

CHANGING OF DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES OF INTERNATIONAL AND LOCAL NGOS TO BLOCK DAM CONSTRUCTIONS: THE MESOPOTAMIAN IDENTITY MARKER

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Abstract

This article explores the evolving discursive strategies of international and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) opposing the construction of the Ilisu Dam in Turkey in light of broader conflict dynamics in the Eastern Mediterranean. The Ilisu Dam, a cornerstone of Turkey's Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP), has sparked significant controversy because of its environmental, cultural, and socioeconomic ramifications, including large-scale displacement and the destruction of ancient sites. This study examines how NGOs have strategically reframed their opposition over time, incorporating arguments around human rights, cultural heritage, and international law to complement environmental advocacy. Central to this analysis is the Mesopotamian identity marker as a unifying discursive tool, which contrasts with the divisive nationalist rhetoric and aims to foster regional solidarity and international cultural engagement. Process tracing was employed to identify the critical stages of these strategic adaptations, highlighting the role of shifting geopolitical conditions, transnational alliances, and identity framing in influencing public perception and advocacy outcomes. The findings underscore how such strategies resonate with regional and global audiences, shaping cross-border support and pressuring external stakeholders. By situating the Ilisu Dam controversy within the context of regional conflicts over resources, identities, and governance, this article contributes to the understanding of how local and transnational actors navigate the complex intersections of environmental and socio-political challenges in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Keywords: *Turkey, Ilisu Dam, Mesopotamian identity, discursive strategies, environmental activism*

Introduction

The role of water is both multifaceted and pervasive. It is a fundamental physiological necessity, as delineated by Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and is thus a non-negotiable human need (Hale et al. 2018). Water plays a pivotal role in both development and political dynamics. Water's importance as a vehicle for political ideas comes from its vital function in maintaining life, which gives its materiality a great symbolic significance. All major religions share an equivocal imagery of water, which can be seen as either a force of destruction, a source of life, or an element of change and transition. It is intense and ubiquitous in secular rituals, beliefs, and social conventions that are driven by normative, aesthetic, and emotional characteristics. Hydraulic facilities have symbolic value that goes beyond the socioeconomic function of managing water supplies and appeals to broader imaginations.

The multipurpose utilization of rivers has been essential for the significant development of humanity. Dam construction plays a crucial role in national development plans, as the proper use of rivers fosters economic growth. The international analysis of dams and dam systems has become an integral part of International Relations (IR) (Biswas & Tortajada; 2001; Kahsay et al., 2015; Marton & Szálkai, 2017; Bilgen, 2018a). Dams and their operations can be examined from various perspectives, including economic, political, and environmental readings. Furthermore, international law strives to establish norms for the shared use of rivers and the construction and operation of dams.

Developed states built their major dams in the first half of the 20th century, while newly industrialized states, such as India, China, Brazil, and Turkey, began constructing their dam systems during the 1950s and 1960s (Atzl, 2014). Turkey initiated the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP) in the 1970s, a system comprising of 22 dams and 19 hydroelectric power plants. Despite its arid climate, the southeastern region of Turkey has fertile soil. Redirecting the waters of the Euphrates River is expected to transform this area into highly productive agricultural land suitable for cultivating crops such as wool, soy, maize, and sesame. The project envisions utilizing two million hectares to enable Turkey to produce sufficient summer crops for export to other Middle Eastern countries (Warner, 2012). Beyond the efficient use of water and electricity generation, the project also aims to develop Turkey's south-eastern region. The project has garnered significant attention on the international stage for various reasons: some emphasize the undeniable benefits of the dam system (Bilgen, 2018b), while others criticize Turkey from environmental and minority rights perspectives (Ozkahraman, 2017; Tezcür, 2021; Tinti, 2023). In addition to the controversial Atatürk Dam, the Ilisu Dam has been a focal point for international scrutiny. Construction of the Ilisu Dam began in 2006 and was completed in 2016. However, the project faced substantial international opposition even during the planning phase. Global movements and activists opposed the

construction of the dam, citing its harmful environmental impact and human rights concerns. The project necessitated the forced displacement of tens of thousands of people. Despite these objections, Turkey's strong nationalist and developmentalist stance ensured the completion of the dam project in 2016 (Warner, 2012).

This study extends beyond the specific case of the Ilisu Dam, providing valuable insights into contemporary advocacy movements that transcend national boundaries. By analyzing the use of the Mesopotamian identity marker – an identity marker *reintroduced* in the region as complementary to national identity with the aim of uniting people living in the Mesopotamian region (Tinti, 2023) – the paper applies an innovative approach to coalition-building, offering a unifying narrative that contrasts with divisive nationalist rhetoric. This approach not only fosters regional solidarity, but also appeals to international cultural and humanitarian concerns, demonstrating the power of identity framing in influencing global support and public discourse.

The issue of water and dams is an increasingly relevant topic in the context of the growing contemporary water scarcity. Through the example of the Ilisu dam, not only the importance of the water issue, but also the power of the civil sector and the influence of Western values are highlighted. It also draws attention to gaps in international law, whether in terms of the human rights aspect of the issue, the legal rights to our environmental treasures and heritage, or as a matter of transboundary rivers. This research aims to explore the construction of the Ilisu Dam, the actions and reactions of the actors, and the discourses of the campaign. Using the process tracing method, the paper reviews the main theoretical cornerstones related to water, water sharing, human rights, and heritage protection, and then uses them to analyse campaign strategies, highlighting the gaps in various international legal standards. The paper concludes with a discussion of the Mesopotamian identity as a campaign strategy and its potential.

Water, dam building and the role of Identity

The relationship between water and human civilization is inextricable, particularly when considering the direct correlation between the evolution of human civilization and the role of rivers. Discussions on international rivers have historically been absent from broader discourses of IR. Initially, the primary focus in this context was on freedom of navigation for commercial purposes. However, by the late 20th century, growing concerns about water scarcity had given rise to two contrasting perspectives that came to define global water governance. The neorealist or Malthusian discourse, which stresses the conflicting nature of transboundary rivers, draws attention to the dangers of sharing water, emphasizing that water scarcity could even lead to severe conflict or water wars (Westing, 1986; Gleick, 1993; Remans, 1995; Samson & Carrier, 1997; Butts, 1997). A central argument of neo-realists is the heavy dependence of industry and agriculture on water resources. Water scarcity is

a consequence of a decline in agricultural production, leading to famine, migration, civil unrest, and potential wars (Szálkai, 2022). The Jordan River and Tigris-Euphrates River basins are frequently cited as examples of potential water conflicts; however, there are no documented instances of actual water wars occurring within these regions (Warner, 2012). The absence of water wars contributes to the neoliberal school's assumption that transboundary watersheds can play a pivotal role in cooperation and peacebuilding (Deudney, 1991; Dokken, 1997; Schmeier, 2013; Baranyai, 2017). It is now accepted in the literature that the most common feature of our water issues is the coexistence of voluntary cooperation, mainly due to the presence of hydro-hegemony and often latent conflict (Chomsky, 1999; Selby, 2002; Zeitoun & Warner, 2006). Our water affairs are in a delicate state of equilibrium, where increasing water scarcity can easily tip the scales in favour of conflict. This can easily happen, for example, because of a unilateral project that reduces water quantity in the downstream country.

A dam is an engineering feature that enables humans to exert control and influence over nature. However, it frequently disrupts the natural course of the river and occasionally causes adverse effects. Historically, the construction of dams was primarily driven by the need to prevent flooding or facilitate irrigation in drought-prone regions. However, in the last century, the scope of dam construction has expanded significantly with the development of multiple purposes, including flood mitigation, water storage, energy generation, transportation facilitation, recreational activities, and even tourism. A further aspect of this issue that is often overlooked is that dams have been used as a means of demonstrating national growth and influence as well as a tool for exerting political control over minority groups located in the vicinity of the dam or in other states that are tributaries of the river. These states are referred to as 'riparian' countries, a term that was first coined by the Danube Commission. In these instances, dams have become instruments of foreign policy (Benea & Onița, 2017).

Dam construction has several benefits and costs. Among the benefits are flood prevention, irrigation, hydropower generation, reservoir building, and job opportunity creation, potentially boosting tourism (Sayektiningsih & Hayati, 2021). At the same time, a state building a dam also faces costs, such as loss of biodiversity, landslides, damaged forests, forced relocation in the construction zone, decreasing social bonds between displaced communities, political tension, and potential clashes with neighbouring countries (Brown et al., 2009). The impacts of dam building can therefore be measured and categorized from several aspects in the environmental, social, and political sectors. Among political costs, the most discussed is the alteration of river flows. While water is often perceived as a national asset, it is not uncommon for dams to be used as political weapons and referred to as manifestations of power (Villiers, 2000). As the political costs of a unilateral project may be high, the political benefits of bilateral or multilateral projects could be significant.

Bilateral and multilateral relations around waters are powerful diplomatic forces. Transboundary rivers can be both sources of conflict and drivers of cooperation. The construction of a dam on a river shared by two or more countries can provide an excellent basis for international cooperation, assuming that all riparians are willing to relinquish their absolute territorial sovereignty and submit to the norms of international law on the equitable allocation and rational use of water resources.

According to Molle et al. (2009), large-scale hydraulic infrastructures demonstrate the "hydraulic mission" that political elites in the most different geographic regions of the world have undertaken to seize and control water resources during the early phases of state-building. Through the wonders of infrastructural development and routine operations of hydraulic bureaucracies, dominance over nature was accomplished with the intention of demonstrating the power of the state and fostering its legitimacy. Water's vital role in maintaining life gives its materiality a great deal of symbolic meaning, making it an effective medium for expressing political ideas (Tinti, 2023).

Campaigns to prevent dam construction have been part of the global discourse since the 1990s. At that time, the construction of dams on the Narmada River in India inspired the first such movement. The campaign against dams was so well organized that it forced the World Bank to act, leading to consultation between decision-makers and civil society. This has led to the establishment of the World Commission on Dams. The Commission was set up to mitigate the ethical and environmental damage caused by dam buildings. During this period, civil society demonstrated a high degree of organization and mobilization. Consequently, it was determined that financial support for dam construction would be restricted to projects that adhere to a set of diverse standards, encompassing ethical, environmental, and ecological considerations. In 2001, OECD Common Approaches to the Environment and Officially Supported Export Credits were adopted under pressure from civil society. Although this document is not legally binding, it reflects the spirit of the times in which it was possible to ensure that Export Credit Agencies only support dam construction projects with strict guarantees (Atzl, 2014).

The role of identity in water-related conflicts, as in all other conflicts, is crucial. Identity separates *us* from *them*, provides the foundation for individual and group mobilization, and legitimizes individual and group aspirations. In simple terms, identity is self-identity, self-awareness, and self-definition. In certain cases, it is highly fluid in other rigid phenomena. As Cook-Huffman puts it, "*Identities are complex, historically bound, socially constructed, and thus ever moving. They may be transitory in some cases, and rigid and inflexible in others as they are constituted in specific lived realities, bound and shared through story, myth, history, and legend.*" (Cook-Huffman, 2008, p. 19). The concept of identity has emerged as an analytical tool for understanding social conflicts. To understand behaviors, the process of decision-

making and the dynamics of conflict, researchers often rely on identity (Rothman, 1997). Beyond individual identity, there is also collective identity. In the event of a conflict, the latter is analysed more often subjected to analysis.

Identity types can be classified into several categories. Ethnic, cultural, or religious identities are characterized by a sense of belonging based on a shared language, cultural traditions, belief systems, or common ancestry. This type of identity is characterized by stability and greater difficulty in formation, thereby providing a secure point of belonging for the individual. In return, individuals are more loyal to the group. More fluid forms of identity may be exemplified by a selected higher education institution or a previous workplace, which also constitutes a group identity; however, this is less enduring. In the context of contemporary nationalism and nation-states, the concept of national belonging plays a pivotal role in the formation of identity and creates imagined political unity. Nations separated by borders form a community of interests that are difficult to separate (Anderson, 1983).

The importance of identity is not necessarily new to the realm of water in international relations. Throughout the 20th century, dams were seen as an important building block of national cohesion, strengthening national identity, especially in developing countries (Nüsser, 2003). In recent years, the literature has sought to expand our understanding of water sharing by including the issue of identity. In 2016, Josepha Ivanka Wessels used serious gaming, an interdisciplinary methodology to show the cardinal role of identity and the image of others in the sharing of the Jordan River. Wessel's board game experiment demonstrates that groups capable of cultivating a shared identity are more likely to achieve consensus on matters of water governance (Wessels, 2016). Although it is only a theoretical experiment, we can see examples of using identity construction to try to resolve water-related conflicts. The nation to which we belong is a powerful building block of our identity. Building an identity that can transcend national borders is the starting point for a more equitable decision-making mechanism. As discussed in this article, part of the Save the Tigris and Iraqi Marshes Campaign, organizations have sought to combat national identity by promoting the Mesopotamian as a marker of identity (Tinti, 2023).

Water management in the Tigris-Euphrates River Basin

The Tigris–Euphrates River system is one of the most important river systems in Western Asia and ultimately flows into the Persian Gulf. It consists mainly of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, along with several smaller tributaries. Transboundary watersheds, especially in arid and water-scarce regions such as the Middle East, can become conflict hotspots. Water rights in this region became a source of dispute among Iraq, Turkey, and Syria starting in the 1960s, when Turkey launched the GAP project, a large-scale public-works initiative to capture river waters via 22 dams for irrigation and hydroelectric power. Although the water conflict between Turkey

and Syria was particularly intense, Iraq also saw the GAP project as a potential threat. In 1983, the Joint Technical Committee (JTC) was formed to address ongoing data and water-usage disputes among the three countries. However, the Committee only managed to pass two bilateral agreements before it stopped meeting in the early 1990s. One reason for the lack of agreement is that Turkey would treat the two rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates, as a single hydrological unit, while Syria and Iraq would consider this unacceptable (Tinti, 2023). The only two legally binding documents are those between Turkey and Syria (1987) and Syria and Iraq (1990). Currently, there is no comprehensive cooperation agreement in action in the River Basin and there is no basin-wide integrated management (Dohrmann & Hatem, 2014).

The UN General Assembly adopted the UN Watercourse Convention in 1997. The main aim of the Convention is to provide a legal basis for cooperation and dispute resolution regarding shared freshwater resources. This framework is particularly relevant in regions where rivers, lakes, or groundwater cross international borders and where disputes over water rights, usage, and management are common. One of the key principles of the Convention is the equitable and reasonable utilization of the watercourse, meaning that riparian areas must work together and use river water in such a way that downstream countries can meet their needs. The limitation of the Convention lies in the number of its ratifiers, as several upstream riparian countries, including Turkey, refuse to become part of the Convention due to concerns of national sovereignty and resource control. The Harmon Doctrine is compatible with Turkey's position in international relations. The Doctrine, which dates back to 1895, emphasizes absolute territorial sovereignty over transboundary watercourses. Following this concept, upstream riparians are free to divert the water of transboundary rivers, leaving no water for downstream states (McCaffrey, 1996).

Apart from having a geographically more favorable position, Turkey also holds superior political, economic, and military assets. Through its assets and upstream position, the country was able to conduct grand projects on its transboundary rivers. The capacity to construct a dam is not only an indicator of a state's strength, but also a means of fostering national unity. During the era in which numerous significant dams were built, there was a pervasive sentiment of national pride surrounding these structures (Tinti, 2023). This has contributed to the strengthening of the state's national identity and can be regarded as a notable manifestation of nationalism in the 20th century.

Method of analysis

This study seeks to highlight the significance of identity in shaping decision-making processes and foreign policy. It draws inspiration from the emergence of

Mesopotamian identity within discourses, the strategies that preceded this focus, and those grounded in human rights and heritage protection as well as the strengths and limitations of these approaches. To analyse this dynamic, this study employs a process-tracing research methodology. In addition to the academic literature, the analysis incorporates material published in the media and publicly available resources from the Save the Tigris Foundation.

The case study of the Ilisu Dam was chosen because of its historical significance, the level of international and domestic opposition, and the strategic discursive shifts employed by NGOs. The construction of the dam was one of the most controversial large-scale infrastructure projects in modern Turkey, making it a rich case for analysing how advocacy campaigns evolve in response to changing geopolitical, economic, and legal conditions.

The research begins by examining the completion of Ilisu Dam, a project that has generated significant international controversy. Initially, key events were identified to construct a timeline of the process. By tracing causal mechanisms, I analysed how various discourses, such as human rights, cultural heritage protection, and Mesopotamian identity, shaped advocacy efforts and influenced international responses.

The limitations of this study include potential gaps in data, as some key discussions or negotiations related to the Ilisu Dam, particularly government and diplomatic exchanges, may not be publicly available. Furthermore, this case has limited generalizability. Even though the case study of Ilisu Dam provides in-depth insights, the findings may not be easily generalizable to other cases of infrastructure development or advocacy (Bennett & Checkel, 2015).

Changing discursive strategies related to the Ilisu Dam

The Ilisu Dam

Turkey began building the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP), a system of dams and hydraulic power stations, in the 1970s. Ilisu Dam, the second largest in the GAP project, was planned for construction near Ilisu village. Construction of the dam only started in 2006, but plans were mooted much earlier, in 1954, when Turkey surveyed the Tigris River to look for potential dam sites. Ilisu was selected in 1965 because of its geographical characteristics. In 1997-1998, the site was added to the formal construction program of the State Hydraulic Work (Atzl, 2014).

First, the goal of construction was to expand irrigable areas and produce hydroelectricity. Later, the goals were adjusted to serve socio-economic and political ambitions. The GAP region, the southeastern mountains of Turkey, is characterized by low-income levels, unequal water resource distribution, arid areas, unusual migration patterns, and insufficient social services (Bilgen, 2018b). Given these factors, it makes sense that the initiative will serve as a catalyst for societal change and become a topic of conversation in Turkey. The construction of the Ilisu Dam began

in 2006 but received harsh criticism due to its serious social and economic impact: the destruction of ancient cultural sites, forced population displacement, water and environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, and the exacerbation of water scarcity in Iraq (Dohrmann & Hatem, 2014; Thaman, 2021). In addition, the project could not be implemented without destroying the 12,000-year-old cultural site, Hasankeyf.

In 1997, an international consortium of private companies and dams was established by British Balfour Beatty to fund the dam. The participants in this consortium were Austria Sulzer Hydro (today VA Tech), Switzerland ABB, Union Bank of Switzerland, Balfour Beatty (UK), Impreglio (Italy), Skanska (Sweden), and three companies from Turkey. After receiving criticism from civil society, Balfour Beatty, Impreglio, the Union Bank of Switzerland, and Skanska withdrew from the project. The first consortium ended with the withdrawal of four investors. NGOs and civil society organizations, focusing their discourse primarily on human rights, ethical, and environmental issues triggered by the dam's construction, played a crucial role in the dissolution of the first consortium. One of the most prominent organizations is the UK-based Kurdish Human Rights Project, which conducted a fact-finding mission in 2000 to investigate the negative impacts of the Ilisu Dam. The publication of their findings significantly influenced the parties of the consortium, ultimately leading them to withdraw from the project. In addition to the Kurdish Human Rights Project, Corner House, Friends of the Earth, the German-based World Economy, Ecology and Development, the ECA Watch, and the Berne Declaration also participated in the campaign (Atzl, 2014).

The project faced both domestic and foreign opposition; the construction of the dam was strongly criticized on the grounds that it would erase Kurdish identity. Furthermore, the dam's regional impact was highlighted, with concerns raised that its construction would exacerbate existing conflicts between Turkey and its southern neighbours regarding water resource allocation (Ronayne, 2005; Warner, 2012). As a consequence of the project and international opposition, several monitoring mechanisms have been established to subject similar projects to close scrutiny. Such measures included the obligation for the country undertaking dam construction to guarantee the resettlement of those displaced and to ensure the preservation of heritage sites (Tezcür, 2021). Criticisms of construction have focused mainly on the displacement/resettlement of people and the fact that the project is funded by European subsidies. In addition, environmentalists have cited adverse environmental impacts (Warner, 2012).

Following the withdrawal of the United Bank of Switzerland from the project in 2002, a second international consortium led by Austria was launched in 2005. The formation of the second consortium, like the first, received much international press coverage, and many activists expressed their displeasure. Turkey guaranteed certain conditions, including that resettlement of the population would be carried out

according to predefined standards. These conditions included restrictions on heritage and nature conservation (Warner, 2012).

Large dams and dam systems provide several benefits, including renewable energy, increased irrigation and food production, improved access to clean drinking water, and flood control. However, since the 1990s, civil society organizations have levelled criticism at dams, citing concerns about their environmental, social, cultural, and economic impacts. Those in favor of dam construction and those opposed to it are engaged in a discourse that establishes norms and standards for large-scale projects of this kind. Among the various discursive strategies, it is worth taking stock of those that target anti-construction, which reflects the struggle that organizations representing these forces are waging, and how they are trying to renew their strategies against the harmful impact of these large-scale projects.

The Human rights discourse

During the 20th century, nationalist and developmentalist ideas proliferated in the context of dam building. The capacity to construct dams has become a significant aspect of national identity, fostering a sense of unity and pride in the population. Those who were opposed to dam construction were compelled to confront this formidable obstacle. One strategy employed by those in opposition to the construction of dams was to invoke the concept of human rights.

The broad consensus regarding the relevance of human rights has been called into question by numerous scholars, including Posner, who asserts that "human rights treaties can do little to improve the well-being of people around the world" (Posner, 2014. p.8). He observes that despite the proliferation of human rights in recent decades, as evidenced by the multitude of international human rights treaties, there has been a striking absence of tangible reductions in human rights violations. Nevertheless, in 2002 and 2009, human rights-based discourse was successfully implied to pause the construction of the Ilisu Dam. The project could not be stopped, and the construction of the dam, which was completed in 2018 and put into operation in 2019, required a forced displacement of nearly 80,000 people and led to the submerging of 200 localities. The dam has an impact on the flow and water quality of the Tigris River, not only in Turkey but also in a wider region. It is probable that this will result in a shortage of water in Iraq, which could impact the country's drinking water supply, fishing, and transport (Tezcür, 2021). The Hasankeyf site is submerged, with much of the historic fortress buried beneath a thick layer of concrete. To conceal this intentional act of destruction, the Turkish government relocated several "movable" items to an "archaeological park" with the main objective of boosting tourism (Aykan, 2024).

The human rights discourse was spearheaded by the British-based Kurdish Human Rights Project, with the involvement of other NGOs, including Friends of the Earth and Corner House. Austrian, Swiss, and German NGOs participated in this

campaign (Atzl, 2014). The participation of these NGOs was crucial, as the consortium that financed the dam's construction comprised companies from these countries, which also provided export guarantees. For human rights to be effective, there must be broad consensus on their moral importance, necessity, and primacy. This consensus fosters normal responses to violations. Without it, alternative discourses such as developmentalism or national security undermine rights-based agendas. Powerful actors, even if they disregard this consensus, may still face reputational, financial, or otherwise costs when violating rights. These costs, conceptualized as leverage, empower activists to counter violations by enforcing consequences. Without leverage, states may superficially endorse human rights while neglecting them domestically, particularly for marginalized groups (Tezcür, 2021).

The discourse of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) frequently encompasses the topic of water, which is regarded as a fundamental human right. Access to sufficient quality and quantity of drinking water and adequate sanitation are frequently asserted as basic necessities. However, this claim is not well founded in human rights and humanitarian laws. Despite the frequent mention of water-related issues in various development goals, the current international legal framework is inadequate for guaranteeing universal access to water. In the history of water cooperation, human rights considerations are at the back of the agenda.

The concept of cooperation on water issues can be traced back to the 18th century. The initiative for water cooperation was launched in the context of promoting free navigation for trade (Schmeier, 2013). It was not until the turn of the 21st century that the human rights aspect of water began being discussed in earnest. At the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Environment, it was declared that all states had the right to effectively control their natural resources. However, it was also acknowledged that absolute territorial sovereignty over natural resources could not be fully exercised. In support of this, the most important principles of international law in relation to water are equitable, reasonable utilization, and no harm. What could be considered as the formal declaration of water as a human right is the declaration of the UN General Assembly, 2010 stating "*the right to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation as a human right is essential for the full enjoyment of life and all human rights*" (United Nations General Assembly, 2010, para. 64/292).

Based on the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and 1977, water in humanitarian law can be approached from two perspectives: water as a civil right and the protection of water resources, which emphasizes the environmental protection and conservation aspect of the issue. The latter perspective regards water resources as valuable. During the First and Second World War, the Vietnam War, and the Cold War, warfare had an extremely negative impact on the environment, including on the biosphere, flora, and fauna. In 1976, the UN General Assembly approved the Convention on the Prohibition of Military or Any Other Hostile Use of Environmental Modification Techniques (ENMOD). The goal of the Convention is to prohibit the military

or any other hostile use of environmental modification techniques. According to Article II of the Convention, these include “*Any technique for changing – through the deliberate manipulation of natural processes – the dynamics, composition or structure of the earth, including its biota, lithosphere, hydrosphere and atmosphere, or of outer space*”. What emerges from the practice is that, unfortunately, from a humanitarian law point of view, the legislation is not strict enough and not specific enough to provide an adequate protection to water resources (ICRC, 1949; ICRC, 1977).

The other human rights aspect linked to this issue concerns the forced displacement of Kurds. Tens of thousands of people would have had to be mobilized to carry out the project. Article 17 of Protocol II (for non-international armed conflicts) prohibits the displacement of civilians, unless they are secure or due to military necessity. Furthermore, according to Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), people are guaranteed the right to freedom of movement and residence within a state, whereas Article 9 prohibits arbitrary detention or exile. Even though many international protocols refer to situations in armed conflicts, the UN issued Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement in 1998. This document highlights that displacement should only occur as a last resort (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA], 1998).

The issue of resettlement is heavily influenced by the fact that Kurds predominantly inhabit this area. One of the unofficial aims of the GAP project is the eradication of Kurdish diasporas in the mountains of Southeastern Turkey and their integration into Turkish society. Using the leverage of international funds, anti-construction activists were able to successfully animate the discourse on human rights against construction. This was largely achieved because it was possible to undermine support for the project in the West alongside existing human rights standards and the existing discursive consensus over human rights.

Despite the shortcomings of international and humanitarian law in providing adequate protection, and the ongoing debate surrounding the universality of human rights, this discourse temporarily halted the construction of the dam. The spread of Western values was a factor in the temporary halt to construction. This placed Turkey in a challenging position, necessitating that it finances the project from domestic resources, resulting in a loss of international support. However, nationalist and developmentalist forces subsequently gained an upper hand, resulting in the resumption of dam construction. The year 2002 marked a period of silence in the construction of the dam. Once the negotiations of the second Consortium began, the campaign revived, while domestic and NGO activism against the construction of the dam disconnected the issue from the realm of human rights and turned towards another discourse: the protection of nature and heritage and the preservation of the ancient city of Hasankeyf (Tinti, 2020).

Cultural Heritage discourse

In the second campaign, environment and heritage were given a more prominent role, with Hasankeyf as an unofficial symbol. After the end of the first consortium, the project was stalled for two years. Negotiations about the Second Consortium started in 2004. The second consortium was established by Austrian VA Tech, Swiss, German, and four Turkish companies. The campaign against construction this time was led by NGOs from Germany, the ECA Watch (Austria), and the Berne Declaration (Switzerland). The presence of these NGOs was crucial for the campaign as these countries' ECAs were about to grant export guarantees. By the time of the second consortium, the conditions had improved significantly. The Turkish government, in collaboration with European Export Credit Agencies (ECAs), implemented a legally binding framework to enhance standards associated with the Ilisu Dam project. Turkey strengthened its legislation concerning Environmental Impact Assessments, expropriation, and resettlement. The second campaign also played a major role in local organizations, who created the Initiative to Keep Hasankeyf Alive (Atzl, 2014). On several occasions, a Committee of Experts visited the construction site and found that Turkey did not comply with the guarantees; in 2008, European governments withdrew their export credit guarantees (Gaserow, 2008a). European investors subsequently withdrew their export credits. In 2009, Turkey announced that the project would be implemented with the support of two Turkish banks, Akbank and Granitbank (Atzl, 2014; Eberlein et al., 2010).

Therefore, after losing international funding, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan identified domestic funds for the dam. Following 2009, EU-Turkish relations led Turkey to lose interest in keeping up with Western standards regarding human rights and environmental protection. This period is marked by thriving capitalism and developmentalism under the fixation that "rivers flow wastefully without a purpose." In this new setup, where the project did not depend on foreign funding, internationally led campaigns had less room for maneuver – anti-construction activists had a hard time establishing a coalition with robust local linkages, as it would impose a national security threat to Turkey (Tinti, 2020).

The failure of discourse to protect cultural heritage is rooted in the inertia of the international community. With all the associated doctrines and practices, heritage preservation has become a worldwide cult. In Europe and North America, ethos and discursive patterns were born through which heritage conservation was globalized in the 1960s. It was largely through the establishment of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) that rules and frameworks that underpin heritage protection were developed. Through these organizations, heritage has become a public good and is recognized as a common legacy of humanity. The inscription of a site on the UNESCO World Heritage List is a long and cumbersome process, with many tasks for the state and, once successfully inscribed, many

obligations. For a site to be inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List, the government of the state concerned must initiate the process of inscription on UNESCO's Tentative List. It can take up to a year before the site is officially nominated. The state must then document the conditions and uniqueness of the site and submit a plan for its protection. The UNESCO World Heritage Committee, on the recommendation of ICOMOS, then evaluates the nomination and decides on the site's inscription on the World Heritage List (Isar, 2011).

Turkey would have had to go through this process if it wanted to inscribe Hasankeyf, a city that has been continuously inhabited for 12,000 years, on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Although Turkey has never initiated this process, in 1981, the area was declared a natural conservation site (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Culture and Tourism, n.d.). The question arises as to whether a site with such rich cultural heritage deserves international protection only if it is on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Currently, however, there is no mechanism in place to safeguard our heritage from the detrimental effects of nationalism and developmentalist internal policies of a state. This is the problem faced by activists who, because of the political sensitivity of the Kurdish issue, have tried to divert the problem from the realm of human rights to the protection of heritage, and use this as a main argument against the construction of the dam. Turkey argued that dam construction was essential for the sustainable development of the area (Tezcür, 2021).

After several domestic and international attempts, Turkey refused to consider obtaining recognition of Hasankeyf as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Without support from the host country, UNESCO cannot recognize a site as a World Heritage Site. Thus, this strategy has not proven Turkey's strong developmentalist aspirations. The primary challenge with this discourse was that Turkey perceived the issue as resolvable by relocating the movable components of a 12,000-year-old city. While this approach partially addressed heritage protection, it fell short of achieving the campaign's overarching goal of halting dam construction. The discourse on human rights and cultural heritage protection cannot be considered a complete failure as both have achieved partial success. The problem with both discourses is that they have *only* influenced other actors in the international arena but not decision-makers in Turkey.

Save the Tigris and Iraqi Marshes Campaign:

The potential of "Mesopotamian" as an identity marker

While discourses on human rights and cultural heritage protection achieved partial success, they ultimately failed to prevent dam construction. Nevertheless, this campaign catalyzed the emergence of a movement that charted a new course forward. The Save the Tigris and Iraqi Marshes Campaign, a civil society initiative that started in 2011, challenged Turkey's nationalistic policies by promoting Mesopotamia as an identity marker. By focusing on historical and ecological connectedness,

Mesopotamia offers a counternarrative to nationalist policies. *"We are the people of Mesopotamia. We are the people of Hasankeyf in Turkey and of the Marshes in Iraq. We are connected and combined by the Tigris River—our common root, our common lifeline, and our common future."* (Tinti, 2023, p. 8).

Salman Kheirallah, executive manager of Humat Dijlah association and international coordinator in Iraq, says: *"the main goal of Save the Tigris campaign, launched in 2011, is to put pressure to stop the construction of Ilisu Dam and to enlist the Tigris River and marshes to the global heritage list, which will prevent building future dams or any other bioenvironmental projects harming the river. The campaign, with its international and national representatives, believes in the fight against the construction of large dams, given that these concrete barriers form a stroke for water paths with negative environmental, social and economical effects."* (Iraqi Civil Society Solidarity Initiative, 2019).

Using the Mesopotamian identity marker, the Save the Tigris Campaign highlights the unity of the politically fragmented river basin and fights against human-made threats, such as pollution. Since 2012, the campaign has become a strong network of civil society, where movements and activists from Turkey, Syria, and Iran have a place to stand up against ecological injustice in the Mesopotamian region. The first Mesopotamian Water Forum was held in 2019, organized by STC, and partners focused on the damage caused by riparian unilateral water management practices and their refusal of international law, including the 1972 UN Watercourse Convention. The introduction of the Mesopotamian identity serves to present the region as a community of peoples, fragmented by nation-states that are culturally diverse yet interdependent in their water management. The Save the Tigris Campaign engages in a wide range of activities, including river clean-ups, environmental activism, education of youth about environmental degradation, activists engaging with policymakers, participating in research, and facilitating the participation of Mesopotamian voices on global stages. The aim of Mesopotamian identity is thus to override the identity created by nation-states and to reintroduce the common identity, thereby making the distribution of waters more just and equitable. The STG campaign aims to portray water as a force for peace, rather than the zero-sum game it used to be (Save the Tigris and Iraq's Heritage, n.d.).

Accepting a common identity can move a group towards reconciliation and peacebuilding. According to Kelman (2010), five conditions facilitate the formation of collective identity:

- a) *Recognition of each other's' nationhood and humanity.* As a result, one of the keys to the success of Mesopotamian identity may be to create an identity that lives alongside the national, rather than overthrowing it.

- b) *Formulation of a unified moral foundation for peace.*
- c) *Accepting other's narrative about history.* The differences in narratives can serve as a basis for enemy formation. If groups are able to accept each other's historical accounts, they can progress towards a state of peace, a lower chance of conflict, and a common identity.
- d) *Acknowledging responsibility* and e) *establishing institutional mechanisms of cooperation* (Kelman, 2010).

Mesopotamian identity is a political identity marker that presents itself as an ecological identity, promoting the common historical traditions of the region and the interdependence of its inhabitants at its core. However, there are several issues with this identity marker. On the one hand, it is based on a geographically limited territory, which makes it impossible to take an inclusive approach to the issue of water sharing. On the other hand, the interpretation of 'Mesopotamia' itself is its excessive romanticization and westernization. Much of what is known about Mesopotamia comes from Western-led archaeological efforts, which might prioritize interpretations that do not align with local perspectives or narratives (Tinti, 2020).

Evaluation of the three strategies

Discourses based on human rights and heritage protection are similar in several ways. Both human rights and heritage protection reflect Western values. The influence of these values should not be underestimated, as they mobilized global actors, including the World Bank, into taking action. Furthermore, it was largely because of these campaigns that Turkey ultimately lost international support for the project.

Table 1. Evaluation of strategies

	Human right discourse	Cultural heritage discourse	Mesopotamian identity marker discourse
Main arguments	- forced displacement - water as a human right (Iraq)	- destruction of ancient sites - environmental degradation	instead of unilateral developments and large scale projects multilateral cooperation
Strengths	Backed by the Western-led international community		- regional (easier to connect) - offers a counternarrative to nationalism - establishes a link between the issue and the individual and communities
Weaknesses	- cannot counter sovereignty and nationality - only successful if these values are accepted and respected		Not global, but local; local actors are better connected and

		supportive, global actors less so.
Turkey's response (counterargument)	Until 2010, Turkey tried to meet certain criteria, but afterwards it was built in the spirit of developmentalism and nationalism	Turkey's response is not yet visible
Results	Partially successful, but did not prevent the project proceeding	scientific and research activities, strong community building based on the identity

Source: own elaboration

The construction of the Ilisu Dam in southeastern Turkey has sparked significant debate on several fronts, with critics and supporters invoking different discourses to justify or oppose the project (Hommes et al., 2016). The dominant narratives include human rights discourse, cultural heritage discourse, and Mesopotamian identity marker discourse. These frameworks address distinct but interrelated concerns, including forced displacement, environmental degradation, the destruction of historical sites, and regional geopolitical tensions. Human rights discourse focuses primarily on the forced displacement of communities and the fundamental right to water, particularly in downstream countries such as Iraq (Tezcür, 2021). The Ilisu Dam has displaced tens of thousands of people, mainly Kurds, disrupting their livelihoods and cultural continuity. In addition, by reducing water flow to Iraq, the project has heightened concerns about water as a human right and critical resource for agriculture and daily life (Warner, 2012).

One of the strengths of this discourse is that it is supported by international organizations and Western-led institutions that frame the issue within globally recognized human rights norms (Eberlein, 2010). It also personalizes the debate by linking the dam project to individual and community well-being, making it more accessible to international advocacy groups (Tezcür, 2021). However, this study has significant limitations. It struggles to counter national sovereignty arguments, as Turkey asserts its right to develop infrastructure within its borders (Hommes et al., 2016). In addition, human rights advocacy is effective only if the targeted state recognizes and respects these values (Tinti, 2023).

Turkey initially addressed human rights concerns before 2010 in an attempt to meet certain international criteria but later shifted to a nationalist and developmentalist stance. As a result, while the human rights discourse raised awareness and led to limited concessions, it ultimately failed to halt dam construction (Tinti, 2023).

Another major argument against the Ilisu Dam is the destruction of ancient sites, most notably the 12,000-year-old city of Hasankeyf. As one of the oldest continuously inhabited settlements worldwide, Hasankeyf has immense archaeological, historical, and cultural significance (Drażewska, 2018). The heritage discourse is regionally potent, connecting both local communities and scholars who have invested in historical preservation. It also provides an alternative to nationalist narratives, emphasizing shared human heritage over state-centric development (Allouche, 2020).

However, a major weakness of this discourse is its limited global scope. While local actors and heritage organizations are strong conservation advocates, international engagement has been relatively weak, with few high-profile interventions beyond academic circles and NGOs.

Turkey's response to this discourse is mixed (Hommes et al., 2016). Although the government has taken steps to relocate artifacts and reconstruct selected monuments, these efforts have been criticized as inadequate (Aykan, 2024). The broader policy continued to focus on the economic and infrastructural benefits of the dam, diminishing the influence of the cultural heritage discourse.

A more regionally specific narrative opposes the Ilisu Dam on the grounds that it undermines a broader Mesopotamian identity. This discourse links the project to a historical and cultural lineage that transcends modern national boundaries, emphasizing the region's deep ties to ancient civilizations that predate the Turkish state (Tinti, 2023). Proponents argue that large-scale development projects such as dams undermine cultural continuity and erase the identity of affected communities.

The key strength of this discourse is its ability to offer a counternarrative to Turkish nationalism. It challenges state-centered narratives of progress and development by highlighting a broader, transnational identity. In addition, this discourse fosters strong community-building efforts among affected populations, reinforcing a collective sense of belonging (Tinti, 2023).

However, Mesopotamian identity marker discourse has significant limitations. It lacks global recognition and institutional support that human rights campaigns enjoy, making it less effective internationally. Moreover, its local and regional focus limits its engagement with the broader geopolitical actors. Turkey is yet to develop a clear counterargument to this discourse, indicating its marginal influence or potential to gain traction in future debates.

Each of these discourses has contributed to shaping the debate around the Ilisu Dam, but none have succeeded in preventing the project from moving forward. Human rights discourse has garnered international attention but has faltered in the face of state sovereignty claims. The cultural heritage discourse has mobilized strong local opposition but failed to achieve substantial policy change. Meanwhile, the Mesopotamian identity marker discourse has the potential to strengthen regional identity politics by overcoming the struggle to gain wider traction.

Conclusion

This article aimed to review the strategies that have been used to block the construction of the Ilisu Dam and to examine the processes that have led to the emergence of Mesopotamian identity as a strategy. Strategies focusing on human rights and heritage protection show several similarities in their applicability, strengths, and weaknesses. Although Mesopotamian identity as a campaign strategy attempts to

address the weaknesses of the previous two strategies, it falls short of the other two strategies in one respect, namely Western support.

The Save the Tigris campaign and Mesopotamian identity highlight that both sub-state and trans-state actors have an influential role in water management. Identity, which is an important part of decision making, can be a key element in more economical and equitable water sharing, especially in regions where there are ethnic-based conflicts. Although it is difficult to imagine at present that there will ever be an identity that can transcend nationalism, the primary goal is not to supersede nation-state identity but to create an alternative identity linked to geography, place, local, and shared challenges alongside nationally based identities.

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