

Contested hydrosocial territories and disputed water governance: Struggles and competing claims over the Ilisu Dam development in southeastern Turkey



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ABSTRACT

Dam development in southeastern Turkey is a highly-disputed issue, fanned by the Turkish–Kurdish conflict, socio-environmental and historical–cultural concerns, and international geopolitical interests. This paper focuses on discussions around the Ilisu Dam and shows how different actor coalitions imagine different hydrosocial territories regarding this mega-hydraulic project currently under construction. Imaginaries, counter-imaginaries and endeavours to materialize them go far beyond technical projects, portraying the dam to (re)configure the territory physically, ecologically, socio-economically, symbolically and discursively. The paper embeds competing hydro-territorial constructs and claims within an analysis of governmentality and the multi-scalar and multi-issue politics of dam opponents.

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1. Introduction – Turkish dam development, GAP and the Kurdish question

Dam construction is a disputed issue worldwide, of high importance for governments, local people and the environment (e.g., Bijker, 2007; Boelens and Post Uiterweer, 2013; Kaika, 2006; Nixon, 2010; Swyngedouw, 2007). In Turkey, a country that has experienced enormous economic growth in recent years and plays a major regional role for both the Middle East and Europe, large dams have been planned and constructed across the country. A recent, highly controversial scheme is the Southeastern Anatolia Project (*Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi*, hereafter GAP) comprising 22 dams and 19 hydroelectric power plants in the Euphrates and Tigris river basins (see Fig. 1 for an overview of the spatial reconstructions imagined by GAP planners). Besides producing electricity, the dams deliver irrigation water to 1.7 million hectares of land, boosting agricultural production in the region (Yüksel, 2010). Beyond the massive barrier creating a huge water reservoir, these dams branch out in large grids of power cables and canals transforming landscapes, affecting communities in these areas,

and mobilizing protest movements. Opposing stakeholders pick the scientific knowledge and technological capacity that supports their positions and meets their objectives. To explain the various linkages between state power, protest movements, the landscape, local people, science and technology, we engage with the concept of hydrosocial territories (Boelens et al., 2016). The concept is used to analyze the last dam of the GAP complex, currently under construction, the Ilisu Dam. The numbers, although contested, are impressive. The Ilisu Dam is designed to store 343.8 Mm³ of water, under which approximately two hundred towns and villages will disappear, affecting about 78,000 people, primarily Kurdish (see Fig. 2) (Ilisu Consortium, 2005; İlhan, 2009; Ronayne, 2005).

Provisional plans for a dam on the Tigris River were formulated in the 1950s but it took until 1982 to make a project design (Setton and Drillisch, 2006). It took fifteen more years to find funding and investors, leading to an international consortium of companies to construct the dam (Banktrack, 2015). In subsequent years, the consortium's membership changed frequently, as companies withdrew under national and international protests. The construction of the Ilisu Dam officially started in March 2007 and is, as of early 2016, at an advanced stage (Ayboğa, 2015). Although the dam is nearly finished, it is unclear what the hydrosocial territories opened up by the Ilisu Dam will look like.

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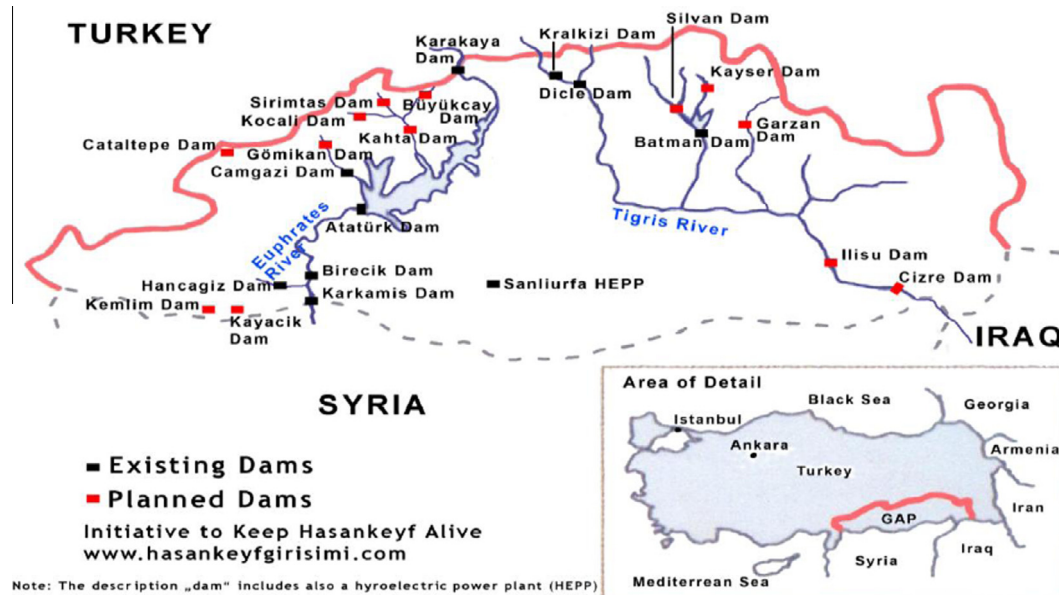


Fig. 1. The GAP Project region, planned and existing dams (Eberlein et al., 2010:293).

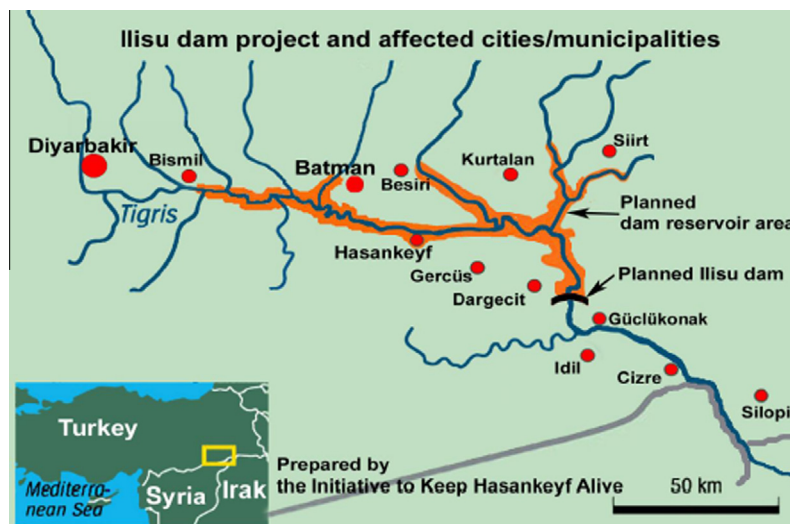


Fig. 2. The Ilisu Dam Project and affected cities/municipalities, prepared by the Initiative to Keep Hasankeyf Alive (Eberlein et al., 2010:295).

The GAP has a history of shifting objectives and realization, from the original focus (early 1980s) on hydroelectricity and irrigation, to an integrated regional development project. Additional objectives were formulated, for example replacing traditional social structures with “modern organizations and institutions” (GAP, 2013b: Objectives of GAP), reducing infant and child mortality, lowering fertility rates and creating permanent settlements for nomadic and semi-nomadic communities (GAP, 2013b). Accordingly, multiple social projects addressing, for example, women’s empowerment, education and entrepreneurship were planned and partly implemented within GAP. The integrated development program aimed to narrow the socio-economic gap between Western and Eastern Turkey (Carkoğlu and Eder, 2001). Although couched in general development language, the ‘Kurdish question’ is inescapable in this area: the decades-old and still ongoing struggle between the Turkish government and Kurds living within Turkish national boundaries. Crucial issues involve recognition of Kurdish identity, language rights, equal status under law, and

greater autonomy for the southeastern provinces (e.g., Harris, 2002; Warner, 2012). The GAP project, however, swamped issues of ownership and dependency, sovereignty and subordination by the socio-technical complexities of dam construction.

The regional context has led scholars to argue that GAP is a mechanism for the Turkish government to gain control and legitimacy in the southeastern regions in various ways (Carkoğlu and Eder, 2001; Harris, 2002; Morvaridi, 2004). In a narrative considering the region’s low socio-economic development status as the root cause of the ‘Kurdish problem’, GAP is depicted as a way to pacify the region through economic development (Harris, 2008). Furthermore, GAP implies increased presence of state organizations, legitimizing state authority and thereby increasing local populations’ dependence on state institutions (Özok-Gündoğan, 2005; Harris, 2002; Jongerden, 2010; Warner, 2008). Such greater dependence on the Turkish state is expected to undermine the power of the Kurdish guerrilla group PKK (Kurdistan Worker’s Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*)).

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