

**INTERNATIONAL CASE STUDY**  
**Water Rights in the Middle East**

**Indiana University Sponsoring Center: Center for the Study of the Middle East**

**Developed by:**

**Carl Pearson, Associate Director**

**Claire Jacobson, Graduate Student**

**Learning Outcomes:**

- A. To expand teachers' and students' knowledge about water rights in the Middle East.
- B. To identify multiple perspectives on the disputed issue.

**What is the disputed issue?**

Water rights in the Tigris-Euphrates Basin

**In what world region and/or country is the disputed issue located?**

The Middle East

**What is the essential question that frames the disputed issue?**

Who does water belong to when rivers cross borders?

## Table of Contents

A. What visual resource might ignite the conversation and/or frame the disputed issue?.....	3
B. What are the key vocabulary terms that students must know in order to understand the disputed issue?.....	5
C. What are the general descriptions and context of the disputed issue?.....	6
D. What are the names of the unique multiple perspectives involved in the disputed issue? ..	7
E. Why does the disputed issue matter? .....	7
Historical Background.....	7
Legal Background.....	7
Geographical Background.....	9
Political Background .....	9
F. What is the timeline of significant events that are related to the disputed issue or that describe its stages? .....	10
G. What map(s) can help students understand the disputed issue better?.....	11
H. What short (6-to-10-minute) video can provide an overall understanding of the disputed issue?.....	14
I. What additional deliberations questions complement the essential question?.....	15
J. What optional and supplementary resources might shape an understanding of the disputed issue?.....	15
K. What are some ways in which students might safely civically engage in response to this case study? .....	16
MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES HANDOUTS.....	18
Republic of Türkiye .....	19
Syrian Arab Republic.....	22
Republic of Iraq.....	25
Kurdistan Regional Government, Northern Iraq .....	28
Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (Rojava).....	31

A. What visual resource might ignite the conversation and/or frame the disputed issue?

Figure 1. *Water!! Water!!*



Dar, S. (2018). *Water!! Water!!* [Cartoon; calendar image for December]. World Bank Water Cartoon Calendar. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2017/12/14/water-cartoon-calendar-2018?CID=CCG TT climatechange EN EXT>

**Note:** “71% of the Earth’s surface is water but only 4% is freshwater and, of that, 0.5% is safe for human consumption” (from World Bank calendar).

Figure 2. *Water in the West*



Keefe, M. (2015, July 8). *Water in the West* [Cartoon]. InToon.com.  
<https://www.intoon.com/cartoons.cfm/id/143182>.

**Note:** Water in the US West is becoming very scarce as the cities are using it all. Who should own, use, or regulate the water in the West?

## B. What are the key vocabulary terms that students must know in order to understand the disputed issue?

**Allocation:** Dividing up or distributing a resource to recipients for particular uses, e.g. allocating water for farming, sanitation, or drinking.

**Aquifer:** An aquifer is a body of porous rock or sediment saturated with groundwater. Groundwater enters an aquifer as rain seeps through the soil. It can move through the aquifer and resurface through springs and wells (National Geographic Society).

**Arable land:** Farmable land, useful for growing crops.

**Basin** (also known as a watershed): An area of land that drains all the streams and rainfall to a common outlet such as the outflow of a reservoir, the mouth of a bay, or any point along a stream channel (United States Geological Survey). The Tigris-Euphrates Basin includes the Tigris, the Euphrates, and all their tributaries; a river system that collects rainfall and snowmelt and carries it all down to the Gulf.

**De facto:** True in practice, if not recognized on paper. Opposite of “de jure.”

**Desertification:** The process by which fertile land becomes desert, typically as a result of drought, deforestation, or farming practices that aren’t suited to the land (Oxford Bibliographies).

**International waters:** Around two-thirds of the world’s oceans are included in this category, as well as (potentially) transboundary waters and aquifers. No one may lay claim to these, and everyone has a right to use them “for navigation, fishing and other activities without interference from others,” as long as they do not exploit or abuse them (Royal Museums Greenwich).

**Riparian bodies:** Lands that occur along the edges of rivers, streams, lakes, and other water bodies (National Parks Service). Legally, riparian states have rights to the bodies of water they border.

**Rojava:** Meaning “west” in Kurdish, this refers to “Western Kurdistan,” or Syrian Kurdistan, the territory governed by Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) in Northeast Syria.

**Semiautonomous:** Having a degree of, but not complete, self-government (Oxford Bibliographies).

**Soil Salinization:** The process by which water-soluble salts accumulate within soil layers above a certain level that negatively affects crop production, environmental health, and economic welfare (Oxford Bibliographies).



**Sovereignty:** A state's authority to govern itself or another state (Oxford Bibliographies). In the case of a body of water, a state's authority to control access to and allocation of water resources. (Absolute sovereignty: When that authority is total and complete, not shared with any other party.)

**Transboundary waters:** The aquifers and lake and river basins shared by two or more countries (United Nations).

**Türkiye:** The official spelling of the name of the country formerly called "Turkey."

### C. What are the general descriptions and context of the disputed issue?

Everybody needs clean water. People drink it, cook with it, clean with it, use it in industry, and need it for agriculture and sanitation. But what happens when a country's main water source comes from outside their borders? What if the people upstream decide to build dams, or use the water in ways that make it dirty? What if they divert the water in the river for their own purposes, leaving less water for the people downstream? This is exactly the situation for the countries who depend on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in the Middle East. Because water is vital to people's well-being, prosperity, and their very survival, negotiations over this most precious resource are very challenging and contentious. In the lands through which the Tigris and Euphrates flow, the challenges are made more complex because of climate change, population growth, and ineffective governments that struggle to enforce their own policies. Unfortunately, international negotiations over water rights very rarely result in equitable sharing. But aren't negotiations a better way to solve problems when the alternative is war?

There are other places that face similar challenges: The Nile River is shared by Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia, and the Colorado River is the primary freshwater source for approximately 40 million people in the United States and Mexico (in Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, Wyoming, California, Arizona, Nevada, Baja California, and Sonora). The Colorado River has been the subject of several treaties and agreements allocating the water and governing its use to make sure everyone gets their fair share and that their share is clean and drinkable when they get it. Since states like California use so much water for agriculture, the **allocation** of water has been a point of controversy with the other states, who feel that they are getting less water for their citizens than California. The Navajo and Pueblo nations have lived in the region for more than 8,000 years but have historically been excluded from these water rights agreements.

## D. What are the names of the unique multiple perspectives involved in the disputed issue?

<b>Perspective One:</b>	Republic of Türkiye
<b>Perspective Two:</b>	Syrian Arab Republic
<b>Perspective Three:</b>	Republic of Iraq
<b>Perspective Four:</b>	Kurdistan Regional Government, Northern Iraq
<b>Perspective Five:</b>	Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (Rojava)

## E. Why does the disputed issue matter?

### Historical Background

The Tigris-Euphrates **Basin** forms a significant part of what is often called the Fertile Crescent, a region that saw the very earliest forms of agriculture and settled civilization, from around 12,000 BCE. The region has historically contained rivers and wetlands that supplied water to its inhabitants and great biodiversity due to its geographic position between three continents. The source of the Tigris and the Euphrates is in the Taurus Mountains in Türkiye. They get much of their water from rainfall and snowmelt, and eventually converge into the Shatt al-Arab in Iraq, which flows into the Persian Gulf. This river system has long been disputed, and in fact was the site of the first documented water treaty in history in 2550 BCE (source: *Global Journal of Archaeology & Anthropology*. <https://juniperpublishers.com/gjaa/GJAA.MS.ID.555669.php>). Today, the nation-states of Türkiye, Syria, and Iraq rely on these rivers for the vast majority of their freshwater resources, which is why control of the water flow is such a vital concern for all.

### Legal Background

No international law governs the use of rivers that cross international borders—called **transboundary waters**. Türkiye, Syria, and Iraq, the three main states that share access to the rivers (known as **riparian** states) are not all signatories of the five international conventions that generally govern the usage of transboundary waters. International laws and conventions are not enforceable in the same way that laws are inside a country. When a country breaks international law, other countries can choose to enact penalties like imposing economic sanctions, denying entry visas to their citizens, or sending a United Nations or NATO peacekeeping mission, but these responses are only optional. The conventions below are more

like voluntary agreements on how to handle transboundary waters, and there is no way to compel anyone to respect these conventions.

**Figure 3. International Conventions Regarding Transboundary Water Use**

Convention/law	Body	Location (year)	Tigris-Euphrates riparian signatories (year ratified)
Helsinki Rules on the Uses of the Waters of International Rivers	International Law Association (ILA)	Helsinki (1966)	—
Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes	Originally a European regional agreement; as of 2016, a UN-wide convention	Helsinki (1992)	Iraq (2023)
Convention on the Law of the Non-navigational Uses of International Watercourses	UN	New York (1997)	Syria (1998) Iraq (2001)  *Türkiye voted against
Berlin Rules on Water Resources	ILA	Berlin (2004)	—
Law of Transboundary Aquifers	UN	New York (2016)	Adopted without vote in the General Assembly

Pearson, C. and Jacobson, C. (2023).

Because of these differences, Türkiye, Syria, and Iraq differ on the question of **sovereignty**: To whom does this water belong? Who has the right to use it, and do they have to share it with others? Türkiye maintains that it has **absolute sovereignty** over the Tigris and the Euphrates, while Iraq and Syria both argue that transboundary waters should be treated as **international waters**, which by definition must be shared among riparian states, according to international law. The conventions—which Iraq and Syria have signed but Türkiye has not—designate transboundary waters as international waters. Ever since 1966, a guiding principle of these conventions has been that the use of water by one riparian state must not do harm to another, whether through overuse, pollution, or **salinization**.



## Geographical Background

Climate change and human intervention have dramatically transformed the Tigris-Euphrates basin from the once-mighty river system that gave rise to the ancient civilizations of the Fertile Crescent. Drought and **desertification** are stealing acres of **arable** land every year, and the rainfall that used to supplement the downstream water supply is continually decreasing. Farmers who rely on the rivers to irrigate the soil are losing their livelihood, and Iraq and Syria are both having to increase their imports of food that they can no longer grow themselves. In the midst of this crisis, Türkiye continues to build dams upstream that supply water to Turkish farmers and hydroelectric energy meant to decrease Turkish reliance on petrochemicals. Under the most recent agreement, Türkiye guaranteed a minimum of 500m<sup>3</sup>/s (cubic meters per second, the rate of flow) of water to Syria and Iraq; these nations however, say that Türkiye has not followed through on the agreement.

## Political Background

Besides the three nation-states who primarily rely on the Tigris-Euphrates (Iran is also a riparian state in that it is the source of a few tributaries of the Tigris, but it does not get the majority of its water from this river system), it is important to consider a few other perspectives. The Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq controls a **semiautonomous** region in northern part of that country, through which the Tigris flows on its way down from Türkiye. Any agreements made between riparian bodies that exclude the KRG would be difficult to implement, as Baghdad lacks enforcement capabilities in the north, so Erbil (the regional capital of the KRG) must be treated as a partner in these conversations. Damascus is similarly constrained regarding the Kurdish population in northern Syria (a region sometimes called **Rojava**). Syrian president Bashar al-Assad is unable to enforce policies he wishes to implement in areas controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), though neither he nor Turkish president Recep Erdoğan are likely to negotiate with the SDF much less treat them as an equal partner. Both al-Assad and Erdoğan see the SDF as an illegal militia bent on overthrowing the governments of Syria and Türkiye and therefore do not respect their legitimacy as a governing body.

Lastly, although there are large Kurdish populations in Iraq, Syria, and Türkiye, it is important to note that there is not a single “Kurdish” position that transcends national boundaries. There are between 35 and 45 million Kurds in this region, divided between Iraq, Syria, Türkiye, and Iran. Kurds are the largest ethnic group without their own nation, and there is a Kurdish nationalist sentiment that is just as old as the Turkish, Armenian, or Arab nationalist identity. Nations like Türkiye and Syria consider Kurdish nationalists to be terrorists, while Iraq has come to a

compromise with its local Kurds by granting them some autonomy and self-rule. As a result, Kurds in different places have different perspectives on international issues like water rights, and there is no consensus among Kurdish parties.

## **F. What is the timeline of significant events that are related to the disputed issue or that describe its stages?**

**Figure 4. Timeline of Relevant Historical Events in Türkiye, Syria, and Iraq**

<b>1923</b>	Founding of Türkiye from former Ottoman lands
<b>1923–1938</b>	President Mustafa Kemal Atatürk begins systematic reforms intended to modernize and westernize Türkiye; this includes planning how to harness the power of Türkiye’s rivers
<b>1925</b>	Sheikh Said leads an unsuccessful Kurdish nationalist revolt against Türkiye
<b>1938</b>	Turkish military massacres Zaza Kurds in Dersim
<b>1962</b>	Syrian government strips more than 100,000 Syrian Kurds of their citizenship
<b>1968</b>	Ba’athist party takes power in Iraq; Saddam Hussein is intelligence chief
<b>1970s</b>	Turkish damming projects begin on the Tigris-Euphrates
<b>1970</b>	Hafez al-Assad takes control of Syria in a coup, establishing his family’s rule over a totalitarian state
<b>1979</b>	Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) is founded in Türkiye; Saddam becomes president of Iraq
<b>1980</b>	Kurdish language banned in Türkiye after a successful military coup
<b>1980s</b>	Iran-Iraq War; Anfal Genocide: Saddam Hussein undertakes a genocidal campaign against Iraqi Kurds throughout the decade—notably, the massacre of the Barzanis (1983) and the gassing of Halabja (1988)
<b>1991</b>	Uprising against Saddam Hussein; Saddam drains the Mesopotamian Marshes in retaliation
<b>1998</b>	Syria expels PKK fighters from its borders; Adana Agreement between Syria and Türkiye
<b>2000</b>	Hafez al-Assad dies; his son Bashar becomes president of Syria
<b>2003</b>	US invasion of Iraq; construction of a new Iraqi state begins, with limited autonomy for Iraqi Kurds
<b>2006</b>	Saddam Hussein is convicted of and executed for crimes against humanity
<b>2011</b>	Arab Spring protests spark Syrian Civil War

*GDC: INTERNATIONAL CASE STUDY: Water Rights in the Middle East*

*Revised: 01/16/25*

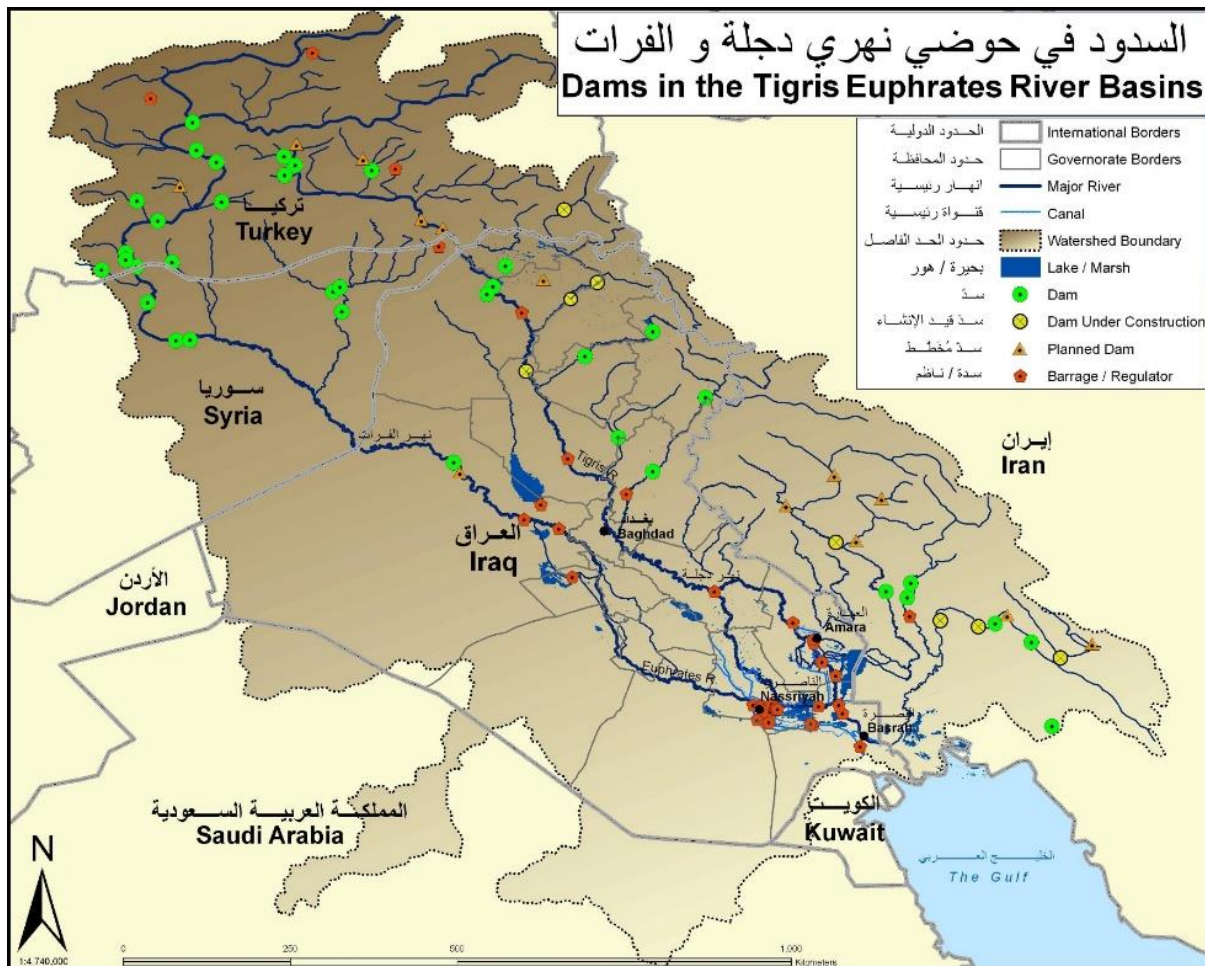
2013

Rise of the Islamic State in chaotic postwar Iraq and Syria; NE Syria declares itself an autonomous self-governing region

Pearson, C. and Jacobson, C. (2023).

## G. What map(s) can help students understand the disputed issue better?

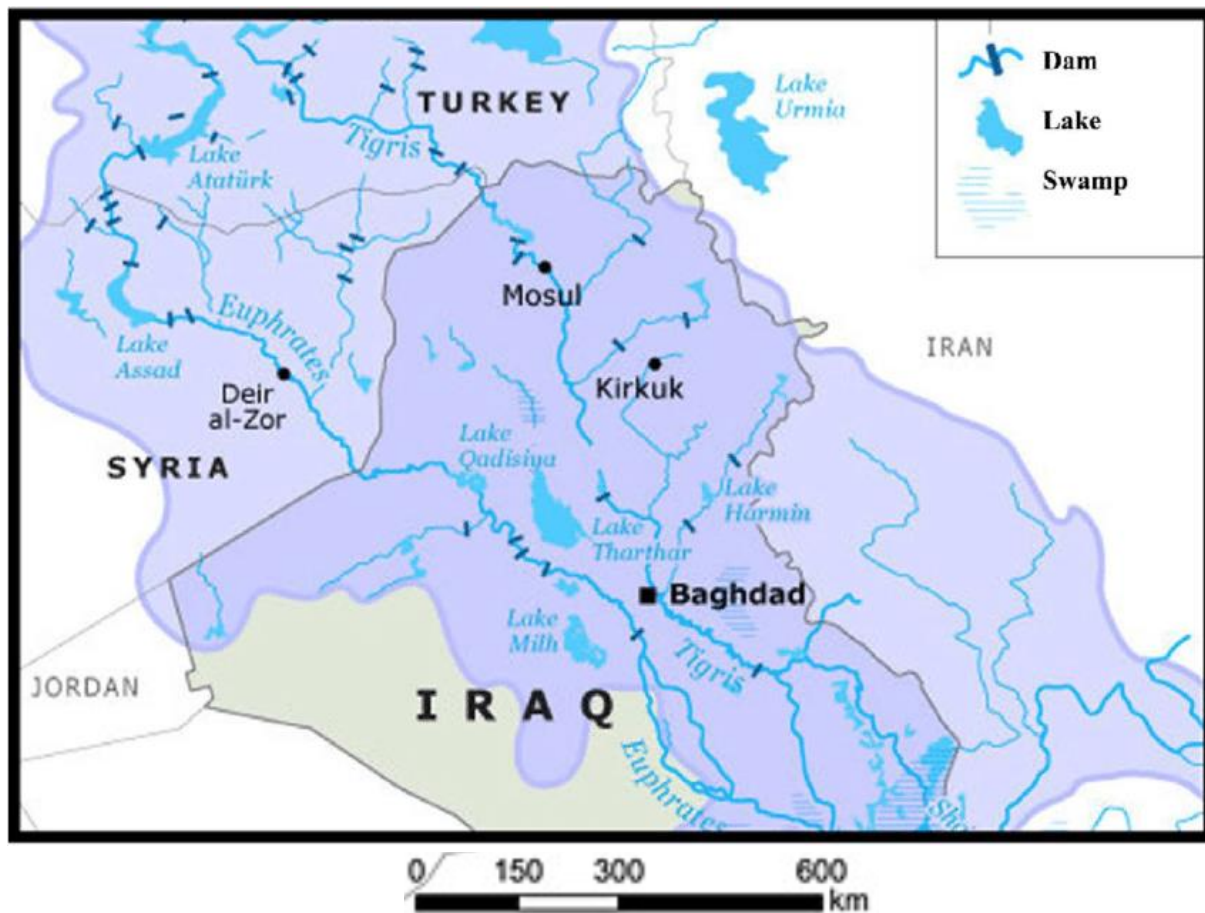
Figure 5. Dams in the Tigris Euphrates River Basin



Map Source: Abdulhadi, A. (2015). *Overview of water resources in Iraq*. Alexandria University Engineering College.

**Note:** This map shows the extent of the Tigris-Euphrates Basin as well as the location of completed and planned dams and barrages on the rivers as of 2015. (Generally speaking, a dam is meant to store water in a reservoir, while a barrage is meant to regulate or redirect the flow of water without storing it.)

**Figure 6. Waterways in the Tigris-Euphrates Basin**

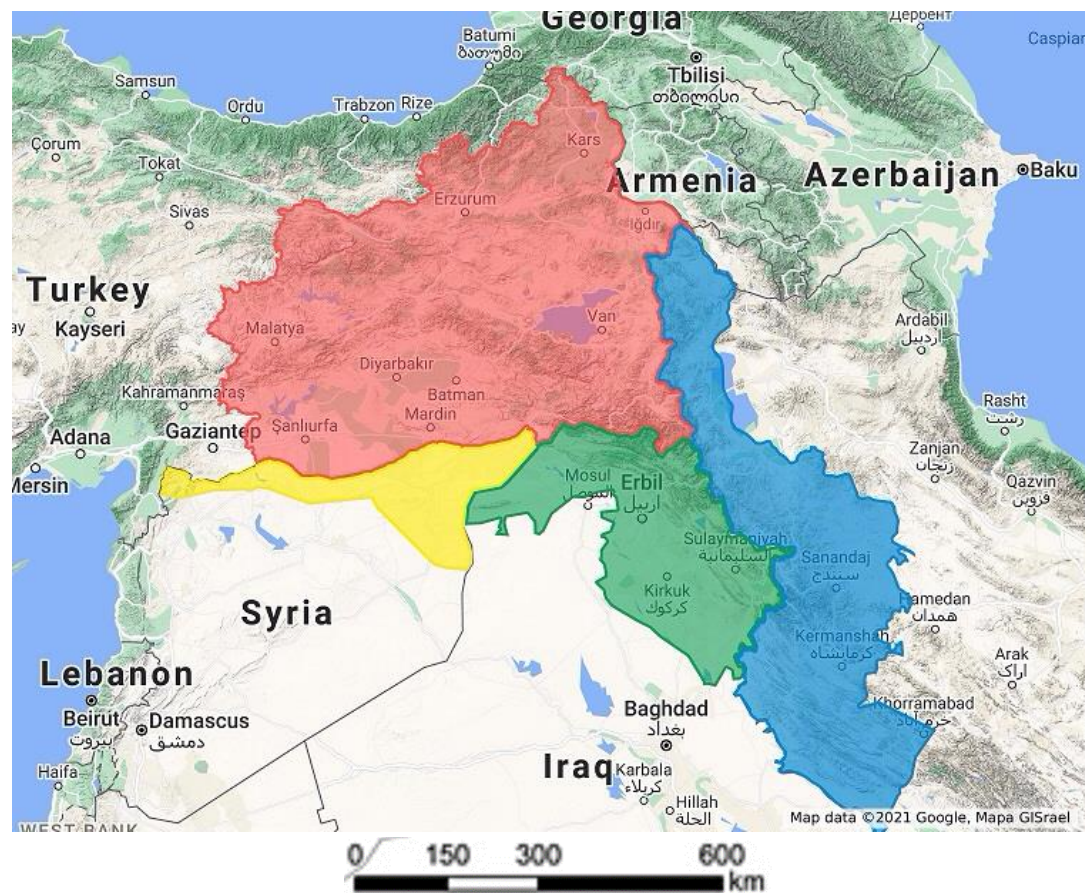


Map Source: Salameh, E. and Al-Ansari, N. (2021). Deficient developmental planning leading to water conflicts across political borders: The way forward. *Engineering*, 13, 161.

**Note:** This map shows waterways (rivers, lakes, and swamps) in the Tigris-Euphrates Basin, as well as the location of dams as of 2021.



**Figure 7. Kurdish-Majority Territory in Türkiye, Syria, Iraq, and Iran.**



- Kurdish areas in Turkey
- Kurdish areas in Syria (Rojava)
- Kurdish areas in Iraq (Kurdistan Region of Iraq, KRI)
- Kurdish areas in Iran

Map source: Brunaccioni, D. (2021). *Why Washington finds foothold in Kurdistan*. Washington Kurdish Institute. <https://dckurd.org/2021/12/21/why-washington-finds-foothold-in-kurdistan/>

**Note:** This map shows the Kurdish-majority regions of Türkiye, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. Although the river system is less visible on this map, comparing it to the others may help to visualize why Kurdish groups need to be consulted when it comes to making decisions about water rights on the Tigris-Euphrates.

**H. What short (6-to-10-minute) video can provide an overall understanding of the disputed issue?**



Video Title: [Why Iraq's Great Rivers are Dying](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_c7AuSQdvow)  
URL: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_c7AuSQdvow](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_c7AuSQdvow)  
Alternative Search: On YouTube, type in "Why Iraq's great rivers are dying"  
Author(s): Sam Ellis for Vox ATLAS  
Year: 2019  
Length: 9:56 minutes

**Note:** This video gives a detailed look at the state of Iraq's water supply and the environmental impact of the last thirty years of water policy, war, and water-rights disputes, especially in the southern city of Basra.



## I. What additional deliberations questions complement the essential question?

1. In what ways are the interests or values of the state similar to or different from those of the people who live in it?
2. How do we tell the difference between a state's real values and interests and what they claim their values and interests are?
3. What solutions could countries (by themselves or together) explore to find sustainable ways to use water?

## J. What optional and supplementary resources might shape an understanding of the disputed issue?

### Parallel US example of the disputed issue:

- The Colorado River: Google “states disputing use of Colorado River”  
“The dispute pits the Imperial Irrigation District, the Metropolitan Water District, the Coachella Valley Water District, the Palo Verde Irrigation and the Quechan Tribal Council against Arizona, Nevada, Colorado, Wyoming, New Mexico and Utah.” (Source: *California, other states reach impasse over Colorado River*. CalMatters. (2023). <https://calmatters.org/environment/2023/01/california-colorado-river-water-2/>)

### Novels, short stories, poetry, documentaries, videos, etc.:

- Ali Fadhil, *Playing Atari with Saddam Hussein* (2018, Iraq)
- Atia Abbawi, *Land of Permanent Goodbyes* (2018, Syria)
- Şebnem İşigüzel, *The Girl in the Tree* (2016, Türkiye)
- Alice Meade, *Dawn and Dusk* (2007, Iranian Kurdistan)

### Resources for young adult/children's literature and literature in translation:

- WorldKidLit: <https://worldkidlit.wordpress.com>  
ArabKidLitNow!: <https://arabkidlitnow.com>
- *Asymptote* journal: <https://www.asymptotejournal.com> (every issue has teaching resources)
- fairytalez.com: <https://fairytalez.com/region/arabic/> (this site collects public domain fairy tales and stories)

### Websites that cover the disputed issue as a whole, with good reliability and validity:

- **World Bank Climate Knowledge Portal:**
  - Iraq data: <https://climateknowledgeportal.worldbank.org/country/iraq/climate-data-historical>
  - Türkiye data: <https://climateknowledgeportal.worldbank.org/country/turkiye/climate-data-historical>
  - Syria data: <https://climateknowledgeportal.worldbank.org/country/syrian-arab-republic/climate-data-historical>
- **Background articles:**
  - *Politics, climate conspire as Tigris and Euphrates dwindle*. AP News. (2022). <https://apnews.com/article/iran-middle-east-business-world-news-syria-3b8569a74d798b9923e2a8b812fa1fca>
  - *Mitigating conflict over water in the Euphrates-Tigris basin*. Arab Center Washington DC. (2020). <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/mitigating-conflict-over-water-in-the-euphrates-tigris-basin/>
  - *In the midst of the riparians: Kurdistan's position at the center of an impending water crisis in the Tigris-Euphrates river basin*. Washington Kurdish Institute. (2023). <https://dckurd.org/2023/02/15/kurdistans-position-at-the-center/>
  - *Opinion—A significant field of diplomacy: Transboundary water politics*, Anadolu Agency. (2023). <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis/opinion-a-significant-field-of-diplomacy-transboundary-water-politics/2985689>

## K. What are some ways in which students might safely civically engage in response to this case study?

Find suggestions at:

- **Better World Info**—many different topics and ways to take action: <https://www.betterworld.info>
- **DoSomething**—has campaigns to join and challenges to take action: <https://www.dosomething.org/us>
- **Global Citizen**—offers petitions to sign on various global issues: <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/take-action/>
- **The Global Goals**—suggests ways to take action on the 17 UN Sustainability Goals: <https://www.globalgoals.org/take-action/>

- **United Nations: Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**—"The Lazy Person's Guide to Saving the World": <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/takeaction/>

**MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES HANDOUTS FOLLOW ON NEXT PAGES\***

**\*HANDOUTS ARE ONLY FOR STUDENT SMALL GROUP PRESENTATIONS\***

**\*NOTE: These are not to be handed out to the whole class, but to small groups after the class has learned about the case content.**

## INTERNATIONAL CASE STUDY

### Water Rights in the Middle East

#### PERSPECTIVE ONE\*:

##### Republic of Türkiye

**\*This perspective description is being handed out to your team only.**

**NOTE:** This description is written from the perspective of the Turkish government.

**General Description:** Türkiye is and has always been committed to the equitable allocation of water resources from the Tigris-Euphrates. However, it is a common misconception that Türkiye is a water-rich country; as a matter of fact, Türkiye is a downstream riparian state of several major rivers and relies on other nations for water resources. At any rate, water within Türkiye must first be allocated to the Turkish people before considering other concerns. The GAP Project (<http://www.gap.gov.tr/en/what-s-gap-page-1.html>), a system of dams and hydroelectric power plants being built along the Tigris-Euphrates, has never once impacted downstream water flow according to our data. Rather, it is helping to develop the poorest regions of the country, bring rural Kurdish farmers into the twenty-first century, provide renewable energy resources in Türkiye, and prevent flooding downstream. Perhaps if downstream riparian states of the Tigris-Euphrates are facing water shortages, they should consider their own outdated agricultural practices and misuse of resources, before laying the blame at Türkiye's feet.

**Values:** Self-reliance, Sustainability, Equality

#### Comments and Resources Supporting this Perspective:

- The new hydroelectric dams will decrease Turkish reliance on oil, shifting the Turkish economy in the direction of sustainability.

**Resource:** *GAP: A grand design for sustainable development*. European Institute of the Mediterranean. (2006). <https://www.iemed.org/publication/gap-a-grand-design-for-sustainable-development/>

- The GAP Project will benefit rural farmers, especially the economically disadvantaged and uneducated Kurdish population, and address the economic stresses contributing to the Kurdish terrorism problem.



**Resource:** *Turkey revives stalled \$32 billion GAP dam and irrigation project.* The Christian Science Monitor. (2008).

<https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2008/0528/p12s01-woeu.html>

- Nations need to take responsibility for their own people, instead of blaming others for their problems.

**Resource:** *The law of international water courses and the Middle East.* (2000).

<https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/816884>

### Comments and Resources Opposing this Perspective:

- The current president of Türkiye, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, is essentially a dictator, and one of the ways he maintains power is by granting building contracts at bargain rates to his family and friends, cutting corners to get around environmental restrictions and building codes.

**Resource:** *The West hoped for democracy in Turkey. Erdogan had other ideas.* The New York Times. (2018). <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/18/business/west-democracy-turkey-erdogan-financial-crisis.html>

- Türkiye was founded in part on a belief in Turkish ethnic superiority. Despite rhetoric about developing the southeast and relieving the economic distress of rural Kurdish farmers, much of this underdevelopment and economic distress is the direct result of discriminatory policies and outright mistreatment of Kurds at the hands of the Turkish authorities. In southeast Türkiye, Kurdish villages and farmland have been burned to the ground in order to forcibly relocate hundreds of thousands of their inhabitants. For much of the twentieth century, it was illegal to speak the Kurdish language, and it remains illegal to publicly criticize the Turkish state (e.g. by acknowledging that the Turkish state treats Kurds badly).

**Resource:** *Displaced and disregarded: Turkey's failing village return program.* Human Rights Watch. (2002). <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2002/turkey/Turkey1002.pdf>

- Türkiye and its downstream neighbors disagree over whether the dams severely impact the water flow. Türkiye claims it is releasing just as much water as before, while Iraq and Syria complain of drastic drops in water supply. They can't all be right.

**Resource:** *Minister: Iraq to face severe shortages as river flows drop.* AP News. (2020). <https://apnews.com/article/9542368977c9ee0ae97fd2cc88933198>



**Primary Outcomes of Perspective:** The goal of the GAP Project is sustainable development for Türkiye, by Türkiye. Billions of dollars have been invested in this project, most of which came from the Turkish government—the Turkish people are building the future for themselves. Besides gaining renewable energy sources, building and maintaining the dams on the Tigris-Euphrates will provide jobs and the water diverted to Southeastern Anatolia will greatly increase the amount of arable land and agricultural output.

**Secondary Consequences:** The construction of these dams has prompted environmental concerns among the international community, in particular regarding the potential for severe downstream water shortages and the possible spread of disease (source: *Emerging Infectious Diseases*. [https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/15266/cdc\\_15266\\_DS1.pdf](https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/15266/cdc_15266_DS1.pdf)). In addition, at least one important Kurdish heritage site, a city over 10,000 years old (source: *The Nation*. <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/turkey-syria-iraq-kurds/>), and hundreds of thousands of locals have been displaced to make space for these building projects.

**INTERNATIONAL CASE STUDY**  
**Water Rights in the Middle East**

**PERSPECTIVE TWO\*:**

**Syrian Arab Republic**

**\*This perspective description is being handed out to your team only.**

**NOTE:** This description is written from the perspective of the Syrian government.

**General Description:** The waters of the Tigris-Euphrates belong to all the nations who share them, not just the source. The Syrian people live every day at the mercy of politicians in Ankara, who can decide on a whim to decrease or completely stop the flow of water through its dams on the Euphrates, a tactic they have previously used to force Syria into compliance with their demands.

Syria and Türkiye have a very fragile relationship, and the Arab Spring and subsequent civil war destabilized it even further. The Adana Agreement has collapsed since Syria was forced to rely on Kurdish fighters to beat back the Islamic State—the same Kurdish fighters that Türkiye has declared to be terrorists. Now Türkiye, with Russian support, has occupied large portions of northern Syria, and regularly fails to allocate the promised 500 m<sup>3</sup>/s of water on the Euphrates. The two nations need a new bilateral agreement that guarantees water security for Syria's people, as well as cooperation in the fight against the PKK (the Kurdistan Workers Party, a militant group fighting for Kurdish independence).

**Values:** Freedom, Security

**Comments and Resources Supporting this Perspective:**

- The Adana Agreement in 1998 worked to normalize relations between Türkiye and Syria for more than a decade, before the revolution undermined it. A new agreement that also includes guarantees of equitable water allocation will help restabilize the region.

**Resource:** *Could Adana Agreement be Turkey's change of heart?* RUDAW. (2022).

<https://www.rudaw.net/english/opinion/10082022>

- Cooperation on the border would strengthen existing forces in the fight against the Kurdish occupation of the northeast and liberate Arab Syrians from foreign rule.

**Resource:** *What's at stake if Turkey invades Syria, again.* Middle East Institute. (2022). <https://www.mei.edu/publications/whats-stake-if-turkey-invades-syria-again>

- The ongoing water crisis has already resulted in contaminated crops and drinking water, with negative health outcomes for the population.

**Resource:** *Inside Syria's water crisis: A cholera outbreak in the making.* ReliefWeb. (2023). <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/inside-syrias-water-crisis-cholera-outbreak-making>

### Comments and Resources Opposing this Perspective:

- Kurds have lived in Syria since at least the twelfth century CE, when the Kurdish military leader Saladin established the Ayyubid Sultanate and made Damascus his seat of power. Modern attempts to paint Kurds as “foreigners” or “Turkish invaders” are examples of racist rhetoric by an Arab nationalist government.

#### Resources:

- *Saladin.* History.com. (2021.) <https://www.history.com/topics/africa/saladin>
- *The Banality of Authoritarian Control: Syria's Ba'ath Party Marches on.* Sada. (2021). <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2021/02/the-banality-of-authoritarian-control-syrias-baath-party-marches-on?lang=en>
- Syria faces negative health outcomes from Türkiye's interference in the water flow, but Syria also contributes to negative health outcomes downstream in Iraq, essentially piling onto the problems already coming down the Euphrates from Türkiye.

**Resource:** *Iraq: Dirty water.* International Committee of the Red Cross. (2011). <https://icrcnewsroom.org/story/en/1317/iraq-dirty-water>

**Primary Outcomes of Perspectives:** With a renewed Adana Agreement, Türkiye would only be able to send its troops a maximum of 5 km inside the Syrian border in pursuit of Kurdish terrorists, as opposed to violating Syrian sovereignty by occupying parts of the northeast region. All Türkiye asks in return is total support in the fight against the PKK and other Kurdish terrorist groups.

**Secondary Consequences:** Syrian president Bashar al-Assad has said that the Kurds in Syria are really Turks who crossed the border illegally, and not truly Syrian citizens. In fact, in the 1960s hundreds of thousands of Syrian Kurds were denaturalized and had their identity papers taken away for this reason. The Adana Agreement was based on a shared commitment to treating

Kurdish forces as terrorists and the Kurdish population as second-class citizens or even foreign invaders—a strategy that seems likely to continue under a renewed agreement. The original agreement consisted almost entirely of Syrian concessions and Turkish privileges; the only real leverage Syria had was its Kurdish population, and the threat of both Turkish invasion and drought were enough to force Syria’s capitulation anyway. Now that Syria has lost control of the northeast to AANES, they no longer have any leverage at all against Türkiye, who can demand just about anything in exchange for not invading and for providing water resources.

## INTERNATIONAL CASE STUDY

### Water Rights in the Middle East

#### PERSPECTIVE THREE\*:

##### Republic of Iraq

**\*This perspective description is being handed out to your team only.**

**NOTE:** This description is written from the perspective of the Iraqi government.

**General Description:** The United States and its allies invaded Iraq in 2003 and ousted the long-time dictator Saddam Hussein. In the two decades since the invasion, Iraq's government has worked to regain and assert its sovereignty. The Tigris and Euphrates run the length of Iraq and provide the vast majority of the fresh water for its populace and agriculture. As dams upstream slow the flow of water in the Tigris and Euphrates, and as climate change reduces the amount of water entering the system, the Iraqi government faces a profound challenge in its efforts to provide sufficient water for its 45 million residents. The situation has already reached a crisis stage, with many areas unable to provide sufficient water for their residents. Upstream states, mainly Türkiye, must accept that the Tigris and Euphrates do not belong to them alone and must develop policies that respect Iraq's claims to these rivers. Water scarcity will become an increasingly difficult challenge. The lack of international coordination on water issues will make it more difficult for Iraq to cooperate with Türkiye on other matters and, as scarcity of water and agricultural products increases, the Iraqi population will become more desperate, which could lead to an increased refugee burden in Türkiye.

**Values:** Sovereignty, Cooperation, Sustainability

#### Comments and Resources Supporting this Perspective:

- Water from the Tigris and Euphrates is essential to the livelihood of Iraq, who must have a say in water usage in upstream riparian states.

##### Resources:

- *Local to global: Tensions course through Iraq's waterways.* Center for Strategic and International Studies. (2023). <https://www.csis.org/analysis/local-global-tensions-course-through-iraqs-waterways>
- *Iraq's water crisis: An existential but unheeded threat.* The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington. (2021). <https://agsiw.org/iraqs-water-crisis-an->

[existential-but-unheeded-threat/](#)

- Sufficient water flow in the Tigris and Euphrates is crucially important for the preservation of Iraqi ecosystems and communities (such as the southern marshlands).

**Resource:** *Water, oil, and Iraq's climate future*. Middle East Research and Information Project. (2023). <https://merip.org/2023/03/water-oil-and-iraqs-climate-future/>

- Water from the Tigris and Euphrates is vital to the renewal and development of Iraqi agriculture.

**Resource:** *Iraq: Drought crisis destroys income and crops countrywide*. Norwegian Refugee Council. (2022). <https://www.nrc.no/news/2022/october/iraq-drought-crisis-destroys-income-and-crops-country-wide/>

**Comments and Resources Opposing this Perspective:**

- Resource mismanagement caused by corruption and unsustainable farming methods is also a major problem impacting water access within Iraq, exacerbating the problems caused by shortages.

**Resource:** *Whose water is it anyway: How political violence and corruption has become Iraq's existential challenge*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. (2023) <https://www.csis.org/analysis/whose-water-it-anyway-how-political-violence-and-corruption-has-become-iraqs-existential>

- Failing water infrastructure is also responsible for some of the contamination problems, made worse by corruption but also by decades of war.

**Resource:** *Iraq's water contaminated with feces, oil, and medical wastes*. ReliefWeb. (2023). <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/iraqs-waters-contaminated-feces-oil-and-medical-wastes>

**Primary Outcomes of Perspectives:** The goal of Iraqi water policy is to provide clean, potable water to Iraq's 45 million residents; to preserve its fragile river ecosystems; and to develop its agricultural sector. Without clean water, Iraqi citizens will be forced to leave the country, creating refugee crises in neighboring countries and possibly encouraging extremism. Iraq's river ecosystems are environmental jewels that should be preserved in the name of sustainability. Water for agriculture will help Iraq become more self-subsistent and decrease its dependence on oil revenues.



**Secondary Consequences:** Iraq's good relations with its upstream riparian neighbors depend on them all sharing water resources. Without sharing, future water wars are a real possibility. Without coordination between the Iraqi government and the Kurdistan region, the integrity of the Iraqi state could further erode, causing tensions or worse within Iraq and in neighboring states.

## INTERNATIONAL CASE STUDY

### Water Rights in the Middle East

#### PERSPECTIVE FOUR\*:

##### Kurdistan Regional Government, Northern Iraq

**\*This perspective description is being handed out to your team only.**

**NOTE:** This description is written from the perspective of the Kurdish Regional Government.

**General Description:** The Kurds in northern Iraq are ethnically and linguistically distinct from the majority Arab population. Since the 2003 American invasion of Iraq, this group has maintained a relative degree of autonomy from the central Iraqi government in Baghdad. The Tigris River flows through the Kurdish region and provides most of the water for its citizens and its agriculture. Like the central government, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) depends on the neighboring riparian states to maintain the flow of the Tigris at levels sufficient to the region's needs. Unlike Iraq as a whole, however, the Kurdistan region enjoys both **aquifers** and water from the yearly snowfall in its mountains. Water from the KRG is an important source of the Tigris's water levels within greater Iraq, which is downstream from the Kurdish autonomous region.

Conscientious management of its indigenous water resources could help alleviate the problems that come from reduced flows of the Tigris, while cooperation with the Iraqi government in Baghdad regarding data collection and analysis would aid water management efforts across the country. The Ministry of Agriculture and Water Management in Erbil should work to improve communications capacity within and between ministries that work on water governance issues, including the Ministry of Natural Resources, and create policies preventing the over-extraction of our groundwater.

**Values:** Cooperation, Sustainability, Stability

#### Comments and Resources Supporting this Perspective:

- Thoughtful and judicious water policy from the KRG can help strengthen its autonomy and sovereignty.

#### Resources:

- *A watershed moment for Iraqi Kurdistan: Subnational hydropolitics and regional stability*. NewSecurityBeat. (2018).  
<https://www.newsecuritybeat.org/2018/05/watershed-moment-iraqi-kurdistan-subnational-hydropolitics-regional-stability/>;
- *Water resources management in the Kurdistan region of Iraq*. American University of Iraq, Sulaimani. (2017).  
[https://auis.edu.krd/iris/sites/default/files/Water%20Policy%20Report%20IRIS\\_FINAL%20ES.pdf](https://auis.edu.krd/iris/sites/default/files/Water%20Policy%20Report%20IRIS_FINAL%20ES.pdf)
- Water in the Tigris downstream from Kurdistan (i.e. in Iraq) depends on flows from Kurdistan; the Iraqi government should therefore treat the KRG with appropriate respect when negotiating future water resource allocation.  
**Resource:** *The water*. Kurdistanica.com. (2018). <https://kurdistanica.com/494/the-water/>
- Regional governments in Turkey, Syria, and Iraq should recognize that economic instability, refugee crises, and violence will be consequences of a water crisis in KRG. It is in the interests of these states to ensure that the situation in the region does not rise to the level of an emergency.  
**Resource:** *Water shortages in Iraqi Kurdistan coming to a head*. Amwaj Media. (2021). <https://amwaj.media/media-monitor/iq-mm-iraqi-kurdistan-s-water-scarcity-causes-alarm>

#### Comments and Resources Opposing this Perspective:

- The fact that the KRG is upstream of a thirsty and suffering Iraq may mean that Iraqis will start to resent their Kurdish neighbors—who have more water by virtue of the land they live on—and become less willing to cooperate with them on water governance issues.  
**Resource:** *A watershed moment for Iraqi Kurdistan: Subnational hydropolitics and regional stability*. NewSecurityBeat. (2018).  
<https://www.newsecuritybeat.org/2018/05/watershed-moment-iraqi-kurdistan-subnational-hydropolitics-regional-stability/>
- The Kurdistan region may have to prepare once more for an influx of refugees from the south, this time due to water shortages rather than the Islamic State. Between 2013 and 2023, the population of Iraqi Kurdistan increased by 41%, which put a significant strain

on the water supply, even without the additional pressure of ongoing climate change.

**Resource:** *Navigating water scarcity in the Kurdistan region: Challenges, causes, and critical solutions*. Rudaw Research Center. (2023).

<https://rudawrc.net/en/article/navigating-water-scarcity-in-the-kurdistan-region-challenges-causes-and-crucial-solutions-2023-08-29>

**Primary Outcomes of Perspectives:** Cooperation between the KRG and the Iraqi government on the one hand, and between the KRG and Syria and Turkey on the other, could produce a lasting settlement for water sharing, resulting in a stable food supply, happy citizens, and peace between the Kurdistan region and its riparian neighbors. Letting the KRG manage its water supply judiciously will increase its legitimacy as an autonomous region that cares for its residents.

**Secondary Consequences:** Failure to provide the necessary water resources to the Kurdistan region of Iraq will result in a worsening crisis in Kurdistan, with the effects felt in all the riparian states. These effects may include refugee crises, food shortages, and violence. However, if Kurdistan demands too much from their neighbors, it will alienate them and cause increased tensions and, very possibly, war.

## INTERNATIONAL CASE STUDY

### Water Rights in the Middle East

#### PERSPECTIVE FIVE\*:

##### Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (Rojava)

**\*This perspective description is being handed out to your team only.**

**NOTE:** This description is written from the perspective of the government of Rojava.

**General Description:** Syria and Türkiye must include the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) in their negotiations over the allocation of water from the Euphrates. AANES is the **de facto** governing body for large portions of northern Syria, and neither the Syrian government in Damascus nor the Turkish government in Ankara have the capacity to take back control of the entire region. The Arab, Kurdish, Assyrian, Turkmen, and Circassian inhabitants of Rojava want to live in peace, with the freedom to govern themselves as they see fit—ideally as an autonomous region in a democratic Syria. However, Türkiye’s President Erdoğan insists that the AANES military coalition, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), are a terrorist group connected to the PKK in Türkiye. Erdoğan has treated the SDF as military targets on par with the Islamic State and is invading northern Syria to fight the Kurdish threat. When AANES and the SDF liberated the region from the Islamic State, Türkiye began to restrict the flow of the Euphrates, and what water they do allow through is increasingly polluted.

The SDF were key allies of the United States in the fight against the Islamic State, with the Pentagon providing them with hundreds of millions of dollars in funds, weapons, and training. The US also embedded Special Forces personnel with the SDF and provided air support. Then, all US support in Syria was withdrawn in 2019, leaving the door open for the Turkish invasion. It seems that AANES and its people receive international support when they can be useful to other great powers but are on their own when it comes to fighting for the right to exist. Sandwiched between Syria and Türkiye, two nations who refuse to recognize AANES as a legitimate government, the people of Rojava will become collateral damage to whatever water agreement governs the allocation of the Euphrates. In short, Kurds deserve to drink water too.

**Values:** Democracy, Justice, Diversity

#### Comments and Resources Supporting this Perspective:

*GDC: INTERNATIONAL CASE STUDY: Water Rights in the Middle East*  
*Revised: 01/16/25*

- A brief piece on the origins of AANES.  
**Resource:** *What the world loses if Turkey destroys the Syrian Kurds.* The New York Times. (2019)  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/14/opinion/trump-syria-kurds-turkey.html>
- While Assad will never consider Kurds to be equal citizens in Syria, Kurds and other ethnic minorities have the chance to govern themselves in AANES.  
**Resource:** *Assad's 'Dangerous' statement on Kurds could be message to Turkey: Official.* Kurdistan24. (2018). <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/21978-Assad's-'dangerous'-statement-on-Kurds-could-be-message-to-Turkey:-Official>
- AANES already controls much of northern Syria, including the Tabqa Dam, the largest dam in Syria. This means that, without the cooperation of AANES, neither Syria nor Türkiye will be able to implement any policy regarding the Euphrates in that region.  
**Resource:** *Turkey is running northern Syria dry.* New Internationalist. (2023). <https://newint.org/features/2023/01/30/turkey-running-northern-syria-dry>
- The northeast is the breadbasket of Syria. The nation is already facing food shortages as a result of the war; these shortages will only get worse as the water quantity and quality both dwindle.  
**Resource:** *Conflict and climate change ravage Syria's agricultural heartland.* The New York Times. (2022). <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/19/world/middleeast/syria-drought-climate-food.html>

#### Comments and Resources Opposing this Perspective:

- AANES relies heavily on the rhetoric of democracy, but their track record is not much better than Syria's or Türkiye's when it comes to press freedom, for example. The resource below is a Reporters Without Borders story about a pro-Assad journalist who has been imprisoned since 2019 on fabricated charges. Syria, Türkiye, and Iraq have all acted similarly, but AANES has no democratic moral high ground here.  
**Resource:** *"I had to tell him four times before he finally recognized me."* Reporters Without Borders. (2022). <https://rsf.org/en/i-had-tell-him-four-times-who-i-was-he-finally-recognised-me>

**Primary Outcomes of Perspectives:** Including AANES in negotiations and water treaty discussions only acknowledges the reality that already exists on the ground in Syria. Politicians'



refusal to recognize the right of the Syrian people to govern themselves is absurd; it both keeps common-sense policy from being enacted and decimates the food supply that the region ought to have. Syrian and Turkish politicians are being self-defeating when they hold to the anti-Kurdish positions they have maintained since the 1990s.

**Secondary Consequences:** Türkiye is actively invading and occupying territory in northeastern Syria and has allied itself with the Assad government, insofar as they have a shared interest in opposing the SDF. Allowing AANES to participate in international treaty negotiations would be tantamount to recognizing it as a legitimate state, a move which would undermine Türkiye's entire foreign and domestic policy framework regarding Kurdish groups generally and the PKK specifically. Assad's position is no less firm: by presenting Syria as an Arab state, the government makes non-Arabs second-class citizens. Assad has gone so far as to say that members of the Kurdish population are not Syrians at all, viewing them as foreign invaders on Syrian soil rather than native-born citizens. The Assad government and Ba'ath Party are Arab ethnonationalists, so allowing Kurds to be on equal footing with Arabs is simply not an option for them.