



Hydropolitics and issue-linkage along the Orontes River Basin: an analysis of the Lebanon–Syria and Syria–Turkey hydropolitical relations

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Abstract

The Orontes River Basin is among the least researched transboundary water basins in the Middle East. The few studies on the Orontes have two main theoretical and empirical shortcomings. First, there is a lack of critical hydropolitics studies on this river. Second, those studies focus on either the Turkish–Syrian or Lebanese–Syria relations rather than analysing the case in a holistic way. Gathering both primary (international agreements, government documents, political statements and media outlets) and secondary sources, this paper seeks to answer how could Syria, as the basin hydro-hegemon, impose its control on the basin? This study argues that the lack of trilateral initiatives, which is also reflected in academic studies, is primarily due to asymmetrical power dynamics. Accordingly, Syria played a dual-game by excluding each riparian, Turkey and Lebanon, and it dealt with the issue at the bilateral interaction. Syria has used its political influence to maintain water control vis-à-vis Lebanon, while it has used non-cooperation with Turkey to exclude Turkey from decision-making processes. The paper also argues that the historical background and the political context have strongly informed Syria's water policy. Finally, given the recent regional political developments, the paper finds that Syria's power grip on the Orontes Basin slowly fades away because of the changes in the broader political context.

Keywords Orontes River · Hydropolitics · Transboundary water · Issue-linkage · Broader political context

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1 Introduction

The extensive literature on hydropolitics in the Middle East has focused on the Jordan River and on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (among others, Lowi 1995; Jägerskog 2003a, b; Kibaroglu 2002; Schultz 1995), overlooking the hydropolitics of the Orontes River.¹ Concerning the Orontes River—also known as the Asi Nehri in Turkish and Nahr el-Assi in Arabic²—most scholars have investigated relations between Syria and Turkey (Kibaroglu and Sumer 2016; Maden 2011; Scheumann et al. 2011; Scheumann and Shamaly 2016), rather than considering both Lebanon–Syria and Syria–Turkey relations. Moreover, most of the studies on the Orontes River focus on technical and managerial aspects of water resources management (Kilicaslan 2016; Yilmaz 2016). They do not sufficiently analyse how the political and historical contexts, power and discourse shape outcomes in transboundary water relations.

This paper identifies Syria as being the key actor, namely the hydro-hegemon, which strongly shapes outcomes in its bilateral hydropolitical relations with Lebanon and Turkey. In this context, the guiding research question of this article is: what informs Syria's water policy on the Orontes River Basin vis-à-vis its relations with Lebanon and Turkey? It also asks how Syria consolidated its control over the Orontes River within the basin? The paper argues that Syria played a “dual-game” to prevent trilateral decision-making settings. On the one hand, Syria has used its strong political influence over Lebanon, to the point of partially regarding its relations with Lebanon with respect to the Orontes Basin as a semi-domestic issue. As such, Syria has been able to consolidate its effective control in terms of its bilateral relations with Lebanon on the Orontes Basin. On the other hand, enjoying its relative upstream position, Syria has persistently refused to negotiate issues related to the Orontes Basin with Turkey, thereby excluding its strong neighbour from decision-making processes.

Nonetheless, recent regional political developments have resulted in a decline of Syria's hegemonic position in the basin. Concerning Syrian–Lebanese relations, as Syria's strong political influence on Lebanese domestic politics has been fading away, Lebanon has become more vocal on the Orontes issue. The Lebanese government effectively used the “issue-linkage” as a bargaining power tactic to increase its influence in the water negotiations (Comair et al. 2013; Comair and Scoullos 2015; Shamout 2015). With issue-linkage, this article refers to the capacity of one of the parties to bring other issues to the negotiating table—which could be directly linked to water, but not necessarily—in order to increase the range of potential benefits and the likelihood of a win–win solution (Tollison and Willet 1979; LeMarquand 1977; Saddoff and Grey 2002; Phillips et al. 2006; Daoudy 2009; Yu et al. 2017; Macatangay and Rieu-Clarke 2018; Warner and Zawahri 2012). Concerning Syrian–Turkish relations, the article finds that the recent political changes at the regional level have compelled both Syria and Turkey to initiate a cooperative framework on water issues including the management of the Orontes Basin. However, these bilateral relations have gradually worsened after the eruption of the Syrian uprising which has led to the end of the era of political rapprochement. As a result, the cooperative framework, which was

¹ This article adopts Elhance's (1997: 218) definition of hydropolitics as “the systematic study of conflict and cooperation between states over water resources that transcend international borders”.

² It is also known as the ‘rebellious stream’ as the Orontes is the only perennial river that flows north in Western Asia.

realised in the context of the political rapprochement in the 2000s, has also ended (Daoudy 2013).

With attention to these issue areas, this article makes a theoretical contribution to knowledge by applying the critical hydropolitics literature and situating it within the concept of a broad multilateral political context. This article will show how changes in the broader political context also change power configurations within that context. The methods of data collection used for this study have been based on a desk review of written documentation and semi-structured interviews. The authors first conducted an in-depth review of the existing treaties mentioned in the study; academic articles published on the topic; national water strategies of Lebanon, Syria and Turkey; and newspaper articles in the three countries located on the Orontes River Basin, from the period since the end of the Lebanese Civil War in 1990 until 2018. Moreover, to better understand how issues were linked and arguments were used during negotiations, semi-structured interviews have been conducted with selected water experts and governmental negotiators in the region. All respondents have been anonymised for ethical purposes and to protect the identity of the interviewees, given the highly political issues discussed.

In the following sections, this article first provides a general overview of the hydropolitics of the Orontes Basin followed by background information regarding the basin. Second, it analyses Lebanese–Syrian hydropolitical relations. Third, it discusses Syrian–Turkish hydropolitical relations. It then provides a discussion and concluding remarks on the analysis.

2 General overview of the Orontes Basin hydropolitics: broader political context and power do mix

Even though in the Middle East technical and managerial “objective strategies” are promoted in transboundary water management, there is a growing body of the literature, namely critical hydropolitics, which recognises how power and discourses shape transboundary water governance (Sneddon and Fox 2006; Zeitoun and Warner 2006; Mirumachi 2010). The framework of hydro-hegemony (FHH) (Zeitoun and Warner 2006) seeks to analyse how different dimensions of power shape transboundary water settings. For Zeitoun and Warner (2006), there are often non-egalitarian and highly asymmetrical power configurations among the riparian countries, and the “more equal” riparian states use material, bargaining and ideational power tactics to maintain hegemonic control. While the so-called hydro-hegemon has a dominant role in shaping the outcome in transboundary water settings, this does not necessarily mean that the so-called non-hydro-hegemons are powerless. They, too, use a variety of material, bargaining and ideational counter-hegemonic tactics to balance the hydro-hegemon (Petersen-Perlman and Fischhendler 2018). As Menga (2016) points out, the riparian position may strongly influence other sources of material power, as the upstream riparian states may have an advantage in exploiting water resources. For Menga, the riparian position also enhances states’ bargaining power capabilities. Bargaining power refers to actors’ ability to set the agenda and the rules of the game, including using issue-linkage in negotiations, making alliances with other riparian countries, using legal frameworks, supporting opposition networks, lobbying and pressurising the targeted groups (Conker 2014). Finally, ideational power refers to actors’ ability to control ideas and to promote sanctioned discourses. In fact, Menga (2016: 411) defines hydro-hegemony as “the success of a basin riparian in imposing a discourse, preserving its interests and impeding changes to a convenient status-quo”. According to the concept of the circle

of hydro-hegemony developed by Menga, these forms of power are interconnected with one another, and the riparian states use a combination of them to either to maintain or to challenge the status quo.

However, the FHH has been criticised for several reasons. It has been criticised for its state-centric focus; Warner (2008) argues that hydro-hegemony must be understood as a layered phenomenon, and he identifies hegemonies at national, basin, regional and global levels. The controversy over the construction of the Ilisu Dam showed that power relations take place at domestic and international scales apart from typical inter-riparian interactions (Warner 2012). Moreover, Menga and Mirumachi (2016) showed that the ruling elites portray extensive hydraulic development as a symbol of national progress; thereby, the discourse promoted at the domestic level is used as source of “soft power” at the transboundary level. Likewise, Harris and Alatout (2010) show how states’ nation-making processes and territorial consolidations inform their transboundary water policies. Wessels (2015) calls for considering the link between hydro-politics and local resistance, drawing on examples from the Golan Heights and on the West Bank. Wessels (2016) also underlines the necessity of considering the role of identities, beliefs, and perceptions of the other, combining ideational power analyses with anthropological methodologies which make local perceptions of individuals central.

Another criticism is that few studies have focussed on how the historical and political contexts influence the outcome in transboundary water interactions. In fact, studies which are in a similar line of thought with the FHH, acknowledge the relevance of political context. According to this view, interactions cannot be understood without considering the general sociopolitical contexts in which they take place (Jägerskog 2003a, b; Zeitoun and Warner 2006; Aggestam and Sundell-Eklund 2014; Castro 2007). Several studies focussed on different aspects of the political context such as issue-linkage (Daoudy 2009), non-water issues that are related to water issues (Petersen-Perlman and Fischhendler 2018) and geopolitical overlay (Nagheeb and Warner 2018). Others looked at how the domestic political context has shaped transboundary water policies of riparian states (Menga 2015; Carkoglu and Eder 2001). Likewise, the recent study conducted by Hussein and Grandi (2017) looks at the relationship between power and broader political contexts. Building on these studies, this paper argues that the empirical evidence derived from hydro-political interactions among Lebanon, Syria and Turkey suggests that the historical and political context strongly influences riparian states’ transboundary water interactions on the Orontes Basin. The historical context is particularly important in understanding Syria’s transboundary water policy, which can be considered as the hydro-hegemon of the basin. The paper also argues that political dynamics are not fixed but subject to change. More importantly, those changes in the broader political dynamics may widen or limit states’ options, determining their capacity to influence in transboundary water settings. In a recent article of Warner et al. (2017: 1), they revise the body of the literature that has built on and constructively criticised the FHH in the past 10 years, showing, in particular, “how thinking on the theorization and analysis of hydro-hegemony has moved beyond the state-centricity, the tendency to see hegemony as solely negative, and the conceptually hegemonic potential of hydro-hegemony itself”.

3 Hydro-politics of the Orontes Basin

As shown in Fig. 1, the Orontes River originates in Lebanon a few kilometres northeast of the Litani River in the western part of the Anti-Lebanon Mountains. More precisely, the sources of the Orontes are the Al-Labweh, Ain Zarka and Daffash springs, which are

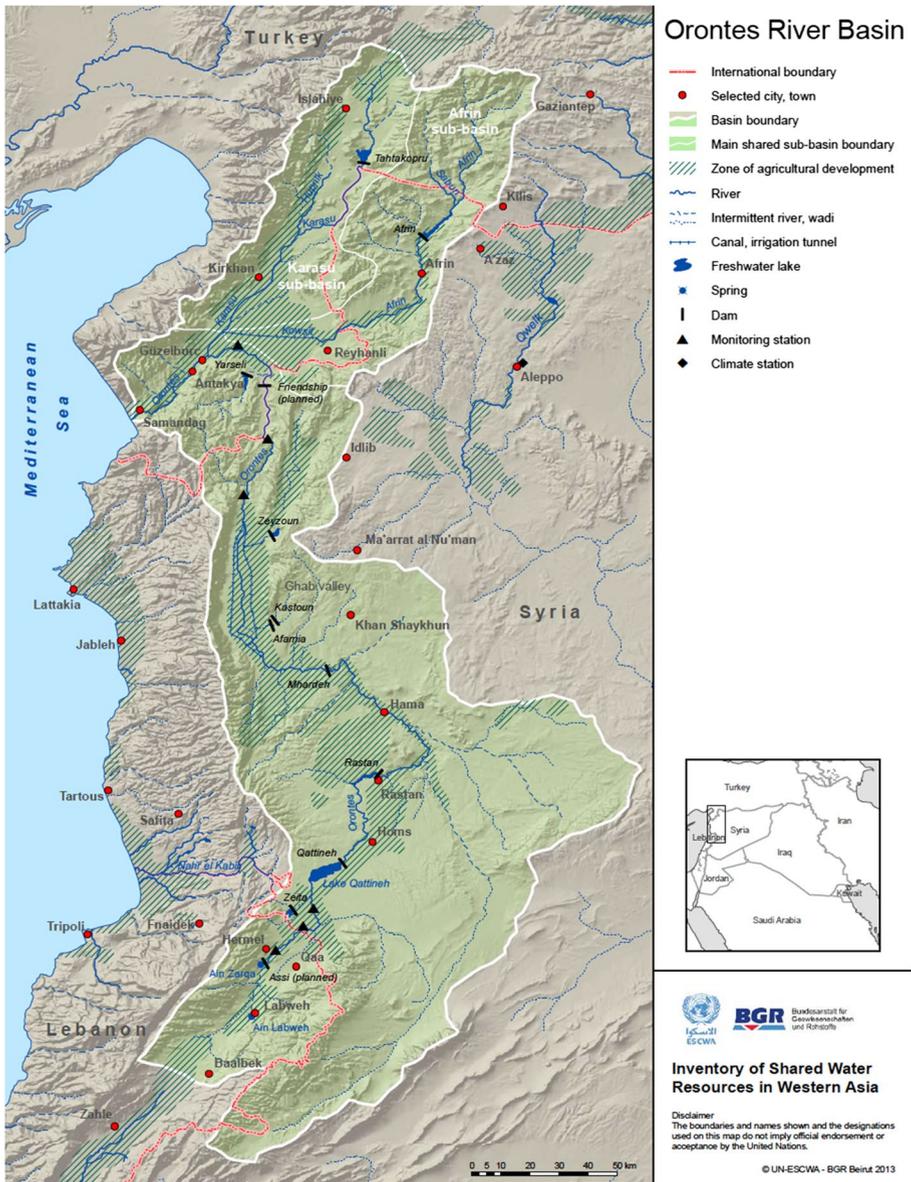


Fig. 1 Orontes River Basin

in the northern Bekaa region of Lebanon. It flows approximately 46 km through north-east Lebanon where it enters into Syrian territory. Thereafter, the river continues to flow northward and enters into Ghab Valley. After acting as an international border for 31 km between Turkey and Syria, the Orontes River enters the Alexandretta region in Turkey by flowing westward where it empties into the Mediterranean Sea (Scheumann

et al. 2011: 302). As discussed below, the Alexandretta region is a disputed coastal area known as Hatay, Iskenderun or Alexandretta.

The total length of the river is 448 km (35 km in Lebanon, 325 km in Syria and 88 km in Turkey), even though estimation concerning the river length varies according to different sources (Scheumann et al. 2011).³ The catchment area of the Orontes Basin for each riparian state varies between estimates of the US Army Corps of Engineers as 22,500 km², the FAO figures of 24,660 km², the DSI estimates of 22,624 km² and UN-ESCWA estimate of 26,530 km² (FAO 2009; Korkmaz and Karatas 2009: 22; Maden 2011: 12; UN-ESCWA 2013), of which most catchment area lies in Syria: 17,881 km² in Syria, 6633 km² in Turkey and 2026 km² in Lebanon (UN-ESCWA 2013). In terms of basin areas per country, 67% is in Syria, 25% in Turkey and 8% in Lebanon (UN-ESCWA 2013). It is estimated that 46% of the annual discharge originates in Turkey, 43% comes from Syria and 11% from Lebanon (Kibaroglu et al. 2005: 67).

There has been an extensive hydraulic development in the Orontes Basin. For Turkey, even though the river constitutes only 0.6% of its entire water potential, there are already three dams operating for both hydropower and irrigation purposes. Until recently, there has been a limited hydraulic development in the Turkish part of the Orontes Basin (Korkmaz and Karatas 2009). However, currently several hydraulic development projects are being introduced by the Turkish government in the region. For instance, Reyhanlı Dam, which is under construction, is a priority project; it is estimated that 60,000 ha of land will be further opened to irrigation in the fertile Amik Plain upon completion of the Reyhanlı Dam. The dam will also tackle the flooding issue, which is one of the main problems in the region (personal communication with interviewee 2).

Lebanon uses about 21 MCM per year of water from the Orontes, primarily for irrigating about 1700 ha of land (up to 21,000 ha if considering the whole catchment area) and about 23% for domestic and municipal uses. The Lebanese government has been planning the Assi scheme, aiming at building a diversion dam, pumping stations, an irrigation network as well as a hydropower facility. For Syria, the Orontes Basin constitutes one of the most important water resources as it constitutes 13.6% of Syria's entire water potential, being the third largest sub-basin after the Euphrates and the Khabur basins in Syria. The Orontes is vital for Syria's agricultural development—one of the most strategic goals of the state during the Baath Rule (Barnes 2009; Hinnebusch 2011)—with a contribution to agriculture of 12.7%. Moreover, according to data before the 2011 Syrian War, the Orontes supplies domestic water needs of the Syrian cities of Hama and Homs, and it delivers 16.52% of the domestic water supply. Finally, it also meets approximately 40% of the industrial water needs (Salman and Mualla 2003: 3). The high proportion of water for industry from the Orontes mainly stems from the fact that the main industries are located in western Syria.

Rarely, do midstream riparian countries emerge as “hydro-hegemony” in the trans-boundary water settings? However, Syria (at least until the Syrian War started in 2011), as the midstream riparian state, appears to be a hydro-hegemon in the Orontes Basin. Here, two questions must be addressed to justify the assertion. First, why should we consider Syria as a hydro-hegemon in the basin? Second, how has the Syrian government consolidated and maintained its hegemony in the basin. With respect to the first question, the

³ According to recent inventory study conducted in Western Asia the total length is estimated as 404 km (UN-ESCWA 2013), while the study conducted by Bazza and Najib (2003) illustrate the total length is 485 km.

following geographical–hydrological and political factors give an advantage in the basin. First, the lion’s share of the river basin is located in Syria. Approximately, 72% of the entire river flows within the Syrian territory. Thus, given the strategic importance of the Orontes River in Syria’s agricultural, industrial and domestic use, the river basin has been heavily exploited by Syria, which gives the Syrian government a significant exploitation potential.

At the same time, the utilisation of the river in both the Turkish and Lebanese parts is relatively limited. Therefore, Syria has far greater exploitation potential and motivations to exploit the river basin for various purposes. Second, Syria has had strong political influence backed by the military presence in Lebanon for decades, which has enabled Syria to enjoy a highly favourable status quo in the Orontes Basin, vis-à-vis its relations with Lebanon. As this paper will analyse in detail, the 1994 Water Agreement between Syria and Lebanon shows the asymmetrical power relations between the two riparian states. The agreement endowed Syria a firm control of water in the basin. It is also worth noting that Turkey has been excluded in this process as a riparian state of the Orontes Basin (personal communication with interviewee 1).

With respect to the second question, we argue that the Syrian government has successfully followed a dual-game policy to maintain the status quo in the basin. First, Syria has established a highly asymmetrical status quo in the basin via agreements concerning its relations with Lebanon by using its strong political influence. Second, given its relative upstream position and high exploitation potential, Syria has used non-cooperation with the strong downstream riparian state as a bargaining power tactic in bilateral negotiations with Turkey to exclude the strong downstream riparian state. Even though the Turkish side has repeatedly raised the Orontes issue in water negotiations, the Syrian government has refused to negotiate (personal communication with interviewee 2). For example, Turkey, Syria and Iraq could not reach an agreement on tripartite talks for the Euphrates due to Syria’s refusal to link the Orontes River issue with the Euphrates during the first rounds of water negotiations in 1965 (Carkoglu and Eder 2001: 66). The issues were once again brought by Turkey to the negotiation table in 1993 in bilateral talks between Turkey and Syria, but the Syrian side once again refused to negotiate (Carkoglu and Eder 2001: 68). Thus, Syria’s persistent refusal to negotiate the issues with Turkey created resentment on the Turkish side (*ibid.*). Syria’s comparative transboundary water policy concerning the Euphrates and the Orontes was portrayed as inconsistent in the Turkish official documents (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1996). Finally, the fact that Turkey is excluded from the 1994 treaty also confirms that Syria has used non-cooperation with the strong downstream riparian as a bargaining power tactic to maintain the status quo. Therefore, we argue that this dual-game policy adopted by the Syrian government did not only enable Syria to maintain the status quo in the basin, but it was also the main reason why there has been no regional approach including all three riparian states.

It is easy to comprehend why and how Syria could impose its will on the Orontes concerning its relations with Lebanon, given the existing power asymmetry and Syria’s strong political influence for decades. However, it is rather difficult to understand why Syria could establish a favourable status quo on the Orontes with regard to relations with Turkey. Here, it can be argued that since some of the tributaries of the Orontes River originate within Turkish territory, Turkey does not have to deal with its upstream neighbours. In fact, two main tributaries of the Orontes Basin, namely the Afrin and the Karasu streams, originate within Turkey. Furthermore, there are other small streams located in the Turkish part of the Orontes Basin. The Afrin stream, which is one of the important tributaries of the Orontes Basin, originates in Turkey and then enters Syria. After that, the flow re-enters Turkish territory from the Hatay region. In other words, the Afrin stream has an exceptional geographical character, which

makes Turkey both the upstream and downstream riparian states. It is also worth noting that the Syrian government has already built the Maydanki (Afrin) Dam on the Afrin stream. Karasu stream also originates from Turkey and then crosses the Turkish–Syrian borderline before it joins the mainstream Orontes River. Therefore, these two major tributaries of the Orontes have their own transboundary-complicated characters. Nevertheless, it appears that Turkey has followed a water resources development strategy in the Orontes for minimum reliance on the upstream states, primarily Syria, considering Turkey’s recent hydraulic development projects.

However, water quantity is not the only problem that Turkey has as a downstream riparian state in the Orontes Basin. Water flooding and water quality constitute even more significant problems for Turkey. According to Turkish water experts, the issue of flooding is one of the biggest challenges that Turkey encounters in regard to the Orontes issue (personal communication with interviewees 2 and 3). For instance, the unexpected collapse of the Zeyzoun Dam in 2002 had adverse effects on the Hatay region (The Great National Assembly of Turkey Minutes Journal 2003). Thus, considering Turkey’s Friendship Dam proposal, apart from its symbolic importance in Turkish–Syrian relations, regulating the water flow and tackling floods were a priority for Turkey. Furthermore, water quality is another crucial issue for Turkey, given that there has been heavy exploitation in Syria (personal communication with interviewee 2). Due to these reasons, even though the Turkish government could deal with the water scarcity problem to some degree in the Turkish part of the Orontes, it still needed to cooperate with the upstream riparian states, primarily Syria, to deal with other water-related problems in the basin.

The complicated character of the Orontes case between Turkey and Syria allows for insightful conclusions given the existing power asymmetry between Turkey and Syria, which was reflected in the Euphrates and Tigris Basin. First, although the riparian position is one source of power that influences both exploitation potential and other sources of power, the Syrian government was able to use its exploitation potential to exert “non-cooperation” as a bargaining power tactic through its relative upstream advantage vis-à-vis Turkey. However, employing such a power tactic is simply not available for Syria due to its downstream position in the Euphrates and Tigris Basin. Second, the comparison between the Orontes and Euphrates and Tigris Basin suggests that there should be both exploitation potential and strong political motivations to consolidate control over water resources. In the case of the Orontes, there is both great exploitation potential and political will which has enabled the Syrian government to establish full control. In the case of the Euphrates and Tigris Basin, while there are strong political motivations and great exploitation potential, those factors are either weak or non-existent in the Orontes Basin for Turkey.

Even though the power relations, to some degree, explain Syria’s relations with Turkey concerning the hydropolitics of the Orontes Basin, we argue that Syria’s water policy is strongly informed by the historical and the broader political contexts. In this regard, the Alexandretta province has always been considered by the Syrian ruling elites as “the stolen province”, denying Turkey of any claim on the basin (Jörum 2013: 116). Furthermore, water relations with Lebanon concerning the Orontes have almost been treated as a “semi-domestic” matter.

4 Untangling the political context of transboundary water relations: the case of Lebanon–Syria on the Orontes Basin

4.1 The broader political context of Lebanon–Syria relations

In order to understand the hydropolitical relations on the Orontes Basin, it is necessary to contextualise them in broader political relations. This section provides general background on Lebanon–Syria political relations, focusing on the period of the hydropolitical bilateral treaties, from the end of the Lebanese Civil War until 2005, the year of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri's assassination. This is not an easy task, as there is no unified history of Lebanon after its independence in 1943; in fact "according to government education policy, there is no history of Lebanon after 1946, the year in which the official unified history curriculum draws to a close" (Makdisi 2006: 201).

The Lebanese Civil War lasted from 1975 until 1990. The civil war ended with the Charter of National Reconciliation, also known as the Taif Agreement,⁴ was agreed on and signed by the surviving members of the 1972–1976 Lebanese Parliament. According to the Taif Agreement, the 40,000 Syrian troops in Lebanon in 1989 had to be redeployed in the Bekaa valley within 2 years from the implementation of the agreement. Nevertheless, according to many Lebanese politicians (Comair et al. 2013: 2015), Syria violated the agreement by deciding not to withdraw or redeploy its troops; however, according to Syria, the agreement meant withdrawing the troops 2 years after confessionalism was eliminated (UN-ESCWA 2013). The US and the international community did not interfere with Syrian influence in Lebanon, also because Syria supported the US alliance against Saddam Hussein in 1990–1991 (Gambill 2005). This resulted in an implicit US acceptance of the Syrian role in Lebanon. In fact, in 2005 there were still 14,000 Syrian soldiers in Lebanon. Only after Hariri's assassination in 2005 and UN and international pressure, Syria withdrew all of its troops in April 2005. Before 2005, the Syrian influence in Lebanon was institutionalised, and Syria played a heavy role in Lebanese politics, shaping and determining Lebanese politics, policies and decisions (Gambill 2005). This role led to many controversies such as the assassination of President Moawad. According to Gambill (2005), Syria kept portraying Lebanon as an unstable country needing Syrian stewardship to maintain stability and peace. Lebanese politicians saw the Syrian presence in the country as a "necessity" while Syria saw it as an "obligation" (Gambill 2005). While Lebanon was aspiring to more independence from Syria, in practice Lebanese politics became more and more tied, intertwined and influenced by Syria (ibid.). This special relationship was institutionalised by several bilateral agreements and treaties such as the Treaty of Brotherhood, Cooperation, and Coordination and the Defence and Security Pact, both signed in 1991. This agreement shows and reflects the special relationship between Syria and Lebanon, interlinking their economies and strengthening their cooperation.

In fact, the former treaty provides the formal basis for cooperation in different sectors, including water. This treaty also established the Lebanese–Syrian Joint Committee for Shared Water, and it allowed for discussions and drafting of the future 1994 bilateral agreement on the distribution of the Orontes River water originating in Lebanese territory.

⁴ The main elements of the agreement were the demobilisation of all militias, a timetable for Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, Lebanese sovereignty on all Lebanese territory—including the southern part occupied by Israel—and political reforms. The agreement also supported principal principles of parliamentary democracy and free economy, while confirming the confessionalism political system.

In order to maintain its influence and role, Syria agreed to fulfil the demand of Lebanon to some extent, for instance, in the water sector, while not responding to the Lebanese requests of more political independence. As highlighted by Jørum (2014a, b) and Pipes (1992), this agreement is to be seen and contextualised within the general historical views that the Syrian government had of Lebanon perceiving Lebanon as part of its territory and zone of influence, part of the “Bilad al Sham” (historic greater Syria); Syria had been controlling Lebanon and Lebanese politics in different ways, considering it almost as a semi-domestic context for decades, exerting its hegemonic political control over Lebanon, including in the water sector (Jørum 2014a, b; Pipes 1992; Comair et al. 2013, Comair and Scoullos 2015). Exactly in this broader context, the 1994 agreement is situated and reflects how a hegemon can impose its will to the weaker party. However, the Syrian influence over Lebanon has been decreasing in the past two decades.

4.2 Lebanon–Syria hydropolitical relations on the Orontes Basin

Discussions between Lebanon and Syria for an agreement on the Orontes River have been taking place since the 1940s. In 1972, the Lebanese and Syrian governments agreed to allocate 80 MCM per year to Lebanon from the Orontes River; however, the agreement never entered into force as the Lebanese Civil War started a few years later, and in 1976 Syria occupied the area of the sources of the river, which are in Lebanon, during the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990). Hence, Syria controlled the use of the Orontes River waters in Lebanese territory (Zwahlen et al. 2016; Sofer 1999).

In 1991, Lebanon and Syria ratified the “Brotherhood, Cooperation, and Coordination Treaty”, supporting bilateral cooperation in different sectors, including water. Within this cooperation, a bilateral commission prepared a draft agreement, building on the 1972 agreement, which was the basis for the 1994 agreement. In fact, on 30 September 1994—after the end of the civil war—the two countries signed in Damascus the “Agreement on the Distribution of the Orontes River Water Originating in Lebanese Territory” that confirmed 80 MCM per year to Lebanon if the flow of the river reached at least 400 MCM per year at the Hermel Bridge gage, otherwise 20% of the flow. Concerning groundwater resources use, the agreement prohibited the construction of new wells. However, no similar restrictions were imposed on wells in the Syrian side (Zwahlen et al. 2016). In the agreement, there are no mentions of the possibility for Lebanon to build dams, diversion works or other infrastructure development, preventing the possibility to store water in the winter—when it is less useful for irrigation—to be used in the dry seasons and for the development of the Kaa and Hermel regions. The agreement also envisioned a joint technical committee responsible to settle issues that were not directly regulated by the agreement, including whether the 80 MCM per year allocated to Lebanon would include the flow of the tributaries of the Orontes River or not (Agreement Lebanon–Syria 1994; Shapland 1997: 145; UN-ESCWA 2013: 238). In a nutshell, the 1994 agreement clearly shows the institutionalised asymmetrical balance of power between the two countries in terms of what is allowed and what is not allowed and in terms of water allocation to Lebanon and Syria.

The 1994 agreement, however, was signed soon after the end of the civil war in Lebanon, and with the 1991 ceasefire the Syrian army entered into Lebanese territory, resulting in a heavy Syrian influence on the decisions of the Lebanese government. Hence, the 1994 agreement was perceived as not favourable to Lebanon and as reflecting “the strength of Syria’s position in Lebanon” (Shapland 1997: 144). Therefore, the agreement was renegotiated in 1997, when Lebanon started recovering from civil war and became more

independent from the Syrian influence compared to 1994 (UN-ESCWA 2013: 238–239). On 11 January 1997, an addendum was attached to the 1994 agreement, envisioning the exclusion of five sub-basins of the Orontes River—Yammouneh, Marjhine, Jabal al-Homr and Orghosh as well as the Labweh Spring—from the Lebanese share of 80 MCM per year. According to the addendum, these five sub-basins are to be considered “closed” basins and not common sources; in other words, they are within Lebanon and not part of the transboundary basins—hence the exclusion from the 1994 agreement. This amendment increased de facto the allocation of the basin’s water to Lebanon (Comair et al. 2013: 135). The Lebanese government, in this instance, made use of issue-linkage to convince the Syrian counterpart to accept the changes to the 1994 agreement, emphasising that the “1994 [agreement] may constitute jurisprudence for Israel. This may affect the rights of Lebanon to waters in the Hasbani–Wazzani River Basin, a main tributary of the Jordan River” (Comair et al. 2013: 135).

Given the increasing independence from Syrian influence, and the fact that both the Lebanese and Syrian governments signed the 1997 UN Convention on the non-navigational uses of international watercourses, they decided to form a committee to revise the 1994 agreement and the 1997 addendum. As noted by Comair et al. (2013: 136), the Lebanese delegation prepared for the negotiations by identifying several linked issues to convince the Syrian counterpart to reach a more equitable agreement for both countries. Among these linked issues, for the Lebanese negotiators future relations with Israel on the Jordan River Basin were also a point to be considered: “a ‘win–win’ hydro-diplomatic situation between the two riparian countries will strengthen Lebanon’s position regarding possible negotiations with Israel”; “build ties between Lebanon and Syria in the hope of establishing a future bilateral agreement between Lebanon and Israel” (Comair et al. 2013: 136). The new 2001 amendment envisioned an 80 MCM per year share for Lebanon plus 16 MCM from wells, and the construction of a diversion dam and of a storage dam to allow Lebanon to expand its agricultural activities. However, in December 2001 the Syrian negotiators rejected what was agreed upon in that year claiming that the new version would negatively impact the Syrian economy of the communities along the Orontes (Comair et al. 2013). Also in this occasion, the Lebanese negotiators used issue-linkage as a technique to increase their bargaining power and convince the powerful counterpart, Syria, to accept the new amendment. As explained by Comair et al. (2013: 136), the issue-linkage deployed by the Lebanese included:

Negative effects on a major part of the Shiite population in the region, who lives beneath the threshold of poverty and may revolt against Syria; the fact that all the Lebanese communities were in favor of the newly revised agreement; the position of Israel which might see this as an opportunity to impose the same negotiation terms on the Jordan River. The latter could have had the following consequences: non-restitution of the Golan Heights and non-recovery of the water shares belonging to Syria.

In January 2002, the presidents of the two countries met in Beirut and decided to sign the decision of the previous year; the new agreement was therefore ratified in the same year and is currently the valid bilateral agreement on the Orontes River between Lebanon and Syria (Comair et al. 2013: 136). In the following years, Lebanon started construction which included: the diversion dam near Ain Zarqa Spring, pumping stations and the irrigation network (phase 1) and a dam near Hermel Bridge and a hydroelectric power plant in the Hermel and Al-Qaa areas (phase 2). A Chinese company, contracted for phase 1, started working on the dam in 2005, but the works had to be stopped the following year when Israel bombed the site during the 2006 war. The reconstruction of the diversion dam

has recently been restarted (UN-ESCWA 2013: 234). This shows that as Syria's influence fades away from Lebanon, the Lebanese elites have been active in using issue-linkages techniques and strategies to increase their power also in the water sector, including on the Orontes River Basin. Nevertheless, since the ongoing Syrian war projects on the Orontes are on hold, and therefore, it is difficult to estimate what and how future scenarios will look like.

5 Untangling the political context of transboundary water relations: the case of Syria and Turkey on the Orontes Basin

The historical background and broader political context played a vital role in Syria's hydropolitical relations with Turkey on the Orontes Basin. During the water talks between Ankara and Damascus concerning the Euphrates and Tigris, the Turkish government wanted to also discuss the Orontes issue, but Syrian officials turned down this request. Ozden Bilen, former head of the State Hydraulic Works (DSI-Turkish acronym), describes Syria's water policy on the Orontes vis-à-vis Turkey as "... a very deaf attitude towards the justified demands of the downstream countries" (Bilen 2009: 90). He summarises Syria's policy on the Orontes as "mine is mine, but yours is negotiable" (Bilen 2009: 90). Syria's reluctance to even discuss the issue is heavily criticised by Turkish governmental documents. For example, Syria's inconsistent policy was criticised for making the comparison between the Euphrates and Tigris and the Orontes basins in policy reports (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1996). In this instance, the Syrian government has used non-cooperation with the downstream riparian states as a bargaining power tactic to maintain its de facto control on the Orontes Basin. But what has driven the Syrian government to adopt such a defiant approach, which could be easily exposed by Turkey? The main answer of this question lies within the historical territorial dispute between Turkey and Syria over the Alexandretta (Hatay) province.

As Hinnebusch (2003) points out, the Syrian ruling elites were always dissatisfied by the post First World War order. In fact, the Syrian elites perceived today's Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine as part of the "historic Syria" (Bilad Al-Sham). The Alexandretta province was also an indispensable part of the envisaged "Greater Syria". In the eyes of the Syrian elites, cession of the Alexandretta province to Turkey by the French Mandatory Authorities was a betrayal carried out by the West. Syria has never officially given up its claims over the province.

The Alexandretta issue was the main obstacle in the Turkish–Syrian hydropolitical relations regarding the Orontes River. For the Syrians, the river does not constitute a transboundary water setting as it flows through the Alexandretta, which was supposed to be within Syrian territory. For Kout (2008: 2304), from the Syrian Ministry of Irrigation, the Orontes River "originates in Lebanon runs through the territory of Syria from south to north and drains into the Mediterranean Sea" without mentioning Turkey. In an interview with the Turkish academic Öziş, he explained, "When we tell our Syrian counterpart 'let us discuss the Orontes issue too'; he replies if you can provide to grant asylum in Turkey, then I can discuss the issue. Otherwise, the moment I discuss the Orontes, I cannot return to Syria anymore" [Authors' translation] (Öziş 2006). Therefore, the Orontes issue remained unsolved between the two riparian states in the context of this historical background and a direct issue-linkage with a non-water issue.

Other issues have also made Syria and Turkey “distant neighbours” for decades (Altunisik 2006). First, the historical legacy inherited from the late Ottoman Empire period, informed mutual identities. On the one hand, the Ottoman Rule is considered as a decay in Arab historiography and inspired Arab nationalism. The end of the Ottoman era is regarded as the emancipation from “Ottoman imperialism” (Aras and Köni 2002). On the other hand, when the Arabs joined the First World War, this was considered as a betrayal among the late Ottoman elites, many of whom then became the founders of the republic of Turkey (Aras and Köni 2002). Second, Turkey and Syria had opposing positions during the Cold War, coming to the verge of war in 1957 (Soysal 1998; Küçükvatan 2011). On the one hand, Turkey received financial and technical assistance from the West (primarily the United States) to fund its large-scale hydraulic development projects (Kibaroglu 2016). On the other hand, the Syrian government, under the Baath Party rule, adopted the Soviet model of large-scale dams, irrigation networks and reclamation projects (Springborg 1981). Third, the issue of the Euphrates and Tigris Basin became another hydropolitical conflict area as of the 1960s. Particularly, when Turkey introduced the Southeastern Anatolian Project (GAP-Turkish Acronym), one of the leverages used by Syria to undermine the project was supporting armed groups. Moreover, Syria’s sanctuary to the PKK during the 1980s and 1990s further worsened relations (Alantar 2000). As the PKK posed a threat to Turkey’s territorial integrity, Syria’s direct support and sanctuary to Abdullah Ocalan, the leader of the PKK, brought the countries to the verge of war in 1998.

After the Ocalan crisis was de-escalated with his expulsion in 1999, a political rapprochement took place during the 2000s. This significant shift in relations lasted until the Syrian War in 2011. Cooperation on water initially started with lower ranking water bureaucracies (Kibaroglu and Unver 2000) followed by cooperation at higher political levels. Revitalisation of the Joint Technical Committee and establishment of the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council (HLSCC) were important steps to galvanise cooperation on water and non-water issues. In the context of political rapprochement, four memoranda of understanding (MoU-hereafter) out of thirty envisioned interstate cooperation regarding water issues (Maden 2011). Those MoUs include construction of a joint dam on the Orontes River and construction of pumping stations that would enable Syria to extract water from the Tigris River, enhancing cooperation on effective water utilisation to combat drought and enhancing cooperation to improve water quality.

The agreement between Turkey and Syria on the Orontes River is of vital importance for three reasons. First, just like symbolism is often made by the ruling elites to portray dams as symbols of national progress (Kaika 2006; Conker 2018), the joint dam is regarded by the Turkish and Syrian elites as a symbol of the political rapprochement. Thus, the dam was named as the “Friendship Dam” to emphasise this symbolism. Second, while other cooperative frameworks realised during the rapprochement set out limited cooperation with respect to water, the Friendship Dam aimed to resolve the Orontes dispute effectively. According to the MoU, each party will take the required water for their irrigation needs from the dam reservoir and they will notify their monthly extractions from the dam at the beginning of every year (MoU on Friendship Dam 2011, Article 10). Furthermore, the parties also agreed upon establishment of a joint commission that will operate the dam and determine each party’s water needs for irrigation. Therefore, the Friendship Dam project also served as a robust tool in the resolution of the long-standing water conflict between Syria and Turkey in the Orontes River. Third, Syria has never officially declared that it gave up its territorial claims over the Alexandretta province. Syria’s policy during the political rapprochement with Turkey was not to put the issue on the political agenda in bilateral relations. According to this view, the issue is “put off for coming generations”

(Pipes 2005). Therefore, the agreement on the construction of the Friendship Dam was considered as a major policy shift in Syria's policy on the Alexandretta issue as well as in regard to the Orontes dispute. This paper argues that major changes in the political context and power dynamics led to this shift.

Global and regional dynamics pushed Syria and Turkey to seek friendly relations due to the following reasons. First, as the USA pressure on Syria intensified after the invasion of Iraq, the Syrian leadership sought for diversifying alliances to shield against the USA. In this context, Turkey was regarded as one of the key regional actors to achieve this aim (Hinnebusch 2009). Second, one of the important political consequences of the invasion of Iraq is the territorial integrity of Iraq. Both Turkey and Syria had shared interests concerning the future of Iraq (Hinnebusch 2015). Third, Syria also had to choose either to cooperate with Turkey or to continue to support the PKK. The political context pushed the Syrian government to choose the former (Conker 2014). Therefore, the PKK was no longer a form of leverage. Turkey's doctrinal shift towards the Middle East affairs has strengthened its economic and political ties with Middle Eastern countries. Cooperation with Syria became more important for Turkey, since Syria was seen as the opening gate to the Middle East (Milliyet Daily 2009). Political rapprochement also resulted in improving economic ties between Turkey and Syria, and Turkey became a major trading partner with Syria. Finally, by the 2000s, almost all the major dams were already completed particularly on the mainstream Euphrates as part of the GAP plan. This enormous storage capacity and water control enabled Turkey a significant leverage in hydropolitics on the Euphrates and Tigris Basin.

However, a decade-long political rapprochement ended after the beginning of the Syrian War (Altuninsik 2016). As the first demonstrations started across Syria only 1 month after the inauguration of the Friendship Dam, the relations between the two countries have gradually worsened. Notably, after the Turkish jet was shot down by Syria, relations were permanently suspended (Altuninsik 2016). As relations have continued to deteriorate since 2011, the discourse that portrays the Alexandretta province as a "stolen territory" returned to the Syrian political agenda (Jörum 2014a, b). The decision-making platforms such as the HLSCC that enabled such cooperation on different issue were also suspended (Daoudy 2013). Bilateral deals including the construction of the Friendship Dam were suspended. Therefore, the construction work also halted.

6 Conclusion

This paper was guided by the following research questions: what informs Syria's water policy on the Orontes River Basin vis-à-vis its hydropolitical relations with Lebanon and with Turkey? How did Syria consolidate its control over the Orontes River within the basin? The reason why the paper has focussed on Syria's transboundary water policy on the Orontes River Basin is its dominant role in the hydropolitics of the basin. We argue that the existing water exploitation by the riparian states suggests that Syria appears to be the hydro-hegemon in the basin, at least until the start of the Syrian war in 2011. We argue that Syria was able to achieve such a dominant position due to both geographical-hydrological and political factors. With respect to geographical-hydrological factors, the paper shows that Syria has the lion's share of the basin, which enables great exploitation potential. The paper also shows the strategic importance of the basin for Syria's agricultural, industrial and domestic water needs. Syria also enjoys a relative

upstream position vis-à-vis Turkey, which has provided an upper-hand in bilateral relations. With respect to political factors, the paper shows that Syria has successfully followed a dual-game policy with Lebanon and Turkey. On the one hand, Syria could impose a status quo concerning its relations with Lebanon by using its strong political influence. The Syrian government has justified the highly asymmetrical status quo via bilateral agreements. On the other hand, it successfully used non-cooperation with the downstream riparian state as a bargaining power tactic vis-à-vis its relations with downstream Turkey. The Syrian government has persistently refused to negotiate the Orontes issue with Turkey for decades, excluding Turkey with any bilateral or trilateral negotiations. The paper concludes that this dual-game policy followed by Syria is the primary reasons why there have been no trilateral cooperation initiatives in the basin.

Furthermore, the paper also concludes that both geographical–hydrological and political factors partly help to understand Syria’s transboundary water policy on the Orontes basin. In this regard, the paper finds that historical context strongly influences Syria’s transboundary water relations with Turkey and Lebanon. The Syrian ruling elites have considered Lebanon and the Hatay region, where the Orontes River flows, as part of Syria. Therefore, while relations with Lebanon concerning the Orontes River were almost considered to be a “semi-domestic” matter, Turkey’s presence as a downstream riparian state has not been officially accepted. Finally, the paper also shows that the broader political context between Syrian–Lebanese and Syrian–Turkish relations strongly influenced hydropolitics of the basin. To put it simply, this paper argues that the long-standing conflict between the Orontes issues cannot be understood without taking into consideration the broader political context in which hydropolitical relations are embedded. In this sense, the broader political context has conditioned the hydropolitical relations, both positively and negatively.

Finally, the empirical evidence derived from the hydropolitics of the Orontes Basin enables to draw the following theoretical conclusions. First, the paper showed that transboundary water politics cannot be understood by only looking at power dimensions within the water box, but showed that the FHH needs to be conceptualised within the broader political context, which allows the non-hydro-hegemonic countries to challenge the status quo by adopting issue-linkage techniques. Those issue-linkage techniques are made possible by changes in the broader political context, ultimately shaping and shifting transboundary water politics and configurations. Second, the comparison between the Orontes and Euphrates rivers between Turkey and Syria shows that riparian position is not merely one source of power, but it may widen or restrain other power opportunities. The paper also showed that the geographical–hydrological characters of a basin can be much more complicated than it looks, and they must be considered in the analysis. Finally, even though the paper attempted to make a holistic hydropolitical analysis by focussing on Syria’s transboundary water policy in the Orontes Basin, there have been significant changes in the basin. In this regard, further studies are necessary to analyse the rationale behind Turkey’s recent water initiatives in the basin and its effects on the hydropolitics of the basin. Likewise, the current situation in Syria and its possible impact on hydropolitical dynamics of the basin appear to be a promising research area. Likewise, the current civil war in Syria has impacts on the hydropolitical dynamics of the Orontes Basin. Particularly the northern sections of the basin have been controlled by different groups. Therefore, further studies are necessary to understand the hydropolitical impacts of the current situation.

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