

Episode Transcript

**Episode Title:
Restoring Iraq's Marshes**

**Guest:
Azzam Alwash**

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**MIDDLE EAST
PROGRAM**

Jon Alterman:

Azzam Alwash is the founder of Nature Iraq. He is a Goldman Prize Laureate for his environmental work, and he is one of the founders of the American University in Sulaimani. Azzam Alwash, welcome to Babel.

Azzam Alwash:

Thank you. As it happens my family is from Babylon, so it's a homecoming of a sort.

Jon Alterman:

You left Iraq when you were a young man, you lived in the United States, you were educated here, you worked here and then you went back to Iraq after Saddam Hussein fell to restore the marshes. Why was that?

Azzam Alwash:

As you said, I had achieved the American dream and I was a kayaker and we used to go kayaking around the wetlands of southern California. Memories of my wetlands haunted me. When I heard that the marshes were dry, that was a devastating blow. In 2003 I went back, naively thinking that this is going to be a one-to-three-year project, not realizing it's a multi-decade endeavor. I did not intend to stay that long, I intended to just go work on the restoration of marshes and then come back home.

17 years later, 18 years later and I'm still at it. I suspect I'm going to be at it until the day I die. This is not an easy project; the economy on the environment of Iraq is settling in a very bad way. The oil production reservoirs, five giant reservoirs are underneath the marshes and so we're going to be at it. I don't want to sound regretful, Jon. It has been one of the most interesting and challenging things that I have ever done. Yes, it has come at a personal price of being away from my children as they grew up and I'm hoping that one day they'll come back and see it and see some of the results of their dad's work and recognize that it was all for a good cause.

Jon Alterman:

Why is it so hard?

Azzam Alwash:

Well, for that I need to explain to your listeners what the marshes are. The marshes are essentially nature's way of containing floods. The marshes are completely dependent on the flood pulse of the Tigris and Euphrates. In fact, the Sumerians celebrated the floods by celebrating the goddess of fertility, Ishtar. You see 60 percent of the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates come down in the snow melt in the spring. That's an incredible amount of water and all of it cannot get to the Gulf. You have a small little host called Shatt al Arab that takes the water away to the Gulf. And essentially the marshes become the container—the bladder if you will—of all this water coming down. So the flood is part and parcel. It's the natural beat upon which the symphony of biodiversity of southern Iraq has been playing since the last ice age and the pulse is no longer.

The dams upstream have made that pulse flat line. When people say the marshes have been restored, I say they have not been restored; they have been reflooded. But the beautiful thing about nature, Jon, is that she's adaptable. She adapts. All we need to do is let the water in and get out of the way, and she will adapt to the new conditions. So, what's happening now? The marshes visually look similar to what I remember from my childhood. Forests of reeds, water as far as the eye can see, birds in the sky, but when you look closely, the kind of fish that the fishermen are fishing is different than what it was when I

was young. It's much smaller, of course, but even the species are different. And so, what's happening is that nature is adapting slowly. The species that are dependent on clear water, that are dependent on the pulse of this flood are no longer thriving.

What is thriving in their stead are species that don't mind having that brackish water, that slow water, that monotonous flow of water. Previously, the flood came in and covered the land. It widened the lateral extent of the marshes. It increased the depth of the water. And that was actually in time with the fish spawning, with the birds migrating.

Jon Alterman:

Let me ask you a question about adaptation. I had a neighbor whose father was from Iraq and she grew up always thinking "my dad is really foreign." And then she went to the Arab world for the first time, she was living in Beirut and she saw her dad in an Arab context and said, "wow, my dad is really American. He doesn't fit into the Arab world." You came back to the Arab world. You came back to an Iraq that was very different from the Iraq you left. How did people treat you as an expatriate coming back in the wake of Saddam Hussein, changed by your experience and wanting to, in some ways, change Iraq, in some ways to something people remembered, in some ways to things they never remembered?

Azzam Alwash:

Yes, you're right, Jon. I am no longer an Iraqi. I'm an American of Iraqi heritage. And I take that with a sense of pride. I'm not ashamed of my Americanness. But I am proud also of my Iraqi heritage. I do not hide it. I didn't change my name. Azzam Alwash is still my name.

Now dealing with Iraqis over the last 17 years has been an interesting trip. Initially, we are viewed by the inner Iraqis, the Iraqis that stayed and suffered the sanctions, we were viewed as a curiosity. I recall initially, when I first went to the marshes, people could guess that I'm from the outside, just by the color of the whites of my eyes. You understand how silly that is. And of course, I remember one time telling the fishermen who was using electricity to fish and killing the small little fingerlings "this isn't haram, this is not kosher. You're killing future fish." He looks at me and says, "you must live from the outside." And I said, "yes, but how do you know?" He said, "well, I'll ask you this: what do you feed your children when you have nothing?" That made me shut up. That was early on. That was summer of 2003. It was a lesson to me not to act like I know it all. To listen. And the marsh people, the fishermen, the birdmen, the people who weave mats, they are my better teachers. They know the marsh a lot better than I do. I'm an engineer. What do I know? I know water flows; I don't know how it goes.

I'm not shy about telling you I do have a change of clothes that I keep in Iraq, purchased locally, so that I don't stand out. It's now dangerous to go into the south and tell people that I'm an American, because in fact they see a hostage, they see money, they see all sorts of things. So, it's been interesting.

Nevertheless, I can tell you—and I can tell your audience—that Iraqis in general still love America and they understand the difference between America and American policy. And in fact, having had suffered through the last 10 years of thuggery by some of the militias, they are dead tired of those militias. And we'll see how life progresses.

Jon Alterman:

We're doing a project that has to do with sustainable services, water, electricity, waste, and the way in which it's integrated with broader governance issues in the region. And which is why I wanted to talk to you today. I think one of the questions I'd really love your views on is at the grassroots level, what kinds of environmental advocates have arisen in Iraq? What kinds of issues let people come together? How do you create? How do you nurture environmental activism at the local level? And you talked about the

importance of people seeing self-interest at the heart and they don't see it in a sort of Western conventional way. They see it in a pure self-interested way. So, what are your experiences there that should inform work we're doing more broadly about advancing sustainability in the region?

Azzam Alwash:

Iraq, until recently, was a top-down nation, and that administrative structure remains. So for me to be effective, I need to work effectively with the government. I also need to work effectively with the stakeholders. I want more people dependent on the marshes, because these are extra voices that I can actually put on buses and take them to the ministry of water and resources in Baghdad and put them in front of the minister and say, "yo, Mr. Minister, please don't forget about us." And so that is activity that I do. In the north, my boys and girls are working on preserving an area for the Persian leopard. So, there I use a totally different language.

I use the language of preserving nature for nature's sake. I preserve nature for creating economic activities around this buffer zone that they can benefit from. So, for each area there is a different language. Another language that I'm using right now with the ministry of environment is that the decision makers in the Ministry of Environment are powerless. They have great laws on the books. Perfect. If they were implemented, Iraq would be an eco-heaven, but unfortunately, they have no power to implement the regulations. What I'm working on right now is changing nature Iraq's websites to advocate, to ask people to send me pictures of polluted areas, where the sewage is being dumped into the river. I want pictures of that, and I will have people extracting the GPS coordinates of these pictures, putting them up, not to create pressure on the Ministry of Environment, but rather to help the Ministry of Environment pressure those polluters, be they industry or government or hospitals or municipalities, whatever the case may be.

So here I have found a niche of trying to work in between the government, because the system is... Namely we're democratic. Namely, we have decentralization, but effectively, we're still a centralized, highly centralized state with, with almost everybody working for the government. So it requires a little bit of a change of mind frame from the Western type advocacy for the environment, demonstrations, pressuring your representative and all of that to a hybrid that kind of uses Western knowledge, grassroot activities, combined with talking logically to administrative decision-makers.

It's something that I was not trained for, Jon. I mean they teach us stress and strain. It's something that you have to learn on the go, but I'll tell you something. Participating in planning commission meetings in the United States did train me to think on my feet and how to deal with people, how to approach issues from the perspective of whoever is objecting. "What's your interest?" As you mentioned, I don't tell people don't fish. Go ahead, go on and fish. I have faith in nature that she will heal, and she will recover. And she has an incredible capacity to self-correct. What I need right now is stakeholders that help me make the case.

Jon Alterman:

If you were to teach environmental education in Iraq, how would you teach it? How would you approach it? If you had young people and you were able to form how they thought about environment issues, what would the curriculum look like?

Azzam Alwash:

I will talk about Iraq before oil. I will tell them about the history of trade. I will tell them about the history of agriculture and how it was invented. I will teach them about the natural way of irrigation in the north, where the water is a lot lower than the land versus the south, where the land is lower than

the river. I will teach them the value of how the original Iraqis adapted to their ecological conditions, their environmental conditions to create the breadbasket for the region. There I will give them the respect that I have gained for the natural system. I came thinking that I have all the knowledge of the West, all the engineering, I came from a generation of "dams are good."

I have learned, humbly, that while dams have positive effects, they do have negative effects too. So ease up. Let's learn from nature what works. And that's probably the best way to approach them because that will give them pride in their heritage, first of all. Pride in the Babylonian, Sumerian, Assyrian heritage of Iraq, it will teach them the respect for nature that I have gained, and that in fact, imitating nature is the best way to make a living. Most importantly it will teach them the impact nature has on them, that oil has been a curse, that oil has made their land the target of many an adventurer. And I will bring in Saddam's history and I'll bring in Qasim's history and all the generals that have basically risked their lives to take possession of this gold mine of oil, and tell them, what have you benefited from it? What have you seen of this oil? You have seen nothing. But what you have seen is destruction of your land because of that dependency on oil. Oil is going out.

It's the fuel of the past. You have in your possession the fuel of the future, namely, our sun. We have photovoltaic cells that can be installed in Iraq for the same cost as they are installed in Germany. In Germany, they would produce 120 days a year. In Iraq they will produce for 350 days. So even if you lose 50 percent of that electricity to transportation, you're still ahead. You have a land that you can open to investors and create forests, not farms, forests of photovoltaic cells. And under these photovoltaic cells, by the way, by the way, you can use clean water to grow crops that you can feed this is entire region with. Then the course would be how original Iraqi embraced nature, lived from nature and how we can learn from our history to live into the future.

Jon Alterman:

So interesting. It's not biology, it's not chemistry. The way you would teach environmentalism in Iraq is through history. And as a trained historian, I'm especially interested in that.

Azzam Alwash:

Maybe we'll create the curriculum together.

Jon Alterman:

That would be wonderful. Azzam Alwash, thank you very much for joining us on Babel.

Azzam Alwash:

Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to reach your audience.