

Scales of justice. Large dams and water rights in the Tigris–Euphrates basin

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Abstract

The paper explores the politics of scale associated with the top-down planning of large hydraulic infrastructures in the Tigris–Euphrates basin. Against the backdrop of a worsening water crisis and the lack of cooperation between riparian countries, dams and reservoirs across the transboundary river system are sites of contestation between competing claims over dwindling and disputed resources. Drawing on post-structuralist insights from human geography on the politics of scale and the literature on megaprojects, it is argued here that hydraulic infrastructures are materially and discursively implicated in the construction of waterscapes at different scales to sustain broader political imaginaries. Based on ethnographic fieldwork and with a focus on the autonomous Region of Kurdistan in Iraq, the analysis juxtaposes the narratives deployed by state- and non-state actors to support or counter the development of additional dams. While, on the one hand, the Kurdistan Regional Government portrays hydraulic infrastructures as a vital source of security and well-being within the overarching nationalist narrative of Kurdish self-determination, on the other hand, transnational civil society groups under the umbrella of the Save the Tigris and Iraqi Marshes Campaign have mobilized against the adverse impact of megaprojects and appealed to the common Mesopotamian heritage in order to de-escalate political tensions within the transboundary river basin. In both cases, hydraulic infrastructures provide a framework for political action to secure recognition of rights and assert the appropriate scale of governance. Furthermore, bottom-up resistance is accompanied by the promotion of a participatory and inclusive approach to shared waters. From this perspective, the spatial politics of megaprojects intersect with issues of identity, equity, and sustainability.

Keywords: hydro-politics, dams, politics of scale, Iraq, Mesopotamia

Capturing water, building the state. The techno-politics of hydraulic infrastructures

“Your most immediate educative sources are dumb, material, objective, inert, merely present. And yet they speak to you.” (Pasolini, 1987: 26)

If any rural society has a hydraulic or fluvial dimension that organizes people into communities of users (Mosse, 2008), past and recent scholarship has shown that throughout history, hydraulic infrastructures have served to channel, store, and distribute water flows as much as to inscribe power into engineered waterscapes. Since Wittfogel (1957) laid the widely criticized (yet provocative) hypothesis that large-scale irrigation schemes in arid and semi-arid environments support administrative

centralization and despotic rule, the relationship between water and politics has been studied from a variety of angles. One of the many streams of literature has focused on environmental histories linking water management and modern state formation.

For example, Jones describes how the Saudi quest for water “was, foremost, a political enterprise, one that served to secure political authority” (Jones, 2010: 5). Confronted with the daunting task of maintaining imperial rule over a sun-scorched land without having an extended support base to count on, Saudi leaders prioritized quenching the population’s thirst. In a riverless country where rainfall is extremely rare and evaporates as soon as it falls, and where fossil aquifers with a non-renewable capacity are the only source of freshwater, environmental planning established the material infrastructure of the Kingdom and bound its subjects to the ruling family. This echoes the grand modernization of Egypt through large-scale hydraulic engineering projects on the Nile, most notably the Aswan High Dam, which reorganized the river system as a field of political regulation for the sake of national development and economic growth. Mitchell deftly examines the politics of techno-science surrounding the damming of the river, which was designed to rearrange both natural and social environments in the mighty shade of the post-colonial state (Mitchell, 2002: 21). Taming the Nile’s raw force and greening the desert with numerous barrages and dikes along its banks created the territorial space of the national economy.

These examples highlight the “hydraulic mission” that political elites in the world’s most diverse geographic regions have pursued to capture and control water resources in the early stages of state-building (Molle et al., 2009). The domination over nature, achieved through the marvels of infrastructure development and the everyday practices of hydraulic bureaucracies, was meant to epitomize the strength of the state and cultivate its legitimacy. Water is a powerful medium for conveying political visions because its essential life-sustaining function imbues its materiality with high symbolic significance. The ambivalent iconography of water (as spring of life, element of transition and change, or force of destruction) can be found in all great religions; it also flows, with the same intensity and pervasiveness, into secular rituals, beliefs, and social norms. These normative, aesthetic, and affective qualities foster collective mobilization, for which the symbolic value of hydraulic infrastructures extends beyond the socioeconomic utility of water supply management and taps into broader imaginaries.

Not only in Saudi Arabia and Egypt did the machinery of the modern state rely on environmental transformation. Nature is continually being ordered by the nation-state because it “provides the most obvious and readily available material resource around which to construct national legends and modes of identification” (Whitehead et al., 2007: 10). The framing of “state nature” entails the violent extrication of fragments of the natural world to be used as representational resources and thus reify national communities via a dual process of centralization and territorialization, which historically “made nature an object of political struggle” (Whitehead et al., 2007: 7). Agricultural laws, scientific procedures, property rights, environmental statistics, and engineering infrastructures are just a few of the techniques and strategies used by the modern state to generate ecological knowledge on a national scale. Despite the fact that nature finds ways to defy these attempts, and human/non-human entanglements are far from being subordinated to human agency, it is true that nature is mostly experienced and governed in national terms.

The framing of water as a national asset has an immediate impact on the perception of hydraulic technologies. First and foremost, these actualize the territorial power of the state by embedding rule into the physical landscape of the homeland (Menga & Swyngedouw, 2018), representing the achievement of administrative capabilities and organizing the national community around the regulation of a primary good. Because water systems are designed to last for decades, they “conjure up notions of immobility, obduracy and resilience” (Obertreis et al., 2016: 172) that are figuratively transferred to the state itself. This is especially true for large dams¹. For better and for worse, “dams [are] unique in the scope and manner in which they altered the distribution of resources across space and time, among entire communities and ecosystems” (Mitchell, 2002: 21). Especially, in newly independent countries, dam building served a dual purpose: it strengthened state capacity while also acting as catalyst for national cohesion. Mohamud and Verhoeven show how the Al-Ingaz regime in Sudan used the Merowe Dam to “propagate a rekindled identity and worldview” (Mohamud & Verhoeven, 2016: 197). Several other studies have emphasized the importance of dams in nation-building efforts (Klingensmith, 2007; Menga, 2015; Shapiro, 2001; Swyngedouw, 1999; Worster, 1992).

¹ According to the International Commission on Large Dams, a large dam is defined as having a height of 15 meters or greater from lowest foundation to crest or between 5 and 15 meters impounding more than 3 million cubic meters.

The transformative reach of grandiose impoundment and diversion schemes extends beyond the dramatic change in riverine ecology. As they are typically at the center of the discursive strategies of political elites (Hussein et al., 2020), it is common for large dams to become contested sites of conflict. Water is not only a source of power. Hydraulic projects also have the potential to demolish regimes, undermine political legitimacy, and disempower social groups (Stahl, 2014). In transboundary basins, an international dimension is added because changes in the streamflow can easily cause disputes between riparian countries (Menga, 2016). As they swing between consolidation and contestation of authority, large dams are thus objects of intense political competition.

This paper explores the politics of scale associated with large dams in the Tigris–Euphrates basin. Dams and reservoirs across the river system are battlegrounds for competing claims to dwindling water resources. In the context of a worsening water crisis and long-standing lack of cooperation, it is argued that hydraulic infrastructures are involved in the technopolitical construction of waterscapes at various scales to uphold political imaginaries. Drawing on post-structuralist insights from human geography and the literature on megaprojects, large dams are understood as both material sites and discursive devices that can assert (or unsettle) geographies of power and criteria of collective identification in a fluvial system².

The study focuses on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), a predominantly Kurdish-populated enclave in northern Iraq that was recognized as an autonomous region with the adoption of the federal Constitution in 2005. The analysis shows how engineered waterscapes are being reworked at sub-state and supra-state levels. While the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) portrays dams as a vital source of national security within the larger narrative of self-determination, the Save the Tigris and Iraqi Marshes Campaign (hereafter STC) calls on the Mesopotamian heritage to oppose megaprojects and promote an inclusive approach to shared waters. Hydraulic infrastructures, in both cases, provide a framework for political action to secure rights and assert what is deemed to be the appropriate level of governance.

A scalar approach to dam building in the Tigris–Euphrates Basin

“And We send down water from the sky according to [due] measure and We cause it to soak in the soil; and We certainly are able to drain it off”

(The Qur’an, Surah al-Mu’minoon, 23:18)

Hydraulic infrastructures have been critical to the well-being of Mesopotamian societies since the earliest civilizations arose, nourished by the silt of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. From Mosul all the way down to the Shatt al-Arab, where the twin rivers meet before emptying into the Persian Gulf, the distribution of human settlements followed the bends of the two watercourses, which were organized in an extensive web of irrigation and drainage canals to enable crop cultivation in areas with little rainfall and were bordered by floodwalls to reduce damages from the seasonal inundations that used to sweep the basin (Husain, 2021). However, with the emergence of modern nation-states to fill the void left by the Ottoman collapse, the unity of the fluvial system was dismembered into national segments. Water bureaucracies were established in Ankara, Damascus, and Baghdad, which “allowed for the definition and penetration of state power into new spheres of social and political life” (Stahl, 2014: 1). Water technologies became a source of contention as well.

Like other types of megaprojects examined in this special issue, large water projects involve multiple levels of government, administrative structures, legal frameworks, and even different countries in the case of transboundary basins. Such a complexity, which necessitates a high degree of coordination across jurisdictions and sectors, can lead to conflict. Despite being lauded as national infrastructure, the benefits and drawbacks of water supply systems are unevenly distributed, both geographically and among users. As a result, changes in the ecology of a river system can exacerbate or create new political divisions. Furthermore, the clash of socio-technical imaginaries can serve as a sounding board for disagreements over economic interests, identities, and ultimately power.

These considerations correct the idea of static and place-bound infrastructure because the spatial and temporal reach of hydraulic projects is not associated with a single event or a one-site practice (Bichsel, 2016). Mitchell recalls that the scientific knowledge and expertise required to construct what

² This understanding fits the definition of technopolitical proposed by Hect as the “strategic practice of designing or using technology to constitute, embody, or enact political goals” (Hecht, 1998: 15).

would become the world's largest embankment dam were not simply applied according to a ready-made blueprint but were given shape during construction by absorbing local knowledge and solving the many problems encountered along the way. As with more recent engineering feats such as the Three Gorges Dam or the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, some of the negative consequences of large water schemes cannot be predicted in advance. While human displacement is immediate and visible, changes in the riverine ecosystem occur at a much slower and incremental pace. For one thing, the full impoundment of a dam can take months or years. As negotiations on water allocations revolve around volumetric estimates of the river outflow after the filling of the reservoir, the halo of uncertainty that surrounds the planning and construction of engineered waterscapes has a destabilizing effect on the parties involved, who are forced to make decisions in a changeable context of imperfect information.

Furthermore, the dam's life cycle differs from that of the political elites who initiated the project. Although water is transient, technologies of water control are more permanent and "outlive the particular political alliances that created them" (Mosse, 2008: 941). Mosse explains that long-gone colonial structures are still built into the irrigated landscapes of southern India and continue to have political consequences by imposing ecological constraints on people. The productive function of the living matter from which technical artifacts are made becomes apparent, particularly when aging and decay disrupt political visions. Large dams have a limited lifespan and must be constantly maintained and repaired. In contrast to less impactful infrastructures, structural failure can be disastrous.

The Mosul Dam is a case in point. Completed in 1986 under the original name of Saddam Dam, the 113 m high and 3.4 km long embankment on the Tigris, north of Mosul, is now a colossus with clay feet whose water permeable rock foundations are karstified to such an extent that continuous injections of cement are required to prevent a biblical collapse. This shaky, poorly designed megaproject has recently made headlines as the "most dangerous dam in the world" (Al-Ansari et al. 2020; Filkins, 2016). According to studies, floodwaters caused by a dam burst could endanger over 6 million Iraqis (Annunziato et al., 2016). The threat of seepage raised public concern about the Mosul Dam, prompting international assistance, including a USD 300 million maintenance contract funded by the World Bank and military deployments to secure an infrastructure that could be a target (and indeed was taken over by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) for a short while in 2014). However, the scale of the problem is such that no solution is within reach, given that the estimated USD 3 billion to fix (and possibly decommission) the dam exceeds the spending capacity of the Iraqi government, which is unable to repair most of the damaged water facilities across the country due to financial constraints.

The temporal rhythms that punctuate the life cycle of water infrastructure provide insight into how uncertainty and complexity can engender conflictual dynamics in nonlinear ways. Another aspect of complexity that should be highlighted is that the techno-politics of large dams has far-reaching consequences on multiple scales. Scalar dynamics are indeed key for identifying the power relations inscribed in socio-natural waterscapes (Swyngedouw, 1999). Research in political geography emphasizes the construction of scale as a means of consolidating and legitimizing authority over water resources (Mansfield, 2001; Harris & Alatout, 2010; Norman et al., 2012; Sneddon & Fox, 2006). Scale serves a territorial purpose by delimiting physical space and imbuing it with political properties. Historically, the expansion of state jurisdiction over water entailed "first, the dilution of authority from the local level; second, the creation of a water identity at the national level; and third, the (initial) refusal to recognize the international character of transboundary river basins" (Allouche, 2010: 50). These various scales all coexist within waterscapes and are found to be interconnected in the strategies used by the elites to mobilize consent (Menga, 2016). Despite the fact that no geographic concept exists outside of language, the objectification of spatial fixity supports the exercise of power (Wainwright, 2005: 1037). The opposite is also true: recalibrating or "jumping" scales can allow subaltern groups to subvert power geographies (Howitt, 2003).

Although "scalar politics of water governance are being continuously challenged and reconfigured around water infrastructures" (Menga & Swyngedouw, 2018: 7), the question of how to apply a scalar approach to dam-related struggles remains. The operationalization of scale is elusive in many studies. One notable exception is Harris and Alatout's (2010) work on hydro-scales, which provides an empirically rich examination of the "tight link" between the constructions of scale and state- and nation-building. It is demonstrated that the Turkish government presented technical facts about the Tigris-Euphrates basin in order to naturalize the national scale "as the indisputable scale for hydrologic assessments" and thus reinforce the legitimacy of centralized management over water, while displacing

and marginalizing other possible claims at a local or regional scale, particularly those of Kurdish communities who have been historically framed as a threat to the country's integrity and as such violently repressed. At the same time, however, Ankara considers the two rivers to be an integrated watershed in order to figure as the major contributor, despite the fact that it only contributes 40% of the Tigris inflow. Hence, the basin-wide scale enables Turkey to reclaim and assert a greater role at the expense of Iraq. Turkish elites have turned the hydraulic mission into a formidable tool of domestic and foreign policy (Conker & Hussein, 2019). This demonstrates not only that scalar constructions are invoked to support political goals but also that the former varies depending on the latter (and the target audience).

Methodological note

This article focuses empirically on the discursive practices involved in the construction of hydro-scalar configurations around large dams. To accomplish this, various sources of evidence were combined. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with KRG ministers and high-level officials, Kurdish MPs, and international water experts working in the region. Aside from monitoring of media coverage, all relevant documents released by both KRG and STC between 2007 and 2018 were scrutinized. These data were supplemented with participant observation: during 2017 and 2018, I volunteered for the STC campaign, building trust and collaboration with local environmental activists. Their mediation shed light on subaltern voices and on alternative imaginings of nature that I would not have noticed or fully understood otherwise as these are not institutionally represented but nonetheless produce collective action. Attempting to achieve (or at least approximate) an insider perspective was as simple as becoming acquainted with and engaging in a social conversation. At a more formal level, I also participated in a UNESCO two-day workshop on groundwater management³, which offered unique insight into Iraq-KRG bilateral negotiations on water issues.

The ethnographic immersion in the research field greatly helped contextualize discursive practices in a more nuanced manner. First, it uncovered data on opposition against megaprojects that were either undetectable or unavailable from afar. Second, because knowledge production is bodily experienced and materially practiced through a broader repertoire of actions than texts, fieldwork provided an added value to the discursive analysis. After all, “the analysis of discourse understood as the study of the preconditions for social action must include the analysis of practice understood as the study of social action itself” (Neumann, 2002: 267–268), which reminds us that the world around us is inter-subjectively constructed and not solely in linguistic terms.

Embracing an interpretive approach, data collection and analysis were conducted using an abductive logic, which emphasizes the iterative–recursive nature of the hermeneutic cycle, with the researcher constantly shifting back and forth from experiential discoveries to theoretical interpretations (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013). As the research progressed, pieces of information were associated with specific codes to conceptually order data and identify the most relevant analytical dimensions, in accordance with grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). The open coding of empirical material went hand in hand with the incorporation of ethnographic memos into the analysis: the points of intersection gradually led to the recognition of discursive patterns, which placed analytical categories within a broader semantic space.

In attempting to drag post-structuralism outside of the text while incorporating anthropological perspectives on materiality, the concept of discursive practice is used here as a performative action that can be expressed with linguistic–rhetorical (e.g., speech acts), visual (e.g., maps), and material (e.g., artifacts) devices. This plural approach responds to the need to unpack the plethora of iterative processes that enact and naturalize “scale effects” (Kaiser & Nikiforova, 2008).

Megaprojects and spatial strategies in comparison

Nationalism and the territorialization of water

The Tigris–Euphrates system (Figure 1) is not governed by any comprehensive cooperation agreement between riparian countries (Kibaroglu & Scheumann, 2013). The 1987 Turkey–Syria and 1990 Syria–Iraq protocols are the only legally binding instruments in place to regulate the sharing of the Euphrates, but

³ The workshop (titled “Building a Roadmap for Effective Groundwater Management in Iraq”) was held in Treviso on 10–11 July 2017 as a wrap-up event of the EU-funded project “Advanced Survey of Hydrogeological Resources in Iraq Phase-II (ASHRI-2).”

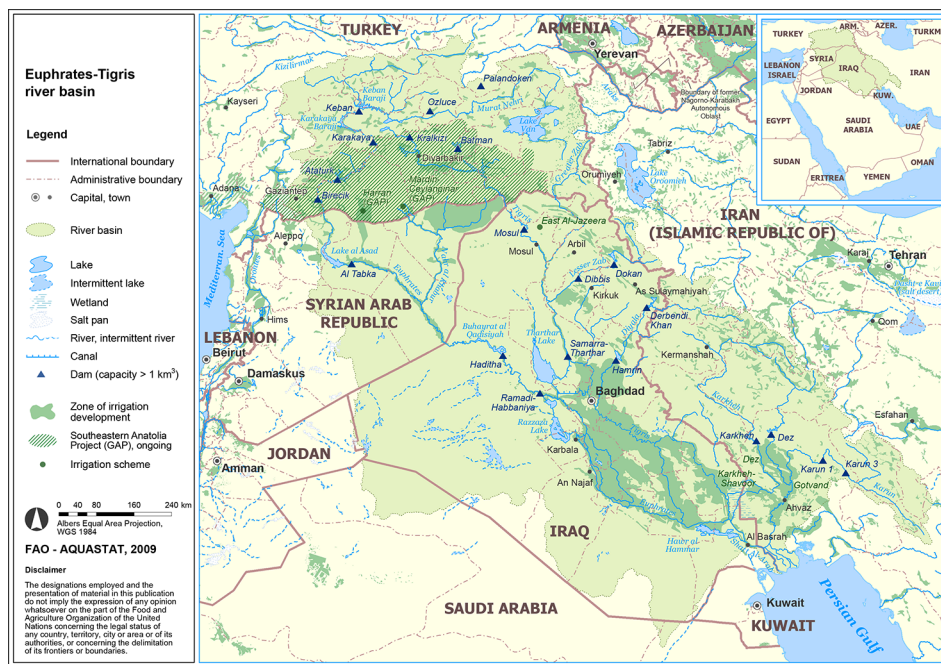


Figure 1. Euphrates-Tigris river basin.

they do not take into account the high flow variability of the river and are thus insufficient to lay the groundwork for efficient and equitable management, especially in light of climate change (Kibaroglu, 2019). Transboundary water relations have a long and tumultuous history. Consultations within the Joint Technical Committee, the only tripartite body established at the transboundary level, dragged on for years with no results due to fundamental disagreement on what was at stake: Turkey's claim that the twin rivers should be managed as a single hydrogeological unit was deemed unacceptable by Syria and Iraq, who insisted that a sharing formula had to be found for the Euphrates only. Given the relentless development of water schemes on the Euphrates and the unwillingness to abide by applicable international law, the literature typically portrays Turkey as the hydro-hegemon in the region (Zeitoun & Warner, 2006). Truth be told, despite power imbalances exacerbated by relative geographic location, all riparian countries have gone their separate ways. The outcome is that a basin-wide integrated management is sorely lacking.

The KRI is strategically located in the transboundary basin, being downstream to Turkey and Iran and upstream to the rest of Iraq. In comparison to the southern Iraqi drylands, which are experiencing an increasing water deficit compounded by salinity issues, the autonomous region's mountainous ecosystem receives more precipitation and has been less impacted by desertification. The fertile Kurdish valleys are watered by the Tigris and its tributaries (i.e., Greater Zab, Lesser Zab, Khabour, and Sirwan). Differently from the flat lowland stretching over large part of the country, farmers and herders still rely on groundwater and seasonal springs as source of freshwater and irrigation (O'Shea, 2004). Given a legacy of ethnic enmity with Arabs and strained relations with the central government, however, it is no surprise that hydrogeological interdependence makes water a geopolitically sensitive flashpoint. Suffice it to say that the equitable distribution of waters, as envisioned in the federal Constitution, has yet to be regulated by law.

Despite its relative abundance, the KRI's underground water table is also approaching critical levels, owing primarily to overexploitation (Tinti, 2017). Water scarcity is a long-standing issue that Kurdish elites are acutely aware of. In the scorching summer of 2021, when the Tigris almost dried up and temperatures reached record highs, severe water shortages prompted protests and street blockades in Erbil, the region's capital. Furthermore, rivers in Iran are increasingly threatened with drying up due to upstream barrages (Abdulrahman, 2018). While Iraqi Kurds have consolidated authority in the form of

a de-facto state as a result of oil and natural gas wealth (Tinti, 2021), water is seen as an even more vital resource to harness.

The KRG's vision is to significantly increase the number of water schemes and river control projects to ensure water security. As of 2007, the KRI had three large dams (in Dukan, Darbandikhan, and Duhok) and 12 other small- and medium-sized dams (Heshmati, 2009: 63). The newly established Ministry of Agriculture and Water Resources (MoAWR) conducted a thorough assessment, identifying over 100 potential dam sites. In 2014, the Directorate General of Dams presented a master plan for the long-term development of 245 barrages, 35 of which were later prioritized (Save the Tigris Campaign, 2020). The KRG allocated USD 27.9 million in November 2019 to restart construction of 11 dam projects that had been halted due to the ISIL insurgency, increasing storage capacity by an estimated 59 million cubic meters. Despite numerous examples of dam failure throughout the region, the KRG accelerated its efforts to reduce vulnerability from upstream countries and gain leverage over the central government.

This policy of double standards must be understood in the context of the larger narrative of Kurdish self-determination. For a stateless nation that was long denied political autonomy and, in fact, suffered genocidal persecutions under the Ba'athist regime, water rights are being politicized and reclaimed as a feature of sovereignty. The KRG has used resource nationalism to mobilize and naturalize a contested national imaginary. However, this framing exacerbated already strained federal relations. During interviews with high-ranking KRG officials, a contradictory discourse on dams emerged. Hydraulic megaprojects in upstream countries were condemned as flagrant violations of international law obligations and discredited for the lack of "human, Islamic, or neighborly values", in the words of former MoAWR Minister, Abdulstar Majeed. Notwithstanding the implicit recognition of a basin-wide perspective, the demand for a fair and equitable water share was paired with the ambiguous policy of building more dams inside the region at the expense of Iraqis downstream. While Turkey and Iran are blamed for threatening water supplies, the reaction is equal and opposite in sign.

"Oil is everywhere in Iraq, water is not. Water lies in Kurdistan, which entails a responsibility towards our people. We must make the best use of our water resources by building dams, developing hydropower stations, using reservoirs for tourism and fisheries. Our needs will grow, and you cannot live a day without water. Protecting and harvesting our water is our priority because Baghdad has no plan for us."⁴

"The Daryan Dam is a disaster. The Iranians use it as a political trump card. It is an international issue that should be approached in accordance with applicable international legal provisions to determine each country's responsibilities. We referred the matter to the federal government, but nothing was done. They avoid bringing up issues with Teheran. They are irresponsible. Worse, they point the finger at us."⁵

The upstream position is one of the few levers available to the KRG against the central government. The fact that MoAWR employees were partially exempted from pay cuts when budget transfers were frozen during 2014 (to sanction the KRG's independent oil exports) demonstrates how much Baghdad fears this condition of geographical disadvantage. This concern is not baseless. Suffice it to remember what the General Director of Dams and Reservoirs at MoAWR stated, while commenting on the impact of waning water from Iran on Arab settlements in central and southern Iraq: "Let them endure a water shortage. We have not let the people of Kirkuk⁶ have issues over drinking water, but it is not our problem any longer to provide water for Hawija and other areas" (Rudaw, 2014). KRG officials have frequently politicized water by taking advantage of preferential access to (and thus control over) the Tigris' waterflow. It is only a short step from rhetoric to action: as a consequence of reduced water inflow from Iran, during the summer of 2017, the KRG reduced discharge from the Dukan Dam into the Lesser Zab, negatively impacting farmlands in the Salah ad-Din province.

Although there is some technical coordination, the tense environment has prevented effective policy cooperation between Erbil and Baghdad. After the request for Kurdish separate representation was denied, the KRG opposed the establishment of a country-wide water council, a supreme body to be

⁴ Senior Official, Directorate of Water Resources, MoAWR; interview conducted in Erbil on 5 May 2017.

⁵ Senior Official, Directorate of Dams and Reservoirs, MoAWR; interview conducted in Erbil on 7 May 2017.

⁶ The multiethnic city of Kirkuk is a powerful symbol for every Kurd, but it is located in the disputed territories outside of the KRI. The KRG wields significant power and provided services when the city was under control of Kurdish forces following the disbandment of the Iraqi army.

chaired by the Iraqi Prime Minister. Despite the constitutional provision that outside waters are the sole domain of the federal government, the KRG has had its own delegation to negotiate transboundary issues with neighboring countries since 2004. In that regard, the UNESCO-sponsored event I attended in 2017 was instructive. On that occasion, a joint document would have obligated Iraqi and Kurdish delegations to implement standard operational procedures for collecting and analyzing data on deep aquifers, but discussions quickly stalled due to disagreement on what geographical scale data management should be tailored for: while Iraqi delegates pushed for a country-wide information system housed in Baghdad, Kurdish delegates called for separate data repositories in Erbil. Discord over data ownership resulted in a stalemate, demonstrating how scalar framings are inextricably linked to territorial claims and identity issues.

What is most important for the argument presented here is that the KRG's plans for further dam construction are based on the securitization of water as an unalienable right for the Kurdish nation to exist. Hydraulic infrastructures mediate the reproduction of Kurdish nationalism and contribute projecting a nation-space into a timeless collective myth, which in turn sustains a geopolitical vision "concerning the relation between one's own and other places, involving feelings of (in)security or (dis)advantage (and/or) invoking ideas about a collective mission or foreign policy strategy" (Dijkink, 2002: 11). Despite being international watercourses, the rivers that flow into the region are portrayed as primarily Kurdish. This geographical transfiguration is reinforced by the implicit argument that the headwaters are located in the Greater Kurdistan, which is viewed as a mythical space whose cultural homogeneity was shattered by the Treaty of Lausanne (Culcasi, 2010). Had history not betrayed the call for self-determination, the map depicting the Kurdish homeland as it *should be* would label today's KRI as Southern Kurdistan. As a result, transboundary water issues are a stark reminder of the violation of national rights. Additional dams would then alleviate this state of affairs by reducing reliance on hostile neighbors and rebalancing relations with the equally dangerous Iraqi parent state. The subtext is that sustainable water balance is a precondition for the autonomy of a landlocked region that will face the existential challenge of accommodating a growing demand with diminishing resources.

Nationalism runs deep into the KRG hydro-policies: water is not only a strategic resource but even more a figurative element of the Kurdish nation. It goes without saying that such high symbolic value makes water a nonnegotiable good, seen as something to "be appropriated, annexed, secured" (Lankford et al., 2013: ix) and territorialized along national lines (Allouche, 2005). The sad irony is that the same logic sacrificed Kurds on the altar of nation-states in the early 20th century.

Mesopotamia as alternative spatial imaginary

"We are the people of Mesopotamia. We are the people of Hasankeyf in Turkey and of the Marshes in Iraq. We are connected and combined by the Tigris River—our common root, our common lifeline, and our common future."

These are the opening lines of a declaration signed in 2012 by Iraqi sheiks gathered in the ancient town of Hasankeyf, a 12,000-year-old historical settlement in south-eastern Turkey at risk of being flooded upon completion of the Ilisu Dam, one of the many branches of the GAP project. Beyond solidarity, community leaders from the Arab marshlands and Kurdish activists from Bakur (Turkish Kurdistan) emphasized belonging to a common natural and cultural space in need of protection from destructive megaprojects. Terminology is never neutral in an ethnically diverse and politically divided region. The use of the toponym Mesopotamia highlights a historically distinctive area encompassing multiple cultures, thus diluting ethno-national divisions within a politically fragmented river system and uniting socio-environmental struggles against human-made threats. Rather than being a one-time event, the declaration inspired the blooming of a counternarrative to nationalist policies. STC has since grown into a civil society network that brings together socio-environmental activists and movements from Iraq, Turkey, and Iran to promote ecological justice in the Mesopotamian region.

In April 2019, STC partner organizations met in Iraq, in the city of Sulaymaniyah, to hold the first Mesopotamian Water Forum under the slogan "water knows no border." In line with international campaigns promoting the principle of free-flowing rivers, the attendees denounced the manipulation of water as political tool and advocated for the sustainable management and the equitable sharing of common waterways. Rather than climate change, emphasis was on the damage caused by riparian

governments' negligence or self-interest, underlining their noncompliance with international law, particularly the already mentioned 1997 UN Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses and the 1971 Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. The final declaration stated unequivocally that "water is under attack in Mesopotamia" as a result of reckless policies that have polluted and degraded the riverine ecosystem.⁷ A consensual and basin-wide approach to water governance was opposed as an alternative path. Contrary to the dominant state-based vision, large-scale water volumes of water through dams and irrigation schemes was presented as a means of social control and expropriation for the purpose of engineering water scarcity and influencing power distribution. By reiterating access to water as a fundamental human right, the Forum called for a halt to the construction of dams on the Tigris and highlighted the necessity of a paradigm shift to make water a force of peace and cooperation.

"There is no better analogy than our body. Strokes occur when arteries become clogged. The same thing happens when a large dam is built or a river's course is changed. As human beings we are connected through and by the rivers."⁸

Shifting attention from water shares to water rights is relevant in two ways: it removes water issues from the zero-sum game of geopolitical struggles, and it posits a bottom-up model of governance that is attentive to local communities and livelihoods. The innovative message, however, is in the ideological rearticulation of Mesopotamia as an identity marker. A geographical area of exchange where cultures, languages, and religions have mingled for millennia, Mesopotamia is devoid of political, sectarian, or factional connotations because it recalls the glorious past of pre-Islamic empires and civilizations that are lost in the past. It refers to a place and a time when the writing system, legal codes, bureaucratic practices, and sedentary agriculture first developed in human history. This glorious ancestry predates the modern-day state system. As a result, "Mesopotamia is not sensitive to anyone," as explained by an organizer of the Forum; "It is not Arab, or Persian, or Kurdish. Everyone wants to be part of it."

"By claiming to be Mesopotamian, we oppose state colonialism. That common identity was erased by nation-states, whose primitive nationalisms have had dire consequences. By reviving belonging to Mesopotamia, we can make a strong case for the equal sharing of water."⁹

Not by chance, the reimagining of Mesopotamia owes much to the Kurdish freedom movement, which began to discuss ecological issues as part of a critique of the nation-state and capitalist modernization as early as the 1990s¹⁰ (Ayboğa, 2018). Kurds have used the Mesopotamian myth as a revolutionary imaginary to address inequalities in the host countries and promote the democratization of the Middle East (Casier, 2011). Beginning with the prison writings of the Kurdistan Workers' Party leader Abdullah Öcalan, a wide repertoire of actions has been mobilized. Most notably, the Mesopotamian Ecology Movement (MSF) was founded during the 2011 Social Forum in Diyarbakır, the major Kurdish city in Turkey, when several panels discussed water issues and criticized dam projects in south-eastern Anatolia. Hydraulic megaprojects in the upper Euphrates were seen as integral to colonialist practices aimed at uprooting and assimilating Kurds. Casier sees the MSF as a performative act to reclaim political space away from the oppressive nation-state model and reimagine it as a borderless and culturally plural region.

The STC brings the Mesopotamian imaginary to life through a variety of practices aimed at reconnecting communities with nature. On the one hand, STC activists have engaged policymakers and public officials through advocacy and research, as well as bringing Mesopotamian voices to global platforms through participation in international solidarity actions and follow up with the UNESCO World Heritage Committee on Iraqi Marshlands management. On the other hand, they have invested in river cleanups, cultural events (e.g., exchanges in the Marshes, photography exhibitions, and poetry readings), and environmental activism training for youth to destigmatize the traditional lifestyles of the villages along

⁷ The final declaration is available at <https://www.savethetigris.org/water-is-under-assault-in-mesopotamia-final-declaration-1st-mesopotamia-water-forum/>.

⁸ Environmental activist; interview conducted in Sulaymaniyah on 27 May 2017.

⁹ Environmental activist; interview conducted in Sulaymaniyah on 19 April 2019.

¹⁰ The "Rojava revolution" in northern Syria is also informed by the principles of social ecology and political pluralism (Flach et al., 2015).

Table 1. State-based vs. rights-based hydro-political frameworks.

Securitizing actor	KRG	STC
Referent object	State (water shares)	Individual (water rights)
Main threat	Upstream damming	Commodification of water
Logic of security	Exclusive	Inclusive
Cultural referent	Kurdish nation	Mesopotamia
Geographical scale	(sub)State level	Basin-wide
Water management	Centralized	Decentralized
Policy solution	Domestic dam building	Applicable international law

the Tigris, which have been undermined by environmental degradation and urbanization trends. In a war-torn country, this crucially links environmental protection to broader issues of democratic governance and social cohesion. One intriguing aspect of STC public outreach is the abundance of Sumerian symbols used to imbue water with a message of interethnic and interfaith reconciliation, such as the archaeological site of Ur and the image of Enki, the ancient god of water.

The reference to Mesopotamia as a shared space highlights an inclusive understanding of water security that debunks the state-centric territorialization of international rivers. Water security has gained prominence in recent years but with a variety of framings that defy uniformity of meaning (Cook & Bakker, 2012; Gerlak et al., 2018; Jepson et al., 2017). While a “geopolitical” conceptualization depicts water scarcity as a threat to the state, a “human security” framework focuses on individual and social vulnerability, drawing attention on an entirely different set of threats, ranging from pollution to displacement (Burgess et al., 2016: 9–13). Since security is best defined “a site of contestation between actors in particular contexts, in which a range of actors articulate alternative visions of who or what is in need of being secured; from what types of threat; and by what means” (McDonald, 2012: 3), any particular meaning ascribed to security helps define the core values of the political community. This is relevant to our discussion because large dams appear to be either security provider or harmful threat in the KRG and STC discourses, respectively.

The path-breaking call for a Mesopotamian identity contributes to conflict resolution and promotes a rights-based approach to water governance. The myth upholds an environmental vision that transcends ethnicity, class, religion, and nationality. This holistic perspective also stresses a critical balance between environment and society: biodiversity and sustainability are thought to be inseparable from multiethnic and multicultural richness. Moreover, the centrality of Mesopotamia connects all cases of environmental injustice across the Tigris–Euphrates basin, from the flooding of Hasankeyf to the depletion of the Khani Bil spring in Iran. In other words, historical and ecological interconnectedness is essential for the formation of a transnational identity, from which inclusive and participatory arrangements within the transboundary water system can emerge.

Conclusions

By contrasting the narratives mobilized by collective actors, this article contributes to the literature on the discursive dimension of megaprojects. As explained in the introduction to this special issue, a discursive perspective is best suited to addressing the importance of agency (Esposito & Terlizzi, 2023). This case study examines large dams as empirical sites where conflicting sense-making processes take place. The comparison shows how the spatial politics of megaprojects intersect with resource ecologies, territorial claims, and the remaking of collective identities. The technopolitical construction of waterscapes around large dams indeed sets the stage for struggles over contested entitlements. While previous research has shown that large dams should be understood as social institutions (Fahim, 1981) and that they function as “techno-political frontiers” reimagining and reengineering entire regions and the communities within (Stahl, 2019), this research reveals negotiating the appropriate geographical scale to manage water resources is found to be both an instantiation of power relations and a pathway for emancipatory changes in water regimes. As a result, water territories stand out as engineered and multilayered geographies within which competing representational strategies are played out at various scales.

These hegemonic and counter-hegemonic strategies are situated in a relational context in which socio-technical imaginaries on hydraulic projects collide with broader imaginaries on the core values of the political community. Evidence of this is the rhetorical use of “nation” and “Mesopotamia” as alternative identity markers that infuse materiality with meaning. Material artifacts are then absorbed in a semiotic space that conveys a sense of collective belonging. While the KRG frames large dams as symbols of national redemption and survival, the NGOs organized under the STC campaign portray them as harmful infrastructure to environmental and cultural conservation, thus forming a “discourse coalition” (Hajer, 1993) to challenge the government’s hydro-policies.

Table 1 presents the resulting state-based and rights-based frameworks for social action. Both hydro-political frameworks are scaled to validate and support ideas about proper water resources management. Although the counternarrative has a weaker grip than the dominant technocratic discourse, scalar framings are equally constitutive of the signifying practices that reorganize water–society relations. The basin-wide scale serves as an anchor for expressing a socio-ecological identity that speaks a common language, beyond national or ethnic divisions.

This demonstrates that scalar configurations can be an effective vehicle for participation, recognition, and change for dispossessed, marginalized, or disadvantaged groups (Howitt, 2003). The finding has a corollary. Although many studies have examined the performative role of megaprojects in state- and nation-building efforts, such spatial focus often obscures processes operating at different scales, ignoring the “remarkable flowering of alternative political identities of a sectoral, ethnic and regional character” (Agnew & Corbridge, 2002: 86). Instead, the case study encourages decentering the prevalent state-centric framework to include sub-state and trans-state geographies. This is especially true if we accept the “postmodern condition” of space in contemporary world, which unsettles and de-territorializes geographical categories, blurs an inside-outside distinction, and sheds light on fragmented and diffused spatial configurations. From such multiscale perspective, the politics of large hydraulic infrastructure highlights an expansive (and potentially emancipatory) understanding of water rights that should be more attentive to social and environmental justice.

Conflict of interest

None declared.

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