

Iraqis Fear Impact of New Kuwait Port

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Locals warn that development could lead to mass job losses in port city of Basra.

Thousands of Iraqis working across five ports in Basra fear they will lose their livelihoods if Kuwait presses ahead with plans to build one of the Gulf's biggest harbours.

There are worries that once the 1.1 billion US dollar Mubarak port is completed, Iraq stands to lose up to 60 per cent of maritime traffic – mostly the larger cargo ships that already struggle to dock in Basra's Umm Qasr, the country's only deep-water port.

Work has started on a new port at Al-Faw close to Umm Qasr, but in May this year, the Kuwaitis began construction of the Mubarak port just over the border from the site.

The close proximity of the two developments has angered Iraqi politicians, workers and tribal leaders, who have pledged action against the Kuwaiti government.

Iraq's transport ministry announced the 1.6 billion dollar port project for Al-Faw in 2005, with an Italian construction firm winning the contract to build the facility. Construction only got under way in 2010, with the first stage of the development planned to be complete by 2014.

The finished project, with total costs estimated to reach six billion dollars by the completion date of 2028, includes not only the port itself but infrastructure such as train lines linking Europe to the Gulf.

Iraqis say that once the new port opens, they will be as hard-hit economically as when the country was subject to sanctions in the 1990s because of the invasion of Kuwait.

"How are we going to react when the Mubarak port is completed and we have to wait for years until we have an alternative?" transport company owner Ali Muhsin asked. "I think that my job will be greatly affected, as we won't see large vessels docking at the port and we'll have to look for work elsewhere."

Aside from diverting trade from Basra, the Kuwaiti project presents some practical challenges.

"The location of the port will block Iraqi sea lanes and increase the risk of large vessels colliding," Iraqi transport minister Hadi al-Amiri said.

Kadhim al-Hamami, who captains a cargo ship sailing from Basra, said the Kuwait port would act as a breakwater, silting up the seabed and gradual cutting Iraqi territory off from deeper waters.

"Iraqi ports will only be able to receive small vessels that can sail in under ten metres of water, whereas most of the vessels involved in major trade need more than 30 or 40 metres," he said.

As shippers opt to use the Kuwaiti port with its modern facilities and ease of docking, the Iraqi authorities fear they will have an unemployment catastrophe on their hands. Basra's five ports directly employ around 12,000 workers, according to Ammar al-Safi, spokesman for the state port authority.

Safi said his agency had no contingency plans in place, and predicted that the Kuwaiti project could lead to the loss of thousands of jobs in Basra.

"Aside from freight companies, many of the national and international firms now working to refurbish our ports might leave Iraq and go in search of areas where they can do better," he said.

The Iraqi government is pressing Kuwait to either reconsider building the port, or sign an agreement to jointly run the adjacent ports in the two countries. Bilateral committees set up earlier this year are still in talks, and Baghdad has said it will ask the United Nations to intervene if there is no resolution.

In a statement, Khaled al-Jarallah, under-secretary at the Kuwaiti foreign ministry, confirmed that the two governments were in communication.

"Kuwait is waiting for the final report from the Iraqi authorities concerning the findings and recommendations of a technical committee that has investigated the matter," he said.

Jawad al-Bazuni, a politician with the State of Law party in Basra, warned that if the other side proved unresponsive, "the last resort will be going to the UN, as well as barring Kuwaiti vessels from our [maritime] borders, which will slow down the operation of Kuwaiti ports".

Militant groups in southern Iraq have threatened to attack targets inside Kuwait if the port is completed and alternative employment is not created for workers in Basra.

In August, the Shia militia Kataeb Hezbollah fired rockets into Kuwait, and it warned further attacks would follow if work on the port continued.

Tribal leaders in the area say that unless the Iraqi government takes action to prevent an economic downturn in Basra, armed militias will seize the chance to return to the city. The city was controlled by armed groups until 2008, when a government offensive drove them out and the economy began recovering.

Sheikh Inizan, the leader of the Ghatarna tribe, warned that if the Kuwaiti project went ahead, “the clans will take the law into their own hands”.

At the Um Qasr port, workers fear for their futures.

“I never completed my education, so I can only work as a porter. I have a family of seven and I'm their only breadwinner,” said Uday Salim, who has spent the last ten years at the port, starting at the age of 15. “What I'm hearing about the construction of the Mubarak port and its impact on Iraq's ports suggests that thousands of us will be put out of work, with very few other options.”

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