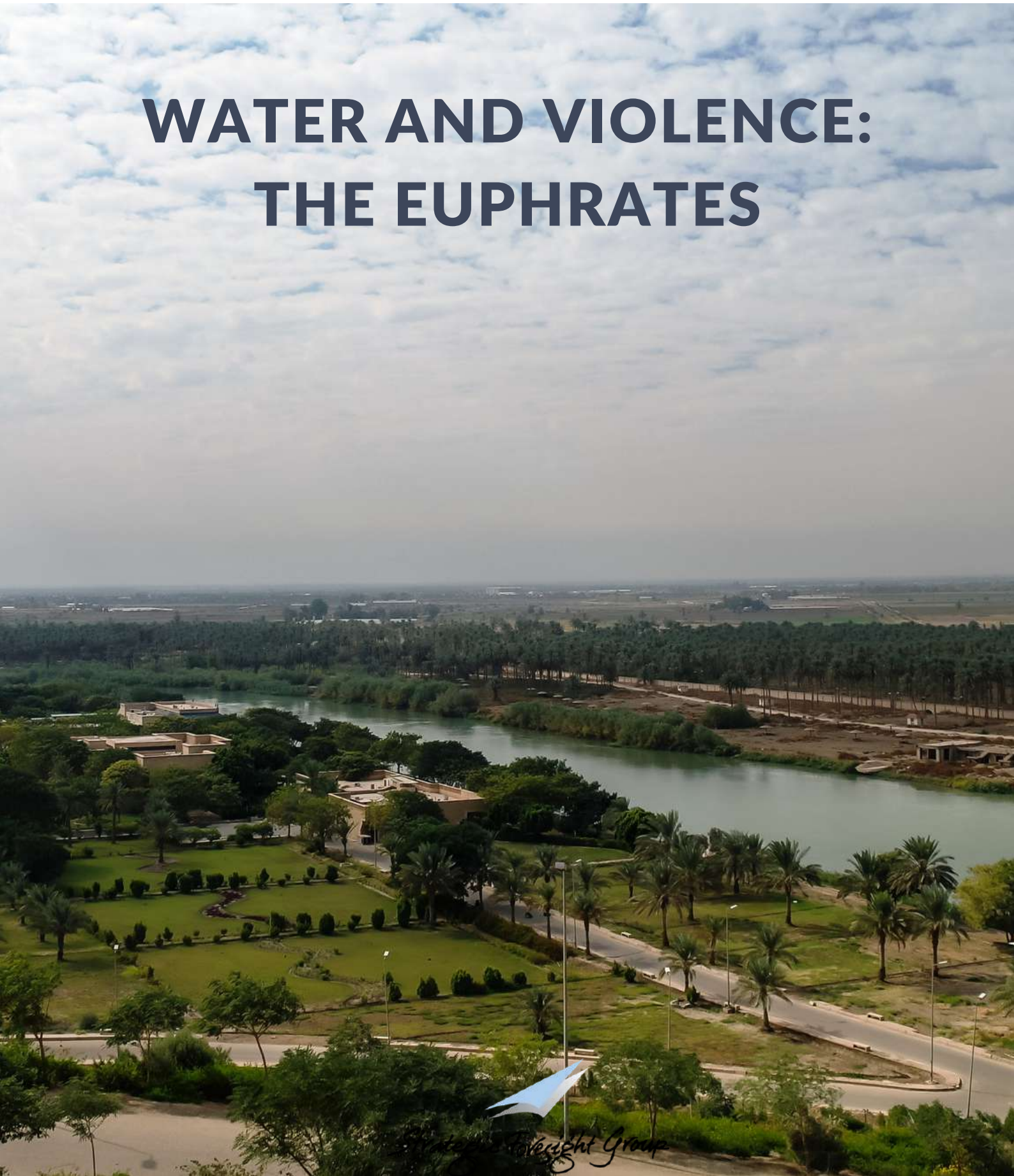


# BLUE PEACE BULLETIN

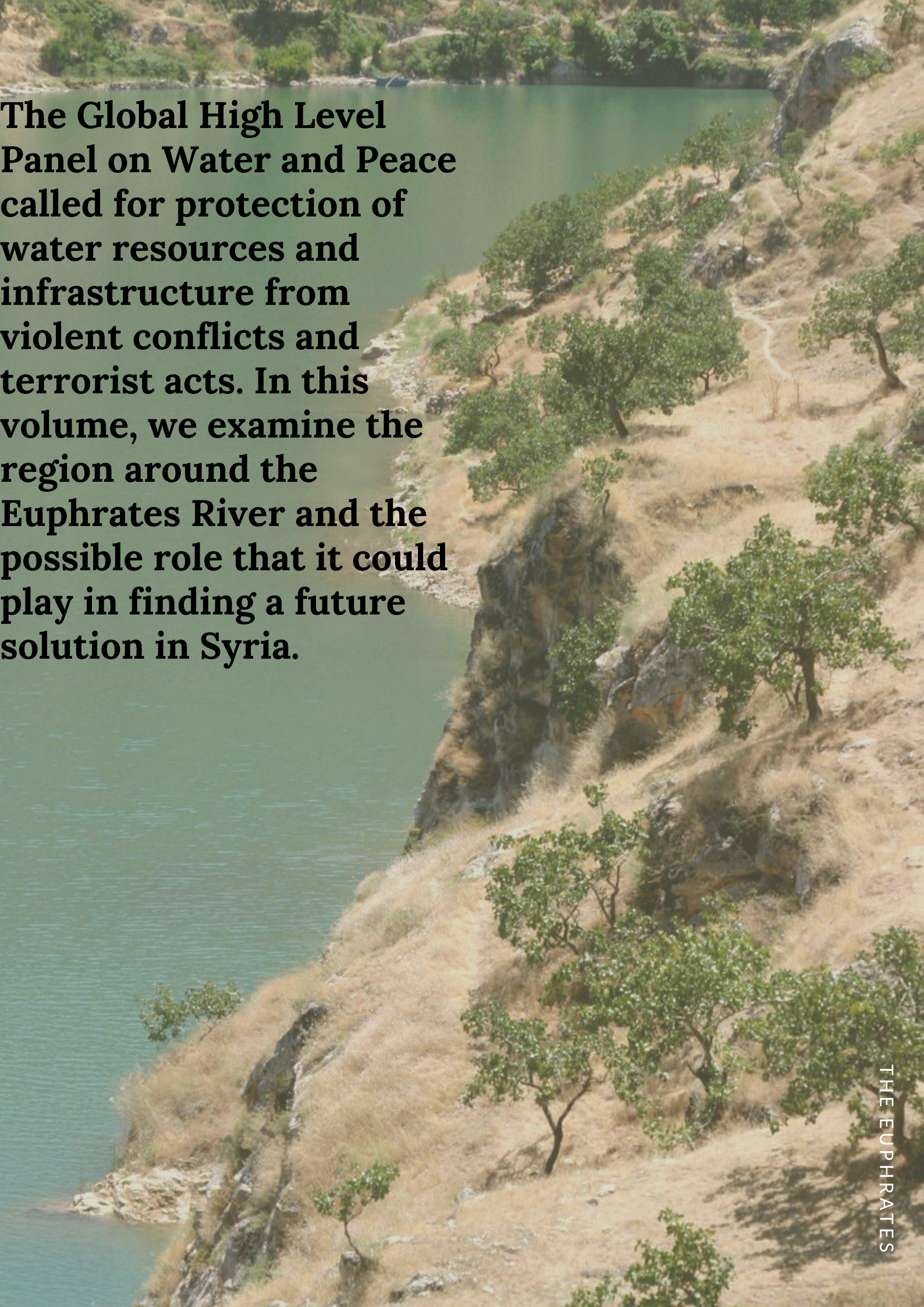
VOL 8/AUGUST 2019

## WATER AND VIOLENCE: THE EUPHRATES



*Transparency Group*





**The Global High Level Panel on Water and Peace called for protection of water resources and infrastructure from violent conflicts and terrorist acts. In this volume, we examine the region around the Euphrates River and the possible role that it could play in finding a future solution in Syria.**



# THE EUPHRATES

The Euphrates River has three riparian countries- Iraq, Syria and Turkey- with a basin area of 440,000 square km. The critical importance of the river lies in the fact that it provides water, food and energy security to all the three riparian nations and supports over 60 million people. Euphrates flows from eastern Turkey to Syria and then flows through Iraq and empties into the Persian Gulf.

## Significance in History

In the Neolithic Age, the Euphrates River supported the establishment and development of early civilizations and the area around the river led to the development of the region which is named as the "Fertile Crescent". The region between Euphrates and Tigris River formed Mesopotamia, the seat of early civilizations of Sumer, Assyria, and Babylonia. The Euphrates River was also the site of the Battle of Karbala. This was a significant war in the history of Islam as it led to the separation of Sunni and Shi'a sects of Islamic believers.

## Significance in Modern Day

The Euphrates River which is the longest river in Western Asia supports primarily irrigation, hydropower and domestic usage in Iraq, Syria and Turkey. Agriculture consumes the largest share of water with more than 70%. Therefore, as mentioned earlier, it has been of critical importance to all the riparians. However, the governance of the Euphrates River has always been fraught with tension. What the region witnessed since the 1970s was a dam-building boom to meet the needs of electricity and irrigation. The multiple dam projects on the river has contributed to the tension between upper and lower riparian nations. Some of the significant projects include:

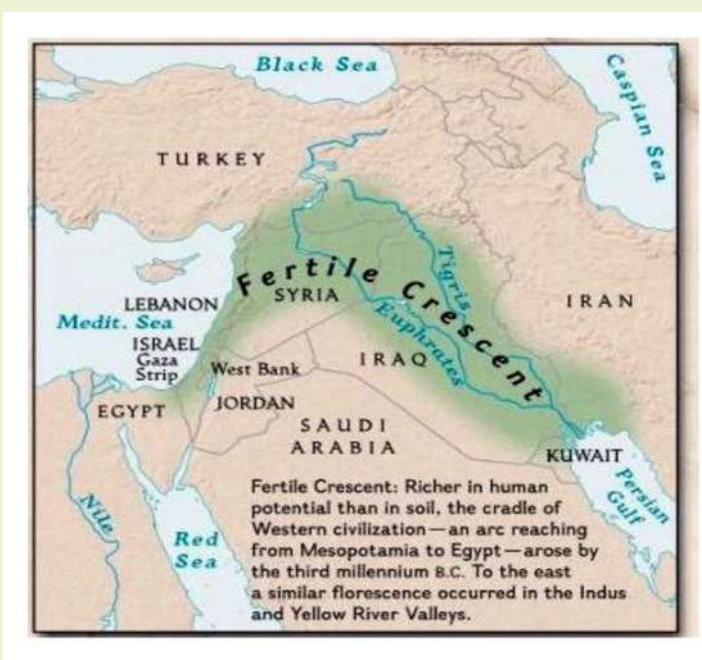
### Turkey:

- The Keban Dam which was opened in 1974.
- The Ataturk Dam which was finished in 1990.
- The ongoing Southeastern Anatolia Project which is USD32 billion scheme to build 22 dams and 19 hydroelectric plants on both the Tigris and the Euphrates.

### Syria

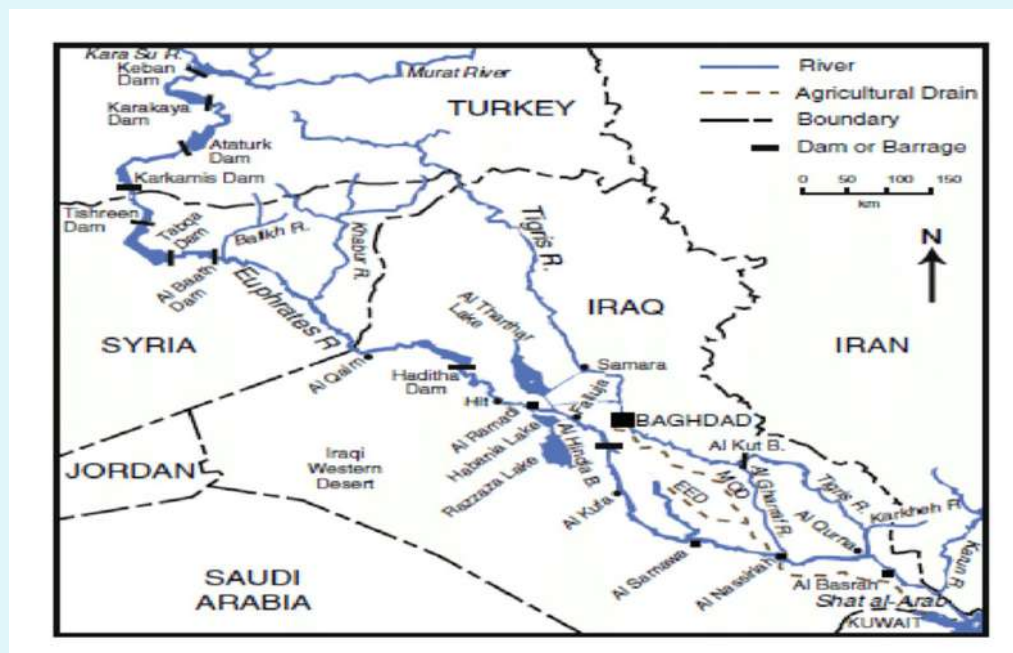
- Tabqa Dam which was built in the 1970s, and added a few more dams on the Euphrates and its tributaries before the civil war ground development to a halt.

It is said that after the Turkish and Syrian dams began operating, the water flow into Iraq from the Euphrates dropped by nearly two-thirds since the 1970s. The construction of large water infrastructure projects in Turkey and Syria has also said to have contributed to the changed flow of Euphrates towards less pronounced seasonal variation. Figure 2 points out the various dams and barrages on Euphrates.



**Fig 1: The Fertile Crescent**

Source: <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/maps/heritage-fertile-crescent/>



**Fig 2: Major Dams and Barrages on the Euphrates**

[https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Tigris-and-Euphrates-basin-with-major-dams-in-Turkey-and-Syria-National-Center-for\\_fig1\\_259440239](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Tigris-and-Euphrates-basin-with-major-dams-in-Turkey-and-Syria-National-Center-for_fig1_259440239)

The Euphrates is subject to two bilateral accords. The agreement between Syria and Turkey specifies the minimum average flow to be at the Syrian-Turkish border. The agreement between Iraq and Syria specifies the allocation of Euphrates water between those two nations. There is however no basin wide agreement. This is due to the fact that the riparian countries have held conflicting positions on international law governing fresh water including the terminology to be used to describe fresh water shared by countries. The only exception is a Protocol for Technical and Economic Cooperation which was signed in 1980. This resulted in the creation of the Joint Technical Committee for Regional Waters in 1983. It functioned for a decade and is no longer functional. It must also be noted that the conflict in Syria made it untenable for transboundary water cooperation.

The governance of Euphrates River is further complicated by the fact that the river has been in the process of degradation due to pollution, over-exploitation, as well as population growth. This has also contributed to the hydro-insecurity, which in the case of Syria became a catalyst for civil war. Prolonged drought and scarcity of water was identified to be one of the drivers of conflict as it forced Syrian farmers to migrate to city centres, thereby creating immense competition for scarce resources and, arguably, a breeding ground for civil war.

### **Armed Conflict in Syria and its effect on Euphrates**

The protracted conflict in Syria has also witnessed the scarce water resources and the related infrastructure being deliberately targeted, as well as suffering collateral damage by violent actions of states as well as non-state actors. Bombing by Russian Forces of a water treatment facility that drew water from Euphrates, bombing by Al-Qaeda's Jabhat al-Nusra of the pipeline carrying water from Euphrates to Aleppo are some examples. The Islamic State's military strategy involved taking control of vital water installations and the area in the Euphrates and Tigris basin. Curiously enough, it can be seen that from 2015 until March 2019, their area of influence and control has been in and round the Euphrates River. The map of the region in Figure 3 illustrates the area of control of ISIS until early 2019 where ISIS was found in a very small area in Baghouz, in the Lower Euphrates River Valley in Syria.

### **Euphrates –The Zone of Control of Domestic and International Actors**

The significance of the Euphrates River in Syria is undoubtedly due to its manifold purposes. Some are direct; such as the fact that it is an important source of sustenance for people in not just Syria but in upstream and downstream countries of Iraq and Turkey. The river and the infrastructure has also been a direct and indirect casualty to the armed conflict. However, the lesser explored aspect of the

significance of Euphrates which has become extremely prominent especially since 2019 is the fact that the river is acting as a de-facto line of demarcation for a plethora of domestic and international actors to operate in relative peace.

As early as August 21, 2017, Euphrates served as a buffer or a de-escalation zone. U.S led coalition, Russia and the Syrian regime agreed to the creation of a buffer zone which is said to have roughly adhered to the Euphrates River. The new buffer zone re-established a previous buffer zone agreed upon in May 2017. The new zone was agreed upon after the US shot down an aircraft of Syrian regime in June 2017, creating fears that such acts could lead to an escalation of the conflict with direct involvement of international players. Since then Euphrates River has served as a line of demarcation of territories or a point of reference between forces with competing interests.

The maps in Figure 4 illustrate a crucial break-up of Syria into regions controlled by different factions. A clear demarcation can be seen primarily along the Euphrates River, between the Syrian regime and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) /Kurdish forces.

As of May 2019 it can be seen that the land, west of Euphrates, comprising of major cities such as Damascus, Homs, Hama, Aleppo, Latakia, Tartus,

Palmyra, Albu and Kamal is controlled by Syrian Government which is the existing regime, supported by Russia and Iran.

The SDF/Kurdish forces control major cities of Raqqa, Qamishli, Hasakah which is on the eastern side of Euphrates. The SDF also controls the three largest dams in Syria (the Euphrates, Baath, and Tishrin dams), thus controlling hydro-power the flow of water to 80 per cent of Syria's irrigated agricultural land. The SDF/Kurdish militiamen aligned with American troops on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River are also to quell ISIS. This helped in the near decimation of ISIS that held small pockets of land along the Euphrates River near the border with Iraq until March 2019.

In early 2019 Turkey had proposed a plan to set up a buffer zone of 460 kilometres between the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers in order to neutralise the threat they face from SDF/Kurdish forces. On 22nd and 23rd July 2019, the US Envoy to Syria had meetings with Turkish counterparts on the issue of the establishment of the buffer zone. However, an official statement from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Syria on the 26th of July 2019 stated that any such zone would be in violation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria and a violation of International Law. Figure 5 shows the map of the suggested Turkish safe zone in Syria, east of the Euphrates River.

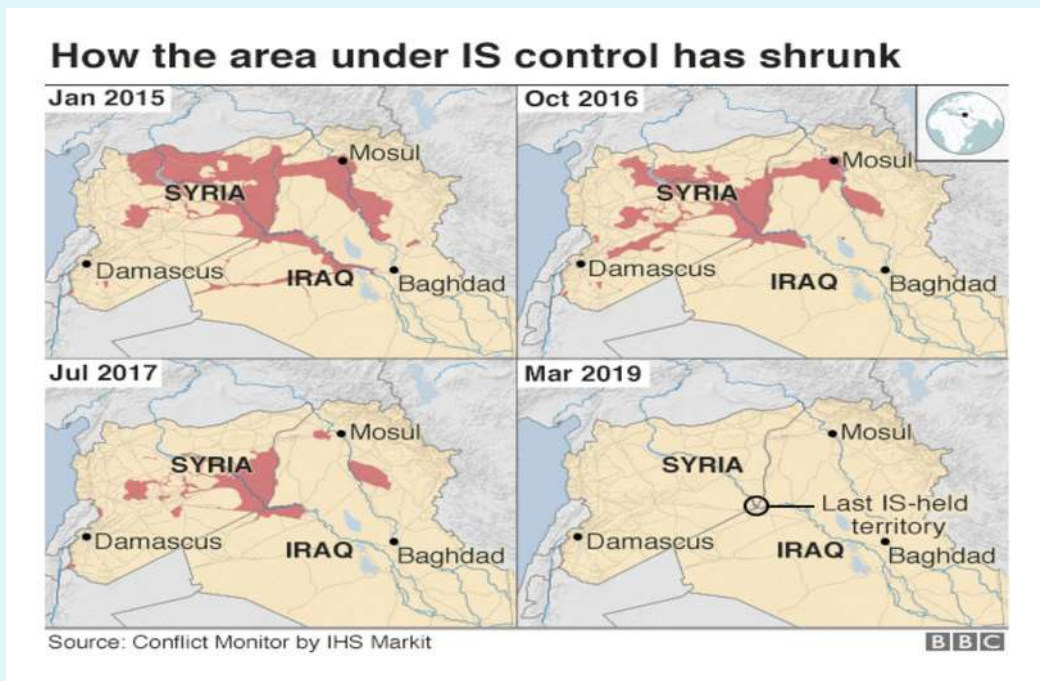
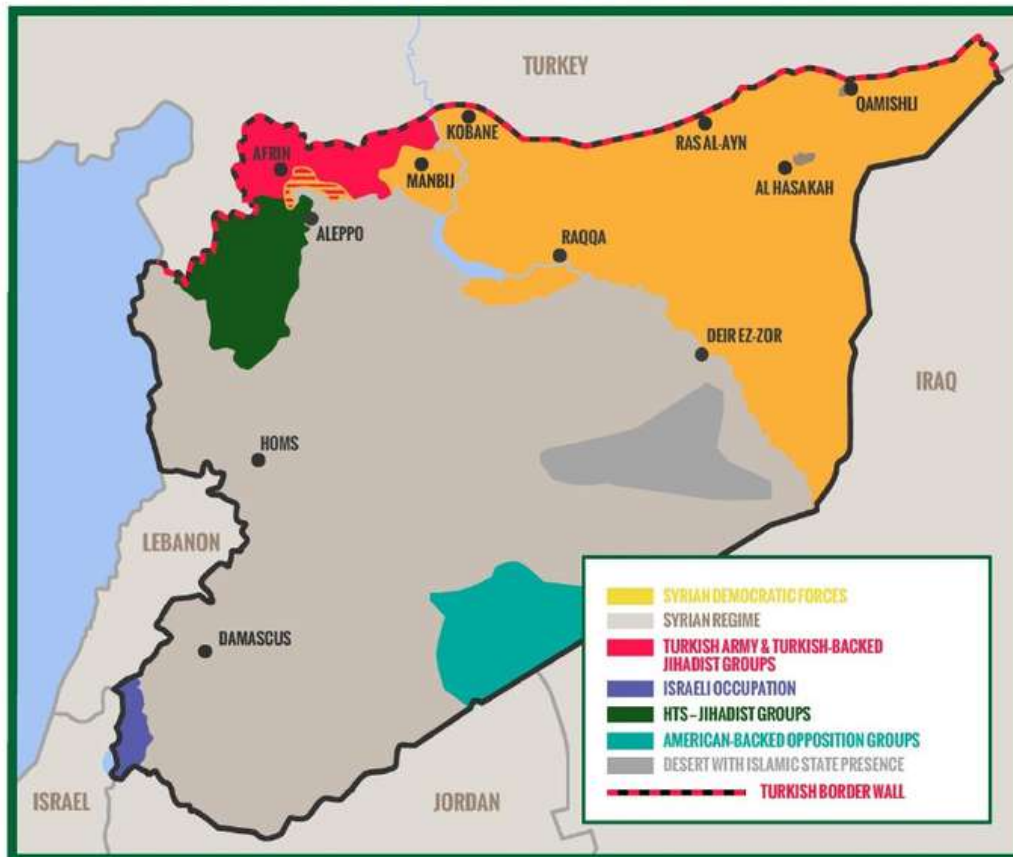


Figure 3: ISIS Control Territory from January 2015 to March 2019



## SYRIA: AREAS OF CONTROL MAY 2019



Map produced by Rojava Information Center, May 2019

Fig 4: Syria: Areas of Control in May 2019

Source: <https://rojvainformationcenter.com/storage/2019/05/RIC-MAP-Syria-Zones-page-001.jpg>

Thus it can be seen that Euphrates River over the years has not only “emerged as the collision point for the great powers and their local allies struggling for influence” but also a zone for ‘de-escalation’ of conflict.

Therefore, it would be important that when any peace process is being considered, Euphrates and its governance as well as its significance in Syria and for Turkey and Iraq should not be ignored. In fact Euphrates would be the key to provide stability, peace and hope in the region. However, it would be crucial to stress here that preserving Syria’s sovereignty and territorial integrity is of utmost importance and would be in adherence to the UN Charter and what is being suggested here is not a fragmentation of the country along the lines of Euphrates with different factions and international actors ruling. It’s an understanding that as things stand right now, any peaceful engagement with actors in the region would involve the Euphrates.

## Recommendations

In order to ensure a long lasting peace in Syria, the River Euphrates should be given vital importance, just as it was in the case of River Rhine and the Peace of Westphalia of 1648. During the religious wars in Europe which lasted for almost a century, it is said that city states in Europe measured the sovereignty of their lands based on the customs barriers that they could impose on the Rhine. The high tolls being imposed on the river Rhine however was greatly affecting the economic conditions of the people which in turn were creating greater instability in the region. Therefore recognising that Rhine could be a great corridor for development for the region in 1642, a condition for peace negotiations was laid to include free transit and a prohibition of creation of new tolls along the River Rhine. Thus, trade barriers were abolished and a certain level of free navigation was introduced as a part of the Peace of Westphalia.

Post Westphalia, a charter was signed by the German Empire in 1804 making Rhine a common German French waterway. In 1815, the Rhine was divided amongst 8 sovereign states where they committed themselves to freedom of navigation, thereby forming the Commission for the Navigation of River Rhine (CCNR) which

is the oldest international organization in modern history. The formation of CCNR is considered as the first attempt by Europe to cooperate and establish machinery for international cooperation. It is also touted by some, as one of the first global measure towards collective security.

Euphrates will have the same importance in the ensuring collective security in Syria and Middle East Region that the Rhine once did in Europe. Any peace process and instruments to be signed with regards to Syria will have to take into account the governance of Euphrates, as well as its related infrastructure. The Taqba dam for example has already become a rare example of cooperation between SDF and Syrian government forces. The Taqba dam lies on the east of Euphrates River basin and is in control of SDF forces. A power line connects Taqba Dam to a smaller dam passing through a government-controlled area. This helps power the station that provides drinking water to the city of Aleppo which is within the government controlled area. Since, July 2018, engineers from the company linked to the Syrian government have also been working as maintenance crew at Taqba Dam.

As has been demonstrated in the paper, Euphrates River is so intertwined with the conflict in Syria, forming a border between different parties to the conflict, a buffer zone and a source of life that any peace process without the mention of the river and its sustainable governance would be an incomplete and weak attempt. A long lasting peace would therefore require the inclusion of Euphrates in the peace building agenda.

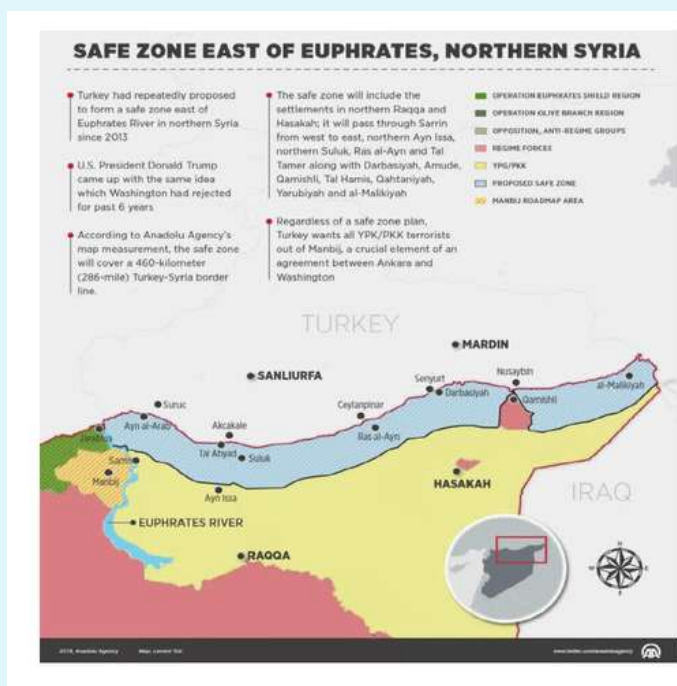


Figure 5: Suggested Turkish Safe Zone in Syria

Source : <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/01/turkey-syria-some-in-army-oppose-new-operation-against-kurds.html#ixzz5shiKUn5l>

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