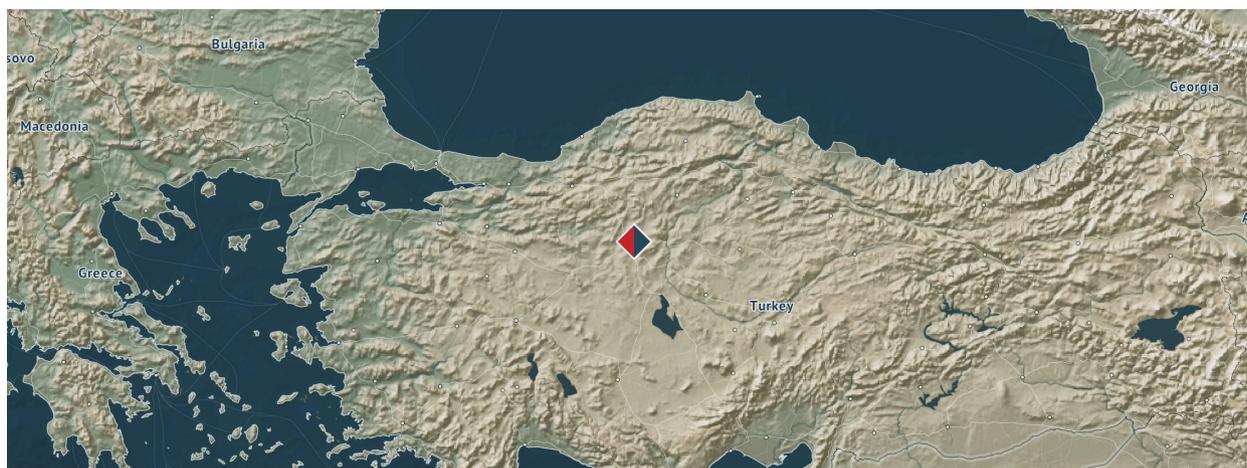




Conflict Factsheet

## EU Influence on the Euphrates-Tigris Conflict, Middle-East

Type of conflict Sub	Intensity 1
Conflict Locality Western Asia	Time 1960 –ongoing
Countries Iraq, Turkey, Syria	Resources Water, Ecosystem Stability



Transboundary  
water  
management

### Conflict Summary

From the 1960s to the 1990s, tensions among the co-riparian states of the Euphrates-Tigris Basin hampered cooperation over the rivers. Since 1999, when Turkey was granted the status of candidate country for membership to the EU, the country started transposing and implementing the EU body of legislation, including the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD). The renewed cooperation which was observed among the three co-riparians in the 2000s reflects the influence of the WFD.

### Conflict History

History of Conflict



Since the 1960s, tensions amongst Turkey, Syria and Iraq over the management of the Euphrates-Tigris Basin led to disputes, which escalated in the 1980s-1990s. Turkey's stance according to which the country enjoys "absolute sovereignty" over the rivers with regards to international water law has been a major obstacle for cooperation. At the end of the 1990s, cooperation over water started anew amongst the co-riparians. This period corresponds to the moment when Turkey was officially declared candidate to EU membership in 1999. Even though other factors must be taken into consideration to explain the improvement of the relations amongst the co-riparians, this case intends to assess the impact that the process of EU accession has had on the evolution of the dispute in the ET Basin.

## Conflict Background

In the Euphrates-Tigris (ET) Basin, Turkey is located upstream on both the Euphrates and the Tigris Rivers. Whilst the Euphrates River crosses Syria and Iraq, the Tigris flows from Turkey to Iraq and both streams meet in the Shatt Al-Arab Basin in Southern Iraq. From the 1960s until the end of the 1990s, a large number of riparian and non-riparian issues led to disputes ([see Turkey, Syria and Iraq: Conflict over the Euphrates-Tigris](#)), which prevented the co-riparian states from jointly managing the Basin Rivers effectively.

## Turkey's stance on the Euphrates-Tigris Rivers

Before EU candidacy, Turkey's position in terms of cooperation with Syria and Iraq has been described as "reluctant" ([Kibaroglu and Kramer, 2011](#)). Turkey considered that it enjoyed "absolute sovereignty" on the ET Rivers and that the downstream countries did not have rights of co-sovereignty on these waters ([Ibid.](#)). The former also refused to give the ET Rivers the status of "international waters", which – according to international water conventions – would require the co-riparians to share the waters equally ([Inan, 2000](#)). Instead, Turkey considered the rivers to be "transboundary watercourses". According to Turkey, in the case of transboundary waters – as opposed to boundary – , rivers are governed by the principle of "absolute sovereignty", which entails that co-riparian states have the right to use the water of a transboundary watercourse flowing within their territory without being accountable to their neighbours ([Carius et al., 2005](#)).

## Turkey and international water legislation and implications of EU membership

Based on this position, throughout the 1990s, Turkey refused to sign international conventions, which established international water principles. Signing these conventions would have clashed with Turkey's principle of "absolute sovereignty" ([Kibaroglu and Kramer, 2011](#)). For instance, the 1997 UN Convention on the law of non-navigational uses of international watercourses did not make a clear distinction between international and transboundary watercourses ([Ibid.](#)). Turkey's adherence to the convention would thus have had direct implications in the ET Basin. Because Turkey has not signed four out of the five



international conventions, the country is therefore not bound to comply with their principles. However, the EU is a party to all of these international treaties. Since EU candidates must adhere to all conventions to which the EU is a party in the process towards EU Membership, the fact that Turkey was declared EU candidate in 1999 entails that the country has to adhere to those water conventions to become an EU member.

Despite the period of tensions from the 1960s to the 1990s, the late 1990s-early 2000s witnessed a significant improvement in the relations amongst the co-riparian states, which enabled the reactivation of cooperation over water management (Kibaroglu, 2014). This improvement can be explained by internal changes in Turkey, evolutions in the regional context and also by the carrot of EU membership. This case study will focus on the influence of the EU on the conflict resolution process of the water-management dispute amongst Turkey, Syria and Iraq. The internal and regional changes are explored in the case [Turkey, Syria and Iraq: Conflict over the Euphrates-Tigris](#).

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## Resolution Efforts

### Implications of process towards EU membership for Turkey's water policies

In 1999, Turkey was officially declared EU candidate. The beginning of the process towards EU membership entailed that Turkey had to comply with the Copenhagen Criteria (Kibaroglu and Kramer, 2011). Amongst these criteria, an important requirement is the transposition and the implementation of the *acquis communautaire* (the whole body of EU legislation) by Turkey, including the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD) (Muluk and Sumer, 2011). The WFD requires EU member states to follow a certain number of rules in terms of national and international water management both in terms of quality and quantity of water (Kibaroglu and Kramer, 2011).

Amongst other measures, Article 13 of the WFD states that "where international river basins extend beyond the territories of the Union, the WFD requires Member States to seek appropriate coordination with the non-EU co-riparians in order to achieve the objectives of the WFD" (European Communities, 2000). This article of the WFD is particularly relevant in the ET basin conflict. As mentioned above, in addition to the *acquis communautaire*, EU membership will also depend on Turkey's adherence to the international water conventions to which the EU is a signatory, namely all UNECE Conventions and the UN Convention on the law of non-navigational uses of international watercourses (European Council, 2003). Turkey's transboundary disputes have been a major concern for the EU. In 2003, the European Council designated Turkish transboundary management as a priority issue with regards to Turkey's candidacy (European Council, 2003).

### The positive influence of the EU on Turkey's water policies since 1999



Since Turkey was declared an EU candidate in 1999, the country has operated a “wave of changes” in water legislation to comply with the EU Water Framework directive and has restructured its institutions to provide new inputs to transboundary water policy (Kibaroglu, 2014). Although Turkey refused to sign the UNECE Aarhus Convention, in 2003 the EU candidate passed a national legislation on the principles of equality, openness and right of information (ACT 4982), which followed the principles of the Convention (Kibaroglu and Kramer, 2011).

### Acceleration of changes since accession talks in 2005

Changes accelerated with the accession talks in 2005 (Kibaroglu, 2014). Since the mid-2000s, a number of laws have been adopted in Turkey with regard to environmental protection and water quality management (Ibid.). According to Kibaroglu, the changes in Turkey’s water policy in the field of environment and water resources have had implications for transboundary water policy making in the ET basin (Kibaroglu, 2014). In fact, scholars have pointed out that the 2009 Memorandums of Understanding (MoU) signed between Turkey and Syria as well as Turkey and Iraq reflect the principles of the WFD (Kibaroglu and Scheumann, 2013). In a report on the implementation of the WFD, Kinaci stated that the MoU with Syria was signed with the purpose of sharing with Syria the experience acquired by Turkey on water management (Kinaci, 2011). Even though cooperation amongst the co-riparians has stalled (see Turkey, Syria and Iraq: Conflict over the Euphrates-Tigris), it can be concluded that the perspective of EU membership has had a significant influence in the revival of cooperation over the ET basin.

### Limits of EU impact on Turkey’s international water policies

Nevertheless, despite the influence of the EU WFD on Turkey’s water policy vis-à-vis the other co-riparians to the ET basin, there are limits to this impact. Turkey has not revised its position regarding the status of the rivers and still does not deem them to be transboundary. In the new framework water law elaborated by the authorities in 2012, which is meant to act as a base to develop national water policies, the rivers were referred to as “bodies of water forming boundaries” to avoid complications and reach consensus amongst the stakeholders (Kibaroglu, 2014).

Moreover, in some areas, alignment to the WFD is “far from being sufficient” (Muluk and Sumer, 2011). Furthermore, Turkey still has not implemented Article 13 of the WFD, which refers to ‘appropriate coordination’ with co-riparians. The EU candidate has declared that it will only apply this provision when Turkey becomes a full member of the EU (Kibaroglu, 2014). Similarly, Turkey declared that complete harmonisation with the Water Framework Directive would only be finalised when the EU gives Turkey a clear perspective of membership (Muluk and Sumer, 2011). Finally, Turkey still has not signed the international conventions to which the country has to adhere as part of the Copenhagen criteria (Kibaroglu, 2014).



## Conclusion

To conclude, despite the deficiencies in some areas regarding Turkey's alignment to the WFD, the efforts made by Turkey to transpose and implement the directive since 1999 show the influence that EU membership has had on Turkey's policies. Considering the major cooperation steps which were achieved at the high level between Turkey, Syria and Iraq in 2009 with the EU WFD as a basis, it seems that progress in the talks for EU membership with Turkey could foster even more cooperation in the ET Basin. In fact, scholars argue that alignment with the WFD could be faster once Turkey gets clear EU membership perspective (Muluk and Sumer, 2011). However, the question which remains open is whether the talks for EU Membership will eventually lead to the acceptance of Turkey as EU Member. Only clearer signals from the EU will motivate Turkey to continue its efforts in transposing the part of the WFD, which particularly deals with transboundary coordination with non-EU States. On the other hand, in 2011, the European Parliament Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI) delegation to Turkey indicated that, owing to the incapacity of Turkey to achieve good cross-border water management, the accession talks could not lead to full membership (ENVI, 2011). Such situation creates a vicious circle, which blocks further progress in terms of water policy. Considering that the recent years have been accentuating the antagonism between the EU and Turkey and that the candidate's chances to become a member of the EU seem to be fading away, it can be assumed that Turkey will have little incentive to go forward with the overhaul of her water policy (Euractiv, 2014; Cowell, 2014).

## Limits of power of attraction of the EU on candidates to membership

This case is a very good example of the influence of the EU's "power of attraction" on candidates to EU membership (Munuera, 1994). The carrot of membership – i.e. the benefits which countries would receive by belonging to the European Union – is the EU's main tool to compel EU candidates to settle conflicts with their neighbours (Cameron, 2006). This mechanism has also proven efficient with other EU candidates, such as Greece. The perspective of EU membership pushed Greece to work on improving her relations with Turkey, as both countries were fighting over territorial claims (Diez et al., 2006). Nevertheless, as the case of Turkey demonstrates, the influence of the EU on candidates has apparent limitations. The lack of clear deadline for accession as well as the absence of clear membership perspective leads the EU to lose her influence over time (Hill, 2001). By acting with the belief that the carrot of membership gives the EU unlimited control on candidate countries, the risk for the EU would be to lose all influence on the latter.



## Intensities & Influences



### INTENSITIES

International / Geopolitical Intensity



Human Suffering



### INFLUENCES

Environmental Influences



Societal Influences



Diplomatic Crisis

**No diplomatic crisis**



Violent Conflict

**No**



Salience with nation

**National**



Mass displacement

**None**



Cross Border Mass Displacement

**No**



## Resolution Success

Reduction in geographical scope

**The geographical scope of the conflict has decreased.**

Increased capacity to address grievance in the future

**The capacity to address grievances in the future has increased.**

Grievance Resolution

**Grievances have been partially addressed.**

Causal Attribution of Decrease in Conflict Intensity

**Conflict resolution strategies have been clearly responsible for the decrease in conflict intensity.**



## Entry Points for Resilience and Peace Building

<b>Cooperation</b>	0
Turkey has yet to implement Article 13 of the WFD, which refers to 'appropriate coordination' with co-riparians.	
<b>Mediation &amp; arbitration</b>	3
When Turkey was granted the status of candidate for membership to the EU, the country began implementing the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD), which mandates that states follow a certain number of national and international water management rules.	
<b>Treaty/agreement</b>	2
In 2009, Turkey and Syria as well as Turkey and Iraq signed Memorandums of Understanding (MoU) that reflect the principles of the WFD.	
<b>Improving resource efficiency</b>	2
Turkey has adopted a number of laws with regard to environmental protection and water quality management.	

## Resources and Materials

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[EU Influence on the Euphrates-Tigris Conflict, Middle-East](#)

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Further information

<https://factbook.ecc-platform.org/conflicts/eu-influence-euphrates-tigris-conflict-middle-east>