

Allouche, J. 2020. Nationalism, legitimacy and hegemony in transboundary water interactions. *Water Alternatives* 13(2): 286-301



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# Nationalism, Legitimacy and Hegemony in Transboundary Water Interactions

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**ABSTRACT:** This article examines how discourses of water nationalism are used to justify and legitimise a state's water policy both domestically and internationally and how that discourse constitutes a battleground of ideas and power in transboundary water interactions. Most literature on hydropolitics takes the social construct of the nation state as a given but the construct reveals a certain degree of fragility. For this reason, legitimacy, both domestic and global, is a crucial factor in understanding these transboundary water disputes. Water-related slogans and landscape symbols can be used to reinforce the legitimising effects of these discourses and are employed as an ideology for consolidating hegemony at the transboundary level. These discourses, however, are also contested both domestically and globally. This paper uses three specific case studies around dam building projects – the Merowe Dam in Sudan, the Rogun Dam in Tajikistan and the Southeastern Anatolia Project in Turkey – to identify how these discourses create different types of transboundary water interactions.

**KEYWORDS:** Nation state construct, legitimacy, fragility, hegemony, transboundary water relations, hydropolitics

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## INTRODUCTION

Egypt and the great river that flows through it were inseparable in the eyes of Herodotus, who declared that "Egypt is the Nile, and the Nile is Egypt" (Herodotus, 2013). The ancient sage's assertion testifies to the influence the river has had on the identity of the inhabitants of its banks for thousands of years, and the wisdom is arguably still applicable today. With so little rain falling throughout Egyptian territory and so many families surviving on irrigated agriculture, there is a clear dependence on the river by people and state alike. A critical eye looking upstream beyond Egypt's sovereign borders cannot, however, ignore that the Nile originates in Lakes Tana and Victoria; the second part of the mantra is thus thrown into question. To a large extent Egypt really 'is' the Nile, but the Nile is also the Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, Rwanda, Eritrea and the Democratic Republic of Congo (Hanna and Allouche, 2018).

This intimate relationship between international rivers, a nation's identity and a state's borders is visible well beyond North and East Africa. Querying that relationship is important in light of the transboundary water conflicts all over the globe. It requires that a crucial question be answered: how do national sentiments about water or rivers shape the nature of transboundary water interactions?

This paper develops the analysis in two parts. The first section explains how efforts to build nation states involve linking domestic and transboundary water resources to national territory through 'water nationalism', specifically through the use of water-related symbols and slogans. The second section explores how the water nationalism of respective countries may collide in international transboundary water contexts; it notes both the limitations and potential of (water) nationalistic ideas to influence hegemonic transboundary water arrangements. The interplay between identity and legitimacy in the shaping of norms at the river basin level is explored through case studies of the Merowe Dam in Sudan, the Rogun Dam in Tajikistan and the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP) in Turkey.

## THE BATTLEGROUND FOR POWER: BELIEFS, IDENTITY, LEGITIMACY AND THE FLUID NATURE OF WATER

Past hydro-political theories were very much influenced by the two key dominant theories of international relations, neorealism and neo-institutionalism (on neorealism see Naff and Matson, 1984, and Starr and Stoll, 1988; on neo-institutionalism see Wolf, 1995, and Allan, 2001). According to neorealists, states are rational actors that aim at maximising their relative power compared to other states; according to this framework, cooperation over international rivers may fail when it challenges a state's core concerns such as sovereignty, territorial integrity and security. Neo-institutionalists, on the other hand, reject the notion that power is the only factor that determines relationships between states; they hold that the emergence of cooperation among parties, including in the writing of transboundary water treaties, is possible when compliance problems and mistrust are mitigated with the help of institutions that provide information, lower transaction costs, increase transparency and reduce uncertainty.

There is now a rich and varied literature in the hydro-politics of international watercourses which explores conflict versus cooperation and the co-existence of the two (Mirumachi, 2015). The body of knowledge is still divided, however, between those focusing on the geostrategic and political economy nature of transboundary water relations and those looking at the social construction of norms, discourses and ideas. Some analyses have focused on how power, hegemony and power asymmetries can impact transboundary water interactions (Zeitoun and Warner, 2006) and can affect even the global political economy (Selby, 2003a). Others have concentrated instead on the influence of norms and beliefs at the individual, societal and transboundary levels; they have particularly looked at the nation and the state as social constructs, examining how narratives and ideas of watercourses become central to efforts to exert territorial control, including state and nation building processes (Allouche, 2005; Allouche, 2010; Akhter, 2015; Harris and Alatout, 2010). These academic silos mean that the relationship between hegemony, power and identity is too little conceptualised in the hydro-politics literature.

The analysis of discursive and ideological dimensions of identity and power provides insights into strategies and tactics of water control under conditions of power asymmetries between basin states. By paying attention to the multiscale nature of hydro-hegemony (Warner, 2008a; Warner et al., 2014; Warner et al., 2017), this paper examines how discursive mechanisms around narratives of water nationalism operate and are used to justify and legitimise a state's water policy at both the international and domestic level. Its objective is to combine, enlarge and pluralise the multilayered relationship between identities, hegemony and hydro-politics by seeing how norms surrounding the concept of the nation state lead to particular pathways of transboundary water interactions.

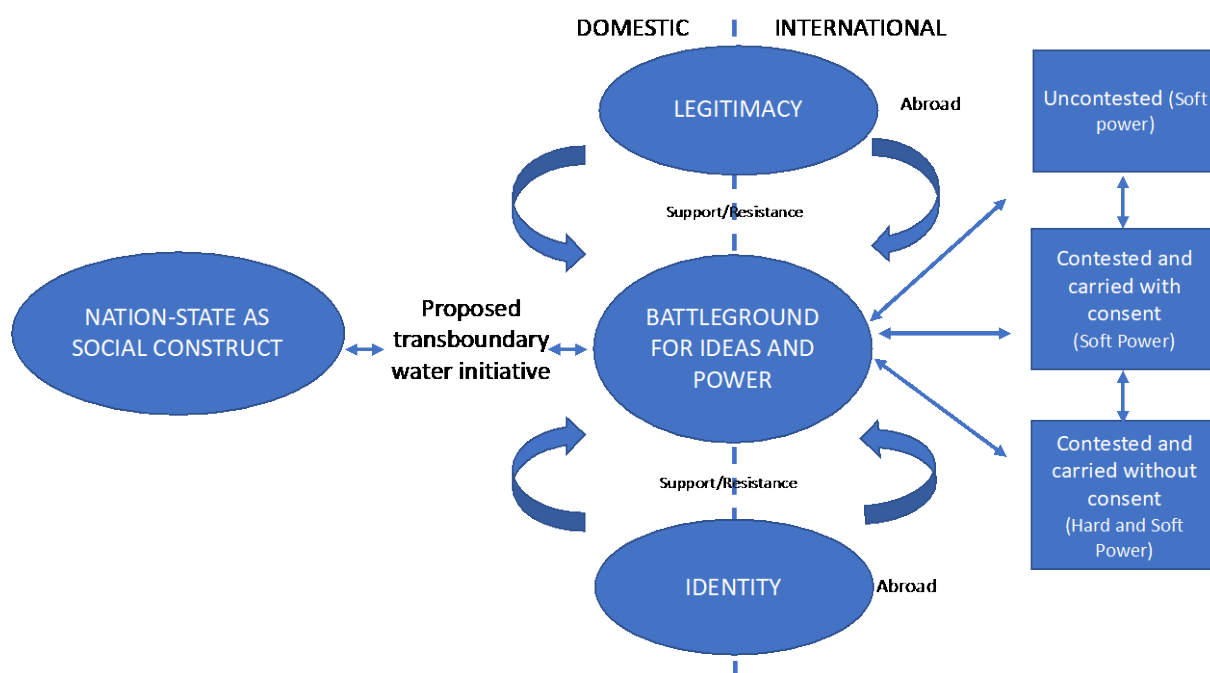
Hydro-political interactions could, in a sense, be conceived as a battleground for ideas and power. International legal scholars have attempted to codify and standardise the management of this shared resource; over time, however, competing legal doctrines over the management of international watercourses have developed (McCaffrey et al., 2019). National claims may derive a sense of legitimacy from the international legal doctrine, and such doctrine will often constitute the main justification for the riparian action taken in the management of these transboundary water resources. The shape of transboundary water arrangements, however, is guided more by the push and pull of sovereign states in the ever-changing global order than by any overarching, objective water-sharing standards or principles. As jurists have noted, the very nature of transboundary water resources places them at odds with the sovereignty-based interests of states and their citizens and thus complicates international cooperation (Benvenisti, 2002). The fluid nature of water has been a challenge to global and regional governance. Political actors who are somewhat, or entirely, unwilling to relinquish aspects of sovereignty may resent or resist the advances of a competing riparian state. Politicians, keen to shore up support for the plans they have for the resource, may readily politicise any sentiment induced by this resistance by tugging on nationalistic heartstrings (Apter, 2013). Overall, the work points to the paradox of how water, so difficult

to control and claim by a single nation or state due to its fluid nature, becomes central to the consolidation of the ideal of singular and fixed nations or states (Allouche, 2019).

Identity and legitimacy are fundamental to this battleground of ideas and power. In most cases, the literature on hydropolitics takes the nation state social construct as a given; this construct, however, as said before, is necessarily fragile. Legitimacy, both domestic and global, is therefore a crucial factor in understanding transboundary water disputes.

Domestically, the success of the state building or nation making process depends on state legitimacy. Internationally, success depends on the degree to which the discursive power of the project is contested by, or complied with, by other riparian countries and by the international community, including global NGOs.

Figure 1. Nationalism, legitimacy and hegemony in transboundary water interactions.



Source: The author.

Figure 1 reflects the assertion that the discourses generated by water nationalism with the aim of garnering domestic and international legitimacy will elicit reactions that can lead to any of three possible outcomes.

Let us first start with the nation state as a social construct. The idea of the nation state is too often accepted as a given in the hydropolitics literature, meaning that conflict over other forms of identity (i.e. ethnicity, religion, gender) are too often ignored in transboundary water interactions. As a social construct, the nation state has pursued the idea of a 'hydraulic mission', which refers to a state's policy of extending safe and reliable water services to citizens and communities throughout its territory (Allan, 2001). This idea has not just emerged with the notion of the modern nation state and its sociopolitical objectives; however, the modern nation state's hydraulic mission and its associated technological developments have taken on an ethical/philosophical dimension with the accompanying belief that humanity was now able to master nature.

The nation state also links this mission with a form of identity building, mainly through slogans and symbols. The well-known saying "Israel made the desert bloom" is a case in point. The saying has symbolic and concrete importance to both the pre-1948 Zionist project and to early efforts to build the Israeli nation state. Zionist efforts to irrigate the Negev desert succeeded partially because of groundwater taken from indigenous residents (i.e. from the residents of Gaza in 1947) (CO, 1947).<sup>1</sup> Zionist ideology linked the control and transformation of the desert with a new feeling of control over nature (Alatout, 2006; Sosland, 2007). As Professor Arie Issar from the Jacob Blaustein Institutes for Desert Research at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev puts it, "the idea that we could make the desert of Palestine bloom was one of the founding pillars of the Zionist movement" (Pearce, 1991: 293). Furthermore, the slogan of Israel making the desert bloom may serve domestically, even today, to reinforce the implication that Israel's Arab neighbours did not (and could not) make the desert bloom, thereby conferring on them an image of neglect that suggests lack of merit or legitimate claim to use the waters.<sup>2</sup> This position further reinforces the chief Israeli argument against negotiating an equitable distribution of the transboundary aquifers, which centres on the notion of 'prior use' (Wine, 2019).<sup>3</sup>

The role of nationalism in periods of state establishment has been very well documented by, for example, Breuilly (1985), Brubaker (1996), and Hechter (2000). Nationalism, in numerous ways, mixes with the hydraulic mission; Bar-Gal, for example, discusses the ideological role of the image of water towers in shaping Israeli Zionist nationalism (Bar-Gal, 1991: 837), while Trottier (1999: 250) discusses similar dynamics in the original water master plans drawn up in 1995 by the then newly formed Palestinian Water Authority.

Rivers, mountains and lakes thus combine with dams, highways, tunnels and water towers to create a distinctive character that becomes ingrained in the minds of the nation state's inhabitants. As historian Simon Schama (1995: 61) has noted:

Landscapes are culture before they are nature; constructs of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock (...). But it should also be acknowledged that once a certain idea of landscape, a myth, a vision, establishes itself in an actual place, it has a peculiar way of muddling categories, of making metaphors more real than their referents; of becoming, in fact, part of the scenery.

Symbols are used to transform space into place and territory into homeland (Anderson, 2006), and the territory and the landscape can become a symbolic expression of a nation state's past and present (Smith, 2000: 806-807).

Examination of the way that nation states decide to name water bodies serves to further the point. The practice of linking natural resources with state rulers may have been set during the European colonial period; Africa's Lake Victoria and Canada's Hudson's Bay constitute a permanent association with the kings, queens, explorers and other powers-that-were. The infusion of personal and state legitimacy, however, did not die with the colonial project; Sironneau, for example, points to cases where water has been an instrument of pressure and propaganda for nationalist regimes, Lake Nasser on the Egyptian part of the Nile and Lake El Assad on the Syrian portion of the Euphrates River being cases in point (Sironneau,

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<sup>1</sup> The arguments made by members of the early Zionist movement for the expansion of British Mandate Palestine's borders into Lebanon were based on – and defined by – water resources. The French and English authorities of the time resisted the pressure to include Lebanon's Litani River in Palestine (FO, 1920).

<sup>2</sup> A letter from Th. A. L. Zissu in London to J. Gywer Esq. (on behalf of the British Colonial Office), dated 7 December 1937, reflects this point of view. It promotes "reclamation and colonisation of the Negeb [Negev desert]", through expansion of irrigation and drinking water systems from groundwater sources used by the Palestinian inhabitants on the coast (the Gaza governorate of British Mandate Palestine). The "negligence of man" is responsible for the lack of development in the area, Zissu states. "Indeed", he says, "the Arab population of the country would neither have the means to colonise the Negeb nor the wish, nor even the need to do so" (CO 1937).

<sup>3</sup> In any case, in light of environmental and conflict-resolution pressures, Israeli and international commentators are growing increasingly critical of the Israeli state's persistence in irrigating the desert (Shuval, 2006; Peraino and Chen, 2008).

1996). Symbols confer legitimacy as they slowly become part of the accepted 'natural' order of things; maps and cartography also take on a central role in the symbolic construction of the nation and the state. Several studies have shown the importance of these tools in the process of territorial socialisation, including Wood (1993), Black (1997), and Herb (1997).

The symbols and nomenclature linked to the national landscape may be used by politicians and nation makers as a form of repository of emotions aimed at evoking feelings that garner support for their causes. Ruling elites, in this way, can use the symbolism of water sites to gain legitimacy; the messages that they send out, which are conveyed through words and slogans, are considered legitimate by those who receive them. Furthermore, projects can be used by a political elite to create an ideology that helps legitimise their behaviour; through this ideology, elites can gain legitimacy while diverting attention from core pressing matters and creating the illusion that they are providing a better future for the population (Menga, 2015). The project becomes a symbol of internal cohesion that supports the nation's right to self-determination and development; anyone expressing opposition to the project, domestically or abroad, becomes an 'enemy of the nation'.

This process of making nation states is not, however, uncontested. Project slogans and symbols sometimes clash with other subnational or transnational forms of identity, which often have ethnic undertones (Allouche, 2019). While these slogans and symbols attempt to portray a *fait accompli*, the nation state as a social construct inevitably is somewhat fragile and should be not assumed to be a given. Legitimacy, both domestically and globally, is thus a crucial factor in understanding these transboundary water disputes.

'Legitimacy', here, is understood according to Ian Hurd's definition; it is taken to be a "normative belief by an actor that a rule or institution ought to be obeyed" (Hurd, 1999: 381). I propose that the creation of legitimacy through political discourse may be accomplished in a particularly manipulative way when international disputes arise from unilateral actions; in such cases, the discourse may be directed at securing the consent of the citizenry as much as that of the international community. Nationalist sentiment as an idea may combine with legitimising acts, namely strategic moves which produce a default norm of compliance. These acts contribute to the unquestioned acceptance of the status quo through "the closing down of consideration of any alternative order" (Capoccia and Kelemen, 2007; Mahoney, 2000). As a result, a set of "ideological hegemonic beliefs" may be established (Lustick, 2002), possibly to the point where a subconscious acceptance of the ideas and discourses by national policymakers may be interpreted as compliance with the order the discourse is based on, or arranges. Competing state actors may construct knowledge or may 'sanction' a discourse; Selby (2003b) has shown how the Israeli side, for instance, has portrayed the domination of the Palestinian water sector as "cooperation". Allouche (2016a), Molle (2008) and Warner (2008b) have explained the uptake and maintenance of hegemonic paradigms, such as Integrated Water Resources Management, in the water management sector. These hegemonic paradigms, in turn, become an enshrined belief and then sometimes an emerging norm for the whole basin, if not globally. Sneddon (2015), however, also shows how hegemonic paradigms that are active in the Mekong basin are not fixed notions, that they are constantly rearticulated in unexpected and plural ways; he notes that "hegemonic concepts, no matter how potent they seem, are simultaneously more omnipresent and rigid than often presented by the architects of global water governance and more variegated and fungible than often presented by the water justice movement and the water activist community" (Sneddon, 2015: 19).

I suggest that governments and other national policymakers may use nationalist sentiment similarly, both to shore up support for policy on domestic water issues and to galvanise support for their interaction with other governments on international water issues. This support, of course, will be conditional on the degree of legitimacy of the interplay between the project and the identities within and beyond the nation state (including other riparian countries); support will also depend on the global community's endorsement of the project.

The subnational and international character of water nationalism affects the nature and outcome of transboundary water conflicts. Whether domestic or transboundary, water resources can take on symbolic and imagined aspects of a nation state's collective territorial sovereignty and geographical identity; this can have demonstrable consequences on transboundary water relations.

### CONTESTED PROCESSES OF WATER NATIONALISM

As the outcome of the congruence between policies, economic structures, power structures and the prevailing ideology at the time, the unilateral policy on shared rivers is divided between those actors that accept the state's legitimacy and those that contest it (Zeitoun et al., 2017). I argue that the different outcomes are linked to the role that power plays within hegemonic orders in shaping international transboundary water interactions. Zeitoun and Warner (2006) show that states may vie for greater control of the transboundary waters – or, more frequently, for maintenance of the current arrangement – through strategies that expand their control or curb challenges to it.

#### **Merowe Dam on the Nile River in Sudan.**

Planning started for this dam in the late 1990s and construction lasted from 2003 to 2009 at a cost of US\$1.2 billion; its installed electrical generating capacity is 1250 MW and the reservoir was built to hold 12.5 billion cubic metres (BCM), or 20 percent of the Nile's annual flow. This corresponds to the first scenario, represented by the top right quarter of Figure 1, where a unilateral project is uncontested at the international level. The dam was made possible following Sudanese oil exports to the international market, which both revitalised the Sudanese economy and provided a significant source of foreign currency revenue. These exports also strengthened Sudan's diplomatic relations with China and with key Arab states of the Persian Gulf; this provided the foundations for financing and constructing such a megaproject (Nicol and Cascão, 2016; Saleh, 2008).

Before turning to the details of this water project, it is important to understand the social construction of the nation state in Sudan. The successive governments of Sudan have imposed a particular vision of the nation state, which is seen by some minority groups as being ethnocentric and totalitarian – authoritative (El-Battahani, 2007). The ascendancy of the Arab – Islamic identity that was promoted by the military – Islamist Al-Ingaz (Salvation) regime, which has been in power since 1989, has been noted by many groups; it is perceived by them as negatively affecting their role and contribution in building a viable Sudanese social unity. Indeed, some subordinated groups feel that the overall hegemony at the centre is systematically nullifying their distinct cultural attributes (El-Battahani, 2007).

This historical background is important for understanding the battle for ideas and power that surrounds the legitimacy of this water project. The Al-Ingaz regime launched a wildly ambitious dam programme; it created the Dams Implementation Unit to update existing hydro-infrastructure and set up new projects, including the Roseires Dam. This programme was pivotal in terms of supporting a process that was specifically aimed at building the nation state. As put by Mohamud and Verhoeven (2016: 183), "the dams have intended to re-engineer how the state functions and to help construct a new citizenry, dissolving the deep societal divisions that had plagued Sudan since independence in 1956". The official discourse centred on economic modernisation (Hanna, 2016), but it was also designed to address reconciliation and unity in order to heal old cleavages and nurture a new Sudanese nation (Ali et al., 2018). At the opening ceremony of the dam on 3 March 2009, President Omar Hassan Ahmad Al-Bashir declared that "[t]he dam is the project of the century (...). It is the pride of Sudan, the pride of the Arabs and the pride of the world" (Verhoeven, 2015: 1). In terms of economic modernisation, the discourse was around the ideology of agricultural revival, which included the greening the desert to realise food security for Sudan and make it the "breadbasket of the Arab World", a vision that was initially promoted by President Numeiry in the 1970s. Since Numeiry first promoted his vision, the idea of Sudan as the Arab World's breadbasket has been the slogan used in the political discourse, both domestically as an

inspirational national project, and on the international arena as a common regional (Arab) vision which deserves financial as well as (hydro) political support (Hanna, 2016).

A tool for both economic and nationalist policy and politics, the building of the dam reflected the entwining of militarism and Islamism; it resealed the alliance between generals and Islamists, between Al-Ingaz leaders Bashir and Taha. The reservoir created by the Merowe Dam, however, flooded several villages and forced the displacement of an estimated 50,000-78,000 people, mainly from the Manasir, Amri, and Hamdab communities. Many were moved to poorly planned and inadequately resourced 'resettlement' sites in the desert where they have been unable to sustain a livelihood and where many of them remain reliant on food aid. This nation building project therefore met with resistance; the government was accused of promoting an exclusively Arab – Islamic identity, with the dams being part of a programme to stamp out Nubian culture (Hashim, 2010; Ali et al., 2018). The resistance committee managed to get global attention with the support of the British Museum, the NGO International Rivers, and the UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing; however, for the reasons explained below, this collaboration could do little to discredit the nationalist discourse articulated by the Sudanese government.

The case of the Merowe Dam is interesting in that, while it emerged as a unilateral project supported by a nationalistic discourse, it was not contested by the affected riparian states, at least not officially. Shortly after Al-Turabi lost power to Al-Bashir in 1999 there was a speedy recovery of relations with Egypt and the Gulf countries, both of which were crucial for Sudan's massive dam programme (Woertz, 2013). For Sudan to implement the Merowe Dam project it was essential that Egypt – given its vital interest in the Nile – first give its consent; Egypt's consent was also crucial if Gulf countries were to provide funding. According to Woertz (ibid: 23), this consent was justified on the grounds that

while Egypt has traditionally opposed dam projects, it was ready to concede as Sudan's dams would prevent increased sedimentation of its High Dam at Aswan and prolong its life span. A widely rumored quid pro quo was the settlement of Egyptian farmers, so Egypt would benefit indirectly from the dams. Egypt also had an interest in bringing Sudan on its side to improve its negotiation position in the multilateral Nile Basin Initiative that was launched in 1999.

From Egypt's perspective, Sudan's unilateral decision to build the Merowe Dam was perceived to be in line with the provisions of the 1959 Nile Waters Agreement, as it was within Sudan's quota of 18.5 BCM and was not a threat in any practical way to Egypt's water security. Furthermore, the historical 1959 Agreement did not prevent Sudan from building further infrastructure as long as it did no harm to Egypt as a downstream country. Consequently, the government of Egypt, after a moment of hesitation and uncertainty, endorsed the construction of the Merowe Dam (Obengo, 2016). Cascão, with regard to Ethiopia, attributes that country's failure to react to Sudan's construction of the Merowe dam to lack of interest; she notes, however, that the refusal to pronounce on this amounts in effect to 'veiled consent' (Cascão, 2008). The nationalistic discourse that was generated was also accepted by the international community; foreign companies and funders have turned a blind eye to the ignoring of internationally accepted standards on human rights, resettlement and the environment (Askouri, 2004).

The lack of contestation by riparian countries in such cases – each for their own reasons – may be considered to be de facto consent. It is important to note that Ethiopia may receive some of the power generated by the dam via the joint grid that is being planned as part of the Nile Basin Initiative's Eastern Nile Subsidiary Action Program (Saleh, 2008); more importantly, other riparian countries, particularly Ethiopia, will be emboldened by the dam's construction to pursue their own interests. In May 2010, five upstream countries (Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda and Tanzania) signed the Cooperative Framework Agreement, with Burundi joining the group in 2011. These countries insisted on the equitable utilisation of water rather than on water sharing that was based on historical rights. In 2011, Ethiopia announced that it would press ahead with five mega-dams on the Blue Nile, starting with the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (Obengo, 2016). Part of the continued complexity of Nile River Basin relations is that

Sudan and Ethiopia are de facto implementing the concept of the Blue Nile cascade, though not under the Eastern Nile Technical Regional Office/Nile Basin Initiative (ENTRO/NBI) institutional auspices or perspectives and, for that matter, not as part of an officially sanctioned agreement between the parties (Nicol and Cascão, 2016). Despite the social and environmental impact of the Merowe Dam, the government, through its nationalistic rhetoric around reconciliation, acquired a certain degree of legitimacy and managed to push the dam construction project through uncontested among the riparian states, most notably Egypt and Ethiopia.

### **Rogun Dam, Tajikistan**

The Rogun Dam in Tajikistan provides a second example of discourse influencing a fragile state and of unilateral water projects having international support. This corresponds to the second scenario in Figure 1, contested and carried out with consent; in this scenario, the original contestation of a unilateral effort or project by affected riparian actors may be neutralised by the recognition that the project is 'inevitable' due to its garnering of early international support.

In Central Asia, most riparian states are now questioning allocations of the waters of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya Rivers, despite those countries having agreed to the current allocations while under Soviet rule (Allouche, 2004). The upstream states of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are now also resisting seasonal water releases because of their own energy needs, which are increasingly satisfied by hydroelectric generation. Prior to independence, their energy needs were met by low cost coal and gas imports from downstream states; more recently, however, those downstream states (such as Kazakhstan) are asking upstream countries to pay market prices.<sup>4</sup> Thus, instead of emptying their reservoirs in the summer for the irrigation of downstream cotton fields (as occurred under Soviet arrangements), upstream states now frequently store the water for use in winter for their own hydroelectric power generation. Most attempts by upstream governments to increase their water quotas for hydroelectric purposes, however, have been countered by Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. Decision makers in these countries seek to maintain current allocations to support agricultural production and, in fact, would like to further increase their allocations. The disproportionate power and political dissuasion wielded by downstream states, especially Uzbekistan, means that it is highly unlikely that hydroelectric projects in upstream states will be implemented. At the opening of the second Central Asia/South Asia Electricity Trade Conference in 2006, however, the Tajik president stressed that his government wished to relaunch the Soviet hydroplant projects at Rogun and Sangtuda, on the Vakhsh River (a tributary of the Amu Darya) (BBC, 2006). Uzbekistan had already objected to the construction of the Rogun Dam (particularly its third stage, which would raise its height) as it claimed that it would give Tajikistan control of the flow of water to Uzbekistan's Surxondaryo (Surkhandarya) and Qashqadaryo (Kashkadarya) provinces.<sup>5</sup>

The Rogun Dam project was initially given some political momentum through the backing of the soft power of the Russian Federation; indeed, Russia's intention in reasserting its political influence over the region may be to increase Central Asia's water dependence.<sup>6</sup> A further method of ensuring dependence is the provision of finance for infrastructure projects; despite a false start with the Russian aluminium company Rusal,<sup>7</sup> the Russian Federation reaffirmed its intention to be a partner in the Rogun

<sup>4</sup> Energy exchanges between the region's countries fell by more than half between 1990 and 2000 (Allouche, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> The first two stages of the project would not put Tajikistan in full control of the river as the live storage would be below 40% of the mean annual flow and the Vakhsh River contributes only 25% of the total Amu Darya flow.

<sup>6</sup> An example of this is fact that the Soviet-era Ob and Irtysh diversion schemes – which would make Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan heavily reliant on Russian water – are once again under consideration (Allouche, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Collaboration between the company and the Tajik government broke down due to disagreements over financing and the height of the dam.



hydroelectric project in Tajikistan (BBC, 2007).<sup>8</sup> The support by the Russian Federation of the Rogun project has therefore enabled the government of Tajikistan to launch the project despite Uzbekistan's opposition.

Construction work at the dam site, in fact, restarted in 2005 and continued until 2012. At the global level, the Tajik government has promoted a discourse which showcases the dam project as an expression of the right to develop the country's largely unexploited hydroelectric potential – an entitlement that cannot be disputed if there is to be development of both the state and the region. The Tajik government, in order to get further international support, developed an international campaign strategy that portrayed the Rogun Dam as a key objective in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (Menga, 2015: 484-486).

This does not mean that this discourse was supported domestically. Opposition to the dam project was already present in the late 1980s, during the latter part of the Soviet perestroika era; it was particularly opposed by ecological organisations, residents from the flooding zones, and representatives of the intelligentsia's technical and scientific circles (Féaux de la Croix and Suyarkulova, 2015). According to various experts, the displacements and resettlements caused by the dam's construction (amongst other policies), and general public opposition to Rogun, were factors fuelling the outbreak of the Tajik civil war, which began in May 1992 (Schoeberlein, 2000; Sodikov, 2009, 2013). The Tajik state is contested between those who impose a centralised version and those who demand more autonomy. This reflects the legacy of the late Soviet system where, during perestroika, the power of the apparatchiks was disputed by the young recruits in charge of the *sovkhozes* (the state-owned farms); the latter called for more autonomy and localism (*mahalgaroi*) after independence. Autonomy, localism and regionalism were key political demands due to the domination of the elites from Leninabad, Tajikistan's second-largest city; this meant that those in other regions felt alienated, especially the Tajiks from the mountains. There was questioning of the symbolic pact between the Tajik from the mountains and those from the plains that had been drawn up in 1929 when the Tajik state was created (Allouche, 2016b).

The Tajik government has been extremely active in promoting Rogun to both its domestic and its foreign audiences. After the project was resurrected, criticism during the latter part of the perestroika era regarding Rogun was dismissed in the Tajik press as defamation and unreasonable protest on the part of the opposition leaders; any objections thus became illegitimate or even unpatriotic by association (Féaux de la Croix and Suyarkulova, 2015).

The geopolitical landscape and financial incentives have changed since the beginning of the project and the Russian government and the state-owned company are less enthusiastic about it. The Tajik government temporarily suspended the project due to the findings of a feasibility study done by the World Bank (Menga, 2015), but the project was not halted. President Rahmon, in 2010, declared that "Rogun is our national idea"; this led to the sale of shares of the Open Joint Stock Company (OJSC) of Rogun Hydropower Plant (HPP) to Tajik citizens. During the initial public offering (IPO) in 2010, Tajik citizens were forced to sacrifice part of their salary to purchase shares of the dam. In 2011, 2 million shares were sold, representing only 10% of the total amount required to build the dam (Menga, 2015: 486). Rogun was presented by the regime as an example of a patriotic act.

The first turbine at Rogun went into operation in 2018, representing 75 metres of the intended 335. This ambitious Tajik infrastructure became a symbol of national pride, honour, progress and prosperity, and was enthusiastically promoted by the government. During the launch of the first unit of the Rogun Dam on 16 November 2018, President Rahmon proclaimed that "Roghun will be the pride of every citizen of our country now and in the future, it will be the source of patriotism and dedication, as well as warm feelings and honour of the Tajik nation!" (Rahmon, 2018). The death of Uzbek President Islam Karimov in 2016 has again changed the geopolitical landscape and opportunities; he had campaigned vehemently

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<sup>8</sup> Unified Energy System, the Russian state-controlled electricity giant, has begun construction on the Sangtuda power station in Tajikistan, and the Russian Federation is considering participation in the Toktogul Rehabilitation Phase 2 Project in Kyrgyzstan.

against the Rogun Dam on the international stage, notoriously going as far as to suggest going to war over water in the region. Karimov's successor, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, has largely put aside Uzbekistan's loud objections to the project in favour of mending ties between Tashkent and Dushanbe. In a joint statement, released in March 2018 during Mirziyoyev's visit to Dushanbe, the two sides suggested Uzbek involvement in the project (Putz, 2018).

This second case study shows how influential domestic and global discourses around water nationalism can be; to a certain extent, they can transform the position of counterhegemonic states in such a way as to alter transboundary water interactions and gain consent over large scale water-related infrastructure projects. I argue that the soft power support of Russia in the early stages clearly enabled Tajikistan to get a new political momentum around the project that would not have been possible otherwise.

### **The Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP) dam, Turkey**

Turkey's Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP) dam building programme illustrates the third possible outcome of water nationalism expressed at the international level (the bottom right corner of Figure 1). In this scenario, the project in question may be contested but is carried out without the consent of the affected riparian actor.

Composed of over 20 large scale multiplant hydropower projects, irrigation schemes, and dams in the Tigris – Euphrates Basin, the GAP provides Turkey with a great advantage in the control of the pivotal waters of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. In a speech in 1994, Süleyman Demirel, the former Turkish president, declared that

[t]he Turkish Nation proves its capabilities by finishing the GAP gradually. Therefore, the GAP symbolizes the progress of Turkish technique, engineering and labour, and also shows the determination of the nation. In these aspects, the GAP is a masterpiece of the republic of Turkey and gets its power from the Turkish nation. (Conker 2018)

The programme, of course, also generates concerns among downstream riparian states due to the effects on the quantity, timing and quality of the flows.

Since the region is largely inhabited by Kurds, the GAP has been linked to the 'Kurdish Question'; not surprisingly, the biggest opposition to the project has come from the Kurds, and in particular the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) (Hommes et al., 2016). In the beginning of the 1990s, in fact, the Turkish government considered the GAP project to be a direct "instrument in the 'fight against terrorism'" (Warner, 2012: 238). Like many state-led water development projects, the project was seen as contributing to the integration of the Kurds into the Turkish nation and thus reducing support for the separatist demands of the PKK (Conde, 2016). It was seen as an attempt to turn Kurds into modern Turks loyal to the Turkish state (Jongerden, 2007), especially by ensuring "state control through economies of dependency on state provision of irrigation, education and subsidies" (Harris, 2002: 754).

As Conker (2014) argues, the GAP was used by the ruling elites as a symbol of the state's progress, conferring on the government an inherent national right to be the stewards of its water resources. The Atatürk Dam, named after the nation's hero and celebrated on banknotes, was also built around a discourse promoting the glorious past. President Demirel insisted in a 2005 speech that "[t]he Turkish nation, Turkish engineers and technicians, Turkish workers and Turkish contractors are proud of creating such a great monument, which is worthy for being named after the great Atatürk and his glory" (Conker, 2018: 885). (This glorification of Atatürk is now changing with President Erdogan and the Justice and Development Party, but this is beyond the scope of this article.)

The GAP is thus a further example of water nationalism having the effect of supporting unilateral water projects on transboundary waters. The dispute between Turkey on the one hand and Syria, Iraq on the other is intense; even more so there is the opposition by the PKK, which consider the GAP to be a

theft of 'Kurdish waters' (Harris, 2016). Turkish expressions of territorial sovereignty may be nowhere more clearly expressed in recent times than in the discourse surrounding the GAP. The statement by Süleyman Demirel at the opening ceremony of the previously discussed Atatürk Dam on 25 July 1992 conveys the upstream state's position:

Neither Syria, nor Iraq can lay claim to Turkey's rivers any more than Ankara could claim their oil. This is a matter of sovereignty. We have the right to do anything we like. The water resources are Turkey's, the oil resources are theirs. We don't say we share their oil resources, and they can't say they share our water resources (BBC, 2000).

The words apparently inscribed onto the dam further demonstrate the unity of project and nation: "Proud is the one who can call himself a Turk" (Trondalen, 2008).

Downstream riparian nations have also used the international arena as a way of contesting the legitimacy of the project. The government of Syria complained through the Arab League (Çarkoglu and Eder, 2001); further, in a throwback to the Cold War geopolitics of the 1950s where Turkey's alignment with the West was resented in the Arab world (Bilgin, 2017), the governments of Syria and Iraq asked the Arab states not to finance the GAP and called on the international consortium to give up working for the Turkish government on what it termed 'Arab waters' (Williams, 2001). In fact, both governments (along with Saudi Arabia) reminded the World Bank of its Operational Policy and Bank Procedures 7.50 which prevents the Bank from financing any project in the absence of official consent by all riparian actors (Çarkoglu and Eder, 2001). While patterns of conflict in bilateral and trilateral relations with respect to the Tigris – Euphrates Basin at the interstate level were a predominant theme until the 2000s, one must recognise that as a result of the GAP there has been a notable shift towards more cooperation. This is illustrated through the Turkish and Syrian governments' cooperative frameworks around transboundary relations in the context of the political rapprochement during the 2000s, even though the parties have not been able to achieve a comprehensive agreement to solve the problem permanently (Conker, 2014). The war in Iraq and Syria has stopped the political process altogether.

Example of this third type of transboundary water interaction around hard power is extreme and limited.<sup>9</sup> In fact, even hydro-hegemonic actors like the Turkish government know that the battlefield is not only about power and about each side's perceived rights (as expressed in part through their water nationalism discourse); they recognise that it also relies on the international support such projects will receive. The Turkish government is certainly working on its international image for a number of reasons, perhaps also in relation to the GAP. Turkey's attempt to act as facilitator in the late 1980s – early 1990s peace negotiations between Israel and Syria with the Peace Water Project (or Manavgat Project) serves two purposes in this regard: to demonstrate that Turkey was willing to cooperate over water issues and to galvanise the United States' support in its dispute over the GAP (Williams, 2001). Paradoxically, this can go both ways as hydraulic development projects are considered to be symbols of a nation's self-determination; therefore, objections to those projects that come from other riparian states (i.e. Iraq and Syria) or creditors (e.g. USAID) are considered to be a breach of Turkey's sovereignty.

Interestingly, recent development of the Ilisu Dam (which is part of the GAP) has proven more tenuous. The above section has argued that the Turkish state imposed its own hydraulic vision at the beginning of the project through a form of hard power; with the Ilisu Dam, this has proven more complicated. Indeed, the dam project elicited successful resistance from Turkey's downstream neighbours and from a coalition of local groups including the Hasankeyf Volunteers Association and international non-governmental organisations such as Friends of the Earth, which targeted international donors and contractors (Warner, 2012). This collaboration was successful in stopping the flow of external funding of the dam in 2001/2002; now, however, 20 years later, the dam is in operation. This points to

<sup>9</sup> Other potential cases include the Aswan High Dam or the Toshka Project in Egypt, the National Water Carrier in Israel, or the Farakka Barrage Project in India (Samaddar, 1997; Thomas, 2017).

another dimension of Figure 1, which is that these outcomes are not fixed; they can change depending on the broader political, socio-economic and cultural dynamics and according to the nationalist discourses that surround the transboundary water interactions and their legitimacy.

## CONCLUSION

This article has shown how geographical identity and visions of territorial sovereignty may be employed in times of conflict as a way to gain legitimacy and support for foreign and domestic policy, particularly through the use of symbols and slogans. Water nationalism as a process helps us to understand hydraulic imaginaries, state power and the infrastructural transformations that are linked to hydropolitics and the discursive ways in which water bodies, landscapes and infrastructures can be infused with the legitimacy, sanctity and unity of the nation state.

Shifting away from neo-institutionalist and neorealist theories of international relations, this article offers a different understanding of the diffusion of hegemonic beliefs that occurs in the process of creating regional regimes for the management of transboundary river basins. Neo-institutionalists tend to focus exclusively on the cooperative aspect of regime creation and effectiveness, and neorealists emphasise the material power capabilities of each state and the balance of power at the international level; this article, by contrast, provides a more nuanced understanding of the multiscale interactions between domestic discourses, regional hegemonic beliefs and global legitimacy. I have sought to understand how water policy interests are articulated and rearticulated through competing hegemonic nationalist discourses. These discourses, symbols and slogans furnish our material world with meaning and intelligibility and provide a context for the commonly accepted practices for managing these resources. This is not to deny balance-of-power and national-interest explanations in global politics but rather to ground them within broader hegemonic struggles between different types of social forces.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article is the result of many years of discussions, exchanges and debates around the overlap between the concepts of hydrohegemony and water nationalism with Professor Mark Zeitoun and many ideas have thereby been influenced by his thinking.

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