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CC. Tom Tugendhat MP, Chair, Foreign Affairs Committee
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6 November 2021

Dear Foreign Secretary,

HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN NORTH AND EAST SYRIA

We are writing to urge your immediate action to address the worsening humanitarian crisis in northern and eastern Syria where tens of thousands now lack water due to the actions of Turkey and its proxies following their military occupation of border areas in 2019. Turkish-backed militia have deliberately cut off water supplies to the 500,000 people who live in al-Hasakeh governorate, with severe consequences for the lives and livelihoods of the local people. As you will be aware, cutting off water to civilian populations by parties to an armed conflict is a war crime. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, the UK has a privileged responsibility and overwhelming obligation to investigate and take action.

Since 2019, when Turkish-backed militia seized control of the Allouk water station, located near the town of Ras al-Ain (Serekaniye), supplies of water to North East Syria have been repeatedly interrupted by the Turkish authorities.¹ According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), “the station has experienced significant drops in output,

¹ See, for example: Syrian Human Rights Observatory, "Turkish forces deactivate Allouk station re-interrupting water in Al-Hasakah city and surrounding areas", 29 March 2020, <https://www.syriahr.com/en/158570/>

operating at less than 30 per cent of total capacity between April and June 2021”.² As of 9 September 2021, the station had not pumped water since 21 August. Although Turkey blames the stoppages on a failure by the Syrian authorities to provide electricity, Human Rights Watch has confirmed that there continues to be enough electricity to operate the water station.³

It would appear clear that the sole purpose of the stoppages of the Allouk water station has been to exert pressure on the local population, which is predominantly Kurdish, with grave repercussions for their health and well-being. This is a flagrant breach of international law, which prohibits parties to an armed conflict (which Turkey’s invasion of the region constitutes) from depriving civilians of objects indispensable to their survival, which would include drinking water and water for irrigating crops.

The problems have been exacerbated by Turkey’s repeated breaches of its international customary law obligations to ensure adequate downstream flows of the Euphrates river, which it shares with Syria and Iraq. Because of dam-building and irrigation schemes in Turkey, the downstream flow of the river has been reduced by 40–45 per cent since the early 1970s,⁴ with Turkey deliberately using its storage capacity to exert pressure on its riverine neighbours, particularly in times of conflict. This Spring, as documented by the NES Forum (a coalition of non-governmental organisations), water flows to the Tishreen dam were half those required to ensure its functioning, leading to its partial closure.⁵ The reduced flow has directly impacted the availability of water for the 5.4 million people, primarily in Deir-ez-Zor, Raqqa and Aleppo governorates, who rely on the River Euphrates for their everyday needs. Combined with lower-than-average rainfall, reduced flows have severely affected crop production:⁶ the OCHA estimates that irrigated crop output this year may have been reduced by 25%.⁷ High rates of food insecurity and malnutrition are a direct consequence.

We would draw your attention to the recommendations of a recent international Water Forum held in Hasakah in North-eastern Syria, which called on the international community to pressure the Turkish state to cease breaching international customary law governing common international waters.

We therefore appeal to the UK to show leadership by taking action both unilaterally and through the Security Council of the United Nations:

² The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Water Crisis in Northern and Northeast Syria - Immediate Response and Funding Requirements, 9 September 2021, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/water_crisis_response_plan-september_2021.pdf

³ Human Rights Watch, "Turkey/Syria: Weaponizing Water in Global Pandemic?", 31 March 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/31/turkey/syria-weaponizing-water-global-pandemic>

⁴ M. Nouar Shamout with Glada Lahn, The Euphrates in Crisis: Channels of Cooperation for a Threatened River, Chatham House, April 2015, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/field/field_document/20150413Euphrates_0.pdf

⁵ NES Forum, Low Euphrates water level risks humanitarian catastrophe in Northeast Syria and Aleppo, 21 May 2021

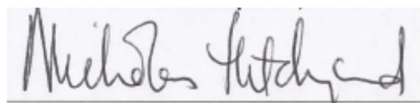
⁶ REACH/NES Forum, Briefing Note: Humanitarian Situation Overview in Northeast Syria, June 2021, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/REACH_SYR_Briefing-Note_Humanitarian-Situation-Overview-in-Northeast-Syria_June-2021.pdf

⁷ The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Water Crisis in Northern and Northeast Syria - Immediate Response and Funding Requirements, 9 September 2021, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/water_crisis_response_plan-september_2021.pdf

- To urge Turkey to withdraw immediately and permanently to a sufficient distance from the Allouk water station to enable the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) to safely repair and operate a vital water intake serving half a million people.
- To urge Turkey to discharge into Syrian rivers at least the amount of water required under existing agreements in order to resolve the humanitarian crisis.
- To investigate the actions of the Turkish military in stopping pumping from the Allouk station and to sanction those held responsible for any war crimes, including through the use of asset freezes.
- To increase humanitarian aid to Syria, especially in areas suffering from water scarcity.
- To start channelling development cooperation funds to the Autonomous Administration and NGOs in north-eastern Syria, which are committed to democracy and equality.

We would request that you acknowledge this letter and respond with the UK's intended actions.

Yours Sincerely,



Nicholas Hildyard, Co-Director, Corner House

Dr. Thomas Jeffrey Miley, University of Cambridge

Dr Felix Padel, Research Associate, Centre for World Environment History, University of Sussex

Margaret Owen OBE, barrister, Widows for Peace through Democracy

Federico Venturini, PhD, University of Udine (Italy)

John Hunt, journalist

Connor Healy, Independent Researcher

David Morgan, journalist

Bert Schouwenburg, International trade union advisor

Estella Schmid, Peace in Kurdistan

Campaign against Criminalising Communities (CAMPACC)

Pishtiwan Jalal, President, Kurdish Alliance of North America

Kristy Perano, Co-President, Kurdish Alliance of North America

Dr. Ebad Rouhi, Department of Law, Sanandaj Branch, Islamic Azad

University, Sanandaj, Iran.

Xeyal Qertel, Founder of New York Kurdish Film and Cultural Festival

Dr. Nicholas S.M. Matheou, Armenian Institute, London

Roz Bird, Navigate Cooperative - Facilitation for Social Change

Marko Ulvila, Finland

Dr Sarah Glynn, Scotland

Dr Andrea Brock, Lecturer in International Relations Centre for Global Political Economy,
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Dr Anthony Ince, Senior Lecturer in Human Geography, Cardiff University

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Ersilia Verlinghieri, Research Associate, University of Oxford

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Mahvish Ahmad, Assistant Professor in Human Rights and Politics, Department of Sociology,
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