‘Our policy now is to simply be very nice to Turkey and hope for the best’.

A Syrian Government Official’s comments on his country’s water strategy

History:

The human history of the Tigris and Euphrates dates back to arguably the oldest know civilizations of Mesopotamian. Using the two rivers as their lifeblood these societies developed some of the first methods of irrigation as well as possibly even flood control. Since that time of early development, the rivers have severed as an important facet in the lives of the surrounding riparian states. This history is especially important in Syria and Iraq’s claim to having historical rights to the river’s water.

The modern history of the region begins with the independence of the Syria and Iraq from colonial rule and the fall of the very powerful Ottoman Empire. Beginning at this time, the three major riparian states in the basin were Turkey, Syria and Iraq. It is important to note that within all three of the states are areas in which the ethnic Kurds claim to be their homeland. This as well as the fact that both Iran and Israel have their own interests in the river contributes to the complexity and potential for problems in the region.
In 1973 conflict seemed imminent when Iraq mobilized troops threatening to invade if Syria did not increase its downstream flow. Luckily in this case conflict was averted by the intervention of Saudi Arabia, yet in the future the scenario could play out much differently. Since then Iraq and Syria have signed treaties agreeing to divide the water coming from Turkey so 52% flows down to Iraq and 48% can be used by Syria. The two countries came to an agreement only out of a mutual fear of Turkey’s dominance over the river’s flow.

Climate:

The region’s climate consists of mostly arid or desert lands. Most of the river’s water originates in the mountains in Turkey with snow melt and as a result flooding is typical. Climate change concerns cite that precipitation variations could decline around 90 mm annually in some areas. This would place further strains on an already water stressed region where some areas receive as little as 80 – 140 mm of annual rainfall. The harsh climate forces farmers to use irrigation techniques with water from the river as the only way to water their crops. To further exacerbate the issue very little ground water supplies are available in the region to aide in crop irrigation.
**Water Resources Concerns:**

The recent history of water resources in the basin are primarily dominated by the will of Turkey. As in most transboundary debates, it is the country that holds the biggest stick that determines the policy for the river. Around 98% of the flow of the Euphrates originates in the 30% of the basin that lies within the boarders of Eastern Turkey. This access to the water and Turkey’s superior financial and military power pose the greatest threats to Syria and Iraq’s share for the water. Currently the states act almost entirely independently of each other’s water needs and action and all have future plans of construction that will stress the region beyond what is sustainable. In the past Turkey as cut off flow entirely while the Ataturk dam was being constructed over a period of a month. Currently Turkey states that they are entitled to 50% of all the water flowing over their border and will allow 50% to flow downstream. However no binding agreements are in place to ensure this will continue and both downstream states are concerned water may be cut off at any time as before.

The most discouraging of Turkey’s projects is the GAP project (Southeastern Anatolia Project) which consists of building 22 dams on the Euphrates and its tributaries within the country and harvesting the water for both irrigation and hydropower purposes. The following are the GAP’s goals as presented in Kevin Freeman’s paper on the region.

1) To develop all of the land and water resources in the region in order to accelerate economic and social development
2) To alleviate disparity between the south-eastern Anatolia region and the other regions of Turkey by increasing the production and welfare levels in the region
3) To increase the productivity and employment capacity in that region.
4) To meet the increased need for infrastructure resulting from population explosion and urbanization
5) To organize economic and physical infrastructure in rural areas in such a way as to utilize the resources in the most useful ways and to direct urban growth in desired directions
6) To contribute to the national objectives of sustained economic growth and export promotion by efficient utilization of the region’s resources

In a region that is already stressed for water these goals glaringly omit any consideration for downstream water shortages.

**Solutions??**

For the Tigris and Euphrates Basin to have any chance of thriving in an overly water stressed environment, mutual talks must begin. It has been suggested that the three states take an approach similar to Pakistan and India has with dealing with the Indus River and involve an outside mediator such as the World Bank. Success in the region focuses around Turkey’s willingness to cooperate with the downstream countries.
Currently Turkey has very little incentive to give up its water privileges and most likely will not without outside pressures pushing it in the appropriate direction. With the United State’s current involvement in the region it is becoming more likely that a future Iraq, backed by the United States will have a much greater bargaining tool in future water talks.

Along with these unilateral talks, water conservation issues must be addressed to conserve the little water that is available. Without these steps being taken, the region must attempt to function with dangerously low water supplies.

Questions…

Will the region’s nations continue to act independently of each other and how long is it possible to do that before the water runs out?

Will Turkey ever willingly act with the interests of its downstream neighbor’s in mind? If not, what could the results be in a region so prone to conflict?

Required Reading


Suggested Readings


(All Texts available through UT-Library Online Journal Database)