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Water and electricity – weapons in the Syrian conflict

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Bonn, 30 June 2014. "Turkey dries up the Euphrates... Instead of simply aiding the Syrian rebels, Turkey is now also killing them with dehydration." – the US religious journal *The Trumpet* on the falling water levels of Lake Assad, the reservoir that supplies Aleppo and the surrounding area with water and electricity.

Is Turkey the bad guy again?

It cannot be ruled out that Turkey is indeed playing the water card. It did this in the 80s, in the hope that Syria would curtail the activities of the Kurdish PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party). The Turkish-Syrian protocol of 1987 guaranteed an average water flow of 500 cubic metres per second for the downstream countries Syria and Iraq. Despite this, the Turkish Southeastern Anatolia Project, known as GAP, with its 22 dams, 18 hydro-electric power plants and planned irrigated area of 1.8 million hectares remained a bone of contention. The accusation was that Turkey was acting like a hegemonic regional water power, with sufficient means to control the rivers. In turn, Turkey claimed its right to development, establishing facts by building one dam after another whilst still adhering to the 1987 protocol. The security treaty of Ceyhan (1998) paved the way for a free trade agreement (2004), which had unexpectedly positive effects on the decades-long dispute over water: a joint dam was to be built on the Orontes, on the Turkish-Syrian border. This was spectacular: until then Syria had maintained territorial claims to the Turkish province of Hatay (historic Alexandretta) and the Orontes as a national river, failing to recognise the political border. And now here was Assad doing precisely that. The foundation was laid in February 2011, shortly before the protests in Syria began.

With the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Councils (HSCC) established in 2009-10 Tayyip Erdogan, Bashar al-Assad and Nuri al-Maliki indicated that they also wished to find solutions to the water dispute. At the first meeting of the Turkish-Syrian HSCC in December 2009 the ministers signed 50 protocols, 4 of which related to water issues. A commission was to draw up practicable proposals regarding how the rivers were to be utilised. The Orontes dam project was approved, with the costs to be shared.

2009-10 could have seen the beginning of a decisive transformation in water relations. However, this was bound to the political leadership in Syria and Iraq, whose slipping grasp on power we are now witnessing.

Water and electricity supplies as a means of applying pressure

As reported by independent sources, all combatants in Syria are now using water and electricity as a means of extortion. As early as September 2012, government troops destroyed the water and electricity grids of Aleppo, in order to pressurise the then moderate opposition. But it is no longer just Assad's troops that exert such pressure. The splintered and internecine opposition groups (the Free Syrian Army, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the Nusra Front) are competing for control of the Euphrates dams essential to the supply of water and electricity to Aleppo and the province of Raqqa. Two or even three are now in the hands of the rebels. Their operator is no longer a Syrian ministry, but ISIS. Each day significant volumes of water are released from the Assad reservoir to dry out the water supplies to Aleppo. Pumping stations are in rebel hands and pumps have been "dismantled" successfully, unfortunately: in May of this year Aleppo was without water and electricity for several days and, according to Vatican Radio, resorted to using wells in mosques and churches, although their water is unsuitable for drinking. And in Iraq? The middle of last week saw ISIS fighters head for the Haditha dam, the second largest in Iraq. The fear is that, as with the capture of the Falluja dam, they will open the sluices – a possibility that government troops are preparing for by considering pre-empting them and doing it themselves.

An uncertain future, also with regard to water

How likely is it, in the face of these reports, that Turkey alone play the water card? The question goes unanswered. The Erdogan government is accused of having at the least tacitly tolerated ISIS. The advances made by ISIS in Iraq now also endanger the interests of Turkey. In the event of the Republic of Iraq failing to survive, Celik, the spokesman of the Turkish governing party, has assured the Kurds in northern Iraq the right to self-determination – a move considered unthinkable until recently.

The shifting geo-political situation raises the issue of water anew, as those governments that Turkey struck agreements with in 2009-10 are now powerless. It remains to be seen how and with whom the water question will now be negotiated. The control of water is and remains a key factor in the regional power game.