

# Water Conflict Between Syria and Turkey

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## Introduction

Water has come to the forefront as issue in relationships between the nations and countries of the Middle East recently. It also dominates a significant place on the plan of several international organizations. The diverse and conflicting nature of ethno-religious groups in the Middle East, which include Turks, Kurds and Arabs makes the controlling of the insufficient water resources a risky venture in diplomacy, and adds to the difficulty of reaching cooperation<sup>1</sup>.

Water is important and necessary for human security and one of the significant element of sustainable socio-economic development.<sup>2</sup>

Water is a valuable resource which is progressively become scarcer. Within 50 years more than half of the world population will be living with lack of water because of a universal water crisis, according to a statement issued by the U.N Environment Program. In additional, it is extremely unlikely that there is going to be enough water for everyone except the necessary steps are taken at regional and international level. World watch Institute claimed that water will be the main reason of new conflicts. Therefore, there is a natural convergence as these states like to control and hold the power and supreme authority on available and obtainable natural water resources.<sup>3</sup>

The issue began when in 1970s Syria and Turkey started consuming and utilizing the waters of the Euphrates by large amount and scale irrigation and hydroelectric power generation projects. These extra-large projects definitely damaged the conventional and customary water supply. This point means a significant issue between these two countries, as it can be seen that the obstructions are noticed as threats not as means to store water.<sup>4</sup> It can be seen that these countries are afraid of the shortage of water in their countries, specially Syria because the main resource of water comes from Turkey and all these obstacles will reduce the water flow from Turkey towards Syria. It is obvious that the shortage will lead to conflicts between these two countries and might lead to war, as a conflict is already existed among them.

## Chapter one

### Turkey's location relating to water resources:

It will be suitable to emphasize at the outset that Turkey, contrary to fundamental belief, is not a rich country in water resources. Moreover, it is not the wealthiest republic of the region in water resources. Turkey is not a country which has additional water capacity. Furthermore, currently Turkey has more water resources if compared with its neighbors, it is a State which will find itself in a situation of shortage in the near future. Turkey's average yearly runoff is about (186bn) cubic meters (m<sup>3</sup>). The quantity accessible for consumption from this capacity is lake 110bn m<sup>3</sup>, containing 12bn m<sup>3</sup> of ground water<sup>5</sup>.

In addition, taking into attention Turkey's population of 60 million, the amount of water per capita will be 1833m<sup>3</sup>. States considered as rich in water supplies and resources, have 8000-10,000m<sup>3</sup> of water per capita per year. Moreover, the existing water per capita in Turkey is around one-fifth of the water-rich states. The impression that Turkey has extra water comes from the fact that it is not at current in a position to fully consume its water resources. Today Turkey consumes only 25.9bn m<sup>3</sup> of its available capacity of 110bn m<sup>3</sup>. The remaining portion of 84.1bn m<sup>3</sup> is not enough to Turkey's necessities, but an amount which cannot yet be allocated to its requirements<sup>6</sup>.

In addition, recently Turkey has made great progresses in water resources development for national and internal use, irrigation, and flood control. The reservoirs and dams constructed have enabled Turkey to keep and save water from its short seasons of rain to use throughout the year for numerous purposes, especially in agriculture.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, Turkey has a serious water issue. The country is struggling with its worst drought in a decade. Climate change is only part of the reason; poor water management is also to blame. Turkey controls the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, leading to tensions with downstream neighbors Syria and Iraq who fear Ankara may

<sup>1</sup>[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/35248998\\_The\\_water\\_dispute\\_between\\_Turkey\\_Syria\\_and\\_Iraq](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/35248998_The_water_dispute_between_Turkey_Syria_and_Iraq) [accessed Oct 15 2017].

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey\\_s-policy-on-water-issues.en.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey_s-policy-on-water-issues.en.mfa)

<sup>3</sup> Samreen Aamir Bari, The water crises in Turkey, Syria and Iraq, JULY 17, 2016

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2016/07/17/the-water-crises-in-turkey-syria-and-iraq/>

<sup>5</sup> Turkish ministry of foreign affairs, the water problem in the middle east, department of regional and transboundary waters.

<http://sam.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/WATER-ISSUES-BETWEEN-TURKEY-SYRIA-AND-IRAQ.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <http://sam.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/WATER-ISSUES-BETWEEN-TURKEY-SYRIA-AND-IRAQ.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey\\_s-policy-on-water-issues.en.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey_s-policy-on-water-issues.en.mfa) .

exploit its power to cut off their water supply. Treatment plants could ease the problem<sup>1</sup>. It seems clear that water shortage lead to serious issues especially conflicts between neighbor countries such as Turkey and Syria.

## Chapter two

### Syria's location relating to water resources:

Syria has fourteen governorates. National water balance in Syria is already facing a water shortage. The capable of being renewed a water resources of (15,208) Mm<sup>3</sup> are exceeded by entire water consumption of (17,669) Mm<sup>3</sup>, which results in a water shortage of (2,461) Mm<sup>3</sup> or 14% of total water consumption in 2004. Furthermore, in 2001, approximately 60% of the population and 61% of the irrigated area were located in river basins that were considered by a water shortage. The total yearly obtainable regulated water resources in Syria are about 14218 million cubic meters and the total yearly use was about 17566 MCM which results in 3348 MCM water lack, the actual internal water production in 2008 was 1183 MCM and the population at that time was about 19.9 million citizens. Therefore, the yearly water consumed per individual equals 59.45 m<sup>3</sup>.<sup>2</sup>

It can be seen that Syria needs more water resources to cover domestic needs. Furthermore, finding a new water resources is not easy and it leads to conflicts between countries especially neighbor countries such as Turkey.

In addition, Agriculture has continuously been the most significant sector in Syria's economy. While government policies have been encouraging towards this sector, agriculture cannot provide all of Syria's requirements, mostly because of the rapid growth of population. The collected space in Syria averages 4.8 million ha. The rain-fed area embodies 85% of the total area civilized. Moreover, Surface irrigation has been growing recently. Wells explanation for 80% of the lately irrigated land. Substantial drops in groundwater levels have already been recognized in the Damascus. Water resources in Syria are different for instance, rivers, springs and probable groundwater<sup>3</sup>.

Syria's main water issue is uneven spatial circulation. Approximately 85% of total water resources are positioned in the deserted northern regions, affecting shortages in areas where demand is greater. Furthermore, as for water use in the essential sectors, most manufacturing development has happened in basins that do not experience water lacks, for instance the Orontes, where more than half of the country's industrial water consumed In the Euphrates basin, 36.3% of manufacturing water supplies are utilized. The water necessity for agriculture is expected at 10.3 billion m<sup>3</sup>, demonstrating 47.4% of total water use. Moreover, in regions where irrigation supplements rain fed agriculture, construction and efficiency are nearly (4) times higher than in un supplemented rain fed zones. Domestic water requirement is approximately 828 million n<sup>3</sup>, which is anticipated to reach 1.2 billion m<sup>3</sup> by the year 2000. The present daily water needs and consumption per capita is about (200) liters, still below international standards<sup>4</sup>.

## Chapter 3

### Main points of water conflict between Turkey and Syria

Water disputes have been a main cause of conflict as Turkey has created numerous barriers on the both revers Euphrates and Tigris as part of the Southeastern Anatolia Project- GAP to develop the region. The project GAP was intended at reducing the harsh living circumstances of the Southeastern provinces of Turkey by building 19 obstructions on the rivers of Euphrates and Tigris. This project, however, would extremely decrease Syrian water supplies. In addition, Euphrates and Tigris are not the only rivers that tangles the relationship of Turkish-Syrian, the water spreading of (Orantes) River which pours into Mediterranean from the province of disputed (Hatay) also rises issues among these two states<sup>5</sup>.

It can be seen that the issue of water resources starts from building obstacles, starting from Turkey side towards Syria. This problem will lead to disputes and conflicts between these two countries, because water is a significant need of citizens. Therefore, governments have to work very hard to obtain water and make water available for their citizens, because it is the obligation of government. However, this obligation is not easy and might led to disputes with other countries.

The most significant point in this issue is water and terrorism connection noticeable in Turkish Syrian relations for a long period of time. The backgrounds of uncooperative relationship between the two countries started from 19th century Arab nationalism in Syria. Recently, Turkey blamed Syria of supporting the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party), a Kurdish nationalist organization aiming at the establishing of a Kurdish Country in southeastern Anatolia, and it did not agree to fix a flow allowance of approximately 700 cubic meters of water

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.dw.com/en/turkey-battles-water-shortage/a-17458001>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2016/07/17/the-water-crises-in-turkey-syria-and-iraq/>

<sup>3</sup> Altinbilek, D. (1997) Water and land resources development in southeastern Turkey, *Journal of Water Resources Development*, 13(3), pp. 311–332.

<sup>4</sup> <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/874231468741336360/pdf/multi-page.pdf#page=161>

<sup>5</sup> Finkel, Andrew (2005-10-08). "Turkish delight?". *The Guardian*. Retrieved 2010-01-18.

per second. Syria, on the other hand, observing Turkey as aiming for regional domination by supporting with Israel and governing the water flow of the Euphrates, used the PKK as power on Turkey, sheltered the Kurdish revolutionaries and its leader Abdullah Öcalan in its region<sup>1</sup>.

In addition, in southeast Turkey there are a numeral of large irrigation projects have been planned to apply the waters of the Euphrates river held in the reservoir behind the Ataturk Barrier. While these projects are completely operating the flow of the Euphrates into Syria will be considerably decreased. Consequently, this action led to protests and complaints from the downstream States such as Syria and Iraq. The environmental effects of importing large amounts of water into the watersheds of two branches of the Euphrates, the Balikh and the Khabour which in their lower paths flow through Syria, are anticipated to be considerable, mainly on the small River Balikh<sup>2</sup>.

Disputes are most likely to be affected as a result of irrigation return waters, which can be highly saline and could be more than twice the river's natural flow. Downstream effects could be increased still further as Syria is preparing and planning a huge irrigation arrangement in the lower part of the Balikh catchment<sup>3</sup>. It is clear that both Turkey and Syria have been planning to build obstacles for irrigation and use of water for their benefits. Consequently, this will have led to disputes between these two countries.

In addition, the relationship between Turkey and Syria will continue to depend to a substantial extent on the broader evolution of the Kurdish issues. Essentially, the Kurdish problem between Syria and Turkey is a symptom, reasonably than the cause, of bad relations. The Kurds characterize an instrument and not a target for Damascus. The Kurdish population of Syria is extremely smaller than Turkey, Iran, or Iraq and Kurdish independence in Syria and has never been a potential issue. If the conflicts between Turkey and Syria - mainly ideological in character, characterizing conflict between a pro-Western state and a pro-Soviet state can be determined, then the Kurdish dispute will lose salience for Syria as one of its weapons of choice against Turkey. Water, extremely, is more an instrument of force and pressure among Turkey and Syria than the basis of conflict in itself<sup>4</sup>.

It seems clear that the main issue between Syria and Turkey is related to water conflicts. However, both countries are use Kurdish dispute in the area as an instrument of a pressure against each other. However, Kurdish parties are only trying to obtain their legal and national rights, with respect of international rules and with respect of other nationalities.

The issue of water and terrorism between Turkey and Syria countries joins these arguments over water and territory, beliefs about joint policies led to the issues of water and support of PKK. These further complicate the dispute. Moreover, Repeated Turkish claims and its awareness of Syrian support of the PKK determines this complexity. The PKK goals and intentions at the establishment of a separate Kurdish country in the Turkish state of southeastern Anatolia, and has involved in armed attacks against Turkish military. Turkey claims that the PKK headquarters is placed in Syria and that the head of this organization exist in Syria<sup>5</sup>.

The building of barriers and irrigation tunnels was initially set to be finished by 2010, however this has now been postponed for several years, due to lack of budget. The funding difficulties are directly connected to Turkey's argument with Syria and Iraq over the rights to water resources. Meanwhile, the demand of Turkey has been refused by World Bank to provide loans because Turkey did not obey with the international principles for such projects. Most significant, Turkey has not reached a settlement with its neighbors, the other "owners" of the water in both rivers the Euphrates and Tigris, on distributing and sharing the water, mainly because Turkey had considered this neither required nor desirable previous President (Turgut Ozal) put it: quot; "We don't tell Arabs what to do with their oil, so we do not accept any suggestion from them about what to do with our water"<sup>6</sup>.

### **In conclusion**

This paper has argued main factors of conflicts between Syria and Turkey that related to water. Turkey suffers significantly from the Syrian support to the PKK but Turkey needs to compromise with Syria by decreasing numbers of dams, can be one of solutions. Syria appears to be impatient to extract a Turkish concern for dividing the Euphrates river, but currently acquires at least 500 m<sup>3</sup>/s of water (and estimating 1000 m<sup>3</sup>/s). Consequently, the Turkish cost is certainly higher than Syria, and Syria impatience concerning the future benefit is higher than Turkey.

The Syrian conflict has many roots, including political, religious, and social disputes; economic dislocations and worsening environmental circumstances. consequences of water shortages, unsuccessful watershed management is the reason of the conflict. Therefore, Syria seeks to control and obtain more water resources.

<sup>1</sup> <http://dergiler.ankara.edu.tr/dergiler/44/674/8586.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S014362289500033X>

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<sup>4</sup> <file:///Users/mahdi/Downloads/WATER%20CONFLICT%20BETWEEN%20TURKEY,%20%20%20SYRIA%20AND%20IRAQ.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> SERDAR GUNER, the water dispute, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, Jan-Mar97, Vol. 20 Issue 1, p105, 12p. <https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#inbox/15ebf3e2272fedde?projector=1>

<sup>6</sup> <file:///Users/mahdi/Downloads/euphrates-tigris-alt%25C4%25B1nbilek.pdf>

Consequently, Syria tries to put a pressure on Turkey to stop creating water abstractions and Dams. Moreover, compromises between these two countries are not easy, however if they did not reach to a compromise expected war will took place between Syria and Turkey. On the other hand, there is some evidence that the current lack is an early indicator of the climatic changes that are predictable for these areas, including higher temperature, reduced basin rainfall and runoff, and increased water shortage. Furthermore, absent of any efforts to address people growth rates, these water-related factors are likely to produce even larger risks of resident and regional political instability, except other mechanisms for decreasing water insecurity can be recognized and applied. However, building new dams, growing water withdrawals, and restricted political assistance on water disputes can become even more significant in coming years. Between the key choices available to policy makers are developments in water-use efficiency and efficiency in agriculture, improved management and monitoring of groundwater resources, and comprehensive international contracts and agreements on managing and sharing the rivers that cross political borders will be one of the best solutions of water conflict between these two countries.

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