

Northeast Syria: Weaponizing Water During Conflict Exacerbates Humanitarian Crisis and Jeopardizes Cultural Identity and Civilians Lives



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Northeast Syria: Weaponizing Water During Conflict Exacerbates Humanitarian Crisis and Jeopardizes Cultural Identity and Civilians Lives

Denying civilians to access safe and sufficient water and weaponizing it by Turkish government as well as other parties to the conflict exacerbate the existing humanitarian crisis and leave disastrous impacts on local communities and on the ecosystem, biodiversity, and cultural identity in northeast Syria.

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Executive Summary

The image of a little girl filling buckets and jerry cans with water from an NGOs-supported makeshift cistern and transporting them using a child's wagon to her house, located in al-Hasakah City, reflects the worsening and chronic water crisis in northeast Syria and its catastrophic effects on the lives of more than four million people, including about one million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), who rely on water resources for drinking, daily use, agriculture and industry.

The ongoing Syrian conflict for more than twelve years has affected all joints of life in the country. Parties to the conflict have varied and Syria's geography has been divided into different areas of influence/control between them. Regional and international parties got involved in the Syrian conflict to further complicate the situation, destroy the infrastructure and deteriorate social services leaving massive humanitarian needs.

The main challenge lies in the fact that Syria's water resources are greatly entangled in the ongoing conflict in the country. Water resources are not run by single unified management but are rather managed according to the policies of the party in control. Meanwhile, parties such as the Syrian and Turkish governments and the groups affiliated with them are accused of committing water-related human rights violations.

Denying civilians to access safe and sufficient water and weaponizing it by the Turkish government as well as other parties to the conflict exacerbates the existing humanitarian crisis and leaves disastrous impacts on local communities and on the ecosystem, biodiversity, and cultural identity in northeast Syria.

The exacerbating water crisis in northeast Syria remains one of the main causes for food insecurity, undermining livelihood, and immigration seeking resources, let alone that water scarcity and its poor quality, poor sanitation and inadequate hygiene, notably in IDPs makeshift camps, cause serious water-borne diseases.

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. The [agreement](#) pertaining to organizing the Euphrates River water flow between Syria and Turkey says the Turkish side undertakes to release 500 M³/Sec to go through Syria. However, since 2019, the most dwindling levels of water flow, amounted to 200 M³/Sec have been recorded many times and at intermittent periods causing damages to the ecosystem and biodiversity in northeast Syria.

Turkey's breaches and deliberate reduction of Syria and Iraq's share of Euphrates River water are not recent developments, but rather a practice which Turkey has followed for decades, especially during years of drought. These actions have escalated following Turkey's incursion into Syria in 2016 and its occupation of vast areas northern the country.



Airborne imagery exclusive to “Synergy” and “Malva” taken on August 23, 2023, showing the low level and water pollution of the Euphrates River near the historic Qal'at Ja'bar [Ja'bar Castle] in Tabqa City in Raqqa countryside.

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.

[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-Areeshah/al-Sed](#) and [al-Twinah/Washokani](#), and [Serê Kaniyê](#) camps (which include tens of thousands of IDPs from different provinces and parts of Syria, as well as 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 \(ICRC\)](#).



Image exclusive to “Synergy” and “Malva” showing a woman and two little girls filling buckets and jerry cans with water from an NGOs-supported makeshift tank to take them to their houses in a neighborhood in al-Hasakah on July 4, 2023 due to the worsening and ongoing water crisis in northeast Syria.

In 2021, Turkish-backed factions of the SNA built three earth [dams](#) on the Khabur River interrupting water flow to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-held areas and causing critical damages to agriculture and food security. This interruption coincided with a period when the region was witnessing severe drought and hikes in fuel prices, preventing many farmers from operating their water pumps and rendering them unable to irrigate their farmlands. Consequently, vast areas of farmlands were left fallow (uncultivated).

As different water resources represented in rivers, most importantly the Euphrates River, and groundwater supplied by seasonal precipitation cover needs of approximately 4,800,000 beneficiaries in northeast Syria, among them more than one million IDPs, the crisis directly affects no less than the half and threatens civil peace as well. Scarcity in water resources creates disputes among the civilians on water resources and priority to access them.

An opinion poll conducted by Synergy Association for Victims and Malva for Culture, Art and Learning which targeted 201 local persons and IDPs reflects the existing humanitarian crisis due to the water crisis in northeast Syria. The poll's results were: 49% considered changing their original place of residence and move to areas less affected by water crisis, while 11% have already changed their place of residence, and 72% illustrated that water crisis this year have significantly worsened compared to last year.

One of the lesser-explored aspects of water crisis is its threat on the cultural identity of the regions in northeastern Syria, where water has long been a fundamental component of their heritage. Archeological sites and mythologies as well as the written and oral heritage all attest to the fact that water has been the backbone of life since ancient times and the main reason for establishing different civilizations alongside rivers particularly the Euphrates and the Khabur rivers. Songs, poems, stories and epics have been composed, such as *Moolaya* songs [traditional kind of songs] and others that glorify or lament the Euphrates and the Khabur rivers and addressing them as great rivers. Some argue that if Egypt is "The Gift of the Nile", so the Mesopotamia is "The Gift of the Khabur and the Euphrates", let alone folk tales and poems.

The exacerbated water crisis recalls years of drought and hunger which historically led to massive human movements and also threatens many water resources-relevant crafts, such as fishing, pottery, cane, bamboo among others which entirely, greatly or partially depend on water.

At a time when a UN bodies-brokered initiative is said to start functioning Allouk Water Station (the nearly sole safe water resource for al-Hasakah, its countryside and the nearby camps), other news says the operation room management of the Euphrates Dam has rung the alarm bell warning, under the title "the Euphrates is dying", that the dam will be inoperable due to the increasingly plummeting in the reservoir level.

The worsening water crisis in northeast Syria has exacerbated the already existing disastrous humanitarian crisis. Water shortage, its poor quality, poor sanitation and inadequate hygiene, notably in IDPs camps, have caused serious water-borne diseases, such as cholera, acute Diarrhea as well as skin diseases like Scabies and contributed in the outbreak of Covid-19 in its peak. Furthermore, people's economic burdens increased; in areas suffering from water crisis, one single family spend \$10-30 per month to purchase water where an average salary for one employee is equivalent to \$20 for the Syrian government employees and \$60 for the Autonomous Administration ones.

Introduction

On August 19th, 2023, operation room management of the Euphrates River issued another warning under the title (the Euphrates is dying, and its dam is at risk of going out of service). The warning stated that the Turkish side has been withholding water from the Euphrates River for the ongoing past 30 months and that the dam which supplies multiple areas with water and electricity is at risk of being out of service, according to the [official website](#) of the Autonomous Administration.

A previous [agreement](#) dating back to 1987 between Turkey and Syria stipulates that Turkey allows 500 M³/Sec of the Euphrates River to pass through Syria, to be shared between Syria and Iraq. However, Turkey withholds water behind its dams, particularly Ataturk Dam, Turkey's largest dams and one of the world's biggest, let alone its setting up huge investment projects on all rivers flowing from its soil, the most important of which is the Euphrates.

In a [study](#) released by professor Dr. Kirk W. Junker, a specialist in international environmental and water protection laws, and a consultant to the U.S government for environmental and water affairs, he highlights that the majority of the upstream countries look with arrogance and disdain at the downstream countries. In numerical terms, Junker notes that the Tigris absorptive capacity will decline from 49 billion M³ in 2009 to 9 billion M³ in 2025, while that of the Euphrates will decline from 19 billion M³ in 2009 to 8 billion M³ in 2025. About 21% of Iraq's water is unpotable and 8% of the Iraqi households drink contaminated water. If this situation continues, the Tigris and Euphrates could completely dry up in 2040.

In a video [statement](#) published on July 3, 2023, the Autonomous Administration declared al-Hasakah City as a disaster area due to water interruptions. According to the official statement, this was attributed to what they termed as "*Russian and governmental complicity*"; Water from Allouk Water Station has been cut from al-Hasakah and its countryside for more than [40 times](#) since the occupation of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê in October 2019 where the waterwork locates.

On July 14, 2013, Synergy Association for Victims and Malva for Culture, Art and Learning along with Syrian organizations and networks/alliances submitted an [allegation letter](#) addressed to the UN Special Procedures to highlight the main reasons for the severe and continuous water crisis in northeast Syria, its ramifications on the populations, including the IDPs, and violating their rights to access drinking and usable water. The signatories called on the UN to take the necessary procedures to find an urgent and sustainable solution to the water crisis in northeast Syria.

Background

The northeast Syria residents rely on three water sources, whether for drinking, domestic, agricultural, industry or other purposes. In addition to rains and groundwater, rivers have long been regarded as the region's lifeline. These water sources serve local and IDP communities, covering the needs of an estimated 4,800,000 beneficiaries¹, including more than one million IDPs.

In 2023, precipitation levels in al-Hasakah Governorate has seen 60% less than over the past documented three years² to correspond with the drought alarm issued by the Global Drought Observatory (GDO) with respect to eastern Syria in April 2021. At that time, al-Hasakah Governorate recorded a clearly sharp precipitation decline compared to the long-term monthly average (80 mm), calculated between 1981 and 2010.³

These levels alarm increase in drought waves and severity bringing more challenges to the residents and to the agrarian sector, especially that rains are responsible for supplying groundwater and main/seasonal rivers. A decade of hostilities has produced many activities that help deepen the climate change. The increase in the emission of greenhouse gases caused local warming and the entrapment of rain in the clouds.⁴

In tandem with the poor rainfall in al-Hasakah, the entire region experienced a significant decline in groundwater levels. Data collected from November 2021 to October 2022 showed that some areas in the region experienced levels that were five times lower than usual, compared to the long-term average.⁵ Droughts, are to blame for this reduction as groundwater levels dwindled along with low rains and overuse of groundwater reservoirs.

The residents turned to digging artisan wells to fill the demand gap generated by low river levels and the cutting off of water from the [Allouk water station](#) in the Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê. In late 2022, local authorities in the region [prohibited](#) residents from digging wells to save groundwater without providing a viable alternative other than tank water, which beneficiaries claim is distributed unfairly.⁶

Water crisis has had negative ramifications on agriculture, livestock, and energy sectors. Surveys collected over 2021 indicate that the percentage of cultivated land has declined to 53% due to poor water resources and immigration of farmers. In turn, the decline of agriculture sector affected the livestock as the percentage of ranching decreased to 39% in 2020 compared to 2008 given providing fodder and veterinary medicines became very difficult. The plummeting of the Euphrates River level has disastrously affected the

¹ "[Population Estimation of AANES](#)", HDC.

² "[Current Situation of the Water Crisis in Northeast Syria and its Humanitarian Impacts](#)", REACH, 26 June 2023.

³ "[Drought in Syria and Iraq – April 2021](#)", GDO, 22 April 2021.

⁴ "[Climate Change its Causes & Consequences](#)", HDC.

⁵ "[Current Situation of the Water Crisis in Northeast Syria and its Humanitarian Impacts](#)", REACH, 26 June 2023.

⁶ "[The AANES Bans Digging Artisan Wells](#)", North Press, 22 October 2022 (Last visited: 7 July 2023).

hydroelectric power as capacity to generate energy curtailed more than 66% and the average level declined from 415 MW in 2020 to 141 MW in 2021.⁷

These natural drivers and the resulting water shortages negatively affect the lives of the region's residents. The absence or lack of water services has turned the region into a hotspot for epidemics due to the dearth of required support and the willingness of some parties to the conflict to weaponize water at the most critical times, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In November 2022, Human Rights Watch (HRW) [demanded](#) that all parties to the conflict ensure the right to clean water and health for everyone in Syria. The organization documented the Turkish authorities' role in exacerbating an acute water crisis, which is believed to have given rise to the deadly Cholera outbreak spreading throughout Syria and into neighbouring countries, pointing out: "The Turkish authorities have failed to ensure an adequate water flow downstream into the Syrian-held portion of the Euphrates River and a consistent water supply from Allouk water station, a critical source of water."⁸

Legal Liability

Under International Humanitarian Law (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 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 opposition 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,

⁷ "[Water Crisis and Its Repercussions](#)", HDC.

⁸ "[Syria: Parties to Conflict Aggravate Cholera Epidemic](#)", Human Rights Watch, 7 November 2022 (last accessed 7 July 2023).

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](#)).

Turkey’s limited flow of the Euphrates River will have serious consequences for the population downstream [northeast Syria]. Taking into account both climatic conditions and further limitations of water coming in from the shutdown of Allouk Water Station, let alone the blockade of the Khabur River’s water flow. These water resources are indispensable for the survival of the civilian population.

Thousands of households are struggling with water access caused by the violation of Turkey and Turkish-backed SNA to have their right access potable water, household, agricultural and industry use. Thus, the blockade is an extreme measure that resulted in denying the civilian population of their sustenance⁹.

Multi-layered violations and their effects on the rights and cultural identity of residents of northeast Syria will have dire, long-term consequences and post-conflict sustainable impacts due to not considering their rights enough.

It is worth mentioning that Turkey is an occupying power in northern Syria and [collaborates with the SNA](#) and this would invoke Turkey’s [obligation](#) to ensure respect for human rights and IHL, including respect the rights of the all Syrians to access potable and usable water. 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, limited flow of the Euphrates River and the repeated interruption of Allouk Water Station all have extensive and negative impacts on the human rights of the civilian population of northeast Syria.

▪ Turkey’s Responsibility as an Occupying Power

IHL states that when a state exercises effective control over part of another state’s territory, it is subject to the laws of occupation, including the obligation to secure the basic needs of the population, among them water. Whether a State is practicing such control is a matter of fact and is not determined by the opinions of the parties involved.¹⁰

According to the international law governing occupation, an occupying power may not arbitrarily use the natural resources of the occupied territories for its own ends but may use

⁹ 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).

¹⁰ For an overview of state practice and judicial decisions confirming that occupation is a question of fact, see: Tristan Ferraro ‘[Determining the Beginning and End of Occupation under International Humanitarian Law](#)’, *International Review of the Red Cross*, pp 132-138.

them to the extent necessary for the current administration of the occupied territories and to meet the basic needs of the population.¹¹ Under no circumstances shall the occupying Power be entitled to exploit the population, resources, or other assets in the areas under its control for the benefit of its territory or population.¹²

Accordingly, in addition to the above-mentioned International Water Law, Turkey's exploitation of the occupation and effective control over Syria's territory, including its water resources and certain vital water facilities, to serve the goals and objectives of its territories and water resources on the one hand or other political ends, including bargaining with other parties to the armed conflict such as the Syrian Government or the Autonomous Administration on the other hand, is a clear violation of this principle.

▪ **Weaponizing Water During the Conflict**

All parties involved in armed conflict must mitigate the negative impact on the right of civilians to water even if water infrastructure is not a target of deliberate attack.¹³ In addition to negative obligations on the parties to the conflict, such as not to target water as a civilian object indispensable to the survival of the population, international law prohibits the use of water and its infrastructure as a weapon, including the diversion or blocking of access to water for purposes of coercion or political pressure.

Some practices, such as intentional cutting of water supplies, are considered to be a form of diversion prohibited under international law, especially when linked to specific contexts, such as the fact that the population is entirely dependent on the source of water that has been diverted or blocked, as is the case with, for example, the practice to which the Allouk Water Station has been subjected to.

These provisions apply to all parties to the conflict, including non-state armed groups, the occupying power and government actors. The duty to respond and secure the needs of the civilian population also imposes positive obligations on the parties to the conflict to undertake actions and measures that would ensure a more effective management of water resources and infrastructure.

¹¹ See, for example: James Crawford, 'Opinion: Third Party Obligations with respect to Israeli Settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories' (24 January 2012) (Available at: <https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/tucfiles/LegalOpinionIsraeliSettlements.pdf>).

¹² Antonio Cassese, 'Powers and Duties of an Occupant in Relation to Land and Natural Resources' in E Playfair, (ed.) *International Law and the Administration of Occupied Territories – Two Decades of Israeli Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1992), 420-1.

¹³ See in general: Diakonia International Humanitarian Law Centre, 'Protection of Water in Non-International Armed Conflicts' (May 2023) (Available at: <https://www.diakonia.se/ihl/news/protection-of-water-in-non-international-armed-conflicts/>).

▪ Enforcement of International Human Rights Law Continues

It is well established in international law and practice that the provisions of International Human Rights Law (IHRL) remain in force during armed conflict, and, in some situations, may have priority, particularly when other articles of IHL fail to provide comprehensive protection.

In the Syrian context, the Syrian State remains primarily responsible for safeguarding the population's access to water and must take all possible measures and procedures to ensure that they enjoy that right, which is enshrined in numerous IHRL instruments. Turkey, as an occupying Power, also bears the same responsibility in the areas under its control. It is also recognized that the provisions of IHRL apply to non-state armed groups exercising de facto authority or effective control over territories and population.¹⁴

In addition to the duty of states to respect the right to water, appropriate measures must be taken to ensure that this right is protected from interference by other parties and is fulfilled. The practices or negligence in Syria's water situation may amount to a clear violation of the three types of obligations: respect, protection and fulfilment.¹⁵

▪ Relevant Basic Principles and Rules in International Water Law

The 1997 Convention on the Law of Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses is the only international treaty that establishes the principles and rules of cooperation between states on the management, use, distribution, and protection of international watercourses. Unfortunately, Turkey did not accede to this agreement—which entered into force in 2014—and instead raised several objections and voted against it in the UN General Assembly.

Nonetheless, there are various other international legal instruments, including those regarded as a reflection of customary international law, that govern international relations involving international watercourses. Additionally, the state of armed conflict in Syria since 2012 and Turkey's involvement in it necessitate the implementation of the relevant provisions of IHL, in addition to the provisions of IHRL.

The principle of equitable and reasonable utilization is considered to be one of the most important international norms regarding the management of international watercourses. Even though the principle of state sovereignty gives states the right to use shared freshwater

¹⁴ UNOHCHR, Joint Statement by independent United Nations human rights experts on human rights responsibilities of armed non-State actors (25 February 2021), (Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2021/02/joint-statement-independent-united-nations-human-rights-experts-human-rights>).

¹⁵ See, for example: UNOHCHR, The Right to Water, Fact Sheet No. 35 (August 2010) (Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/FactSheet35en.pdf>).

within their territories, they are required to do so in an equitable and reasonable manner towards other states.¹⁶

Accordingly, no riparian state can exploit a *fait accompli* to acquire the right to international watercourses. Involved states must instead continue to enforce the principle of equitable and reasonable utilization through constant review and evaluation because changing conditions require adjustments in use.¹⁷ The armed conflict in Syria, and the various dynamics of control in the country, as well as the challenges brought about by climate change, may be some of the clearest examples that compel Turkey to conduct such assessments and evaluations.

The principle of no-harm is one of the provisions of customary international law that applies to IWL, in addition to being applicable to all aspects of international law and international relations.¹⁸ This principle can be interpreted as states can utilize what they own without causing harm to what other states own. This principle is closely linked to the principles of good neighborhood¹⁹ and prohibition of abuse of rights.²⁰ On the basis of this principle, states have an obligation of conduct rather than an obligation of result, which means they must take all reasonable measures not to cause significant harm. To do so, states must take into account the facts and circumstances in each case in accordance with the principle of due diligence. This principle applies to both upstream and other riparian states.

Moreover, riparian states must follow a set of procedures that, on the one hand, ensure the implementation of their other duties and lead to evasion of conflicts between states on the other. The most essential of these obligations are the duty to notify, the duty to exchange information and data, the duty to consult with potentially affected states, the duty to conduct an environmental impact assessment, and the duty to cooperate.²¹

The environmental consequences of the measures taken by riparian states should not be limited to assessing the environmental impact on the other states involved but should go beyond that to take into account environmental considerations in general. The Syrian case, such considerations include the impact on groundwater, soil pollution, and desertification, among others.

Eventually, it should not be assumed that the texts regulating IWL do not literally address individual rights as a justification for the negligence of these rights. The rationale behind the principle of equitable and reasonable utilization in itself and the provisions of IWL, which

¹⁶ See in general, Stephen McCaffrey (ed.), 'The Law of International Watercourses', Oxford University Press, Third Edition (2019).

¹⁷ Mohamed S. Helal, 'Sharing Blue Gold: The UN Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses Ten Years On', *Colorado Journal of International Environmental Law and Policy*, Vol. 18, No. 2. (2007), p. 345.

¹⁸ See, for example: *Corfu Channel (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland v. Albania) (Merits)*, I.C.J. reports 1949, p. 4, para. 22.

¹⁹ UN General Assembly, Declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation among States in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations (A/8082), Resolution No. 2625 (XXV), 24 October 1970.

²⁰ See: PCIJ, *Germany v. Poland (1926)*, P.C.I.J. (Ser. A No. 7 at 30).

²¹ B. Baker Röben, 'International Freshwaters', in F.L. Morrison and R. Wolfrum (eds.), *International, Regional and National Environmental Law (2000)*, pp. 303-304.

regulate the management and distribution of water between states, is that both this principle and the provisions aim to meet vital human needs and therefore should be prioritized over any other uses.²²

Recommendations

1. Establish an impartial and independent monitoring mechanism for the Euphrates River and all transboundary water resources shared by Syria, Turkey, and Iraq. Its mission should be tasked to oversee compliance with signed agreements and the provisions of international law, as well as to facilitate dialogue between key stakeholders to reach a sustainable settlement that ensures equitable and reasonable water usage.
2. Call on 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.
3. Reinforce monitoring and oversight of 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 the Syrian Arab Republic must systematically include the issue of interruption of rivers water-related violations in their reports and raise this issue with the relevant authorities.
4. 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.
5. 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.
6. Prioritize the conservation and prevention of depletion of existing water resources, in addition to the rehabilitation of their infrastructure, and initiate the clean-up and treatment of all contaminated water resources and rivers.
7. Pressure all parties, including the Syrian Government and the Autonomous Administration, to assume their responsibilities in providing the interventions

²² K. Bourquain, 'Freshwater Access from a Human Rights Perspective: A Challenge to International Water and Human Rights Law', Brill-Nijhoff (2008), p. 43.

necessary in northeast Syria to avoid the resurgence of epidemics, such as cholera, including the increase of the number of water stations.

8. Support efforts of preserving the collective memory and cultural identity of people of northeast Syria, particularly in the region between the Euphrates and the Tigris rivers, and plan for interventions and projects aiming to protect crafts, livelihood and industries at risk of extinction due to water resources crisis as a part of seeking a sustainable and comprehensive peace in Syria.

Methodology

This joint report prepared by Synergy Association for Victims and Malva for Culture, Art and Learning relies on an approach focusing on victims' experiences, perspectives and priorities in northeast Syria towards the worsening water crisis and its impact on humanitarian crisis, cultural identity and societal peace.

The report is based on an extensive research on the historical and legal context of the crisis and on 20 direct testimonies/interviews collected during July and August 2023. The interviewees included water crisis-directly affected victims, residents or IDPs, craftsmen, and experts in various relevant fields. The purpose is to study the impact of water crisis on the exacerbating existing humanitarian crisis and jeopardizing the cultural identity and the civilians' lives.

The report is also based on analyzing outcomes of an opinion poll for 201 persons from different social components with a view to a broader understanding the seriousness of water crisis in northeast Syria and explore its multi-faceted impacts on local communities. Different aspects, such as geographical diversity, age and gender were taken into account in the research sample, with female participation accounting for 43%.

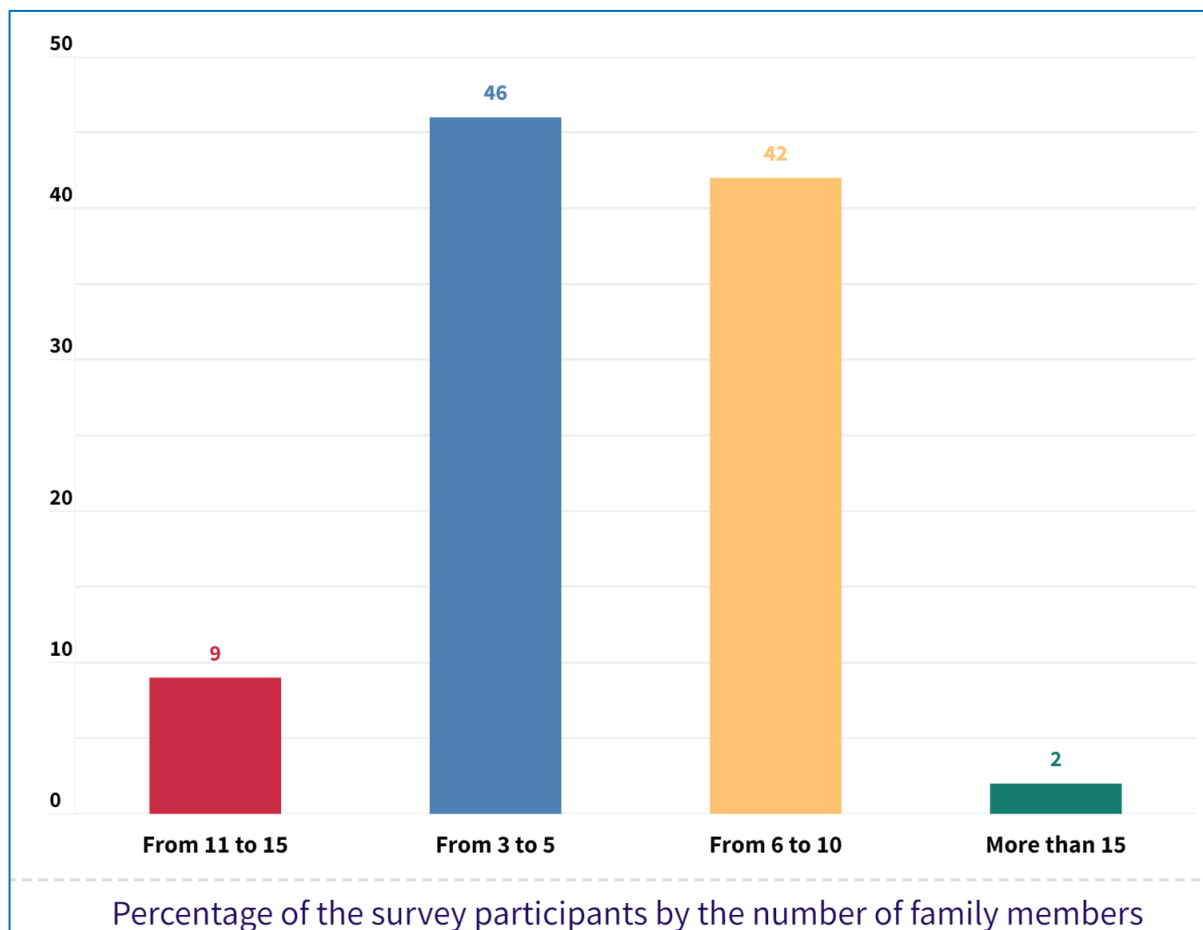
Furthermore, the report relies on information from various open sources, human rights and press reports, and official statements which were cross-checked, verified and some were quoted.

The Outcomes of the Opinion Poll

Synergy and Malva conducted an opinion poll targeting 201 persons, on the seriousness of water crisis in northeast Syria and explore its multi-faceted impacts on local communities. 108 persons affected by the blockade of the Khabur River, and the repeated interruption of Allouk Water Station took part in the poll, in addition to 93 persons affected by Turkey's restriction of the water flow of the Euphrates River.

The percentage of female participants was 43% compared to 57% of the men. The suffering of women, who often carry out the chores and share the economic repercussions with men,

reflects the implications of water crisis on households as a whole. In addition to water crisis' impact on agriculture and some water-related crafts and professions. The results of the opinion poll showed that 42% participants live in, or support, a family composed of 6-10 members, thus increasing their humanitarian needs. The average number of family members of the participants is at least 1,374.

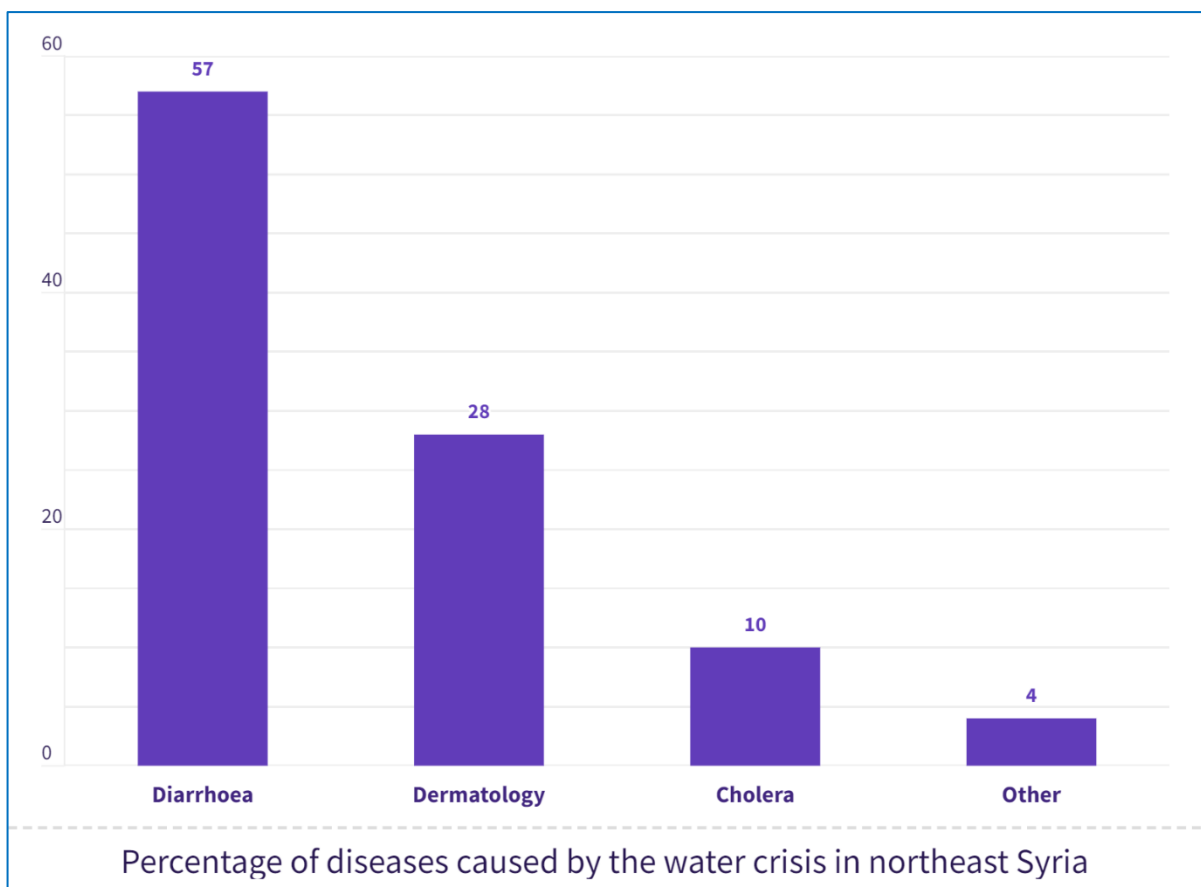


The percentage of the participants, aged between 31 and 45, was the biggest as it reached 53%, mostly breadwinners; a percentage reflecting a deeper understanding of the water crisis repercussions. On the other hand, the percentage of the participants, aged 18-30, reached 37%, reflected the water crisis repercussions on the youth.

- **Catastrophic Humanitarian Ramifications**

The results of the opinion poll reflected the exacerbated existing humanitarian crisis due to the water crisis in northeast Syria. 49% of the participants considered changing their original place or residence and move to other places less affected by water crisis. Whereas 11% of the participants did move to a new place of residence. Also 72% of the interviewees illustrated that water crisis has exacerbated significantly this year compared to last year.

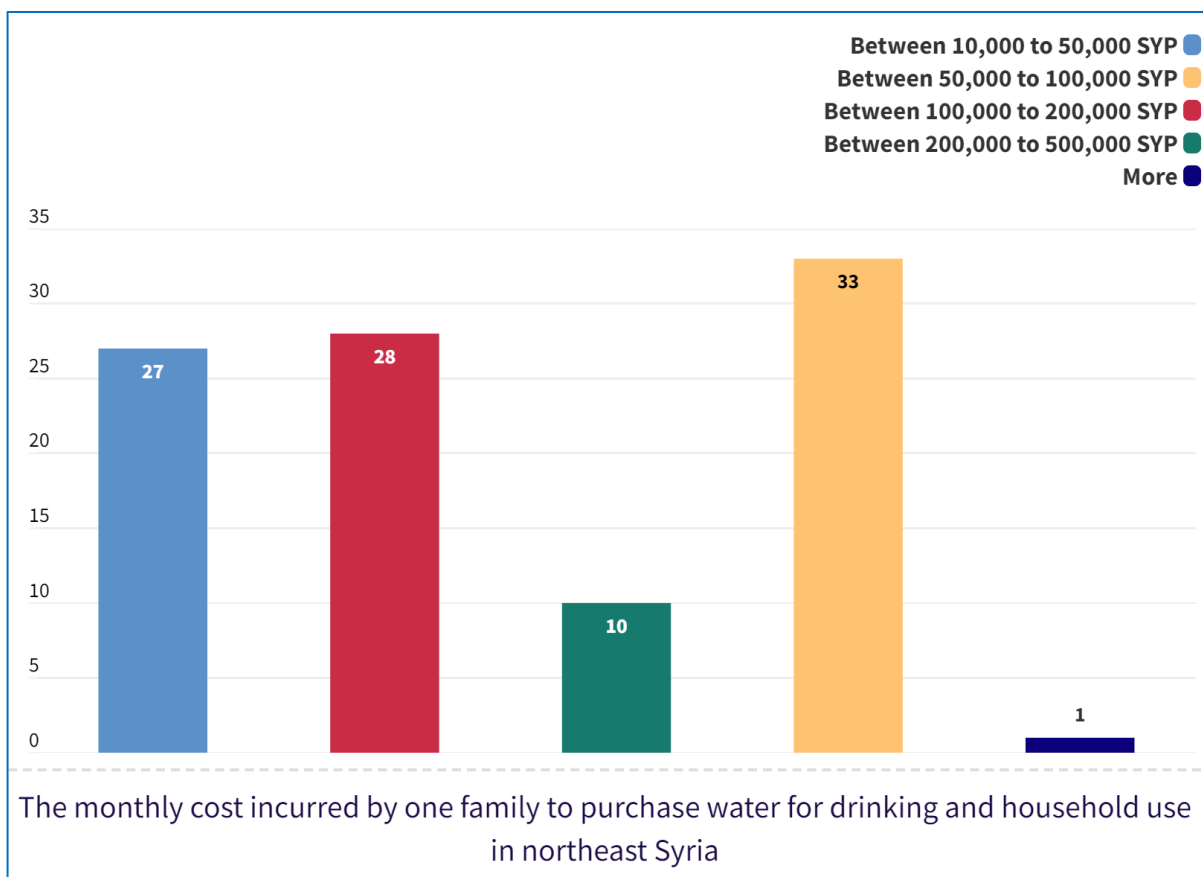
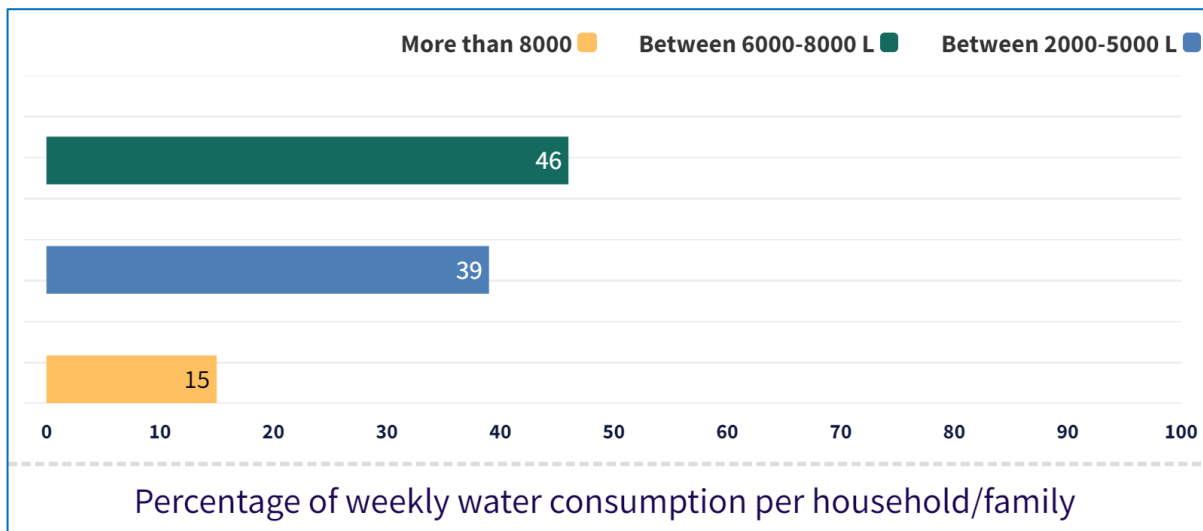
while 10% said water shortage and its poor quality was the reason their family members infected cholera, mostly common in Deir Ez-Zor.



- **Additional Economic Burdens**

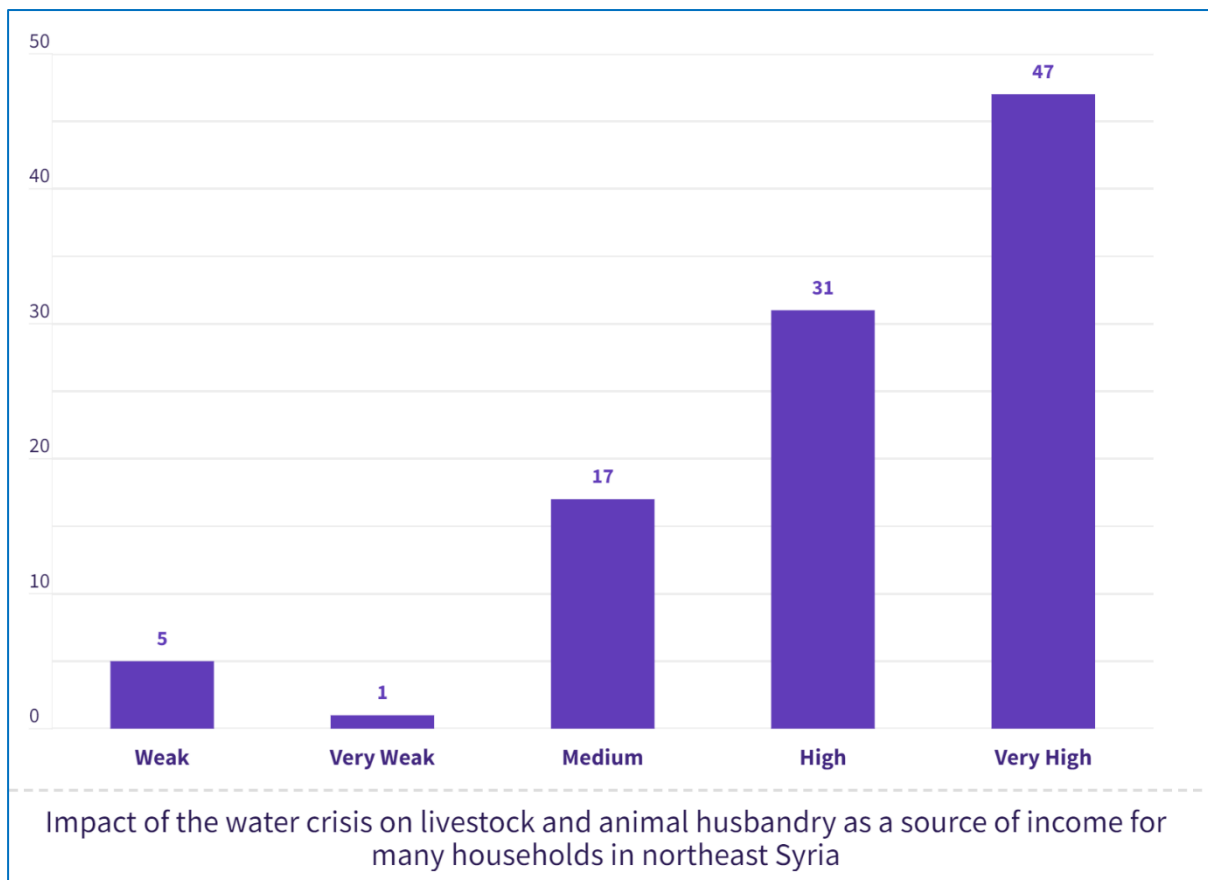
The results of the opinion poll showed that: 46% of the participants’ families consume about 6,000-8,000 L of water weekly for multiple domestic use, 15% consume more than that, while 39% consume 2,000-5,000 L per week.

Purchasing water from private cisterns, the majority of which are uncontrolled or checked, reflects huge additional burdens on the residents, particularly in al-Hasakah City and its countryside who are considered to be the main population affected by the repeated interruption of Allouk Water Station in the east of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê following its occupation by Turkey in October 2019. 10% of the participants said they spend 200,000-500,000 Syrian pounds (SYP), at the time of writing this report, on purchasing water per month while 27% said they spend 100,000-200,000 SYP per month. This percentage can be compared to the general employees’ monthly salary: Employees working for the Autonomous Administration are paid monthly 400,000-800,000 SYP whereas Syrian state employees are paid 100,000-150,000. This explicitly illustrates the harsh economic burden water crisis has left on households depleting their already poor financial income.



In addition to the economic heavy burdens for securing daily water, water crisis has also affected agriculture and green spaces due to interruption of water flow from the Khabur River and the limited flow of water from the Euphrates River from the Turkish side. 84% of the participants said water resources crisis have greatly affected the agriculture production and green spaces that rely for irrigation on water flowing from the Khabur and the Euphrates in northeast Syria. This percentage has impacts on the financial income for thousands of households who mainly depend on agriculture as an essential source of living.

94% of the participants explained that water resources crisis has affected raising livestock, as an essential or secondary source for income. 47% out of them said water crisis has had a significant impact on this sector.



- **Changes in Daily Routines**

The participants of the opinion poll said that water crisis has severely affected their healthy daily routines, most importantly regular baths specially during summer. They said they resorted to rationing water at the expense of personal hygiene and watering plants. Their families are forced to recycle water and use it more than once for more than one purpose.

Participants also expressed getting more nervous and stressed whenever the water is cut off and/or the interruption period prolonged.

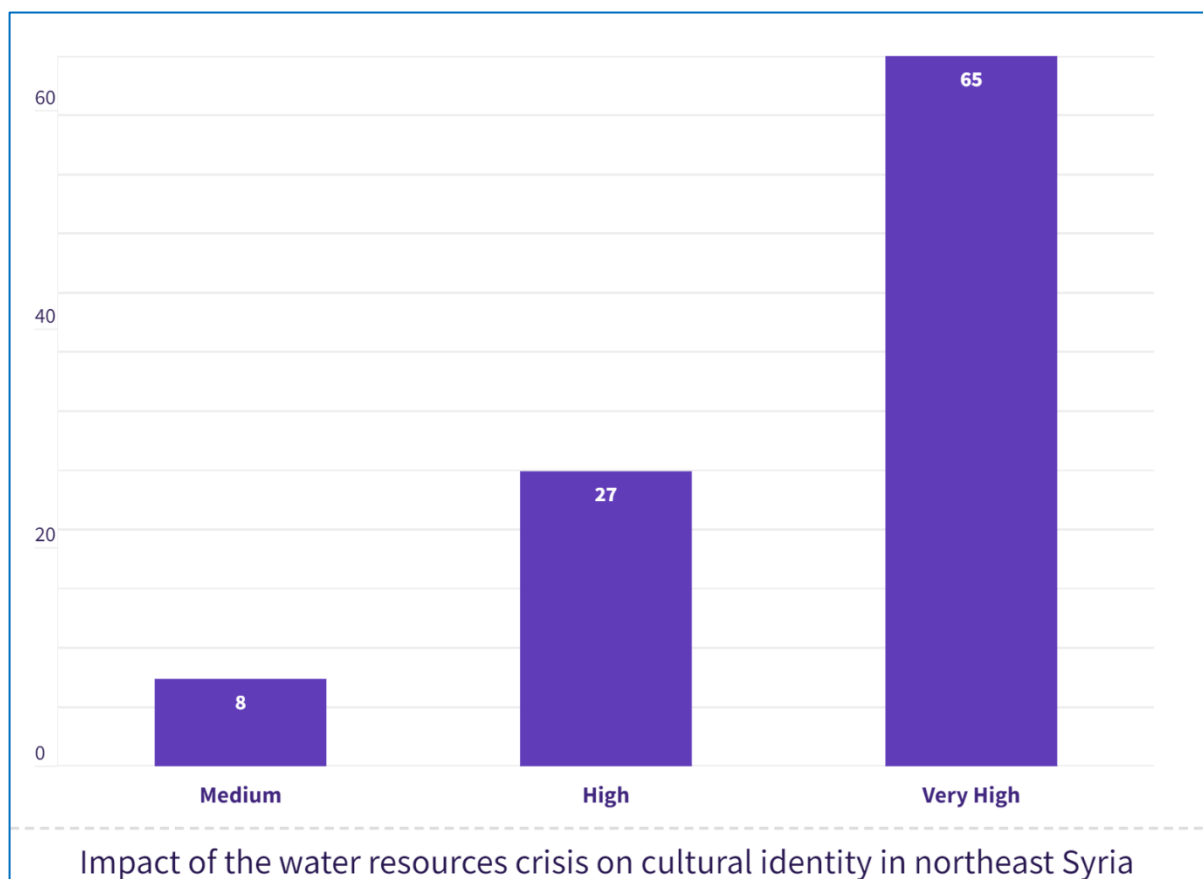
- **Threatening Civil Peace**

Water crisis has impacts on civil peace, according to participants in the opinion poll, giving incidents they witnessed or, directly or indirectly, were involved in. The incidents varied from disputes among locals on the priority to get water distributed by the municipalities or the use of high- pressure centrifugal water pumps (locally known as thief pumps, Arabic *harami*) that have high capacity to draw high volume water depriving neighbors to access water if there is

less water available in the network. The water crisis-relevant disputes led to injuries and one of the participants reported divorce cases as he witnessed one in his own neighborhood.

- **Threatening Cultural Identity**

Water resources crisis jeopardizes and adversely affects the cultural identity in northeast Syria, as it threatens many crafts and professions with societal cultural nature to extinct and has an impact on holding culturally different activities in the region. 65% of the participants said water resources crisis significantly impacted the cultural identity.



85% of the participants said that the crisis of water resources has, and still, impacted crafts, professions, and manufacturing industries of societal cultural trend, such as fishing, pottery, cane, bamboo among others, in addition to manufacturing industries (instruments, leather, etc). While 63% added that water resources crisis has negatively, and gradually, affected organizing cultural activities in the region.

“If we consider that one single air conditioner, used for cooling in the region, consumes about 90 L of water per day, then we understand that the camp’s residents are forced to purchase additional water from private cisterns.”

He continued saying:

“Boreholes from which cisterns are filled are considered to be hotspot for water-borne diseases. First, offices of the Autonomous Administration check these boreholes and authorizes them. However, over time, and due to their deficiency, the contamination rate in some of them increases to the point where the water becomes unfit for consumption. This leads to many diseases, the most common of which are enteritis, diarrhea, dehydration, renal insufficiency, skin lesions, and gum infections.”

The consequences of the water crisis are particularly evident among children. The teacher Mohammed Hajo, an education official in Serê Kaniyê Camp, said 3,230 students attend school for the three educational stages; 60 cases of scabies amongst the children were recorded this year in addition to cases of the spread of lice particularly amongst the students in the primary stages. These are all results of poor hygiene, which in turn is linked to water shortage.

- **Vulnerable Categories are the Most Affected**

Repercussions of water crisis exacerbate in summer and appears distinctively amongst the vulnerable categories, especially children and people with special needs like in the case of Mohammed Rahim, who is unable to stand up. He feels the consequences of water crisis more watching efforts of all members of his family to secure water, fill in tanks and call on water tanks to come. Rahim says people like him can only watch the news about water which is an important part of the crisis that has cast its shed on all joints of life.

Rahim said he heard that some children escaped from their homes located in the security square (where the Syrian Government Forces are in control in al-Hasakah) because private water cisterns do not enter that area making it more difficult to secure water. Therefore, the children fled because their parents do not respond to their demands to move to other places of residence as they are forced to carry jerry cans filled with water to distant areas beyond their capacity.

- **Reduction of Agricultural Production**

Since the Euphrates River has been historically considered sources for agriculture creating a greenbelt along the river, hence, restricting water of the Euphrates River behind Turkish dams has seriously curtailed the water level, reduced irrigation-dependent crop production on the Euphrates, and substantially affected the yields.

Ahmed al-Khalid, a farmer from Raqqa, said water scarcity damaged his crops. Once, agriculture production was his sufficient main source of income, but now he works in other freelance jobs, which are hardly enough for his daily living.

Water scarcity led to disputes among the locals, particularly farmers, in a region always characterized by civil peace and coexistence, al-Khalid confirmed. The priority to draw water and irrigate farmlands were the causes of disputes, which he himself witnessed many and in some incidents there was shooting in the air.

Blind Malla, the Chief Executive Officer of Organization (HDC), pointed out that agriculture declined by half in northeast Syria during 2022 mainly due to water resources crisis and the farmers' reluctance to farming.

- **Threatening Livelihood**

Adham al-Ali is a fisherman who inherited his profession from his ancestors and lives with his seven-member family near the Euphrates River. He said the plummeting level of the Euphrates alarms that it will dry up in the future and has already significantly impacted fishing which is his quasi-main source of income. Al-Ali, along with some members of his family also raise livestock.

Fishing declined badly due to limited flow of the river coming from Turkey. The flow reached 200 M³/Sec and affected the fishermen's source of income along the Euphrates River.

Al-Ali stated that despite his strong attachment to fishing, he will eventually leave this hobby if this situation continues.

Water Crises Threatens Cultural Identity

As a part of its multi-faceted impacts, water resources crisis threatens the cultural identity of residents in northeast Syria. Water shortage impacted, and still, many regions identity-related professions and crafts.

- **Pottery Industry as a Cultural Identity**

Pottery industry is one of the professions that expresses and is closely related to the region's identity. Pottery making, development and shapes can depict the region's social status and its development. The region's archaeological hills are full of versatile jars dating back to hundreds of years.

The boss Anto is one of the few potters who remained in areas of northeast Syria and the only craftsman in Qamishli City. He works in pottery industry which was passed down from his

father, who in turn inherited it from his seventh grandfather. Anto says his children will take up this profession because preserving it is something related to moral legacy, in addition to being a source of income.

Anto added that even though life has developed, and its tools have evolved, this craft is still preserving given its own symbolism and presence. Previously, jars were used for drinking water and wine, storing food stuff, such as fat, Qaliya (meat stored for winter) and ghee among others, and also for bringing water.

Anto continued:

“Long ago and until now, pottery has had a social traditions-related significance heritage and particularly symbolizes folklore. One of the region’s folk customs during wedding ceremonies was filling a jar with candies and then breaking it into pieces as a good luck. They are also filled with water and then broken after a traveler to wish him safety.”

The potter Anto pointed out that water crisis impacted his profession significantly. Pottery industry relies on a particular kind of earth he fetches from the Euphrates River, which was greatly impacted due to the plummeting of the river’s level. Furthermore, pottery industry relies on 2,000 L of water each time to convert the earth to mud by washing it several times and move on to other stages.

Despite all challenges, Anto said he will keep practicing his craft, so he has drilled an artisan well inside his workshop to avoid water resources crisis that pushed other craftsmen to leave it. The well’s water level varies in summer and winter and is linked to rains. It is worth mentioning that Anto and his 11-member family make a living from this craft.

- **Violin and Creating Joy**

Violin, a simple string instrument, is one of the folk musical instruments played in wedding ceremonies and joyful occasions, accompanied by mawwals (song gener) and Dabke (Levantine Arab folk dance) songs. It is closely related to the region’s cultural heritage. Violin industry, despite its importance, is one of the very few crafts and is at risk of extinction, according to Abdulqader Henoush, a violin maker who has been taking up this profession for 35 years and inherited it from his father.

After being a violin export to several countries, including Turkey and the European countries in which communities from this region live and are still linked to their heritage, now violin industry is at risk of extinction for numerous reasons. Some of which are closely related to water resources crisis, such as shortage of rains, scarcity of river water resources and irrigation channels, drying up of many rivers and threatening other rivers of drying up as well, according to Henoush.

Violin manufacturing is made up of two essential components that rely directly on rivers; they are wood and fish leather. Violin makers used apricot and walnut trees that are about to disappear due to rivers drying up and scarcity of water resources. In addition, the leather used mainly come from the Ariidae (ariid catfish) that used to live in the Euphrates River, but fishing has been badly affected due to the plummeting water levels.

- **Fur Industry Also Needs Water**

Since 1990, Milad Touma has been working in leather tanning and fur manufacturing, an ancient profession related to the region's cultural identity. The various types of leather uses refer to the region's culture and its taste. Leathers are used as houses covers and car floor mats, decoration, and as a costume to keep warm in winter. Different communities from the region wear clothes made of leather, mostly by men. Leather materials from inside are made of animal wool and leather, especially lanolin. It is a local materials-based craft but is at risk of extinction similar to many other crafts, according to Touma.

Touma has been taking up this profession for 33 years, but it seems he would abandon it. He said, **"I do not want to quit this profession, but I am forced to do that."**

This industry depends on livestock, which was negatively affected by water resources crisis, and also heavily depends on water in the actual work stages. There are multiple stages to get this product, according to Touma. First you start washing and cleaning and you need huge amounts of water. Then, you add materials like salt and alum. After that, there is the stage of rinsing and filtering. All of these stages need huge amount of water.

Touma mentioned the difficulty of the profession, stating that it requires significant effort, and the craftsmen tail in their work. That's why most of those working in it are men, and they have all abandoned it because it is heading towards extinction. The reasons for this decline are multiple, including the scarcity of water resources, the shortage of pastures and animal wealth, in addition to high prices and transportation costs.

- **Raising Buffalos and Making Malai (Kurdish Qeymax)**

For 18 years, Basma al-Hamadi has been raising water buffalos and making malai, one of the most culturally valuable products in areas of northeast Syria which is famous for raising buffalos and making malai. Mainly women work in it and there is a special market where shopkeepers offer malai next to honey for breakfast. In general, expatriates and foreigners (tourists) visit that market to taste a traditional dish the region is famous for.

Water buffalos consume lots of water as they are raised in herds; each one has up to 100 individuals. In addition to water for drinking, buffalos need to roll in water, especially in summer. Therefore, Basma and her family take the buffalos to the Euphrates River in the summer due to the drought in the Jaghjagh River, which passes through Qamishli city, as it is

interrupted by Turkey as well. Turkey opens the dams and allows the Jaghjagh to flow into Syria only in winter because precipitation level is high.

Buffalos need to wallow in water or to be splashed by water when temperature is too high. Water resources crisis and the dwindle of the flow of water from the Euphrates River has badly affected raising buffalos and making malai. Furthermore, mainly water-based pastures have diminished.

- **Manufacturing Industries in Light of Water Crisis**

Water resources crisis impacts simple manufacturing industries that express the societal culture, particularly home catering and household economy.

Rojin Ahmed, an engineer who has worked for years in rural women's units of agriculture offices, said scarcity of water resources have had an impact on women's jobs. Water-related manufacturing and creative industries retreated.

Examples of these industries are: converting tomatoes into tomato paste, drying vegetables, supplies and preserves. They were damaged significantly as productivity declined directly affecting the economy, contributing to soaring prices and resorting to imported products with high prices, hence affecting the population's livelihood.

Water resources-dependent local production quantities, directly or indirectly, affect the revitalizing factories, workshops and plants, and even affect the livestock-based industries which were also severely impacted by water crisis, such as textile cheese plants and leather tanning. Consequently, all these industries retreated in the region.

Cotton yields are considered to be the most important materials used in manufacturing industries since cotton seeds contribute to manufacturing oil, cotton husks are used as fodder, and cotton itself is used for making clothes, threads, mattresses and pillows.

The farmer Yousef Hemo said all these industries retreated and the majority of cotton gins have stopped due to the decline of cotton production and the decrease of cotton-planted swaths that clearly resulted from water resources crisis.

Wood industries are considered to be local important manufacture industries. they rely, in important parts of them, on wood trees grown in the streams of Saffan Dam, in the countryside of Malikiyah/Derik, like poplar and willow trees, Gabi Ni'me, a craftsman who has taken up this profession since he was 12 said. However, this profession retreated severely due to water resources crisis as many rivers dried up in the last years. In the past around 400-500 tons of wood were provided, now only up to 30 tons are provided as a direct impact of water resources crisis.