



Conflict Factsheet

Turkey-Armenia: Water Cooperation Despite Tensions

Type of conflict
Main

Intensity
1

Conflict Locality
Western Asia

Time
1990 –ongoing

Countries
Armenia, Turkey

Resources
Water



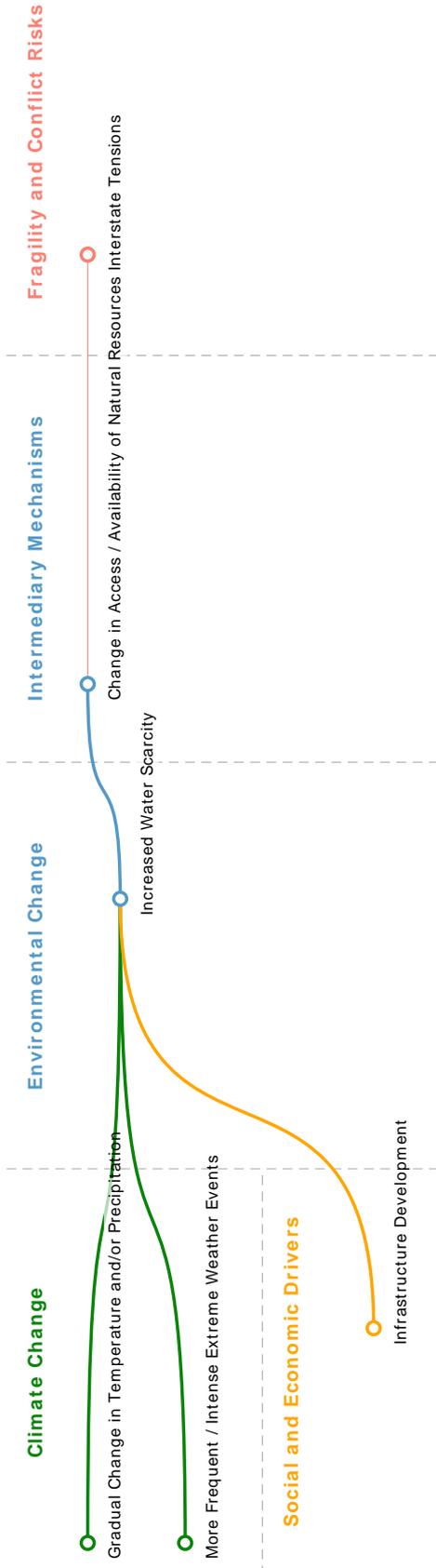
Transboundary
water
management

Conflict Summary

The Turkish/Armenian case is a prominent example of how two co-riparians can put their tensions aside, work together in their mutual interest, and share transboundary waters equitably.



Conceptual Model



Context Factors



Water



History of Conflict



Conflict History

Armenia and Turkey have been sharing the water of the Arpacay River – which forms the border between them – equitably, despite their lack of bilateral diplomatic relations. Before Armenia became independent in 1991, the former USSR had signed a number of treaties with Turkey over the Arpacay (or Akhourian) River. Although relations between Turkey and Armenia have been at an impasse since the 1990s, both countries have continued to implement the old treaties brokered before the collapse of the USSR and shared the Arpacay River equitably until today. Nevertheless, as the treaties only deal with the quantity to be shared between the co-riparians, unsettled issues – such as water quality ([see Turkey-Armenia: Water-quality challenges](#)) – require further cooperation, which strongly depends on a general improvement of the relations between the countries.

The Armenian-Turkish bilateral relations in a deadlock

The Kars River – which originates in Turkey – and the Ahuryan River – which originates in Armenia – merge into the Arpacay (or Akhourian) River, which constitutes the border between Armenia and Turkey. Throughout the 20th century and until today, relations between the two co-riparians have been strained as a result of a certain number of contentious issues. The issue of the Armenian genocide, the very term of which Turkey officially objects to; the resulting distrust between the co-riparians; as well as the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan – which escalated in 1993 and led Turkey to close its border with Armenia – have brought relations between the countries to a deadlock ([Gorgulu, 2009](#)). Since the 1994 cease-fire, which put an end to a six-year war between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Armenian forces have been keeping control over the Nagorno-Karabakh region ([NYtimes, 2015](#)).

Since then, communication between Turkey and Armenia have been largely interrupted and the sealing of the border has prevented any business cooperation between the co-riparians, although some official contacts continue ([Gevorgyan and Punsman, 2012](#)).

Recent bilateral rapprochement

The last years have witnessed progress in the normalisation of the relations between the two neighbours. This can partly be explained by the prominence of the issue of the Armenian genocide in US and European politics, which increased the pressure on Turkey to improve its relations with Armenia ([Gorgulu, 2009](#)). Moreover, as new obstacles have arisen in Turkey's bid for EU accession since 2009, Turkey's intention to become a regional leader intensified ([Ibid.](#)). Since the lack of diplomatic ties with Armenia is a major obstacle to this ambition, a rapprochement with Armenia is important for Turkey ([Ibid.](#)). Finally, from an economic point of view, Armenia has strong interests in re-opening the border with Turkey ([IWPR, 2009](#)). The 2008 Russian-Georgian War showed Armenia's dependence as it compromised its only trading route to Russia (through Georgia), with the borders to Turkey and Azerbaijan remaining closed ([Hill et al., 2015](#)).

Failure to normalise bilateral relations

Despite this progress, the Armenian President in February 2015 refused to ratify an agreement which had been concluded in 2009 between both countries ([The Huffingtonpost, 2015](#)). This agreement would have



continued this process of normalisation and would have led to a re-opening of the border (Minasyan, 2010; Hurriyetaidailynews, 2015). This non-ratification can be explained by the failure of both sides to compromise on the major questions of the Armenian genocide and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Hill et al., 2015).

Given the deadlocked relations between Armenia and Turkey, one might think that water sharing would be an additional factor of discord between the countries. However, despite the lack of diplomatic relations between them, the two countries have been able to build on past agreements concluded before the collapse of the USSR to sustain bilateral cooperation over the Arpacay River.

Resolution Efforts

Water cooperation initiated under the USSR

In order to manage the Arpacay River, the USSR and Turkey signed the "Protocol on the beneficial Uses of Boundary Waters" – or Kars protocol – in 1927. The protocol provided water-allocation rules between the co-riparians, which agreed to share the water of the river equally on a 50%-50% basis (FAO, 2015).

Further agreements over the River were signed by the USSR and Turkey during the Cold War. These agreements reflected Turkey's foreign policy of building institutional structures with neighbouring countries that were "in the enemy camp" (Kibaroglu, 2014).

In 1964, the countries committed to the joint construction of the Arpacay dam on the river (Gevorgyan and Punsmann, 2012). This treaty once again contained rules regarding the equitable sharing of the water and included provisions concerning the establishment of a joint commission to operate the infrastructure (Ibid.; Carius et al., 2005). The construction of the Arpacay dam started in 1975 and finished in 1986 (Gevorgyan and Punsmann, 2012).

Two further agreements followed in 1973 and 1990. The 1973 agreement dealt with border issues and particular regulations relating to tributaries, whilst the 1990 treaty included provisions on technical cooperation, river bed changes and joint hydropower facilities (Carius et al., 2005). These water-treaties thus survived the entire cold war and continued after the fall of the USSR and the independence of Armenia in 1991.

Continuation of cooperation despite strained relations

Despite the lack of diplomatic relations between Turkey and Armenia, both countries have been withdrawing water from the Arpacay River equitably until today, based on the 50-50% allocation of the 1927 treaty (FAO, 2015). Moreover, Armenia and Turkey have continued managing the Arpacay dam jointly through a permanent joint commission, which meets every month (Gevorgyan and Punsmann, 2012). In 2004, both countries even created a Turkish-Armenian inter-state commission on the use of the Arpacay Dam (Klaphake and Kramer, 2011). What is more, the Armenian government has recently expressed its willingness to collaborate with Turkey on the construction of a joint dam – the Surmalu dam – along the Armenian-Turkish border on the Araks River, downstream of the Arpacay River (Cestti et al., 2015). A joint technical concept for the dam has been prepared (Ibid.). In fact, most of the bilateral agreements



between Turkey and Armenia concern water allocation ([Ibid.](#)), underlining the peacebuilding potential of this resource.

Why cooperation?

Even though the configuration of the river makes the situation rather symmetric, the two countries' continued cooperation over water might seem surprising. Yet it can be explained by several factors. First of all, the Arpacay Dam is of particular importance for both Armenia and Turkey, because its significant storage capacity enables Turkey to irrigate the Igdir plain and because Armenia's agriculture is heavily dependent on irrigation ([Carius et al., 2005](#); [Gevoryan and Punsmann, 2012](#)). Moreover, even though the treaties were concluded under the USSR, Armenia considers itself to be a successor state of the USSR and therefore considers itself to be bound to these agreements (EUWI-EECCA, 2005). Finally, one of Turkey's overarching foreign policy objectives after the Cold War has been to maintain stability in the region and to become a regional leader ([Gorgulu, 2009](#)). The antagonism with Armenia is an obstacle to this objective - which may have prevented Turkey from seeking to leverage its greater power to Armenia's disadvantage.

Loopholes of the agreements – threat for long-term cooperation

Both Armenia and Turkey comply with the mentioned agreements. Yet there are significant loopholes in the treaty, such as the lack of a legal framework for transboundary cooperation and the absence of agreement on water quality standards and water protection ([Cestti et al., 2015](#); [Carius et al., 2005](#)). Moreover, exchange of data on water between the co-riparian states is insufficient ([Carius et al., 2005](#)). Turkey's ongoing water development projects will likely affect flow patterns, availability and freshwater ecosystems downstream ([Ibid.](#)). For the Armenian government, the expected flow impact of such water infrastructure upstream is a real concern ([Cestti et al., 2015](#)). Finally, assessments based on national projections predict that both precipitation and river run-off are expected to decrease by 10 to 20% by 2030 and that both variability in seasonal precipitation and the risk of floods and droughts are likely to increase ([UNECE, 2011](#)). Without further cooperation on these technical issues, these loopholes could change the current water-sharing status quo and upset the already limited cooperation between the co-riparians.

Recommendations

Owing to the inability of both parties to compromise on those issues which are critical to the normalisation of their diplomatic relations, Hill et al. argue that they should at least support smaller initiatives to foster reconciliation ([Hill et al., 2015](#)). Given the ongoing dialogue between border officials and the cooperation for the joint management of the Arpacay dam, both countries should build on this for further cooperation ([Tepav, 2010](#)). The existing cooperation would provide a good framework for the creation of other joint technical commissions ([Ibid.](#)).

The fact that both Turkey and Armenia have continued to enforce the agreements signed during the Soviet time and are still sharing the river equitably is a very good example of how two co-riparians can put aside their tensions and focus on their mutual interest in shared transboundary waters. Nevertheless, unsettled issues – such as Turkey's water-development projects upstream and water quality deterioration – require cooperation beyond the existing agreements. The failure of both countries to remedy these issues, coupled with the predicted impacts of climate change, might upset the limited cooperation between Armenia and Turkey. Given the current deadlock in the bilateral relations between Armenia and Turkey,



some scholars argue that small-scale bilateral initiatives would be more likely to foster the process of reconciliation between both parties. Cooperation over water could therefore be a way to bridge the gap between Armenians and Turks.

Intensities & Influences



INTENSITIES

International / Geopolitical Intensity



Human Suffering



INFLUENCES

Environmental Influences



Societal Influences



Diplomatic Crisis

Diplomatic crisis involving non-violent tools such as economic sanctions



Violent Conflict

No



Mass displacement

None



Cross Border Mass Displacement

No



Resolution Success

Reduction in geographical scope

There has been no reduction in geographical scope.



Increased capacity to address grievance in the future

There is no increased capacity to address grievances in the future.





Entry Points for Resilience and Peace Building

Cooperation	0
The existing cooperation of the Arpacay dam would provide a good framework for the creation of other joint technical commissions.	
Treaty/agreement	3
Turkey and Armenia have been able to build on past agreements concluded before the collapse of the USSR to sustain bilateral cooperation over the Arpacay River.	
Promoting alternative livelihoods	0
Exchange of data on water between the co-riparian states must be improved.	

Resources and Materials

Conflict References

[Turkey-Armenia: Water-Quality Challenges](#)

References with URL

[Carius et al. \(2005\). Cooperation on Turkey's transboundary waters.](#)

[Cestti et al. \(2015\). Toward Integrated Water Resources Management in Armenia.](#)

[Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations \(FAO\). \(2015\). AQUASTAT website. Turkey International water issues.](#)

[Gevorgyan and Punsmann. \(2012\). Review Of Legal Issues between Armenia And Turkey.](#)

[Gorgulu, A. \(2009\). Towards a Turkish-Armenian Rapprochement?. Insight Turkey, 11, 2, 19-29.](#)

[Hill et al. \(2015\). Armenia and Turkey: From normalization to reconciliation.](#)

[Hurriyetsdailynews. \(2015\). Armenia halts ratification of agreement with Turkey.](#)

[JPWR. 8/05/2009. Pollution in Border Reservoir Worries Armenia.](#)

[Kibaroglu, A. \(2014\). An analysis of Turkey's water diplomacy and its evolving position vis-à-vis international water law.](#)

[Klaphake, A. and Kramer, A. \(2011\). Kura-Aras River Basin: burgeoning transboundary Water Issues. in Kibaroglu et al. Turkey's Water Policy: National Frameworks and International Cooperation.](#)

[Minasyan, S. \(2010\). Prospects for Normalization between Armenia and Turkey: A View from Yerevan.](#)

[TEPAV. \(2010\) Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey. The On going Official Contacts and Cooperation on the Turkish-Armenian Border The Impossibility for Neighbours to Elude Geography.](#)

[The Huffington Post. \(February 16, 2015\). Armenia Halts Agreement To Restore Relations With Turkey.](#)

[The New York Times. \(February 16, 2015\). Armenia Halts Ratification of Agreement With Turkey.](#)

[UNECE Economic Commission For Europe. \(2011\). Second assessment of transboundary rivers, lakes and groundwaters.](#)

References without URL

EUWI – EECCA Technical Secretariat. (2005). Country Situation and Priorities – Armenia.



Further information

<https://factbook.ecc-platform.org/conflicts/turkey-armenia-water-cooperation-despite-tensions>