

مركز البيدر للدراسات والتخطيط

Al-Baidar Center For Studies And Planning



The impact of effective diplomacy on the process of regional water cooperation between Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey

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The Center seeks to contribute to developing the state and its institutions, by proposing ideas and practical solutions to the main problems and challenges facing the state, including improving public sector management, policies and strategic planning, using reliable data and best practices. The Center engages the relevant authorities in the state with regular meetings to support this objective and utilises the support of international organizations dedicated to assisting Iraq's development. The Center also seeks to support economic reforms, sustainable development and provide technical assistance to the public and private sectors. The Center also seeks to support development of the private sector to provide job opportunities for citizens through training and upskilling, in a way that reduces dependence on government institutions and contributes to supporting and diversifying the country's economy.

The Center aims to utilise the vast amount of potential in Iraq's human resources by organizing programs to prepare and develop promising young people, including leaders capable of proposing, adopting and implementing visions and future plans that advance society and preserve its value system based on the commitment to a high moral standard and rejection of all types of corruption.

The impact of effective diplomacy on the process of regional water cooperation between Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey

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Everywhere, all over the world, and without exception, water is considered a valuable natural resource that has been the reason for and continues to create competition and tension between human communities and countries. The majority of conflicts which have arisen between countries because of water have revolved around shared watersheds, and so far it has proved difficult to find a reasonable mechanism for the equitable distribution of these finite resources. Given the strategic and vital role of water and its unequal distribution in different parts of the world, in addition to the many basins and water resources shared between countries,¹ the need for pragmatic diplomacy is an inescapable fact. Iraq has long had disagreements with its neighbours over the sharing of common border waters and transboundary rivers, which makes the reliance on diplomacy more important than ever before, as well as giving the whole matter greater attention.

The water crisis

Until the early 1970's, Iraq was considered one of the countries that was rich in water resources. In the years that followed, both Syria and Turkey began building dams on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, resulting in a significant decrease in the flow of both rivers entering

1. Transboundary Waters. <https://www.unwater.org/water-facts/transboundary-waters/>

Iraq,² with a concomitant deterioration in water quality.³ This situation made everyone concerned pay greater attention to the water shares of every other riparian country sharing the basins of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers because of their significant impact on the national security and development strategies of these countries.

The level of water stress in Iraq is put at 3.7 out of 5 according to the water stress index, placing it in the list of countries classified as having a “high risk” regarding the risks associated with water scarcity.⁴ The global index predicts that by 2040 Mesopotamia (Iraq) will become a land without rivers after the Tigris and Euphrates rivers dry up completely.⁵ Several factors are behind this critical water situation, the most important of which are climatic changes represented by the lack of rainfall and the drying up of rivers, in addition to other factors that negatively impact on water flows from the two rivers as a result of the activities of the upstream countries, Turkey and Syria, and neighbouring Iran, involving the building of dams at the expense of their downstream neighbour, Iraq. Add to this, the outdated water policies that are in dire need of modernization – which in turn contribute to the exacerbation of the water deficit, compounded by the abject failure on the part of Iraq’s Ministry of Water Resources in making any real effort to negotiate with neighbouring countries the means to secure Iraq’s water share.

2. Al-Ansari, N. A. and Knutsson, S., “Toward Prudent management of Water Resources in Iraq”, *J. Advanced Science and Engineering Research*, 1, 2011, p. 53-67.

3. Development and Evaluation of a Water Quality Index for the Iraqi Rivers. file:///C:/Users/Fw%20admin/Downloads/hydrology-07-00067.pdf

4. These 20 Water-Stressed Countries Have the Most Solar and Wind Potential <https://www.wri.org/insights/these-20-water-stressed-countries-have-most-solar-and-wind-potential>

5. UN (2010) Water Resources Management White Paper. United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, United Nations Country Team in Iraq, 20 p.

According to the 1946 agreement,⁶ there are two common border rivers between Iraq and Turkey, namely the Tigris and the Euphrates, from which both countries benefit according to the agreement. As regards Iraqi-Iranian relations, we can point to the Algiers Agreement of 1975,⁷ which is concerned with the more important issue of the role of the Shatt al-Arab river. Monitoring and regulating the Shatt al-Arab flow has always been a major political objective for Iraq, and this has led to numerous conflicts with Iran over recent decades. Today, however, following the dredging of the basin to better facilitate the movement of ships and cargo containers, along with the environmental significance of the Shatt for both countries, ranging from environmental crises such as dust storms, ecosystem destruction and climate change, to the depletion of potable water, together these factors will form the basis for the emergence of future water disputes between Iraq and Iran.

The courses and drainage networks of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers

The Tigris and Euphrates rivers originate from Turkey and irrigate Iraq, eventually flowing into the Great Hor in the south. Turkey prevents a large portion of the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers from flowing into Iraq, due in large part to the construction of the Ilisu Dam on the Tigris River.⁸ There are also the consequences from the Euphrates or Tabqa dam in Syria.⁹ These factors have created a

6. United Nation (1946) Treaty of Friendship and Neighbourly Relations between Iraq and Turkey, Collection of Treaties. No. 580, 281-331. https://www.internationalwaterlaw.org/documents/regionaldocs/Iraq-Turkey-Friendship_1946.pdf

7. Treaty Concerning the State Frontier and Neighbourly Relationships between Iran and Iraq. <https://www.internationalwaterlaw.org/documents/regionaldocs/iran-iraq.html>

8. THE SOUTHEASTERN ANATOLIA PROJECT (GAP). <http://www.gap.gov.tr/en/what-s-gap-page-1.html>

9. Syria's Tabqa Dam: A strategic prize. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1075756/middle-east>

grave deficit in Iraq's water resources, which will undoubtedly have devastating consequences, especially on the agricultural sector, which in the course of time may even endanger Iraq's very existence.¹⁰

On the Iraqi side, the Ministry of Water Resources has confirmed that the volume of water from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers from Turkey has decreased by 50%, while also confirming that Iran had reduced the flow from the tributaries of the Darbandikhan Dam to zero percent.¹¹ The three main riparian countries, Iraq, Syria and Turkey, have so far failed to reach a lasting solution on their respective shares from the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates basin. Notwithstanding, Iraq, for its part, has affirmed the "ancestral irrigation" rights acquired by it from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.¹²

The construction of dams in Turkey, Syria and Iran has greatly reduced the flows of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Here, we must specifically mention Iran's role, which has also built dams on the tributaries of the Tigris River. When reviewing what Iran has done, their actions may be summarized as follows:

- Building a dam on the Alvand River, which cut off the water from the city of Khanaqin;
- Building a dam on the Karkheh River;
- Construction projects on the Karun River and diverting its waters into Iran;

10. Turkey starts filling huge Tigris River dam, activists say. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-dam/turkey-starts-filling-huge-tigris-river-dam-activists-say-idUSKCN1US194>

11. Minister for Water Resources: Tigris and Euphrates revenues decreased by 50 percent. (Article in Arabic). <https://www.ina.iq/125653--50-.html>

12. Iraq's Ministry of Irrigation, as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (Article in Arabic). <https://mowr.gov.iq/>

- Diverting the waters of the Siwan River, which is one of the tributaries of the Diyala River; and
- Building dams across the seasonal valleys near the Iraqi border, thereby trapping their waters to ensure that they do not cross into Iraqi territory.¹³

Ways of overcoming the crisis.

In view of what has been mentioned above, the main question posed by this research is what impact will water diplomacy have on the process of regional cooperation between Iraq and Turkey, together with Iran? Since Iraq has transboundary watersheds and shared water basins with its neighbours, in addition to issues such as the water crisis, environmental issues, pollution, economic, political and security relations, which are of great importance, given the existence of international treaties, agreements and laws, as well as active and effective diplomacy and careful management; cooperation and interaction is possible between Iraq and its neighbours, by means of which solutions may be reached without causing damage, or creating tensions and further challenges. At this juncture, additional, secondary questions also arise, namely:

What is the likely future impact of water diplomacy on the pattern of cooperation in the relations that bring Iraq together with its neighbours?

Water management is a form of diplomacy aimed at securing the water interests of the country in its relations with its neighbours, and specialist knowledge and clear policy objectives play an important role during negotiations; and the reliance on unscientific methods to make decisions may lead to a deepening crisis and unnecessary tensions. In other words, there is a risk of political conflict in the water-sharing

13. Abdullah, A. A, Shared Rivers between Iraq and Iran and its effect on Agricultural lands and Food Security, Tikrit University J., 20, 1, 2012, p. 356–388.

regimes between countries, and accordingly, the most successful country should have: international contracts and institutions, positive international relations, high levels of economic development and international cooperation and partnership projects.¹⁴

What is the most appropriate model for cooperation on political issues arising from transboundary waters that can be established between Iraq and its neighbours?

Some believe that the use of water at the national level for sustainable development should be governed by a national law on water management in the country concerned. However, in the majority of cases, as is the case with the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, current Iraqi laws are neither consistent nor homogeneous, and do not reflect international water standards. It is clear today that the use of water without restrictions will have environmental and economic consequences. Moreover, improving the quality and quantity of water in the downstream countries, will reduce the adverse effects, and will impose additional costs on the upstream countries.

The most successful way of reducing pollution in the Tigris and Euphrates rivers is to propose that Turkey and the other countries receive economic incentives and financial compensation. In addition, the implementation, monitoring and verification of the audit system should be an integral part of the compensation mechanism. More specifically, assistance may be sought from institutions such as the World Bank or the United Nations, possibly in cooperation with the Global Environment Facility (GEF) Trust Fund, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development or the European Investment Fund, provided that they cover the cost of a comprehensive pollution

14. Sara McLaughlin Mitchell and Paul R. Hensel, International Institutions and Compliance with Agreements, *American Journal of Political Science* Vol. 51, No. 4 (Oct. 2007), pp. 721-737 (17 pages) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4620096>

abatement system which also includes agreement on water standards.¹⁵

It is also conceivable that water diplomacy will play an important role in furthering commercial cooperation, complementary economics, environmental issues as well as political issues, and that precise, comprehensive and effective management is one of the most important factors that can create a stable situation between Iraq and its neighbours. By such means, steps may also be taken towards cooperation, interaction, development and progress in relation to cross-border waters and shared water basins and transformations that avoid future tensions, conflicts and challenges.

The future need for improvements in the international cooperation and management of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

Regardless of the political and geopolitical changes on the ground and their consequences, for example in Iraq, there is a clear and urgent need for a co-ordinated international initiative to avoid the Tigris and Euphrates becoming dry riverbeds; and instead to turn them into a real blessing for the people and the lands of the region.¹⁶

Equally important, the role of the international community and the need to take the necessary steps to establish the Tigris and Euphrates Basin Initiative should not be neglected; which would, and should, provide the necessary mechanisms for quick measures being taken to avoid a catastrophe. Indeed, all three countries: Iraq, Syria and Turkey, should be encouraged, even coerced, into taking practical measures now. If these measures are not taken, the water crisis will worsen for

15. Jon Martin Trondalen , *Water and Peace for the People: Possible Solutions to Water Disputes in the Middle East*. UNESCO, Jan 1, 2008 - Technology & Engineering, 2008 - 245 pages.

16. *ibid*

the downstream countries, in particular Iraq, and may lead to dire consequences, even for countries outside the region.¹⁷

There is one outcome upon which everyone is agreed, namely the need to improve the water management of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in the near future. If this does not happen, the water resources will not be sufficient for the downstream countries to provide drinking water for all their people in terms of both quality and quantity, and the water resources will also be irreversibly degraded.

17. *ibid*

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