Turkey, Syria and Iraq: Conflict over the Euphrates-Tigris

Type of conflict: Main
Intensity: 1

Conflict Locality: Western Asia
Time: 1960 – ongoing
Countries: Iraq, Turkey, Syria
Resources: Water

Conflict Summary
The Euphrates-Tigris Basin is shared between Turkey, Syria and Iraq, with Iran comprising parts of the Tigris basin. Since the 1960s, unilateral irrigation plans altering the flows of the rivers, coupled with political tensions between the countries, have strained relations in the basin. Disputes have prevented the three governments from effectively co-managing the basin’s rivers. Although cooperation efforts were renewed in the 2000s, these have yet to result in a formal agreement on managing the basin waters.
Gradual Change in Temperature and/or Precipitation

Climate Change

Environmental Change

Fragility and Conflict Risks

Intermediary Mechanisms

Social and Economic Drivers

Context Factors

Gradual Change in Temperature and/or Precipitation

Increased Water Scarcity

Pollution / Environmental Degradation

Change in Access / Availability of Natural Resources

Demographic Change

Infrastructure Development

Policy Change

International Tensions

Context Factors

Water
Conflict History

The Euphrates and the Tigris both originate in Turkey and flow to the Shatt Al-Arab Basin in Southern Iraq. Whilst the Euphrates River crosses Syria and Iraq, the Tigris flows from Turkey to Iraq. Turkey contributes 90% to the Euphrates whilst Syria contributes 10% to the water flow (Kibaroglu and Scheumann, 2013). As for the Tigris, Turkey, Iraq and Iran contribute 40%, 51% and 9%, respectively. Although Iran also contributes to the flow of the Tigris, scholars do not consider the country to be a main co-riparian in the Euphrates-Tigris (ET) Basin.

In the 1960s, after thousands of years of sharing the waters of the ET Basin, disputes started erupting amongst the co-riparian states over the water flow reaching their territory. Between the 1960s to the 1990s, there were several instances of close cooperation, but other events brought the countries to the brink of war. Although cooperation between the co-riparians started anew in the 2000s, several factors have put an end to this cooperation. The prediction of the UN, according to which the flow of the Euphrates and the Tigris could decrease by 30% and 60% respectively by the end of the century, show that the quantity of water flowing through Syria and Iraq is likely to become even scarcer. An agreement to manage the waters of the ET efficiently is thus crucial for stability in the region.

Between cooperation and conflict

Relations between the three main co-riparian states have been punctuated by highly cooperative as well as highly conflictive events (Oregon State University, 2008). Until 1960, as the water used by the co-riparians was low, the relations between the three countries were considered “harmonious” (Kibaroglu, 2014). However, at the beginning of the 1960s, several factors led to tensions amongst the states and thus inhibited cooperation on water management of the ET basin.

Unilateral water-development projects lead to tensions

At that time, the co-riparian states unilaterally initiated large-scale water development projects in an uncoordinated way, thereby affecting the river flow (Kibaroglu and Scheumann, 2013). As population growth in the region led to higher water demands, the initial purpose of these projects was to regulate the flow of the river and prevent floods (Ibid.; Gleick, 1994). However, it rapidly became a plan for hydropower generation to enable Turkey to limit its dependency on oil for energy (Kibaroglu and Scheumann, 2013). In addition to that, environmental factors aggravated the tensions between the co-riparians. For instance, in 1975 Turkey and Syria simultaneously started to use the Keban (Turkey) and Taqba (Syria) dams during a period of drought (Ibid.). This dispute, solved thanks to the mediation of Saudi Arabia, almost led to an armed conflict (Ibid.). Moreover, the variation of precipitation through the seasons coupled with very inefficient irrigation systems and the cultivation of water-intensive crops in the region intensified the dispute over water (Erikson and Lorenz, 2013).

External factors intensify the dispute

Besides these environmental aspects, other factors unrelated to water played a major role. First, while the Cold War deepened the tensions over water, Turkey joined NATO whilst Syria and Iraq kept close ties with the USSR (Kibaroglu, 2014). Second, the issue with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) was a major bone of contention between the two countries until the 2000s (Erikson and Lorenz, 2013). Lastly, the territorial
dispute over the Hatay province was a major source of tension between the countries until 2005 (Carius et al. 2005; Stern, 2005).

1980s-1990s: Culmination of the conflict
The tensions brought the dispute to another level in the 1980s-1990s, as Turkey started to use water as an instrument to put pressure on the other co-riparian states and linked it to issues not related to water (Gleick, 1994). For instance, in 1987 Turkey and Syria brokered an agreement, in which Turkey committed to release 500 m³ water per second to Syria whilst the latter committed to put an end to its support to the PKK (Erikson and Lorenz 2013; Kibaroglu, 2014).

Moreover, in 1990, Turkey cut off the Euphrates flow when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990 (Gleick, 1994). In this period, cooperation seemed to be in a deadlock (Vajpeyi, 2012). Turkey’s refusal to sign the 1997 UN Water Convention, being one of only three countries to vote against it in the UN General Assembly, added to this deadlock. Turkey, the upstream riparian, thereby indicated that it did not feel bound to comply with the principles the convention sought to codify, especially the obligations to not cause significant harm to co-riparian states and to share the river equitably (FAO, 2008).

The large number of factors which play a part in the eruption of the conflict shows that grievances over water management are not the only sources of conflict in the ET Basin. This also shows how Turkey, as upstream state, could instrumentalise water to pressure states located downstream. After a period of acute tensions between the co-riparians during the 1980s and 1990s, the late 1990s-early 2000s witnessed a significant improvement in the relations amongst the co-riparian states and enabled the reactivation of cooperation over water management (Kibaroglu, 2014).

Resolution Efforts

Late 1990s-early 2000s: improvement of the relations amongst the co-riparians
The late 1990s and early 2000s have witnessed a significant improvement in the relations amongst the co-riparian states (Kibaroglu and Scheumann, 2013). Politicians at the highest level of decision-making enabled the evolution of water policies from hostile to cooperative (Ibid.). In 1998, Syria expressed the will to re-start Joint Technical Committee meetings, which had been attempted unsuccessfully in 1983. The expulsion of the PKK’s leader from Syria was a major step towards improvement of relations (Erikson and Lorenz, 2013).

Signature of water-management agreements
Moreover, in 2001, a Joint Communiqué between Syria and Turkey – which advocated sustainable use of the region’s land and water resources through joint projects and exchange of knowledge – was a turning point in the relations of the co-riparian states (Ibid.). Although this communiqué did not lead to any concrete actions, it acted as a framework for agreements made at the end of the 2000s (Kibaroglu, 2014).

Amongst these initiatives, the most significant are the Memorandums of Understanding (MoU) on water management signed between Iraq and Turkey and Syria and Turkey in 2009 (Ibid.). In an additional sign of improving relations between Turkey and Syria, both co-riparians agreed, in 2009, to jointly build a dam on the shared Orontes river in the province of Hatay, which used to be a bone of contention between the neighbours (Ibid.).
Factors explaining increased cooperation

A number of factors can explain this increased cooperation on water management. These can be divided into three categories: internal changes, external factors of influence and changes in the regional context.

The first range of factors corresponds to internal changes in Turkey. Years of negotiation processes in the ET basin – although failed – and the increasing participation of Turkey in global fora on water have exposed Turkey to the “benefit-sharing” idea based on water use efficiency, pollution protection and cooperation (Erickson and Lorenz, 2013). Turkish authorities have become aware of the increasing pressure of large-scale irrigation projects in the region on the Euphrates and of the unsustainability of such projects (Ibid.). Moreover, the decision-making process of Turkey’s water legislation became more inclusive and decision-makers met with stakeholders, NGOs, universities and water users (Kibaroglu, 2014). The involvement of experts to elaborate water legislation played a major role in promoting cooperation amongst the co-riparians (Ibid.).

The second factor is related to the influence of the EU membership perspective on Turkey’s water policy (see EU influence on the Euphrates-Tigris Conflict, Middle-East) (Ibid.).

The last factor explaining the increased cooperation is the general improvement of the political climate between the countries at the time, and the cooperation on non-water issues to achieve win-win situations (Ibid.). In 2003, Syria and Turkey signed a Trade Agreement and both countries united to fight jointly against the PKK in Northern Iraq (Emerson and Tocci, 2004). The reactivation of cooperation also became possible because countries developed complementary objectives (Erikson and Lorenz, 2013). For instance, Iraq and Syria wanted to diversify their economy whilst Turkey wished to increased trade with its neighbours (Ibid.).

Interruption of cooperation

Despite the cooperative events since the beginning of the 2000s, collaboration on the ET basin has ground to a halt. Whilst cooperation efforts were attempted at the high political level, both MoUs could not be ratified as they did not fulfill the legal requirements in parliament and were therefore rejected by both the Syrian and the Iraqi parliament (Ibid.). The resentment and the distrust of Iraq’s population towards Turkey regarding the upstream use of the Euphrates have also been a reason for the Iraqi Parliament to reject the MoU (Ibid.; UPI, 2009).

Environmental risks of lack of water-management cooperation

Meanwhile, the absence of a trilateral agreement makes it problematic to collectively address the severe environmental challenges in the basin (Kibaroglu, 2014). Scholars have pointed out that the environmental impacts of irrigation plans – which led to salinity and pollution through chemicals – are likely to have “greater, and more immediate” effects on the population in the basin than a reduction in water quantity (Ibid.) Considering the importance of agriculture for Turkey, Syria and Iraq, this degradation of soils and waters would put more pressure on local populations (Erikson and Lorenz, 2013). In addition to these environmental impacts, the UN predicts major temperature increases in Turkey – 2 to 3 degrees Celsius – by the end of the century (Ibid.). This could cause a reduction of the Euphrates flow by 30% and of the Tigris flow by 60% by then.

To conclude, although the relations amongst the co-riparians had become more cooperative since the beginning of the 2000s, cooperation over the management of the ET Basin has now stalled. Considering
the impacts of climate change predicted by the UN and the increasing environmental degradations in the basin, it is critical to find solutions to mitigate these effects in a region where livelihoods rely heavily on agriculture.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intensities &amp; Influences</th>
<th>Resolution Success</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Reduction in geographical scope</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>There has been no reduction in geographical scope.</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Increased capacity to address grievance in the future</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>There is no increased capacity to address grievances in the future.</td>
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<td>Grievance Resolution</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Grievances have been mostly ignored.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Causal Attribution of Decrease in Conflict Intensity</td>
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<td>There has been no reduction in intensity</td>
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<th>Intensities</th>
<th>Influences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International / Geopolitical</td>
<td>Environmental Influences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intensity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Suffering</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<th>Influences</th>
<th>Societal Influences</th>
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<tr>
<td>Diplomatic Crisis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Threat of violence by a country</td>
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<td>Violent Conflict</td>
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<td>No</td>
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<td>Mass displacement</td>
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<td>Cross Border Mass Displacement</td>
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Entry Points for Resilience and Peace Building

Cooperation
The late 1990s and early 2000s have witnessed a significant improvement in the relations amongst the co-riparian states. In 1998, Syria expressed the will to restart Joint Technical Committee meetings. Moreover, in 2001, a Joint Communiqué between Syria and Turkey, which advocated sustainable use of the region’s land and water resources through joint projects and exchange of knowledge, was initiated. This communiqué acted as a framework for the Memorandums of Understanding (MoU) on water management signed between Iraq and Turkey and Syria and Turkey in 2009. This same year, Turkey and Syria agreed to jointly build a dam on the shared Orontes River, which used to be a bone of contention between the neighbours. The reactivation of cooperation also became possible because countries developed complementary objectives.

Treaty/agreement
A trilateral agreement is imperative in order to collectively address the severe environmental challenges of the basin, especially as major temperature increases are predicted by the end of the century. The degradation of soils and water in the region will continue to put more pressure on local populations.

Improving actionable information
The increased participation of Turkey in the global fora on water has exposed the country to new information on water use efficiency, pollution protection and cooperation. Turkish authorities have become aware of the unsustainability of large-scale irrigation projects on the Euphrates. Moreover, the decision-making process of Turkey’s water legislation became more inclusive as decision-makers met with stakeholders, NGOs, and universities. The involvement of experts to elaborate water legislation played a major role in promoting cooperation amongst the co-riparian states.

Resources and Materials

Conflict References
EU Influence on the Euphrates-Tigris Conflict, Middle-East

References with URL
RT. (2014). Islamic State militants threaten Turkey with violence if Euphrates water supply not restored.

References without URL

Further information