HYDROPOLITICS IN POST-ASSAD SYRIA: RESOURCE COMPETITION, REGIONAL SECURITY, AND ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE

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Annotation

Syria´s December 2024 transition fundamentally redefined the country´s critical infrastructure. Instead of serving as weapons of war, water and agriculture are now ground zero for state-building and regional diplomacy. However, Ahmed al-Sharaa's transitional government is operating with depleted funds and a shattered grid. This failure to deliver basic services is actively bleeding the new state's legitimacy and fuelling local flashpoints. The integration of the Kurdish-led northeast, including the Euphrates dams, in 2026 has increased the government's responsibility for these assets faster than its capacity to run them, while Turkey continues to hold leverage over both Damascus and Baghdad through its control of the Euphrates and Tigris headwaters. The paper outlines three scenarios and the factors that will decide between them. To prevent a full-blown environmental security crisis, the EU and the Czech Republic must tie any financial aid to strict resource transparency, while aggressively backing localized, decentralized water projects.

Introduction

Syria experienced six major droughts over the course of a few years, and like many countries in the region, it sought to invest in infrastructure such as dams, wastewater treatment plants, and irrigation systems to secure and manage water flows. Before the civil war, between 2006 and 2011, Syria experienced extreme drought, which ultimately led to large-scale population displacement and a decline in water availability, particularly in rural areas. Unfortunately, during the civil war, many dams and water sources were captured and occupied by various forces. Water has thus been misused by all major actors as a weapon to exert control or inflict harm, particularly on the civilian population. During the civil war, Islamic State of Iraq, and Syria deliberately contaminated drinking water in provinces including Raqqa and Aleppo in order to extend its control over the population. While the United Nations repeatedly condemned the targeting of civilian infrastructure, Russian and regime airstrikes systematically decimated water grids throughout the war. By 2016, these intentional attacks had halved the country's access to safe drinking water. This use of water as a weapon has significantly worsened the situation in areas with civilian populations and increased the risk of waterborne diseases among the affected population.

State Capacity, Reconstruction Costs, and Institutional Constraints

The fall of the Assad regime marked the beginning of a fragile recovery in Syria. Extensive damage in rural and urban areas continues to hinder the return of displaced residents. The transitional government led by Ahmed al-Sharaa faces massive challenges in nation-building. A lack of resources, exacerbated by climate change, particularly in water and energy infrastructure, poses a critical socioeconomic and security threat. According to a December 2025 analysis by PAX for Peace, uncontrolled drilling of new wells in the Zabadani area has led to an alarming drop in the groundwater level of nearly 30 meters. This decline poses an immediate risk to Damascus, which is critically dependent on this strategic resource (PAX for Peace, 2025).

The reconstruction of Syria's water and energy infrastructure presents a challenge that far exceeds the capacity of the weakened state. Total physical damage for the period 2011–2024 reached $108 billion, of which $52 billion (48%) is attributable to infrastructure alone, where 40% of the pre-war value was destroyed (World Bank, 2025). Water supply systems and the energy sector were particularly hard hit. Moreover, the devastation is heavily concentrated in areas critical to water policy, 61.1% of local infrastructure was destroyed in Raqqa and 58.4% in Deir ez-Zor (World Bank, 2025). Total physical reconstruction costs are

estimated at $216 billion to $345 billion, with the cost of building resilient infrastructure networks alone reaching $82 billion (World Bank, 2025). Given the decline in Syria's nominal GDP from $67.5 billion (2011) to an estimated $21.4 billion in 2024, the state's macroeconomic capacity to cover these expenses is practically zero (World Bank, 2025). Ensuring water security will thus depend entirely on international aid, which should be strictly conditional and directed directly toward decentralized projects. Crucially, these macroeconomic and damage estimates must be approached with methodological caution. As assessments conducted in active or recently concluded conflict environments are inherently constrained by "information fog," physical access limitations, and fragmented administrative registries, the presented figures represent conservative "best estimates." They likely underreport the full scale of indirect economic losses, damages to invaluable cultural heritage sites like Aleppo and Palmyra, and minor, localized household destruction. Consequently, external aid frameworks must remain highly flexible to accommodate substantial cost and logistical variations during actual physical reconstruction.

The transitional government is attempting to rebuild the fragmented state through a new legislative framework. The central pillar is the Statement of Recovery Priorities for International Cooperation, which the government released in March 2026 as its first national blueprint for postwar reconstruction and which aims to restore institutional stability and unify macroeconomic policy (ODI, 2026; World Bank, 2026). This is followed by the National Initiative for Camp Closure and Recovery, commonly called "No Tents, No Camps," focused on the integration of internally displaced persons and the strengthening of local public finances. However, efforts to rebuild the bureaucracy face insurmountable security and structural constraints, including ubiquitous checkpoints that restrict the movement of people and markets. Particularly critical is the disruption of registry offices and land registries, lost property documents and destroyed archives are causing immense chaos. Furthermore, any reforms are paralyzed by a lack of liquidity and complications with the transition to a new currency (UN OCHA, 2026). Since government capital expenditures have plummeted to just 11% of 2010 levels (World Bank, 2025), the central government's ability to finance bureaucratic reconstruction and enforce new legislation without massive external aid is practically nil.

Drought, Local Competition, and Instability

The extreme drought at the turn of 2024 and 2025, described as the worst in 36 years, is intensifying the struggle for dwindling resources in Syria. In key agricultural regions, such as parts of Aleppo, Al-Hasakah, Ar-Raqqa, and Deir ez-Zor, intense competition, and growing tension among farmers over control of dwindling public irrigation resources, as well as conflicts among herders over remaining pastures can be observed. The situation is particularly critical in rain-fed areas, where, for example, the province of Al-Hasakah faces a rainfall deficit of up to 69%. Furthermore, the rainfall failure has affected 75% of all cultivated land, which further intensifies local struggles for access to the remnants of the functional water network (FAO, 2025).

The stability of Syria's provinces, already critically weakened by disrupted infrastructure and logistics, is currently being fatally undermined by the immediate effects of extreme drought. Data from global information systems (GIEWS, ASAP) confirm persistent agricultural stress indicating severe to extreme drought, which, as a result of below-average winter rainfall, has severely devastated key crops such as wheat and barley, as well as extensive pastures (FAO, 2025). The humanitarian response plan estimated that in 2025, 13.3 million people were suffering from food shortages, of whom 7.2 million were experiencing acute food insecurity, following years of conflict and economic difficulties (UN OCHA, 2026). The food crisis in the affected provinces was expected to reach entirely unprecedented levels between October 2025 and mid-2026 (FAO, 2025).

The extreme scarcity of resources is escalating disputes over water and land, which is sharply increasing tensions between returnees, internally displaced persons, and host communities (UN OCHA, 2026). Roughly a quarter of the population now lives in extreme poverty, and 13.3 million people face food insecurity. A major security threat is posed by the 2.7 million children (37%) who do not attend school at all, which directly exposes them to the risk of child labour and recruitment into armed groups (UN OCHA, 2026). The desperation stemming from the inability to secure basic sustenance, compounded by a documented increase in substance use as a form of stress management (UN OCHA, 2026), thus creates a highly volatile environment in which the risk of radicalization grows.

Hydropolitics of the Euphrates Basin

The geopolitical reality of Syria's post-Assad transition is fundamentally constrained by transboundary water dynamics. In the Middle East, water security is structurally complicated by the fact that approximately 60 % of the region's water flows across international borders, making transboundary basins like the Euphrates-Tigris (ET) highly contested arenas of hydropolitics. The Syrian civil war has historically demonstrated that while the genesis of the conflict is highly complex, water resources have been an undeniable part of its narrative (Kibaroglu, 2020).

Ankara's strategic upstream control over the headwaters of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers continues to act as a powerful leverage point over both Damascus and Baghdad. This unilateral upstream grip, combined with persistent regional climate anomalies, has driven water levels in the Euphrates to historic lows. Reduced precipitation and drought have cut Syria's primary water resources, including the Euphrates, aquifers, and springs, by an estimated 30 to 50 %, reducing access to water for more than 10 million people already struggling to meet their basic needs (UN OCHA, 2026). This transboundary deficit severely exacerbates a domestic crisis where up to 12 million Syrians suffer from limited or highly unsafe access to water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services, and more than 30 % of local communities report physically damaged water infrastructure (UN OCHA, 2026). Ankara's political support for the new government in Damascus (Bin Javaid, 2026) does not remove this leverage: friendly relations make a negotiated solution more likely, but they do not give Syria a reliable means of enforcing its claims on the river.

Control of the dams on the Euphrates is also a domestic political question. They lie in the northeast, which was long run by the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration and its Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). A March 2025 framework agreement between SDF commander Mazloum Abdi and President al-Sharaa promised integration into state structures, but implementation stalled, and in January 2026 government forces took the Tabqa Dam, the country's largest hydroelectric facility, along with key oil and gas fields (Bin Javaid, 2026). A ceasefire and integration agreement followed, under which the SDF withdrew from Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa (Rudaw, 2026), and border crossings, energy fields and prisons passed to the state (Enab Baladi, 2026). On 25 August 2026, Abdi announced the dissolution of the SDF and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) and their full integration into state institutions (Enab Baladi, 2026). Earlier assumptions that Damascus would have to negotiate technical co-management with an autonomous administration are therefore outdated.

The outcome was shaped by politics more than by water. Damascus had courted Arab tribes in Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa that were frustrated with the Kurdish-led administration, the United States narrowed its role to counter-ISIS operations, and Turkey backed al-Sharaa's moves (Bin Javaid, 2026). Control of Tabqa matters because it governs electricity and irrigation across much of the north and east, but the same analysis stresses that these assets need reconstruction, investment, and

transparent management to deliver results (Bin Javaid, 2026).

Integration therefore changes the question from who controls the dams to how well a weak state can run them. Physical control does not guarantee operations, which depend on staff, salaries and spare parts, and the transfer will be seen as legitimate only if Kurdish and Arab communities regard it as inclusive. Reported commitments on Kurdish citizenship and cultural rights (Bin Javaid, 2026; Qatar News Agency, 2026) are a start, but if water allocation or hiring appears to favour some groups, local disputes could return. Integration also removes a rival authority and an interlocutor, so every local grievance now falls directly on Damascus. It raises the government's responsibility faster than its capacity.

Syria's inability to maintain stable transboundary water management acts as a dangerous risk multiplier for downstream Iraqi security. Because Syria's domestic water sector has been shattered, with 70 % of displaced camps lacking piped water and 50 % completely disconnected from sewage systems, untreated wastewater and agricultural runoff increasingly contaminate transboundary riverbeds (UN OCHA, 2026). This infrastructure failure has fuelled cascading epidemiologic threats, including over 1,800 investigated outbreaks of acute watery diarrhea (AWD) and cholera in 2025, which propagate downstream along transboundary river corridors (UN OCHA, 2026). Furthermore, transboundary agricultural competition is intensifying; with the worst drought in 36 years ruining nearly 75 percent of Syria's cultivated land and causing a massive wheat deficit of 2.73 million tons, local Syrian factions and Iraqi farmers are left to compete for the dwindling transboundary flow of the Euphrates basin (FAO, 2025).

Despite these severe failures in formal inter-state water cooperation, alternative diplomatic frameworks offer a viable path forward. Institutional analysis highlights the critical role of Track-two diplomacy, particularly the Euphrates-Tigris Initiative for Cooperation (ETIC) established in 2005 (Kibaroglu, 2020). Comprising water professionals, former diplomats, technocrats, and academics from Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, ETIC has successfully functioned as a resilient non-governmental platform. Crucially, ETIC managed to sustain technical dialogue, research, and collaborative training activities even during periods of severe bilateral political deterioration and the height of the Syrian civil war. This resilient framework underscores that regional stabilization in the post-Assad era cannot rely solely on formal state-to-state treaties but must actively leverage established informal track-two channels to address broader socioeconomic and environmental development issues across riparian states (Kibaroglu, 2020).

Scenarios, Czech Engagement and Policy Recommendations

The profound environmental and socioeconomic collapse in post-Assad Syria represents a critical risk multiplier that extends directly to the European Union. With over 15.6 million people requiring humanitarian assistance, 13.3 million facing persistent food insecurity, and a massive wheat production deficit caused by the worst drought in 36 years, rural communities are increasingly forced to adopt desperate coping strategies (UN OCHA, 2026; FAO, 2025). As agricultural livelihoods collapse and more than 30 % of local communities report physically damaged water infrastructure, the lack of basic services is actively bleeding local stability. When rural populations lose their main source of survival, the pressure for secondary migration waves toward neighbouring states and onward to Europe remains extremely acute.

Against this background, three trajectories seem plausible over the next two to three years. The most likely is administrative paralysis: the state holds the northeastern assets but lacks funds to repair them or pay staff, so service deficits and humanitarian dependency persist. In the best case, technocratic co-management, flexible donor funding keeps dams and pumping stations running and Damascus engages Ankara and Baghdad through technical

channels such as ETIC. In the worst case, hydropolitical escalation, a facility failure or tighter upstream retention in a dry year triggers disease outbreaks, displacement, and disputes with Iraq. The decisive factors are the flexibility of donor funding and whether it reaches local utilities, how the northeast is integrated and how Kurdish and Arab communities and former administration staff are treated, Turkey's release behaviour, rainfall, and whether technical utility management can be kept apart from political competition. External actors can influence mainly the first and last of these.

The Czech Republic already contributes to the kind of model proposed below. Its Reconstruction Programme for the Middle East, with 100 million CZK annually across the region and 300 million CZK allocated for 2025–2027, financed solar-powered water treatment plants in Douma and Mleha that supply more than 50,000 people and are connected to two schools and a health center (MZV ČR, 2025), under contracts with the Damascus water authority (Embassy of the Czech Republic in Damascus, 2024). Czech NGOs complement this at community level:

People in Need, with funding from an UN-managed fund, equipped three water stations in Idlib and Harem districts with solar power and repaired their networks (Člověk v tísni, 2025), and Caritas Czech Republic restored the pumping station in Kaljibrin (Charita ČR, 2026). The scale is modest and all figures come from the implementers, without independent evaluation, but the approach already combines agreements with the Damascus water authority and direct work with communities.

To mitigate this environmental security crisis, European and Czech policy must pivot toward a coordinated framework of technical conditioning and decentralized engagement. This requires resolving the inherent paradox of state-building, where bypassing central institutions to prevent corruption risks hollowing out the transitional government's domestic legitimacy. To address this, international donors should adopt a coordinated "dual-track" assistance model. Under this framework, central transitional authorities are engaged as strategic coordinators and guarantors of technical standards, thereby anchoring their institutional legitimacy. Concurrently, to prevent aid diversion amid disrupted cadastral registries (UN OCHA, 2026), the actual physical implementation and financial management of projects must bypass central departments and flow directly to local communities and municipal actors, as Czech NGOs already do in their work with local water stations (Člověk v tísni, 2025). Because integration has made Damascus directly responsible for the northeastern dams, donors should also condition support on the inclusion of former AANES technical staff in operations. This direct funding should prioritize localized, small-scale water and sanitation (WASH) projects, such as solar-powered pumps and community water-harvesting systems, which immediately bypass central bureaucratic bottlenecks and secure clean water in vulnerable return areas and displacement camps, 70 % of which currently lack piped water (UN OCHA, 2026).

On the regional level, the Czech Republic can leverage its continuous Damascus footprint to champion resilient, informal Track-two platforms, most notably the Euphrates-Tigris Initiative for Cooperation (ETIC). Providing political and technical backing to ETIC's established network of water professionals, academics, and technocrats from Turkey, Syria, and Iraq (Kibaroglu, 2020) allows European diplomacy to foster essential transboundary water dialogue and data exchange. This nongovernmental avenue offers a pragmatic path to manage shared river basins without waiting for elusive formal state-to-state treaties, and Czech efforts should be coordinated with larger actors rather than duplicate them. However, while track-two engagement is vital for rebuilding technical trust, such informal diplomacy cannot overcome Turkey's massive upstream power asymmetry on its own (Kibaroglu, 2020). Because Ankara's unilateral control over transboundary flows remains a highly securitized political leverage, this informal facilitation must be reinforced by high-level diplomatic pressure, with the European Union actively integrating transboundary water

compliance and stable flow guarantees into its broader bilateral trade and political dialogues with Ankara.

Addressing these structural challenges also requires resolving the temporal mismatch between long-term infrastructure reconstruction and the immediate survival needs of returning populations. While decentralized water systems and agricultural recovery projects require years to fully mature, the transitional phase demands an immediate "humanitarian bridge" to maintain short-term stability. The EU and the Czech Republic must therefore frontload funding for emergency return and reintegration grants, immediate food security assistance, and mobile water purification units in high-severity return corridors. This immediate stabilization is essential to secure livelihoods on the ground before desperate communities are forced into secondary cycles of displacement.

Conclusion

Syria's water crisis is both a humanitarian emergency and a test of the transitional state. By taking over the Euphrates dams and integrating the northeast, Damascus has gained control of key assets, but with it also the responsibility to operate them, pay and retain staff, and serve communities that remain wary, in the worst drought in decades and with very limited funds. The decisive variables are largely political: how integration is carried out, whether donors fund local utilities flexibly, and whether Turkey's upstream leverage is moderated through technical cooperation. If they go wrong, scarcity will keep pushing rural families toward neighbouring states and Europe.

For the European Union and the Czech Republic, the most realistic contribution is targeted rather than large. The Czech Republic cannot close the reconstruction gap or change Turkish policy on its own, but it already combines agreements with the Damascus water authority and direct work with communities, and it has diplomatic access in Damascus. Transparent, decentralized support, together with coordinated technical diplomacy, is therefore the most effective way to protect both local stability and European interests. How well this works should be tested through independent evaluation of the projects already under way.

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