

Water and Turkish Security

Over the past several years, as regional resources have declined in availability, hydro-politics has grown to dominate national security and strategic planning among countries in the Middle East. For Turkey, water is rapidly emerging as one of the most significant elements of the country's contemporary security policy. This article examines the relationship of the water issue to Ankara's relationship with Damascus, the problem of Kurdish terrorism, and the evolving strategic partnership between Turkey and Israel.

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In 1991, while still Egyptian Foreign Minister, former United Nations Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali cautioned that the next war in the Middle East could be over water. Boutros-Ghali's warning may have been prophetic, for water is reshaping the political landscape of the contemporary Middle East.

This is no overstatement. According to a survey conducted by the World Bank in 1996, water availability in the Middle East was deemed to be the worst in the world, a mere fraction of Asian and African levels. These conditions have only worsened, as lingering drought conditions, population growth and resource mis-management have eroded regional resources.

The impact on Middle Eastern nations is ruinous. Syria's deepening water woes, for example, already substantially affect that country's main source of revenue, its agricultural sector, and have forced Damascus to enact restrictive water rationing measures. In spite of this, Syria's water situation is expected to worsen, since at its current rate of growth the Syrian population is expected to double the country's demand for water in less than two decades. Jordan faces a similar situation. Fed only by underground sources and the Jordan River, Amman is experiencing an escalating water deficit – one expected to reach 250 million cubic meters, nearly 1/3rd of current annual consumption, by the end of the decade. Even Israel, which has long viewed water as a cardinal element of its national security, faces hydrological crisis. Expanding demand, domestic mismanagement and mounting international commitments have stretched the

country's National Water System to its limit, leading officials to warn of an imminent catastrophe.

Not surprisingly, however, the region's turbulent power politics have impeded any sort of consensus over these dwindling resources. The vast majority of regional agreements, constructed as bilateral diplomatic ententes, fail to address the rights of neighboring countries or the growing needs brought about by social and environmental changes. Those that do, only do so abstractly or implicitly. As a result, hydro-politics now looms large in the strategic calculations of countries in the region, and has emerged as a distinct element of Mideast national security and foreign policy planning.

For Turkey, water represents one of the most important, though least explored, items on the country's contemporary security agenda. Geographically situated on the headwaters of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers and enjoying substantial annual rainfall, Turkey is far and away the region's dominant hydrological power. This position has inextricably linked water to several important elements of Ankara's Mideast policy – its troubled relationship with Damascus, the problem of Kurdish terrorism, and the evolving strategic relationship with Israel.

The Iraq-Syria equation

Water has been the primary source of tension between Ankara and Damascus since the late 1970s, when commencement of the ambitious Southeast Anatolia development project (the *Guneydogu Anadolu Projesi*, or GAP) shifted the balance of the power

equation among Turkey and her neighbors. Through its extensive manipulation of the Euphrates, GAP has provided Turkey with broad control over regional resources, making it capable of influencing Syrian, as well as Iraqi, water supplies. Despite repeated efforts to allay Syrian concerns (most notably a 1987 Protocol in which Ankara committed to ensuring an average flow of 500cm/sec from the Euphrates), progress on GAP has increasingly underscored Syria's susceptibility to Turkish water control. The clearest example of this occurred in January of 1990, when Turkey's temporary diversion of the Euphrates for agricultural purposes left Syria almost wholly without water.

This vulnerability prompted a number of notable developments in Syrian foreign policy. Militarily, Damascus assumed the role of chief broker for the radical Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), using it as a proxy through which to disrupt and destabilize Turkey's Anatolia region. The overt linkage between the group's guerrilla activities and the water issue was underscored in the 1987 Protocol, under which Damascus pledged to curb its support for the PKK in return for Turkish water guarantees. But despite this commitment – and the PKK's subsequent relocation to Lebanon's Bek'aa valley – Syria remained an active sponsor of the terrorist group throughout the 1990s, using its activities as a tool to impede Turkey's hydrological development. Syria's sponsorship of the organization finally fomented a major crisis in October 1998, when the Turkish parliament issued an ultimatum to Damascus, calling for it to curb its support for terrorism or “face the consequences.” Under this intense pressure, the Assad regime capitulated, signing the so-called Adana memorandum and forswearing support for the PKK.

Continued perceptions of vulnerability also prompted Damascus to initiate a series of diplomatic measures aimed at diminishing Turkish hydrological power. In 1996, Syria made an unsuccessful diplomatic bid to acquire Turkish water as a precondition for negotiations with Israel. Damascus repeated this move in the year 2000 round of Israeli-Syrian negotiations; in a bold but failed overture, the Assad regime proposed to compensate Israel with Turkish water for any loss of resources from the Golan Heights – a move that would have simultaneously lessened Turkish power and bound Ankara to Israeli-Syrian agreements.

Finally, water has served as a central factor behind Syria's deepening strategic coordination with its historic rival, Iraq. In a dramatic break from their longstanding regional competition, in 1990 the two Ba'athist regimes signed the Agreement on the Sharing of the Euphrates, which was primarily intended to counter their common vulnerability to Turkish water control. Since then, despite a temporary rift during the early 1990s (the result of Syria's participation in the U.S.-led Gulf War coalition), Damascus and Baghdad have grown consistently closer in joint opposition to Turkish water power. In February 2000, common concern over Ankara led the two countries to reestablish formal diplomatic ties for the first time in over a decade. And since the ascension of Bashar Assad to the Syrian presidency in July of 2000, movements toward reconciliation have accelerated, evidenced by a spate of high-level diplomatic contacts and Iraqi visits to Damascus.

For Damascus, this tilt is the logical end result of a series of unsuccessful measures designed to dislodge Turkish control over the Euphrates. Baghdad, for its part, has embraced the idea of a strategic alignment directed against Turkey's superior hydrological position in the region. With water from the Tigris and Euphrates representing some 95-98 percent of Iraqi industrial/agricultural needs (and close to 85 percent of domestic consumption), the Iraqi government is both acutely aware of Ankara's hold on its domestic water situation and eager to eliminate Turkey's leverage.

Both countries are now in the process of making this goal a reality. Since late 2001, Syria and Iraq have commenced joint diplomatic efforts to reopen long-dormant discussions with Turkey regarding the water equation between the three countries. And they appear to be succeeding. Over the past year, in response to mounting diplomatic pressure, the Turkish government has qualified its longstanding policy of sovereign hydrological control and indicated a willingness to reopen long-dormant discussions with Syria and Iraq over the water equation among the three countries.

The Turkish-Israeli entente

Water has also emerged as central element in the evolving strategic dialogue between Ankara and Jerusalem. For Israel, control over water has long been a cardinal security concern, contributing to the outbreak of the 1967 Six Day War and playing a major role in the country's decision to establish a security zone in Southern Lebanon in the early 1980s. Its importance to the country's national security doctrine was clearly articulated by the Israeli Ministry of Agriculture's 1990 declaration that "[i]t is difficult to conceive

of any political solution consistent with Israel's survival that does not involve complete continued Israeli control of... water and sewage systems.”

Not surprisingly, therefore, hydrological cooperation quickly emerged as an important element of the Jewish State's dialogue with Turkey following the initiation of political contacts in the mid-1990s. In July of 1999, as part of the growing political warmth between Ankara and Jerusalem, then-Turkish President Süleyman Demirel made a landmark offer to supply Israel with water from the Manavgat River. The subsequent memorandum signed between the two countries codified Turkey's commitment to provide Israel with 50 million cubic meters of water – equivalent to 2.5% of Israel's annual water requirements – per year.

Nevertheless, a final accord on water cooperation remained elusive. Israeli fears of dependence on extraneous water sources, and Jerusalem's serious misreading of the significance attached by Ankara to the water issue, served to stall hydrological negotiations between the two countries, with dramatic results. Over a six-month time period in 2000, Israel lost upwards of \$5 billion in defense contracts with Turkey – including tenders for advanced attack helicopters and a lucrative \$1 billion tank modernization and upgrade program – in a clear manifestation of Turkish displeasure over the stalled hydrological talks between the two countries. As late as the fall of 2001, Israeli delays were prompting Turkish officials to threaten the suspension of additional weapons projects between the two countries.

Since then, Ankara and Jerusalem appear to have reached a tentative accord on the water issue. In October 2002, the two countries formally concluded a 20-year agreement under which Israel committed to purchasing from Turkey 50 million cubic meters of water annually. Nevertheless, implementation of the agreement is still pending, as the two countries remain divided on both the price of the water and its means of delivery.

The Challenge for Turkish Policy

For Turkey, the water issue is thus one of both crisis and opportunity. The tactical alliance becoming visible between Damascus and Baghdad is, quite clearly, a challenge to Turkey's hydrological position in the region, as is Syria's continued involvement with the PKK, now known as KADEK. The level of real commitment in Damascus to the 1998 Adana memorandum is a matter of open debate in Turkish national security circles, and officials in Ankara cannot, therefore, rule out the possibility that some future array of circumstances (such as additional GAP development or a further deterioration of Syria's internal hydrological situation) might again make the extremist group an instrument that Syria would attempt to use to blunt Turkish water power.

Turkey's future relations with Israel are also likely to be profoundly defined by the water issue. As Turkish officials make clear, hydrological cooperation is seen in Ankara as a test of Israel's reciprocity in the larger strategic relationship between the two countries. As such, Turkey will continue to look upon the water issue as a barometer of Jerusalem's commitment to strategic ties. Recent movements toward a durable hydrological relationship are undoubtedly a positive development. However, should this relationship

flounder or be handled improperly by the Israeli government, the resulting discord could have a chilling effect on the overall tenor of the Turkish-Israeli strategic dialogue.

Conversely, lasting accord on the water issue, and Jerusalem's recognition of the strategic value placed by Ankara on hydrological cooperation, is likely to spur a revitalization of ties.

In fact, such an agreement could open new vistas for strategic cooperation between Israel and Turkey. Since extensive regional water planning requires commerce and technology stretching across borders, it also requires a political-military structure capable of ensuring its safety and security – a traditional alliance able to deter hostile regimes. Clearly, the Turkish-Israeli strategic entente fits this bill, and an expansion of the strategic dialogue between the two countries could create a defensive shield for regional resources.

This type of alignment, in turn, could lay the groundwork for further regional water development. Lebanon, for example, has the capacity to become a significant regional water producer. With some nine billion cubic meters of rainfall annually, large surface water supplies and additional resources from the Hasbani, Litani and Orontes rivers, Lebanon could potentially be harnessed to meet regional needs. What's more, Lebanese officials have intimated that they are both willing and able to have their country serve as a regional water source. A pro-Western pivot, one capable of loosening Damascus' grip over Beirut, could eventually allow Lebanon to regain its independence and develop into such a role.

Above all, in a region where water is rapidly becoming a strategic imperative, an alliance capable of guarding against hostile diplomacy or "water grabs" remains a prerequisite for meaningful cooperation. Such a grouping could serve as a framework for regional water security – one that, over time, might be expanded to include Jordan and other emerging pro-Western states as well.

Furthermore, with the proper political will, and the backing of the United States, such a grouping could bring real hydrological and political change to the region.

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