

Water Wars directed against Syria and Iraq: Turkey's Control of the Euphrates River

Turkey's control of the Euphrates might lead to disaster

By [Global Research News](#)

Global Research, July 01, 2014

[Middle East Monitor](#)

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Environment](#)

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The water level of the Euphrates Lake has decreased by six metres in the body of the dam, RMC reported.

Criticism of the Turkish government has been voiced by civil society activists in Northern Syria concerning Turkey's control of the River Euphrates. In recent weeks, the Turks have stopped the flow of water into Syria from the mighty river, which has its source in Turkey's Taurus Mountains before flowing into Syria and on into Iraq. The Euphrates is the main source of water for the Northern Syrian province of Raqqa.

"This threatens us with a real disaster within the next few days," said Abu Mohamed, a local activist from Raqqa. He pointed out that half of the villages in the district currently have no water available for residential use or agricultural purposes.



The Euphrates has three main dams within Syria: Tishreen, Euphrates and Al-Baath. The Euphrates dam is considered the most important of the three. The water level in the Euphrates Lake (formerly known as Al-Assad Lake) has dropped significantly. It is the largest man-made lake in Syria at 85km long; until recently it held more than 14.2 billion cubic metres of water. The lake and hydro-electric power station on its dam is the source of water and electricity to Raqqa and eastern Aleppo.

Turkey initially cut the flow of water into Syria at the beginning of May for six days. In June, the government decreased the river flow gradually until it was stopped completely by the middle of the month.

According to a news [report](#) published by the independent Raqqa Media Centre (RMC), there are currently only three turbines working to generate electricity at the dam, instead of the usual eight, due to the low water level. The RMC also noted that the water level lake has dropped by 1.6 billion cubic metres; the report condemns Turkey for the suffering caused to the people of Raqqa. "Turkey is purposely not allowing the water to enter Syria for political reasons," claimed the RMC report.

The Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS), which controls Raqqa province, were also angered by Turkey's control of the river. It [issued](#) a statement criticising the Turkish government for

“cutting water to Al-Sham [Levant] prefectures.”

However, according to Abu Mohamed from Raqqa, ISIS has not expressed contempt about the issue, as the group is not concerned with the issues of the Syrian people; rather, it is concerned about maintaining control of the province. “ISIS provides water and electricity through generators for its own people,” he added, emphasizing that the negative impact of extremist groups on the people of Raqqa is now compounded by Turkish control of the Euphrates.

A source close to ISIS [told](#) the pan-Arab daily Al-Quds Al-Arabi last week that the group called on the Turkish government to open the flow of the Euphrates River as a prerequisite for the release of the kidnapped Turkish consul in Iraq and his colleagues.

The Istanbul-based Syrian National Coalition, which is considered the most important opposition body, has not yet issued a comment on the dispute. “The coalition doesn’t have enough confidence to express an explicit stance on this issue,” said Ali Amin Al-Suwaid, a Syrian political analyst and a member of the General Authority of the Syrian Revolution. He explained that the coalition headquarters is based in Turkey and so it must maintain diplomatic relations with the Turkish government. “What is needed is to urge Turkey to return to the Syrian people the agreed share of the Euphrates,” he demanded.

Turkey’s decision to block the flow of the Euphrates also affects Iraq’s share, said Khaled Abu Al-Waled, a media activist from Raqqa City. “This is a flagrant violation of international water conventions,” he insisted. “No drop of the Euphrates now enters Syrian territory.”

Some villages have no safe drinking water, forcing locals to use water taken directly from the lake, despite the danger of disease.

The pro-opposition Violation Documentation Centre in Syria (VDC) also condemned Turkey’s behaviour, warning that the consequences will be negative. “This is a weird action,” said Bassam Al-Ahmad, the VDC spokesperson. He called on the Turkish government to reverse the decision. “Our demands are clear for the Turkish government to take immediate measures to stop this action.”

Historically, Turkey has been in conflict with Syria and Iraq over the control of the Euphrates. In the past, Turkey denied that the Euphrates is an international river and that Syria and Iraq had any rights over the control of the flow.

In 1994, an agreement between Syria and Turkey was registered at the United Nations to guarantee a minimum share of the water from the Euphrates to Iraq and Syria. “We can say that this measure is serving the interests of Turkey and embarrassing the Assad regime,” added Ali Amin Al-Suwaid.

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