



## **Weaponizing Water Resources Against Civilians in Northeast Syria**

*The Turkish government and other parties to the conflict should abide by their duties towards human rights, respect the right of all Syrians to access potable and usable water, as well as neutralize water resources from political rivalries*

## Introduction:

Under the title of “**Addressing The Water Crisis in Northern Syria: Bridging Gaps for Sustainable Solutions**” Synergy Associations for Victims along with civil society partners organized on June 8, 2023, a side event on the sidelines of the Brussels VII Conference on “Supporting the future of Syria and the region”<sup>1</sup>.

The side event was co-organized by: [11.11.11](#) Coalition<sup>2</sup>, [Impact](#) Organization, [Baytna](#) Organization, [Synergy](#) Association for Victims, [Malva](#) for Culture, Art and Learning, Midad Organization and [Sada](#) Youth Team. As for the facilitation, the event was facilitated by [Natasha Hall](#), Senior Fellow Researcher at the [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#) (CSIS).

The event was organized to highlight the seriousness of water crisis in northern Syria, explore its multi-faceted impact on local communities and submit recommendations to the European Union, the States Members and other international actors.

During the event, [Izzedin Salih](#), the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Synergy Association spoke about the impact of weaponizing water by parties to the conflict on local communities, ecosystem, and biodiversity in northeast Syria, including access to potable water, and water used for agriculture, economy, health, and energy.

The exacerbating water crisis remains one of the main causes for food insecurity, undermining livelihood, and immigration seeking resources, let alone that water scarcity and its poor quality, mostly in makeshift camps for the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in northern and northeastern parts of Syria, cause serious diseases.

The main challenge is that water resources are greatly involved in the ongoing conflict in the country since water is not run by single unified management, rather it is managed according to the policies of the party in control. All the dominant governmental and non-governmental actors in the country are accused of committing water-related human rights violations which are often catastrophic on the population.

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<sup>1</sup> The European Union will organize Brussels VII Conference on “Supporting the future of Syria and the region”, on 14 and 15 June 2023, in Brussels. The Ministerial meeting will take place on 15 June. (A Day of Dialogue) will be held on the preceding day bringing together civil society from Syria and beyond, decision makers, and operational partners to engage in dialogue about Syria and the region as well as on its humanitarian and resilience challenges. The overarching objective of the Brussels Conferences is to ensure continued support to the Syrian people, both in Syria and in the wider region, by mobilizing the international community in support of a comprehensive and credible political solution to the Syria conflict, in line with UN Security Council resolution 2254. As was the case at previous years’ conferences, Brussels VII will also address critical humanitarian and resilience issues affecting Syrians in Syria, neighboring countries, and those which impact communities hosting Syrian refugees in the region.

<sup>2</sup> 11.11.11 is the coalition for non-governmental organizations, unions, movements and various solidarity groups in Flanders (Dutch speaking part of Belgium). It brings together efforts of about 60 NGOs and more than 20, 000 volunteers working to make change happen as a part of a worldwide network to achieve one common goal: “A fair world without exploitation, because together we are stronger than alone.”

## Weaponizing Allouk Water Station During Covid-19 Pandemic:

Since the Turkish occupation of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê region in October 2019 as a result of a military operation dubbed “Peace Spring” by Ankara, the communities of northeast Syria, deliberately and discriminatorily, have been denied their right to access sufficient and safe water by the Turkish government and by Turkish-backed factions of the opposition Syrian National Army (SNA) due to repeated interruptions in pumping drinking water from Allouk Water Station in Ras al-Ayn countryside in the pandemic peak outbreak.

[Allouk Water Station](#), which experienced numerous disruptions, is the only source for drinking water for approximately 800,000 people in northeast Syria, particularly the residents of [al-Hasakah](#) city, [Tall Tamr](#) town and the adjacent countryside, in addition to being the main source for water trucking for [al-Hol](#), [al-Areesha/al-Sed](#) and [al-Twinah/Washokani](#) camps (which include tens of thousands of IDPs from different provinces and parts of Syria in addition to thousands of Iraqis and foreigners who used to live in areas formerly held by the Islamic State, known as ISIS), according to [the International Committee of the Red Cross](#) (ICRC).

When restricting Allouk Water Station, hence depriving 800, 000 civilians from accessing potable water, Turkey is thus employing methods prohibited by and in breach of International Humanitarian Law (IHL). As illustrated in other contexts, such as in Sudan, restrictions on water can amount to crimes against humanity, and this applies to any restrictions imposed for ulterior purposes like attacking specific populations, that can be constitutive of the crime of genocide, as argued by the International Criminal Court’s Office of The Prosecutor.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, the restriction on water violates several basic human rights, such as the right to water, proclaimed by the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council as part of binding International Law in 2010 and that to life.<sup>4</sup>

## Building Dams on Khabur River:

In 2021, groups affiliated with the Turkish-backed opposition SNA built three earth [dams](#) on the Khabur River interrupting water flow to areas held by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) causing critical damages to agriculture and food security.

The interruption of Khabur River’s water coincided with a period when the region was witnessing severe drought and hikes in fuel prices, preventing many farmers from operating

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<sup>3</sup> [The Prosecutor V. Omar Hassan Ahmad AL BASHIR, Prosecution’s request for a finding of non-compliance against the Republic of the Sudan in the case of The Prosecutor v Omar Hassan Ahmad AL BASHIR pursuant to Article 87 \(7\) of the Rome Statute, 19 December 2014.](#)

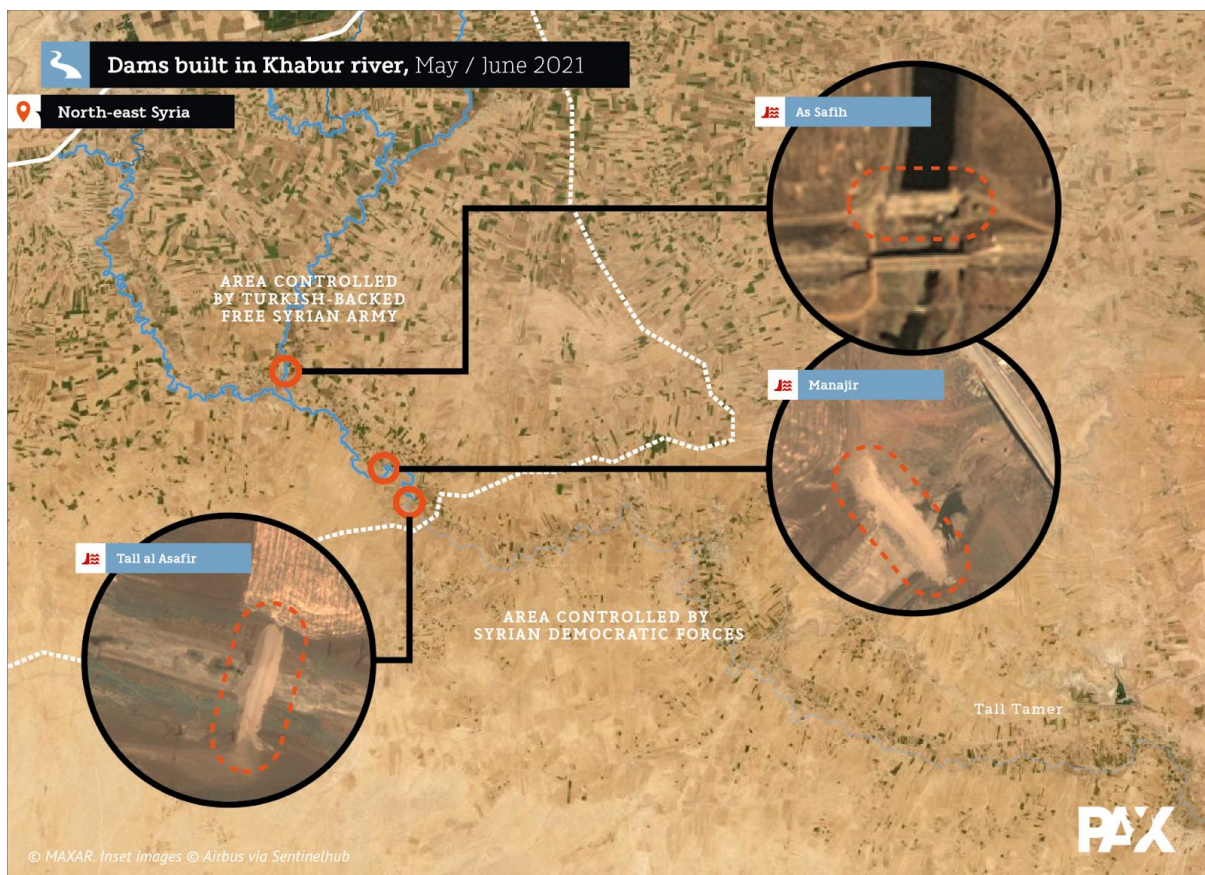
<sup>4</sup> [Human Rights to Water and Sanitation, UN Water.](#)



their water pumps and rendering them unable to irrigate their farmlands. Consequently, vast areas of farmlands were left fallow (uncultivated).

The Khabur River is the largest tributary to the Euphrates River and an unseasonal waterway historically. It originates in Turkey, and it extends on 320 km passing through al-Hasakah province, Syria’s food basket, and joins the Euphrates River in Syria’s Deir ez-Zor province.

Building dams on the Khabur River denied thousands of households to access water, constituting a flagrant violation of IHL and this could be a calculated measure employed by the SNA’s factions with the intention of starving the civilian population and/or bringing about their forced displacement as a method of warfare.



An image showing the three earth dams constructed by the SNA on the Khabur River in 2021 near the villages of Tall al-Safah, al-Manajir, and Tall al-Asafir in the south of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê city. Photo credit: [PAX organization](#).

### Blocking the Euphrates River:

For several years, the Turkish authorities have been decreasing Syria’s portion of water from the Euphrates River, an essential source for drinking water for more than five million people in Syria, according to the UN estimates, thus causing damages to the ecosystem and biodiversity in northeast Syria.

The drop of the Euphrates River's level has had dire consequences on local communities in northeast Syria. Turkey's blockade of water flow from its dams upstream to the Euphrates river has exacerbated the reduction of the river's water volume, hence increasing the rate of its pollution due to sewage system that flows into it and the oil pollution in oil well-rich areas. All these have contributed to the recent outbreak of Cholera disease and hundreds of people have been affected.

The decrease of the Euphrates River has also led to a drought in the farmlands and diminished green swaths in northeast Syria, where their cut-off has adversely affected agricultural production and achieving food security.

Furthermore, the low water levels pose a threat to the electric power supply, since around three million people in northeast Syria receive power, para-exclusively, from three hydroelectric power plants on the Euphrates River.

More than 12 million people in Syria and Iraq are facing dire consequences given the low levels of rainfall and of the Euphrates River, according to [humanitarian agencies](#).

### **A Violation of International Humanitarian Law:**

The blockade of the Khabur River's water flow by the Turkish-backed SNA will have serious consequences for the population downstream. Taking into account both climatic conditions and further limitations of water coming in from the shutdown of Allouk Water Station, as well as limited flow into the Euphrates, the Khabur is an indispensable source for the survival of the civilian population. With thousands of households struggling with water access caused by the deliberate building of dams stopping the flow of water essential for household and agricultural use. Thus, the blockade is an extreme measure that resulted in denying the civilian population of their sustenance.<sup>5</sup>

Under IHL, included in the Geneva Conventions Additional Protocol I (Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts), attacks on 'objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population', (including water infrastructure), is prohibited. These concerns were further expanded in the Geneva List of [Principles on the Protection of Water Infrastructure](#) under Principle 12 and in Rule 10 of the ICRC's [Guidelines on Protection of the Environment in Armed Conflict](#). Both documents outline how "rendering useless" water infrastructure — in this case the blockade of water in a river — would fall under this category. Similarly, [the 2004 Berlin Rules on Water Resources of the International Law Association](#) under Article 51 provides that "in no event shall combatants attack, destroy, remove, or render useless waters and water installations indispensable for the health and survival of the civilian population if such actions may be expected to leave the civilian population with such

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<sup>5</sup> For more, read the report: [Killing the Khabur: How Turkish-backed armed groups blocked northeast Syria's water lifeline](#). Pax Organization. Publish date: November 3, 2021, (last accessed: June 12, 2023).

inadequate water as to cause its death from lack of water or force its movement”. The scope of this provision covers the construction of water installations such as dams that block access to water indispensable for the survival of the civilian population.

This could be a calculated measure employed by the SNA with the intention of starving the civilian population and/or bringing about their forced displacement as a method of warfare. These methods of warfare constitute violation of the rules of IHL. In this regard, customary International Humanitarian law prohibits: “the use of starvation of the civilian population as a method of warfare” ([Rule 53](#)) and “attacking, destroying, removing or rendering useless objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population” ([Rule 54](#)).

It is worth mentioning that Turkey has a military presence in northern Syria and [collaborates with the SNA](#). This would invoke Turkey’s obligation [to ensure respect](#) for IHL. Thus, Turkey must exert its influence, to the degree possible, to stop such violations by the SNA and any armed group with which it collaborates.

Moreover, this case also raises issues related to the violation of fundamental human rights, such as the right to water, the right to food and the right to life. The blockade of the Khabur River has extensive negative impacts on the human rights of the civilian population of northeast Syria.

## Recommendations:

- 1. Respect international legal obligations on the protection of civilian infrastructure:** calling the Turkish government and other parties to the conflict to abide by their duties towards human rights and respect the right of all Syrians to access drinking and usable water, as well as neutralize water resources from political rivalries.
- 2. Reinforce monitoring on the ground regarding violations of the right to water and seek justice for victims:** international organizations and donors must support efforts of documenting and archiving water rights-related violations, meaning efforts conducted by victims’ groups and civil society organizations. Also, the Human Rights Council and the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria must include the issue of interruption of rivers in the monitoring situation, as well as include systematically water-related violations in their reports and raise this issue with relevant authorities.
- 3. Develop a strategy for the region on transboundary water challenges:** The United Nations must take the necessary measures to ensure the right of the civilians in northeast Syria to access safe and sufficient water, and address the conflict challenges influencing surface water, groundwater, soils and vegetation cover.

4. **Ensure inclusive participation in water resources management, access to information and transparency measures:** platforms must be established to involve key stakeholders, including local communities and civil society bodies, in consultations or policies about water resources and transboundary water, while increasing the platforms' transparency in reporting on water resources management issues.
5. **Uphold victims' groups and advocate for their causes:** victims' groups-led advocating efforts must be supported to pressure parties to the conflict, states and non-state armed groups, and urge them to commit to their duties towards human rights and respect the right of all Syrians to access potable and usable water, as well as neutralize water resources from political rivalries.
6. **Support environmental peacebuilding in the field of water resources management:** through exploring opportunities of bringing together the conflicting communities to reach joint peaceful solutions for problems of water resources management, particularly transboundary water. This has to be supported by the United Nations or other international organizations. An effective suggestion in this regard is to recall the best previous practices taken and the successful (diplomatic) initiatives in similar contexts.



