



**“The Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP): water,  
counterinsurgency, and conflict”**

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Course “Food Security in International Politics: The Middle East and  
Africa”

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Spring 2018

This paper has received the *Kuwait Program at Sciences Po*

*Student Paper Award*

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"They [PKK] say: 'We are against dams'," he said, adding: "[But] if there are no dams and no ponds then we cannot bring irrigation or drinking water to cities? If there was no Atatürk Dam, how could we bring water to [the Turkish province] Şanlıurfa?" the minister asked."<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction

The Southeastern Anatolia Project (*Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi* (GAP)) is one of the largest and most controversial dam projects existing worldwide.<sup>2</sup> The project, which started in the 1960s and is ongoing since, has led to the construction of 15 dams, and the area covered by the GAP constitutes more than 10% of the Turkish territory.<sup>3</sup> While the Turkish Ministry of Development claims that the GAP is a regional development project, improving the region's socio-economic status through the provision of hydro-electric energy and irrigation<sup>4</sup>, the GAP has been criticized for its negative effects on the natural environment, cultural heritage and population in the GAP region.<sup>5</sup> Since the GAP region is largely inhabited by Kurds, the GAP has furthermore been linked to the 'Kurdish Question'<sup>6</sup>, most notably through the ongoing violent conflict between the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) and the Turkish state.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, as the above statement by Turkey's Minister of Forestry and Water affairs, Mr. Eroglu, shows, the GAP dams have been a point of contention between the PKK and the Turkish state: while the Turkish state stresses the importance of the dam to ensure the welfare of its Kurdish citizens, the PKK has throughout the years attacked several different GAP dams and irrigation projects.<sup>8</sup>

This paper investigates the link between the GAP project and the Turkish-PKK, conflict by placing it within the scholarly debate about the links between water and conflict. The research on conflict and water, which falls within the research on the environment-conflict nexus, has led some

<sup>1</sup> "Turkey to Build Dams despite Threats by the PKK, Minister Says," *Daily Sabah*, September 17, 2015, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2015/09/17/turkey-to-build-dams-despite-threats-by-terrorist-pkk-minister-says>.

<sup>2</sup> IDMC, "Lessons Not Learned: Turkey's Ilisu Dam" (International Displacement Monitoring Centre, July 18, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> "What's GAP?" (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Development, n.d.), <http://www.gap.gov.tr/en/what-is-gap-page-1.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Arda Bilgen, "Demystifying the (Post-)Politics of Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP): An Analysis of the What, Why, and How of GAP and the Operations of Development in Turkey from a Critical Perspective" (Rheinischen Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Gilberto Conde, "Water and Counter-Hegemony: Kurdish Struggle in the Tigris and Euphrates in Turkey," *Revista de Paz y Conflictos* 9, no. 2 (2016): 43–58.

<sup>6</sup> There is no clear definition of the Kurdish question, however, it generally refers to the either the lack of rights given to the Kurds, spread over four different countries, or to the struggle of the Kurds for more rights and/or independence.

<sup>7</sup> Lena Hommes, Rutgerd Boelens, and Harro Maat, "Contested Hydrosocial Territories and Disputed Water Governance: Struggles and Competing Claims over the Ilisu Dam Development in Southeastern Turkey," *Geoforum* 71 (2016): 9–20.

<sup>8</sup> "Turkey to Build Dams despite Threats by the PKK, Minister Says."

scholars to argue that contested freshwater access can lead to conflict, sometimes with military clashes as a result.<sup>9</sup> However, the idea of a water-conflict nexus has faced considerable criticism: different authors have argued that the empirical proof for a relation between water and conflicts is lacking, and a direct link between resources and conflict hard to find.<sup>10</sup> One of the critiquers of the environmental-conflict nexus is Harry Verhoeven. In his article on climate change and conflict, he argues that, although environmental changes are real, environmental dynamics and their effects cannot be separated from political dimensions: the way in which natural resources such as water impact conflicts is inextricably linked with power dynamics, and “deeper-lying material dynamics and discursive practices”.<sup>11</sup> This paper draws upon Verhoeven’s idea of the environment as quintessentially political, by showing how politics and water management came together in Turkey’s GAP project. It is argued that the water development program was used by the government as a tool to fight the PKK, leading to population-displacement, the creation of ‘natural’ borders, and cultural destruction.

The paper is structured in the following manner. First, the argument made by Verhoeven will be further clarified, in order to set the theoretical framework in which the case study is placed. Secondly, the GAP project is shortly introduced. Thirdly, its relation with the Turkish-PKK conflict is analyzed and placed in perspective, leading to the conclusion that it is not necessarily scarcity that links water to conflict, but rather the political use of water programs that can be used as weapons against one’s enemies.

## 2. The environment-politics nexus: water as quintessentially political

In his article on “climate change, conflict and development in Sudan” published in 2011, Harry Verhoeven discusses the scholarly arguments which treat the environment as an independent variable responsible for the emergence of so called environmental conflicts. The idea of ‘green wars’, in which scarcity of food and freshwater can lead to interstate and intrastate violence, Verhoeven argues, is mistaken in including the environment as an external variable. Instead, politics and the environment are interlinked: while environmental issues surrounding food, water, forestation etc. are real in the

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<sup>9</sup> See, amongst others: Peter H. Gleick, “Water and Conflict: Fresh Water Resources and International Security,” *International Security* 18, no. 1 (1993): 79–112; Thomas F Homer-Dixon, “Environmental Scarcities and Violent Conflict: Evidence from Cases,” *International Security* 19, no. 1 (1994): 5–40.

<sup>10</sup> Jon Barnett, “Destabilizing the Environment—conflict Thesis,” *Review of International Studies* 26, no. 2 (2000): 271–88; David Katz, “Hydro-Political Hyperbole: Examining Incentives for Overemphasizing the Risks of Water Wars,” *Global Environmental Politics* 11, no. 1 (2011): 12–36; Harry Verhoeven, “Climate Change, Conflict and Development in Sudan: Global Neo-Malthusian Narratives and Local Power Struggles,” *Development and Change* 42, no. 3 (2011): 679–707.

<sup>11</sup> Verhoeven, “Climate Change, Conflict and Development in Sudan: Global Neo-Malthusian Narratives and Local Power Struggles,” 6.

effects they have on populations, the form these effects take are shaped by the political and social relations in which they are embedded.<sup>12</sup>

The political dimension of conflicts surrounding resources can thereby take different dimensions. As Verhoeven<sup>13</sup> discusses, environmental changes can impact different groups in society differently, due to underlying political-, social- and economic inequalities. However, environmental factors can also be explicitly used to justify the implementation of oppressive policies. For example, in the case of Sudan, the “international rhetoric about the breadbasket was used as a weapon against the Nuba, Ingessana and Dinka”<sup>14</sup> : Sudan’s development program to increase its food production was intentionally used to justify landgrab and the expropriation of Sudan’s marginalized communities.

Indeed, the fact that food or water programs can be as a weapon was also recognized by Gleick, Yolles and Haleh when they analyzed the relationship between water and war in the Middle East.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, while water, food or other environmental factors should not necessarily be considered an independent variable causing war, there remains a link between conflict and these environmental factors. This link, however, is mitigated by the politics surrounding both the use of resources, as well as war. The political use of food and water concerns necessitates, according to Verhoeven, a reconceptualization of the climate-security nexus: instead of believing that it is the scarcity of resources that lead to conflict, the focus should be on the “failed model of top-down development and gross inequities in power, locally as well as globally” that link environmental issues (including food and freshwater) to conflict.<sup>16</sup>

This paper draws upon Verhoeven’s idea of the environment as quintessentially political, by looking at the GAP and its dams, a developmental project closely tied to a highly political conflict. The GAP’s water development has been mostly analyzed in relation to Turkey’s cross-border relations with Syria and Iraq<sup>17</sup>, the two downstream countries that have been concerned with Turkey’s water usage. However, growing literature has shown that the relationship between conflict, politics and water

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<sup>12</sup> Verhoeven, “Climate Change, Conflict and Development in Sudan: Global Neo-Malthusian Narratives and Local Power Struggles.”

<sup>13</sup> Verhoeven.

<sup>14</sup> Verhoeven, 13.

<sup>15</sup> Peter H. Gleick, Hatami Haleh, and Yolles, “Water, War & Peace: The Middle East,” *Environment* 36, no. 3 (1994).

<sup>16</sup> Verhoeven, “Climate Change, Conflict and Development in Sudan: Global Neo-Malthusian Narratives and Local Power Struggles,” 2.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example: Frederick M Lorenz and Edward J Erickson, “The Euphrates Triangle: Security Implications of the Southeastern Anatolia Project” (NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIV WASHINGTON DC INST FOR NATIONAL STRATEGIC STUDIES, 1999).

often also plays out at a more national or even local level.<sup>18</sup> Looking at the relationship between the GAP and the Turkish-Kurdish conflict can therefore shed an interesting light on the water-politics-conflict nexus. The following sections will show that water is indeed directly linked to politics: water projects cannot only be used as a weapon that can lead to conflict, as Verhoeven stated, but can also be used as an active weapon in an already ongoing conflict.

### 3. The Southeastern Anatolia Project and development:

Before analyzing the conflict dynamics of the GAP, it is important to first discuss the GAP and its link with the Kurdish Question. The groundwork for the GAP was already laid in the 1930s by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founding father of the Turkish Republic. Recognizing the potential of the Euphrates and Tigris basins, he believed that river development could lead to greater development and prosperity in Turkey.<sup>19</sup> It was in the 1960s that these plans started to concretize with the initiation of the Southeastern Anatolia Project. Initially, the GAP focused on water and land resource development, but in the 1970s, it was turned into a “multi-sectoral, socioeconomic regional development program”.<sup>20</sup> This development program covered projects concerning, amongst others, irrigation, hydropower, forestry and education.<sup>21</sup> The GAP included the construction of twenty-two dams, which were considered to turn Turkey’s Southeast into a Middle Eastern ‘breadbasket’ and to a strong hydropower.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, it was thought that GAP could irrigate up to two million hectares of land, thus turning Turkey into an agricultural exporter.<sup>23</sup> By 2017, fifteen out of the twenty-two dams have been constructed. One of the dams currently still under construction is the Ilisu Dam: once completed, this dam is thought to produce about two percent of Turkey’s energy needs, through which

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<sup>18</sup> See, amongst others: Colin H. Kahl, *States, Scarcity, and Civil Strife in the Developing World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Clionadh Raleigh and Henrik Urdal, “Climate Change, Environmental Degradation and Armed Conflict,” *Political Geography* 26, no. 6 (2007): 674–94.

<sup>19</sup> Jeroen Warner, “The Struggle over Turkey’s Ilisu Dam: Domestic and International Security Linkages,” *International Environmental Agreements* 12 (2012): 231–50, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10784-012-9178-x>.

<sup>20</sup> IH Olcay Unver, “South-Eastern Anatolia Integrated Development Project (GAP), Turkey: An Overview of Issues of Sustainability,” *International Journal of Water Resources Development* 13, no. 2 (1997): 187.

<sup>21</sup> Unver, “South-Eastern Anatolia Integrated Development Project (GAP), Turkey: An Overview of Issues of Sustainability.”

<sup>22</sup> Warner, “The Struggle over Turkey’s Ilisu Dam: Domestic and International Security Linkages.”

<sup>23</sup> Elektra Tsakalidou, “The Great Anatolian Project: Is Water Management a Panacea or Crisis Multiplier for Turkey’s Kurds?,” *Línea*, *New Security Beat Blog* 5 (2013).

the government of Turkey hopes to reduce Turkey’s energy dependency.<sup>24</sup> Figure 1 gives an overview of the GAP project.



Figure 1: the GAP Project region (including planned and existing dams in 2016). Source: Hommes et al., 2016, p.10

As Harris<sup>25</sup> discusses, there are several reasons why Southeastern Anatolia has been chosen as the site for ‘water-related development’: firstly, about 19% of all irrigation potential and 22% of Turkey’s hydropower potential can be found in Southeastern Anatolia; secondly, about 28% of all freshwater in Turkey is provided by the Euphrates and Tigris rivers; and thirdly, the region, largely inhabited by Turkey’s Kurdish population, has faced structural underdevelopment in comparison to the rest of Turkey. Taken together, the GAP was thought to kill two birds with one stone: it would aid the modernization of Turkey and, at the same time, increase the living standards in the Southeastern Anatolian regions.<sup>26</sup> However, despite all the promises of water-driven development, the GAP has not resulted in a substantial improvement of the region’s socio-economic status. Many parts of the region still lack sufficient electricity, and the irrigation programs have only benefitted a marginal part of the

<sup>24</sup> Susanne Güsten, “Construction of Disputed Turkish Dam Continues,” *The New York Times*, February 27, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/28/world/middleeast/construction-of-disputed-turkish-dam-continues.html>; IDMC, “Lessons Not Learned: Turkey’s Ilisu Dam.”

<sup>25</sup> Leila M. Harris, “Water and Conflict Geographies of the Southeastern Anatolia Project,” *Society and Natural Resources* 15 (2002): 743–59, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920290069326>.

<sup>26</sup> Conde, “Water and Counter-Hegemony: Kurdish Struggle in the Tigris and Euphrates in Turkey.”

Kurdish population living in the region.<sup>27</sup> What the next section will show, is that the ‘water development as a weapon’ potential of the GAP, on the other hand, was much more forceful.

#### 4. Water and war: the GAP and the fight against the PKK

Although there is no consensus about the exact reasons for the start of the Turkish-PKK conflict in 1984, it is generally said that its origins lie in the cultural, political, and economic suppression of the Kurdish population by the Turkish state since the founding of the Turkish nation-state.<sup>28</sup> The conflict, which has cost the lives of about 30,000 people over the last 40 years, has mobilized a substantial part of the Kurdish population in Turkey: it is estimated that over the years, the PKK became a force of more than 15,000 fighters, about 50,000 ‘civilian militias’ and a support base amongst part of the Kurdish populations at home and abroad.<sup>29</sup> The first time the PKK conflict became directly linked to water was in 1987, with the signing of the Protocol of Economic Cooperation by the Turkish and the Syrian state. In exchange for access to 500 cubic meters of water from the Euphrates per second, the Syrian government promised to stop its support to the PKK.<sup>30</sup> The use of cross-border water flows against the PKK, however, was only one part of the water politics used by the Turkish state; it was in the domestic sphere that the GAP could directly be used as a method of counterinsurgency, of warfare.

The fact that the GAP concerned those areas mostly inhabited by Turkey’s Kurdish population linked the GAP inevitably to the conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK. It was at the beginning of the 1990s that the GAP became considered as a direct “instrument in the ‘fight against terrorism’”.<sup>31</sup> In fact, the development of the Kurdish region foreseen by the GAP was not only considered to serve the communities, but was also thought to contribute to the integration of the Kurds into the Turkish nation and thus reducing the support for the separatist demands of the PKK.<sup>32</sup> This meant that gradually, the GAP became part of a security strategy of the Turkish state, and was

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<sup>27</sup> Cemal Ozkahraman, “Water Power: The Domestic and Geostrategic Dimensions of Turkey’s GAP Project,” *Conflict, Security & Development* 17, no. 5 (2017): 411–28.

<sup>28</sup> A discussion of the conflict goes beyond the scope and purpose of this paper. However, more information on the conflict can, amongst others, be found here: Alper Kaliber and Nathalie Tocci, “Civil Society and the Transformation of Turkey’s Kurdish Question,” *Security Dialogue* 41, no. 2 (2010): 191–215; David Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization and Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Alizia Marcus, *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

<sup>29</sup> Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization and Identity*.

<sup>30</sup> Bilgen, “Demystifying the (Post-)Politics of Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP): An Analysis of the What, Why, and How of GAP and the Operations of Development in Turkey from a Critical Perspective.”

<sup>31</sup> Warner, “The Struggle over Turkey’s Ilisu Dam: Domestic and International Security Linkages,” 238.

<sup>32</sup> Conde, “Water and Counter-Hegemony: Kurdish Struggle in the Tigris and Euphrates in Turkey.”

meant to, on the one hand, turn Kurds into modern Turks loyal to the Turkish state<sup>33</sup>, and on the other hand, ensure “state control through economies of dependency on state provision of irrigation, education and subsidies”.<sup>34</sup> The link between a water-developmental program and security meant that, when deciding on the spending of their funds, the ministry of development of Turkey became concerned not only with the benefits for Turkey’s development, but also with the investments’ return on the population’s loyalty to the Turkish state.<sup>35</sup> Thus, while the official state discourse presented the GAP dams as a gift to the Kurdish populations, aiding local Kurdish populations was by no means their only function, which is also represented in the fact that the benefits from water development for the Kurdish communities remained low.

While the idea of water-development programs as a means to ensure security and to enable the building of a Turkish nation initially remained relatively separate from its war practices, over time the discourse surrounding the GAP and its use further securitized, turning the GAP into a means of warfare. This touched three main issues: peoples displacement; ‘natural’ borders and occupations; and cultural destruction. Firstly, the construction of the GAP dams has displaced (and will most likely cause future displacement to) a large number of people living in Southeastern Anatolia. Only the construction of the Ilisu dam alone is estimated to affect up to 78,000 people, and in total it is thought that the GAP project has led to the displacement of about 350,000 people.<sup>36</sup> Most of the displaced people are Kurdish, and although the government has some programs in place to ensure compensation, a large part of the displaced Kurds have been deprived of such.<sup>37</sup> The displacement of the mostly Kurdish communities has led to the dispersion of the Kurdish population and has occurred largely alongside the war dynamics with the PKK.<sup>38</sup> This has led several scholars to argue that the Turkish government has used the construction of the dams as a way to implement its assimilation and repression policies. The strategy of resettlement in response to Kurdish claims is not unknown to the Turkish state; already in the early years of the Republic, the Turkish government engaged in forced

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<sup>33</sup> Arda Bilgen, “A Project of Destruction, Peace, or Techno-Science? Untangling the Relationship between the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP) and the Kurdish Question in Turkey,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 54, no. 1 (2018): 94–113, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2017.1376186>; Joost Jongerden, “Dams and Politics in Turkey: Utilizing Water, Developing Conflict,” *Middle East Policy* 17, no. 1 (2010): 137–43, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4967.2010.00432.x>.

<sup>34</sup> Harris, “Water and Conflict Geographies of the Southeastern Anatolia Project,” 754.

<sup>35</sup> Bilgen, “Demystifying the (Post-)Politics of Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP): An Analysis of the What, Why, and How of GAP and the Operations of Development in Turkey from a Critical Perspective.”

<sup>36</sup> IDMC, “Lessons Not Learned: Turkey’s Ilisu Dam”; Sevket Ökten, “Environmental Justice, Dams and Displacement in Southeastern Anatolia Region, Turkey,” *The Journal of International Social Research* 10, no. 50 (2017): 414–20.

<sup>37</sup> Ökten, “Environmental Justice, Dams and Displacement in Southeastern Anatolia Region, Turkey.”

<sup>38</sup> Jongerden, “Dams and Politics in Turkey: Utilizing Water, Developing Conflict.”

resettlement programs to disperse the Kurdish population.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, under the GAP driven resettlement, unitary Kurdish communities were broken up to implement the water development plans, meanwhile reducing the unitary support base of the PKK.<sup>40</sup>

The GAP dams have furthermore turned into military means when their placement and construction became centered around the creation of what Jongerden<sup>41</sup> calls ‘walls of water’. As the dams flood large land areas, they could serve as a hindrance to the free movement of PKK fighters. Several dams alongside the border between Turkey and Iraq and Syria have stopped the PKK fighters to cross into Turkey from their training places across the borders. As Warner states: “state officials argued that ‘terrorists will no longer be able to easily cross from one region to the other due to the dams’<sup>42</sup>, thus turning the dams into border-control mechanisms for the mountainous corridors used by the PKK fighters. Such use of the dams was further strengthened by the fact that the construction of the dams justified the placement of more security forces into the area. While officially there to protect the construction of the dams, these state forces were also serving as a way to ensure complete control over the areas until then largely controlled by the PKK.<sup>43</sup> A secret letter written by former president Turgut Özal to the then Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel in 1993 exemplifies how water was intentionally used as hard power in the fight against the PKK:

*“With the evacuation of mountain settlements, the terrorist organization (PKK) will have been isolated. Security forces should immediately move in and completely control such areas. To prevent the locals’ return to the region, the building of a large number of dams in appropriate places is an alternative”<sup>44</sup>*

Thirdly, Turkey’s GAP strategy also involved cultural destruction, which mostly affected the cultural heritage of the Kurdish communities. The Anatolian regions touched by the building of the GAP dams are seen by many Kurds as their ancestral territory, and the GAP project has been considered

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<sup>39</sup> This is a tactic not unknown to the Turkish government. Already in the early years of the Turkish Republic, the Turkish state engaged in forced resettlement programs to disperse the Kurdish population. See, amongst others: Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization and Identity*; Mesut Yeğen, “Turkish Nationalism and the Kurdish Question,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30, no. 1 (2007): 119–51.

<sup>40</sup> Morvaridi Behrooz, “Resettlement, Rights to Development and the Ilisu Dam, Turkey,” *Development and Change* 35, no. 4 (2004): 719–41.

<sup>41</sup> Jongerden, “Dams and Politics in Turkey: Utilizing Water, Developing Conflict.”

<sup>42</sup> Warner, “The Struggle over Turkey’s Ilisu Dam: Domestic and International Security Linkages,” 238–39.

<sup>43</sup> Conde, “Water and Counter-Hegemony: Kurdish Struggle in the Tigris and Euphrates in Turkey”; Warner, “The Struggle over Turkey’s Ilisu Dam: Domestic and International Security Linkages.”

<sup>44</sup> As cited in: Conde, “Water and Counter-Hegemony: Kurdish Struggle in the Tigris and Euphrates in Turkey,” 50.

by many Kurdish communities as destroying their history.<sup>45</sup> On top of general damage to the environment, the flooding caused by the dams have created serious damage to important Kurdish historical sites; for example, the Ilisu dam will flood parts of the town Hasankeyf, which is known for its archeological buildings.<sup>46</sup> The destruction of cultural heritage is a well-known war strategy, and its importance in war has been recognized under the Geneva Conventions governing the conduct of war.<sup>47</sup> As Erica Bussey, senior legal advisor of Amnesty International stated: “Attacks against religious and historical monuments violate cultural rights and can cause significant harm to local and sometimes broader communities.”<sup>48</sup> The destruction of cultural heritage as caused by the dam can be considered an attack on the Kurdish cultural identity, possibly even serving as a punishment for Kurdish opposition.<sup>49</sup>

### 5. The GAP: a peaceful counterinsurgency method, or a method and cause of war?

The previous section has outlined the relationship between Turkey’s water projects and the fight against the PKK. Water was thereby mostly used as a potential tool for warfare: the GAP dams created natural borders, could serve as a way to reduce the support base for the PKK in Southeastern Anatolia, and has led to the cultural destruction of Kurdish heritage. However, the fact that the GAP has been used to counter the activities of the PKK by refraining from using direct military means – in the form of the Turkish army or weapons - has by some been put forward as proof that such water-development projects are actually a way to achieve peace instead of being related to war.<sup>50</sup> This approach sees water as a political tool that can be used to pressure other countries or internal enemies to stop their activities through pressure-methods short of actually using force.<sup>51</sup> This thereby counters the idea of the water-conflict nexus, as the use of water can actually achieve peace through other means than warfare.

While it is indeed true that water should not be considered as an independent driver for conflict, the argument given above falls short in the fact that it proposes a very limited interpretation

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<sup>45</sup> Conde, “Water and Counter-Hegemony: Kurdish Struggle in the Tigris and Euphrates in Turkey.”

<sup>46</sup> Güsten, “Construction of Disputed Turkish Dam Continues.”

<sup>47</sup> Patty Gerstenblith, “From Bamiyan to Baghdad: Warfare and the Preservation of Cultural Heritage at the Beginning of the 21st Century,” *Georgetown Journal of International Law* 37, no. 2 (2006): 245–352.

<sup>48</sup> As quoted in: Amnesty International, “Mali: ICC Trial over Destruction of Cultural Property in Timbuktu,” August 22, 2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/08/mali-icc-trial-over-destruction-of-cultural-property-in-timbuktu-shows-need-for-broader-accountability/>.

<sup>49</sup> Jongerden, “Dams and Politics in Turkey: Utilizing Water, Developing Conflict”; Conde, “Water and Counter-Hegemony: Kurdish Struggle in the Tigris and Euphrates in Turkey.”

<sup>50</sup> Bilgen, “A Project of Destruction, Peace, or Techno-Science? Untangling the Relationship between the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP) and the Kurdish Question in Turkey”; Tsakalidou, “The Great Anatolian Project: Is Water Management a Panacea or Crisis Multiplier for Turkey’s Kurds?”

<sup>51</sup> Different arguments are put forward in: Gleick, Haleh, and Yolleh, “Water, War & Peace: The Middle East.”

of security, peace and war. Rather than seeing water as a way to establish peace, it is important to reconceptualize the relationship between water and conflict. The case study of the GAP stresses the point that water resources and the policies related to them are a political project, and their consequences should therefore also be considered as politically induced. This does not mean, however, that a relationship between water and war should be denied. The strategic use of water in the fight against the PKK, although not falling within the traditional military paradigm, did pose a fundamental security threat to the populations affected. Looking at what happened in Southeast Anatolia through a human security lens, as is also proposed by Verhoeven, indicates that the difference between using guns or water might not always be that big. Indeed, the concept of human security, which is not concerned with weapons but instead “with human life and dignity”<sup>52</sup> shows how the use of the GAP dams should be considered a real security threat to the populations affected. Instead of treating water as an independent driver to war or peace, it should thus be considered as a means that can be used in conflict settings, with significant effects on the population’s human security.

Moreover, the use of the GAP dams in the fight against the PKK might lead to social conflicts in the longer run. As Harris argued, different ethnic groups have unequally benefitted from the GAP dams, exacerbating disparities in the region and causing intercommunal tensions.<sup>53</sup> In fact, it is argued that “the evacuations and ensuing conflicts made the dam and water development project the central node of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict.”<sup>54</sup> This shows that the political use of water can have serious security consequences on the local level, further stressing the relationship between politics, water, and conflict. On top of that, the strategic use of the dams has made them an object of attacks by the PKK. As Jongerden states, the utilization of water as military means has made the dams “potential objects of contention”<sup>55</sup>. This has led to an increase in deployment of military troops to secure the dams, further securitizing the issue of water in the region.<sup>56</sup> Thus, although the issue of water is not the reason for conflict, the political use of it can lead to a securitization of water that turns it into one of the issues driving the conflict. This does not mean that a full-fledged war between the PKK and the Turkish state over the GAP dams is to occur, nor will water completely determine the conflict

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<sup>52</sup> Gary King and Christopher J.L. Murray, “Rethinking Human Security,” *Political Science Quarterly* 116, no. 4 (2001): 589.

<sup>53</sup> Harris, “Water and Conflict Geographies of the Southeastern Anatolia Project.”

<sup>54</sup> Catherine M Ashcraft and Tamar Mayer, *The Politics of Fresh Water: Access, Conflict and Identity* (Taylor & Francis, 2016), np.

<sup>55</sup> Jongerden, “Dams and Politics in Turkey: Utilizing Water, Developing Conflict,” 137.

<sup>56</sup> Warner, “The Struggle over Turkey’s Ilisu Dam: Domestic and International Security Linkages.”

dynamics.<sup>57</sup> However, it does show how the political use of natural resources can further induce the conflict.

## 6. Conclusion:

The relationship between water and conflict is highly contested. Especially the treatment of water, more specifically the (perceived) lack of it, as an independent driver of conflict has been criticized for neglecting the political dimensions that cannot be separated from the effects environmental issues have on conflict dynamics. Indeed, as Verhoeven argues, the impact environmental factors have on conflicts is quintessentially political. The political dynamics of the environment can take different forms: firstly, due to politically induced inequalities, environmental factors can have a different impact on particular communities. Secondly, development programs related to natural resources such as water can also be used as a mean to achieve political objectives. Both forms can trigger conflict in the long run, or play a part in existing conflict dynamics.

The GAP presents such a political use of water-development, thereby showing that politics, natural resources and conflict are strongly interlinked. The GAP water development program was used by the government as a tool to fight the PKK, leading to population-displacement, the creation of 'natural' borders, and cultural destruction. Water in this case should thus not be understood as a source of conflict, but rather as a means that could/can be used during the conflict. This asks for a reconceptualization of the relationship between water and conflict: Instead of treating it as an independent driver to war or peace, in this context it might be more beneficial to consider water as a means that can be used according to political aims, causing significant threat to the population's human security. This paper thereby shows the multidimensional relationship between water and conflict represented in the link between the GAP and the Turkish-PKK conflict. It is important that such a complex, multidimensional relationship should not be overlooked by those concerned with the well-being of the populations in Southeastern Anatolia, nor by those aiming to achieve peace between the Turkish state and the PKK

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<sup>57</sup> "Dams Power Turkey's Conflict With the Kurds" (Stratfor, June 23, 2016), <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/dams-power-turkeys-conflict-kurds?id=be1ddd5371&uuid=f815f31d-7259-403b-bf7b-15720e5352af>.

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