

# ORSAM REVIEW OF REGIONAL AFFAIRS

No.6, JULY 2014



## ISIS, KRG AND NEW HYDROPOLITICS ORDER IN THE EUPHRATES-TIGRIS BASIN

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It can be argued that a new era has been started since the ISIS control spread from Syria to Iraq in particular Mosul together with other vast areas. Since the ISIS controlled territories in Syria and Iraq lie in the Euphrates-Tigris basin, some speculate on how the ISIS may use those water infrastructure installations against the central government in Baghdad. As a result of over three years of war in Syria, every form of weaponry is liberally used in the conflicts in the region; hence it is observed that the water resources and structures are to be used as a weapon. In this work the water structures constructed on the Euphrates-Tigris Basin that lies in territories of Syria and Iraq will be examined and the approaches adopted by the powers that control the area is tried to be defined. Similarly parallel to ISIS advance, this work will discuss how the attempts of KRG to expand its domain in disputed areas impact the hydropolitics of the basin.

The attacks of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) against the central government in the Anbar province since the beginning of the year have gained a different dimension since gaining the control of Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq. After the failure of the Iraqi army in Fallujah and Ramadi within the Anbar province, ISIS seems to have gained control in most of the Sunni dominated territories in Iraq, Mosul being in the centre of these areas. Additionally, the armed units of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) have increased their presence, which was established by Asayish and Peshmerga forces in Kurdish populated areas such as in Kirkuk, and also have expanded their influence beyond the territories the of Arbil, Dohuk and Suleymaniyah provinces.

Currently, it seems that central government in Baghdad cannot defend its boundaries and has lost vast amounts of territory. The latest statements of the United States indicate that the US would not provide any military assistance to Baghdad. It is known that Iraq had to purchase military jets from the Russian Federation to use against ISIS, despite the paid pre-order for such items from the USA.<sup>1</sup>

Since the ISIS controlled territories in Syria and Iraq lie in the Euphrates-Tigris basin, some speculate on how the ISIS may use those water infrastructure installations against the central government in Baghdad. ISIS has been using Fallujah Dam and diversion structures in clashes in the Anbar province since January 2014.<sup>2</sup> Hence, it will not be surprising to see such actions by the



ISIS in the recently gained areas.

After the attacks on Mosul, ISIS has rapidly gained control in Sunni populated areas. Since the news about ISIS' potential intentions of cutting water and causing a water shortage in mostly Shia populated areas of Iraq, it is essential to evaluate the situation. The ISIS controlled territories are upstream of Baghdad in the Euphrates-Tigris basin. Those areas are also important because of the existence of main water structures, such as dams and the water diversion facilities. The importance of the Euphrates has been highlighted during the clashes between ISIS and the Iraqi central government due to the territories that are under the ISIS control in Syria lying within the Euphrates valley. With the aforementioned reasons in mind, it is important to evaluate these rivers and their existing water structures separately.

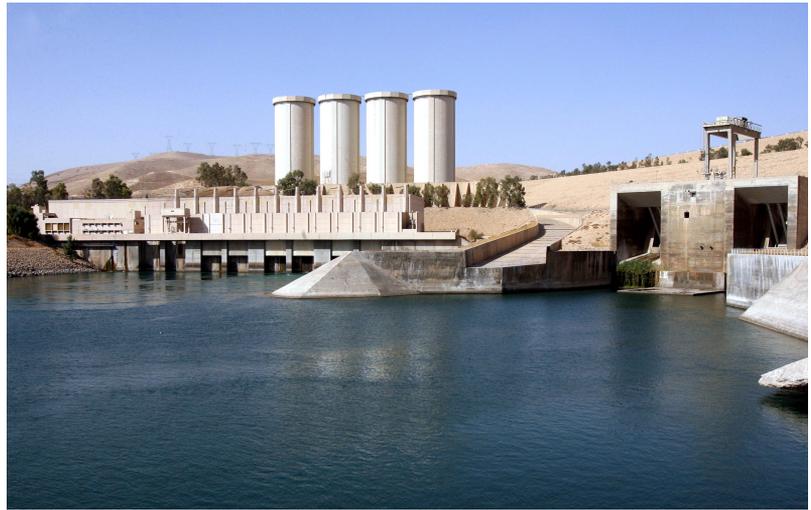
## 1. Situation of the Tigris River and Tributaries

### *A. Mosul Dam:*

The situation in the Mosul Dam, which is one of the most important water-structures on the Tigris River, can be summarized in

the following way. There are two Peshmerga divisions recruited by KRG at the Mosul Dam, namely the 15th and 16th Mountain Divisions, nominally affiliated with the Nineweh Operations Command of the Iraqi Army.<sup>3</sup> Bad management, reluctance to fight, and the shortage of ammunition are the main factors that led to the fall of Mosul. However, the 15th and 16th Mountain Divisions deployed close to the Mosul dam have not retreated from their positions. The idea that ISIS can conquer the dam and use it as a weapon against the Shia government without the retreat of those divisions is out of question. It is also possible that those divisions have been reinforced after the advance of ISIS. Due to the close proximity of the Mosul dam on the way to the Dohuk province, which is in the KRG's region, the Peshmerga units will defend this area strongly. Some suggest that ISIS may blow up the dam, causing a flood in Baghdad. However, this seems a very unlikely possibility because Mosul is under the ISIS control and its location is downstream of the dam. The structural problems of the Mosul dam also would make causing such a flood fairly easy. The dam's embankment is founded on top of gyp-

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sum, a soft mineral that dissolves upon contact with water. After the invasion of Iraq by the USA, a remediation program was started, but has not yet been completed. Thus, it is impossible to operate the dam at the maximum level. The Badush Dam, which is supposedly built to cope with those issues, remains unfinished. The construction of the Badush Dam, which is planned to regulate the tail waters of the Mosul dam, was halted after the 2003 US invasion. Because of the risk related with the Mosul Dam, Baghdad administration was forced to revise the plans and to increase the height of the new dam. However, it is highly unlikely that such plans will be executed in the near future after the recent developments in the area.

### *B. Samarra Regulator:*

Samarra Dam is also of great importance among the water structures built along the Tigris River. This dam was constructed in 1954 to prevent Baghdad from the floodwater of the Tigris River as well as to divert the surplus waters of the Tigris River to Thartar Lake.<sup>4</sup> It is possible for ISIS to try to flood Baghdad by controlling the Samarra and its dam. Due to other water structures on the Tigris and its tributaries, the natural flow of water has been diminished. On the other hand, the central government will not retreat from this city easily because of the Al-Askari Mosque, a holy place for Shias.

### *C. Hemrin Dam:*

The Hemrin Dam is an important water structure on the Diyala tribu-

tary of the Tigris River. The KRG has fought ISIS in order to maintain its control over the region, since the KRG claims that the Hemrin Mountains are its natural boundary.<sup>5</sup> Clashes between the ISIS and Peshmerga forces continue in Jalawla, located northeast of the Hemrin Mountains. On the other hand, ISIS controls the area downstream of the Hemrin Dam.<sup>6</sup> The dam was built for flood control, irrigation, and hydroelectric production. There is also a diversion structure downstream from the dam in order to feed the irrigation canals. The area irrigated from this dam covers vast plains on both sides of the Diyala River between the Khalis and Bakubah districts. Whoever controls the dam will also have the power over the agricultural areas. In the case of a KRG rule over the Hemrin Dam, the KRG will gain influence over Baghdad. Hence the KRG tries to reach the Hemrin Mountains, which is claimed as its natural borders. Any change in Hemrin Dam operations will have a direct impact on the areas downstream. It is worth remembering that when the KRG had a dispute with the central government in Baghdad, it did not hesitate to use the Darbandikhan Dam and its water released for irrigation as leverage in politics.<sup>7</sup> The KRG's past record is not so bright in these

regards.

*D. Adhaim Dam:*

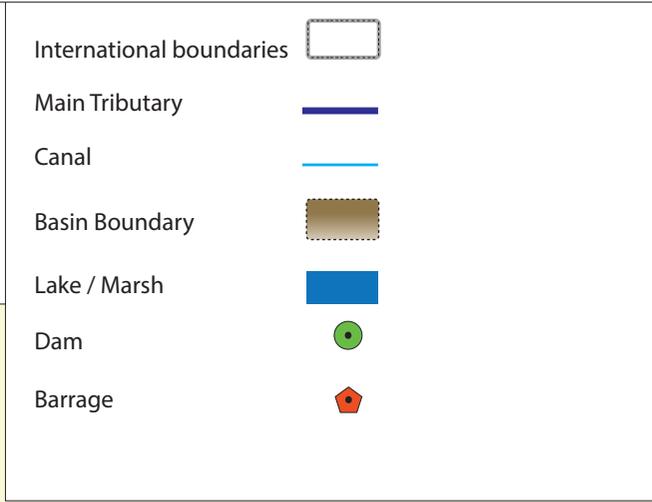
Adhaim River, the most important tributary of the Tigris River, originates in Iraq. The river, which has the same name of the dam, Adhaim, converges with the Aksu tributary, which passes through Tuzhurmatu. This dam is also in the Hemrin Mountains. On 16 June 2014, the town of Adhaim, located south of the dam, fell to ISIS. Also it is known that ISIS has some activities around the territories of the dam.<sup>8</sup> Due to the low flow regime of the river and the small capacity of the dam, it is unlikely to be used as a bargaining chip against Baghdad. As mentioned before, the Hemrin Mountains, where the dam is located, are deemed to be the natural borders of the KRG and a clash between the KRG and ISIS can be expected in near future.

*E. Dukan and Darbandikhan Dams:*

Dukan and Darbandikhan Dams, which are located on the Lesser Zap and Diyala River tributaries of the Tigris River, are also under the control of KRG. It can be asserted that ISIS can have no effect on those dams within the immediate future.

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# WATER STRUCTURES IN THE EUPHRATES-TIGRIS BASIN



## 2. Situation of the Euphrates River

It can be said that in the Euphrates valley from the Turkish-Syrian border to Fallujah, which is a city close to Baghdad, there is ISIS control except a few small pockets. According to the latest news, ISIS also gained control of the left bank of the Euphrates by occupying the villages of Zor Magar, Beyati and Ziyaret, located just on the other side of the Turkish border after gaining the control of Jarablus.<sup>9</sup> The dams and other water structures make the Euphrates River an important water resource for all riparian countries, namely Turkey, Syria and Iraq. The Tishrin and Tabqa Dams in Syria not only supply water for domestic usage and hydroelectric production, but also enable irrigation in large agricultural areas. The Haditha dam in Iraq has an important role in the production of electricity in Iraq.

### *A. Tishrin and Tabqa Dams:*

These two dams are the main water structures on the Euphrates for Syria. However the Syrian regime lost its control on both these dams, which were constructed for hydroelectricity and irrigation. ISIS seems to have gained control of the entire Euphrates valley with the sei-

zure of Deir ez-Zor after Rakka, the centre for ISIS operations in Syria. The two important water structures of the Tabqa Dam and the Tishrin Dam, which are found upstream from the Tabqa, are both under ISIS control and ISIS cut the domestic water supply for Aleppo.<sup>10</sup>

It is not possible to obtain concrete information about the water level and water regime of the dams. After a while, without the proper maintenance of these dams, depreciation will occur in the structures and irrigation systems of dams and they will be out of commission.

The water structures on the Euphrates River in Iraq are almost completely under ISIS control. ISIS has gained control of Sunni populated areas in Iraq after the Mosul raid. The Anbar province, the main area where ISIS activities are observed, contains the Euphrates valley and the main water structures. Listing from upstream to downstream, the Haditha, Ramadi and Fallujah Dams are the main water structures.

### *B. Haditha Dam:*

The Haditha Dam was constructed between the years 1977-1987 and was repaired after the 2003 US invasion. It is one of the most important

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dams producing hydroelectricity. The dam is still under the control of the Iraqi Army and local forces. It is also known that the main force protecting both the city centre as well as the dam in the north from ISIS militants is the local forces.<sup>11</sup> However, it is not clear how long those local forces can remain intact. Haditha is the only city that is not under ISIS control from the Syrian border to Abu Ghraib, a city close to Baghdad. In the case of ISIS control over the city and the dam, ISIS can gain influence against Baghdad.

*C. Ramadi Dam:*

The Ramadi Dam was constructed mainly to divert water to irrigation canals and to feed Lake Habbaniyah. The dam and city of Ramadi have been under ISIS control since January 2014.<sup>12</sup> The di-

version structure of the dam feeds not only the Habbaniyah Lake but also Razzara Lake, and the water, taken from Razzara Lake via an irrigation canal, reaches the city of Kerbela, which is a holy city for Shiites. Considering the anti-Shiite position of ISIS, it can be argued that ISIS may cut waters to these irrigation canals in order to distress the Shiites in Kerbela.

*D. Fallujah Regulator:*

The Fallujah town and the Fallujah Regulator are under ISIS control since January 2014. ISIS closed the dam's floodgates on the right hand side while opening the floodgates on the left hand side, flooding vast areas in Abu Ghraib. This created a buffer zone and prevented central government's armoured units to reach the city.<sup>13</sup> This struc-



ture will play an important role in the future clashes between ISIS and the government forces.

### Conclusion

If ISIS can manage to merge its controlled territories in Syria and Iraq and become an independent state, the hydro-politics balance in the Euphrates-Tigris basin, existing since the 1960s, will change radically. The foundation of a new Sunni-oriented state in the territories of Syria and Iraq will create a challenging relationship between the rest of Iraq and the new state. As a result of over three years of war in Syria, every form of weaponry is liberally used in the conflicts in the region. ISIS frequently expresses their intention of using water resources and structures as a weapon against the Baghdad regime upon becoming a sovereign state at the upstream part of the Euphrates-Tigris basin. As previously was mentioned, there is not any ISIS control on the main tributary of the Tigris River and its tributaries are controlled by the KRG. The two main water structures on this river, the Mosul Dam and the Samarra water diversion structure, are under control of the KRG and the central government in Baghdad respectively.

However, ISIS control on Euphrates is more crucial. Except some

small pockets in Iraq, the entire Euphrates valley, from Jarablus, downstream of Karkamış in Turkey, to the Abu Ghraib is under the control of ISIS. In the case of a declaration of independence by ISIS, the small pockets, like the town of Haditha would no longer be able to resist and ISIS will gain nearly the full control of the Euphrates in the Syrian and Iraq territories.

If this was to occur, KRG's independence would be on the agenda of the international community and the hydro-politics balance formed in the 1960s for the Euphrates-Tigris Basin would need to be renegotiated by the new actors.

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