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TURKEY–IRAQ. WILL THE WATER CONFLICT BE OVER?²

It is no secret that water is a strategic resource and a security issue for states. Eloquent proofs of this are the 1634 water conflicts that have taken place in different parts of the world from different periods of history to the present day³.

The water issue between Turkey and Iraq mainly revolves around the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Usage of water from the Tigris and Euphrates, which originate in Turkey and flow through Iraq to the Persian Gulf, is vital for both countries. Turkey's construction of dams on these rivers has been a point of contention in interstate relations as it has reduced the flow of water into Iraq, especially during dry periods. These problems began after the 1960s, when Turkey began building the *Keban Dam* as part of the “GAP” project. During this process, negotiations and agreements were reached between Iraq, Turkey, and Syria. However, due to fundamental disagreements between the parties and other reasons, a comprehensive agreement was never reached.

Moreover, Syria embarked on a plan to develop its hydroelectric and irrigation potential in parallel with Turkey, which soon led to tensions between the three countries. In 1975, Iraq even threatened to bomb the Syrian *Tabqa Dam*. It can be said that relations between Syria and Turkey remain stained over the issue of sharing the river's flow. At one point, the three parties wanted to come together and sign an agreement after deciding on an equal distribution of the water. Turkey stated that Syria and Iraq also have rights to the Euphrates and Tigris, but it believes that it is more important to use the water rationally and avoid wasting it. Therefore, Ankara said it could not sign a binding agreement with Syria and Iraq on this issue until the «GAP» project was fully implemented, and so it would be clear how much water would be needed for irrigation in the future.

Over time, however, the Turkish side began to build new hydroelectric power stations, dams, and irrigation systems that, among the other things, reduced Iraq's water resources. In particular, the *Ilisu Dam* and hydroelectric power plant have been built on the Tigris River, with the smaller *Jizra Dam* to be completed in 2027 as part of this project. According to a study conducted by a group of Iraqi scientists

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² The Armenian original of the article was submitted to the Editorial office on 30.04. 2024.

³ Water Conflict Chronology. <https://www.worldwater.org/conflict/map/> (download date: 28.04.2024).

last year, it is predicted that these and other dams will have a negative impact on Iraq's socio-economic situation⁴.

In 2018, Turkish authorities assured that water would be shared with Iraq “*evenly, reasonably and in the most appropriate manner*”, while then-Iraqi Water Minister Hassan Al-Jabani criticized Ankara for “*using water as a bargaining chip.*” According to him, Iraq will remain vulnerable until a common interpretation of international water law is adopted⁵. On the other hand, Iraqi officials claim that the *Ilisu Dam* on the Tigris River has reduced the country's water supply by 34%, and sandstorms have even occurred in Iraq due to water shortages.

In 2022 Minister of Water Resources Mahdi Rashid al-Hamdani noted that the level of Tigris River had dropped by 60% compared to 2021. The deputy speaker of the Iraqi Parliament, Hakim al-Zamili even threatened to terminate economic relations and trade exchanges with Turkey due to falling water levels of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers⁶.

According to a comment by Ihsan al-Shammari, the president of the Iraqi Centre for Political Studies “*Since Turkey avoids signing a water agreement in accordance with the international law, it has always used the water card against Iraq to prevent it from taking a strong stance against Turkey in other areas. Iraq has few alternatives and no strong pressure card to use against Turkey. This situation is a problem in itself. Thus, it weakens Iraq's hand at a time when the water problem, which is putting a lot of pressure on it, is getting worse*”⁷.

On April 22, 2024, after a 13-year break, Turkish president Erdogan paid an official visit to Iraq. The agenda for negotiations between the two countries included a wide range of issues: regional and international security, economics, energy, trade, etc. Earlier, the ARVAK Center commented on the visit⁸.

After the visit, it was announced that “*a framework agreement on cooperation in the water sector was signed between the governments of the Republic of Iraq and the Republic of Turkey*”, according to which the parties will jointly build a dam, carry out wastewater treatment and establish irrigation systems on the territory of Iraq. In general terms, according to the plans resulting from the agreement, a dam will be cooperatively constructed on the Little Zab River, a left tributary of the Tigris

⁴ Haghghi A.T., Akbari M., Noori, R., Mehr A.D., Gohari A., Sönmez M.E., Kløve B. (2023). The impact of Turkey's water resources development on the flow regime of the Tigris River in Iraq. *Journal of Hydrology: Regional Studies*, 48, 101454 (download date: 28.04.2024).

⁵ Erika Solomon. Why water is a growing faultline between Turkey and Iraq. (04.07.2018). <https://www.ft.com/content/82ca2e3c-6369-11e8-90c2-9563a0613e56> (download date: 28.04.2024).

⁶ Iraq: Fırat ve Dicle'de su seviyesi düşmeyi sürdürürse Türkiye ve İran ile ilişkiler kesilebilir (09.06.2022). <https://tr.euronews.com/2022/06/09/irak-f-rat-ve-dicle-de-su-seviyesi-dusmeyi-surdu-rurse-turkiye-ve-iran-ile-iliskiler-kesile> (download date: 28.04.2024).

⁷ Irak-Türkiye su ilişkileri ve ertelenen vaatler. (12/28/2020). <https://turkish.aawsat.com/home/article/2708206/irak-t%C3%BCrkiye-su-ili%C5%9Fkileri-ve-ertelenen-vaatler> (download date: 28.04.2024).

⁸ Erdogan is seeking to normalize relations with Iraq. ARVAK Center comment from 23.04.2024. <https://tinyurl.com/4j25x2c9> (download date: 28.04.2024).

River located on the border between the two countries. Simultaneously, irrigation stations, hydroelectric power plants and wastewater treatment plants will be installed for the efficient use of water resources⁹.

After the signing of the agreement, according to some optimistic estimates, the water issue, which occasionally aggravated the relations between the two countries, can be considered as finally resolved. However, given that Turkey, which has signed a treaty with both Syria and Iraq, has repeatedly failed to fulfill its obligations to deliver the agreed amount of water to these countries, for various reasons, Ankara may continue to behave in the same way. In fact, this situation will continue until both countries accept the obligations arising from an international agreement on water sharing between parties, as many countries have done. Therefore, for Ankara and Baghdad, the “solution” to the problems remains in the realm of bilateral relations. And in this case, as before, the remedy is mutual talks and meetings where the issue is always Ankara's promise to release more water. Thus, it is unlikely that the existence of and adherence to bilateral agreements defining water allocation and management practices between the two countries can ensure a more equitable distribution of water resources, especially on the part of Ankara.

As for the most recent intergovernmental agreement signed with Iraq, it does not deal with Turkey's management of water resources, but rather with joint investments aimed at the use of water resources within Iraq's borders and the improvement of the existing infrastructure. With this step, Turkey may be trying to release the “pent up” anger of the Iraqi authorities on water issues and achieve an investment policy to prevent Baghdad from taking the issue to international courts. It is worth to recall that in recent years, Iraq's political leadership has hinted that the issue could be referred to the UN Security Council.

SOURCES AND LITERATURE

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⁹ Türkiye-Irak arasında su sorunu nasıl çözülecek? (25.04.2024). <https://anlatilaninotesi.com.tr/20240425/turkiye-irak-arasinda-su-sorunu-nasil-cozulecek-1083148983.html> (download date: 28.04.2024).