



## **Submerging Kurdish History in Turkey: A Case Study of the Ilisu Dam**

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### **Abstract**

The Southeastern Anatolia Project (Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi, GAP) is the largest regional development project in Turkey, involving the construction of twenty-two dams and nineteen hydroelectric power plants along the Tigris and Euphrates river basins. Particularly notable is the Ilisu Dam, the most recent dam built under GAP. Although the Turkish state has presented the dam as a potent source of renewable energy and job growth, it has also faced criticism for its devastating impact on the local Kurdish population. Using the Ilisu Dam as a case study, this paper examines the relationship between Turkey's water development projects and the long-standing Turkish-Kurdish conflict. I used three main research methods: (1) conducting a qualitative literature review of the Southeastern Anatolia Project, (2) analyzing promotional government campaigns of the Ilisu Dam, and (3) examining data and information presented by international nongovernmental organizations. This paper concludes that while the Ilisu Dam has reduced Turkey's reliance on energy imports and generated economic growth, it also reflects the states' historical attempts to assimilate ethnic Kurds by inundating historical sites and forcing resettlement into cities. Additionally, this paper suggests that these assimilationist and repressive practices have not diminished Kurdish political aspirations. Instead, Kurdish communities have perceived the dam as a cultural cleansing of their history, which has fueled international opposition and cast critical light on Turkey's developmental projects.

**Keywords:** Ilisu Dam, Hasankeyf, Kurds, Turkey, cultural heritage protection, human rights, development

### **Introduction**

The ancient city of Hasankeyf, located along the Tigris River in southeastern Turkey, offers a window into 10,000 years of human civilization. With ancient artifacts embedded into limestone cliffs –such as cave dwellings, amphitheaters, mosques, and aqueducts– Hasankeyf and its surroundings resemble an open-air museum. However, rising water levels from the Ilisu Dam have already submerged the splendor of Hasankeyf and its rich cultural history.

The Ilisu Dam is part of the Southeastern Anatolia Project (Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi, GAP), a development initiative of the Republic of Turkey established in 1984 which envisages the construction of twenty-two dams and nineteen hydroelectric power plants on both the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and its tributaries. At the cost of over 100 billion USD, the project –according to its supporters– aims to reduce

Turkey's dependence on energy imports and provide jobs in impoverished rural areas.<sup>1</sup> However, GAP has faced criticism for its forced displacement of villagers and erasure of cultural heritage.

As the largest hydroelectric dam on the Tigris river, construction of the Ilisu Dam began in 2006 and has already reached full capacity. The dam will provide over 1200 megawatts of electricity per year, contributing an estimated \$412 million per year to the Turkish economy; the dam has already contributed approximately \$51 million so far. From these measurements, the Turkish government has argued that the dam will bring prosperity to Southeastern Anatolia.<sup>2</sup> However, the project has faced stiff opposition for its destruction of cultural heritage and the damage to local communities. For example, estimated flooding from Ilisu Dam has submerged fifty-two surrounding villages and displaced around 78,000 people. The dam has also inundated eighty-two heritage sites, including several Muslim and Christian holy sites in Hasankeyf. Additionally, ninety percent of the total population in these affected villages are ethnically Kurdish. Because of its disproportionate impact on Turkey's Kurdish population, some critics have described the Ilisu Dam as a vehicle of cultural genocide.<sup>3</sup>

This paper agrees with this claim as critics have advanced it. It presents the Ilisu Dam project as part of Turkey's historical attempts, since the establishment of the Republic after World War I, to assimilate ethnic Kurds by inundating historical sites and forcing resettlement into cities. However, it is important to note that the dam simultaneously reflects Turkey's bid to reduce its reliance on energy imports and foster economic growth by developing hydroelectric power. In this way, to use a common English proverb, the dam can "kill two birds with one stone" for the Turkish state.

This paper draws upon a range of books and articles about the Southeastern Anatolia Project. It also examines promotional YouTube videos and news articles by the General Directorate of State Hydraulic Works (DSI), a state agency responsible for Turkey's water resources planning and development projects. Finally, it analyzes data and information presented by international nongovernmental organizations, including the Kurdish Human Rights Project and the Ilisu Dam Campaign.

This paper consists of four main sections. It begins by providing a brief overview of the Turkish state's efforts to force Kurdish assimilation through cultural and political suppression since its establishment as a Republic in 1923. It continues by surveying the destruction of cultural heritage caused by the Ilisu Dam, focusing on the government's plans to transfer ancient artifacts to a new archeological park. The next section examines how forced eviction and resettlement policies removed people from their land and dispersed the Kurdish population. It concludes by assessing the Ilisu Dam project's success in accomplishing the state's goal of evaporating the Kurdish political agenda in Southeastern Anatolia.

### **GAP and the Turkish-Kurdish Conflict**

The idea to build mega-dams in Southeastern Turkey first materialized in the 1960s under the leadership of Süleyman Demirel, who was then the prime minister of Turkey. Süleyman envisioned GAP as a way to accelerate economic development through the construction of irrigation projects. He expressed his hope that development in the GAP region would cause the following level of prosperity: "When we look from here in ten years, we will see a sea down there. This sea will be a green sea. In it, there will be bread, abundance, pearl-like cities, pearl-like villages, pearl-like towns, and bright people."<sup>4</sup>

In addition to providing renewable energy, GAP's objectives include improving residents' life quality by enhancing productivity and providing employment opportunities in the region. The project was projected to generate up to 200,000 employment opportunities, both during the construction period and following

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<sup>1</sup> Joost Jongerden, "Dams and Politics in Turkey: Utilizing Water, Developing Conflict," *Middle East Policy*, March 15, 2010, 2, accessed September 21, 2020, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1475-4967.2010.00432.x>.

<sup>2</sup> Dissinger, George. "The Dual Nature of Displacement: Dam-induced Displacement in Southeastern Turkey," (Senior Thesis, Fordham University, 2020), 25

<sup>3</sup> Behrooz Morvaridi, "Resettlement, Rights to Development and the Ilisu Dam, Turkey," *Development and Change* 35, no. 4 (October 6, 2004): 7, accessed November 3, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0012-155X.2004.00377.x>.

<sup>4</sup> Arda Bilgen, "The Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP) in Turkey: An Alternative Perspective on the Major Rationales of GAP," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 21, no. 5 (August 2019): 6, accessed November 16, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2018.1506287>.

all infrastructure commissioning. Moreover, GAP irrigation would allow more land to be used for agriculture, as the project would bring two million new hectares of land under irrigation. The GAP administration estimated that the project will increase cotton production by 200 percent, lentils by 250 percent, and tomatoes by 700 percent. GAP will also develop local infrastructure through the construction of roads and railways. Between 1985 and 1995, following the completion of GAP projects such as the Karakaya and Atatürk Dam, the percentage of villages with paved access to the highway system increased from 71 to 98 percent.<sup>5</sup>

GAP predominantly affected areas inhabited by Turkey's Kurdish population, which has suggested that the project will help resolve the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. As the largest minority ethnic group in Turkey, the Kurds have struggled for greater rights and autonomy since the Republic's establishment in 1923. Indeed, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic, sought to create a culturally homogenous society where no minority had the right to claim cultural independence. Thus, the Turkish state tried to impose uniformity by renaming Kurdish villages and criminalizing use of the Kurdish language in public places. The government also suppressed Kurdish identity by implementing restrictions on their clothing, music, and religious practices.<sup>6</sup> President Erdogan has loosened many of these restrictions on Kurdish culture as part of his "Kurdish Opening," a policy approach developed in 2009 to ease tensions between the government and Turkey's Kurdish population. However, after a failed coup attempt in 2016, Erdogan declared a national state of emergency to suppress anti-government resistance. These emergency decrees enabled the government to target Kurdish opposition by shutting down Kurdish media organizations, schools, and other cultural institutions.<sup>7</sup>

These repressive policies have generated support for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the largest Kurdish insurgent group in Turkey. Since 1978, the PKK has fought for an independent Kurdistan and self-determination through armed confrontation with the state. In response, the Turkish state has deployed its water resources as a physical barrier against Kurdish insurgent activity. In the 1990s, the government built eleven dams in the Hakkari and Sirnak provinces to prevent PKK fighters from crossing the mountains from Iraq. Similarly, the Turkish government strategically placed the Ilisu Dam near "Hell's Valley," famously named for its mountainous corridors that contain many cross-border trails used by PKK fighters. Thus, GAP projects effectively restrict PKK resistance fighters' movement, ensuring that the Turkish military controls the Southeastern Anatolia area.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, President Erdogan has indicated his underlying political motives to diminish support for the PKK by benefiting the Kurdish minority in the area. Residents in Southeastern Anatolia face a lack of economic opportunities and higher unemployment levels, as demonstrated in the local poverty rate of 45.6%. Poor economic conditions fueled dissatisfaction and resentment, which the PKK has channeled to garner political support. Therefore, the Turkish government sought to use regional development from GAP to establish regional peace by improving Kurdish living standards and thus reducing support for the PKK's separatist demands.<sup>9</sup> However, it is unclear whether GAP has achieved this goal of increasing the local Kurdish population's well-being, or if the project instead had the opposite effect by undermining and demoralizing Kurds by appearing to destroy tangible manifestations of Kurdish history and heritage.

### **Loss of Cultural Heritage**

Construction of the Ilisu Dam will permanently submerge centuries of rich cultural heritage in the Southern Anatolia region. Estimates suggest that the Ilisu Dam will flood 312 km<sup>2</sup> of the Upper Tigris Valley and its tributaries. As a result, the Ilisu's reservoir has inundated at least 200 archeological sites, including several Muslim and Christian Holy Sites.<sup>10</sup> Particularly notable is the ancient city of Hasankeyf, a 10,000-

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<sup>5</sup> *The Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP)*, 225, April 2007, accessed November 16, 2020, [https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/hemispheres/\\_files/pdf/geography/GAP\\_project\\_turkey.pdf](https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/hemispheres/_files/pdf/geography/GAP_project_turkey.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Ofra Bengio, "Turkey's Kurdish Dilemma," *The Kurds in a Volatile Middle East*, February 1, 2017, 27, accessed November 16, 2020, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep04759.8.pdf?ab\\_segments=0%2Fbasic\\_search\\_solr\\_cloud%2Fcontrol&refreqid=fastly-default%3A5c767b7edc6604b7ee28459dbcb5455f](https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep04759.8.pdf?ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_solr_cloud%2Fcontrol&refreqid=fastly-default%3A5c767b7edc6604b7ee28459dbcb5455f).

<sup>7</sup> Rusen Cakir, "Kurdish Political Movement and the 'Democratic Opening,'" *Insight Turkey* 12, no. 2: 1, accessed November 16, 2020, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/26331455?seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/26331455?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents).

<sup>8</sup> Jeroen Warner, "The Struggle over Turkey's Ilisu Dam: Domestic and International Security Linkages," *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law, and Economics* 12, no. 3 (May 24, 2012): 238, <http://dx.doi.org.proxy.library.upenn.edu/10.1007/s10784-012-9178-x>.

<sup>9</sup> Max Hoffman, *The State of the Turkish-Kurdish Conflict*, 1, August 12, 2019, accessed November 16, 2020, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2019/08/12/473508/state-turkish-kurdish-conflict/>.

<sup>10</sup> *Cultural Heritage: Review of the Environmental Impact Assessment Report for the Ilisu Dam and HEPP*, 4, September 2001, accessed November 21, 2020, <https://www.dundeechamber.co.uk/Cultural%20Heritage%20analysis%20-%20final.pdf>.

year-old town situated beside the Tigris River. Hasankeyf and its surrounding limestone cliffs host thousands of human-made caves and nearly 300 medieval monuments. These formidable arrays of monuments –including cave churches, ornate mosques, and Islamic tombs– contain valuable elements of Assyrian, Abbasid, and Ottoman history. However, the Ilisu Dam's reservoir has flooded over 80% of the city of Hasankeyf and its surroundings. As the UK government's Trade and Industry Select Committee stated in 2001: "The fact has to be faced that the Ilisu dam would mean the end of Hasankeyf."<sup>11</sup>

The destruction of cultural heritage takes on a new, sharper meaning in the context of conflicts between the Turkish state and its Kurdish minority. Kurdish settlements in Hasankeyf emerged around 2,500 years ago after early Kurdish peoples migrated from Western Persia; today, about 90 percent of its inhabitants are ethnically Kurdish. A 2010 investigation by the Kurdish Human Rights Project, a London-based organization that aims to raise awareness about human rights issues in Kurdish regions, found that "the town is of particular cultural significance to the Kurdish people. The GAP project, and Ilisu in particular, is motivated primarily by a desire to destroy the Kurds as an ethnic group by destroying their most important cultural sites."<sup>12</sup> Consequently, many Kurdish people and organizations view the Ilisu Dam as another attempt by the Turkish state to suppress their history, culture, and identity.

In response to local and international opposition to the Ilisu Dams' destruction of cultural heritage, the Turkish government has relocated some monuments to "New Hasankeyf," a new settlement area located three kilometers away from historical Hasankeyf. New Hasankeyf, which is designed and managed by Turkish authorities, became a prominently advertised facet of the Ilisu project. The government has already moved several prominent relics to New Hasankeyf, including the tomb of Zeynal Bay and the Artuklu Bath.<sup>13</sup>

While the Turkish government touts the success of their preservation efforts, this relocation of historical sites still results in a loss of valuable archeological and cultural heritage. For instance, New Hasankeyf lacks the scenic natural landscapes that surround these ancient relics. A report by the Heritage at Risk foundation in England describes that the monuments in New Hasankeyf "lose much of their dignity and integrity. Their aesthetic value is diminished. If the projected plan is put into execution, the new open-air museum of 'Hasankeyf' will be just a small park in which small fragments of great monuments will be exhibited like museum pieces." It is impossible to recreate the picturesque backgrounds for monuments such as the Sultan Süleyman Mosques, located upon magnificent limestone cliffs overseeing the Tigris river. Additionally, the Heritage at Risk Report also highlights technical problems with the DSI's relocation plans, noting that most historical structures are fragile and will likely become damaged in the relocation process.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, attempts to relocate historical sites have continued to undermine their cultural value and sever the historical bonds that tie Kurdish communities to their lands.

### **Resettlement and Forced Displacement**

In addition to erasing Kurdish cultural heritage, Turkey's construction of the Ilisu Dam has expropriated 108 inhabited villages and displaced about 78,000 people. As a result, the DSI has constructed the Ilisu Resettlement Action Plan (IRAP) to compensate displaced residents.<sup>15</sup> The plan offers two programs for affected residents: self-resettlement through cash compensation and government-assisted resettlement. Under the "self-resettlement" category, families have received an average of 25,000 USD from the Turkish

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<sup>11</sup> United Kingdom Parliament Select Committee on Trade and Industry, *Summary of Conclusions and Recommendations*, [Page #], 2001, accessed November 21, 2020, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200001/cmselect/cmtrdind/512/51211.htm>.

<sup>12</sup> Kurdish Human Rights Project, *The Ilisu Dam: A Human Rights Disaster in the Making*, [Page #], November 1999, accessed November 21, 2020, <http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/resource/ilisu-dam-human-rights-disaster-making>.

<sup>13</sup> Rachel Brown, "This Medieval Tomb Weighs 1,100 Tons. Watch Workers Move it On Wheels," *National Geographic*, May 23, 2017, accessed November 21, 2020, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2017/05/zeynel-bey-tomb-mausoleum-turkey-relocation-video-dam-flooding-archaeology/>.

<sup>14</sup> Heritage at Risk, *Turkey*, 156, 2007, accessed November 21, 2020, [https://www.icomos.org/risk/world\\_report/2006-2007/pdf/H@R\\_2006-2007\\_42\\_National\\_Report\\_Turkey.pdf](https://www.icomos.org/risk/world_report/2006-2007/pdf/H@R_2006-2007_42_National_Report_Turkey.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> George Edgar Dissinger, "The Dual Nature of Displacement: Dam-induced Displacement in Southeastern Turkey," Senior Thesis, Fordham University, December 11, 2019, 25, accessed November 21, 2020, [https://research.library.fordham.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1039&context=international\\_senior](https://research.library.fordham.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1039&context=international_senior).

government, depending on their house and land value. Those who choose government-assisted resettlement have received housing in New Hasankeyf. As advertised by the DSI, this new town features a college, a cultural center, hospital, industrial park, commercial center, library, and other public institutions. The DSI offers 25-year mortgage plans for resettled citizens in New Hasankeyf, with no payback for the first five years.<sup>16</sup>

However, forced resettlements have displaced Kurdish people without compensation due to their lack of capacity to document land rights. The Ilisu Resettlement Plan only provides compensation to individuals who have land deeds: a legal document that proves property ownership. Yet land deeds exclude common property, such as pastoral land used for grazing livestock, which targets Kurdish communal lifestyles. This requirement disenfranchised an estimated 50 percent of rural people —most of them Kurdish farmers with less than 10 hectares — who lacked the legal documentation to prove ownership. The DSI did not consider the value of undocumented land in the "self-resettlement" option, thus depriving predominantly Kurdish residents of rightful compensation.<sup>17</sup>

Additionally, residents who have followed the government-resettlement program in New Hasankeyf live in cramped conditions. As of 2019, the DSI has resettled forty-eight households into the New Hasankeyf region. Each household received an 800-square-meter plot of land and a 25-square-meter, one-story house with three rooms. Even families of as many as twelve members have only received one house each. These conditions have had a detrimental effect on cultural traditions, as there is no community meeting area for families to congregate. For example, women in Ilisu traditionally spent a lot of time together in their kitchens, preparing food. The smaller kitchens and homes in the New Hasankeyf make it challenging for these women to host extended families and celebrate traditional holidays.<sup>18</sup>

One resident offers another reason for their reluctance to resettle in New Hasankeyf: "The government is not giving the new homes to the people. They are selling them." A house in New Hasankeyf costs 116,000 lire (33,500 USD), which is significantly more than the government's compensation for their larger homes and land in Hasankeyf, if they received compensation at all. Many residents had to take out loans to buy their new housing and fear that they cannot afford the monthly installments after the five-year grace period. The lack of adequate employment opportunities in New Hasankeyf has exacerbated their concerns about falling into debt. New Hasankeyf residents stated that they had not been given an adequate amount of land for cultivation and livestock rearing, as the grapes and pomegranates they grow in their backyards are insufficient to earn an income as before. While the government employed around 1,500 men from the Southeastern Anatolia region at the dam construction site, only about 200 of these men were from villages directly affected by the project.<sup>19</sup> Although the Ilisu Resettlement Plan ostensibly ensures compensation for displaced residents, in reality, unfair payments and offerings have removed Kurds from their land in a way that reflects Turkey's historical efforts to undermine Kurdish identity and perhaps to keep Kurds in economically marginal positions.

## Conclusion

The Ilisu Dam case study highlights how states can take advantage of development programs to achieve political objectives. The Turkish government has used the Ilisu Dam to suppress the PKK and accelerate economic growth, again, effectively "killing two birds with one stone." While the project has generated considerable revenue and increased Turkey's power supply, its damage to the local Kurdish population has outweighed these benefits. For instance, the dams' flooding of historical sites has severed Kurdish connections to their culture. Similarly, the organized eviction and resettlement process removed local communities from their land and transplanted them into new settlements with different social contexts, reflecting Turkey's historical efforts to divide and assimilate Kurdish identity.

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<sup>16</sup> Dissinger, "The Dual Nature of Displacement," 27.

<sup>17</sup> Behrooz Morvaridi, "Resettlement, Rights to Development and the Ilisu Dam, Turkey," *Wiley Online Library* 35, no. 4 (October 6, 2004): 13, accessed November 3, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0012-155X.2004.00377.x>.

<sup>18</sup> Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, *Case Study Series: Dam Displacement*, 10, July 18, 2017, accessed November 21, 2020, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/20170719-idmc-turkey-dam-case-study2.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, *Case Study*, 9.

However, these assimilationist and repressive practices still have not eliminated Kurdish political aspirations. Kurdish communities have perceived the project as a cultural cleansing of their history, fueling domestic and international opposition. Indeed, international nongovernmental organizations based in Europe, including the Kurdistan Human Rights Project and the Ilisu Dam Campaign, have led campaigns protesting the forced displacement of villagers and the erasure of ancient history from the project. Such opposition has cast a critical light on Turkey's developmental projects, while showing how activists in the Kurdish diaspora have provided transnational networks through which local protests can challenge state restrictions. Perhaps one sign of these Kurdish initiatives' success has been that the World Bank refused to provide loans for the dam, citing its threat to Kurdish culture. Similarly, several European countries, such as Germany and Switzerland, also withdrew finances for the project.<sup>20</sup>

Further studies should aim to incorporate the personal insights and experiences of the local Kurdish population. Research into GAP and the Ilisu Dam should focus on the long-term effects of displacement and how to minimize disruption in the resettlement process. Additionally, in the future, scholars should assess the governments' attempts to relocate cultural heritage sites.

Development should be equitable and inclusive, yet the Ilisu project has run counter to this narrative. Ultimately, the Turkish government should make a greater effort to preserve the historical integrity of relocated monuments and reduce the negative impacts of displacement. The Ilisu Dam case study illustrates, too, that consulting affected communities and providing them with full information will be essential for a proper resettlement process. By soliciting input from local communities instead of forcefully consolidating Turkish national identity, the government could better achieve its goals of minimizing the Kurdish population's incentives to support separatist groups through stimulating job growth and economic development.

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<sup>20</sup> Maggie Ronayne, "The Ilisu Dam Project in Southern Turkey," *World Archeological Bulletin*, accessed November 21, 2020, <https://worldarch.org/world-archaeological-bulletin/the-ilisu-dam-project-in-southern-turkey/>.

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