

## The Tigris and Euphrates River Basins: A New Look at Development

Examine any issue in the broader Middle East region today—from Turkey's possible European Union accession to Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon to the insurgency in Iraq—and the question remains of how to promote stability and economic development. Water is at the crux of both these concerns.

Despite the political volatility of the issue, shared water resource management between Turkey, Syria and Iraq may promote international cooperation—as opposed to interstate conflict—in the coming decades. In broader terms, the Tigris and Euphrates rivers represent an underutilized engine of economic development and integration for the region. Dr. Olcay Ünver, currently a visiting distinguished professor at Kent State University, put forward these remarkable claims during his presentation to a recent CSIS Global Strategy Institute Forum. Dr. Ünver negotiated on water issues on behalf of the Turkish government with Syria and Iraqi counterparts as part of his responsibilities as president of the Regional Development Administration, in charge of the Southeastern Anatolia Development Project (GAP) from 1991-2003, and subsequently as senior advisor to the Turkish Republic's Prime Minister from 2003-2004.

Dr. Ünver observed that during bilateral and trilateral summits with Turkey, Iraq and Syria, water is always the last topic broached because it is so potentially explosive. Each of these three riparian nations exhibits "hydro-nationalism," fueled by underlying tensions between the states. Yet, water has played an extensive track-two diplomatic role in negotiations between the countries, and has often provided Turkey—the most upstream riparian nation—with leverage in difficult talks.

Dr. Ünver believes that in the future, water could play an even more prominent role in defining open relations between the countries. Toward that end, disproportionate water usage by one state—presumably, Turkey—could be offset by sharing with neighbors the gains from water in the form of electricity, agriculture, commerce and even educational exchange. Hydro-nationalism would change from a defensive ideology to one of shared vision and benefits, creating regional goodwill.

Over the past 50 years, Turkey has been at the center of controversy surrounding the rivers because it has moved



The Tigris and Euphrates rivers flow 1795 miles and carry over 88 billion m<sup>3</sup> per year of water to Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Kuwait and even northern Saudi Arabia.

forward with significant river basin development projects, while its neighbors have talked big and delivered little in terms of development. The conflict over water has come not because Turkey has deprived Iraq and Syria of water, but because these states greatly overestimate the water they will use in the future. According to current consumption targets put forward by the three riparian states, they intend to use a combined, impossible total of 149% of available water from the Euphrates and 112% from the Tigris.

For these reasons, Dr. Ünver supports "big" thinking about the possibilities of meeting the region's need for better interstate relations through shared economic and human development, with water management at the core. A strong model for this is the Turkish Southeastern Anatolia Development Project (GAP), implemented in the Tigris and Euphrates river basins (the upper Mesopotamian plain)—the least developed region of Turkey. GAP is a project of "integrated sustainable human development," a holistic approach built around not only infrastructure, but also integrating the promotion of all human development indicators, from gender empowerment issues to disease prevention to literacy.



The concept of developing a river basin with large-scale infrastructure tied to human-level needs is nothing new; Franklin D. Roosevelt's Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) pioneered the balanced, long-range approach in the 1930s. Like the TVA, which only began to realize significant returns two decades after its creation, Turkey's GAP is a long-range project. However, GAP has already increased small farm income in the region by 300% while raising human development indicators, such as literacy and health. By creating an independent authority to consider regional development issues, GAP authorities are able to apply a more integrated cost-benefit analysis and establish economies of scale. Consequently, GAP authorities have allocated resources more efficiently, and they have offered a "one-stop-shop" for public information and investment opportunity for the private sector.

In a recent article, Dr. Ünver explained the massive scale and long-range impact of GAP: "The water development program of GAP includes 13 main irrigation and energy projects, seven of which are in the lower Euphrates subbasin and six in the Tigris subbasin. There are 22 dams, 19 hydropower plants, and irrigation networks to irrigate 1.7 million hectares of land. The installed capacity to be created is approximately 7,500 MW, with an annual hydroelectric production of 27 billion kWh [23% of Turkey's total energy production]."<sup>1</sup>

In the interest of regional stability and avoiding future water conflict, Turkey's development successes must flow downstream, metaphorically and literally. Scholars have observed that, "The only recorded incident of an outright war over water [on the planet and in all of human history] was 4,500 years ago between two Mesopotamian city-states, Lagash and Umma, in the region we now call southern Iraq."<sup>2</sup> Yet, conflict is increasingly likely with dwindling accessible water resources and exploding populations in key regions around the globe. Experts believe that the future of hydrologic conflict in the next few decades is likely to be intrastate (civil war) and to occur in downstream riparian nations.<sup>3</sup> This means that Turkey—a regional military superpower capable of defending its investments—is in the position to offer a unique opportunity to Iraq and Syria, who are likely to be the ones to suffer on many levels from any future water shortages. Turkey could work toward

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regional development through an expanded GAP. Such a move would be in Turkey's interests, as it would bring greater regional stability and economic growth. If Turkey is ready to cooperate on water issues, Iraq and Syria should seize the opportunity by considering the nexus between water, agriculture, energy and human development.

To that end, Dr. Ünver has launched the Euphrates-Tigris Initiative for Cooperation (ETIC). ETIC is a track-two diplomatic project that aims to bring together Iraqi, Syrian and Turkish water experts and graduate students to build group identity, promote networking and an exchange of ideas, and develop a trilateral institutional framework removed from major political pressures. The group can open dialog that avoids hydro-nationalist sensitivities, and which collects and shares multi-stakeholder data. This group can also pass along its recommendations to politicians with the benefit of scientific reason and agreement.

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During this time of great upheaval and transformation in the Middle East, the Tigris and Euphrates river basins could bring about a unique rebuttal to worries over "water wars" in one of the most conflicted regions on Earth. With the change of regime

in Iraq—and the potential opening of Syria—now may be an appropriate time to focus on cross-border water issues as a catalyst for regional cooperation and economic development.

#### References

1. Olcay Ünver, "Southeastern Anatolia Development Project," *IEEE Power Engineering Review*, March 2002:1-3. Total energy needs calculated according to CIA World Factbook, which places Turkey's total kWh production in 2001 at 116.6 billion kWh.
2. Sandra Postel and Aaron Wolf, "Dehydrating Conflict." *Foreign Policy*, September/October 2001: 60-67.
3. *Ibid.*