

A step forward for putting preventive water diplomacy into action in the Middle East

Hydropolitical Importance of Türkiye and Iraq Water Framework Agreement for the Future Water Challenge in the Middle East

Shifting paradigm to actionable transboundary water cooperation on the ground

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Abstract:

The article discusses the significance of the "Framework Agreement on Cooperation in the Water Field" between Türkiye and Iraq, signed in April 2024, as a critical step toward enhancing transboundary water diplomacy in the Middle East. This agreement promotes collaborative water management projects in the Tigris and Euphrates basins. It integrates water resources, security, energy, and trade within a holistic framework, offering a new paradigm for resolving regional water challenges amidst climate change and geopolitical instability.

The agreement reflects a shift towards preventive diplomacy, aiming to mitigate future water-related tensions while addressing Iraq's water infrastructure needs. The interconnectedness of water, oil, and regional security underscores the importance of this cooperative framework, with broader implications for regional stability and development.

Additionally, the Development Road Project, linking the Gulf to Türkiye via Iraq, is highlighted as a complementary initiative, fostering economic integration and offering alternative supply routes, further solidifying Iraq-Türkiye cooperation and enhancing Middle Eastern geopolitics.

It emphasizes the importance of moving beyond traditional water diplomacy that focuses solely on high-level negotiations, advocating for a model that includes various formal and informal arrangements, adaptive governance, and a focus on mutual benefits.

A key theme is the recognition of water diplomacy as a preventive measure that encompasses not only technical and political dimensions but also integrates economic, environmental, and security considerations. This multifaceted approach promotes collaboration and addresses shared challenges, particularly in the face of climate change and regional instability.

The article underscores that effective water diplomacy requires a continuum of cooperation, from information sharing to joint infrastructure management, ultimately contributing to long-term peace and security in the region.

The Türkiye-Iraq agreement, involving oil-for-water projects, exemplifies this shifting paradigm towards actionable transboundary water cooperation, paving the way for enhanced regional stability and integrated resource management.

Keywords: *Preventive Diplomacy, Regional Security, Economic Integration, Development Road Project, Holistic Framework, Middle East,*

1. Introduction

The "Framework Agreement on Cooperation in the Water Field between the Government of the Republic of Turkey and the Government of the Republic of Iraq", signed in Baghdad, the capital of Iraq, on April 22, was approved and published in the Official Gazette dated August 16, 2024.

This article examines the importance of a new water framework agreement on the relationships between Turkey and its downstream riparian state, Iraq. This article defines the emerging need for joint management of water resources in the region under the increasing effect of climate change and regional instability.

The water framework agreement between Türkiye and Iraq aims to increase cooperation in water resources and issues such as security, regional development projects, and trade development. Therefore, unlike other agreements, it allows both countries to implement the agreement. Iraq's provision of oil in exchange for Türkiye's water projects and water management support in the agreement will facilitate the implementation of the agreement.

This article also aims to analyze what kind of water diplomacy approach can help to enhance collaboration and prevent future water-related tensions.

Türkiye and Iraq's preventive and holistic water diplomacy approach can be a crucial step forward in water cooperation in the region and an exemplary hydropolitics application. However, there are also many difficulties arising from the region's geopolitics and the interests of non-regional powers in this region. However, despite all this, the Euphrates and Tigris basin countries should make a paradigm shift in cooperation, considering the risks posed by the effects of climate change.

2.A holistic approach to energy and water

The last agreement signed between Türkiye and Iraq must be addressed with a holistic approach that integrates trade, energy, security, and water problems. In addition, Iraq's oil supply in exchange for water projects can create a new paradigm for solving the Middle East Water equation. These new approaches can best help improve water cooperation between Iraq and Türkiye, improve Iraq's water infrastructure, and increase climate change resilience.

The water framework agreement between Türkiye and Iraq was signed together with trade, energy, and security agreements. In addition, the agreement has the flexibility to exchange. Türkiye will provide project support to the Iraqi administration on the good management and economical use of the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Türkiye will finance the projects with the oil it will purchase from Iraq. In other words; Water projects and water management support will be provided to Iraq in exchange for oil. This could create a new paradigm for solving the Middle East Water equation. These new approaches can best help develop water cooperation between Iraq and Türkiye and meet to develop Iraq's water infrastructure needs.

In other words, the holistic approach that integrates subjects such as trade, energy, security, and water agreements can best help develop relationships as well as implementation of the water framework agreements.

Among the agreements signed during Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's visit to Baghdad on April 22, was a 10-article water cooperation framework agreement on water.

During Türkiye's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's visit to Iraq in April, one of the key agreements reached was the formation of a Council of Ministers to manage the construction and operation of the Development Road.

The "Framework Agreement on Cooperation in the Water Field between the Government of the Republic of Türkiye and the Government of the Republic of Iraq", signed in Baghdad, the capital of Iraq, on April 22, was approved and published in the Official Gazette dated August 16, 2024.

Accordingly, it was decided to carry out joint projects on infrastructure, sustainable use of the environment, and water resources and infrastructure.



2.1.Security, Water, and Oil Interrelation

In this visit water, oil, and regional security issues were topping in agenda. Türkiye has operated from several dozen military bases in northern Iraq against the PKK. Its military operations, which sometimes take place deep into Iraqi territory, have regularly strained bilateral ties, while Ankara has sought out increased cooperation from Baghdad in its fight against the PKK.

Iraqi side declared that bilateral security coordination" would meet the needs of both Iraq and Türkiye. Apart from security, another major contentious point was water and sharing of the precious resources.

Baghdad has been highly critical of Turkish upstream dams on their shared Tigris and Euphrates rivers, saying the reduced flow has worsened water scarcity in Iraq. President Erdogan said the water issue would be "one of the most important points" of his visit following "requests" made by Iraq. "We will make an effort to resolve them. That is also their wish," he said.

3.The Water Framework Agreement

Iraq and Türkiye have signed a 10-year "framework agreement" to improve water management in the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The agreement includes collaborative projects to enhance water management and exchange expertise in modern irrigation systems and techniques (1).

A statement from the Iraqi Prime Minister said the ten-year agreement aims to establish joint and fair management of water resources, providing benefits to both Iraqi citizens and Türkiye. It adds that both parties recognize the importance of preventing worsening water issues and ensuring Iraq's water share(1).

Sudani hoped this would mean "joint and equitable management of water resources" from the two rivers. "It is in no one's interest for the situation to worsen regarding water and Iraq's quota," Sudani said. President Erdogan said that both Türkiye and Iraq were "negatively affected by the climate crisis". "The efficient use of water and avoiding waste is as important as the amount of water," he said.

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The issues agreed upon by Türkiye and Iraq in the Decision Concerning the Approval of the Framework Agreement on Cooperation in the Water Field between the Government of the Republic of Türkiye and the Government of the Republic of Iraq (Decision Number: 8836) are as follows:

- Turkish companies specialize in infrastructure, environment, and water protection, sustainable and effective use of water resources, water desalination projects, flood and drought protection, irrigation and sewage networks, wastewater treatment and collection, purification, and reuse of industrial wastewater, by the Republic of Iraq Participation in the tender processes to be announced upon invitation.
- There will be cooperation in the field of implementation of joint projects on the development of sustainable water management in the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and their best use in various fields such as agriculture, industry, municipal, and drinking water in Iraq.
- Expertise projects will be implemented in Iraq on the construction of water infrastructure and collection systems, dam safety, and improvement of existing dams.
- Projects will be financed in the most appropriate way to be agreed upon. The financing of each project will be met through a system based on Türkiye's oil purchases from Iraq unless otherwise agreed by the parties.

"The Development Road" project.



Figure 1. Route of the Development Road Project.

This is a road and rail corridor that would stretch 1,200 kilometers (745 miles), aiming by 2030 to link the Gulf with Türkiye via Iraq (Fig.1).

The Development Road Ministers' Summit in Istanbul on August 29 marked a pivotal moment in the advancement of the Türkiye-Iraq Development Road Project, highlighting critical considerations in its implementation(17).

Four ministers representing Iraq, Türkiye, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar signed a memorandum of understanding on the \$17-billion project. It said the project "aims to stimulate economic growth and enhance regional and international cooperation through economic integration".

During a press conference with his Iraqi counterpart, Razzaq Muhibis Al-Saadawi, Turkish Minister of Transport and Infrastructure, Abdulkadir Uraloglu, underscored the project's significance—not only as a viable alternative to global supply chains but also as a key initiative for integrating with other **connectivity projects and fostering regional prosperity** (17).

The Development Road Project is a highway and railway transportation project that starts from the Persian Gulf, traverses Iraq from south to north, and reaches the Turkish border. With the reinforcement of pipelines in the future, it could offer an alternative route to the Red Sea-Suez route to transport Gulf oil to Europe. It also provides a new route for those, from China, and India to Japan who want to transport their other products, not just oil, to Europe and the Caucasus via Türkiye and Iraq. This interest extends particularly to Iraq and the Gulf countries. Hence, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar are also interested investors in the project(1).

Such developments could potentially change the Middle East equation currently trapped in the conflict between Israel and Iran.

The project will change the geopolitics of the Gulf countries and will also be very beneficial for Jordan, Syria, and Türkiye. It would create benefits and economic opportunities even for Iraqi armed groups that could attract their support. For all these reasons, former Iraqi Minister

of Transport Nasser Hussein Bandar Shibli believes that the implementation of this project will bring more security and stability to Iraq. Because the countries benefiting from the project will work to ensure the security of the project in question.

This route, which starts from Basra, will enter Türkiye from the contact point of Iraq, Türkiye, and Syria after passing through the important cities of Iraq and continue to Europe from Mersin Port.

3.1.Lost oil revenues

Iraqi oil exports are another point of tension between the two countries, with a major pipeline shut for more than a year over legal disputes and technical issues.

Oil exports were previously independently sold by the Kurdistan region, without the approval or oversight of the central administration in Baghdad, through the Turkish port of Ceyhan.

The halted oil sales represent more than \$14 billion in lost revenues for Iraq, according to an estimate by the Association of the Petroleum Industry of the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government which represents international oil companies operating in the region.

3.2.Oil supply cooperation in return for water project support

Oil supply and water project support cooperation between Iraq and Türkiye will be a mutually beneficial step forward in the region.

Oil supply cooperation in return for water project support is an intriguing concept that highlights the interdependence of natural resources and the strategic partnerships that can form around them. This arrangement could be a win-win for countries or regions facing specific resource challenges—oil-rich nations needing water solutions and water-rich but energy-scarce regions seeking fuel security.

Key Benefits:

1. **Resource Optimization:** Oil-rich countries, often facing water scarcity issues, can leverage their energy assets in exchange for access to water technology, infrastructure, or direct water supplies. This exchange optimizes the use of both resources, aligning each party's strengths and needs.
2. **Economic Diversification:** For oil-dependent economies, engaging in water-related projects can help diversify economic activities, promoting stability and sustainability in the long term.
3. **Environmental and Social Impact:** By investing in water projects, oil-producing nations can improve water access for their populations, enhancing quality of life, supporting agriculture, and mitigating the impacts of water scarcity exacerbated by climate change.
4. **Strategic Alliances:** This kind of cooperation fosters stronger political and economic ties, enhancing regional stability and mutual trust between participating countries.

Potential Challenges:

1. **Geopolitical Risks:** Political instability or leadership changes could disrupt agreements, impacting the supply of oil or water.

2. Resource Management Conflicts: Differences in management styles or priorities could lead to disputes over project implementation, requiring clear agreements and oversight.

This mutually beneficial arrangement aligns the goals of energy and water security, emphasizing the value of strategic cooperation over competition. It represents a forward-looking approach to addressing some of the most pressing resource challenges of the 21st century.



Factors explaining increased cooperation

Several factors can explain this increased cooperation on water management and other issues. These can be divided into two categories: increasing uncertainty in political climate and climate change effects in the region.

Increasing climate change effects over river basin, increasing regional instability, uncertainty internal changes, external factors of influence, and changes in the regional context.

The first range of factors corresponds to political uncertainty and seems to be the last-longing factor in the region. The second range of factors corresponds to climate change effects on water resources in the region. Considering the projected impacts of climate change and worsening environmental degradation in the basin, it is critical to find solutions to mitigate these effects in a region where livelihoods rely heavily on agriculture for both neighboring countries.

Apart from a water framework agreement, the general improvement of the political climate between Türkiye and Iraq and the **cooperation on non-water issues** at the same time **have been concrete steps forward** to achieve a win-win situation.

However, since the Middle East is a geography of shifting sands, the implementation of agreements has been difficult. For instance; in 2003, Syria and Türkiye signed a trade agreement. However, this agreement could not be implemented due to the internal turmoil in Syria. Actions to achieve such “mutually beneficial approach and win-win” situations have so far been limited, although the potential is promising: for example, Türkiye could store water for Iraq in its territory where evaporation losses are low, while Iraq could offer Türkiye cheap energy in exchange (18). This approach could be the next phase of water projects and water management support provided to Iraq in exchange for oil as indicated in the last agreement.

However, still, a sustainable political will and a strong paradigm shift are required for progress on water cooperation in the region. This paradigm shift must be based on a mutually beneficial

approach. However, continuing this approach requires not only a water framework agreement but also cooperation in many areas such as trade and development projects.

4. Why water management cooperation is vital!

Considering the importance of agriculture for Türkiye, Syria, and Iraq, the degradation of soils and waters would put more pressure on the livelihoods of local populations (7).

In addition to these environmental impacts, climate change could heighten the risks faced by the Euphrates and Tigris (ET) basin's population. By the mid-21st century, warmer temperatures are projected across the basin – in the southern part of the basin and east of the Tigris River for example, temperatures could rise by up to 1.2°C (8). Rainfall levels are projected to decline by as much as 40mm per year during the same period in the northern part of the basin and the border area between Iraq and Iran – areas that are important for the generation of river discharge (8). Indeed, runoff in the upper Tigris River basin is projected to decline by 30% after 2040, which will significantly influence downstream water availability (9).

Considering the projected impacts of climate change and worsening environmental degradation in the basin, it is critical to find solutions to mitigate these effects in a region where livelihoods rely heavily on agriculture. While some observers argue that the risk of inter-state war over the ET basin remains low (7), the lack of progress in cross-border water cooperation could lead to “progressively growing fragility”, especially in Iraq and Syria (8).

5. Shifting paradigm to actionable transboundary water cooperation on the ground

It is vital to work flexibly with existing institutional, diplomatic, and political opportunities and constraints, as well as in its emphasis on strengthening water diplomacy on the base of a mutually beneficial approach.

A requirement for flexibility might be an approach to water governance that is not confined to questions around allocation and a focus on water volumes but maintains an open attitude to a wide range of possible benefit-sharing opportunities (social, economic, environmental, and security benefits).

Supporting collaborative research and the development of a joint vision around benefit sharing. Could be a trigger To avoid scenarios in which interventions in water are seen as a zero-sum game, potentially leading to conflict, it is possible to support multidisciplinary visioning processes that cut across boundaries generate win-win outcomes, and remove data and information gaps that may hinder cooperation.

The implementation of benefit-sharing arrangements as well as mutually beneficial approaches require effective institutions in transboundary basins to enable sustainable management of water resources and contribute to long-term security and peace. Transboundary cooperation on water could be conceived as a continuum ranging from limited levels of coordination – involving for instance information sharing – on the one hand, to the joint ownership and management of infrastructure investments on the other hand. It is argued that states tend to cooperate when the net benefits of cooperation are perceived to be greater than the net benefits of non-cooperation, and when the distribution of these net benefits is perceived to be fair (11).

Diplomacy is required to achieve such shared benefits. A ‘traditional’ approach to water diplomacy involves a strategy that is narrowly focused on high-level dialogue between

governments – such as at the Ministerial level or between Departments of Foreign Affairs to put a formal agreement (treaty) in place.

In general, these traditional approach-based agreements don't work on the ground. Many different kinds of agreements are needed to ensure mutually beneficial and effective water governance. This should include a wide variety of formal and informal arrangements and cooperation in different sectors.

5.1. Interrelation effect between riparian states to water diplomacy

There is no fixed-transboundary water agreement to implement across the world. The agreements to be implemented successfully should be flexible enough and consider many different social, economic, and political issues to cooperate across the different regions and river basins.

Therefore in one region, water diplomacy may start with the strengthening of water information systems, and water management systems in another it may start with capacity building on international water law or other technical issues.

Water diplomacy must be adaptable to changing conditions, such as climate change and population growth. A multi-cooperative approach enhances resilience by integrating flexible strategies that can respond to new challenges and opportunities.

The development of cooperation in economic and security areas between riparian states significantly contributes to the development of water diplomacy by creating a conducive environment for the collaborative management of shared water resources. Economic ties enhance interdependence and mutual benefits, making peaceful cooperation more attractive, while security cooperation stabilizes relationships and builds trust. Together, these forms of cooperation create a powerful foundation for effective water diplomacy, turning potential water conflicts into opportunities for sustainable development and regional stability.

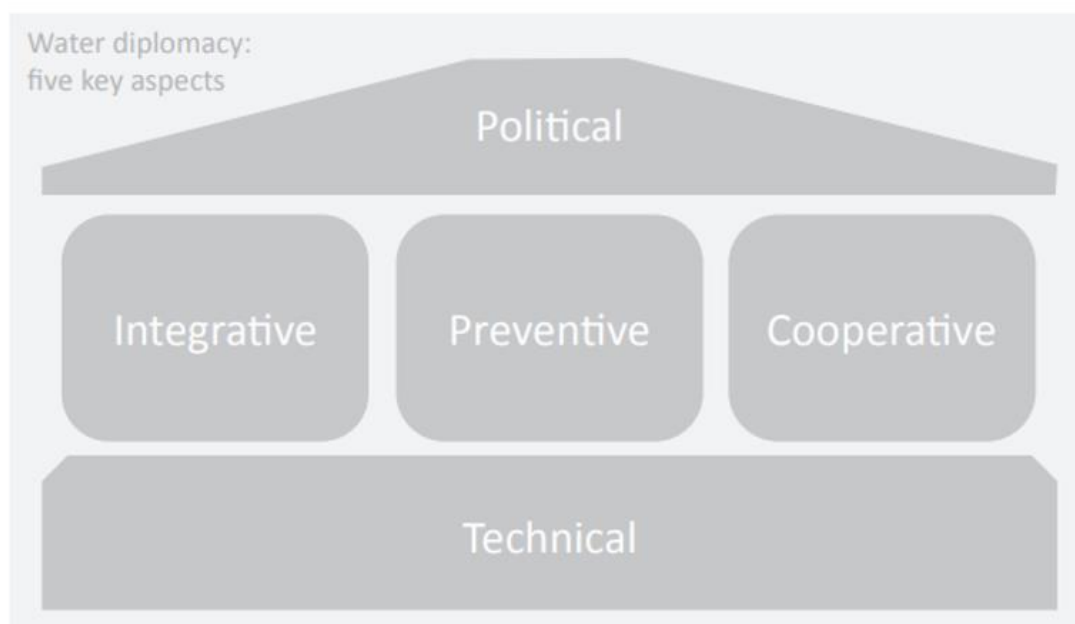


Figure 2. The five water diplomacy aspects and their main relations (12).

5.2.Preventive Water Diplomacy

Water diplomacy is an emerging concept to address the political nature of transboundary cooperation and to link water with broader regional cooperation, geopolitics, and foreign policy.

Out of the five aspects, the Political and Technical aspects cross-cut the entire concept: while the Technical aspect emphasizes the role of water and related knowledge production processes as a subject of diplomacy, the Political aspect emphasizes the inherently political nature of the interaction between the water diplomacy actors. The three other aspects –Integrative, Preventive, and Cooperative– can then be seen as characterizations of the key motivations and mechanisms of water diplomacy (Fig. 2). In practice, the five aspects are typically all present in water diplomacy contexts, but different emphases that may also change over time(12).

The Water Diplomacy Paths approach aims to provide a way to analyze a given water diplomacy context and to both motivate and recognize possible water diplomacy actions. We see that the strength of the approach is its step-wise structure as well as simultaneous consideration of water-related and political tensions and related preventive and mitigating water diplomacy actions.

While the water diplomacy actions identified as part of the approach are likely to cover all five aspects, we see that the approach is helpful to address particularly **Political and Preventive aspects**.

The “Preventive” aspect views water diplomacy as an approach for peace mediation as well as conflict prevention and mitigation. In this way, the aspect includes both preventive (in terms of preventing future conflicts) and restorative elements (in terms of reconciliation and reduction of existing tensions with an adaptive water management approach).

Because the other three aspects (Integrative, Cooperative, Technical) are often well covered already by existing transboundary water cooperation activities that water diplomacy actions seek to complement and the current water diplomacy activities could make better use of the experience that peace mediation and conflict resolution literature provides on preventive diplomacy actions.

A large number of research papers primarily consider water as a form of preventive diplomacy, linking it to the promotion of regional stability and peace. Conflict prevention and peace mediation activities can thus create enabling conditions for water diplomacy and other types of preventive diplomacy, and vice versa: water diplomacy may enhance conflict prevention and peace mediation (14,15).

An innovative preventive water diplomacy needs to go therefore beyond the conventional approach for cooperation mechanisms between riparian states to help envision alternative future scenarios, moving beyond the potential present-day challenges long-term view is important also to realize and adapt to climate change effects that are likely to alter both the quantity and timing of the flows.

This, in turn, emphasizes the importance of systemic and adaptive approaches to understand the complexities included in such connections and the related actor networks as well as the dynamic, evolving nature of the resource flows and the actors’ relations. This dynamism

challenges the ways diplomacy is being practiced, emphasizing more diverse and adaptive forms of diplomatic actions.

Preventive diplomacy with a more adaptive water management approach for compensation for the changing flow conditions due to climate change will facilitate collaboration and a trust-building process. Preventive diplomacy aims to prevent and resolve tensions and conflicts through the use of diplomatic tools and different cooperation mechanisms as well as knowledge and experience in water resources management that can be seen in the Türkiye- Iraq water framework agreement.

The case results of Keskinen et al. article (12) emphasizes on, energy security and regional trade indicate that the approach's focus on potential water-related and political tensions and required actions can help to complement the more dominant and largely technical water cooperation activities with actions that consider also the broader aspects of regional cooperation and foreign policy.

5.3.The future-oriented water diplomacy and cooperation

The future orientation can also be seen to help contemplate the long-term developments in the region, putting present-day tensions into perspective and linking the actions to the future trajectories related to water scarcity and climate change. At the same time, the recognized actions do build largely on already existing cooperation activities, emphasizing the close connection that water diplomacy has with transboundary cooperation.

Water diplomacy offers several tools that complement nexus governance, including joint fact-finding, value creation, and collaborative adaptive management, together with a mutual gains approach.

6.Conclusions

The exploitation of transboundary water, energy, and food trade-offs can open economic opportunities in trade agreements and strategic development of future infrastructures in a transboundary context. Flexibility is also an important approach to transboundary water governance that is not confined to questions around allocation and a focus on water volumes but maintains an open attitude to a wide range of possible benefit-sharing opportunities (social, economic, environmental, and security benefits).

At any one time, there may be momentum toward the achievement of different benefits, and it is important to realize these broader processes for maximum effectiveness. (10).

Therefore the benefits from cooperation can be more significant than the benefits from water resources management alone, extending from water use to broader issues of economic cooperation, politics, and security, and facilitating trade-offs beyond the water sector. At the same time, the interaction can be considered as a means to build mutual understanding and trust between the parties both about shared waters and more broadly.

Mutually beneficial and practical implementation of transboundary water cooperation on the ground can build a confidence-building process to step further. This can lead to a win-win situation and facilitate sustainable water management.

Ultimately, water diplomacy aims to prevent and mitigate water-related tensions with the help of cooperative mechanisms and water- and diplomacy-related actions.

The water framework agreement signed between Türkiye and Iraq includes oil supply cooperation in return for water project support is an intriguing concept that highlights the interdependence of natural resources and the strategic partnerships that can form around them. In summary, this can be taken as an example of shifting paradigm to Actionable transboundary water cooperation on the ground.

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September. 26 2024