

مجلس الإدارة الذاتية لشمال وشرق سوريا

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الإدارة الذاتية لشمال وشرق سوريا

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CALL FOR INPUT

“The rights to water and sanitation as a tool for peace, prevention and cooperation”

This contribution has been submitted by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. This administration governs North and East Syria with a democratic system and respect for all religions and ethnic minorities living in the area. The Administration wants a democratization and decentralization of Syria. It presents this contribution as a victim of the lack of water for its civilian population caused by the attacks on the Alouk water supply station.

10. How have insufficient water and sanitation services contributed to violence, social unrest, conflicts, and/or displacement in your region or community?

Context of drought and lack of water in the North and East of Syria

The water crisis affecting North and East Syria has multiple dimensions: lack of rain, reduced flow of the Euphrates River and a long-term reduction in groundwater. The meteorological drought, that is, the lack of rain, began at the end of 2020 and has continued until today with a combination of two factors: a reduction in the number of average rainfalls and an increase in heat waves. In this sense, since 2021, a substantial reduction in the flow of the Euphrates River can be seen as it passes through the North and East of Syria.¹

This reduction of the Euphrates capital has had two main negative impacts. First of all, a lack of water for agriculture, the main engine of the economy of North and East Syria. According to data from the NGO REACH Initiative, 21% of the population between 18 and 64 years of age works in this sector. And secondly, it has caused a reduction in the production of electricity

¹Drought data can be consulted with graphs and, in particular, the reduction in the flow of the Euphrates River in the report of the humanitarian NGO Reach Initiative in its report of April 19, 2022 "Briefing Note: Humanitarian Impact on Water Shortages in Northeast Syria" available at:

<https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/briefing-note-humanitarian-impact-water-shortages-northeast-syria-april>

through, mainly, the Tishreen and Tabqa dams. It must be taken into account that these dams are the main source of electricity production in the area. Therefore, the reduction in its operation has caused the majority of the population to have no electricity for several hours a day.

The duration of the drought and the heat waves have caused this not only to affect the flow of the Euphrates River but also the groundwater. This is especially problematic because in North and East Syria groundwater wells have been used for decades to obtain water for agriculture and human consumption, as the report by the NGO REACH Initiative indicates. In this sense, the reduction of groundwater has caused that to extract it, more powerful motors are needed, which extract the water to greater depths and need more energy to work. This has caused an increase in demand for alternative methods of water supply. In particular, the demand for water supplied by trucks and stored in each house has risen sharply, a method that is already much more expensive in itself and that, moreover, has increased in price. Only in 2021 it is estimated that the price of water transported privately by truck has increased by 69% according to data from the NGO REACH Initiative. This price increase has caused many families to choose to supply themselves with unsafe water, increasing the number of infections and diseases caused by its consumption.

This drought and insufficient access to water, for a large part of the population of North and East Syria, have only increased the conflicts over water control, in a territory that for more than a decade has lived in a state of war or conflict. Specifically, water has been used as another weapon to attack a population, which already lives in very precarious conditions. In this sense, in this report we want to focus on the consequences that this war for water has caused to the Alouk water supply station, which gives access to drinking water to almost a million people. The report intends to describe why this station has been a focus of conflict, to what extent it has stopped working and what have been the consequences for the population's access to water.

Alouk water supply station

The water supply station is located in the province of Al-Hasakeh, specifically, in the city of Ras Al-Ayn located next to the border between Turkey and Syria. It is the main source of water supply in the province of Al-Hasakeh, providing coverage, in its normal operation, to a population of 460,000 people directly and 500,000 more indirectly through transport with tanker trucks. Included in the supply are several refugee camps, including Al Hol and 6 camps for internally displaced persons. The supply includes 30 of the 37 health centers in Al-Hasakeh province.²

Occupation of Alouk station by pro-Turkey militias

In October 2019, the Turkish army, with the support of the Syrian National Army, an opposition group to the Bashar al-Àssad regime, launched a military offensive against the Syrian Democratic Forces in the northern part of Al-Hasakeh province. At the end of October,

²Data obtained in the Flash update of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, of July 1, 2021: "Syria: Alouk water station", available at:

<https://www.unicef.org/mena/reports/syria-alouk-water-station>.

the fighting ended, but the Turkish army and other pro-Turkish militias were left in control and occupation of a strip of territory between the cities of Tell Abyad and Ras Al-Ayn. This military operation was classified as illegal under international law and various NGOs, such as Amnesty International, reported various war crimes.³

Early in the occupation of Ras Al-Ayn by pro-Turkish forces, an agreement was reached with the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria to maintain the supply of water from Alouk station to Al-Hasakeh province. This agreement has been broken several times by the pro-Turkish militias that control the area.

As multiple reports and statements point out⁴ from NGOs such as the REACH Initiative, Save the Children, Human Rights Watch or Doctors Without Borders⁵ between August 1, 2021 and March 28, 2022, 29% of the days the station has not worked and 36% of the days it has done so below its average capacity. This capacity limitation is due to the fact that since the occupation there has been limited access to the technicians needed to maintain the plant and multiple attacks on the power lines that supply power to the station. The limitation of the operational capacity of the Alouk station has consequently caused the water reserve of the Al-Himmer dam, which receives water from Alouk and distributes it throughout the city of Al-Hasakeh, to be at levels of water below the operating limit and has stopped working.

The attacks by the pro-Turkish militias and the neglect of the maintenance of the Alouk station are just one example of how the insufficiency of water and its sanitation are used in the conflict between the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria and pro-Turkish to make it worse and harm the civilians. The use, by the pro-Turkish militias, of the Alouk station as a weapon of war to leave almost one million people without access to drinking water, constitutes a war crime in accordance with the Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the protection of civilian persons in time of war and article 9 of the Rome Statute⁶.

Humanitarian effects

The main effect that the substantial reduction in the operation of the Alouk plant has produced on the civilian population is that, since they cannot be supplied through the water supply network, the only option to obtain drinking water is to buy water from private

³The Amnesty International report of October 18, 2019, "Syria: Damning evidence of war crimes and other violations by Turkish forces and their allies" can be consulted at the following link:

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2019/10/syria-damning-evidence-of-war-crimes-and-other-violations-by-turkish-forces-and-their-allies/>

⁴The statements of the NGOs Save the Children and Human Rights Watch are included in the Aljazeera news item of October 19, 2021 "Water crisis plagues tens of thousands in northeast Syria: NGOs", available at:

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/19/water-crisis-plagues-tens-of-thousands-in-northeast-syria-ngos>

⁵Report by Doctors Without Borders on the water crisis in North and East Syria: "Driven out by war, displaced in desperate conditions", available at

<https://www.msf.org/ru/node/47490>

⁶Rome Statute. (nd). Recovered from:

[https://www.un.org/spanish/law/icc/statute/spanish/rome_statute\(s\).pdf](https://www.un.org/spanish/law/icc/statute/spanish/rome_statute(s).pdf)

companies through transport with tanker trucks. This method, as already described above, is much more expensive and has caused many families to choose to use unsafe water.

The use of these unsafe waters has caused an increase in diseases and poisoning in the Al-Hassakeh area. As the report from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs details, between 2020 and 2021 the cases of acute diarrhea detected in the province of Al-Hasekeh have increased by 54%.

In addition, it must be taken into account that the humanitarian disaster caused by the drought and exacerbated by the limitation of the operation of the Alouk station affects an area that already lives in permanent humanitarian urgency due to the conflict situation and the enormous number of refugees and internally displaced persons it hosts. Specifically, as the report by the NGO REACH Initiative indicates, it is estimated that in North and East Syria there are some 630,000 refugees or internally displaced persons out of a population of 2.7 million.⁷

In this sense, the UNICEF report on the Programming Framework for Syria (2018-2022) notes that in the country as a whole the levels of severe acute child malnutrition (0.4%), moderate acute child malnutrition (1, 3%) and growth retardation (12.6%) do not reach emergency levels, but it is detected that there is a gradual worsening. Iron deficiency anemia affects 27% of children aged 6 to 59 months and 31% of lactating pregnant women. It has been observed that 42% of children have minimal dietary diversity and 25% of children do not benefit from a timely introduction of varied foods.⁸

This gradual worsening is detected, especially in the Al-Hasakeh area and, among other causes, is caused by the rise in food prices due to the lack of water and the decrease in the ability of families to buy food. due to the increase in the price of water. Situations caused, in large part, by the malfunction of the Alouk station due to the water war.

Water war and internally displaced persons

In addition to the most extreme attacks such as the one at the Alouk station, water has been used for a long time in North and East Syria, as well as in the country as a whole, to exacerbate existing conflicts and make the civilian population suffer. . In 2017, UNICEF already warned that, in Syria, the destruction of infrastructure such as tanks and pipes or its own occupation,

⁷Information obtained from the report of the NGO Reach Initiative of August 9, 2022 "Movement Intentions of IDPs in NES: An Analysis of Push Factors in Al-Hasakeh City May 2022". Recovered from:

<https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/movement-intentions-idps-nes-analysis-push-factors-al-hasakeh-city-may-2022>

⁸Data extracted from the report for the UNICEF Executive Board of July 7, 2022 "Programming Framework for Syria (2018-2022)". Recovered from:

https://www.unicef.org/executiveboard/media/11046/file/2022-PL18-Syria_CPD-ES-ODS.pdf

was leaving entire cities without drinking water for weeks. Forcing thousands of families, including many children, to drink contaminated water or risk their lives to obtain it.⁹

Specifically, throughout the country it is estimated that around two thirds of the water treatment plants, half of the pumping stations, one third of the elevated water tanks, one fourth of the wastewater treatment plants and a sect part of the wells have been damaged.

The attacks on the Alouk water station and the reported attacks on all kinds of water infrastructure in the rest of the country have only increased the number of internally displaced persons to areas where the water supply is better. But, what is most worrying, the situation of lack of water, due to the attacks on the Alouk station, has caused the humanitarian conditions in the camps for internally displaced persons and refugees in Al-Hasekeh, such as the Washokani camp, the already very harsh living conditions of the people who live in these camps worsen, as detailed in the report by Doctors Without Borders, cited above.

CONCLUSIONS

The context of drought and the lack of stations, means of transportation and other water sanitation infrastructures affecting the North and East of Syria have led to increase conflicts to have control over the water supply infrastructures in the area, such as the Alouk water station.

This difficulty in accessing water has led to using water as a weapon for war. Specifically, after the occupation by the pro-Turkish militias of Ras Al-Ayn, the Alouk water supply station, which supplies water to one million people in the province of Al-Hasekeh has been attacked and sabotaged multiple times.

These attacks have meant that the humanitarian disaster, which the inhabitants of the area, and especially the refugees and internally displaced persons living in Al-Hasekeh governorate, were already suffering, have only worsened due to the increase in the price of drinking water. This price increase has caused many families to choose to consume contaminated water or have problems for obtaining food. In addition, this lack of water is worsening the unrest in the area, which has already experienced many tensions in recent years. For this reason, it is feared that the lack of water could worsen tensions and create new violent conflicts.

⁹UNICEF. (nd). Conflict in Syria: Water in times of war. Recovered from:

<https://www.unicef.es/blog/emergencias-ayuda-humanitaria/conflicto-en-siria-el-agua-en-tiempos-de-guerra>