

Hydropolitics, Middle East Security, and the Reach of the Neo-Ottoman Project in Syria

Nicolas Parent
Department of Geography
McGill University

Prof. Jon Unruh
Department of Geography
McGill University

International Conference on Environmental Crises in the Indian Ocean World since 1800
Indian Ocean World Centre (IOWC), 28-29 May 2021



McGill



IOWC

SSHRC

CRSH

Plan

1. Research Gap
2. Neo-Ottomanism
3. Hydrological context
4. Turkey's hydrohegemony
5. Tension in the basin
6. Kurdistan and competing hydrosocial territories
7. Turkish incursions in Syria

Research gap

Resource Context

- Tigris-Euphrates river basin
- Agriculture in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey
- Drought and climate change
- Persian Gulf saltwater intrusion

Hydropolitics

- Water hoarding
- National resource boundaries
- Water rights
- Resource conflict



Research gap

Resource Context

- Tigris-Euphrates river basin
- Agriculture in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey
- Drought and climate change
- Persian Gulf saltwater intrusion

Hydropolitics

- Water hoarding
- National resource boundaries
- Water rights
- Resource conflict

Strategic geography

- Foreign policy
- Military intervention
- Nationalist discourse
- Imperialism

Research gap

Resource Context

- Tigris-Euphrates river basin
- Agriculture in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey
- Drought and climate change
- Persian Gulf saltwater intrusion

Hydropolitics

- Water hoarding
- National resource boundaries
- Water rights
- Resource conflict

Neo-Ottomanism

Neo-Ottomanism

- "...a political project aimed at reviving the Ottoman past in a variety of domains, including the urban fabric, anniversary celebrations, and foreign policy" (Ergin & Karakaya 2017: 34)
- Embraces the ideal of Middle East unity based on shared histories and heritage under imperial Ottoman rule
- Revival of Ottomanism by ex-President Turgut Özal (1989–1993):
 - Ottoman pluralism as response to the 'Kurdish issue' (Yavuz 2016)
- *Strategic Depth* (2001), by ex-MFA and later PM Ahmet Davutoğlu
 - Outlines *pax Ottomanica* in foreign policy terms

Pax Ottomanica

(Ergin and Karakaya 2017; Övünç Ongur 2015)

- Domestic
 - Suppression of Kurdish territorial claims (terrorism & security)
- Regional
 - Leadership (historical precedence; sectarian strife)

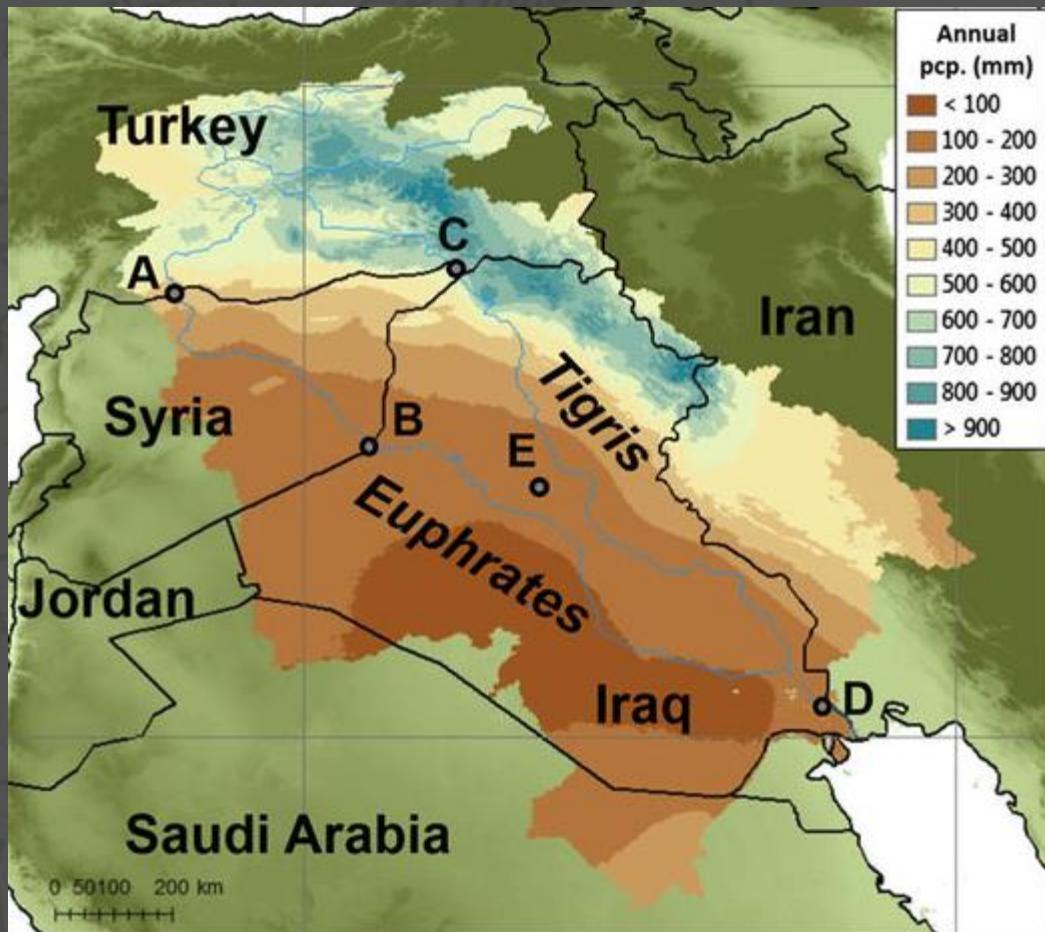
Pax Aquarum

(Kolars and Mitchell 1991; Warner 2008)

- Domestic
 - Irrigation, agriculture, and power generation in Kurdish areas (development)
- Regional
 - Stability (resource geography)

Hydrological context

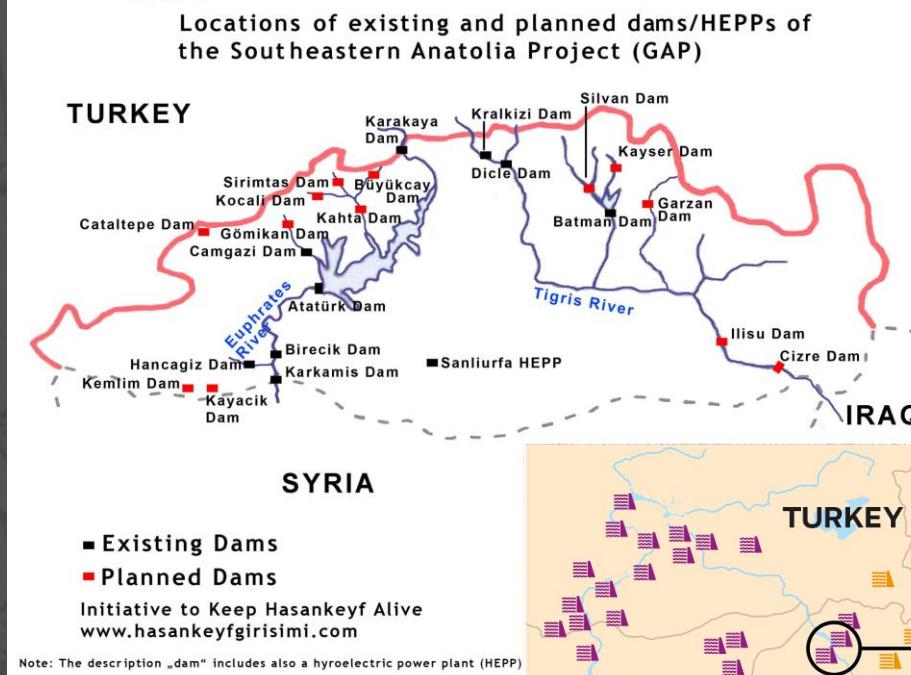
- Tigris-Euphrates River Basin (TERB) as lifeblood of the eastern Fertile Crescent, with headwaters located in Turkey
- Turkey provides 88% of water flowing through the Euphrates
- 86% of Syria's water flows from Turkey (Dohrmann 2014)
- 15 year drought (1998-2012) (Cook et al., 2016; Stokes 2016)
- Hydroengineering and change
 - 1971-present: 38-46% decline in Euphrates flow (Al-Quraishi and Kaplan 2021)
 - Iraq will lose 80% annual water once GAP is complete (Nachamani 2018)



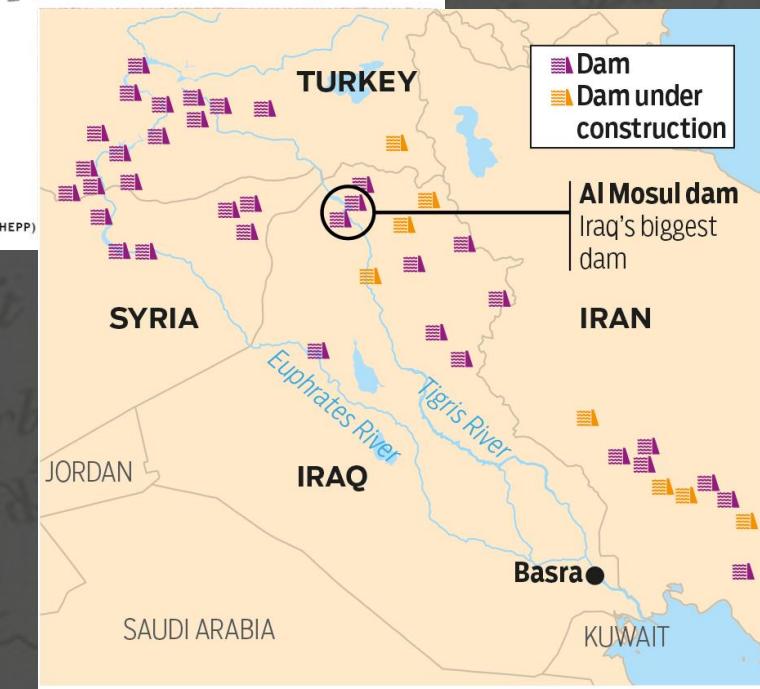
Rougé et al. 2018

Dam projects

- Turkey:
 - Southeast Anatolia Project (GAP)
 - Regional logic: Resource allocation
 - TERB designation: transboundary river
 - Regular tension with (predominantly) Syria and (sometimes) Iraq (Euphrates; Tigris)
- Syria and Iraq
 - Some large dams; many thwarted by upstream Turkey
 - Regional logic: Resource sharing
 - TERB designation: international river
 - Occasional tension between both states (Euphrates)



Hommes et al. 2016



Source: dspace.library.uvic.ca

©Gulf News

Turkey's hydrohegemony:

Tracing its discursive journey

1940 1950 1960 1970 1980 1990 2000 2010 2020

Basin stability (regional)

Expansion (national)

Development (national)

Cooperation Leadership (regional)

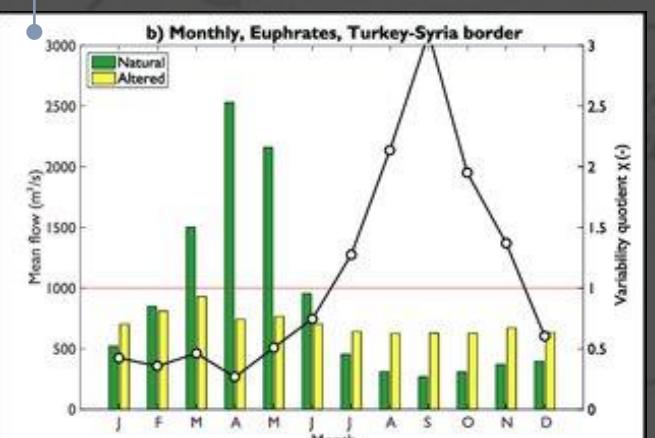
Security (reg.)

GAP Project

Keban (1974)
Karakaya (1987)
Atatürk (1992)
İlisu (2018)
Etc.

Water diversion for irrigation
Power generation
Regional development

Joint Technical Committee (1980-87)
Protocol of Economic Cooperation (1987)
Peace Pipeline (1986-87)
Training and Expertise exercise (2002)
Various MOUs on water (2008)



Tension in the basin

Time	Parties	Event	Outcome
1974-75	Iraq; Syria	Tabqa Dam (Euphrates; Syria) is built	Iraq threatens to bomb Tabqa Dam; both parties almost go to war. Tension is resolved through political means.
1987	Syria; Turkey	As Atatürk Dam (Euphrates; Turkey) was being built, Syria hosts Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)	Protocol of Economic Cooperation is established. Rule of 500 m ³ /sec at Syria-Turkey border is established.
1991	Iraq; Turkey	NATO asks Turkey to stop flow of water in Iraq	Turkey refuses request, looking out for its interest in the Iraq-Turkey oil pipeline.
1992	Syria-Turkey	In the final phase of construction, the Atatürk Dam (Euphrates; Turkey) stops flow for one month.	Syria asks Arab League not to finance Turkish water projects.
1998	Syria; Turkey	Turkey sends military to Syrian border. They demand that Abdullah Öcalan (PKK leader) be repatriated.	Syria expels Öcalan who is later captured by Turkish authorities in Nairobi in 1999; both parties sign Adana Accords.
2014	Turkey; PKK	Ilisu Dam (Tigris; Turkey) is the center of peace talk collapse between Turkey and PKK.	PKK attacks the dam.
2014-21	Turkey/FSA; PYD/YPG/PKK	Reduction of Euphrates flow; Interruption at various water & hydroelectrical stations in Kurdish areas	Continued armed violence; Impact on agricultural production; Water & electricity cuts

Kurdistan

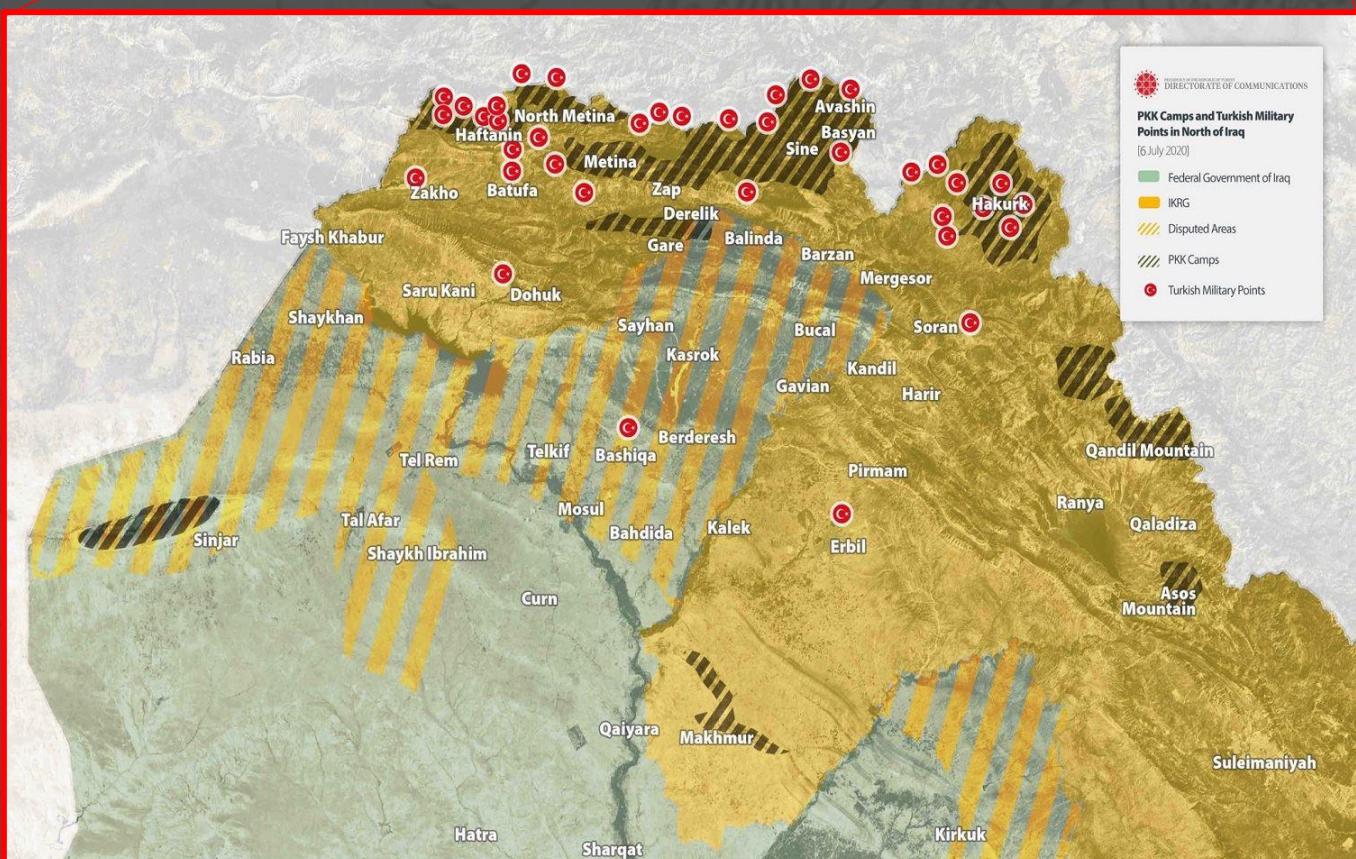
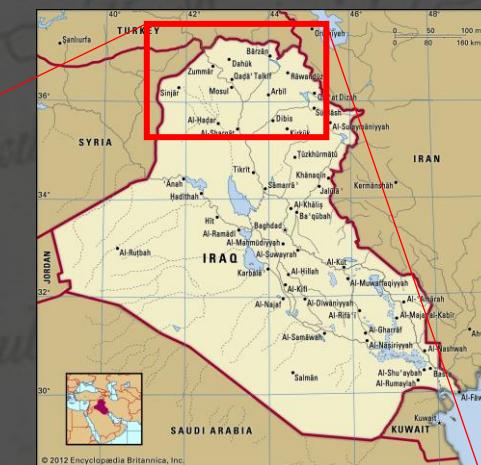
- The 'imagined homeland' (Anderson 1983) of those who share Kurdish ethnicity
- An existential threat to Turkish hegemony, its logics and praxis
- Turkey:
 - Rifts between Kurds and the Turkish government begin during the early years of the Republic (1920s)
 - Ban on language and cultural rights in 1980s (partially lifted in early 2000s)
 - Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) with multiple insurrections and guerilla warfare in the east (1970s-present)
- Important consideration in discussions around regional 'hydrosocial territories' (Hommes et al. 2016)



Turkish military bases in Iraq

“...since the early 1980s Iraq permitted the Turkish army to operate against the Kurds in northern Iraq. Baghdad had to ‘swallow,’ with hardly a gulp, these Turkish occasional anti-Kurdish incursions into its territory ... Iraq practically owes its territorial integrity to the whims of Ankara...”

Nachmani 2018



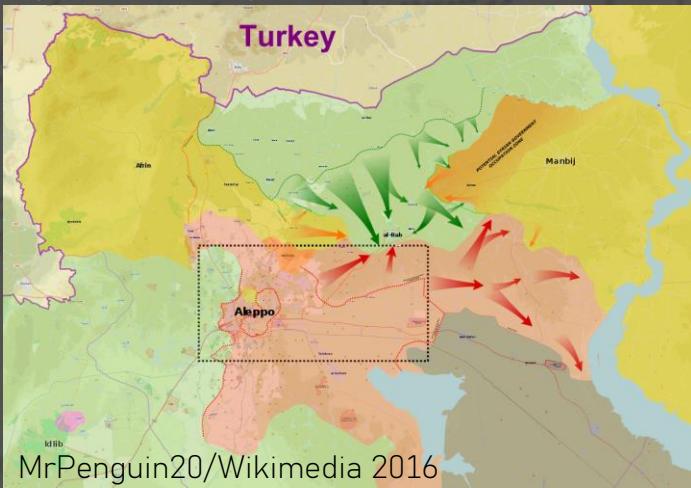
Turkish Directorate of Communications
via Faidhi Dri/Rudaw 2020

TAF and Syrian water supply (2014-)

- Early reporting in May 2014 (Dohrmann and Hatem 2014; Middle East Monitor 2014)
 - ISIS calls Turkish government to open Euphrates as prerequisite for the release of the kidnapped Turkish consul in Iraq
 - Syrian National Coalition and Violation Documentation Centre also ask for the flow to continue
- March 2018: UN for humanitarian affairs notice water supply cut during Turkish-FSA incursion of Afrin (Operation Olive Branch) (Al Jazeera 2018)
- March 2020: Human Rights Watch reports Turkey interrupting water supply to Kurdish areas (HRW 2020)
- August 2020: Syrian Rep. to UN Bashar Ja'afari reports Turkey's cutting off of water to Alouk station (15 times; periods between 2-10 days) (UN 2020)
- April 2021: UN Relief Chief observes 20 interruptions at Alouk water station over the last year (UN 2021)
- May 2021: Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reports 200 m3/sec flow from Turkey and impact on various water distribution, irrigation, and power generation facilities (SOHR 2021)

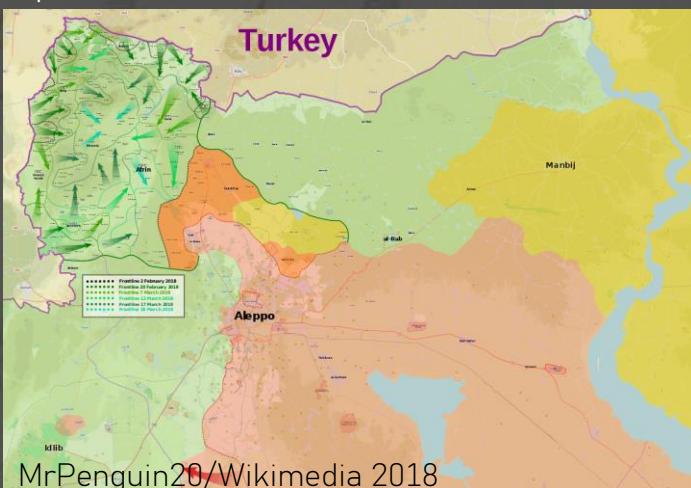
Turkish territorial incursions in Syria

Operation Euphrates Shield (2016)



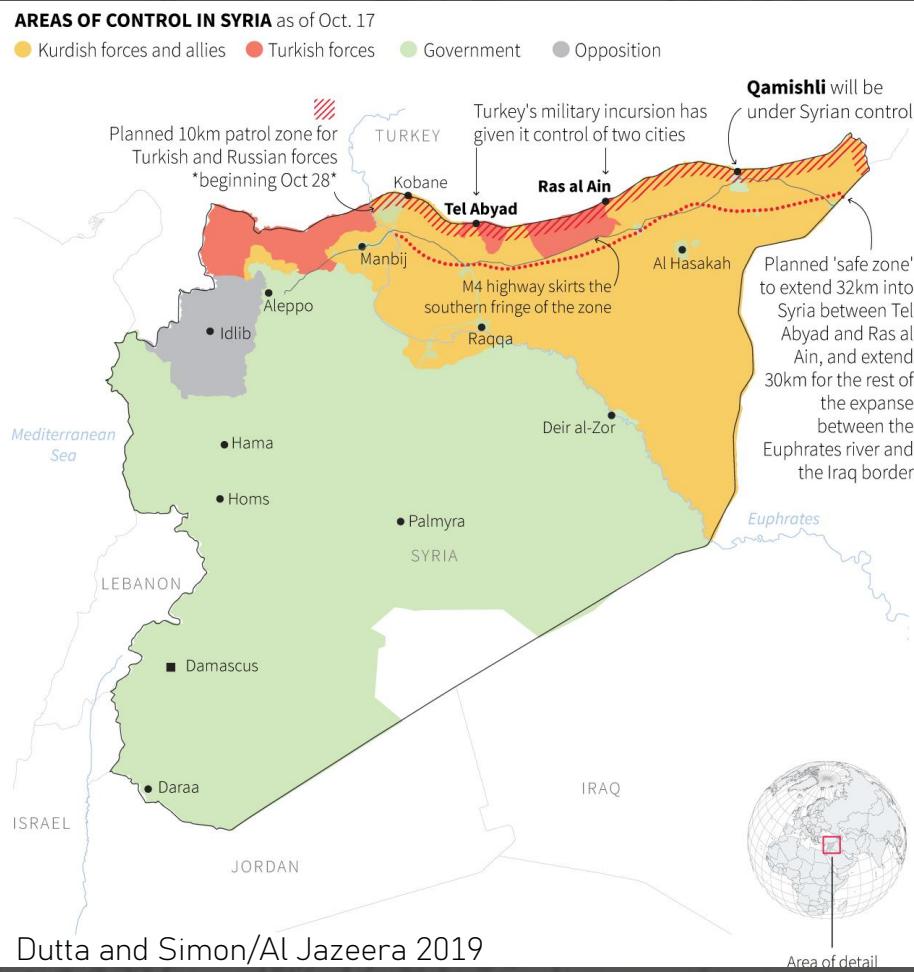
MrPenguin20/Wikimedia 2016

Operation Olive Branch (2018)



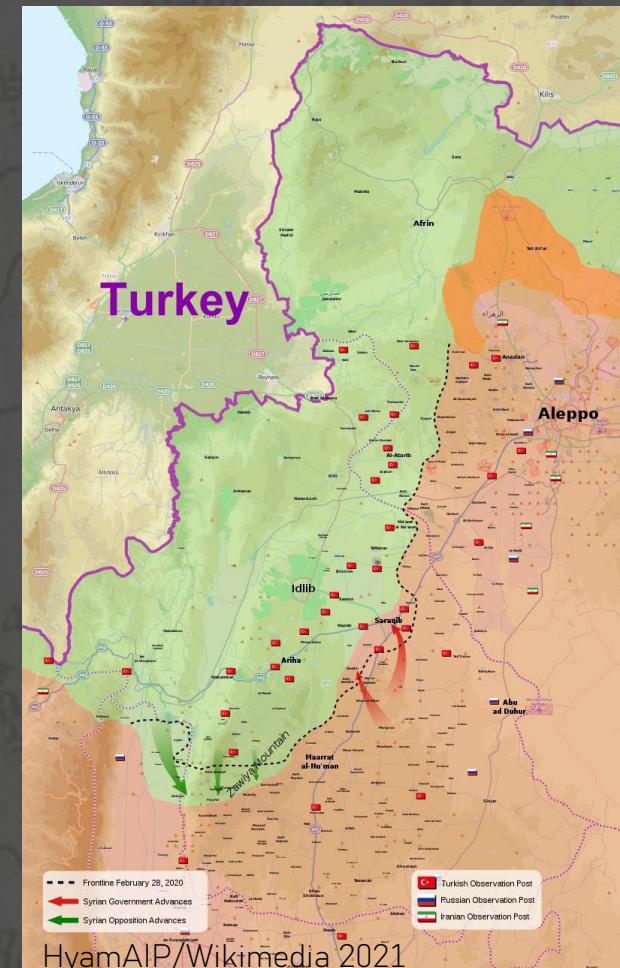
MrPenguin20/Wikimedia 2018

Operation Peace Spring (2019)



Dutta and Simon/Al Jazeera 2019

Operation Spring Shield (2020)



HyamAIP/Wikimedia 2021

Next steps

- Articulate the linkages between *Pax Ottomanica* and *Pax Aquarum*
- Discursive analysis of water-related national and foreign policy through the lens of neo-Ottomanism, Turkish nationalism, and imperialism
- Develop the Kurdish case as example of territorialized Turkish hegemony and power contests within hydrosocial territories
- Plot out water cut events with Turkish territorial incursions into Syria

Nicolas Parent

nicolas.parent@mail.mcgill.ca

Prof. Jon Unruh

jon.unruh@mcgill.ca

Thank you!