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Cycles of Technopolitical Transformation and (De)Politicisation in Water Infrastructure: Insights from the Atatürk Dam

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ABSTRACT: Large dams are often portrayed as technical achievements that advance economic development, energy production and regional integration, yet they also embody political struggles over expertise, authority and development priorities. This article examines the Atatürk Dam, Turkey's largest hydraulic infrastructure project, as a technopolitical intervention rather than merely an engineering structure. It asks how technical expertise, institutional arrangements and technopolitical strategies have shaped the dam's governance, and how processes of politicisation and depoliticisation have influenced the framing of its hydrosocial, hydropolitical and politico-ecological implications. Drawing on archival sources, interviews and documentary analysis, the article argues that the governance of the Atatürk Dam did not move from technical design to political controversy in a linear trajectory; rather, it evolved through recurrent and co-constitutive processes of politicisation and depoliticisation, as competing actors continuously contested expertise, institutional authority and scalar governance. In doing so, the article reconceptualises politicisation and depoliticisation as intertwined technopolitical processes and demonstrates how large-scale water infrastructures both materialise and mediate political conflict.

KEYWORDS: Atatürk Dam, depoliticisation, politicisation, technopolitics, water infrastructure, Turkey

INTRODUCTION

From the Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Chinese and Mayan empires to early modern hydraulic states, the capacity to regulate rivers has long been associated with political authority, territorial control and agrarian surplus (Molle et al., 2009: 329). With the advent of the Industrial Revolution, dams acquired additional functions, most notably hydropower generation, and became central instruments for economic growth, territorial integration and regional development (Huber and Joshi, 2015: 13). This expansion, however, has come at considerable social and ecological cost, with dams profoundly altering riverine ecosystems, displacing millions of people, submerging cultural heritage and reconfiguring land tenure and livelihoods worldwide (McCully, 2001; WCD, 2000). Despite these consequences, large dams (defined as structures exceeding 15 metres in height) proliferated rapidly. Their number increased from approximately 5000 in the late 1940s (WCD, 2000: 8) to more than 62,000 by the mid-2020s (International Commission on Large Dams, 2023). This expansion was driven by rising energy demand, state-led development strategies and the political appeal of large public works (Tilt, 2015: 41).

A substantial body of scholarship has examined how large-scale water infrastructure consolidates state authority, shapes national identities and enables forms of social control (Akhter, 2015; Menga, 2015; Mitchell, 2002; Wittfogel, 1957). Central to these dynamics is the 'hydraulic mission': the state-led ambition to mobilise and manage water resources to meet domestic, agricultural and industrial demands

(Allan, 2005; Molle et al., 2009). Throughout the 20th century, the institutionalisation of hydraulic bureaucracies, advances in engineering and the global circulation of planning paradigms – most notably the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) model – further normalised large-scale river basin development (Ekbladh, 2002; Molle et al., 2009: 333; Sneddon, 2015: 55-63).

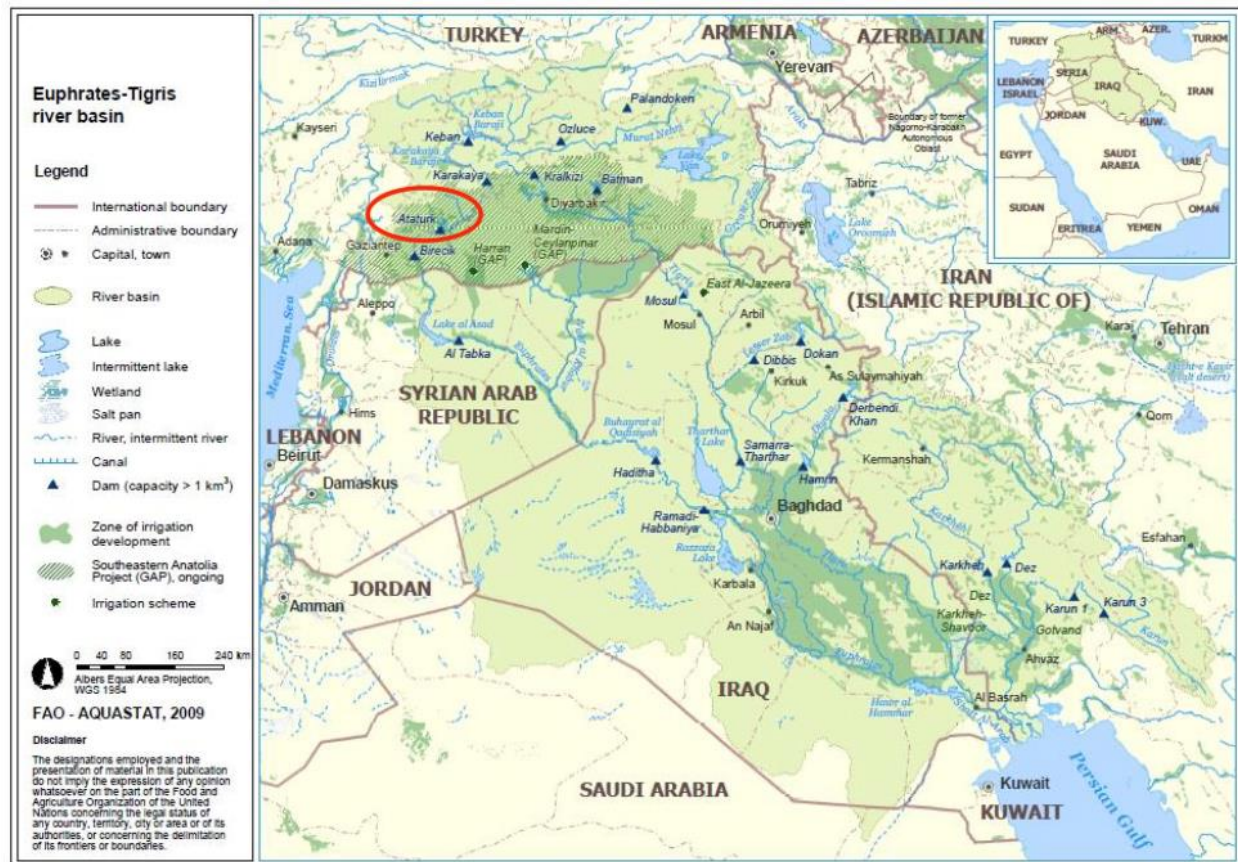
From the beginning of the Cold War onwards, and especially in the context of decolonisation, hydraulic megaprojects became powerful symbols of national sovereignty, technological prowess and developmental ambition, reinforcing the enclosure of rivers within technocratic regimes of control (Biswas and Tortajada, 2001: 11; Nixon, 2010: 65; Sneddon, 2015: 1). Beyond their material functions, large dams thus became emblematic of a faith in scientific rationality, technical expertise and large-scale planning as pathways to progress (Khagram, 2004). Across diverse political contexts, dams were celebrated as markers of national strength and independence; this extended from the Grand Coulee Dam in the United States (Allouche, 2010: 53-54) to the Aswan High Dam in Egypt (Mitchell, 2002), and from the Akosombo Dam in Ghana (Miescher, 2014) to the Rogun Dam in Tajikistan (Menga, 2015). This celebratory framing, however, coexisted with – and often obscured – intensifying social conflict, ecological degradation and struggles over expertise, authority and development priorities.

This tension is particularly evident in the case of the Atatürk Dam, arguably the most symbolically, strategically and economically significant piece of water infrastructure in Turkey's hydraulic history. Constructed between 1983 and 1992, and situated between the provinces of Adıyaman and Şanlıurfa in southeastern Turkey (Figure 1), the dam is among the largest installations in the Euphrates-Tigris Basin. Promoted as a cornerstone of Turkey's hydropower and irrigation agenda, the dam is a major contributor to national electricity generation and is a key supplier of irrigation water to the Şanlıurfa-Harran and Mardin-Ceylanpınar plains (Çetin, 2020: 295). The dam thus occupies a position of enduring prominence within Turkey's hydraulic portfolio. Its dominant role can be compared to other smaller, but still high-profile water engineering projects including earlier initiatives such as the Seyhan (1956), Keban (1974) and Karakaya (1987) dams, later ones such as the Deriner (2012), Ilisu (2021) and Yusufeli (2022) dams, as well as the Turkey–Northern Cyprus Water Pipeline (2015) and the ongoing Great Melen Project.

The Atatürk Dam has also functioned as the linchpin of the Southeastern Anatolia Project (Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi, or GAP), a large-scale hydropower, irrigation and regional development initiative launched in the 1970s (Bilgen, 2018). In that sense, the dam has operated within a framework that has been geared not only towards increasing agricultural output and energy production; it has also had the aim of transforming a historically marginalised and conflict-prone region with a significant Kurdish population into a productive space aligned with national development goals (Akıncı et al., 2020; Harris, 2002). This strategy of governing through development – linking poverty alleviation to security – has, however, generated criticism. The dam has been associated with ecological degradation, mass displacement, uneven irrigation outcomes and the continued marginalisation of affected communities (Akça et al., 2013). Beyond Turkey's borders, it has intensified transboundary tensions with Syria and Iraq (Safaei et al., 2026), particularly regarding downstream water availability; this has become particularly acute in recent years amid increased evaporation losses, rising demand from growing populations, and the diversion of larger volumes of water for irrigation (Öziş et al., 2020: 401).

Despite its contested impacts, the Atatürk Dam has often been treated in policy-oriented and technical analyses as a neutral engineering achievement, detached from the sociopolitical processes that shaped its planning, construction and operation (Ağralıoğlu, 2014; Akyürek, 2005; Altınbilek and Tortajada, 2012; Brismar, 2002; Malla et al., 2006; Tortajada, 2000). While a growing body of social science research has addressed the political, social and environmental implications of GAP, analyses that systematically examine the interplay between technical expertise, institutional struggle and political

Figure 1. Location of the Atatürk Dam



Source: FAO AQUASTAT (2009).

authority remain limited, particularly those focusing on relationships among political elites, bureaucrats and professional chambers.¹ Equally scarce are reflections on their visions to engineer nature, assert political authority and direct sociotechnical processes.

This article analyses the Atatürk Dam as a technopolitical intervention rather than as merely a physical structure. It addresses two central questions: 1) How have technical expertise, technopolitical strategies and institutional arrangements shaped the governance of the Atatürk Dam? 2) How have processes of politicisation and depoliticisation shaped the framing of its hydrosocial, hydropolitical and politico-ecological implications? We argue that large-scale water infrastructure does not move from technical design to political controversy in a linear trajectory. Instead, water governance surrounding the Atatürk Dam has operated through recurrent and co-constitutive processes of politicisation and depoliticisation as struggles over expertise, institutional authority and scalar governance have continually reshaped the project's design, coordination and justification. In developing this argument, we draw on scholarship on water's materiality, debates on politicisation and depoliticisation, technopolitics and scalar governance, offering new insights into the study of large-scale water infrastructures and their afterlives.

¹ In the Turkish context, chambers are legally recognised professional organisations that represent occupational groups, provide professional oversight and have historically played an important role in public debates and policy processes, particularly in areas related to technical expertise.

Conceptually, the article challenges static understandings of politicisation and depoliticisation. It reconceptualises them as recurrent and co-constitutive processes that are mediated through technopolitical practices (see Aggestam and Sundell, 2016; Atkins, 2019; Beveridge, 2012; Bilgen, 2019; Molle, 2009). Thematically, it explores the linkages between water, infrastructure and development, with particular attention to how technocratic rationalities, elite competition and nationalist discourses affect hydraulic interventions (see also Crow-Miller et al., 2017; Meehan, 2014; Mollinga, 2008). Empirically, it provides an in-depth single-case analysis that complements existing research on Turkey's large dams, including the Çubuk (Polatoğlu, 2019), Ilisu (Yalcin and Tigrek, 2016), Keban (Stahl, 2014), Seyhan (Tozoğlu, 2021), and Yusufeli Dams (Evren, 2014), as well as studies of small-scale hydropower development (Akbulut et al., 2018; Islar, 2012; Sayan, 2019), and inter-basin water transfer projects such as the Turkey–Northern Cyprus Water Pipeline (Mason, 2020) and the Great Melen Project (Kırcı and Aydın, 2026). Taken together, the article provides a critical understanding of water infrastructures that demonstrates how technical systems both materialise and mediate political conflict.

The article is structured as follows. First, the study's conceptual framework is set out and contextualised within water infrastructure literature, followed by a methodological summary. The historical context of Turkey's water policy highlights the milestones that laid the foundations of the Atatürk Dam. The main empirical analysis then examines the technopolitical trajectories of the dam, focusing particularly on the dynamics of politicisation and depoliticisation in its design, construction and operation. Finally, the discussion and conclusion reflect on the wider implications of the findings.

WATER INFRASTRUCTURE, (DE)POLITICISATION AND TECHNOPOLITICS

Large dams are deeply political interventions that materialise particular forms of authority, expertise and governance (Menga and Swyngedouw, 2018; Mitchell, 2002; Scott, 1998). They do not merely regulate rivers; they actively reconfigure socational relations and produce new territorial and scalar orders through which state authority is exercised (Akhter, 2017; Lavers and Dye, 2019; Swyngedouw, 2007). Throughout the 20th century, dams became emblematic not only of state-led development but also of Cold War modernisation projects, as competing geopolitical visions promoted hydraulic infrastructure as a pathway to economic transformation, territorial integration and national sovereignty (Josephson, 1995; Sneddon, 2015; Power, 2019). Through storage, flow regulation and redistribution, dams render water measurable, controllable and administratively legible; they simultaneously concentrate hydraulic interventions and transform ecological systems, social relations and territorial configurations (Mitchell, 2002; Scott, 1998). In doing so, they embed development priorities, risk and the distribution of benefits and burdens into technical designs and operations. They therefore provide a rich site for analysing how political authority is produced, contested and stabilised through technical means.

Water's material characteristics include its variability, storability, seasonality and dependence on infrastructural mediation; these characteristics make it especially amenable to technocratic forms of governance. Governments are able to frame water management as a matter of optimisation, efficiency and control, translating complex social and ecological processes into calculable variables, models, audits and performance targets (Anand, 2015; Barry, 2001; Ferguson, 1994; Li, 2007). Such translations present governance decisions as technical necessities rather than political choices. Regulating water, however, inevitably redistributes risks, resources and opportunities; in the process, it generates new conflicts over allocation, authority and justice (Aijaz and Akhter, 2020; Del Bene et al., 2018). Water governance therefore unfolds through interconnected processes of politicisation and depoliticisation, rather than through purely technical and ostensibly neutral administration.

Before further discussing politicisation and depoliticisation, it is necessary to clarify that politics is an essentially contested concept. While some scholars conceive the political as a sphere of consensus, deliberation and public reason, others emphasise contestation, dissensus and antagonism (Mouffe, 2005). From a Science and Technology Studies (STS) perspective, Latour (2007) argues that political issues

are articulated through five interconnected modalities: the production of new sociotechnical associations (cosmograms); the formation of publics around shared problems; sovereign state authority; deliberative engagement; and routinised governmental practices through which political questions become embedded in administrative and material infrastructures. This article adopts a broad understanding of politics (including technopolitical governance) as being the negotiation of a set of competing interests, values and forms of knowledge in order to make collectively binding decisions over the allocation of resources, authority and risk (see Hay, 2017). From this perspective, infrastructure planning is inherently political because decisions concerning design, expertise, resource allocation and operation privilege particular visions of water governance while marginalising others.

Against this backdrop, politicisation refers to processes through which issues previously treated as technical, managerial or neutral become sites of contestation, in the process revealing the power relations, normative assumptions and distributive consequences embedded in governance arrangements (Swyngedouw, 2011: 266-268). From an STS perspective, on the other hand, politicisation is the process by which an issue becomes articulated, opened up and assembled through various sites, shifting across different political modalities (Donaldson et al., 2013). In dam governance, politicisation may emerge through opposition to displacement and resettlement, disputes over environmental degradation, professional conflicts among engineers and planners and/or struggles between state institutions over development priorities. Politicisation therefore does not simply introduce politics into infrastructure; rather, it reveals the politics as they are temporarily stabilised by technical systems.

Depoliticisation should not be understood as the opposite of politicisation, but rather as one of the principal ways through which political disagreement is managed. It involves reframing inherently political questions as matters of expert knowledge, scientific rationality or technical optimisation, thereby narrowing the scope for democratic debate and contestation (Mouffe, 2005: 10). In depoliticised modes of water governance, depoliticisation often operates through engineering reports, cost–benefit analyses and numerical targets, and through development indicators that present contested decisions (such as reservoir size, operational rules or irrigation priorities) as objective outcomes of technical optimisation and calculation, suppressing ideological and political contests (Swyngedouw, 2009). Accordingly, depoliticisation does not eliminate politics; rather, it displaces political conflict into expert domains, privileging certain forms of knowledge while marginalising alternative claims, values and experiences (Flinders and Buller, 2006: 296). Empirical work in critical water studies has shown how such technocratic narratives obscure questions of justice, accountability and uneven impact (Argade and Narayanan, 2019; Ennabih and Mayaux, 2020; Linton and Saadé, 2024; Octavianti and Charles, 2019).

Technopolitics provides the analytical lens through which the recurring movements between politicisation and depoliticisation can be understood. Technopolitical governance extends beyond engineering artefacts to encompass the institutional arrangements, administrative practices and expert networks through which water is rendered governable (Warner et al., 2014). Rather than treating technical systems as neutral instruments that are subsequently shaped by politics, technopolitics emphasises that infrastructures actively organise political authority by embedding particular assumptions about development, efficiency, territorial order and acceptable trade-offs within material artefacts and institutional practices (Anand, 2017; Hecht, 2011; Mitchell, 2002). Technical governance depends not only on producing knowledge but also on managing uncertainty and rendering certain forms of ignorance administratively acceptable (Anand, 2015). Engineering models, hydrological data and planning tools actively produce authoritative ways of seeing, measuring and governing water, thereby shaping which forms of expertise become politically legitimate (Akhter, 2017). Technopolitics therefore explains how political disagreements become translated into technical questions and how apparently technical decisions subsequently generate new political controversies. It is through these translations that claims of neutrality, necessity and universality are produced, contested and reconfigured.

Water infrastructure governance is inherently scalar, but these scales should not be understood as fixed geographical levels. Rather than occurring independently at local, national or transboundary levels,

they are continuously negotiated through political, institutional and technopolitical practices that redefine where water problems are located and who has authority to address them (Aijaz and Akhter, 2020; Harris and Alatout, 2010). Technopolitical settlements are rarely confined to a single spatial arena and political controversies that are displaced at one scale frequently re-emerge at another (Warner et al., 2014). Local conflicts surrounding displacement, environmental degradation or livelihood transformation may be reframed nationally through narratives of economic development, national integration and energy security. National hydraulic projects may, in turn, become objects of transboundary diplomacy, geopolitical negotiation and competing claims to basin authority (Allouche, 2020; Harris and Alatout, 2010; Obertreis et al., 2016; Swyngedouw, 2007). Scale should therefore be understood not simply as the geographical setting within which politics unfolds, but rather as one of the principal mechanisms through which political conflict is reorganised, displaced and renewed.

Taken together, this framework conceptualises water infrastructure governance not as a sequence of technical and political stages, but rather as a recursive technopolitical process through which political conflict is repeatedly stabilised, displaced and reconstituted. Technical design decisions embed normative assumptions and distributive consequences within material infrastructures, progressively closing off particular political debates while simultaneously creating new sites of contestation. As these conflicts travel across institutional and spatial scales, authorities seek to re-establish technical closure through renewed appeals to expertise, optimisation and scientific necessity. Depoliticisation is therefore never a final or unidirectional process; rather, it is one moment within an ongoing cycle in which politicising, depoliticising and repoliticising forces coexist and continually reshape one another (Aijaz and Akhter, 2020: 4). This perspective moves beyond treating politicisation and depoliticisation as opposing states by explaining how technopolitical practices mediate their continual interaction.

Although politicisation and depoliticisation unfold across local, national and transboundary arenas, this article primarily examines how these dynamics are articulated through national institutions and technopolitical practices. Local-scale politics (Harris, 2012; Warner et al., 2014) and transboundary interactions (Tinti, 2023; Turgul and Warner, 2025) are analysed insofar as they shape, and are shaped by, these national processes. For instance, while displacement and the marginalisation of local communities, particularly of Kurds, are central to the dam's political significance, they are examined in this paper primarily through the ways in which they have been framed, managed and contested within technopolitical governance processes, rather than being presented in the form of ethnographic accounts of lived experience. Similarly, while transboundary disputes over allocation of the surface water that flows from upstream Turkey to downstream Syria and Iraq are integral to the political significance of the Atatürk Dam, they are examined primarily through their influence on domestic technopolitical governance rather than as a standalone hydropolitical analysis (Bilgen and Mason, 2026; Safaee et al., 2026). The following section outlines the methodological approach through which this framework is operationalised in the empirical analysis of the Atatürk Dam.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts the Atatürk Dam as a case study because its planning, construction and operation spanned several decades of shifting governments, geopolitical dynamics and institutional arrangements. Rather than representing a single episode of hydraulic development, it enables an examination of how processes of politicisation and depoliticisation unfolded across successive phases of infrastructure governance, making it an information-rich case for theory-oriented analysis (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

To examine elite technopolitical debates, institutional struggles and discursive framings surrounding the Atatürk Dam, a qualitative dataset was assembled during three distinct but overlapping phases of data collection conducted between 2016 and 2020.

The first phase involved a systematic review of scholarship on water infrastructure and governance in Turkey, covering the period from the late Ottoman era to the early 21st century. This material included

monographs, journal articles, policy reports and technical analyses addressing water infrastructure – and the Atatürk Dam in particular – from hydrological, political and socio-economic perspectives.

The second phase consisted of archival research conducted both online and at the National Library of Turkey in Ankara. Archival sources make it possible to reconstruct institutional debates, engineering decisions and administrative rationales that cannot be observed directly and are only partially recoverable through retrospective interviews (Bowen, 2009). The sources examined include: 1) the parliamentary proceedings of the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TBMM, Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi), covering the years 1963 to 2002; 2) the archives of *Cumhuriyet*, one of the most influential daily newspapers in Turkey, covering the years 1949 to 2019; and 3) publications produced by relevant institutions, including the State Planning Organisation (Devlet Planlama Teşkilatı, or DPT), the General Directorate of State Hydraulic Works (Devlet Su İşleri Genel Müdürlüğü, or DSİ), the GAP Regional Development Administration (GAP Bölge Kalkınma İdaresi, or GAP-BKİ), the Turkish Chamber of Civil Engineers (İnşaat Mühendisleri Odası, or İMO), and the Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects (Türk Mühendis ve Mimar Odaları Birliği, or TMMOB).

The third phase involved field interviews. They complemented documentary sources by providing insight into how participants interpreted key decisions, institutional relationships and competing forms of expertise that were only partially documented in archival records (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). In Adıyaman, Ankara and Şanlıurfa, 26 semi-structured interviews were conducted with retired and current staff from GAP-BKİ, DSİ and DPT. Representatives from irrigation networks and the General Directorate of Agricultural Reform were also consulted to gain a broader understanding of interactions between central and local government actors. All interviews were conducted with informed consent; participants were anonymised. While the broader interview corpus informed the historical reconstruction and interpretive context of the study, this article draws on the interviews that most directly illuminate the elite technopolitical debates and institutional struggles surrounding the Atatürk Dam.

Combining archival research with interviews and documentary analysis enabled methodological triangulation. Archival materials reconstruct the project's formal evolution and institutional decision-making, while interviews illuminate interpretations, disagreements and professional judgements that often remain absent from official documentation. Together, these sources allow a richer analysis of the technopolitical processes through which the Atatürk Dam was planned, redesigned and governed.

A discursive analysis was applied across the entire dataset, including archival materials, policy documents, media sources and interview transcripts. The aim was to identify recurring narratives, justificatory frames and contested vocabularies through which the Atatürk Dam had been problematised, legitimised and reinterpreted over time. Applying a common interpretive lens across diverse source materials enabled a comparison of how different actors (engineers, politicians, bureaucrats, consultants, journalists and professional organisations) constructed and contested the meaning of the Atatürk Dam over time. Through this lens, the analysis attended not only to explicit statements but also to the underlying assumptions, categories and knowledge claims through which actors constructed water, infrastructure, development and governance (Hajer, 1995; Wagenaar, 2011; Yanow, 2000). Rather than treating discourse as merely rhetorical, this approach understands language as constitutive of governance practices. It is perceived as shaping how policy problems are defined and as influencing which forms of expertise are considered authoritative and which courses of action become politically legitimate (Fischer, 2003). Examining these discursive constructions across multiple source types enabled the identification of both continuity and change in dominant policy narratives; it revealed how competing understandings of water governance have evolved alongside shifting institutional priorities and political contexts. The following section situates these discursive dynamics within their broader historical context.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The early decades of the Turkish Republic were marked by the consolidation of the nation state in parallel with the expansion of large-scale public works, with water infrastructure playing a central role in both processes (Kurtiç, 2019: 93-94; Sayan et al., 2025). The institutionalisation of water governance began in 1925 with the establishment of the Water Directorate under the Ministry of Public Works. This was followed by the creation of the General Directorate of Waters in 1929 and its reorganisation as the Directorate of Water Works in 1939 (Altınbilek and Hatipoğlu, 2020: 64-65). In the same period, the 1936 establishment of the Electrical Power Resources Survey and Development Administration (Elektrik İşleri Etüt İdaresi Genel Müdürlüğü, or EİE) further reflected the growing emphasis on hydropower and river basin surveys as foundations for future interventions (Tigrek and Kibaroglu, 2011: 27).

As explained earlier, these domestic developments were embedded within broader transnational currents in water infrastructure planning, particularly the institutional prominence of the US Bureau of Reclamation and the US Army Corps of Engineers, as well as the creation of the TVA from the 1930s onwards (Molle et al., 2009: 333; Tozoglu, 2021: 384). The TVA, in particular, introduced a novel approach to river basin development by promoting unified control over river systems, multipurpose dam construction and regional economic development. This model inspired many developing countries, including Turkey, to conceptualise rivers as governable units and to frame large-scale infrastructure as a vehicle for territorial and economic transformation (Alkan, 2021: 71).

Following World War II, Turkey's alignment with the US, particularly through Marshall Plan assistance, further reinforced these influences. From the 1950s onwards, American funding and expertise enabled not only the construction of major dams such as the Sarıyar and the Seyhan, but also the formation of a cadre of Turkish technical experts trained domestically and abroad (Tozoglu, 2021). The establishment of the DSİ in 1953 as the primary agency responsible for planning, constructing and operating water infrastructure nationwide drew explicitly on the organisational model of the US Bureau of Reclamation. The DSİ institutionalised basin-based planning by dividing Turkey into 26 river basins, a configuration later reduced to 25 following the decision to treat the Euphrates and Tigris as a single transboundary system (Alkan, 2021: 73). This institutional architecture centralised hydraulic authority within a technocratic bureaucracy, positioning expertise and planning as the primary mediators of water allocation and development priorities.

The military coup of 1960 marked a further turning point in Turkey's political economy and water governance, ushering in a period of Keynesian developmentalism. The establishment of the DPT in 1960 institutionalised this shift, introducing Five-Year Development Plans (FYDPs) as the principal mechanism for coordinating public investment and addressing regional disparities (Tekeli, 2008: 69). Jointly prepared by policymakers and technical experts, the FYDPs extended planning beyond sectoral investments to encompass broader questions of economic growth, regional development and social policy (Sezgin, 2018: 654). This period signalled the ascendancy of technocratic expertise over the more populist approaches of the 1950s, framing large-scale infrastructure as a rational and necessary instrument of national development (Heper and Keyman, 1998: 264). Within this context, water infrastructure development gained renewed momentum. The close coordination between the DSİ and the DPT reinforced a central planning logic, closely aligned with Turkey's hydraulic mission, that positioned dams as key tools for agricultural expansion, industrial growth and energy security (Conker and Hussein, 2019; Sayan, 2016: 8).

The initial FYDP (1963-1967) prioritised the construction of the Keban Dam as the first large-scale intervention on the Euphrates (Tekeli, 2013: 46-47). The completion of the Euphrates and Tigris Basin Reconnaissance Reports in 1964 and 1968, respectively, laid the technical and administrative groundwork for the Lower Euphrates Project, a coordinated package of 13 hydropower and irrigation schemes.

The commissioning of the Keban Dam in 1974 played a foundational role in establishing the engineering capacity, institutional confidence and political momentum required for subsequent large-scale projects; this included GAP, which comprised 22 dams, 19 hydroelectric plants (with a total installed

capacity of 7640 MW and an annual output of 27 billion kWh) and irrigation networks covering 1.7 million hectares (ha) (Bilgen, 2018).

Building on this historical trajectory, the next section analyses the Atatürk Dam as a site where technocratic planning and hydraulic expertise repeatedly intersected with political contestation, producing cyclical processes of politicisation and depoliticisation over time.

TECHNOPOLITICAL TRAJECTORIES OF THE ATATÜRK DAM

Planning (1970s): Clashing expertise

By the 1970s, water infrastructure planning in Turkey had become a key site of elite contestation. The institutional authority of the DPT within the bureaucracy and the significant presence of engineers and planners in the TBMM shaped a governance environment in which expertise carried political weight, while access to decision-making remained tightly controlled (Alkan, 2021). Two structural problems were especially salient; the first was the preference among senior technocrats for foreign consultants in strategic roles, and the second was the growing alignment of technical authority with partisan agendas, which blurred boundaries between technical expertise and political interest. This dynamic generated tensions between politically embedded technocrats and professional bodies that were positioned outside core state institutions. As engineers and planners affiliated with professional chambers challenged official planning decisions, debates over dam design became disputes over authority and legitimacy and over whose expertise counted in the making of national development.

The gradual transformation of the Karababa Dam into the Atatürk Dam illustrates this moment of politicisation. Before the official announcement of GAP, two separate development plans had been prepared for the Lower Euphrates and Tigris Basins. In 1970, the Swiss engineering and consultancy firm Electrowatt prepared the Lower Firat Project, taking into account the effect of the upstream Keban Dam on downstream flows. Electrowatt was initially focused on the planning and design of hydroelectric power schemes in Switzerland; however, it later expanded its operations to countries such as Chile, Ethiopia, Senegal, India, Sri Lanka, Laos and Thailand (Lang et al., 2000). Although the DSİ and EİE had conducted preliminary surveys prior to 1970, the Electrowatt project was the first comprehensive blueprint for what would later become GAP (İMO, 1971: 29). According to the report, the programme aimed at the integrated development of the water and land resources of the Lower Firat Project Area, with irrigation as a principal objective (İMO, 1971: 29).

The report assessed 22 combinations of four main dams on the Euphrates, adjusting dam heights to test their hydropower and irrigation potential. The final proposal included the Karakaya, Low Gököy and Middle Karababa dams and power plants, as well as the Bedir Dam on a tributary. Since the dam heights were not sufficient for gravity-fed irrigation, two pumping stations were planned to divert water from the Middle Karababa Dam to irrigate 700,000 ha of land (İMO, 1971: 30).

The İMO publicly challenged this plan, with engineers arguing that the project privileged foreign technical and commercial interests. One engineer from İMO, for instance, stated:

[M]any of our problems actually arise from the fact that Turkish engineers have been excluded from solving technical problems in their country. We want to explain that this technology transfer method is basically a tool of imperialism, implemented step by step through a policy of exploitation. (...) If it is up to those who want to put the "cannot deal with politics" clause in our law in Parliament, we will not be able to criticise even the location of an industrial establishment or a dam. (...) If we warn officials that their actions are inappropriate, we risk being sent to prison or reported to prosecutors (İMO, 1974, authors' translation).

In this context, the critique of technology transfer as a 'tool of imperialism' refers to the unequal conditions under which such transfers occurred, often privileging external expertise and development

models over local forms of knowledge and decision-making. The İMO engineers were also convinced that Electrowatt did not prioritise Turkey's interests but was instead primarily concerned with its own. After preparing the planning report at a remarkably low cost, Electrowatt offered to also oversee implementation, suggesting that the initial underbid was a strategic move to secure the more profitable engineering and design work. To support this claim, the İMO addressed a letter to the Prime Ministry, the Ministry of Finance, the DPT and the DSI, expressing concern over the proposed technical specifications. They warned that building the Karakaya (the first dam on the Lower Euphrates) according to Electrowatt's plan for pumped irrigation would mean that all future dams would be locked into the same design logic, rendering gravity irrigation impossible (İMO, 1971: 27, 37-38).

The engineers thus warned that Electrowatt's so-called optimal scenario could not truly be optimal, given the project's heavy reliance on electricity for irrigation. For them, this proposal to pump irrigation water was driven not by technical necessity, but by Electrowatt's close ties with Escher Wyss, a Swiss industrial company that manufactured hydraulic systems, including pumps. Notably, İMO engineers framed their critique not only on technical grounds but also by aligning it with state elites' developmental priorities, particularly the urgent need for electricity as the backbone of industrialisation (İMO, 1971: 42). In doing so, they strategically rearticulated political critique through technopolitical registers that resonated with senior bureaucrats, redistributing authority toward particular forms of expertise.

The İMO argued that constructing a single large dam instead of two mid-sized dams (Gölköy and Karababa) would allow water to flow by gravity, thereby removing the need for pumps. They further argued that building the dam as a rockfill rather than a buttress structure would enable local engineers to handle the construction and that costs would also be lower. The İMO's recommendations gained greater relevance after the 1973 Oil Crisis, which dramatically altered the country's economic landscape. Faced with rising energy demands and sharply increasing energy costs, the DSI had to reconsider the existing plan and seek alternatives that would ensure greater and more affordable electricity generation without relying on pumped irrigation.

This episode did not eliminate contestation; rather, it re-stabilised it through technopolitical adjustment. The DSI reassessed the options outlined in Electrowatt's report under the new conditions. As the İMO had previously noted, omitting the Gölköy Dam and increasing the height of the Karababa Dam would enable both gravity irrigation and higher electricity generation. The DSI's revised studies confirmed this approach, which led to key design modifications in 1978. These modifications did not simply optimise performance; they inscribed a particular development vision into the infrastructure, privileging energy production and centralised control while rendering expanded inundation and displacement as secondary technical consequences. In this move, the social costs of expanded inundation were reframed as 'inevitable' side effects of optimisation, thereby embedding displacement within the technical logic of dam height and storage capacity and narrowing the space for public debate over whose livelihoods would be sacrificed in the name of modernisation and national development.

One scenario featured a reworked version of Electrowatt's High Karababa Dam, which was now accompanied by an additional downstream dam and installed generating capacity that was expanded from 2100 MW to 2400 MW thanks to an extra turbine. The same year, the dam was renamed the Atatürk Dam to honour Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey (GAP-BKİ, 2012: 54). Fikret Otyam, a journalist covering southeastern Turkey, summarised these changes and their economic implications as follows:

Our engineers and experts revised the basin plan in light of changing electricity and construction costs and new geological studies, deciding instead to construct the Atatürk Dam and hydropower plant. (...) Unlike the original Karababa Dam, whose high concrete structure required complex techniques and foreign contractors, the earth-and-rock-fill Atatürk Dam could be built by local companies, saving valuable foreign currency (*Cumhuriyet*, 1978, authors' translation).

Compiled from official DSI and DPT sources, Table 1 below shows that although the reservoir capacity remained constant at 48.7 billion m³ (Bm³), the planned irrigation area expanded with the adoption of the High Karababa option. A veteran DSI engineer attributed this increase to the development of the Şanlıurfa Tunnels to abstract water for irrigation; these were two parallel 26.4-km-long tunnels, each with an inner diameter of 7.62 metres.² The increased dam height allowed for greater water storage at higher elevations, thereby enhancing potential energy,³ but the expansion of the planned irrigation area also had an important distributive dimension. The Şanlıurfa-Harran plains, among the first areas expected to receive water from the Atatürk Dam, were characterised by pronounced inequalities in land ownership; almost half of farming families were landless, while large landowners and tribal elites exercised considerable political influence and resisted redistributive land reform (Karapınar, 2005). In this agrarian context, increasing the area brought under irrigation raised the prospective value of already concentrated landholdings and disproportionately favoured large landowners.

The increased height of the dam also meant that more villages would be submerged, especially in Adıyaman. With 55,000 resettled individuals, the dam ranks sixth in the world in terms of resettled population (Şahinli, 2024). These consequences unfolded in a predominantly Kurdish region marked by a longer history of political and socio-economic marginalisation (Akıncı et al., 2020; Harris, 2002; Yörük and Sari, 2025). Expanded inundation and the uneven distribution of irrigation benefits therefore intersected with pre-existing territorial and agrarian inequalities that could not be reduced only to engineering trade-offs over dam height, reservoir capacity and irrigable area.

Table 1. From the Karababa Dam to the Atatürk Dam

	Middle Karababa	High Karababa (early 1978)	Early Atatürk (late 1978)
Dam height (m)	112	169	169
Reservoir surface area (million m ²)	369	817	817
Total storage capacity (million m ³)	16,090	48,700	48,700
Number of turbines	5	7	8
Power capacity (MW)	800	2100	2400
Irrigation area (ha)	700,000	800,000	n.d.

Source: Brismar (2002: 109).

Upon the adoption of the revised dam plan, national and international experts collaborated to develop the final project. Together with the Turkish firm Dolsar, Electrowatt and Société Générale pour l'Industrie submitted the completed project to DSI in 1979 (Öziş, 1991). The renewed project sparked widespread hope for the future. Some leading newspapers hailed the Lower Euphrates Project as capable of "solving all the energy problems" of the country, at least until 2020 (*Cumhuriyet*, 1979, authors' translation), reinforcing a public narrative in which the project's technical promise stood in for political debate.

² Interview, 10 April 2019, Şanlıurfa.

³ A key limitation of the power capacity figures in Table 1 is that they represent installed capacity, not actual output, and therefore overlook the trade-offs between electricity generation and irrigation; for example, a dam designed for 2400 MW could, in theory, generate 8100 GWh annually, but this output would drop to 5300 GWh after the implementation of irrigation projects (Bağış, 1989).

Construction (1980s-1990s): Growing national autonomy

In 1981, the DSI established its 16th Regional Directorate specifically for the Atatürk Dam (Şahinli, 2024). In 1983, the project was awarded to the Ata Construction Company – a joint venture consortium formed by the merger of Palet Construction, Seri Construction and Enerji-Su – for a sum of 102 billion Turkish lira (Şahinli, 2024). Construction began that same year, with the contractor undertaking preparatory tasks such as setting up the construction site, conducting road surveys and advancing project planning. External financing nevertheless remained central to the construction phase through export-credit arrangements and bank syndicates that supported machinery procurement and engineering services from predominantly European countries (*Cumhuriyet*, 1986). In 1984, consultancy services were awarded to the AEJV, a consortium of Electrowatt, Société Générale pour l'Industrie, and Dolsar (Şahinli, 2024).

As explained earlier, dam engineering in Turkey has developed since the 1950s through international networks of expertise and training; this has allowed Turkish engineers to cultivate specialised skills, particularly in large-scale rockfill dams (Stahl, 2014). This foundation allowed many to play key roles in major projects such as the Atatürk Dam, where they applied their technical expertise during construction. They later contributed to the dissemination of this expertise, as Nurhan Motugan, the General Coordinator of Ata Construction, explains:

After the Atatürk Dam was completed, we at ATA Construction pursued very large projects abroad. The arrival of \$200 million worth of machinery for the Atatürk Dam, along with the latest technology and knowledge of that time, contributed to the dissemination of this technology and expertise in Turkey. (...) Engineers who had worked on the Atatürk Dam were practically fought over by other major companies (GAP-BKİ, 2012: 63-64, authors' translation).

As highlighted earlier, the deliberate policy to reduce reliance on foreign experts was not merely a symbolic or practical gesture; it reflected a broader struggle for autonomy and recognition within Turkey's engineering community and in technocratic governance circles. The dam offered a crucial opportunity for engineers to demonstrate their capabilities and assert their authority in the field. One engineer, for instance, linked the name "Euphrates" to national identity by criticising its foreign etymology and insisting that those who called it "Firat, not Euphrat (...) should make it happen", framing this act not as a wish but as "the natural demand of accumulation [of knowledge]" (*Cumhuriyet*, 1983a, authors' translation). This remark underscores a desire to assert ownership over heritage, echoing the İMO's emphasis on national interests and technical sovereignty. That said, the Minister of Energy emphasised that because the dam "bears the name Atatürk and is a social prestige of Turkey", it was best to entrust the project to the state's technical bureaucracy, which he presented as a means of avoiding what he termed "unnecessary speculations" (*Cumhuriyet*, 1983b, authors' translation).

This symbolic and technical assertion of national competence was soon followed by efforts to institutionalise the dam's promises; however, national enthusiasm surrounding the Atatürk Dam could not conceal the emerging coordination problems, particularly in the irrigation and drainage projects that were vital for the region's agriculture-based economy. Partly due to the lack of synchronisation among the various projects of GAP, and partly to implement the principles set out in the *1989 GAP Master Plan*, Prime Minister Turgut Özal issued an emergency decree establishing GAP-BKİ under the guidance of the DPT. This was first announced in September, 1988, when Özal convened the Cabinet at the Atatürk Dam instead of in Ankara, a first in Turkish political history (GAP-BKİ, 2012: 105). Tasked with coordinating the implementation, management, monitoring and evaluation of development activities, GAP-BKİ faced significant challenges due to its centralised and cumbersome administration, which was influenced by conservative political considerations.

The episode of depoliticisation, however, was neither complete nor final. By the late 1980s, the technically driven process of reservoir filling emerged as a politically sensitive issue for Syria and Iraq as downstream riparians (Altınbilek, 1997: 327). Turkey formally notified both states of its intent to

commence impoundment, providing comprehensive procedural details and pledging to offset any potential reductions in flow by maintaining downstream discharges at 768 cubic metres per second (m³/s) (Altınbilek, 2004: 29). Concurrently, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in coordination with the DSI, conducted a diplomatic outreach to Arab states, stressing that any temporary flow interruptions were strictly technical in nature (Bilen, 2022).

The reservoir filling occurred between 13 January and 13 February 1990. Between November 1989 and February 1990, Turkey released 3.6 billion m³ of water to Syria; this averaged roughly 500 m³/s and was in accordance with the *1987 Protocol on Economic Cooperation* (Altınbilek, 1997: 327). A retired DSI official later interpreted the dam's completion as a geopolitical advantage, arguing that once the infrastructure and its storage capacity had materialised, the resulting de facto arrangement became difficult to reverse.⁴ This retrospective account illustrates how material completion was able to help stabilise the dam domestically as an accomplished technical fact while simultaneously strengthening Turkey's position in transboundary water negotiations. The Atatürk Dam's downstream afterbay dams (Birecik and Karkamış) continued to raise concerns in Syria and Iraq with regard to water availability and quality, while Turkey maintained that these upstream dams would benefit both countries by mitigating fluctuations in the Euphrates' flow (Bremer, 2013: 155).

Operation (1990s – present): Consolidation of legitimacy

Following its commissioning in 1993, the Atatürk Dam came to represent more than concrete; it was framed as a testament to the strength and modernising capabilities of the Turkish nation (Conker, 2018). At the presidential level, discourses surrounding the dam reflected a narrative of national unity, pride and technical superiority in the field of engineering. At the dam's ceremonial groundbreaking, President Kenan Evren hailed it as the greatest testament to the determination and power of the Turkish nation (*Cumhuriyet*, 1983c); similarly, Özal underscored the dam's reliance on domestic resources, portraying it as a test of the nation's technical capacity (Bağış, 1989: 51).

Efforts were also made to circulate the dam's image to broader, non-elite audiences, fostering a shared sense of national pride and normalising the dam as a taken-for-granted achievement. During the inaugural ceremony of the Şanlıurfa Tunnels in November, 1994, for instance, renowned folk singer İbrahim Tatlıses, a native of Şanlıurfa, gave a mini concert during which he performed a folk song with the following lyrics: "The Euphrates cuts through the mountain / Water flows to Harran's plain / Mother, rise and give a joyful cry / Water is coming to my Urfa" (Tatlises, 2011, authors' translation).⁵ Celebrated as a milestone in Turkish engineering, an image of the dam was also featured on Turkey's 1 million lira banknote, which entered circulation in 1995 (Conker, 2018: 9). These symbolic practices reinforced techno-developmentalism and technopolitical governance by transforming technical achievement into a source of national belonging; infrastructural authority was thereby extended beyond expert and bureaucratic domains into everyday social life.

The extension of infrastructural authority into everyday life was not limited to national symbols and public ceremonies. A former DSI official responsible for audiovisual publications described the production of educational films concerning irrigation practices, crop rotation, drainage and salinisation. Prepared in collaboration with agricultural researchers and engineers familiar with the region, these films translated technical knowledge into accessible visual narratives, at times dramatising the effects of soil salinisation to encourage changes in agricultural practice.⁶ Rather than relying on direct instruction alone, the

⁴ Interview, 25 July 2019, Ankara.

⁵ In the 1940s, Woody Guthrie, one of the most influential figures in American folk music, was commissioned by the US government to write songs celebrating the Columbia River dam projects. We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for drawing our attention to this historical parallel.

⁶ Interview, 25 July 2019, Ankara.

initiative sought to persuade farmers through visual demonstrations of the practical and economic benefits of modern irrigation techniques; this reflected a broader effort to embed technocratic forms of knowledge within everyday agricultural practice.

Such programmes also extended technopolitical governance into a pedagogical domain. Environmental and operational problems that emerged after the installation of irrigation infrastructure were represented at least partly as deficits of knowledge and behaviour to be corrected through expert communication. In this way, the arrival of water generated new sites of politicisation – salinisation, uneven access, and agricultural change – which state institutions attempted to restabilise through technical education and the production of particular forms of modern agricultural conduct.

From the 2000s to the 2020s, state institutions continued to present the Atatürk Dam as indispensable by mobilising its scale and quantified performance as markers of national achievement. The DSI, for example, proudly notes that the dam contains enough fill material to build a wall 7.85 metres high and 1 metre wide around Turkey's land borders, or a wall 4 metres high and 0.5 metres wide around the equator (DSI, 2020). Alongside such metaphors of magnitude, the dam's legitimacy has been reinforced through selective economic accounting. Official narratives highlight cumulative electricity generation and irrigation revenues, frequently invoking claims that the project paid for itself within a few years of operation (DSI, 2020) and has since contributed hundreds of billions of lira to the national economy (Davut, 2024). In this sense, numerical accumulation operated as a technopolitical device: by emphasising economic return and monumental scale, it consolidated the dam's status as a national achievement while marginalising social, ecological and distributive critiques that resist easy quantification.

The distribution of irrigation benefits also generated a territorial conflict between technical feasibility and claims of regional justice. A DSI official in Adıyaman explained that conveying water from the Atatürk Dam reservoir to parts of the province would require deep tunnelling and substantial pumping, making the scheme prohibitively expensive.⁷ From this perspective, the geography of irrigation resulted from elevation, gravity and cost, rather than from provincial preference. Locally situated accounts constructed the issue differently, however, with one participant describing the contrast between Adıyaman's proximity to the reservoir and its limited irrigation benefits in the following terms:

Adıyaman's plain has always been dry; it is surrounded by water, yet remains without water. (...) The costs of the Atatürk Dam were borne by Adıyaman, while its benefits went to Urfa. We are not opposed to the project. It gives life to thousands of people, but do not extinguish ours. Include us among those who will benefit (authors' translation).⁸

This account is significant not because it disproves the engineering explanation, but because it constructs the problem through a different scale and normative register. The DSI rendered irrigation as a question of elevation, energy and economic feasibility; the local account rendered it as a question of territorial sacrifice, recognition and distributive justice. Technical calculation therefore did not eliminate the political question of who benefited from the dam; rather, it displaced that question into the domains of cost and feasibility, from which it later re-emerged through local claims of unequal treatment.

RETHINKING WATER INFRASTRUCTURE GOVERNANCE

The study challenges the linear understandings of hydraulic development that implicitly assume that infrastructure progresses from political debate to technical implementation and eventually to routine administration. Rather than becoming progressively depoliticised, the Atatürk Dam remained politically contested throughout its planning, construction and operation, although the arenas, actors and forms of

⁷ Interview, 26 March 2016, Adıyaman.

⁸ Interview, 28 March 2016, Adıyaman.

contestation changed over time. Decisions concerning dam height, irrigation design, foreign consultancy, reservoir filling and transboundary releases repeatedly shifted between expert, bureaucratic, diplomatic and public arenas. In this sense, the case supports the scholarship that understands politicisation and depoliticisation as recurrent and co-constitutive processes through which political conflict is continually displaced, stabilised and reopened (Akhter, 2017; Aijaz and Akhter, 2020; Donaldson et al., 2013). The case also demonstrates that depoliticisation does not refer to the disappearance of politics (Buller et al., 2019); rather, technocratic interventions repeatedly reorganise where politics occurs, who can legitimately participate in it, and which claims become visible or marginalised.

The findings also extend understandings of technopolitics beyond the common argument that technical expertise merely disguises politics (Burnham, 2001; Ferguson, 1994). As the evolution of the Atatürk Dam shows, technical analyses shaped the policy options that were considered feasible; they also redistributed authority among engineers, consultants, bureaucrats and politicians, and redefined the boundaries between technicity and political decision-making. The expansion of irrigable lands further illustrates this dynamic, in that technical optimisation operated through an unequal agrarian structure that amplified the prospective benefits attached to already concentrated landholdings (see Adalet, 2022). Technopolitics thus operated simultaneously as a mechanism for stabilising political authority and as a source of renewed contestation whenever techno-institutional arrangements generated new political, social and environmental consequences.

The study also contributes to scholarship on the scalar politics of hydraulic infrastructure (Biro, 2007; Harris and Alatout, 2010; Norman et al., 2016; Swyngedouw, 2007; Warner et al., 2014). Despite its primary focus on national politics, the study demonstrates that the governance of the Atatürk Dam cannot be understood through fixed local, national and transboundary scales isolated from each other; rather, these scales were continually produced, connected and reconfigured as technopolitical struggles unfolded over time. Questions initially framed as local engineering problems became national development priorities, while operational decisions surrounding reservoir filling simultaneously acquired transboundary significance. The Adiyaman dispute makes this scalar movement particularly visible; a nationally celebrated irrigation achievement was repoliticised locally as an unequal distribution of sacrifice and benefit, while the DSI translated that claim back into the technical register of elevation, pumping requirements and economic cost. Conversely, transboundary disputes concerning the allocation and quality of surface water flows were closely intertwined with national water policies, which in turn produced local experiences of water insecurity in both upstream and downstream riparian states (Mason et al., 2023). Consistent with previous works on the Indus Basin (Aijaz and Akhter, 2020; Akhter, 2017), politicisation travelled unevenly across scales, with conflicts subsiding in one arena only to re-emerge in another. The case therefore affirms that scalar governance is a key mechanism through which processes of politicisation, depoliticisation and repoliticisation are continually produced and reorganised.

A further contribution concerns the role of expertise in water infrastructure governance. While existing studies examine relations between states and affected communities (Leslie, 2005) or between upstream and downstream riparians (Mirumachi, 2015), the study reveals that important political struggles also unfolded within expert communities themselves (see Kamruzzaman, 2017; Kothari, 2006; Mosse, 2011). Competing visions advanced by foreign consultants, Turkish engineers, professional chambers, bureaucratic organisations and political elites shaped the continuous (re-)design of the project and influenced whose knowledge became institutionalised. While expert knowledge is often associated with the technicisation of the political, expertise in this context functioned as a political arena through which authority, legitimacy and national autonomy were negotiated. This finding complements the work on hydraulic expertise, state formation and modernisation (Akhter, 2017; Allouche, 2010; Kaika, 2006), while highlighting the importance of examining conflicts within technocratic institutions themselves.

Finally, the study demonstrates how political meanings attached to infrastructure evolve over time even when its material form remains largely unchanged (Carse and Kneas, 2019; Larkin, 2013). The same dam simultaneously functioned as an engineering solution, an instrument of socio-economic

transformation, a symbol of national sovereignty and a bargaining tool in water diplomacy, depending upon the actors, scales and historical moments through which it was interpreted. Infrastructure therefore possesses a political durability that extends beyond its physical permanence; it continually invites new forms of contestation as governance priorities, social expectations and geopolitical contexts evolve.

CONCLUSION

This article examined how technical expertise, technopolitical strategies and institutional arrangements shaped the governance of the Atatürk Dam, and how recurrent processes of politicisation and depoliticisation influenced the framing of its hydrosocial, hydropolitical and environmental impacts. Drawing on archival research, interviews and discursive analysis, it has shown that the governance of the Atatürk Dam was characterised not by a linear progression from technical planning to political controversy, but by recurring shifts between technocratic stabilisation and political contestation. Throughout the project's planning, construction and operation, struggles over expertise, institutional authority and scalar governance continually reconfigured both the technical design of the dam and the political meanings attached to it. Rather than representing the absence of politics, depoliticisation relocated political disagreement into expert, bureaucratic and administrative arenas, from which new forms of contestation subsequently emerged.

More broadly, the findings suggest that large-scale water infrastructures are best understood as technopolitical assemblages through which political authority, expertise and competing visions of development are continually negotiated. By conceptualising politicisation and depoliticisation as recurrent and co-constitutive processes rather than as sequential stages, this article contributes to debates on water governance, technopolitics and the political geographies of hydraulic infrastructure. While grounded in the historical trajectory of the Atatürk Dam, its analytical insights extend beyond the Turkish case. They offer a framework for understanding how large dams and other hydraulic infrastructures continually reshape, and are reshaped by, the politics of expertise, governance and scale. Future research could build on this approach through comparative analyses of hydraulic infrastructures across different political and geographical contexts, as well as by examining how these technopolitical dynamics are experienced and contested by affected communities beyond the institutional arenas that have been the primary focus of this study.

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