

# The Ilisu Dam Project

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## A Flawed Plan is Revived Unchanged

**KHRP Briefing Paper**

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### Summary

The Ilisu Dam is part of a large scale regional development project in southeast Turkey. Plans were approved by the Turkish government in 1982, but the project has failed to meet international standards. In 2002, foreign companies and financiers dropped out of the project due to its potentially disastrous consequences. The dam as envisaged will not only harm the environment, decreasing the quality of soil and water, killing fish, and causing diseases, but it will also drown many villages, including the ancient city of Hasankeyf, displacing more than 55,000 people and destroying their homes and farms. Finally, the dam will wipe out the history and culture of the region, embodied in the towns and communities that exist there today. Additionally, Turkey has failed to involve either local communities or riparian nations in decision-making, in violation of international standards. Nevertheless, German, Austrian, and French companies have signed on to the infamous project with full knowledge of the potential dangers and the Iraqi government's objections to the project.

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## **Ilisu Dam: Facts and History**

### **The First Attempt**

Ilisu Dam is one of nineteen dams planned as part of the south-eastern Anatolia Project (GAP), a large-scale regional development plan. Its intended location is on the Tigris River, 65 km from the border with Syria. It includes a hydroelectric power plant with a capacity of 1200 MW, and will be built in conjunction with another dam, at Cizre, used for irrigation purposes. The total cost is expected to reach 2 billion Euros.

GAP was launched in 1977, and plans for Ilisu were approved in 1982. These plans were shelved for a time in response to recurring conflicts in the area, but were revived in the late 90s. At this time the project was adopted by several European companies, including UK construction company, Balfour Beatty. These companies sought financial backing from Export Credit Agencies (ECAs) and received provisional approval.

However, the project was highly criticized by archaeologists and environmental and human rights groups because of the damaging effects it would have on the local environment, villagers, and international relations. As a result of the Ilisu Dam Campaign, the companies involved withdrew from the project in 2002, citing the State water agency's (DSI) failure to meet criteria established by the ECAs. The criteria required Turkey to develop a resettlement plan meeting

international standards, a plan for preserving the archeological heritage of Hasankeyf, and assessments of the cultural and environmental impacts of the dam.

### **Ilisu Returns**

Despite the serious problems associated with the Ilisu Dam project, the Turkish government decided to continue with construction plans. In 2004, Austrian company, VA Tech, (now owned by German company, Siemens, with VA Tech Hydro still based in Austria under Andritz AG) was contracted to build the dam. Other German, Austrian, and French companies are also involved. In March of 2007, the German government approved an export credit guarantee despite the infamous project's virtually unchanged situation.

European non-governmental organizations (NGOs) Corner House, Berne Declaration, ECA-Watch, Forests and European Union Resource Network (FERN), Kurdish Human Rights Project (KHRP), and World Economy, Ecology & Development (WEED), as well as local activists in the Initiative to Save Hasankeyf (ISH), are continuing the Ilisu Dam Campaign. These groups are highlighting the project's continuing failure to meet international standards relating to environmental protection, resettlement, archaeological preservation, and negotiation with affected communities and other nations. As a result of the campaign, one firm has already pulled out of negotiations. On June 15, 2007,

Zuercher Kantonalbank of Switzerland announced its decision to withdraw from the Ilisu Dam project.

## **Motivation behind Ilisu Dam**

### **Economic Goals**

The two professed goals of the GAP project are harvesting energy and creating more irrigated farm land (and therefore higher employment rates and standards of living). However, studies of the future sites and experience from currently operating dams indicate that the project will be unable to achieve these economic goals if continued as planned. The present villagers will be unlikely to benefit from any economic growth, as they will be displaced from their homes, forced into the shanty towns of nearby cities. Even those that stay behind may find the newly irrigated land unworkable because of salinisation and erosion caused by the dam, or uninhabitable because of diseases such as malaria. This has been the typical aftermath of completed GAP dams.

In addition, the dams are only expected to have a life of about 50-70 years. During much of this time they will be controlled by foreign investors under the Build-Operate-Transfer method of financing the project. Developed countries have largely abandoned dams as an energy collection method. The foreign companies are only willing to accept these projects because they retain most of the financial gain.

Turkey has yet to consider other options, such as solar or wind power, which may be more beneficial economically, without harming the land and culture of the area. Also, a different location or a shorter dam could save the ancient city of Hasankeyf, while dramatically reducing building expenses.

### **Social/Political Goals**

Another goal of the GAP project, displayed on their website, is "to reinstate civilization to the Upper Mesopotamia." This statement demonstrates the Turkish government's refusal to recognize Kurdish heritage as valuable, or even worthy of being called civilization.

The GAP project is a part of a larger program of cultural assimilation, aimed at erasing the Kurdish culture and assimilating Kurds into the mainstream Turkish culture. The floods will erase Kurdish history and heritage, displace families and communities, and cover up evidence of government oppression in the region, including potential graves of the "disappeared." According to the World Archaeological Congress, this amounts "to a form of ethnic cleansing" in which supporting governments and companies will be complicit.

## **Impact of the Ilisu Dam**

The Ilisu Dam project fails to meet international standards in several areas, which will be highlighted below. Severe problems are evident in the environmental, archaeological/cultural, social (resettlement and compensation),

and political aspects of the plan. The project does not even meet the minimum requirements of the World Bank: mitigating environmental problems, assessing alternatives, consultation with riparian nations, and local participation in decision-making.

### **Environmental Issues**

According to internationally renowned Universities like the Swiss ETH Zürich, the Environmental Impact Assessment Report (EIAR) released by the Turkish authorities is vague, incomplete, and sometimes even contradictory. It does not comply with the EU Directive on Environmental Impact Assessment, though the European Commission has stressed that Turkey must comply with these standards in all projects. It also fails to meet World Bank standards for impact assessments.

The EIAR does not assess the degree of the impacts associated with the dam. Without this information it is impossible to find solutions for minimizing effects.

In addition, the EIAR's assessments do not include impacts outside of Turkey, in Syria and Iraq. The farmers in these countries have not been informed of the project, and will not receive any assistance for negative side-effects. The Turkish DIA insists that they are helping these farmers by preventing floods. However, these farmers actually rely on annual floods to irrigate their land. And although the dam will prevent yearly floods, it will create

daily flood waves which are not beneficial to farmers.

Another potential environmental problem is a decrease in water and soil quality. The soil downstream may become salinated or erode as a result of the dam. Sediment will be trapped, preventing it from fertilizing farmland and causing a build-up in the reservoir, decreasing the dam's productivity. In addition, the water will be 10-15 degrees cooler downstream and will contain less oxygen. The water will also become dirtier as a result of sewage from upriver cities and agricultural run-off collecting in the basin. Sewage treatment plants are planned for upriver cities, but they will not be completed before the dam, nor do the plans take into account the population increase from displaced villagers. Finally, the eutrophication and anoxic conditions caused by the agricultural runoff will remain unmitigated.

Because this increasingly dirty water will remain stagnant, the river will not be able to purify itself, creating a risk for disease. This risk is increased by rotting plant life submerged under the reservoir, which creates a breeding ground for insects that carry malaria, leishmaniasis, and other diseases. There have been severe malaria problems in the wake of recently completed dams, such as the Atatürk and Birecik.

Finally, local varieties of fish and plant life are endangered by the dam, such as riparian systems of vegetation and backwater aquatic habitation. About 400 kilometres of

river ecosystems (the Tigris and its tributaries) would be destroyed, and a number of species specific to the area would lose their habitat. A decrease in fish will also remove an additional source of income for villagers – fishing.

### **Social Issues**

The Turkish government has developed a Resettlement Action Plan (RAP) to handle the displacement of villagers. It is not ready for decision-making by ECAs. The organizational plans for resettlement and compensation are weak. In addition, officials have not consulted with local communities, particularly women, or even made information available to them (the RAP is not publicly available). This violates the World Bank standards for international financing, to which the ECAs have expressed a commitment.

One problem in the organizational structure is the RAP's uncertainty about population. Earlier reports suggesting higher than 80,000 were later changed to 55,000. The RAP also fails to account for the population growth rate, which will be high on account of large families.

Another unaddressed problem is the local landowning system. Most of the property is owned by landlords, while many farmers own no property. The RAP does not ensure that those who use the land will receive compensation for their losses. Many farmers will end up in the shanty towns of nearby cities. These cities are already burdened by refugees from recent conflicts and

have no resources available for villagers.

Additionally, the RAP does not account for villagers who have already been displaced because of conflicts. They will have nowhere to return to after their villages are flooded, and the compensation will be received by the village guards living in their homes.

Neither the villagers, nor the cities hosting those displaced have been consulted about the dam. Although the DSI professes local support, fact-finding missions report that many villagers have not even been informed, while others are adamantly against the project. The town of Hasankeyf even has a local initiative to save the town from flooding. City officials from nearby Batman are also unsupportive, as they are unable to cope with thousands of displaced farmers.

Women, in particular, have been left out of the decision-making, although the DSI claims to be focused on women's and children's issues. Those women interviewed by fact-finding missions universally declare that they do not want the dam because it will make caring for a family even more difficult. As most women do not own property, the small compensation will go only to the men.

Even if villagers are consulted, it is within the ongoing context of state oppression, torture, and other human rights violations. Villagers are afraid to speak out. For many of them the method of "consultation" was being ordered into a police station and told that the dam was going to be built.

Under the present conditions, a fair and open discussion of the project is impossible.

Finally, it is uncertain whether the RAP is legally binding. It may ultimately amount to nothing more than promises.

But binding or not, it remains inadequate. The RAP has not been changed – it is the same plan that foreign companies and governments rejected the first time around.

### **Archaeological/Cultural Issues**

The most widely decried result of the Ilisu Dam is the destruction of the ancient town of Hasankeyf. It is a first degree Archaeological Conservation Site, and any intervention must be approved by the Diyarbakir Board for the Conservation of Cultural and National Assets. DSI authorities have yet to seek approval from the board.

In addition, the Turkish government has ratified the 1992 European Convention on the Protection of Architectural Heritage as part of the EU accession process. According to this convention, archaeological assets are non-renewable resources that should be preserved, preferably *in situ*. Turkey's plan to quickly remove parts of Hasankeyf before destroying it, without considering alternatives, is in direct violation of this convention.

Archaeologists have grave doubts about the plan to move parts of the city to safety. Experts believe it will be impossible to transport the antique monuments without

destroying them. Also, Turkey has not set enough time or money aside for this endeavour. Archaeologists claim it will take at least twenty-five years, but the dam is expected to be finished in less than ten.

Even if the plan is successful, part of the town will still be lost, violating the EU Convention's focus on *in situ* preservation. The city of Hasankeyf is a monument, as an important stop on the Silk Road and as a flourishing medieval city between two empires in the East and West.

But Hasankeyf is not the only site of archaeological interest to be lost in the flood. Archaeologists believe discoveries from the area could lead to connections between Neanderthals and modern man. As of today, the area has not been thoroughly surveyed by archaeologists (a tragedy in itself), but rough surveys of some areas suggest layers of history below ground that stand to be drowned by the reservoir. This is a loss not only to the local residents, but to the history and heritage of all humanity.

In addition, the flooding caused by the dam will wipe out more recent history, including the culture and traditions of the people living in the area today. This is part of a broader plan to repress cultural diversity in the region, particularly with regard to the Kurdish people. The floods will cover up the religious and cultural centres of the region's residents and the graves of their ancestors. It will also separate communities, who will not be resettled together – all part of an attempt to assimilate locals of the

region into mainstream Turkish culture.

Finally, the floods will cover up evidence of recent conflicts and human rights violations occurring in the area, including evacuated villages and possibly graves of the “disappeared.”

### **Political Issues**

*Global:* Turkey shares the waters of the Tigris River with Syria and Iraq. International law requires that Turkey consult with these countries, negotiate, and address any problems raised before interfering with the water supply.

There was a meeting in March of 2007 on this issue. Turkey claims that an agreement was reached, but Iraq and Syria deny this. Iraq insists that the only agreement was over a framework for future talks, denying that it has given approval to Turkey’s plans.

Although the European ECAs said they would require Turkey to inform Iraq, the project was approved in March despite Iraq’s objections.

This situation threatens to increase already present tensions between Turkey and Iraq, and could even lead to “water wars.” The idea of using water as a weapon is not new – in fact, Turkey used its dams to stop water flow into Iraq in 1990. Iraq responded by threatening to bomb the dams. Water wars such as this could have disastrous consequences for local civilians. Even in times of peace, allowing a state to wield this powerful tool increases tensions between neighbouring countries.

Although the Final Terms of Reference for the Ilisu project require a flow of 60 cubic metres per second, this is only at Ilisu, not the border. The flow could end up being much lower, especially in the summer, after passing through irrigation dams such as the one planned for Cizre. The Ilisu Dam could allow Turkey to completely halt the flow of the Tigris into Iraq and Syria.

In addition, Iraq and Syria face the same environmental problems (flooding, decreased water quality, etc.) as downstream Turkish farmers.

By funding before the required negotiations have been made, the ECAs may be in violation of international law. World Bank standards demand that Turkey solicit opinions from riparian nations (as well as local communities) before beginning the project.

*Local:* Finally, the dam will increase tensions in the already conflict-ridden region of south-east Turkey, as more locals become refugees. Turkey has essentially acknowledged this, sending 5,000 soldiers to the region for security.

The reservoir also serves the political purpose of disrupting the movement of the Kurdish armed group, the PKK. This has been admitted by officials to be one of the motives for building past dams.

### **Conclusion**

The Ilisu Dam project is destructive to the environment, society, culture, and political stability of the region and the world. It is in violation of International law. The foreign companies involved should

withdraw their support until these problems are resolved.

## **Recommendations:**

### **Requirements: Government of Turkey**

- Release all information and plans
- Consider alternative projects
- Complete a thorough and accurate environmental impact report
- Have interventions with archaeological sites approved by relevant authorities
- Develop a comprehensive resettlement plan addressing land ownership issues and impact on women and children
- Community involvement in decision-making within an environment free from fear and oppression
- Consult/negotiate with Iraq and Syria.

### **Suggestions: Governments of Iraq and Syria**

Write as a matter of urgency to the governments of Turkey, Austria, Switzerland and Germany:

- Specifying the information that has not been received from Turkey
- Indicating that required consultations have not taken place
- Reiterating rights set out under international law and bilateral agreements with Turkey.
- Create an inter-agency commission for strategizing in regards to state interests.

### **ECAs of France, Germany & Austria**

Reconsider involvement in the project for the following reasons:

- ECA conditions fail to bring the project up to international standards
- Turkey has, in any case, refused to make these conditions binding
- The GAP project is already subject to litigation in the European Court of Human Rights
- The project carries high and difficult-to-justify risks for the reputations of shareholders
- The banks could be held liable for knowingly permitting breaches of local and international law.



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