**A report on the Global Water Crisis and Human Rights**

**Submitted by:** Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights (an organization in special consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council).

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* **Examples of how water pollution, water scarcity and floods have negative impacts on human rights:**

Water resources have become used as a weapon in political rivalries and conflicts among countries, especially in light of the further escalation and prolongation of conflicts, the absence of water alternatives and the impact of climate change on them. Turkey sets a perfect example in this regard, as it uses various water resources as a weapon in its political struggle against the Syrian government as well as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), through the intensive construction of dams and other larger water infrastructures in the basin of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers or cutting off water from areas in Syria[[1]](#footnote-1), in addition to shelling water facilities and pumping stations, whether by air strikes or artillery, destroying the infrastructure of water resources[[2]](#footnote-2). Such acts undermine humans’ basic rights, including the right to access to safe and sufficient water and increases the risk of waterborne diseases. These problems are compounded by the damage caused to the Syrian industrial and agricultural sectors, which affects the livelihood of individuals and their access to food, let alone the massive shortage of energy sources.

In this context, people in the eastern and northeastern regions of Syria, especially those living on the banks of the Euphrates River, are running out of water after the Turkish army took control of the main dam and water pumping stations, thereby increasing infectious disease outbreaks, and threatening the environmental and human rights situation in multiple regions inside Syria.[[3]](#footnote-3) The Turkish forces have controlled the Alouk water station, and cut off the supply for Hasakah and its countryside, putting about 600 thousand people in the regions of northeastern Syria, at risk. This station also pumps water to the residents already suffering from water shortage, such as the residents of the Al-Hol and Areesheh camps where tens of thousands of Syrians, Iraqis and foreigners live under very poor conditions, lacking access to improved sanitation, clean and sufficient drinking water and at increased risk of contracting the COVID-19.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In the context, the Turkish-backed Syrian Turkmen armed opposition groups are cutting off water from the Syrian city of Hasakah; thus, water bills have surged remarkably and people’s right to access clean and sufficient water has jeopardized. All this is aggravated by the growing fears of the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic among residents, as a result of the poor hygiene and sanitation caused by inadequate drinking water.[[5]](#footnote-5)

On another hand, the Turkish bombing of some areas causes sever damages to Syria’s main pumping stations and water facilities[[6]](#footnote-6). In April 2020, the flow of water from the Alouk water station to Hasakah province in North and East Syria has been cut-off by Turkey and its proxies in the Syrian National Army (SNA) as a result of the Turkish hostilities carried out continuously as part of the aggression and occupation of the Syrian territories in 2020.[[7]](#footnote-7) It is worth noting that during the Turkish military "Operation Peace Spring", artillery shells hit the Allouk pumping station and put it out of action.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Above all, Turkey’s construction of dams and other projects has taken its toll on agricultural and industrial sectors, as the level of water flowing through the Tigris and Euphrates rivers has critically declined, affecting crop production, and thus threatening the right to adequate food[[9]](#footnote-9).

On another level, closing the floodgates and withholding the Euphrates water reduces the water flow to Syria; as a consequence, reducing the electricity generation and damaging the agricultural sector. In June 2020, the Turkish government curbed the water resources flowing to the Tishrin Dam, the largest dam on the Euphrates River, which led to a significant decline in lake levels, and this in turn affected the generation of electric power feeding the Euphrates and Tishreen stations in the regions of northern and eastern Syria, which operating hours dropped to only 12 after it was 18 hours to generate electricity,[[10]](#footnote-10) in violation to the Syrian-Turkish Agreement signed in 1987[[11]](#footnote-11).

In light of the above, it become clear that water scarcity and pollution in Syria as a result of Turkish practices has undoubtedly contributed to affecting the right to access clean water, health, food and livelihoods.

As if that were not enough, the floods in Turkey contributed to affecting the right of people to life. In August 2020, 4 people died and 11 people were lost, as a result of the flash floods that hit the Giresun region in northern Turkey[[12]](#footnote-12), and due to poor infrastructure resulting from poorly planned urban development projects. The risks of flood disasters in Turkey and other nature borne disaster have exasperated, not only because all the asphalt and cement prevent water from being absorbed into the soil[[13]](#footnote-13), but also as a result of the uncontrolled buildings and all the activities that destroy the area’s natural structure[[14]](#footnote-14).

* **How has climate change exacerbated water problems?**

Turkey's government actively supports coal power expansion and subsidizes new coal-fired power plants[[15]](#footnote-15); therefore, greenhouse gas emissions increase, greatly contributing to the exacerbation of the phenomenon of climate change, which will lead to an increase in the temperature from 2.5 to 3.5 by 2100. Consequently, rainfall will expectedly decrease by 25-35% in Turkey, which means an equal decrease in Turkey’s water resources and an increase in water stress[[16]](#footnote-16). This has a significant adverse impact on the availability of water for food production and rural development, which further exacerbates social inequalities within Turkish society, in addition to reducing the level of groundwater, due to the intrusion of sea water in most coastal aquifers against the background of coastal erosion due to floods caused by climate changes[[17]](#footnote-17), Turkey’s water resources are projected to suffer a modest decline of 11% by midcentury[[18]](#footnote-18) and 12% by the end of the century.

* **Specific obligations of states and corporate responsibilities in addressing water pollution, water scarcity and floods; to protect human rights:**

Articles 11 and 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights stipulate that states parties should ensure that natural water resources are protected from contamination by harmful substances and pathogenic microbes.[[19]](#footnote-19) While there is no explicit article in the Turkish constitution providing for the elimination of water pollution and its scarcity, Article 168 of the Turkish Constitution implicitly stipulates that water resources in Turkey must be protected and developed[[20]](#footnote-20). In 2012, a Water Management Coordination Committee (WMCC) was established with the aim of protecting water resources. This is in addition to the responsibilities of the State’s General Directorate of Water Works, which takes measures against various floods[[21]](#footnote-21). Although these legal articles bind the Turkish government to preserve water resources, it uses water resources as a weapon in its political rivalry with the Syrian government and the Syrian Democratic Forces. Moreover, Turkey’s energy-related environmental policies subsidizing coal power is inconsistent with its climate change strategy, and contributes significantly to acute shortage of food and water resources.

* **Protecting populations particularly vulnerable to water pollution, water scarcity and floods:**

Syrian citizens, camp residents and displaced minorities are exposed to many violations related to water scarcity and pollution, such as lack of safe water and sanitation, lack of agricultural crops and hydroelectric power, let alone the severe floods and other natural disasters that keep hitting people in Turkey, due to the government’s abusive practices and activities; therefore, Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights recommends the following: -

* + The Turkish government must stop cutting water in separate areas of Syria, due to its devastating effects on the citizens’ rights to access safe water and adequate food.
	+ The Turkish forces must stop targeting and shelling water facilities and pumping stations, whether by air strikes or artillery, during the war in Syria.
	+ The Syrian government's full share of water must be protected and guaranteed without being reduced by the construction of the dams.
	+ Turkey’s energy-related environmental policies subsidizing coal power must be changed in order to protect environment and maintain water resources.
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