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The Islamic State and Water Infrastructure

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In late January 2016, an article in the *Wall Street Journal* stated that the Islamic State (IS) was using Syria's largest dam, Tabqa Dam, as a "fulcrum of power," hiding prisoners and sheltering senior officials at the dam in the belief that it would not be bombed by the United States.[1] While many journalists focus on the use of water infrastructure as a weapon of war, in the words of Jürgen Todenhöfer, "we have to understand that ISIS is a country now."[2] The Islamic State also uses its control of water infrastructure as a political instrument to confer bargaining power, earn political legitimacy, and marshal local support. The Islamic State's control over dams in Iraq and Syria allows it to use water as both a weapon and a tool of governance. Analysts have written extensively about the Islamic State's control over other resources, such as oil,[3] and its transition to a functioning state through the provision of services,[4] but comparatively little substantive work exists on how control of water resources is a crucial element of the Islamic State's power and transition to a state.

Water is a critical resource for three reasons – first, it can be used as a weapon of war, second, it can be used as political leverage, and third, by providing basic services, it can be used to legitimize a government's rule. This last point is particularly important to the Islamic State. Jennifer Dyer, a former U.S. intelligence officer, noted, "If ISIS has any hope of establishing itself on territory, it has to control some water. In arid Iraq, water and lines of strategic approach are the same thing."[5]

The Islamic State is not afraid to use water as a weapon. Indeed, in the second issue of the Islamic State's magazine, *Dabiq*, it presented a stark ultimatum: "it's either Islamic State or the flood."[6] In April 2014, the IS closed the gates of the Nuaymiyah Dam near Fallujah in order to flood government forces upstream, as far as the town of Abu Ghraib. Farms and villages in an area of more than 200 square miles were also flooded.[7] Closing the gates of the dam also deprived the downstream Shiʿi population in southern of Iraq of their water supply, particularly in the shrine cities of Karbala and Najaf, as well as Babylon and Nasiriyah, displacing up to 60,000 people and destroying the homes of approximately 12,000 families.[8] A few months later, in the summer of 2014, the Islamic State deprived 12,000 people in the Iraqi city of Amerli of water, food,

and medicine for months.[9] In September 2014, the IS also cut off water to Balad Ruz, and according to the mayor, the Islamic State lined the roads to the dam with improvised explosive devices, forcing the government to hire trucks to bring potable water to civilians.[10]

In 2014, it was feared that the Islamic State's actions would result in the collapse of Iraq's largest dam, Mosul Dam—either intentionally or as a product of the battles occurring in the area. This has been described by the U.S. army as "the most dangerous dam in the world."[11] The collapse of Mosul Dam would threaten the lives of up to half a million Iraqis all the way south to Baghdad. The Islamic State is no longer in direct control of the Mosul Dam, and there are ongoing efforts to maintain the dam, with Baghdad officials and outside engineers providing varying estimates as to the severity of its disrepair and the threat it presents to the region.[12] Control over the water supply also affects political relationships and has been used as a political bargaining chip in the past, as well. Turkey, for example, attempted to use water as political leverage with the Syrian government in 1987, only complying with the agreed flow-rate of the Euphrates from Turkey into Syria in exchange for the Asad regime's cooperation against Kurdish rebels from Turkey, who were taking refuge in Syria.[13] More recently, in 2014, Turkey was on the receiving end when the Islamic State ransomed a kidnapped Turkish consul in Iraq, in exchange for Turkey re-opening the flow of the Euphrates into Islamic State-controlled territory in Iraq.[14]

The Islamic State's legitimacy is based on creating a territorial sovereign caliphate. It has built a system of governance that includes a range of administrative functions, including infrastructure projects, social services, basic foodstuffs, and regulation, as well as education and security.[15] If the Islamic State's caliphate is to survive, it must provide the services of a state. This includes providing not only law and social order, but water and electricity too. Water is critical for creating the conditions necessary for social stability. Indeed, one Mosul resident stated, "if [IS] could only maintain services – then people would support them until the last second."[16] IS has blamed water shortages on Turkey.[17] By blaming Turkey for mismanaging water supplies, the Islamic State is also showing that it understands that providing basic water services is an important part of its state-building project.

The Islamic State has had mixed success managing water provision in its territory. When the IS made Raqqa its de facto capital city, it began running dam power plants at high capacity in order to ensure the availability of electricity.[18] But running the hydroelectric power at high capacity at Tabqa Dam required emptying the reservoir, causing the water level of Lake Asad to drop by six meters.[19] Since May 2014, the Islamic State has been backtracking and attempting to refill the reservoir by rationing electricity from the dam but this has resulted in blackouts in Aleppo ranging from 16 to 20 hours a day.[20] In the summer of 2015, the Euphrates River's water level dropped to less than 50 percent of its normal level.[21]

The Islamic State has tried to maintain the existing staffs at dams; it has built wells, and implemented a system of taxation on water.[22] There is evidence that

the Islamic State is using local expertise and labor, as well as recruiting internationally. It retained the existing staff at Tabqa Dam outside of Raqqa, suggesting that it is aware it lacked the specialized knowledge required to manage water supplies.[23] The regimes in Syria and Iraq continue to pay the government engineers and workers at these dams, which are operating under Islamic State supervision.[24]

The Islamic State is walking an impossible tightrope by trying to use water as a weapon at the same time that it is trying to supply it as a reliable basic service. These strategies are incompatible. It cannot flood or drown the populations and farmland it hopes to govern. This might suggest that the Islamic State intends first to use water to conquer territory and afterwards to govern new territory and provide water and electricity through managing water infrastructure. However, in using water as a weapon, it is damaging valuable territory and alienating the populations it hopes to rule.

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