



# Displacement Caused by Thirst

## How does cutting off Al-Hasakah's water cause potential displacement of the population?



### **ASO Center for Consultancy and Strategic Studies**

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## Introduction

From the outbreak of the war in Syria, the various Syrian military factions; the opposing and loyal to the Syrian regime, used different forms of violations and extortion against civilians, to achieve political gains and put pressure on military opponents to control additional geographical areas. They even came to weaponize potable water sources to starve thousands of civilians in conflict zones. In addition, turning them into paramilitary targets, subjected to deadly water starvation, in areas that suffer mainly from the scarcity of water sources, and the lack of alternative investment mechanisms, such as water harvesting by moisture, and the intelligent use of groundwater. Not to mention the fact that the entire region has experienced years of drought. It was culminated by the Syrian war, which basically destroyed the underdeveloped infrastructure, and resulted in internal displacement that exceeded the capacity of the internal Syrian cities to host the displaced. Then came the Covid-19 crisis, which silently claimed the lives of the people in the absence of attention from the international community that left the people in Northeastern Syria to their fate, lacking any guarantees to live in light of these capacities. The inhabitants of the city of Al-Hasakah are in search of scarce drops of water. The catastrophe is beyond the capacity of this report to define.

In 2015, the Syrian opposition factions blew up the Al-Fijah Spring to pressure the Syrian regime to stop its military operations targeting the countryside of Damascus Governorate. Also, water was used as a condition in the negotiations; as the water of Ain al-Fijah was pumped to the governorate of Damascus in exchange for the implementation of a truce agreement with the Syrian regime. Jabhat al-Nusra cut off the water to all residential areas that the regime controlled in Aleppo city, and stipulated the cessation of airstrikes to restart water pumping. Likewise, the Syrian regime cut off electricity to water pumps in the northern countryside of Aleppo governorate, during the control of the Islamic State Organization (ISIS).

Since 2018, Turkey has weaponized water in its war against the Kurds in Syria to implement ethnic cleansing and demographic change projects in the Syrian Kurdish cities bordering the Turkish borders. While advancing to occupy the city of Afrin, Turkey cut off the water supply to the city. The local population was starved and therefore used wells to get water by distributing it through water tanks. Turkey also has repeatedly targeted water pumping stations in the cities of Qamishlo/Qamishli and Serekaniye/Ras al-Ain. Since the occupation of the cities of Serekaniye/Ras al-Ain in Al-Hasakah governorate 2019 and Gire Spi/Tal Abyad in Raqqa governorate, Turkey has cut off the water of the Allouk station, which supplies the entire city of Al-Hasakah and its countryside and the displacement camps located in the southern countryside of the governorate. As well, it has weaponized water to expand its control points in the governorate, and in negotiations with the Russian forces, forcing the

local population to submit to Turkish dictates and inciting them against the local authorities in the governorate.

Turkey's continuous water cut-off forced the local residents of Al-Hasakah to get water through water tanks that transport water from the governorate's cities to the city center, and to dig water wells in front of their houses to secure their needs. Various diseases have emerged and affected the population, especially children because the groundwater in Al-Hasakah city is bitter and contains high levels of salt making it unpotable. Although the majority of the people used this water for necessities other than drinking, some of them used it for drinking for economic reasons related to the inability to purchase water from tanks coming from other cities, or because of the permanent lack of water from those tanks.

### The story from the beginning

On October 10, 2019, the Democratic Self-Administration announced that the Turkish army had targeted Allouk drinking water station in the countryside of Serekaniye/Ras al-Ain in Al-Hasakah governorate, and shelled it with heavy artillery. The Self-Administration indicated that the Turkish army bombed Allouk station with 10 shells, of which 3 fell on the pumping hall and hit the electric power supply lines, which led to the station being completely out of service.

At that time, Al-Hasakah Water Directorate, affiliated with the Self-Administration in Northeastern Syria, warned against depletion of water resources, which are usually allocated to emergency cases such as water cuts or damage to the water transport networks from Serekaniye/Ras al-Ain to the center of Al-Hasakah city and towns of Tal Tamr, Al-Hol, Al-Shaddadi, Areesha, and Markada, in addition to the two camps of Al-Hol and Areesha in the countryside of the governorate.

The Self-Administration, through Al-Hasakah Canton Water Directorate, provided potable water to the people of these areas, whose number is estimated at nearly one million people, by taking water out from wells located in the Tel Brak area.

The Democratic Self-Administration, in coordination with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), began returning the Allouk water station to service, and pumping water back to different areas of Al-Hasakah Governorate, with direct assistance from the Russian military command located in Northeastern Syria. As they took over the talks with Turkey, during which Turkey demanded to repair the Allouk water station in return for supplying it with electricity from the Tishreen Dam.

The Commander-in-Chief of the Russian forces in northern Syria, General Alexei Anatoly, stated in a meeting with journalists in March of 2019, that he met with the commander of the Turkish Coordination Center, General, Burhan Aktash, in the

Kurdish town of Nusaybin in Turkey. The Russian general described the Turkish government's water-cutting practices as an "illegal and immoral act".

Although the Self-Administration's maintenance workshops re-established the electricity lines connecting to the Mabrouka station, which supply electricity to the Serekaniye/Ras al-Ain and Tal Abyad regions, Turkey did not abide by the agreement and did not pump water.

After several negotiations between the Russian military command in Northeastern Syria and the Turkish forces, the latter allowed the re-pumping of water from the "Allouk" station, east of Serekaniye/Ras al-Ain, on March 26, 2020, 5 days after it was cut off. The latest agreement between the Turkish and Russian forces provided for the supply of the Mabrouka power station, west of Serekaniye/Ras al-Ain, with a power charge between 12 - 15 megawatts from the "Tishreen" dam, which is under the control of the Syrian government and the Self-Administration, in exchange for allowing the "Allouk" water station to operate by the Turkish side, according to the supervising engineer in the joint electricity committee between the Self-Administration and the Syrian government.

#### How is water accessible to the people of Al-Hasakah?

Since the beginning of the water cut off from the city of Al-Hasakah, the Democratic Self-Administration has started distributing water through water tanks belonging to the People's Municipality to the city of Al-Hasakah, by getting water from the town of Tel Brak and the governorate's cities, and distributing it to the residential neighborhoods in order to provide potable water to civilians.

A number of international organizations operating and active in Northeastern Syria have distributed large water tanks in the city's neighborhoods in order to provide civilians with water.

In addition, the SDF used water tankers and their tanks to transport water from the towns and cities where water is available to the center of the city of Al-Hasakah, and to the towns cut off from the water.

Ivan Hassib, a journalist from the city of Al-Hasakah, says, "The people of Al-Hasakah rely mainly on specific water tanks to obtain water. To a lesser extent, the people depend on the water of surface wells for washing and cleaning, in addition to large water tanks located in neighborhoods of the city, and they are constantly filled with water by international organizations cooperating with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent."

He added; "The potable water of the Allouk station wells reaches through a pipe that passes from the town of Tal Tamr to Al-Hamma reservoirs, north of the city of Al-Hasakah, where the water is pumped to the city of Al-Hasakah, and sometimes

chlorine is added for sterilization, resulting in an increase in the salinity of the water because the wells are somewhat salty.”

Ivan Hassib confirms that; "The water from the wells in the city of Al-Hasakah is not suitable for drinking. It is salty limewater, so it is used for cleaning and washing only."

### Diseases Outbreaks due to Water Cut Offs

During April of this year, the People's Hospital in the city of Al-Hasakah recorded 1728 sick cases, between diarrhea and poisoning; including 197 cases of diarrhea among children, 172 cases of diarrhea among adults, 169 cases of poisoning among children, and 1,190 cases of poisoning among adults, according to a statement by the joint head of the People's Hospital in the city of Al-Hasakah, Muhammad Saeed Abdullah, to the local radio station Arta FM.

Although the Water Directorate in Al-Hasakah city sterilizes water and tanks that are distributed to residential neighborhoods in the city center, sick cases often result from the use of non-potable well water. The reason for using well water is that the water that is distributed to civilians through water tanks, is not sufficient for the families' water needs.

Ivan Hassib points out that thousands of children have suffered from intestinal diseases, poisoning, and diarrhea, and most of these children are the children of families that used to buy water from tanks with unknown water sources.

Hassib indicates; "Due to the lack of water and the lack of wells in the area and people's urgent need for water in the summer, people use any source that can supply water, whether or not the source of that water is known, which is often the source of wells in the countryside of Al-Hasakah, where the water is at least not salty. However, due to the lack of monitoring, the tanks are full of dirt and sediment because they are not cleaned up continuously, as well as many of them do not have clean nozzles and hoses. The tanks operate throughout the day without stopping under changing weather conditions, dust and heat, especially in the periods when Turkey cut off the water supply from the Allouk water station."

### Water Cut Off and the Corona Pandemic

The Self-Administration and humanitarian organizations in Northeastern Syria are facing major obstacles in their attempts develop a readiness plan to deal with the coronavirus pandemic. They were unable to bring additional supplies to the region due to the closure of the borders with the KRG, and the UN Security Council's

cancellation of the authorization for the passage of aid through Al-Yarubiyah crossing in January, under Russian pressure.<sup>1</sup>

However, these aims and efforts undertaken by the Self-Administration are faced with a number of obstacles, the most important of which is the Turkish government's cutting off water to areas that suffer mainly from fragility in the medical and water sectors.

Humanitarian organizations indicate that they have decided to raise awareness on handwashing due to limited options, however frequent water cuts hamper even their ability to encourage this measure, and alternatives to pumping water from the Allouk water station are insufficient. Humanitarian organizations are currently providing water tankers in an intermittent and time-consuming process. According to a report by the Northeast Syria water and sanitation group, water trucking provides less than 50 percent of the needs of the population and is too costly.<sup>2</sup>

Human Rights Watch has documented dire conditions in these camps, including overflowing latrines, sewage trickling into tattered tents, and residents drinking wash water from tanks containing worms. These conditions are likely to be exacerbated with the water supplies cut off, and will only put the population at greater risk of contracting coronavirus.<sup>3</sup>

The UNICEF warned that "The interruption of water supply during the current efforts to curb the spread of the Coronavirus disease puts children and families at unacceptable risk." It also indicated that "No child should have to live even one day without safe water. Clean water and handwashing save lives."<sup>4</sup>

The UNICEF rejected weaponizing water and water facilities for military or political gains and referred to the fact that they and their partners are supporting families in the city of al-Hassakeh and camps for displaced families with water trucking, but this barely covers minimum needs if the water supply is interrupted again.<sup>5</sup>

According to Human Rights Watch, the failure of the Turkish authorities to ensure adequate water supplies to the regions of Northeastern Syria is negatively affecting the ability of humanitarian organizations to equip vulnerable communities for their protection, in light of the spread of the Coronavirus pandemic.

"In the midst of a global pandemic that is overloading sophisticated governance and infrastructure systems, Turkish authorities have been cutting off the water supply to regions most under strain in Syria," said Michael Page, deputy Middle East director at

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<sup>1</sup> COVID-19 in North and Eastern Syria Threat, Response and Challenges <https://cutt.us/vxiML>

<sup>2</sup> Turkey/Syria: Weaponizing Water in Global Pandemic? <https://cutt.us/zrSFx>

<sup>3</sup> Turkey/Syria: Weaponizing Water in Global Pandemic? <https://cutt.us/mwPcs>

<sup>4</sup> Interruption to key water station in the northeast of Syria puts 460,000 people at risk as efforts ramp up to prevent the spread of Coronavirus disease <https://Oi.is/XJra>

<sup>5</sup> Interruption to key water station in the northeast of Syria puts 460,000 people at risk as efforts ramp up to prevent the spread of Coronavirus disease <https://Oi.is/XJra>



Human Rights Watch. "The Turkish authorities should do everything they can to immediately resume supply to these communities."<sup>6</sup>

### Approaching the Borders... Civilian's Movement to Border Cities

Al-Hasakah city is considered a main economic and educational center in Al-Hasakah Governorate, and as a result, thousands of civilians from the cities and towns affiliated with the governorate have moved to live there, whether for reasons related to completing university education, or government jobs, or in search of better economic conditions, or recently because of the city's remoteness from the border points that are often attacked by the Turkish occupation forces.

All of these groups, along with the original inhabitants of Al-Hasakah city, began a reverse migration from the city center towards the towns, cities and villages of the governorate, where water is available and can be obtained, without health consequences.

Alia Sa'oud, a civilian woman who moved from Al-Hasakah city to Amouda due to water cuts, says; "The reasons that led us to relocate to Amouda were the scarcity of water and its continuous interruption from the Allouk station, controlled by the Turkish occupation, which made us purchase potable water at exorbitant prices. As well as, the need to restore to salty well water for domestic use."

She added, "My sons suffered from illnesses caused by the use of tanker water and saltwater for domestic purposes."

### Conclusion:

The Turkish army and its loyal Islamic factions have not been able to conduct military operations against all Kurdish cities and towns in Northeastern Syria. Consequently, they were unable to implement projects of demographic change and the displacement of Kurds from all cities, and the Kurds maintained some war-neutral areas such as the city of Al-Hasakah.

Reportedly, the Turkish government does not weaponize water during its military operations against Kurdish cities, as it did in the operations of the occupation of Afrin, Serekaniye/Ras al-Ain, and Tal Abyad, but rather weaponize it in cities that it cannot reach, in the context of its policies and projects, opportunities in Northeastern Syria.

This systematic war against civilians in the center of Al-Hasakah city, and its countryside not adjacent to the border with Turkey, could lead to a population displacement towards the countryside and towns near the border areas occupied by

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<sup>6</sup> Turkey/Syria: Weaponizing Water in Global Pandemic?  
<https://www.hrw.org/ar/news/2020/03/31/340129>

Turkey, in search of water, despite the danger of exposure to the serious violations committed by the Syrian jihadi factions affiliated with Turkey against civilians, especially their crimes against the Kurds. Displacement, in search of water, may lead to a complex demographic change in Northeastern Syria, and this is one of the most important aims of Turkey, which is emptying the region of its indigenous people, in case it is not able to displace the population through a military operation.

The devastation endured by the afflicted city of Al-Hasakah, plagued by the crime of cutting off the water in the driest period, and the extreme outbreak of the Covid 19 epidemic. The impact of the global pandemic on this crowded city of people and displaced people. All these factors make the city one of the priorities requiring immediate intervention by the Global Coalition against Terrorism, international organizations concerned with humanitarian affairs, and the UN-OSE to Syria, to act at all levels, to liberate the Allouk water station from the domination of Turkey and its jihadist factions. Moreover, submitting this file to the competent international courts as a crime against humanity and as a war crime in accordance with the relevant international covenants such as the Fourth Geneva Convention and other relevant human rights instruments.



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