

**Background information on the  
Petition to Save Potential World Heritage on the Tigris River in Mesopotamia  
directed to the World Heritage Committee of the UNESCO.**

Civil society organizations from the Turkey, Iraq and Iran have come together to initiate this petition because they are deeply concerned about the impacts of the Ilisu Dam Project being constructed on the Tigris River by the Turkish government. This project will have grave impacts not only on the cultural and natural heritage along the entire Tigris in the eastern part of Mesopotamia but also on the socio-economic structure of a big region.

The Ilisu Dam is the largest hydroelectric power plant planned by the Turkish government. It is a key part of the large scale regional development project, the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP), in the Kurdish southeast of the Republic of Turkey. GAP aims to produce electricity, develop export oriented agriculture and to create up to 3.8 Mio. jobs for the economically so called “underdeveloped” Kurdish provinces. To date approximately 60% of the GAP has been implemented, however no improvements can be seen for the local people, rather, they have had to bear the social, cultural and ecological costs while the industrial centres in West-Turkey and big companies gain profit.

The Ilisu Dam has been under construction for two years now. It is situated 45 km upstream of the Iraqi-Syrian border and would flood the Tigris on a stretch of 136 km and an area of 313 km<sup>2</sup>. The 1200 MW and 2 billion Euro project has become one of the most controversial projects in the international finance community. After several years of local and international campaigning, the Export Credit Agencies of Germany, Austria and Switzerland, made an unprecedented step in July 2009, by suspending the credit guarantee due to the Turkish failure to comply with required environmental, social and cultural heritage conditions. However, the Turkish state and the companies found new financing and continue with the project.<sup>1</sup>

After several years of local and international campaigning, the Export Credit Agencies of Germany, Austria and Switzerland, made an unprecedented step in July 2009: They withdrew the credit guarantee extended to Turkey because of failure to comply with required environmental, social and cultural heritage conditions. However, the Turkish state and the companies found new financing and continue with the project.<sup>2</sup>

## CULTURE

Mesopotamia is unique in many ways. It hosts great geographical, climatic as well as biological diversity and the step of transition from nomadic pastoralism to sedentary agriculture took place in the upper parts of Mesopotamia. The first human settlements discovered to date are found here<sup>3</sup>. After this Neolithic revolution, some thousand years later, the first human civilizations have been developed in the lower parts of Mesopotamia. The oldest cities of humanity are located along the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers. Thousands of archaeological sites bear testimony of dozens of cultures which intermingled here. They provide the exceptional chance to gain further knowledge of

---

<sup>1</sup> The credit is given by three Turkish banks (Akbank, Garantibank and Halkbank) with a credit guarantee by the Turkish government and other which are not presented to the public. The current consortium consists of four Turkish companies (particularly Nurol and Cengizler) and the Austrian company Andritz and two more small Swiss companies.

<sup>2</sup> The credit is given by three Turkish banks (Akbank, Garantibank and Halkbank) with a credit guarantee by the Turkish government and other which are not presented to the public. The current consortium consists of four Turkish companies (particularly Nurol and Cengizler) and the Austrian company Andritz and two more small Swiss companies.

<sup>3</sup> The oldest human settlement is called "Hallan Chemi" in the province Diyarbakir which has been submerged by the Batman Dam in 2003. The oldest human location is Göbekli Tepe close to the Euphrates River in the province Urfa, approx. 200 km to the west.

humanity's history. Nowadays the inhabitants of Mesopotamia, particularly Kurds, Arabs, Aramaeans and Turkmen, are the carriers of this worldwide unique cultural heritage. The Ilisu Dam project would, single-handedly, affect officially 300 archaeological sites<sup>4</sup>. The oldest village of human history, Hallan Çemi, has been submerged in another dam in 2003. Hasankeyf, with a history of at least 10,000 years, is unique in being continuously populated from Neolithic times through Classical Antiquity and the Middle Ages until today. It is a world class example of a site that combines both outstanding cultural heritage and natural landscape features. A recent study shows that together with the surrounding Tigris valley it fulfils nine out of the ten UNESCO criteria for World Heritage Sites – a level reached by hardly any existing site. Should the Ilisu Dam be built, the site would be lost forever. More details can be found here:

[http://www.hasankeyfgirisimi.com/en/index-Dateien/unesco-file\\_engl.pdf](http://www.hasankeyfgirisimi.com/en/index-Dateien/unesco-file_engl.pdf)

Hasankeyf symbolizes the identity of the local people who have put Hasankeyf in the centre of their struggle against the Ilisu Dam.

## NATURE

Within the borders of Turkey the Ilisu Dam will destroy approx. 400 km<sup>2</sup> of precious riverine habitat for many – partially endangered – species like the Euphrates soft shell turtle. The river stretches are very crucial for the ecology of the whole region. Even the regional climate would be affected as it can be seen in the Euphrates River Basin where many dams have been constructed leading to serious negative impacts on the river ecology as well as traditional agriculture. As only little research has been carried out in the Tigris valley till today, the exact ecological losses due to the dam are hard to estimate. The water quality of the reservoir is expected to be extremely low, leading to massive fish extermination.

## PEOPLE

The planned Ilisu Dam and reservoir would completely or partially flood 199 villages and the antique city of Hasankeyf, which are the homes of up to 78,000 people. Additionally, 30,000 nomads would suffer directly. These nomads and almost half of the affected villagers do not have land and/or land titles and they would not be compensated either.

For the other small villagers there is neither land for resettlement nor have other income restoration measures been set in place yet. The affected people face a future in extreme poverty, the loss of their livelihoods and history, and the disruption of their village and family structures. No public participation has been implemented. Alternatives for energy (like maintenance of existing transmission lines, solar and wind) and regional development (like repopulation of destroyed villages, developing of cultural tourism and revival of animal stock raising) proposed by local people, local authorities, civil organizations and researchers in Turkey have been disregarded by the Turkish government, demonstrating an ignorant centralistic behaviour. Furthermore, the changing water levels of the reservoir would create good habitats for mosquitoes and thus pose a threat to the health of more than 10,000 people.

## DOWNSTREAM IMPACTS ON IRAQ

Turkey shares the waters of the Tigris River with the states of Syria and Iraq. Particularly Iraq relies on the water of the Tigris River and could almost not have any agriculture and water supply of urban centres without the water of Tigris and Euphrates. The fact that the storage capacity of the proposed Ilisu Dam and other dam projects is larger (at least 21 Cubic Kilometer) than the annual water flow of the Tigris (17 Cubic Kilometer) from Turkey to Iraq, explains the high impact of this project.

---

<sup>4</sup> In fact this figure is much more as only half of the region has been surveyed until today and the undertaken survey was not comprehensive enough.

International convention and law, particularly the UN Convention on the Law of the Non-navigational Uses of International Watercourses<sup>5</sup>, requires Turkey to consult, negotiate and come to an agreement with Syria and Iraq before implementing any large project at or on the Tigris River. Such an agreement is still missing. Therefore, the Ilisu Dam Project and other dam projects are not only debatable on an international level but also a source to intensify existing conflicts in the region.

Iraq's ambassador to the UN agencies in Rome, Hasan Janabi, and many other analysts describe severe expected impacts.<sup>6</sup> Within the state of Iraq all habited regions along the Tigris River would be affected seriously<sup>7</sup>. Losses of flowing water of up to 50% and dam reservoirs experiencing eutrophication would also mean decrease of water quality. Nearly half of the Iraqi population are dependent on the Tigris water, especially the Capital Baghdad with 6 million people in addition to Mosul (2 million), Kirkuk (1 million), Kut (1,5 million), Amara (1 million) and Basra (2 million). The decrease of water quantity and quality will lead to extreme ecological damage. Additionally, agriculture would be limited significantly as Iraq's agriculture is highly dependent on irrigation. Decrease of the river channel, absence of crucial floods, loss of biodiversity, salinization, desertification and intensified sanitation problems would be some of the results.

Particularly, the Marshlands of Mesopotamia in the South of Iraq would suffer from the Ilisu Dam as well as other large dam projects. The Mesopotamian Marshes used to receive nearly 80% of the Tigris River flows recorded at Baghdad and contributed to 40% of the national food production. Under the former regime of Saddam Hussain, the marshes were deliberately drained out in a massive operation to destroy this unique wetland system in the Middle East and to drive out their inhabitants. After 2003, Iraq succeeded in restoring 40% of the vast 15000 km<sup>2</sup> of marshes. The period of impounding of the dam will be extremely severe, especially if the region is experiencing drought as it did between 2008 and 2010. Furthermore, as settlement in Middle and South Mesopotamia was only possible through irrigated agriculture, the people in the state of Iraq have a natural right to access to enough water. The society of Iraq has been highly dependent on river waters for 5000 years.

Owing to their outstanding value as the largest wetland in the Middle East and their function as a home to the 'Marsh Arabs' with their distinct 5,000-year-old culture, the Marshlands of Mesopotamia are on the Tentative List submitted by Iraq to the World Heritage Committee in 2003. After severe deterioration in the past decades, a major restoration program was started after 2003. The progress achieved is under threat now due to the construction of the Ilisu Dam.

#### Initiators:

- Initiative to Keep Hasankeyf Alive, Batman/Turkey, [www.hasankeyfgirisimi.com](http://www.hasankeyfgirisimi.com)
- ICSSI – Iraq Civil Society Solidarity Initiative, [www.iraqcivilsociety.org](http://www.iraqcivilsociety.org) and <http://icssi08.ning.com/>
- CDO – Civil Development Organisation, Sulaimaniah/Iraq-KRG, [www.cdo-iraq.org](http://www.cdo-iraq.org)
- CENESTA – Centre for Sustainable Development, Teheran/Iran, [www.cenesta.org](http://www.cenesta.org)

---

<sup>5</sup> Adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 21 May 1997, see: [http://untreaty.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/8\\_3\\_1997.pdf](http://untreaty.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/8_3_1997.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> See also: <http://www.iauiraq.org/reports/water/Water-Security-in-Iraq-HJ-article.pdf> and [http://www.banktrack.org/download/ilisu\\_dam\\_project\\_comment\\_on\\_the\\_impending\\_export\\_credit\\_guarantee\\_decision/090612\\_ilisu\\_project\\_comment\\_on\\_impending\\_ecguarantee\\_decision.pdf](http://www.banktrack.org/download/ilisu_dam_project_comment_on_the_impending_export_credit_guarantee_decision/090612_ilisu_project_comment_on_impending_ecguarantee_decision.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Here it has to be noted that also dams on the tributories of the Tigris River coming from Iran have some grave impacts.