

Dam Projects and the Formation of State Identity

A Case Study of States' Dam Constructions, the Motives
behind them and their Social Consequences

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Abstract

Dam projects are initiated in large scale on rivers all over the world, inevitably resulting in social and cultural consequences. While the causes of states' dam constructions conventionally are understood in economic and geostrategic terms, this thesis aims to understand why dams are constructed in terms of states' ambitions to strengthen and maintain identities. The concept of the idea of the state, which deals with the relation between state and nation, is employed in the analysis. Discussing the cases of Turkey and Syria, using an extensive academic material, I observe that these states seem to utilise their dam projects in order to strengthen their state identities: In Turkey, dam projects seem to be a means to suppress and assimilate its Kurdish minority, while in Syria, the state's ambition to implement its ideology of Ba'athism is facilitated by such dam projects. Moreover, examples of social and cultural consequences of dams regarding the examined states are outlined. The study concludes that the problématique that is introduced in this thesis fruitfully could be used in future research.

Keywords: state identity, idea of the state, dam projects, GAP, Euphrates project

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1 Introduction

Dam projects are a phenomenon that emerged extensively in the 20th century, seeing more than 45 000 large dams being constructed in 140 countries over the world and leaving nearly half of the world's rivers dammed up. In addition to environmental degradation and increased health problems for the affected people, there are severe social and cultural consequences associated with dam projects. It is estimated, for instance, that a total of 40 to 80 million people have been displaced due to large dam reservoirs (WCD 2000a: 10-18; 2000b: 6).

There are many different ways to understand why states undertake dam projects. Regional development concerned with enhanced irrigation and hydro-electric power supply are some of the factors that cause states to build dams. There is, however, nothing sensational about such motives. But there is also the symbolic power attached to dam constructions that could be used by states to demonstrate their strength domestically, or to gain influence on the international arena (McCully 1996: 236-242). This, however, corresponds to motives that are not usually announced by the states themselves.

In this thesis I employ the less conventional view that dam projects are motivated by states' ambitions to strengthen their identities. I draw on the assumption that states in general are occupied with the formation of meaningful, uniform identities. Buzan (1991) calls this "the idea of the state" and I intend to use that concept in order to understand why states build dams. By studying cases of dam projects in Turkey and Syria, I show that the advantages related to a strong idea of the state could help to understand why dams are constructed to such a great extent.

1.1 Purpose and research question

This study is more concerned about *understanding* than about *explaining* why states build dams, since it does not primarily aim to examine any causal relationships. Rather, the study aims to introduce a concept (the idea of the state) on a phenomenon (dam projects) that is usually not understood in these terms.

The main research question follows: *Can we understand the causes of dam projects in terms of states' ambitions to create and maintain meaningful identities?* To address this question there is need for examination of the following queries regarding the cases in focus, Turkey and Syria: *What is the character of these states' identities? How do the dam projects affect the premises for the states to maintain these identities?* In addition, I intend to give examples of social consequences that could be addressed to dam projects in these countries.

1.2 Prior research

Where is this study situated in relation to other studies in social science? In order to position this study, this section presents prior research on water politics and dam projects. Much of the literature on water politics focus on transboundary waters, that is, river basins shared by two or more states. In the area of international relations, predictions of water wars and concerns about a global water crisis are common elements. Water rights, prospects for co-operation and legal dimensions of the water disputes are other classic areas in the field of water politics (cf. Sneddon & Fox 2006: 182). The Middle East is often subject to analysis of such water disputes (see, *e.g.*, Allan 2002; Amery & Wolf 2000; Lowi 1995; Zeitoun 2008), motivated by the characteristics that, it is argued, make the region suitable for examination¹. Such a focus could, as Barnett notices, be problematic in the way it is motivated. “[T]he sensationalist discourse on water wars in the Middle East”, he argues, “seems motivated by Northern interests rather than a concern for the people or the environment in the region” (Barnett 2001: 56f). The states examined in this thesis are, in fact, situated in the Middle East. However, they are selected for completely different reasons, which I return to in *section 1.4.1*.

According to Sneddon and Fox, many studies on water politics “understand conflicts over water as limited almost exclusively to inter-state conflicts, and thus have very little to say about the multi-scalar, multi-actor character of water politics” (2006: 182). Constraining the analysis to interstate relations overshadows much of the nuances that could be found in water politics on the domestic level (cf. Furlong 2006: 452). This thesis focuses primarily on state level issues and the relationship between state and nation, thus differing from the classic inter-state studies.

Châtel, in her quasi-scientific study of the relationship between people and water in the Middle East, calls for more focus on the individuals that are affected by water shortages. The literature on water issues, she argues, fails to answer questions such as “what it feels like to be that Moroccan farmer who rises each morning to pray for rain that never comes” (Châtel 2007: 5). However, there could be mentioned several studies that analyse the impacts of dam constructions on local peoples, but only a few that observe the issue more broadly. McCully (1996), for instance, examines social impacts of dam constructions in general terms, while Donahue and Johnston (1998) present examples from dam projects all over the world. As part of this thesis, I intend to present examples of the social impacts of dam projects in Turkey and Syria.

The concept of the idea of the state, presented more thoroughly in the following section, is today treated as an important contribution to different views

¹ Amery and Wolf, for instance, emphasise “conflicting territorial claims, ethnic and historical antagonism, rapid population expansion through natural growth, immigration and refugee flows, [and] limited surface and subsurface water” (2000: 2) as typical features of the Middle East region.

on international politics, particularly regarding national security issues (see, *e.g.*, Little & Smith 2006). When it comes to the field of water politics, however, the usage of the concept seems limited. To my knowledge, no study of dam constructions has before taken the idea of the state into consideration, and that is one of the reasons why I carry out this study.

1.3 Theory: the idea of the state

The concepts of *identity* and *meaning* are central to this thesis since it aims to describe the logics of dam projects in these terms. More accurately, the study deals with what could be labelled “the idea of the state”, a concept that helps us understand the relationship between the *state*² and the *nation*. Nations are in this context treated as larger entities of people that share, for instance, a common culture, history and/or ethnicity. In its relationship to the state the nation could either precede the formation of the state (*e.g.* Germany), or it could be the other way around (*e.g.* the United States). Some states contain more than one nation (*e.g.* Canada) and sometimes nations are divided among several states (*e.g.* the Koreans). In some cases, a nation does not even have a state (*e.g.* the Palestinians or the Kurds) (cf. Buzan 1991: 70). I return to these classifications in the analysing part of this thesis.

The idea of the state is, according to Buzan, related to questions of the meaning and identity of the state: “What does the state exist to do? Why is it there? What is its relation to the society it contains?” (1991: 70). “The two main sources for the idea of the state”, he argues, “are to be found in the nation and in organizing ideologies” (ibid.). Sometimes nations are not created naturally, but instead through governments’ attempts to establish a unifying ideology, making the nation coincide with the state borders (ibid: 71f). Both domestically and externally, Buzan argues, “having state and nation coincide provides tremendous advantages” (ibid: 72). In her analysis of the water conflict between Israel and Jordan, Lowi (1995: 37-39) makes a point of the variation in the countries’ ideas of state. The power relationship between the two states is affected by Jordan’s weakly developed idea of the state, making the country “vulnerable to challenges and interference from within and without” (ibid: 39). The advantages associated with a strong idea of the state are highly intertwined with the question of security:

Unless the idea of the state is firmly planted in the minds of the population, the state as a whole has no secure foundation. Equally, unless the idea of the state is firmly

² Treating the state as a uniform actor could, of course, be subject to critique. It is motivated, however, by the fact that states are the most significant units in the international system (Buzan 1991: 58). “Most of the non-state units that command political and military power”, Buzan argues, “see themselves either as aspirant state-makers or as seeking more control over a political space within an existing state” (ibid: 59).

planted in the ‘minds’ of other states, the state has no secure environment. (Buzan 1991: 78)

It seems clear that states are motivated to consolidate their idea of the state. This study aims to explain constructions of large dams in the light of such motives, especially concerning states’ capabilities to create and maintain unifying ideologies. In the analysing part of this thesis I return to Buzan’s reasoning about the idea of the state. Please note that I use the concept “state identity” as synonymous with “idea of the state”.

1.4 Methods

It is no easy task to label this study by putting it in a distinct category. However, there could be outlined elements from several ideal types of studies in this thesis. Since the purpose of the study is to illuminate new aspects of dam projects with some help from a conceptual framework, it would be fair to call it a *descriptive study*. In such a study it is important to be able to make conclusions that are not self-evident in the empirical material. The conceptual framework is, therefore, essential to a descriptive study (Esaiasson et al. 2007: 37f). However, this thesis could also be described as a type of *pilot study*, since it encourages further examination of the problématique it deals with. The *explanatory* ambitions of this study are limited, but it could possibly resemble what Esaiasson et al. describe as a *theory-generating study*. In such a study, they argue, “the empirical analysis is intended to result in a proposal for new explanations to the phenomenon that is subject to study” (2007: 43, my translation). Since I intend to describe the phenomenon of states’ dam constructions from an original point of view, this study could be useful for future attempts to generate new theories on the subject. The purpose of the theory in this thesis is, however, to put the analysis forward rather than to be exposed to tests or reviews.

How, then, do I proceed in practice with this study? To address the question of how to understand why states’ build dams in the light of the formation of meaningful identities, I make use of two empirical cases as examples. I employ a predominantly academic material that deals with the identity of the Turkish and Syrian state, as well how their governments handle dam projects. Possible motives for the governments to construct dams are found in this material and discussed in the analysing part of this thesis. Since the study deals with a mainly secondary material, primarily consisting of books and articles, I have chosen to include an extensive number of sources in order to produce reliable results. To put the discussion forward I enrich it with the theoretical concepts that are central to this study. Metaphorically speaking, I put on a pair of glasses labelled “the idea of the state” and ask myself: why do states build dams?

1.4.1 Cases as examples

Even though I make use of two countries, Turkey and Syria, as cases in this thesis it cannot be regarded as a comparative study. Rather, the cases should be viewed as empirical examples that illustrate the answer to the research question. Following Flyvbjerg's (2001: ch. 6) reasoning, context-dependent *case knowledge* of this kind could be at least as valuable as *rule-based*, context-independent, knowledge. He goes as far back as to Aristotle who in contrast to his predecessors, Plato and Socrates, defends the value of case knowledge. One of the benefits of case knowledge, Flyvbjerg argues, is that it provides the researcher with closeness to the object of study: "Great distance from the object of study and lack of feedback easily lead to a stultified learning process, which in research can lead to ritual academic blind alleys, where form becomes more important than the content" (ibid: 72).

Flyvbjerg (2001: ch. 6) points out a number of common misunderstandings about case studies, for example that they cannot produce generalisations and that they are less suitable for theory building than other methods. Depending on the choice of case, though, one can actually make fruitful generalisations from just a single case. Flyvbjerg does not argue that formal generalisation deriving from large number of cases is useless; he rather means that it is "only one of many ways by which people create and accumulate knowledge" (ibid: 76). Moreover, making generalisations is not the only way to move the scientific process forward: "A purely descriptive, phenomenological case study without any attempt to generalize can certainly be of value in [the process of knowledge accumulation] and has often helped cut a path forward toward scientific innovation" (Flyvbjerg 2001: 76; cf. also Laitin 1995: 455f). In this thesis I seek neither to evaluate *to which extent* dam projects are motivated by certain factors nor to make any generalisations about these motives. Rather, I use two countries as examples of a certain tendency, namely that dam projects are motivated by governments' aspiration to demonstrate uniform identities.

Why, then, do I choose to examine certain dam projects in Turkey and Syria of all countries? There are many different strategies regarding the selection of cases for case studies. Quite simply, the choice depends on for what purpose the researcher intends to use his or her cases. With prior information of a number of cases one could, for instance, select those cases that represent a maximum variation on a certain aspect (Flyvbjerg 2001: 77-81). Another strategy is to select so-called *paradigmatic cases*, which, as Flyvbjerg puts it, "highlight more general characteristics of the societies in question" (ibid: 80). A case that is paradigmatic "operates as a metaphor and may function as a focal point for the founding of schools of thought" (ibid.). The selection of cases for this thesis is primarily grounded in the latter strategy. The dam projects in Turkey and Syria are treated as clear and illustrative examples of the *problématique* I intend to visualise.

There exists, in fact, no standard for selecting paradigmatic cases other than to follow the researcher's intuition. "[A]ll that researchers can do", Flyvbjerg argues, "is to use their experience and intuition to assess whether they believe a given case is interesting in a paradigmatic context, and whether they can provide

collectively acceptable reasons for the choice of case” (2001: 81). The countries that are examined in this thesis are situated in a regional state system that, according to Hinnebusch, is well suited for issues regarding state identity. “There is an ongoing struggle [in the Middle East] between multiple competing identities”, he argues, “that can throw light on the process of identity formation” (Hinnebusch 2005: 152). Both Turkey and Syria are associated with substantial state identities, which fruitfully could be subject to examination.

One could, of course, criticise the selection of countries in this study for being too alike to provide for general statements about the logics of dam constructions. Turkey and Syria share the same river basin, for instance, and are situated in the same regional state system. But again, the intention with this study is not to make such generalisations. I am convinced that the research questions for this study would result in similar answers in many parts of the world, and that the conclusions that follow are not limited to the Middle East. However, I leave that to be examined in another thesis.

1.4.2 Cases of what?

What are the cases in this study cases of? According to Esaiasson et al., an adequate requirement for descriptive studies is to *identify the recurring phenomenon* that is subject to study (2007: 38). However, Flyvbjerg does not fully agree with such a statement, instead arguing that the task should be left to the reader itself:

[T]here is space for the voice of the reader in deciding the meaning of a given case and in answering that categorical question of any case study: ‘What is this a case of?’ Case researchers practicing *phronesis* encourage readers to occupy that space. (Flyvbjerg 2001: 86)

The question of *what the cases are cases of* has to be answered and it would probably be valuable to leave some of it to the reader. Nevertheless, it could be fruitful to make a general identification of the phenomenon that is subject to examination. Since I in this thesis apply the concept of the idea of the state to a phenomenon that are not usually regarded in these terms, it would be useful for the reader to understand what type of phenomenon that is concerned.

As mentioned above, dam projects are in this study regarded as an instrument for states to create meaningful identities. Hence, the recurring phenomenon in the study could be identified as *state-building* or, more to the point, the *formation of state identity*. I would recommend the reader to bear this in mind when interpreting the following content.

1.5 Disposition

Having presented the research question, prior research, the concept of the idea of the state and the methods that are used in this study, I continue with the analysing parts of this thesis. The following chapter deals with questions of what causes states to build dams, as well as which social and cultural impacts that emerge. The latter issue is illustrated by examples from Turkey and Syria.

Chapter 3 constitutes the core of this thesis, examining how states' identity formation is related to dam projects. The cases of Turkey and Syria play a central role when I examine how dam projects could facilitate the process of identity formation and maintenance. The narratives that are presented concern, mainly, the suppression of the Kurdish minority in Turkey and the implementation of the Ba'athist ideology in Syria.

I begin *chapter 4* with a discussion of the observations from the preceding chapter, mainly concerning the differences between the two states. Thereafter, and finally, I suggest possible research designs for future examination of the problématique that is introduced in this thesis.

2 Causes and consequences of dams

Before bringing the concept of state identity into the analysis of dam projects, there are some questions that have to be discussed. Firstly, what are the main causes of dam constructions and, secondly, which are the consequences? The first section deals with the causes of states' dam constructions, while the second section, drawing on the cases of Turkey and Syria, discusses social and cultural consequences of dams.

2.1 Why states build dams

In addition to economic interests, there could be outlined a number of reasons for states to build large dams inside their borders. McCully (1996: 236-242) moves the discussion away from the conventional view and emphasises the symbolic power that is often attached to large dam constructions. Dams are often used as nationalistic symbols or to demonstrate the might of the state in order to, for instance, strengthen the presence of the state in separatist regions. Historically, it has been noticed that “[d]ams were a particularly popular means of shifting water control from communities to central governments and colonizing rivers and people” (Shiva 2002: 53). For upstream countries, dams could be used externally, as a political weapon, to control the water supply for countries situated downstream (McCully 1996: 242). On the bureaucratic level one has to consider aspects such as “[c]orruption and the power of the big-dam lobby” (McCully 2003) when dealing with the causes of dam projects. The process of constructing dams does not seem to involve any major risk for the state bureaucrats to be held accountable for negative impacts of the dams. According to McCully, “the process of planning, promoting and building dams is usually secretive and insulated from democratic dissent” (1996: 236).

How, then, do states legitimise their dam constructions? In a well-considered report, the *World Commission on Dams* notices the following:

Dams have been promoted as an important means of meeting perceived needs for water and energy services and as long-term, strategic investments with the ability to deliver multiple benefits. [...] Regional development, job creation and fostering an industry base with export capability are most often cited as additional considerations for building large dams. (WCD 2000a: 11)

There are, however, more than just economic arguments for dam projects. McCully (1996: 236-242) points out some “ideological themes” that occur among

the proponents of such projects. Man's power over nature, expressed in terms of "the 'taming' of 'wild' or 'turbulent' rivers" (237), is one of these themes. Another one, which is still widely used, is the notion that rivers that flow to the sea without being dammed are wasted (see also Shiva 2002: 53f).

In *chapter 3* I seek to introduce an additional dimension to the question of why states build dams, drawing on cases from Turkey and Syria. This dimension is based on the above-mentioned causes, particularly the power-related incentives, but deals more explicitly with the relationship between the state and the nation.

2.2 Social and cultural consequences of dams

The question of how to understand the link between state's dam projects and the idea of the state would not be of any significant interest if there were no negative impacts of dams. Environmental and health-related impacts, such as earthquakes, decreased fish habitats and the spreading of water-borne diseases, are some of the consequences that stem from large dams (McCully 2003). But there are also significant social and cultural impacts. As mentioned in the introduction, 40 to 80 million people have been displaced due to constructions of large dams. Displacement seems, in other words, to be the main issue when it comes to the social consequences of dams, probably due to the huge surface reservoirs that are created behind these constructions. The World Commission on Dams observes that "whole societies have lost access to natural resources and cultural heritage that were submerged by reservoirs or rivers transformed by dams" (WCD 2000a: 16).

I devote this section to illustrate social impacts of dams in Turkey and Syria. "Dams impoverish the already poor", Galié and Yildiz notice (2005: 100), and as I show below there are no exceptions for the countries that are examined in this thesis.

Due to the so called *GAP*³, which is a huge dam project in the Turkish region of South-eastern Anatolia, more than 350 000 people have so far been displaced (Morvaridi 2004: 729). Moreover, the planned *Ilisu Dam* is expected to displace another 78 000 to 100 000 people in the region (KHRP 2009: 10). In Syria, it is estimated that between 60 000 and 75 000 people have been displaced by *Lake Assad*, a huge water reservoir that was filled due to the construction of the *Tabqa Dam* in the 1970's. Most of the people displaced by Lake Assad were relocated in infertile areas while some were offered to resettle in so called *pilot farms*. However, economic compensation for losing their land, houses and animals was very limited to most of the displaced people. The Syrian state gave compensation only to formally registered landowners, thus excluding vulnerable groups such as the landless, women and the Kurdish minority (Galié & Yildiz 2005: 101-103).

³ *Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi*

In Turkey, the people that are displaced due to the GAP achieve some material compensation but, still, they are not compensated for losses of the intrinsic value of rights (cf. Morvaridi 2004: 731f). Likewise, in Syria, many of the farmers displaced by dam projects have experienced huge cultural losses. The pilot farms, for instance, were intended to function as model villages in which “[p]eople would work and live[,] sharing a communal ideology” (Galié & Yildiz 2005: 105). The elimination of traditional forms of kinship was, however, tied to this strategy, which caused many communities to split (ibid: 102). Despite the economic advantages of working on these pilot farms (Rabo 1986: 141), only 9 % of the people displaced by Lake Assad agreed to move to them. Many farmers feared that it would lead to limitations on their freedom (Galié & Yildiz 2005: 106).

In neither Turkey nor Syria, there has been any significant involvement of local people regarding planning and implementation of the resettlement programmes associated with dam projects (Morvaridi 2004: 732; Galié & Yildiz 2005: 102; cf. Hinnebusch 1989: 242). Galié and Yildiz argue that “[d]ams regulate the flow towards the most powerful nations, the most influential regions, and the richest social classes; their ‘waste’ is dumped on minorities, women and the poor” (2005: 101). In other words, these projects seem to worsen, rather than mitigate, cleavages concerning gender, class and ethnicity.

3 Dam projects and state identity

In this chapter, which constitutes the analysing part of this thesis, I draw on the cases of Turkey and Syria to examine the relationship between states' formation of identity and dam projects. In the first section I employ Buzan's models of how states and nations interact, in order to describe the characters of the countries that are examined. In the subsequent sections I dig deeper in the cases of Turkey and Syria, respectively, to observe how dam projects in these countries facilitate for the states to maintain their state identities. The discussion on Turkey focuses on the state's relation to its Kurdish minority, while the section on Syria centres on the state's maintenance of the ideology of Ba'athism. In the last section, general observations from this chapter are outlined.

3.1 State-nation relationship

Buzan, in his discussion of the idea of the state, presents a framework comprising four models of possible links between the state and the nation. The models are not mutually exclusive, that is, a state could fit in more than just one category (Buzan 1991: 77). By placing Turkey and Syria in their appropriate categories according to this classification, I seek to enrich the analysis in this chapter with explicitness.

In the *nation-state* model, the nation precedes and gives rise to the state, while in the *state-nation* model, it is the other way around (Buzan 1991: 71-73). Neither Turkey nor Syria could be said to be nation-states, but rather contain elements that suit the state-nation model. In such a "top-down" relationship between state and nation the former plays a significant role in establishing the latter: "The state generates and propagates uniform cultural elements like language, arts, custom and law, so that over time these take root and produce a distinctive, nation-like, cultural entity which identifies with the state" (Buzan 1991: 73). Atatürk's enforcement of Kemalism in Turkey as well as Assad's implementation of Ba'athism in Syria, both of which I examine in more detail below, are phenomena that could be seen in the light of such state-nation relationship. As I am about to show, an instrument that both of these states seem to have adapted in order to maintain their imposed ideologies, is the construction of dams.

The *multination-state* model, according to Buzan, represents states that contain

more than one nation within their borders⁴. A sub-type of this model, the *imperial states*, “are those in which one of the nations within the state dominates the state structures to its own advantage” (Buzan 1991: 76). In imperial states, the dominant nation typically seeks to suppress the other nations using various methods, such as extinction or cultural absorption (ibid.). I show below that Turkey and Syria contain clear elements from the imperial state model, both suppressing their subordinate nations in different ways.

So, what is the models’ contribution to the following analysis of dam constructions? The framework provides us with a comprehensive view on the relationship between state and nation:

[The models] make it clear that national security with regard to the nation/state nexus can be read in several different ways, and that consequently different states will experience very different kinds of insecurity and security in relation to the nationality question. (Buzan 1991: 77)

Accordingly, different states ought to seek different strategies in order to cement their ideas of the state. Given that Turkey and Syria include elements of the state-nation and imperial state models, they have certain goals to strive for. In the following sections, I identify some of these state goals regarding the countries in focus. Moreover, I show that dam constructions are effective instruments for these states to consolidate their ideas of the state.

3.2 Dams in Turkey: Suppressing and assimilating the Kurdish minority

The *South-eastern Anatolia Development Project*, better known as the GAP, includes the plan to construct 22 dams and 19 hydropower plants. The project, which was first announced by the Turkish government in 1977, is the largest water development scheme in the Euphrates-Tigris region⁵ (Frenken 2009: 68). The project is intended to improve irrigation and provide hydroelectric power. Besides, the government tends to frame it as a regional development programme designed to increase the socio-economic condition and to reduce poverty (Islar & Ramasar 2009: 13; Morvaridi 2004: 722). There are, however, other motives than these behind the GAP. To discuss the role of state identity, which I intend to do

⁴ There is also a model entitled the *part nation-state*, which is characterised by a nation that is divided between, and dominant in, several states. Such a strong, transboundary, nation does not seem to exist in neither Turkey nor Syria, even though Kurdistan ought to count as a significant nation inside these states. The pre-1973 Vietnamese nations and Germany during the Cold War are better examples of part-nation states (cf. Buzan 1991: 74f).

⁵ The *Atatürk Dam*, completed in 1992, is in fact one of the largest dams in the world (Frenken 2009: 68; Information Please Database 2010).

below, there is need for some knowledge of the relationship between the state and the people in the affected region.

The state identity of Turkey is much influenced by the ideology imposed by Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic. Two main elements constitute this national identity, known as *Kemalism*, namely nationalism and secularism. “Turkish nationalism may indeed be inclusive for those who bow before it”, Robins argues, “[but] for those who insist on asserting an alternative form of primary identity, Turkish nationalism is harsh, disapproving, and ultimately exclusive” (2002: 319). Hence, the Kurdish population and other minority groups could be seen as the main threats to, as well as victims of, Turkish nationalism. Harris points out that “[t]he Kurdish minority [...] has constituted the most important challenge to the notion of unitary Turkish identity” (2002: 751). Moreover, clashes between the Kurdish separatist organisation PKK’s⁶ armed forces and the Turkish army have cost several thousands of people’s lives throughout history⁷ (ibid.).

The South-eastern Anatolia region, in which the major dams related to the GAP are situated, is the least economically developed region in Turkey. It is also suffering from low literacy rates and uneven land distribution. The Kurdish minority, which makes up about one-fifth of the total population in Turkey, constitutes about 65 percent of the people living in the South-eastern Anatolia region (Harris 2002: 749-751; cf. Çarkoğlu & Eder 2001: 49). In other words, the minority group that seems to pose the biggest threat to Turkish state identity is mainly situated in the same region as where most of the large dam projects are undertaken by the government. Hence, these dams could probably be utilised by the Turkish state for reasons that are associated with state identity

What kind of threat, then, does the Kurdish minority pose to the state of Turkey? In his discussion on national insecurity, Buzan (1991: 112-134) presents five categories of threats that occur to states to varying degrees, namely *military*, *political*, *societal*, *economic* and *ecological threats*⁸. Societal threats are aimed at values concerning “the sustainability [...] of traditional patterns of language, culture and religious and ethnic identity and custom” (ibid: 123). Hence, this kind of threats tends to occur *within* states rather than externally, and they are often combined with military and political threats (ibid: 122f). The ethnic minorities in Turkey seem to pose threats of precisely this kind to their state, not at least since nationalism plays such an important role for Turkish state identity. The mere idea

⁶ *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*

⁷ The relationship between the Turkish state and its Kurdish population is, however, more complex than sketched out here. The discrepancies that have to be addressed by the Turkish state are not only between Turks and Kurds, but also between Kurdish tribal leaders and Kurdish peasants (Criss 1995: 35). Unequal land distribution typifies much of the Kurdish region, with traditional landlords (*Aga*) possessing the land. This problem, however, does not seem to be significantly tackled by the government (Morvaridi 2004: 726f; Toprak 1996: 113). More accurately, the Turkish state seems to be ambivalent when it comes to the feudal structure among the Kurds, not unusually supporting the Agas’ position (cf. Bruinessen 1992: 191).

⁸ These categories are, however, not mutually exclusive. In other words, threats may belong to more than one group (cf. Buzan 1991: 122).

of the Turkish state, rooted in nationalism and secularism, could be seen as threatened by the minority groups' attempts to express their language, religious beliefs and culture.

So, how does the Turkish government respond to the above-mentioned threats? Ever since the Ottoman era there have been efforts to manage the populations in the South-eastern Anatolia region, for instance by fostering the nomadic population to settle into isolated villages. For the Turkish republic, promoting the Turkish language and constraining the use of Kurdish languages has for long been part of a strategy to control the populations in the region (Harris 2002: 751f). Constructions of dams, and the way the development of the GAP is managed, could be seen as yet another instrument for the Turkish state to be able to strengthen its influence in the South-eastern Anatolia region (McCully 1996: 242; cf. Harris 2002: 751f). For instance, it could be noticed that the language used in the GAP education programmes is Turkish, not Kurdish (Harris 2002: 753). Such interventions force the Kurdish minority into an assimilation process that seems to underpin the ideology of Turkish nationalism.

As Islar and Ramasar put it, "the GAP is motivated highly by national interests and sovereignty" (2009: 13). Increasing the social and economic prosperity in the southeast, with the GAP as an important tool, is one of Ankara's strategies to prevent Kurdish separatism (cf. Çarkoğlu & Eder 2001: 49; Schulz 1995: 107f). The *Kurdish Human Rights Project*, a UK-based NGO, believes that the main driving force behind the GAP is "the security establishment's misguided beliefs that this project will weaken Kurdish identity in Turkey and will potentially allow for a military victory in the ongoing armed conflict in the Kurdish region" (KHRP 2009: 8). The way in which improved living standards are aimed at rural areas could, however, have the effect of diminishing Kurdish concentrations⁹ (Harris 2002: 753). This strategy could, hence, be seen as an attempt to absorb the Kurds into the Turkish population. For imperial states such efforts are not uncommon in their policies of suppressing their non-dominant nationalities (cf. Buzan 1991: 76). Considering the way dam projects could be aimed at developing certain regions, such projects seem to facilitate for states to carry out policies of absorption.

The symbolic power of large dams is clearly evident when it comes to the GAP, not only since it demonstrates a desirable investment in a poor region, but also since it has become "a symbol of national pride" (Çarkoğlu & Eder 2001: 42; 51f). Few political parties in Turkey therefore afford to question the project and, besides, it has been prioritised within the government's budget. "From a national perspective", Çarkoğlu and Eder argue, "any accomplishment in GAP can be easily used as a way to boost national pride through effective use of the media and thus be translated into electoral gains" (ibid: 42). All in all, the symbolic power of

⁹ Even though redistribution of land, which is an inevitable side-effect of the GAP, will cause some instability in the region, this effect will probably be damped by increased living standards (cf. Medzini & Wolf 2005: 151).

the GAP seems to be widely used by the Turkish state in order to strengthen the uniform identity of the state.

Could the GAP not be regarded, then, as a way for the government to help its population out of poverty? Çarkoğlu and Eder point out that “despite [the GAP’s] remarkable achievements in popular projects such as the increase in the number of schools, hospitals and nurses [...], [it] has lagged significantly behind in terms of improving overall living standards” (2001: 49). This notion indicates that the government’s intentions in the region are more about seeking regional support than fighting poverty. Not only in the case of Turkey and the GAP, but also regarding other countries’ dam projects, one can identify a “gap between the states’ intentions and the needs on the local level” (Schulz 1995: 116).

According to Buzan, “[t]he state-nation process is often aimed at suppressing, or at least homogenizing, sub-state social identities” (1991: 123). As described above, the Kurdish issue, and the fact that there is a significantly large nation (Kurdistan) within the Turkish state, provides the latter with incentives to assimilate the Kurds into the Turkish identity. Since the GAP is expected to increase state control in the southeast, for instance by boosting the economy in the region and promoting the Turkish language, it could be seen as a vital tool for such assimilation. “It is one of the awful contradictions of national security logic”, Buzan argues, “that the suppression of sub-national identities might well contribute, in the long run, to the creation of stronger and more viable states” (1991: 123).

3.3 Dams in Syria: Defending the Ba‘thist ideology

Ever since the establishment of the *Ba‘th party* in Syria, and through its way to power in 1963, it has had intentions to gather support from rural areas. This was where most of the people lived at the time, as well as where the majority of the party’s members came from. It could be argued that the rural areas offer a political base that is inevitable for the ruling Ba‘th party in Syria (Barnes 2009: 521f). In the late 1960’s, the Ba‘th-government implemented a land reform that sought to redistribute land from powerful landlords to peasants. The reform turned out quite successful for the Ba‘th regime, widening its influence in the villages. In fact, it was more or less necessary for the survival of the regime¹⁰ (Hinnebusch 1989: 89-99). In 1970, when Ba‘thist president Hafez Al Assad came to power, it could be said that he “cemented the state-rural relationship” (Barnes 2009: 521). The new president was a leader of peasant origin, the first of its kind in Syria, who “identified closely with his rural roots” (ibid.). As I show below, the relationship between the Syrian state and its rural population, in which the former is dependent

¹⁰ Hinnebusch argues that “[w]ithout [the reform], Syria would today probably be ruled by the kind of military regime in alliance with the landed class against the peasant masses found in many areas of Latin America” (1989: 99).

on support from the later, can help us understand why dams have been constructed to such a great extent under the Ba‘th era. In fact, there were no dams in Syria before the Ba‘th party came to power (Barnes 2009: 524); by 2007 there were 165 of them (Frenken 2009: 344).

The Euphrates project is a large agro-industrial development scheme in northern Syria that is centred on the *Tabqa Dam* (also known as the *Atthawra*, *Thawra* or *Euphrates Dam*), a partly Soviet financed mega-project initiated in 1968. An 80 kilometres long lake, the *Lake Assad*, was filled due to the dam (Collelo 1987: 131; Galié & Yildiz 2005: 95). Except the dam construction, the Euphrates project involves irrigation programmes and the reclamation of significant areas of land. A number of state run villages, entitled *pilot farms*, were established as a result of the resettlement of peasants in the 1970’s (Rabo 1986: 2f, 137-145). Hinnebusch describes the project as “an effort to reshape whole human communities” (1989: 242). The period from the initiation of the Euphrates project and forth seems to coincide with the phase when the Syrian idea of the state, typified by the ideology of Ba‘thism, was shaped and consolidated. Hence, this section focuses on that era in order to examine the links between the Euphrates project and Syria’s attempt to create and maintain its identity.

Hinnebusch notices that “[t]he Ba‘th saw [the Euphrates project] as the key to the creation of a modern agro-industrial sector in Syria”, as well as a tool to carry out social change (1989: 236). The project was associated with the Ba‘th’s principles of *agrarian socialism* (ibid.) and thus, according to Barnes (2009: 521), in line with the party’s intentions to control its rural base. These objectives of control and modernisation have been manifested in both symbolic and practical terms. The symbolic value of large dams is probably well known by the Syrian state. The Tabqa Dam, for instance, could be seen as “a showpiece of Ba‘thism to demonstrate the engineering prowess of the Ba‘thist state” (ibid: 525). Moreover, the development project tied to this dam could be regarded as “a symbol of the state’s welfare aspirations” (Rabo 1986: 47). As in the case of Turkey, large dam constructions seem to be used by the Syrian state to strengthen its uniform identity. It is probably no co-incidence that the names of the projects refer to political leaders or ideological mottos, Lake Assad honouring the Ba‘thist president and the Atthawra Dam referring to the Ba‘thist revolution (cf. Galié & Yildiz 2005: 95).

The ideology of Ba‘thism includes, except the inevitable relation with the rural population, the notion of *Arabism*. Arabism (or Arab nationalism) has long been a prominent feature of Syria’s national identity and the defence of *Pan-Arab* interests have played a significant role in Syria’s foreign policy. Even though the country is religiously divided, it is predominantly Arabic-speaking, thus uniting the Sunni Muslim majority with varying Islamic and Christian minorities (Hinnebusch 2002: 141-143). The Kurdish minority, preferring its own languages and identity, tends however to fall outside the identity of Arabism. Syria’s relationship with its Kurdish people is, similar to the situation in Turkey,

oppressive and discriminating¹¹. A significant number of Kurds are neglected citizenship and the use of the Kurdish language is actively restricted by the Syrian state (McDowall 2004: 476). Suppressing subordinated nations in this way is a typical behaviour of the dominant nation in an imperial state (cf. Buzan 1991: 76).

The displacement of people due to the Euphrates project has indeed facilitated Syria's strategy of suppression of Kurds. Many Arabs that were affected by the project were resettled in the Kurdish region by the government, thus creating an "Arab belt" along the Turkish border (Tejel 2009: 61f). Syrian Kurds would then be separated from Turkish and Iraqi Kurds and, as a result, the claims of a Kurdish nation inside Syria's borders would be held back. In addition, this assimilation process seems to have served the purpose of preventing Iraqi infiltration attempts through "the potentially dissident Kurdish population"¹² (Galié & Yildiz 2005: 68f). The driving force behind this attitude of oppression could be linked to Syrian state identity and its mission to defend the idea of Arabism (cf. Tejel 2009: 60f). The Euphrates project and its associated resettlement plan has, in other words, facilitated for Syria's ambitions to defend its identity of Arabism and suppress other nations.

How, more explicitly, do the Syrian state utilise the Euphrates project in order to strengthen its state ideologies? Hinnebusch notices that the project was regarded, among other things, as "a big school for development of [...] government experience in organization and management" (1989: 236). The pilot villages that were created as a part of the resettlement plan could indeed be seen as state-initiated experimental projects (cf. Rabo 1986: 34). Moreover, the regime has regarded the Euphrates area as "a testing ground for implementing an ideological – socialist or etatist – agenda not necessarily shared by peasants" (Hinnebusch 1989: 242). Barnes notices another example of how the state seeks to demonstrate its political power: "[T]he concentration of water resources behind a dam creates a site that can be politically controlled. The police guard tower located at each major irrigation infrastructure in Syria is a visual manifestation of this political control" (2009: 525). The Euphrates project seems, in other words, to have facilitated for the state to develop methods of governing, as well as to strengthen its state identity by implementing organising ideologies.

In line with its objective of gaining control in the rural areas, the Syrian state has sought to make peasants dependent on state bureaucracy. Such tendencies are seen, for instance, when it comes to the planning of irrigation design in the villages that were renovated due to the Euphrates project. Despite advice from a French firm that was hired for the job, a Syrian state branch¹³ insisted on

¹¹ However, the situation for Kurds in Turkey, as well as in Iraq and Iran, is described as much worse (McDowall 2004: 476).

¹² When it comes to the Kurdish people that settle inside the borders of Turkey and Iraq, though, Syria tends to give them support rather than oppress them (HRW 2009: 10f). During the 1980's and 90's Syria provided support to the PKK in Turkey and used this as a bargaining tool against Turkish policy on the water flow in the Euphrates. This suggests, as well, that the Kurdish issue is highly intertwined with the water question in the Euphrates region (cf. Çarkoğlu & Eder 2001: 59f).

¹³ The *GADEB* (General Administration for the Development of the Euphrates Basin).

designing the irrigation so that it could be controlled from a main network. This was a strategy that “would make peasants more dependent on an irrigation bureaucracy” (Hinnebusch 1989: 245f). By making the population dependent, the state and its bureaucracy construct themselves as “needed” and meaningful.

State identities vary from very loose concepts, such as democracy, to very narrow ideologies, as is the case for many variants of nationalism. The narrower an idea is, the harder for the state to attract popular support for it. Thus, narrower ideas “point to a larger role for institutions in underpinning the structure of the state” (Buzan 1991: 82). The Ba‘thist ideology could probably be regarded as a relatively narrow idea since it expresses visions of, for instance, secularism, state ownership and radical Arab nationalism (cf. Hinnebusch 1989: 16-19). Therefore, the state institutions in Syria have to play an active role in maintaining the state ideology. As discussed above, controlling its rural population by means of dam projects seems to be of importance for the Syrian state in order to manifest the ideas of Ba‘thism.

3.4 General observations

This section intends to outline the general observations from this chapter, according to the following questions: What are the features of these states’ identities? How do the dam projects facilitate for the states to maintain their identities?

Both Turkey and Syria include elements of what Buzan calls state-nations and imperial states. This implies that the states are very much concerned with the creation of a uniform state identity, as well as to make sure that no subordinated nations inside the state challenge this identity. In Turkey, state identity is much characterised by the notion of Turkish nationalism. Minorities that do not accept this identity, such as the Kurdish population, are regarded as societal threats to the state. The development programmes associated with Turkish dam projects are aimed at a region that is inhabited by the bulk of the Kurdish population. Hence, the dams provide the government with a tool to assimilate the people in these areas into a Turkish identity, for instance by promoting the Turkish language and dispersing Kurdish communities.

In Syria, the Ba‘th party has shaped the state identity into an ideology of agrarian socialism, secularism and Arabism. For the state to preserve such a narrow ideology, the government institutions have to maintain control over the population. The Euphrates project seems to have facilitated for the government to control its rural population, as well as to implement and develop state ideologies. In both Turkey and Syria, dam projects are employed as tools to make the population dependent on their states. Moreover, the dams contribute as strong symbols of might and national pride.

4 Concluding discussion

4.1 Discussing the results

This thesis seeks, as mentioned, to examine if dam projects are associated with state's ambitions to create and maintain identities. In the previous chapter, cases of dam projects in Turkey and Syria are examined. The observations made in that chapter are discussed below, including possible explanations to the difference (or rather the absence of difference) between the two cases.

Turkey and Syria are both states whose identities are significantly challenged from inside. The challenge seems, however, to be more evident in Turkey, where separatism poses a more serious threat than in Syria (see, *e.g.*, Medzini & Wolf 2005: 152f). The Syrian state seems to have a better relationship with its rural population, probably since the ideology of Ba'athism is partly based on rural empowerment. Another variation that is evident between the two states is in the presence of democracy. While Turkey has been on its way to a somewhat free and fair democracy, Syria lacks significantly behind in that aspect¹⁴. Moreover, there is a considerable difference when it comes to the two countries' positions in the international arena. Turkey could be regarded as far more important player than Syria in the regional and global state system (see, *e.g.*, Freeman 2001; Allan 2002: ch. 6).

In this study, I have not observed any difference between the states regarding *the extent* to which identity formation is prioritised in government. Neither does it seem to be any obvious difference in the degree to which dam projects are exploited. Hence, the variations regarding internal threats, democracy and regional power does not seem to significantly affect the way in which the states handle their dam projects. It would, however, be naïve to make such conclusions from a study that does not have any comparative ambitions. Therefore, I devote the next section to present possible designs for future research on this topic.

¹⁴ According to *Freedom House* (2010a; b), for instance, Turkey scores 3 in both *political rights* and *civil liberties*, while Syria scores 7 and 6, respectively (on a scale from 1 through 7, lower scores being more "democratic").

4.2 Where to go from here?

This thesis contributes with a bird's eye view of how dam projects are used as instruments for states' identity formation. In what way, then, are the results of this study valuable for future research? I have, hopefully, shown that there is an interesting problématique that needs to be examined further and in more detail. At a lower level of analysis it would be possible to examine, for instance, the logics of state bureaucracy in dam projects. In this section, I give examples of possible conclusions that could be made if the problématique would be examined further. In particular, I suggest a comparative approach that deals with democracy and its influence on how states handle dam projects.

Is there a variation in how democracies, in relation authoritarian states, employ dam projects to strengthen their state identities? Does the form of government affect a state's possibilities to create and maintain its identity? In a democratic state with a lively civil society, as opposed to an authoritarian state, it would probably be harder for the government to push ahead with dam projects. In other words, it might be harder for democracies to build dams at all, given that a significant number of people oppose such plans. Yet, the formation of state identities seems to be relatively important for some states, be they democracies or not, since it is intimately associated with questions of national security. Hence, if a state is convinced that a dam project is inevitable to gain control over a certain region, or strengthen national sentiments, it will probably build those dams anyway. National security, it could be argued, is prioritised above all.

An interesting observation from the case of Turkey is that when certain minority groups demonstrate against dam projects, these attempts tend to be regarded as issues of national security and therefore suppressed by the government. When the national environmental groups campaign against the same dams, on the other hand, the government seems to pay more attention to the critique (cf. Morvaridi 2004: 737; Ayboga 2008). Perhaps the environmental groups, in contrast to the minority groups, do not pose any significant threat to Turkish state identity. By studying the phenomenon of dam constructions one could possibly address questions such as: How is the formation of identity prioritised by different states? What type of state regards the idea of the state as most important?

The questions that are raised in this section are only examples of how to further investigate the relation between dams and state formation. Dam projects are a phenomenon that gives rise to social consequences for many people and, thus, the causes of such projects are an interesting issue to examine. This thesis concludes that it is possible to understand dam constructions in the light of states' intentions to create and maintain uniform identities. In other words, dam projects are partly caused by factors that are usually not announced by the states themselves.

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