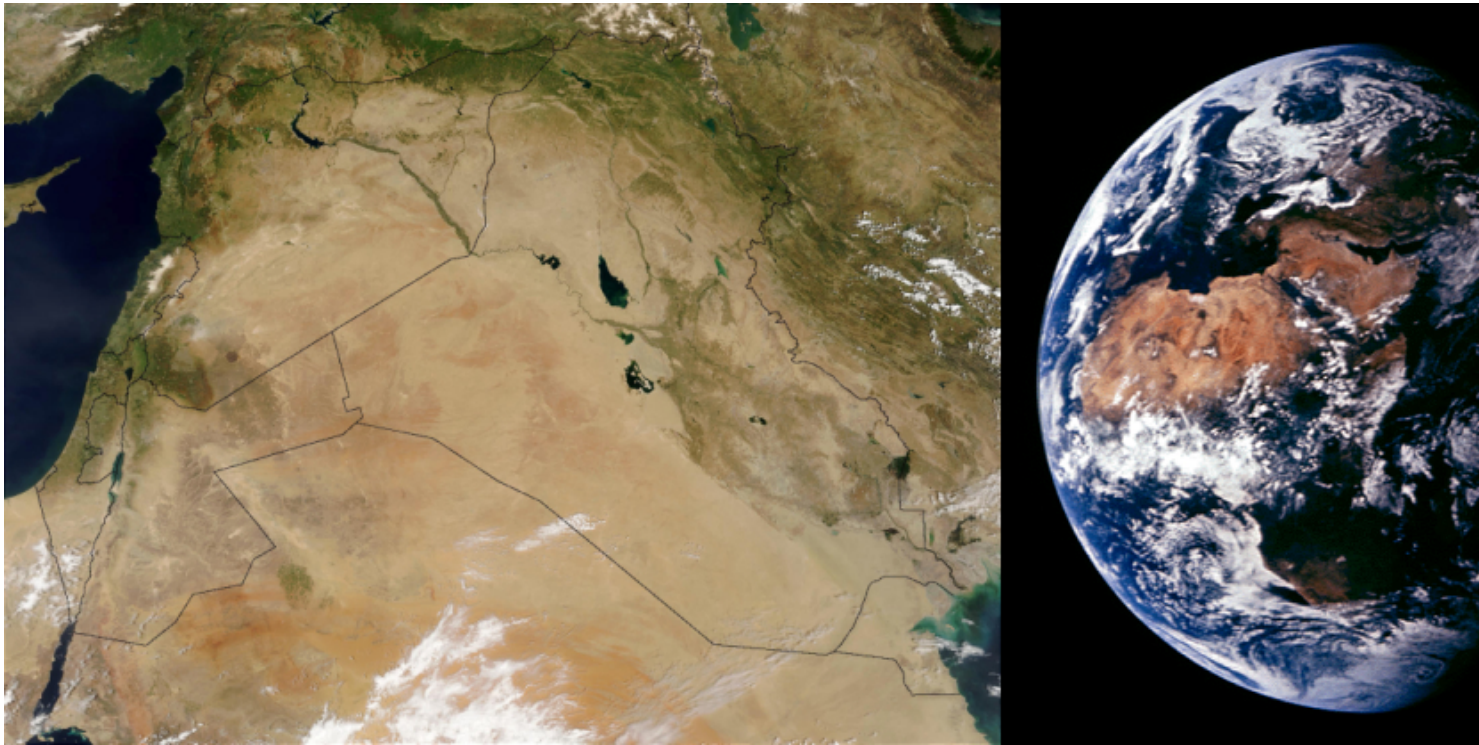


Desert spreading like cancer in the Middle East
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ROME - The desert is making a comeback in the Middle East, with fertile lands turning into barren wastes that could further destabilise the region, experts said at a water conference on Thursday in Alexandria, Middle Est Online reports.

"Desertification spreads like cancer, it can't be noticed immediately," said Wadid Erian, a soil expert with the Arab League. Its effect can be seen in Syria, where drought has displaced hundreds of thousands of people, ruining farmers and swelling cities, Erian said.

The United Nations Development Programmes 2009 Arab Human Development Report said desertification threatened about 2.87 million square kilometres of land, or a fifth of the Middle East and north Africa.

Erian said a large portion of range land and agricultural land was under threat, with little effort taken so far to reverse the process. Burgeoning populations, which put further strain on the environment, and climate change are accelerating the trend, he said. "The trend in the Arab world leans towards aridity. We are in a struggle against a natural trend, but it is the acceleration that scares us," he said.

A 2007 UN study spoke of an "environmental crisis of global proportions" that could uproot 50 million people from their homes by 2010, mostly in Africa.

Erian said that if unchecked, the trend could emerge as a threat to international stability, a conclusion shared by the UN report. "It will lead to more immigration and less security. It will lead to people losing hope," he said.

Source: [ANSAmед](#).