

Syria

# War by other means: water as a weapon

by Karin Leukefeld\*



Karin Leukefeld  
(Photo ma)

*In addition to climate change, Turkey is the main threat to Syria's supply of a vital resource. Ten years of war do the rest.*

In 1992, the "Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes" was adopted within

the framework of the *United Nations Economic Commission for Europe* (UNECE) and came into effect in 1996. In 2013, the convention was adopted by the UN for all member states, but only 40 signatory states belong to it. These have ratified the convention and thus adopted it into their national legislation.

## Syria threatened by record drought

Western media and international organisations such as the UN are sounding the alarm. A "record drought" is threatening "millions of people" in north-eastern Syria, the British *Independent* headlined at the beginning of November. A "water war in the cradle of civilisation" was identified by the British Times, which warned that the "next Syrian tragedy" was imminent. Turkey is using "water as a weapon", wrote the internet portal *Al-Monitor* in mid-November, providing another dramatic report under the heartrending title "Camels weep over their young, dying in Syria's murderous drought".

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It is true that in Syria, as in the entire eastern Mediterranean, water is scarce. Rainfall and snowfall have decreased significantly in recent years. Rivers, lakes, underground watercourses and reservoirs, the aquifers, are no longer being replenished as they were a few years ago. The warming of the world climate is clearly contributing to the water shortage in the country between the Euphrates, Tigris and the Mediterranean. But it is not only climate change that is responsible for the devastation of the region.

## Turkey turning off the tap

Currently, Turkey has once again turned off the tap on the Euphrates. Ankara wants to hit the mainly Kurdish "Autonomous Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria" (Rojava) along the border with Turkey. Ankara has been operating in northern Syria for years with military invasions and attacks, with the aim of pushing back the Kurds and enforcing a buffer zone there. To do this, it supports and finances jihadist militias that have failed on various other fronts against the Syrian government in ten years of war.

The war has severely damaged the water supply and the necessary infrastructure along the Euphrates. With the current deliberate throttling of water flow, Turkey is harming the entire region.

In Syria, the Euphrates primarily supplies Aleppo and the provinces of Rakka, Hasaka and Deir Al-Sor in the northeast with water and electricity. The wheat and cotton fields in Hasakah and the Euphrates valley are irrigated by an extensive system of canals and reservoirs. For months, however, the water level in the Euphrates and in the largest water reservoir, the Assad reservoir, has been dropping. This also reduces the energy output of the Tabka dam located there. The Jazira – the island – as the area between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers in north-eastern Syria is also called, is losing more and more water.

## Water pumping station "controlled"

In addition, Turkey and its allied jihadists have controlled the Aluk water pumping station in the

north of the provincial capital Hasaka since 2019. Powered by water from the Khabur, a tributary of the Euphrates originating in Turkey, Aluk was able to supply fresh water to around one million people in Hasaka and the surrounding area. Since the Turkish capture, the station is rarely used.

The water shortage leads to an overloading of the underground water sources and wells, which have been re-drilled and pumped so frequently in recent years that the water is salinised and unclean due to the influx of sewage. In addition, there is a lack of diesel to run the pumps. Those who have money buy expensive drinking water. Those who have no money continue to use the polluted water, which harms nature, both humans and animals alike: diarrhoeal diseases in children and skin rashes increase dramatically.

#### **Heavy oil in groundwater**

The pollution of the water is also linked to the destruction and improper wild exploitation of Syria's oil resources since 2012. Heavy oil is discharged unprotected into the ground, it reaches the groundwater and thus the food chain. This leads to a large number of cancers and – in humans and animals – to miscarriages and stillbirths. Nomads who live from breeding camels and sheep in the Syrian-Iraqi desert region of Hasaka and Deir Al-Sor normally move with their animals from north to south and vice versa to find fodder for the livestock where the pastures – depending on the season – are green. Now the animals are too weak or too sick for the long migrations.

#### **Cancer from depleted uranium**

The miscarriages of the animals and, above all, the large number of cancers in humans may also have another reason: at the end of 2015, the US Air Force used so-called DU munitions in north-eastern Syria. This toxic ammunition made of depleted uranium (DU stands for Depleted Uranium) causes cancers, miscarriages and severe malformations in newborns. The visible effects of DU munitions usually only appear five to seven years after their use. DU use in north-eastern Syria was at the end of 2015.

#### **Economic sanctions by EU and USA**

In addition to the lack of water, the high price of wheat also has to do with the de facto division of the country along the Euphrates river. Centrally organised cultivation, harvesting and processing – which always guaranteed Syrians enough flour and bread before the war – are thus prevented. Half of Syria's wheat silos were destroyed during the war. Due to the economic sanctions imposed by the EU and the USA, wheat – like oil and cotton – is being speculated on, which drives up the price. From Hasaka, Rakka and Deir Al-Sor, these raw materials are sold to northern Iraq and Turkey.

In the north-east of the country, fertiliser and seeds are distributed by international aid organisations. The Syrian Ministry of Agriculture is currently unable to operate there. In addition, Damascus cannot buy fertiliser on the world market because it is on the EU and US sanctions list as an explosive.

*Source: <https://www.jungewelt.de/artikel/415238.krieg-mit-anderen-mitteln-wasser-als-waffe.html>, 25 November 2021  
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