debate, joined by other internationals. More than 60 people gathered each day in a video call group. This report collects the notes of the 2-day Virtual Assembly. The Mesopotamian Water Forum is initiative of Save the Tigris Campaign.*

## **PROGRAM**

### **DAY 1: SATURDAY 16 MAY 2020**

1. Introduction to the goals of the Virtual Assembly
2. Updates on Covid-19 virus from movements in the region. What is the impact of the crisis situation on water provision and water infrastructure? What is the impact of the crisis on activism and advocacy? Updates on the water situation in the region, in particular dams, pollution and climate change. Including questions and comments. - Iraq - Kurdistan Region of Iraq - Iran - Syria - Turkey
3. Recap
4. General questions and comments

### **DAY 2: SUNDAY 17 MAY 2020**

1. Opening and introduction about the challenges faced by civil society in the Mesopotamian region, especially in coordination, and the organisation of the 1st Mesopotamian Water Forum. Including questions and comments. - Iraq - Kurdistan Region of Iraq - Iran - Syria - Turkey
2. Is the 2019 declaration still valid, does it require any modifications?
3. Feedback on the first edition of the Mesopotamian Water Forum from 2019. What lessons can be learned and how can we work towards the second edition which is aimed to be organized in 2021?
4. What other kind of solidarity is required for the movements of the region? What kind of actions and campaigns?
5. Closing statement

# DAY 1

## **1. Introduction to the goals of the Virtual Assembly**

The Covid-19 crisis was a good opportunity to meet again, 1 year after the first edition of the Mesopotamian Water Forum. We have had two levels of virtual meetings. We did local assemblies and we do the main virtual assembly. This virtual assembly is not an alternative to the first forum, actually a step in the middle to get organized, be in contact, evaluate and get prepared for the second forum.

## **2. Updates on the coronavirus and water situation in each country**

### **Iraq**

The crisis had an impact on water and infrastructure. More water is being used on the domestic level, but the agricultural and industrial use went down. So generally, water use decreased. Iraq will face an economic crisis due to this due to the dropping of the oil price. The investment budget will be almost zero, and salary comprises a large amount from the operational budget. Iraqis see this crisis as an opportunity to diversify the economy and shift away from oil. The government should invest in agriculture, sustainable tourism and other sectors. Activists are optimistic and developing communication with partner organisations, trying to find new ways to collaborate with each other, to invest in networking and planning. They are planning new ways to use social media and websites. They are using this time to increase the number of volunteers as well as their skills. Unfortunately, there is also a lack of field activism due to the lockdown.

In the current season there is no drought in Iraq like before, there is plenty of water. The rivers have been fed with water. Still there is the concern of water management, especially for the Southern governorates who are still afraid of water scarcity. They feel Iraq is not taking advantage of the current situation of water abundance, such as storing water. A lot of wastewater in Iraq remains untreated. Some Iraqis wondered about the role water plays in the spread of the virus. People are also worried about the impact of upstream dams, such as Ilisu Dam. It is now very late to take any actions against the impact of this dam. Iraqi activists hope some of the large dam projects can be stopped, and instead more investments in health, dealing with pollution issues.

### **Kurdistan Region of Iraq**

The Kurdistan Region might go through a second wave of the virus. The activists have held online meetings. It is important to keep the activist movement going. It will take a long time for people to fully realize how important protection of water resources is, the learning process is very slow. Activists have been active during the pandemic, working on communication and digital outreach. Solidarity messages were spread. It was also an opportunity to do some data collection, once the main lockdown was lifted. People have been psychologically affected, but we have to see this crisis as an opportunity. It demonstrates the need for care of the environment. During this crisis the environment had the opportunity to heal a bit. Activists

noticed that there was less garbage and waste in many places. They hope that people appreciate the environment now.

Lack of awareness of water conservation among the general population (overconsumption) remains common, as well as lack of implementation of environmental laws. Pollution of both surface and groundwater is common in the KRI. It was mentioned that the quality in the Kurdistan Region the quality of water is better than in Southern Iraq. Salinity levels of water in Southern Iraq are much worse there. The Kurdistan regional government doesn't have much funds to spend on the many dam projects they have planned. Dams have been constructed upstream to control transboundary water flows. The participants noted that Iran is building a number of tunnels to divert water mostly on the Lesser Zab. the Iraqi government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Region should collaborate to negotiate with Turkey and Iran for equal shares of water.

## **Iran**

The Covid19 crisis has affected all countries in similar ways. The pandemic could have a silver lining, as it caused a fall in carbon dioxide emissions. In the Middle East and Iran there was less pollution, and people could experience what life is like without pollution. The crisis is an opportunity to review our economic systems. Environmental concerns have remained, such as degradation of water resources. The Coronavirus outbreak can be a turning point in the Mesopotamian region and an opportunity to re-connect with the environment. In Iran, the crisis has exposed to poor people how wealthy communities have been doing better in society. It is not clear what society will look like in a year or two. What will be the impact on the fragility and resilience of society? The situation is even more complicated when you take into account that there are also other issues such as climate change. Besides the Covid-19 crisis, Iran has suffered from the negative impacts of international sanctions.

Activism needs to have short-term and long-term goals. Activists need to be close to communities on the ground. Grass roots movement need to achieve bargaining power against authorities to improve the water quality. There is no pressure or incentive to improve quality of water resources otherwise for policymakers. There are a few ideas from Iranian activists: the development of a water parliament, restoration of water resources. As for dams there are the large-scale projects implemented by the authorities. The problem with Iran is that there are no cross-border partnerships or collaboration. This is a missed opportunity. There is room to build cross-border collaboration between Iraq and Iran in especially, and a need for a regional, community-based project, which could be a good basis.

## **Syria**

Syria has been in conflict for 9 years. There is a lack of hospital and health workers. At the moment there is a high concern for a Covid-19 outbreak. The situation is not clear, politically. Millions of people are in need of humanitarian aid, and there is a high concern for IDPs, who have a lack of access to water. Movements of people have been limited during the lockdown.

Both Tigris and Euphrates flow through Syria and have been heavily affected by water pollution. Many rivers have been suffering from waste discharge. Increased environmental

awareness among policymakers and the population of the region will be necessary to reduce the amount of waste disposal. In addition, Northeast Syria is affected by the lack of water supply from Alok Station. This water station was targeted by Turkey during the invasion. There are more than half a million people in Hasakeh region who have been affected by this lack of access to clean water. International support and mediation is required between Turkey and Northeast Syria, in order to prevent the use of water as a weapon.

## **Turkey**

Turkey also had a lockdown like all the countries. There is hardly any waste now, and the rivers look very clean. The Turkish government and private companies have profited from the ban on public demonstrations to move ahead with the construction of previously halted projects, mostly hydropower projects. Activists have done online actions and campaigns against these projects during the Covid-19 crisis. An example was a project that was stopped by the instruction of the court, but they still went ahead with construction. Activists filmed the construction and published it on social media in order to expose it. As a result, the project was halted again.

Privatization of water is an important issue in Turkey, and water pollution is a crucial issue for access to water. Surface water is often polluted by chemicals, which is used for instance to wash the streets. Overconsumption of water is an issue as well. Dam construction is ongoing with many dams planned. A major issue is that dams destroy cultural heritage. Various examples of hydropower projects in different locations were given. Ilisu Dam reservoir is almost filled. More than 10 dams have been completed in the past years in the Tigris-Euphrates basin. The capacity of Turkey store water is rapidly growing and this is a risk for neighbouring countries, especially since they are not consulted by Turkey. There are also the so-called security dams crossing the mountains on the borders in the southeast of Turkey.

Turkish activists really want to connect on a regional level with other activists in Mesopotamia. There is a big enthusiasm to organize another edition of the Mesopotamian Water Forum.

## **3. Recap**

## **4. Summary and general comments and discussion**

*Should we focus on internal water management?*

- In Iraq, we need to develop public participation in water management; more efforts are needed to raise awareness among the people. The internal water management of Iraq should be reformed, before discussions with neighbouring countries can start.

*Is there data about large companies who are building dams?*

- In KRI there are mostly different partnerships between the KRG and local, regional and European companies in different setups (publicly or privately funded, or through PPPs).

- In Turkey tenders are given to companies, consortia. The government decides where the dams are built. Construction is executed through the central government.

- In Iran dam construction is very centralized. IRGC are building most dams. Most of the dam projects are given to them, and this makes it a security issue. Most people who want to discuss

dams are basically interpreted as criticizing the IRGC. One of the negative impacts of sanctions is that it concentrated income and power in the hands of the IRGC. Water supply is a top national security in Iran, at all costs. This affects the way water is managed.

*Security of environmental activists?*

- We are in a very difficult context where governments consider water issues as a security/sovereignty issue. Activists are not allowed to get information. Access to activists should be limited because it is not easy to be exposed. We want to tell the world that civil society in the region is advanced, which is why we should be in touch with the media. This is an ongoing struggle for which people are risking their lives, for everybody in each country. It is important not to disclose names of activists from countries. International solidarity is important.

*What about the activists working on the Persian Leopard in Iran who are imprisoned?*

- This is a case of the IRGC. They are still imprisoned. Their sentence has been reduced. It is a very difficult situation. No one can accept such a situation.

*How does the Covid19-crisis create new opportunities? In UK people realize the people we rely on most (such as healthcare workers) have been underpaid and not enough appreciated. Capital is lining itself up to get massive state subsidies, in particular airline and oil industries, in order to keep going as things were before. They way communities have been self-organizing creates opportunities. Can we think out of the box and use the Covid-19 crisis for organizing opportunities to create alliances and reach out to other movements?*

- Some governments are not as strong as a result of this crisis.

- The crisis is a good lesson to everyone that massive change can happen on the level of environment and water. We are worried about the reaction of the multinational companies who want to compensate their losses following this crisis.

- The perspective of people on religion will change as a result of this crisis.

- Global supply chains will be affected too.

- We are in an extraordinary crisis and governments cannot really provide an answer. Most governments prefer to continue like before. This provides an opportunity for activists.

- People across the region have been sharing solidarity messages, this is an important opportunity to follow up on that.

## DAY 2

### **1. Opening and introduction about the challenges faced by civil society in the Mesopotamian region, especially in coordination, and the organisation of the 1st Mesopotamian Water Forum**

The first edition of the Mesopotamian Water Forum we held last year, with about 200 water activists from the region, for 3 days of workshops and discussions on 3 thematic issues of dams, pollution, democratic water management. A declaration was released. The idea is to do a next edition of the forum hopefully next year.

*Some challenges faced by civil society working on water issues:*

- There is still the idea that dams are good. Many people in the region believe this. Dams are promoted by academics, experts. The problem is also that downstream countries build their own dams in response to dams built in upstream countries. The Kurdistan Region is such a case, where the plan is to construct many dams to store water, in response to Turkish and Iranian dams. But this creates its own problems, especially for Southern Iraq.
- Lack of reliable data. There is not much transparency from authorities, data is not shared and often the authorities themselves lack data. Authorities are not willing to share data with civil society when requested. Even important documents are not shared with civil society. The Iraqi government for instance has a strategy on water resources which was never shared. Also the outcomes of negotiations between Turkey and Iraq are not shared. Especially in Iran dams are seen as a matter of national security so information is lacking.
- Lack of a basin-wide approach among policymakers, experts etc. They don't take into account the cumulative effects water activities have on the basin as a whole. If a dam is constructed in Turkey, this will have an impact on Southern Iraq. If waste is dumped into the water in the Kurdistan Region, this will affect the rest of Iraq.
- Internal and external water issues and solutions go hand-in-hand. It is not possible to blame water scarcity only on what neighbouring countries are doing, but also on internal mismanagement, pollution or over consumption.
- Women are affected by water issues. We definitely try to get more women on the stage and we believe their voice is very important. We would like to involve more women in our work.
- There can be a lot of pressure on activists, even environmental activists, in many countries in the region. Environmental issues have often been politicized. Some activists have been even detained and face real threats. Cyber security is also important.

*The first edition of the Mesopotamian Water Forum took months of organizing. Some of the major issues that we ran into:*

- It is important to put the forum in the framework of the current political-economic system. We want to provide a different perspective. Instead of exploitation and conflict, we believe we can develop peace through water and water can be a source of collaboration instead of conflict. This is a new paradigm. Especially in Syria and Iraq water has been really used as a weapon for hegemony. We need to underline this vision.
- Creating solid groups on local levels, for each region or country that can be part of the water forum. Maintaining local networks requires a lot of work. Because distance and language it is not always easy. This is even harder on a regional level. It also requires a lot of followup and mostly motivation and also meetings on local levels.

- Language. We did not want to do the forum in one language or in English, because we cannot assume that everyone speaks English, this is often not the case, and we also want to give the opportunity to everyone to speak in their local language. So basically we had to provide simultaneous interpretation for each language (Arabic, Turkish, Farsi, Kurdish and English)
- Location issues for gathering: There are few places where participants from each country can gather because of visa issues. We found that the Kurdistan Region of Iraq is the location where most nationalities can easily enter. For Syrians it is difficult to reach other countries. Turkey is relatively ok. For internationals Iraq is not always easy. Then there are also security issues which have to be taken into account.
- Following up and staying in touch after the water forum, to consolidate the network is always a big challenge. This difficulty is exacerbated by the fact that people speak different languages. A proposal could be to do smaller meetings between two regions or countries, or at least periodical online meetings.
- Different topics have to be discussed. Last time we focused on pollution, dams, water management but another topic is privatization of water. This is an important issue for instance in Turkey.
- Reaching out to global and regional civil society is very important as well. How can we build connection with regional and global water movements? During the last forum we invited activists from Lebanon, Jordan, Sudan to connect with other water movements from the region. We also had activists from Chile, Russia, USA and other countries. Their presence and participation is very important to facilitate the exchanges between global civil society and civil society from Mesopotamia. The aim is to bring the stories of the Mesopotamia region to the international level and learn from each other's struggles, and create solidarity networks.
- What are some tangible goals that we can achieve, in the short-term and long-term? Is it possible to do more campaigns together?

## **Iraq**

Water and environment were not a priority in Iraq. Save the Tigris Campaign started in 2012 and was one of the first campaigns to work on such issues. Civil society previously was mostly interested on sectarian issues. There are only a small number of civil society organisations in Iraq, especially on environmental issues, which makes it difficult to advocate on the national level or to network. Lack of information is a challenge. Civil society cannot access the information that they need. The authorities are not transparent in the sharing of information. Questions often remain unanswered. Civil society is isolated from the process of decision-making and not consulted, whether on pollution, irrigation or dams. Civil society is still faces a lack of experience, but it has been trying to get locally organized in different cities, grass-roots. At the same time civil society is closest to local communities. Lastly, security threats are common in Iraq, from militias and others actors

## **Kurdistan Region of Iraq**

There is pressure on civil society, especially in this time. It is hard to get the government moving on specific issues, such as environmental legislation and the commodification or privatization of water. We also need to work on last year's recommendations from the forum. Some participants wondered why the Mesopotamian Water Forum only focusing on water?

Mesopotamia is more than just water and rivers. (Comment: The water resources are more threatened than other resources, so we should focus mainly on water)

## **Iran**

Water transfer projects with the aim of development of water resources are not in compliance with environmental principles. This leads to unfair development and injustice, which will deepen crises in the country. We should criticize decision-making structures, especially on the local level. There was again a proposal for a water parliament. Another proposal from Iran is to form international water 'watchmen' (i.e. waterkeepers) in order to guarantee their rightful release of water and advocate with governments to review their environmental policies. Another proposal is to restore water resources, to relieve the pressure on upstream rivers. Local communities require investments in order to achieve economic development.

We need to focus on evidence-making and collecting data, especially regarding the political economy of dam construction in the region. We need to lead this movement to actions. A specific suggestion is that a group could get together and produce documents underlining our vision. What kind of benefits are we going to provide to the region (governments, communities, etc). What kind of logistics and support can organizers provide?

## **Syria**

Due to the conflict most of the focus is on humanitarian aid and emergency response. Not many organisations and CSOs have experience working on water and environment. There are few networks or groups for communication. We need to invest in youth, especially considering they lack information. Often there are no data, resources available, though this would help in order to advocacy on water. Many activists have great proposals though. Activities find that it is important to have frequent meetings, perhaps on a monthly basis. Civil society needs more opportunities for exchange and capacity building.

## **Turkey**

Many groups have been working on water and ecology in the past fifteen years, it is not a new topic in Turkey. The number of ecology organisations is still increasing. A decade ago, water was the main struggle, now there is a variety of including mining, airports, nuclear power. Since 2018 the degradation of ecology has increased due to an economic crisis. Movements have challenges bring their cases to the media. Currently media are mostly controlled by the government and there is a lot of repression from the government, also against ecology activists. Social media has become more important, but face-to-face remains important as well. Activists are reaching out to local communities, there is a need to be close to the communities, especially dam-affected communities. It is important to document riverine ecosystems and communities before they get destroyed as a result of dam construction. An example is the documentation of the Tigris River in 2019. Currently there are efforts to discuss alternatives to state-run mega projects. However it is difficult to come up with solutions and alternatives acknowledged by all actors. People are trying to organize on local and regional levels. They also work on other issues which indirectly affect water, such as mining.

## General questions and comments

### *Has anyone used legal means?*

- In Turkey activists took the government to court over environmental impact assessments, they tried to stop companies via the court. It is important to expose such trials to the public. If the public is aware of the cases there is a higher guarantee for success, and the decision-making process will be sped up. A challenge in Turkey is that the legal system is controlled by the government.
- In Iraq the courts get interfered by the authorities and they are not independent.
- In Iran there is a proposal initiated by the Department of Environment in collaboration with NGOs to establish a court for environmental crimes. On the operational level there have been cases in which NGOs or activists went to court, and often rulings were in favor of the environment. However, usually courts rule in favour of society.

### *Why don't we focus on water preservation?*

This is one of the main goals of the Mesopotamian Water Forum in the region. Our approach is to respect environment and preserve water. Our focus is not against small-scale dams or community participation, only on large megaprojects.

### *We should discuss the issue of silt in fostering fertility of the land?*

- We advocate not only on the quantity of the water, but as well on the quality of the water and the management systems. The rivers were bringing food and richness to local cultures. The government doesn't consider water quality a priority.
- In fact, water as a tool for peace is an old paradigm; the integration of the rivers with culture, trade and connection. Cultural heritage is very important in this regard as a means to advocate for our message. We need to engage in cultural heritage as a dynamic.

## 2. Is the final declaration of the forum still valid?

Issues of (over)extraction is still valid, as well as the importance of water for Mesopotamia. This is the basis of our work. We mention the resistance against destructive policies. We emphasize the spirit of solidarity, and the MWF is an expression of it. We mention the use of water as a tool for hegemony. We should clarify what kind of policies we propose, for instance in agriculture. We increasingly have started discussing pollution in Save the Tigris Campaign and should continue to do so. We should strengthen the organizational structure of the Mesopotamian Water Forum.

## Comments

- A proposal is to look at the rivers as an alternative to road transportation to mitigate the effects of climate change. We should emphasize the importance of rivers for the culture, protecting it in order to preserve the living environment and culture of the region. It is important to look to the past and the relation of the rivers with cultural heritage. We need access to the river in order to gather more information about the state of the river.
- You cannot be oppositional only and get into technical arguments. It is essential to be propositional and to build living examples or living alternatives. We need to be upfront about

what we want to build. Current authorities are building a top-down centralized society. We need to provide an alternative.

- We have to take into account the Sustainable Development Goals, dams should be included in it.

### **3. How can we work towards the next edition of the Mesopotamian Water Forum?**

- Many people cannot join due to limitations regarding language. Interpretation is an issue and if it is not well managed it is difficult to contribute to the process. Participants don't really speak each other's language. Some issues require more attention, such as the Ilisu Dam case, or privatization of water. We need to link it to the political-economic systems. Another critical issue is the gender issue, which should be increasingly highlighted in practice or in the declaration. We do not want to organize a forum for the sake of it, but it must be part of a process. We should be more committed to the execution of the declaration.

- We need to develop joint sustainable water management. We need to focus also on internal water management issues, not only external. First you have to solve internal problems in each country, later on discuss transboundary water issues.

- It is important to find influencers, such as media, to report on issues. We need more journalists writing about environmental and water issues in Southern Iraq. It is difficult to approach them.

### **4. What kind of solidarity is required for the region?**

- We should put a few questions. With whom do we want to do solidarity? We need solidarity among us internally. We can talk about solidarity on a local level, between cities. We should foster understanding of water issues between communities on the local level. What kind of topics put us together? What kind of values are we defending? We can be in solidarity with each other on certain values, such as the use of water as an instrument for peace. We have to be consequent: if we are against dams, we have to be against dams in all countries, not only in one country. What is the environmental impact of all these megaprojects, and how to they affect our values? Communication is very important. We need to know what is going on in each country. There are problems of language, geographical distance, technology. We need to communicate our struggles to each other. We need to network and the Mesopotamian Water Forum is a good example of networking. This is a great achievement which did not happen before. We can exchange elements of training or trainers. We need more exchange visits. We can do joint research in order to collect information. On the issue of values, the declaration is essential in order to build on common values.

- The Mesopotamian region could be included in the Alternative World Water Forum.

### **5. Closing statement**

- This Mesopotamian Water Forum Virtual Assembly took place during Ramadan. This month can be like a marathon, getting to the celebration at the end of the day. I do think we learn so much from another. Save the Tigris Campaign and the Mesopotamian Water Forum are very important efforts and platforms through which we meet one another and share information. There is a lot of continuity even though our format this year is different from the edition of last year in Sulaymaniyah. There is so much continuity in the energy and inspiration that we

bring to this discussion and the struggles in Mesopotamia. We, the world and every country, are living through the experience of Covid-19 which is changing the world. There are tremendous opportunities here. As we connect on social media, we see an increase in solidarity (internationally). We appreciate the support and sympathy people are showing. There are also opportunities as systems change, as government policies are in flux. There are challenges and opportunities as governments change their policies. There are company interests and capitalist interests that are making sure their demands have been sent to the government. We will also have to articulate our values and make sure our agenda is clear. This requires not only solidarity within Save the Tigris Campaign, but also an increase in the resilience of local communities. There are 2 big lessons that we are taking away from our conversations: First, we don't know when we will be able to meet again, but we hope next year. This will be different in the new world, but we know we have the opportunity to exchange and build solidarity digitally. Second, we can connect local communities. Rivers unite, we cannot let them divide. How do we facilitate the sharing of information, sharing of local traditional practices of water management from Iran to Iraq to Turkey to Syria? There is a huge opportunity here, and I think we are on the road. The task now is to keep organizing and stay in touch, and build a vision, identify the goals and articulate a plan of action for moving forward towards the world we want to see in Mesopotamia and in the world.

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*The Virtual Assembly was held in English. Prior to the main assembly, participating activists from the Mesopotamian region organized local virtual assemblies in local languages, to prepare for the main regional discussion. Summaries of each local assembly are available on [www.savethetigris.org/news](http://www.savethetigris.org/news)*

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[www.savethetigris.org](http://www.savethetigris.org)