

## ***CHALLENGE B***

**Construction of large dams and other water infrastructure on the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers and their tributaries which respect neither the rights of people, nor international standards, hereby threatening the cultural and natural heritage of the Tigris-Euphrates Basin. This is exacerbated by the use of water infrastructure as weapon and a tool for achieving political hegemony in regional conflicts.**

Construction of large dams on the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers causes permanent damage to the cultural and natural heritage of local communities. While the lifetime of dams can be less than 50 years, the region's heritage dates back more than 12,000 years! Indigenous communities are severely impacted; some are forced to leave their homelands. The process of constructing dams is often in direct contradiction to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP), as well as to environmental conventions such as the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). In recent years, dams and water infrastructures have been used as weapons in regional conflicts and wars. We believe in the alternative: water should be a force for peace and catalyst for cooperation among all the countries and peoples of Tigris-Euphrates Basin.

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### **The need for basin-wide collaborative coordination against dams**

Abstract

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The aim of this paper is to analyze the ecological, social and cultural impacts of dam building and the related political implications in the Mesopotamia Region as well as to discuss alternative proposals based on acknowledging rights of people living in whole basin. These alternatives should foster collaboration between civil society and national governments. Contributions to the following framework are welcome:

The intensive construction of dams and other water infrastructures such as irrigation canals in the basin of Euphrates and Tigris rivers – also called Mesopotamia - has profound impacts on the whole river ecology, on the territorial and temporal occurrence of water sources, water quality and thus the access to water for people. These have lacked any consideration of the cultural and natural heritage, relevant international conventions and declarations [like the UN Convention on the Non-Navigational Use of International Watercourses from 1997, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP) and United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)] and principles of democratic decision making process. Apart from the national governments, big companies and big landowners nobody benefits from this policy which is an expression of the “capitalist modernity” linking subsistent producing peasants to the

markets and remote populations to a central administration and thus develop the “nation-state. Dams and its reservoirs allow control over big water resources with which state bureaucracies are able to dictate flows and water availability in downstream regions and states and make water part of a wider geopolitics. Turkey and in last years also Iran use large water infrastructures as weapon and a tool for achieving political hegemony. It intensifies the existing conflicts seriously.

What could be a tool for socially and ecologically sound water politics, is a Euphrates-Tigris basinwide collaborative coordination which includes independent civil society organizations, local communities, municipalities, researchers and regional administrations. We object to the way the four states in Mesopotamia have negotiated the Euphrates and Tigris rivers and their tributaries: Imposition by upstream states without civil society participation and no mutual agreement between all four states. Local campaigns against destructive dams have contributed in the past 20 years to a growing consciousness among people in Mesopotamia. Save the Tigris Campaign expresses the need for basin wide coordination.

Such basinwide coordination could challenge all efforts and politics to abuse water and develop a new kind of hydrohegemony. People and civil organizations with different political, ethnic and religious backgrounds can negotiate with political authorities in order to find a consensus which takes into account the water rights of all people. Throughout the history the Euphrates and Tigris have connected people from areas far away to each other, but the modern nation-states have caused interruption. A genuine basin-wide civil society movement could even challenge the UN Convention on the Non-Navigational Use of International Watercourses which has not brought the result as expected when approved by the UN and ratified by many states.

Current plans of the four states in Mesopotamia to develop the water resources of the region would lead to further destruction of the rivers and thus drought and increased political conflict. We do not need more dams and more irrigation projects. Strategic goals should be the recovering of the river ecosystem and the return to less water intensive crops in agriculture, as well as the removal of some dams. Hydroelectricity production should be limited to a low level. Water solutions should be developed mainly at local and especially sub-basin level, taking into consideration the needs of the people and ecosystem downstream. This has to be discussed at the basin-wide level.

*We invite activists, scholars, journalists and others to explore the development of a basin-wide new paradigm in the Mesopotamian region that provides alternatives to dam construction.*

Questions to be addressed include:

- What are the drivers behind "water nationalism"? Where can water rights activists look for new allies in challenging the use of water to exert political

control over others?

- What are the limitations of the UN Convention on Transboundary Watercourses and other agreements governing shared rivers? Can they be made more effective as tools for challenging hydrohegemony?
- What insights can be drawn from historical and current efforts by riverine communities to evolve basinwide collaborative decision-making processes? Where have succeeded and where have they failed; and why? Are regional water parliaments a way forward?

**To contribute, please email Ercan Ayboga at  
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*<http://www.savethetigris.org/international-mesopotamian-water-forum>*