

What have dams got to do with peace? Conflict and the politics of infrastructure development

Presentation to The International Conference of Diyarbakir on “Peace in the Middle East and People’s Right to Peace”.

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First, I would like to thank the organisers of this conference not just for inviting me to speak but also for putting the meeting on in the first place. There is no more important struggle than the struggle for peace – and peace will not come, here or anywhere else, without dialogue. I hope that all sides in the conflicts that scar the Middle East will therefore rise to the challenge that this meeting has posed and seize the opportunity to pursue a political solution to the wars that have blighted – and continue to blight – this region. I am no fan of Winston Churchill but would agree with his view that “jaw, jaw is better than war, war.”

To introduce myself: my name is Nicholas Hildyard and I work for The Corner House, a British-based non-governmental organisation that focuses on human rights, the environment and development. I would argue that the three issues are intimately linked and cannot be separated. I am also involved, with other colleagues from The Corner House, in The Refugee Project, a coalition of groups (including Kurdish groups) in Britain that investigates and publicises the links between the creation of refugees and asylum seekers and British foreign investment and foreign policy. The Project seeks to expose, for example, how British arms companies (with the financial backing of the British government) perpetuate conflict by selling arms to repressive regimes, Turkey included, or British construction companies create forced evictions through infrastructure development, such as large dams, which does not have the support of affected communities. The Ilisu dam is a case in point.

This is my fifth visit to Diyarbakir. All my previous visits have been related to work on trying to stop British, US and European involvement in the Ilisu project, which as you will know, would cause the forced eviction of some 78,000 people, mainly ethnic Kurds, and the flooding of Hasankeyf, a city that is of international cultural significance.

In many ways, I am embarrassed to be on this platform. When I look at the statistics provided by the Human Rights Association of Diyarbakir on the incidence of torture, arbitrary arrests and village burnings in the South East of Turkey over the past few months; when I see how the number of cases have risen dramatically in the wake of the resumption of conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurdish armed groups; and when I relate such torture and village burnings to the many conversations I have had over the years with those who have suffered – and continue to suffer – from repression; I can’t help thinking that my “slot” would have better been given to someone who could directly address these issues. For no peace is possible until the civil and political rights of ordinary citizens are secured. In that respect, I am sure that many of you are asking: “Why have we got a speaker on infrastructure development? What have dams and pipelines got to do with peace?”

It is a very apposite question. As a senior official in DEHAP put it to me some years ago in relation to Ilisu: “Look, we are opposed to the dam. But we do not have the time to work on it. Our concern is to stop our members from being arrested, killed and tortured.” He added: “But if working on Ilisu helps in your struggle for democracy in your own country, then we support you.”

I took those words seriously and, with others, including the Kurdish Human Rights Project in Britain and many other groups elsewhere, campaigned for four years to stop the British government and other western governments from supporting Ilisu. And we won. The companies withdrew. And I hope that in undertaking this campaign, we helped to create some political space in which the wider issues of the “Kurdish question” could be discussed. Certainly, throughout Europe and the US (which was also considering support for the dam), the campaign introduced new constituencies to the Kurdish issue – environmentalists, development activists, government officials, businessmen and women, parliamentarians and the general public. The issue was debated in the British parliament and discussed by two influential select committees, both of which came out against British support for the dam, not least because of concern over its human rights impacts. The campaign even made its way into the financial community, through shareholder resolutions against Balfour Beatty, the main British company seeking to build the dam. To pick up on a point raised by Mr Ekinçi yesterday, the Ilisu campaign broke the Kurdish issue out of the ghetto of marginalized Left-wing activism. And it did so because it talked about an issue which the European public understands – the environment.

But it talked about more than the environment. It also raised key questions about human rights. International standards (as exemplified by those of the World Commission on Dams) require that communities affected by large dams are *consulted* and that the dam has *demonstrable public support*. But how can such consultation take place when there is no freedom of expression for the communities that will be affected? How can support be gauged when those who criticise the project are subject to prosecution? When those, like Mr Mahmut Vefa of the Diyarbakir Bar Association are charged with insulting the Turkish state merely for raising questions about the legality of the project? And should European companies even consider becoming involved in projects where human rights cannot be guaranteed?

So dams and other infrastructure projects, such as oil pipelines and mining, are not just about the environment: they also raise key questions about decision-making and political and economic power. Who decides whether a project should go ahead? Whose environment gets destroyed? Who benefits? And because poorer people, those most directly affected by project and those who are marginalized by mainstream society currently have little or no say in deciding these issues, infrastructure development speaks to the urgent need for radical change in the way that development policy is decided – changes that are critical if peace in this and other regions is to be more than simply the “cessation of violence”.

The research undertaken on Ilisu revealed other reasons why an attention to infrastructure development may be important to securing a lasting peace both here and in the wider region.

Many of you will be aware of the secret Memorandum, leaked some years ago, in which the then President of Turkey, Turgut Ozal, set out his “solution to the Kurdish issue”. The Memorandum states:

“With the evacuation of mountain settlements, the terrorist organisation PKK will have been isolated. Security forces should immediately move in and establish complete control in such areas. *To prevent the locals’ return, the building of a large number of dams in appropriate places is an alternative.*”

Many of those dams have already been built as part of the GAP project. I have no doubt that the majority of GAP officials and field workers are deeply committed to the project’s overt aims of poverty alleviation. But the project is also deeply political and is underpinned by a desire to assimilate the region’s Kurdish majority into mainstream Turkish society and culture. Indeed, the official GAP literature states that a prime aim of the GAP project is to “*dramatically change the social and cultural make-up of the region.*”

A past Director-General of DSI, the Turkish government department responsible for building dams, has also recently stated:

“We do not have Kurdish people. We are all Turkish people. . . Turkey’s policy is that the citizens of the GAP region will not be treated differently from other regions just because of their ethnic origin.”

To many Kurds, many of whom have been forcibly displaced from their homes in recent years, and who, as a people, have long been denied their cultural rights, including language rights, by the Turkish state, such statements may ring alarm bells. Is GAP really a development project intended to benefit local people? Or a means of altering the demography of the region, through the displacement of Kurds into larger towns where they can be more easily controlled?

And what of the wider implications of GAP for peace? Turkey’s three major dams on the Euphrates - Keban, Karakaya and Ataturk - have a storage capacity (some 90-100 billion cubic metres of water), which greatly exceeds the *entire* annual flow of both the Tigris and Euphrates put together. Should Turkey decide to cut off downstream flow completely, it would therefore have the means to do so for a considerable period of time. As such, it has immense power to exert pressure on these downstream neighbours. And it has already shown itself willing to use that power – effectively blocking downstream flows completely during the filling of the Ataturk reservoir. On a number of occasions, Turkey’s monopolistic approach to water – “the water resources are Turkey’s” – has brought the wider region close to war.

So infrastructure development is not just about the environment or about human rights: it is also about wider geo-politics. It is about *who* controls resources – and the conflicts that could arise as a result.

It is also about re-colonisation. To give an example, this time not a dam but a pipeline: the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan project.

This project, being built by a consortium led by the British oil multinational BP, is governed by a special legal regime, negotiated between Ankara and BP. Under this regime, the pipeline corridor is exempt from all Turkish law other than the Constitution. In effect, Turkey has ceded control over a strip of land from Georgia to the Mediterranean to a British multinational and its partner companies, only one of which is Turkish. And within that strip, the Gendarmerie have powers that are almost as extensive as those granted to it under Emergency Law. A militarised corridor has been created between Western and Eastern Turkey.

This is of relevance not only to Turkey but also to Iraq, where similar legal regimes are being put in place by the oil companies to ensure that they have control over Iraq's oil resources, even if those resources are not formally privatised. The oil remains the property of the state but the control of the oil rests with the companies. If the Kurds ever gain an independent state in the North of Iraq, they may find that they have been robbed of control of the oil that would otherwise be theirs.

So infrastructure development matters. It matters because it is the nexus where many conflicts over resources and decision-making meet. It is the nexus in which many future conflicts are being sown – and past conflicts perpetuated. A contested ground for civil and political rights but also social and economic rights.

In the next few days, many of you may go to Hasankeyf. Unfortunately, the town is again threatened – the Ilisu project has been revived. There is an active campaign to stop the dam, both here and in Europe. And the European parliament has made the project's compliance with international standards one of their conditions for Turkey's accession to the European Union.

This presents an opportunity to test Turkey's commitment to change:

- Will the environmental impact assessment and resettlement action plan meet international standards? Will the project documents be published in Kurdish, or only in Turkish and English?
- Will people be free to oppose the project or voice critical concerns?
- Will the rights of those affected be respected?
- Will the wider geo-political issues be addressed?

It is also an opportunity to make new allies – by raising concerns over Ilisu in new constituencies. Siemens, the German multinational that owns company that is seeking to construct the dam, is also the company that is seeking to build Turkey's first nuclear plant. And Siemens also makes numerous household appliances – from fridges to mobile phones. Mobilising the power of the “Kurdish” lire, the “Kurdish” dollar and the “Kurdish” Euro through not buying Siemens' products may prove a powerful means of exerting pressure on the company – in addition to making new friends amongst those who are challenging corporate power around the world.

So I come full circle. And I end where I began. Nothing is more important than peace – and the first priority must be to secure civil and political rights for those who currently do not enjoy them. But to challenge power, as former DEP MP Orhan Dogan reminded us earlier, it is always necessary to build alliances. And if I can help in bringing your struggle to other constituencies via my work on infrastructure

projects, such as Ilisu, I am at the service of all those who seek peace in this troubled region.

You are *not* alone. And you need *never* walk alone.