

How the Middle East Can Benefit from Türkiye's New Innovative Hydropolitics and Hydro Diplomacy

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Abstract

Climate governance in the Middle East will have a lasting impact on the region's political and economic future. At present, intensifying climate impacts and political instability are forcing governments to act with urgency. The way these countries manage climate action and water security will reshape state-society relations in the region. Climate governance in the Middle East will play a significant role in shaping the region's political stability and economic resilience as climate impacts intensify.

Innovative hydro diplomacy could also accelerate global cooperation. Win-win-based Hydro Diplomacy can bring new opportunities and secure long-term cooperation.

This paper argues that a new, innovative hydropolitics and hydrodiplomacy approach that uses a water-oil swap agreement may offer the best chance of achieving sustainable transboundary cooperation and regional development. Combining a regional development project with transboundary water cooperation can mobilize finance, manage social impacts, and maintain public trust.

Keywords: Middle East, Hydro diplomacy, Hydropolitics, Climate change,

1. Introduction

Türkiye's relations with its southern neighbors, Iraq and Syria, have long been hampered by the intensity of the conflict in the region and the influence of terrorist movements such as ISIS, the PKK, and the PYD-SDF. An exception to this period was the exceptional improvement in Türkiye-Syria relations in 2008, which lasted until the civil unrest in Syria began in 2011. Subsequently, Türkiye maintained relations with the Iraqi Central Government and the KRG at various levels, while relations with Syria were completely severed and resumed after the regime was overthrown by Ahmed Shara in December 2024. Towards the end of this period of civil war and turmoil, Türkiye signed a significant "Framework Agreement on Water Cooperation" with Iraq, one of its southern neighbors, in 2024. This agreement was not merely a technical

document on water management between the two countries; it heralded a new regional model integrating water, energy, and economic cooperation.

This agreement was shaped by the objectives of sustainable management of the Tigris-Euphrates basin, modernization of Iraq's water infrastructure, and integration of Türkiye's technical capacity into Iraqi projects. This agreement was followed by Türkiye's unilateral withdrawal from the 1973 Crude Oil Pipeline Agreement on July 21, 2025. This decision can be seen as a new beginning within the broader framework of the two countries' energy relations. The new draft energy agreement submitted by Türkiye to Iraq aims to elevate energy relations between the two countries to a multidimensional, strategic level.

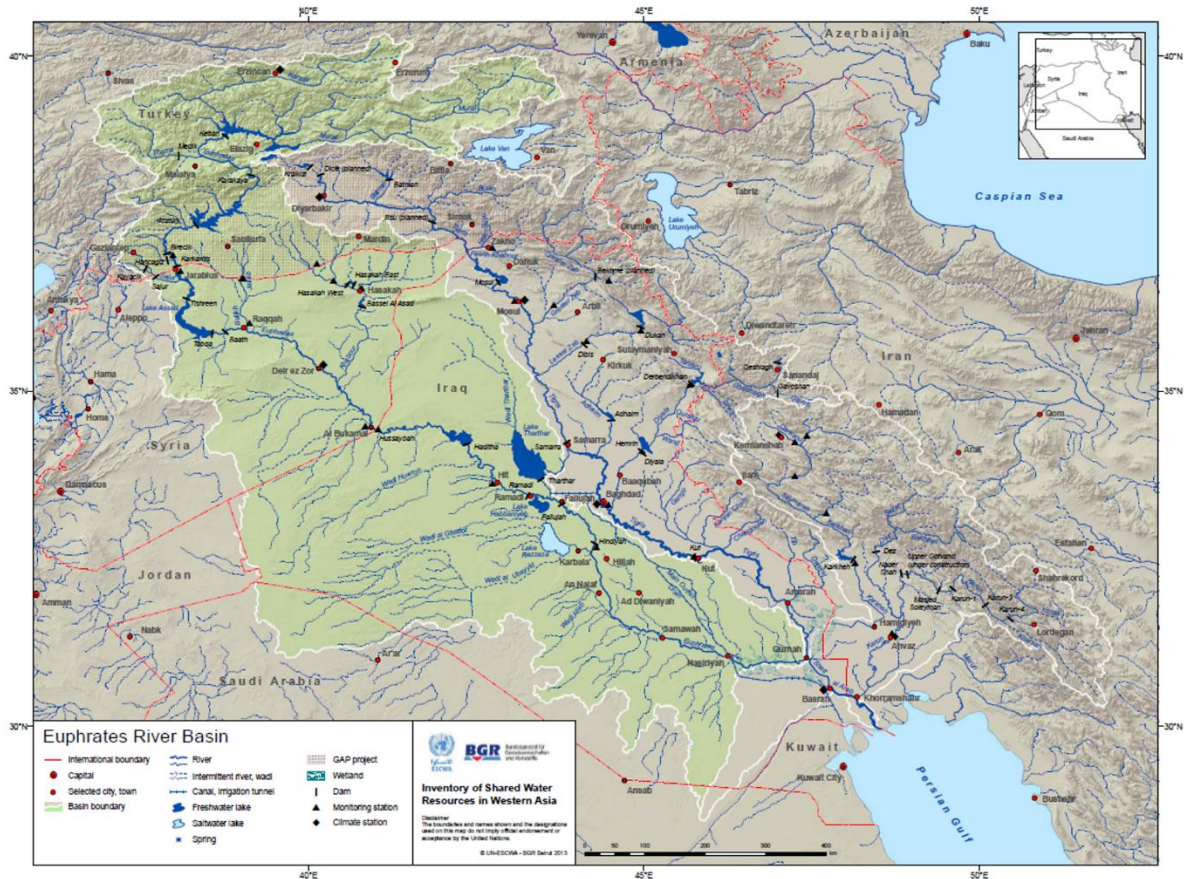
2. Rising effects of climate change

Rising temperatures and frequent droughts bode ill for the future of water cooperation in the region. An increase in global temperatures by two degrees is likely to cause severe droughts every five years in Syria and Iraq and every two years in Iran, according to the World Weather Attribution service. In Jordan, rainfall levels are predicted to decline by 17% by 2050. By 2030, the average per-capita supply of water across the Middle East and North Africa is expected to fall below basic human needs. In the absence of regional cooperation frameworks, riparian states may continue to develop and use their national water resources without accounting for climate change and drought, setting the stage for an unstable future.

3. Multi-Scale Innovative Hydro Diplomacy

Water diplomacy is often described in terms of treaties, negotiations, or river basin organisations. These formal processes are important, but they capture only part of the picture. The Handbook emphasizes that water diplomacy must be understood through multiple, overlapping layers. The first of these is transnational (*transboundary*) *dynamics*, where upstream–downstream realities and political relationships shape flows and expectations. The second is *national priorities*, where decisions about infrastructure, agriculture, energy, and economic development influence basin and regional outcomes. The third is basin-level *institutions*, which provide continuity and help maintain cooperation even in periods of political uncertainty. And the fourth is *community-level systems*, which manage water on the ground and form the social foundation for effective agreements.

This multi-scale view is particularly relevant in regions where climate stress, demographic changes, and shifting political landscapes are placing additional pressure on shared resources. Each scale influences the others, and successful water diplomacy depends on recognising and navigating these interconnections.



4.New hydropolitics shaping regional cooperation

Türkiye's new, innovative hydropolitics and multi-scale diplomacy approach in the Euphrates–Tigris basin is an important step towards strengthening cooperation.

National development priorities can shape regional water relations, and diplomacy evolves alongside these priorities. For instance, as an upstream country with extensive investments in hydropower, irrigation, and regional development, Türkiye has long influenced downstream water availability.

Over time, Türkiye's approach has shifted from a primarily nationally focused development strategy to one that increasingly emphasizes collaboration, benefit-sharing, and technical engagement. This evolution reflects changing regional dynamics, growing recognition of shared vulnerabilities, and the need for sustainable long-term management of the basin.

Recent cooperation agreements between Türkiye and Iraq illustrate this shift. The two countries have established mechanisms to support major water-related infrastructure projects in Iraq, including water-harvesting structures, irrigation system upgrades, and land management initiatives. These agreements are supported by joint financing arrangements linked to long-term economic partnerships. These developments

highlight a key principle that national strategies and regional diplomacy are deeply connected. Investments, financing, and technical cooperation can become tools of diplomacy, reinforcing shared interests and helping translate political commitments into practical outcomes. As climate pressures intensify across the Euphrates–Tigris system, such collaborative approaches are likely to become even more important.

5. Nexus approach for benefit sharing

A water–energy–food/land nexus approach is necessary for the region. Negotiations and operational discussions in this context are inherently complex, multi-layered, and subject to long timelines. Stakeholders may exhibit unexpected attitudes, sometimes stemming from misinterpretations, limited technical knowledge, or historical sensitivities. Therefore, political will and unity of effort are essential. Negotiations should be based on evidence-based persuasion rather than rhetoric to build understanding, trust, and alignment over time. The region needs transboundary water management cooperation that comprehensively considers the nexus of water, energy, food, and environmental security. Therefore, instead of the traditional approach that focuses on water sharing within a single sector, an innovative Nexus approach is needed to ensure the overall security and sustainability of all resources.

The water and energy-related cooperation approach between Türkiye and Iraq should be shaped not only by releasing more water but also by establishing a broader vision encompassing the water-energy-food-environment nexus, sustainable water management, joint projects, water efficiency, technological cooperation, and energy and investment dimensions. This initiative has the potential to shift the classic model of water diplomacy from "resource sharing" to "resource management + energy partnership."

6. A new hydro diplomacy framework

It is time to establish a new hydro diplomacy framework in the region. Transboundary water negotiations should focus on benefit-sharing, linking water with energy, food, and economic cooperation—rather than on volumetric allocation alone. **A paradigm shift from reactive to strategic diplomacy is not only necessary but also vital for some regions, such as the Middle East.**

Strategic diplomacy should adopt a broader approach to develop a regionally beneficial project and to promote WEF Nexus–based agreements that create durable cooperation incentives.

A new and innovative hydro diplomacy also requires strengthening Track Two Water Diplomacy involving academia and policy networks. Therefore, academia and policy networks should be more interrelated to anticipate both rational and irrational

stakeholder responses. Because every stakeholder interaction is an opportunity to strengthen credibility, reduce asymmetries, and secure long-term cooperation.

7.Iraq-Türkiye Water Diplomacy

The management of transboundary waters should be viewed not only as a technical but also as a geopolitical issue in Iraq-Türkiye relations. The sharing of water resources in Iraq concerns energy, food, environmental security, socio-economic development, and social welfare. In southern Iraq, especially around Basra, declining river flows have led to higher salinity, reduced agricultural yields, and economic and social tensions among the local population. Therefore, despite several fundamental shortcomings, water diplomacy has persisted in Iraq-Türkiye relations and has recently made significant progress. The declining flow regime in the Tigris-Euphrates Basin creates the risk of a "slow-onset crisis," increasing the need for enhanced diplomatic cooperation.

Iraq has been experiencing extreme droughts in recent years and has occasionally requested additional water releases from Türkiye. Since 2009, Iraq has repeatedly requested increased water releases from Türkiye. On July 1, 2025, following the visit of Iraqi Parliament Speaker Mahmoud Mashhadani to Ankara, Türkiye began releasing 420 cubic meters of water per second from the Tigris River. Türkiye meets Iraq's additional water demands following droughts. This demonstrates the tangible results of water diplomacy between the two countries. However, the asymmetry between Türkiye's upstream location and hydropower investments, and Iraq's dependence on water, is a key determinant in shaping the diplomatic mechanism.

8.Conclusions

Water management problems in the region, which will increase due to climate change, will not only be an environmental issue but will also impact regional peace and stability through their political, economic, and social dimensions.

The Türkiye-Iraq Framework Agreement on Water and Energy Cooperation (2024) can be considered a significant step toward regional hydropolitical transformation, aligned with the "oil-water cooperation" model. However, the region's geopolitical landscape is not well-suited to the development of mutual trust and interdependence among countries, nor to the establishment of hydropolitical initiatives. The speed and effectiveness of the agreements made within this scope depend on numerous regional and international factors. Issues such as differences in institutional capacity and the lack of coordination between the two countries, volatility in oil revenues, and the impacts of climate change can also be considered risks and challenges to progress.

In summary, climate change and other geopolitical risks are increasing in the Middle East. Therefore, riparian states must shift from short-term, zero-sum classical hydro-

politics to regional cooperation with a broader vision. Track two diplomacy can play a very effective role in this regard. Civil society, academia, and experts should move away from classical crisis analyses and towards an innovative vision of cooperation to foster regional cooperation. Turkey's New Innovative Hydropolitics and Hydro Diplomacy is an initiative aimed at increasing regional cooperation. Therefore, it should be evaluated by the countries of the region, taking into account the growing risks of climate change and geopolitics. The Middle East needs a more innovative, visionary, and collaborative approach to sustainable water management that takes into account past experiences.

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Biography



Dursun Yıldız C.E. (MSc.) is a hydropolitics specialist and Director of the Hydropolitics Academy Association located in Ankara-Türkiye.He is a civil engineer and used to be Deputy Director at State Hydraulic Works in Türkiye; completed a hydroinformatics post graduate course at the IHE in Delft, a Technical training program in USBR-USA, and a master's degree in Hydropolitics at the Hacettepe University-Türkiye. He has over 5 years of teaching experience in some Turkish Universities and now works as head of his own Hydro Energy & Strategy consulting company located in Ankara. He has published several international articles and 15 books. He received the Most Successful Researcher Award on International Water Issues from Turkish Agricultural Association in 2008 and from the Central Union of

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