

## RESEARCH ARTICLE



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# Exploring friendship in hydropolitics: The case of the friendship dam on the Asi/Orontes river

Hannah Haemmerli<sup>1,2</sup> | Christian Bréthaut<sup>1</sup> | Fatine Ezbakhe<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Institute for Environmental Sciences & UNESCO Chair in Hydropolitics, University of Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland

<sup>2</sup>School of the Environment, Washington State University, Pullman, Washington, USA

## Correspondence

Christian Bréthaut, Institute for Environmental Sciences & UNESCO Chair in Hydropolitics, University of Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland.  
Email: [christian.brethaut@unige.ch](mailto:christian.brethaut@unige.ch)

## Abstract

“Friendship dams” are an explicit, yet underexplored, materialization of hydropolitics that illustrate the potential role of water in international cooperation. Via a case study analysis of the Syria-Turkey Friendship Dam project proposed for the Asi/Orontes river, we trace the process of cooperation that led to the use of this notion of “friendship” in transboundary cooperation. Using a transversal analysis of different phases of cooperation and non-cooperation, we consider broad, big-picture political and diplomatic factors related to water and beyond. Our analysis shows that two key variables shaped how water was used as an instrument of cooperation in this case: (1) security and (2) the dynamics of international cooperation undertaken by the riparians, namely Turkey. The friendship dam label can be considered a manifestation of strategic international friendship that the two riparian countries invoked to achieve security and bilateral cooperation.

## KEYWORDS

friendship dam, hydropolitics, Syria, transboundary, Turkey, water

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Numerous authors have contributed to an enhanced understanding of existing interplays between water management and dynamics of conflict and cooperation (for contributions see, among others, Bernauer & Böhmelt, 2020; Hanasz, 2017; Hussein et al., 2018; Ide & Detges, 2018; Warner & de Man, 2020). These contributions offer perspectives via analyses of political processes, legal and institutional frameworks, or existing discourses. In this paper, we aim to contribute to such a stream of research by focusing on one of the most explicit—yet underexplored—cases that illustrates the potential role of water for peace and international cooperation: the case of “friendship dams.” We explore the case of the Syria-Turkey Friendship Dam project and identify key political variables that structured cooperation over the transboundary dam, influencing its “friendship” label.

International Relations (IR) research approaches studying the concept of friendship descriptively, normatively, analytically, and

conceptually (Oelsner & Koschut, 2014; van Hoef & Oelsner, 2018). Therefore, the term “friendship” has various connotations in IR scholarship. As van Hoef and Oelsner (2018) suggested, rather than focusing on the definition, it can also be useful to approach the concept of friendship from a functional perspective. Instead of tackling what friendship is, we can learn a lot by also addressing what friendship *does* and what friendship is *for*, since it enables us to understand and explain the process and practice of friendship in IR. It is in this vein that we focus on friendship dams, a concept that has not yet been formally defined. Bromber et al. (2014, p. 293) noted, in the context of the politics of big dams, that dam projects have been celebrated as forging “friendship of the peoples,” expressing international solidarity. Indeed, dams can be powerful symbols for countries and communities. Dams are frequently political objects and sometimes used for building national identity (Menga, 2015). They can also be used as symbols for social and economic development, displays of power, or for cooperation between stakeholders. For example, the Rogun Dam, which the

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Tajik government instrumentalized to symbolize a national ideology and legitimize its position and power, despite causing tensions with neighboring countries (Menga, 2015). These impacts are possible because dams go beyond the water sector. For example, dams are often linked to other variables, such as socio-economic factors or security. Therefore, the exact causes, nature, and impacts of conflict or cooperation over large dam projects are highly contextual.

Hydropolitics scholarship seeks to understand the—often coexisting—cooperative and conflictive nature of transboundary water resources (Bréthaut et al., 2021; Mirumachi & Allan, 2007; Zeitoun & Warner, 2006), including infrastructure such as dams. In a broad sense, hydropolitics refers to the transnational interactions among state and non-state actors regarding the management and perception of shared water resources (Meissner, 2005; Rai et al., 2017; Warner et al., 2017; see the Geneva Water Hub, 2021 for an overview of definitions). Researchers have found numerous contextual variables that influence hydropolitical relations in transboundary contexts (e.g., De Stefano et al., 2017; Lavers & Dye, 2019; Xie & Jia, 2017). These variables include water quality and quantity, climate change impacts, riparian relationships (including historical relationships), upstream-downstream relations, geographical dynamics, the design of transboundary treaties and agreements, domestic water policies, among others. Whether or not hydropolitics leads to increased tension or cooperation can depend on the above variables, as well as the configuration of actors, governmental frameworks and institutions, the various dimensions of power (Cascão & Zeitoun, 2010), and the existence of support mechanisms to deal with changes in physical or institutional systems (Wolf et al., 2003). Therefore, in studying transboundary hydropolitical situations, it is important to consider variables outside of the traditional water box. This is especially the case for infrastructure, such as dams, which, although obviously linked with water, touch upon a wide spectrum of sectors of activity and levels of intervention.

Cooperative hydropolitics can lead to benefits external to water management itself, such as greater cooperation and peace between states, trade agreements, security agreements, and more. For example, in western Africa, hydropower dams have been drivers for regional integration and intersectoral collaboration (Gakusi et al., 2015). Therefore, it is not surprising that the term friendship has also been applied to large dams. Considering this perspective, the study of friendship dams holds great potential for contributing to the conceptual framework of international friendship, especially as it applies to hydropolitics, and therefore, such an analysis necessitates looking at a suite of contextually relevant political variables.

What remains unclear is what political processes lead to developing a friendship dam. Like all labels, naming a dam a “friendship dam” is not necessarily a sign of friendly, just, or equitable cooperation over waters; it may signify an intention of such cooperation, or, on the contrary, indicate the absence of friendship. This contribution is the first, to our knowledge, that investigates the dynamics at play that structured and impacted the process of cooperation over the development of a friendship dam. Via this analysis we seek to gain greater clarity of the meaning(s) of friendship dams and to understand the politics that create a foundation for them.

Throughout this contribution, we examine friendship dams as a rather new and underexplored entry point to study conflict and cooperation processes in the water sector and the concept of international friendship. Understanding the variables that structured the friendship dam process allows us to explore the role of hydropolitics in building friendship dams, and also the role of “friendship” in international relations more broadly. We first review the scholarship on international friendship. Then, we provide a global overview of friendship dams. Following this, we describe the methodology we have used—based on historical institutionalism and process tracing—to analyze the case of the Syria-Turkey Friendship Dam project. We then explore the historical phases of the hydropolitical relations between the two countries and discuss the key variables behind the genesis of the Syria-Turkey Friendship Dam. Finally, we summarize the (hydro)political variables that can lead to the establishment of so-called friendship dams and discuss the implications for our understanding of friendship in international relations.

## 2 | INTERNATIONAL FRIENDSHIP

The notion of friendship can be normatively understood as a relationship characterized by trust, openness, honesty, acceptance, reciprocity, solidarity, and loyalty (Aristotle, 1999 and Fehr, 1996 in Berenskoetter, 2014). Political friendship has long been recognized and studied in the field of political philosophy (van Hoef & Oelsner, 2018), and the normative characteristics of friendship (Berenskoetter, 2014), as well as the terminology of friendship (Devere, 2014), is present in international politics. Although the recognition and analysis of friendship in studies of International Relations are not new (e.g., amity-enmity continuum of Wolfers, 1962), friendship only began to be theorized and conceptualized by scholars within the last decade (e.g., King & Smith, 2018; Oelsner & Koschut, 2014; Oelsner & Vion, 2011).

In International Relations (IR) scholarship, the notion of friendship has been studied via different conceptual approaches (Oelsner & Koschut, 2014; van Hoef & Oelsner, 2018). One body of work focuses on epistemological and ontological issues of international friendship, theorizing why it exists, its characteristics, and how it structures international politics (Berenskoetter, 2007; Oelsner & Koschut, 2014). A second body of work analyzes the use of the term “friendship” in official international documents, such as treaties and agreements, and in diplomatic events, to understand the rhetorical and instrumental role of friendship in IR and how it differs between regions and historical periods (Devere, 2014; Devere et al., 2011; Oelsner & Koschut, 2014). The terminology of friendship has been institutionalized and discursively framed in international treaties (Devere, 2014; Oelsner & Koschut, 2014). Bilateral friendship agreements, for example, were a key instrument in early modern and contemporary diplomatic practice and were dominantly linked with commerce, colonialism, and state-building (Devere, 2014; Roshchin, 2017). For example, Roshchin (2017) describes the contractual concept of friendship as key to understanding the dynamics of the expansion of the

commercial interests of major European powers. Devere (2014) finds that very few treaties transformed the friendship between signatories in a normative way. Dominantly, friendship treaties have been used as rhetorical, diplomatic instruments by powerful actors in order to expand and protect their military and commercial interests (i.e., strategic international friendship; Devere et al., 2011). Devere (2014) also discovers instances of cultural misunderstandings of international friendship, such as the case of the friendship treaties between colonial powers and the Pacific island states.

A third body of work studies friendship as an analytical category of international political practice (Oelsner & Koschut, 2014). Such scholarship uses case studies to examine the impact of interpersonal bonds between political leaders and the process of the institutionalization of friendship and trust-building at different levels (Oelsner & Koschut, 2014; van Hoef & Oelsner, 2018). Given these different approaches, it is not surprising that the term “friendship” has various connotations in IR literature. For example, Wendt (1999, pp. 298–299) viewed friendship as a “role structure” within which states expect each other to follow the two rules of non-violence and mutual aid. Friendship is thus a “temporally open-ended” version of alliances (Wendt, 1999, p. 299). Oelsner and Vion (2011, p. 130) defined friendship as a “political process” that can be recognized by identifying a “series of acts and facts that could be interpreted as signs of engagement... in friendship.” For Berenskoetter (2014, p. 57), friendship is closely linked to security and power. It can be understood as a “special relationship of choice” that forms because of “a mutual commitment to use overlapping biographical narratives for pursuing a shared idea of international order.”

Oelsner and Koschut (2014) proposed a conceptual approach for analyzing friendship in international politics. They consider international friendship dependent on historical periods, culture, social contexts, and geographic regions, and distinguish between two types of international friendship: strategic and normative. Strategic friendship refers to actors considering each other as friends in political discourse and treaties, but such reference does not result in long-term behavior change and is rather an instrumental, functional, and often asymmetrical form of friendship (e.g., Roshchin, 2014). Normative international friendship, on the other hand, is based on normative and moral foundations, rather than strategic ones (e.g., Berenskoetter, 2014). Roshchin (2017) considers these two understandings of friendship as not necessarily at odds with one another, but rather as evidence that there is more than one concept of friendship that exists in international politics. Oelsner and Koschut's (2014) conceptualization identifies friendship as a potential change agent in international politics, as a bilateral relationship, and links the concept with zones of stable peace and security communities. Underlining the dynamic nature of friendship, Oelsner and Koschut (2014) propose conditions that can serve as indicators to locate and study international friendship, including symbolic interaction (i.e., the institutionalization of cooperation and trust-building), affective attachment (i.e., the friendship is idealized as special and unique), self-disclosure, and mutual commitment. International friendship, as either normatively or strategically understood, can represent positive international relationships

(Eznack, 2011, 2012), but can also be associated with violence (Berenskoetter, 2014). Koschut and Oelsner (2014) call for a wider range of empirical studies of international friendship to highlight its different dimensions and practices. Therefore, studies of the use of the term friendship in international agreements, such as this one, contribute to a better understanding of the nature and consequences of friendship in international politics and diplomacy.

### 3 | FRIENDSHIP DAMS AS A RESEARCH TOPIC

If the concept of friendship in international politics has been under-theorized, the case of friendship dams has been nearly neglected. While many have studied the symbolic and political dimensions of dams (among others Fox & Sneddon, 2019; Menga, 2015; Middleton, 2022; Nagheeb & Warner, 2018; Warner et al., 2019), few have attempted to conceptualize the meaning and the implications of the friendship label as applied to dams. The so-called friendship dams represent a small sample of the nearly 60,000 large dams worldwide (International Commission on Large Dams, 2020). Yet, their diversity and contextual nature can shed light on the multiplicity of existing variables affecting the hydropolitics of dams and the instrumentalization of water infrastructures in wider political processes.

As a relatively unexplored research avenue, “friendship infrastructures,” from highways and railways to bridges, pipelines, and dams, have not yet been defined. A look at the existing and planned friendship dams (Table 1) reveals their strikingly different characteristics, motivations, and disparate results. In terms of describing the general characteristics of friendship dams, first (1), the so-called friendship dams are multipurpose infrastructures, used for hydro-power and flood protection as well as for water supply and irrigation. All but the Ambouli Friendship Dam include hydroelectricity production. Second (2), earth dams predominate in friendship dams, with only one rockfill dam—the Afghan-India Friendship Dam—and no gravity, buttress, or arch dams. This is not surprising, as earth dams represent nearly 65% of the world's dams (ICOLD, 2020). Third (3), the friendship label is not confined solely to riparian states. Whereas most friendship dams involve two riparians, there are cases where the dam represents a donor-recipient relationship, such as in the Salma (India-Afghanistan) and Ambouli (Turkey-Djibouti) friendship dams. In the case of the Youyi dam in China, there are no international parties involved. Fourth (4), their governance architectures are varied. Some governance structures are based on memoranda of understanding (e.g., the Ambouli and Syrian-Turkey friendship dams). Others develop operation-driven commissions (e.g., the Afghan-India, Doosti, and Dostyk dams). Only the Amistad Dam involves a basin-wide joint management body that goes beyond just the dam's operation and maintenance. Fifth (5), friendship dams are not immune from tensions and conflictive dynamics between countries. For example, two friendship dams span the Harirud river in the Middle East: the Afghan-India Friendship Dam on the upper Harirud river and the Iran-Turkmenistan Friendship Dam in the lower part. Whereas the Afghan-Indian

**TABLE 1** Overview of friendship dams (to our knowledge).

Name	Countries involved	River	Status	Infrastructure characteristics	Governance characteristics
Amistad Dam (Amistad = Friendship in Spanish)	Mexico USA	Rio Grande	In use (construction began in 1963, and operation in 1969)	Type: Earth-fill Height: 78 m Reservoir: 3887 MCM Use: Flood protection, and later hydropower (132 MW) Cost: USD 125 million (from 1963)	International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC) as the joint management body, created in 1889. The IBWC is in charge of the distribution of waters in the Rio Grande and Colorado river in general, and the joint operation and maintenance of the Amistad dam, reservoir, and flood control system.
Doosti Dam (Doosti = Friendship in Persian)	Iran Turkmenistan	Harirud/Tejen	In use (construction began in 2001, and operation in 2005)	Type: Earth-fill Height: 77 m Reservoir: 1250 MCM Use: Hydropower (16 MW), irrigation and drinking water Cost: USD 168 million (from 2000)	Common Coordinating Commission (CCC) as joint management committee, created in 2000. The CCC was involved in investigating technical or legal problems during the construction of the dam, and is now responsible for the operation and maintenance of the Doosti dam.
Afghan-India Friendship Dam (formerly the Salma Dam) <sup>a</sup>	Afghanistan (funded by India)	Harirud/Tejen	In use (construction began in 1976, but was halted between 1979 and 2006 because of the Soviet invasion and then civil war of Afghanistan, operation finally began in 2015)	Type: Earth and rock-fill Height: 107 m Reservoir: 1193 MCM Use: Hydropower (42 MW), irrigation and drinking water Cost: USD 275 million (from 2006)	Water and Power Consultancy Services (WAPCOS, under the Ministry of Jal Shakti of India), as the company constructing and operating the dam. There is no joint body nor agreement.
Syria-Turkey Friendship dam	Turkey Syria	Orontes/Asi	Construction delayed (first stone set in 2011, construction halted due to civil war in Syria)	Type: Earth-fill Height: 22.5 m Reservoir: 114 MCM Use: Irrigation, flood control and hydropower (9 MW) Cost: USD 28 million (from 2011)	Technical Working Group as the binational body in charge of the design, construction and operation of the dam (according to the 2009 Memorandum of Understanding regarding the joint dam on the Orontes River under the name "Friendship Dam").
Dostyk hydrosystem (Dostyk = Friendship in Russian and Kazakh)	China Kazakhstan	Khorgos/Horgos	In use (construction began in 2011, and operation in 2013) New dam being constructed five km upstream from the Dostyk hydrosystem, the Chukurbulak (Almaly) dam (2018–2020).	Type: – Height: – Reservoir: – Use: Irrigation, flood control and hydropower (21 MW) Cost: USD 6 million (from 2011)	Kazakh-Chinese joint commission as the binational body in charge of the management and operation of the joint waterworks (created with the 2010 Agreement on Joint Construction of Dostyk Headworks on the Horgos river).

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Name	Countries involved	River	Status	Infrastructure characteristics	Governance characteristics
Ambouli friendship dam	Djibouti (funded by Turkey)	Ambouli	In use (construction began in 2017, and filling began in 2019).	Type: Earth-fill Height: 71 m Reservoir: 14 MCM Use: Flood control and irrigation Cost: USD 20 million (from 2017)	Dam constructed within the frame of the 2014 Cooperation Agreement in the field of Water, but there is no joint body nor agreement.
Youyi Reservoir (Youyi = Friendship in Chinese)	China	Dongyanghe	In use (constructed in 1958, with modifications in 1970)	Type: earth-fill Height: 40 m Length: 290 m Reservoir: originally 116 MCM (reduced to 60 MCM due to siltation, as reported in 1998) Use: water supply (mainly irrigation), flood control, and hydroelectricity	Reservoir on the border of Hebei Province and Inner Mongolia.
Amistad Cuban-Bulgarian dam (Amistad = Friendship in Spanish)	Cuba (funded by Bulgaria)	Saramaguacan	In use (constructed in 1986)	Type: earth-fill Height: 24 m Length: – Reservoir: 136 MCM Use: water supply (mainly drinking water)	No information found.
Friendship Dam (Suakacagi Dam, Tunca Project)	Turkey Bulgaria	Tunca (Tundzha)	Not constructed	Type: – Height: – Length: – Reservoir: – Use: flood control, hydropower, irrigation	Protocols signed and agreements drafted (by 2006), but ultimately Bulgaria did not agree to the project.

\*A second Afghan-India dam is currently being planned: the Lalandar (Shatoot) Dam, near Kabul, with an MoU signed in February 2021.

friendship dam represents cooperation between these two non-riparian countries, it has caused tensions between the riparian states of Afghanistan and Iran (Ramachandran, 2018). Similarly, while the Iran-Turkmenistan Friendship Dam has yielded a framework for continuing cooperation and friendship between the two countries on transboundary water management, it has left out the third riparian, Afghanistan, from the negotiations (Nagheeb et al., 2019).

Such diversity makes the study of friendship dams an interesting research endeavor. By looking at friendship dams from a functional perspective—that is, by considering what a friendship dam entails—we can start examining the meaning and processes behind this type of infrastructure. Out of the nine friendship dams included in Table 1, we selected the Syria-Turkey Friendship Dam project as our first case study for two main reasons. First (1), although this friendship dam is perhaps one of the most investigated (Williams, 2011; Scheumann & Shamaly, 2016; Kibaroglu & Sümer, 2016; Conker & Hussein, 2020), it has been mainly studied from a “water-focused” perspective, without much room for understanding the broader political and diplomatic picture. By tracing the history of the development of cooperation that led to the Syria-Turkey Friendship Dam initiative, we aim to offer new insights into the cooperative dynamics that resulted in the development of this friendship dam. The Syria-Turkey Friendship Dam project is embedded in a long-term relationship between Syria and Turkey over sharing the Asi/Orontes river, a relationship going back at least to the 1960s. By analyzing the evolution of such a relationship, we aim to reveal the political conditions underlying a friendship dam's conceptualization, negotiation, formalization, and materialization. Second (2), the Syria-Turkey Friendship Dam is still under construction, halted due to the onset of the Syrian civil war. This ongoing, open nature of the project enables us to analyze the process without being influenced by the outcome.

## 4 | METHODS

As Oelsner and Koschut (2014) emphasized, the notion of friendship is shaped by different historical periods, cultural dimensions, as well as several social contexts and geographic regions. This is also true for infrastructures such as dams that imply, among others, long term perspectives (often planned for over a century) and impacts across multiple scales, jurisdictions, sectors of activity involved, and types of actors. As a result, understanding how a label such as friendship dam is crystallized and operationalized entails focusing on a complex set of variables and factors that comprise water and non-water related dimensions.

In this contribution, we provide a single case-study analysis and try to untangle the process and the primary factors and triggers that led to establishing a friendship dam. We adopt a historical perspective to trace the evolution of a process, identify involved institutions, and grasp which actors intervene and at what stage. To do so, we build our framework on two main analytical perspectives anchored in historical institutionalism and process tracing.

On the one hand, we consider that the historical perspective allows for understanding how actors and organizations act within defined

institutional arrangements (Kay, 2005). In this regard, historical institutionalism provides an overarching framework that enables us to focus specifically on the evolution of institutions (Sorensen, 2015). This framework enables the analysis of cooperation and conflict dynamics of friendship dams particularly well, as it allows for analyzing how institutions define and settle conflicts among specific groups of actors (Bolognesi & Bréthaut, 2018). As a result, we will focus on how institutions evolved during the timeframe of the study (Steinmo, 2008) and on the factors that influenced specific trajectories.

On the other hand, we consider process tracing to be particularly well-suited to be used with historical institutionalism as an overarching framework. We use process tracing as a method to identify causal mechanisms and influencing factors that intervene within and outside the water sector. We aim to describe and understand the causal processes that produced the outcome of a historical case (Beach, 2017). Process tracing is particularly useful in our case because it allows us to focus on how causal processes work in the long run. We situate ourselves in a minimalist perspective of process tracing (*ibid.*). This means identifying existing phases of the process and deriving and analyzing possible triggers for change without necessarily providing a full understanding of the inner workings of each causal mechanism at play. Process-tracing implies considering a wide set of possible causal factors. We, therefore, pay particular attention to the context because the mechanisms discovered and described work in a specific way for a particular context and may not behave the same way in a different context.

By employing this method, this research aims to trace the series of events that led to the definition of an agreement related to the Syria-Turkey Friendship Dam project, and potentially identify likely causal mechanisms that played a role in the evolution of the process. We rely mainly on secondary data analysis derived from media, scientific, and grey literature. We complement our data set with five semi-structured interviews with both Syrian and Turkish water experts that allow us to triangulate information and collect qualitative viewpoints about possible factors and causal links. Interviewees from both countries came from both technical and academic backgrounds and some were directly involved with the Syria-Turkey Friendship Dam project. Interviewees were informed of the research objectives and gave their consent to be interviewed with recognition that their identity would be concealed.

It is important to mention that much of the prior research and data obtained to analyze this case study comes from Turkish scholars and resources. Perhaps this is reflective of the processes being mostly led by Turkey, but other biases influencing the available data may exist.

Nonetheless, a richer understanding of the case can be developed with future studies of the Syrian perspective.

We structure our analysis along two main sections. First (1), we provide an in-depth case study based on the analysis of the context and on the identification of the main phases that structure the evolution of the Syria-Turkey Friendship Dam institutional arrangement. Second (2), we conduct a transversal analysis of the different phases and focus our attention on the key variables that played a significant



role and led to the formalization of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) as a structuring framework for the Syria-Turkey Friendship Dam. The analysis stretches across the time period beginning when Turkey and Syria gained their independence, through to 2011, when the onset of the civil war in Syria halted the Friendship Dam project.

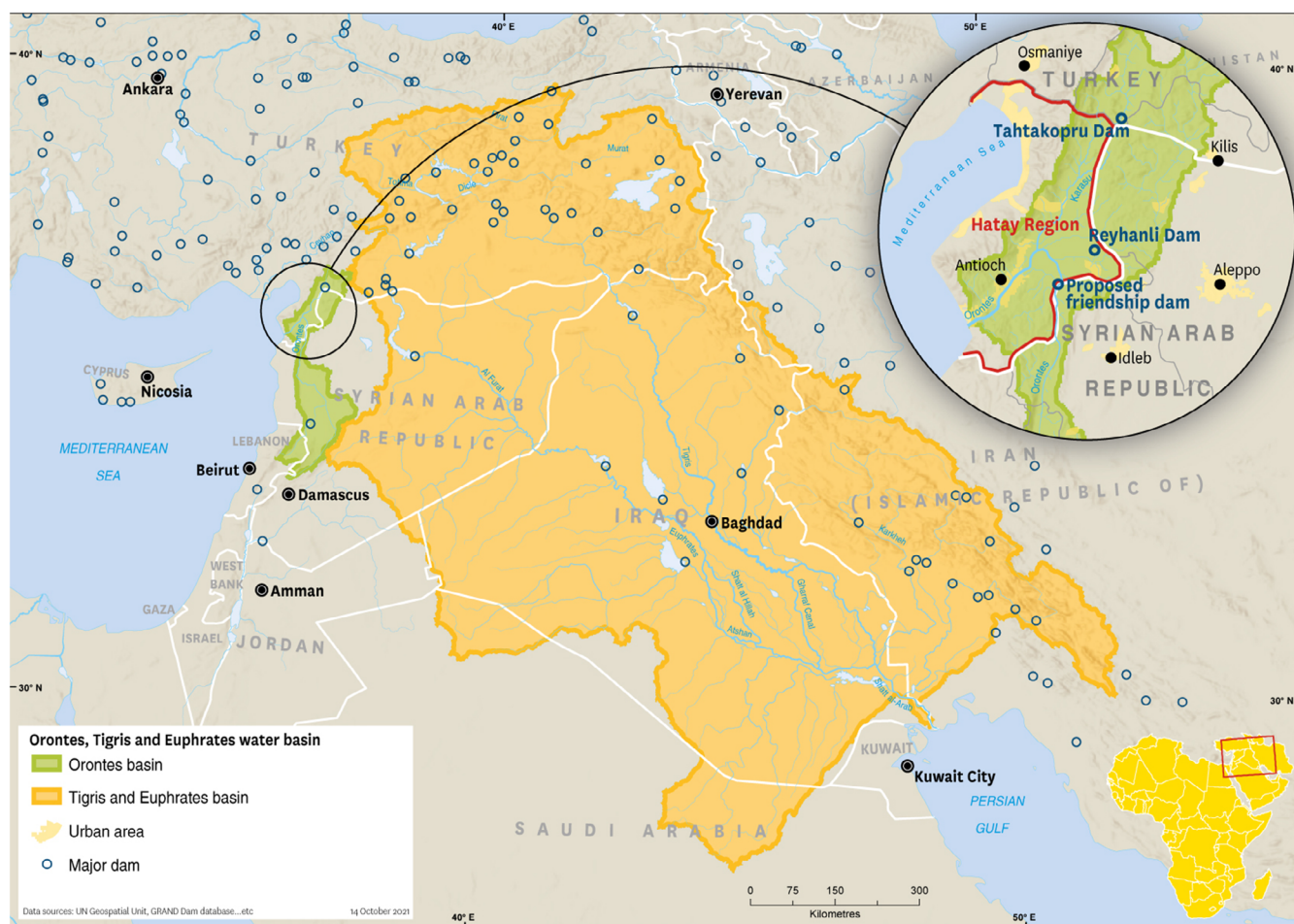
## 5 | CASE-STUDY ANALYSIS: THE SYRIA-TURKEY FRIENDSHIP DAM

### 5.1 | The Syria-Turkey friendship dam

The proposed Syria-Turkey Friendship Dam site is located on the Asi/Orontes river (Figure 1), which originates in Lebanon, flows through Syria, and exits into the Mediterranean Sea in the Iskenderun/Hatay region of Turkey. Passing through one of the first industrialized regions of Syria, the Asi/Orontes river is heavily used by people and industry before largely polluted waters exit into Turkey (Jaubert & Saddé-Sbeih, 2016). Critically, the Asi/Orontes river delineates the (disputed) Syria-Turkey border. What is now the Iskenderun/Hatay region was originally a part of Syria according to the 1923

French Mandate for Syria and Lebanon. Then, Iskenderun/Hatay became a part of Turkey in 1939 (via the Agreement on the Absolute Solution for the Territorial Problems between Turkey and Syria) in tandem with a friendship treaty between Turkey and France, in order to secure Turkey as an ally during WWII (Magued, 2019). In 1939, Syria and Turkey signed the Final Protocol to Determine Syria-Hatay Border Limitation, which established that the thalweg lines of the Asi/Orontes, Karasu, and Afrin rivers would mark the border between Syria and Turkey (Comair et al., 2013a; Kibaroglu et al., 2005) and that the water resources would be allocated equally (Comair et al., 2013a). However, after Syrian independence, Syria refused to accept Iskenderun/Hatay as a part of Turkey (Magued, 2019).

The conflict over to which country the region belongs has significantly colored Syria and Turkey's transboundary management of the Asi/Orontes waters (Conker & Hussein, 2020). While Turkey has advocated for discussing all transboundary waters shared with Syria collectively, Syria historically refused to discuss the Asi/Orontes river as a part of this package because Syria considered the Iskenderun/Hatay province to be Syrian territory. From a utilitarian point of view, at least since the 1960s (Conker & Hussein, 2020; interviewee 04, personal communication, November 2020), Turkey sought to build a dam



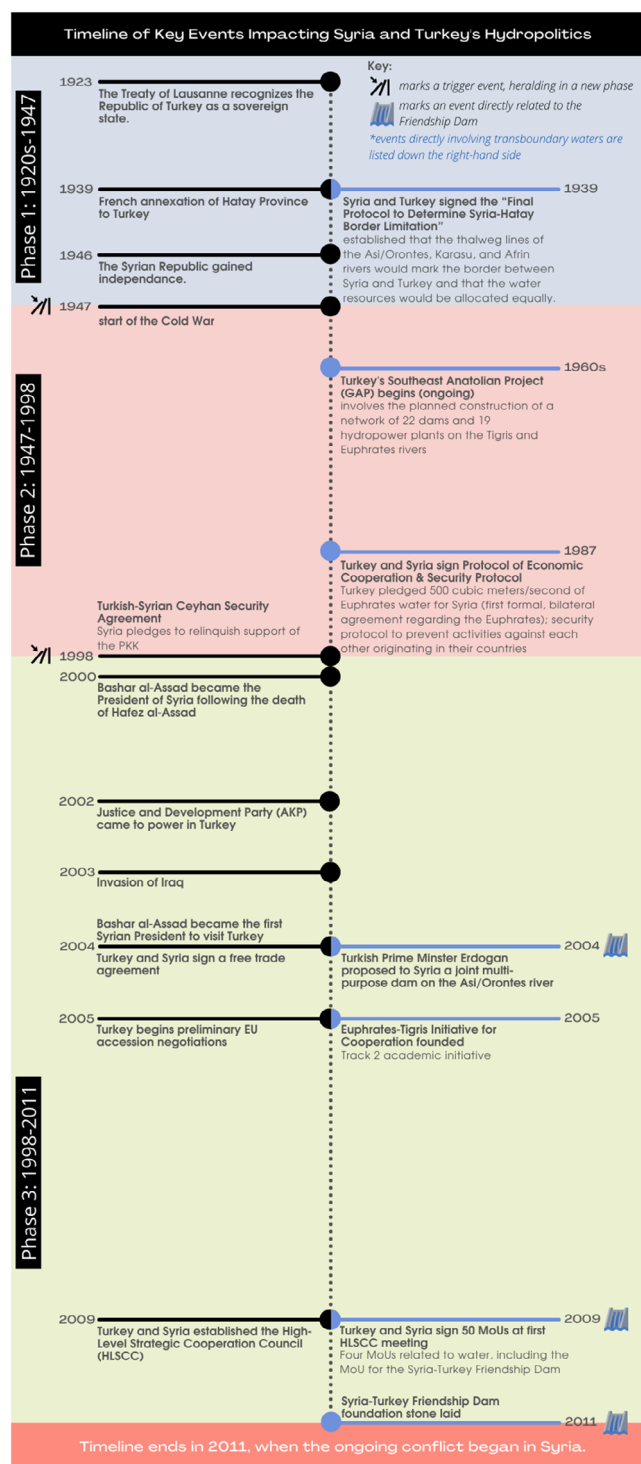
**FIGURE 1** Map of the Asi/Orontes, Tigris, and Euphrates river basins highlighting the distribution of dams. Inset map shows the proposed Syria-Turkey Friendship Dam location. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/eap.2038)]

on the Asi/Orontes river for protection from frequent, severe flooding (Conker & Hussein, 2020), and additional, anticipated benefits were to include hydroelectricity and irrigation for both riparians (Kibaroglu & Sümer, 2016). The contentious border region was the most promising location for the dam since the Amik Plain further downstream in the Turkish territory is topographically unsuitable for a dam (Scheumann & Shamaly, 2016). However, the project could not move forward due to poor political relations between Turkey and Syria until the dawn of the 21st century. Therefore, the eventual development of the Syria-Turkey Friendship Dam project in 2009 was touted by Turkey as being a “major cooperation step” (Maden, 2011 in Scheumann & Shamaly, 2016, p. 126).

Although the technical aspects were yet to be agreed upon, the MoU signaled the political will to build the dam, and on February 6, 2011, the dam's foundation stone was ceremoniously laid, jointly by the prime ministers of Syria and Turkey. However, just weeks later the construction of the dam was put on hold due to the onset of civil war in Syria in March 2011 and the resulting deterioration of Syrian and Turkish relationships has kept the dam unfinished ever since. While the signing of the MoU for the Friendship Dam again signified Syria's recognition of Iskenderun/Hatay as Turkish (Scheumann et al., 2011), this geopolitical understanding was reversed with the eruption of the Syrian conflict in 2011. Iskenderun/Hatay and the areas close to the proposed Friendship Dam locality have become hotspots for conflict (Daoudy, 2020) in the ongoing war in Syria. Most recently, this zone has been considered (albeit unsuccessfully) for demarcation as a “peace corridor” to allow refugees to safely return to Syria (Luerdi & Hakim, 2020). Although the Syria-Turkey Friendship Dam does not yet exist, understanding the institutional processes and motivations for cooperation that led to the declaration of the intent to build such a joint dam can reveal much about the hydropolitical interactions between Syria and Turkey and the role that a friendship dam has, or does not have, in creating transboundary water cooperation, and peace, between co-dam-builders.

## 5.2 | Key events leading to the development of the friendship dam project

Syria and Turkey share three rivers: the Euphrates, Tigris, and Asi/Orontes, and transboundary cooperation between the two countries has a long and undulating history. Drawing on previous work, here we provide a brief overview of the key events that shaped Turkey and Syria's hydropolitical relationship since the 1920s, when Turkey gained sovereignty, through to 2011, when the ongoing conflict erupted in Syria (Figure 2). We highlight key events that seemed to trigger periods of particularly cooperative or non-cooperative hydro-political relations between the two countries. We trace the evolution of broad political and hydropolitical cooperation and non-cooperation with a particular focus on the events and triggers that led to the commitment to build a joint dam on the Asi/Orontes river with the label friendship dam. This focus on the Friendship Dam has allowed us to identify two main political variables at play, security and the dynamics



**FIGURE 2** Timeline of events that impacted Turkey and Syria's political relationship and cooperation over the Friendship Dam project. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

of international cooperation, which we propose ultimately led to the decision to build the joint dam and bestow on it the label of “Friendship Dam.” Three broad phases of political and hydropolitical cooperation or non-cooperation between Syria and Turkey occurred between 1920 and 2011.



### 5.2.1 | Contestation over the Iskenderun/Hatay region and the Asi/Orontes river (1920s–1950s)

Upon gaining independence as sovereign states (Turkey in 1923 and Syria in 1946), both countries undertook periods of nation-building, during which neither state used transboundary waters in a way that negatively impacted the other (Kibaroglu & Unver, 2000; Turan, 2011). During this time, there was a low level of hydropolitical cooperation between Syria and Turkey, but also low water-related tensions. Nonetheless, the foundations for later transboundary water tensions were being laid, namely with the annexation of the Iskenderun/Hatay region in 1939, through which part of the Asi/Orontes river runs.

### 5.2.2 | Water as security and foreign relation matters (1947–1998)

With Turkey a NATO member and Syria an ally of the former Soviet Union, the dawn of the Cold War triggered the subsequent period of low cooperation over water resources and high conflict between Turkey and Syria, from the 1950s to 1998 (Altunisik & Tür, 2006). During the War, national security concerns were a high priority for both countries, and water was a key security variable. For example, for Syria, water was essential for irrigated agriculture, which in turn was essential for securing identity, self-sufficiency, independence, and Arab nationalism (Altunisik & Tür, 2006). For Turkey, the resources of the Tigris and Euphrates were key for developing south-eastern Anatolia (Altunisik & Tür, 2006).

From the 1950s onward, Turkey, Syria, and neighboring countries began to carry out large-scale, uncoordinated development projects (e.g., dam building, the Ghab Plain Project, and others) and established competitive transboundary water policies (Beaumont, 1998). Both Turkey and Syria embarked on damming the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers in the 1960s. Hydropolitical tensions rose in the 1960s and 1970s, as Turkey began to take advantage of its upstream position on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, developing the south-eastern part of Turkey via a series of dams, known as the GAP (Southeast Anatolian Project). The GAP project in Southeastern Anatolia, home to a large Kurdish population and also an area considered less socio-economically developed, was carried out without consultation of Turkey's downstream riparian neighbors, Syria and Iraq, and thus created conflict between the three countries, which continues today, and influences Syria's and Turkey's relations with respect to their other shared transboundary waters, such as the Asi/Orontes river.

To avoid a subsequent violent escalation of tensions, in 1987 Turkey and Syria signed both water and security protocols (Turkish-Syrian Protocol on Economic Cooperation; Altunisik & Tür, 2006). This resulted in Syria pledging to cease support for the PKK (Partiya Kerkaran Kurdistan; in English: "Workers' Party of Kurdistan"), who posed a terrorism threat to Turkey, and in a commitment by Turkey to ensure 500 cubic meters per second of water from the Euphrates for Syria, the first formal, bilateral agreement regarding the

Euphrates (Kibaroglu, 2017), and the first time the PKK conflict was explicitly and directly linked with water (Çarkoglu & Eder, 2001).

### 5.2.3 | Increasing cooperation and "friendship" (1998–2011)

This time period can be characterized by transboundary cooperation and low tensions. In 2000, the change in leadership in Syria led to a relaxation of political tensions, and an elite consensus favored deepening ties with Turkey (Altunisik & Tür, 2006). Visits by high-ranking politicians between the countries improved their relationship. Turkey's leadership also changed in 2002, as the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power, and transformed Turkish foreign policy (Altunisik & Martin, 2011). In 2004 Bashar al-Assad visited Turkey, marking the first time a Syrian president had done so since Syria's independence. This was interpreted as the beginning of a new period of regional cooperation and stability (Larrabee, 2007). However, at the same time, in the early 2000s, Turkey was apprehensive about the situation in Iraq, which made this one of Turkey's main foreign policy issues (Altunisik & Tür, 2006).

After 2001, the Turkish economy was doing well and consequently, Turkey looked to Syria for new markets (Phillips, 2011 in Kibaroglu & Sümer, 2016). In December of 2004, the two countries signed a free trade agreement that fostered economic connections between Syria and Turkey, and which de facto implied Syria's recognition of Turkey's possession of Iskenderun/Hatay (Williams, 2011). Simultaneously, Turkish PM Erdoğan offered Syria technical support for a proposed joint dam project on the Asi/Orontes river to irrigate farmland in Syria and Turkey. At this time, the governments also agreed on Syria's water transfer from the Tigris River (Conker, 2014). In 2005, Syria faced hostility from the EU, the United States, and other Arab countries because of the assassination of the former prime minister of Lebanon. Syria looked to Turkey for support and friendship, to escape isolation (Phillips, 2011 in Kibaroglu & Sümer, 2016).

In 2008 and 2009 Turkey, Syria, and Iraq cooperated on foreign policy initiatives (Kibaroglu, 2017). Perhaps setting a precedent for what was to come between Turkey and Syria, in January of 2008 Syria agreed to discuss and sign an MoU with Turkey and Iraq regarding the Tigris waters. Turkey and Syria decided to meet in the framework of the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council (HLSCC) from September 2009.

Although the border dispute persists today, it has not been a constant. Syria's refusal to recognize Iskenderun/Hatay as belonging to Turkey continued through until the 1998 Adana Agreement (also known as the Turkish-Syrian Ceyhan Security Agreement) was signed by Turkey and Syria, which signaled a turning point allowing for better political and economic relations between the two countries (Kibaroglu, 2015). Following this, in 2004 Syria and Turkey signed a free trade agreement, and Syria's assent to this implied the recognition of Iskenderun/Hatay as Turkish (Williams, 2011). That same year, Turkey proposed to Syria to build a joint dam on their border. Under the auspices of the HLSCC in 2009, Turkey and Syria signed a

package of 50 memoranda of understanding (MoUs), agreements and cooperation protocols between Turkey and Syria, one of which established the agreement to build the Syria-Turkey Friendship Dam, and four in total that were related to water (Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2009).

The Syria-Turkey Friendship Dam was touted by Turkey as being a “major cooperation step” (Maden, 2011 in Scheumann & Shamaly, 2016, p. 126) with equal benefits for both countries. The MoU for the Friendship Dam did not include technical specifications, and Turkey and Syria established a joint technical working group (comprised of experts from the Turkish DSI and the Syrian General Commissions of Water Resources [GCHS]) to determine the dam's technical characteristics (Scheumann & Shamaly, 2016). Scheumann and Shamaly (2016) assessed the proposed allocation of benefits and costs of the Friendship Dam, concluding that, although both countries would benefit from hydroelectricity production, the dam would largely favor Turkey via flood control and water for irrigation, and the negative externalities were predicted to largely impact Syria, as the planned reservoir would mainly flood Syrian territory. When negotiations over the dam paused in 2011, the technical specificities of the Friendship Dam had not been yet confirmed. Additionally, an analysis by Sümer (2015) states that planning for the Friendship Dam did not involve environmental impact studies, consultations with local stakeholders, consideration of resettlement issues, nor consideration of the impacts of climate change.

### 5.3 | Analysis: A strategic friendship in the Asi/Orontes river basin?

Tracing the history of Syria's and Turkey's cooperation and non-cooperation over transboundary waters, including the Asi/Orontes river, highlights key political variables that led to a window of opportunity for the establishment of the Friendship Dam. For this particular case, the variables of (1) security and (2) the particular character of international cooperation engaged in by the two countries stand out as key factors influencing the motivations for and the process leading to the establishment of the Friendship Dam. Newfound collaboration between Syria and Turkey beginning in the late 1990s resulted in a number of collaborative initiatives, including the Friendship Dam, which may be interpreted to symbolize them all, and publicly secure the strategic friendship between the two states. This “friendship” label can be interpreted as representing strategic, rather than normative, friendship between Turkey and Syria. The two variables identified as salient to the friendship dam process align with the conceptualization of strategic friendship, as defined by Koschut and Oelsner (2014) as instrumental, functional, and often asymmetrical.

### 5.4 | Instrumentalization

While a dam on the border was sought by Turkey for decades, it was security concerns that proved to be key in eventually enabling the

border dam development process between Syria and Turkey, and the affixing of the “friendship” label. In the framework of Syria and Turkey's international relationship, high-level political relations, security, and water have historically been interconnected. Since the two countries became sovereign, security concerns have triggered shifts in high-level political relations between Syria and Turkey. These high-level political relations can be directly correlated to the degree to which transboundary water relations are cooperative. Furthermore, in the past, Syria and Turkey have linked water and security issues together (e.g., 1987 economic and security protocols, the building of the GAP; Conker, 2014). The GAP project, for example, provided Turkey with control over the flow of the Euphrates river into Syria. Some suggest Syria attempted to protest the GAP by supporting the PKK (Altunisik & Tür, 2006), in an effort to coerce Turkey to share more water. In the same vein, Turkey may have used the Tigris and Euphrates waters in a manner that may have punished Syria for their backing of the PKK (Jongerden, 2010) and as a means for the Turkish state to fight against terrorism (Warner, 2012, p. 238). Hydropolitical relations between Syria and Turkey on the Asi/Orontes river have historically been linked to issues between Syria and Turkey concerning the Euphrates and Tigris rivers (Kibaroglu & Unver, 2000; Maden, 2018).

Historical analyses of Syria and Turkey's high-level political relationships (e.g., Altunisik & Tür, 2006; Magued, 2019; Phillips, 2011) make evident the importance of security in shaping internal policies and foreign relations matters in both countries. Historically, matters of security seem to be the catalysts ushering in new periods of cooperation or non-cooperation between Syria and Turkey (Figure 2). For example, an absence of security at the dawn of the Cold War, with water recognized as a key security variable, pitted Syria and Turkey against one another, hampering cooperation, including over transboundary waters (Kibaroglu & Scheumann, 2011). Collaboration between Syria and Turkey beginning in the late 1990s, which aimed to ensure security from the PKK, resulted in a number of other collaborative initiatives, including the Friendship Dam. As a major piece of visible infrastructure, the Friendship Dam could be interpreted as a public symbol representing Syria and Turkey's friendship and commitment to cooperation and security. Security and international friendship are linked in the literature (e.g., Berenskoetter, 2014; Oelsner & Koschut, 2014; Wendt, 1999). While Wendt (1999) contends that friendship is a role structure in which states expect each other to settle disputes without war and fight as a team if either friend's security is threatened, Oelsner and Koschut (2014) reason that zones of stable peace and security communities create the conditions under which international friendships can develop. In this particular case, we see that cooperation preceded the establishment of the Friendship Dam. As described by Roshchin (2007), international friendship can serve to maintain state security, where friendship is used as a contractual instrument to provide security in bilateral relationships. We can consider the MoU for the Friendship Dam as an expression of strategic friendship, as both Turkey and Syria had security gains to make from the public and physical manifestation of their declaration of friendship, to ensure their allyship and security in the face of threats such as

the ongoing conflict in Iraq, the PKK, for economic gains, among other objectives. In other studied treaties and pacts, the use of the term friendship has been found to be largely instrumental (Devere & Smith, 2010).

## 5.5 | Functionality

When we consider the period from 1998 to 2011 as a window of opportunity, which produced the conditions that enabled the establishment of the Friendship Dam project, the importance of the particular ways that international cooperation was carried out becomes clear, as a key variable that led to the Friendship Dam agreement. First, there were a multiplicity of factors that influenced the cooperation process, many of which had water embedded within them, but many of which were also outside of the traditional “water box.” For example, cooperation was assisted by a change in government leadership in both countries, which for both Turkey and Syria was accompanied by a change in the countries' approaches to foreign relations. Particularly significant, was Turkey's Justice and Development Party's philosophy to have “no problems with neighbors.”

When considering the role of the dynamics of international cooperation, it becomes evident that a multi-scalar perspective is important. At the level of the states, within this window of opportunity described above, Turkey was engaged in efforts to join the EU, and Syria and Turkey needed to define their borders to establish the boundaries of their free trade agreement. What also influenced the dynamics of international cooperation is where Syria or Turkey positioned themselves on a topic and at what moment. The salient elements of their cooperation narrative change through time: the willingness to cooperate was dependent on governments' particular foreign policy strategies and political positioning, which was affected by events. This particular combination seems to have led to the establishment of the Friendship Dam, which was just one of a package of 50 MoUs signed together as a part of Turkey and Syria's bilateral HLSCC. There was a multiplicity of processes at play, and this is what we mean about the dynamics of international cooperation being central to understanding the triggers, windows of opportunities and/or framework conditions that influenced the Friendship Dam process.

Just as the seeds of the friendship dam process cannot be understood without the context of the territorial dispute over the Iskenderoun/Hatay region, their germination would not have happened without the high-level institutionalization of cooperation. The most direct evidence of this facilitation is the Turkish-Syrian HLSCC's role in developing and signing the MoU for the friendship dam in December 2009. However, this high-level institutionalization of cooperation is not unique to Turkey and Syria.

The rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) in the early 2000s represented a shift in Turkish foreign policy. The doctrine of “strategic depth,” developed by the former Minister of Foreign Affairs Davutoğlu (2001), guided Turkey towards a more active, multi-dimensional, and multi-layered approach to foreign policy. One of the most critical features of this

new approach was the “zero problems with neighbors” principle. In the words of Davutoğlu (2004) himself, this meant “get[ing] rid of the psychology of Turkey is always surrounded by enemies” and “improv[ing] its relations with all its neighbors.”

Following the “high-level political cooperation” pillar of this approach, Turkey's foreign policy activity translated into an extensive network of the HLSCCs; an institutionalized model for bilateral partnership platforms. They generally took the form of joint cabinet meetings bringing together ministries from both sides, dealt with several issues—from economy and energy to transportation, tourism and education—and resulted in a series of joint statements, agreements, and memoranda of understanding. Throughout the years, the network of HLCCs has grown to include 27 states. In addition to these bilateral platforms, the network also involves some multilateral mechanisms, such as the Turkish-Arab Cooperation Forum.

Were the processes leading to the Syria-Turkey Friendship Dam project bilateral or multilateral in nature? International relations (IR) scholars have long been working on characterizing diplomatic interactions as multilateral, bilateral, or unilateral. While some definitions focus on the number of countries involved (e.g., Keohane, 1990), other scholars have noted that this approach misses the qualitative dimension of the phenomenon that makes it distinct. For instance, according to Ruggie (1992, p. 571), what makes a regime multilateral in form, beyond involving three or more states, is that it is based on “generalized principles of conduct.” Such principles specify appropriate conduct for a class of action without regard to the particularistic interests of the parties or their strategic exigencies.

The HLCCs contributed to the institutionalization of (mostly) bilateral relations and shaped cooperative behavior between Turkey and other states. In the Asi/Orontes river basin case, the Turkish-Syrian HLSCC facilitated the process of materializing the friendship dam idea. The political will expressed at this highest level empowered water bureaucracies to open up the black-box of the state and address the urgent problems of water shortages, quality deterioration, and flood impacts. However, this is true for other HLSCC and other sectors too. For example, the 48 agreements signed by Turkish-Iraqi HLSCC in October 2009 facilitated the Kirkuk-Yumurtalik (Ceyhan) oil pipeline expansion.

The establishment of the Turkish-Syrian HLSCC in September 2009, following Syrian President Al-Assad's visit to Turkey, represented a step towards “a long-term strategic partnership to expand and solidify [their] cooperation on a wide range of areas of mutual concern and interest” (Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2009). During the HLSCC's first meeting in December 2009, the two countries put into practice the understanding reached during the visit and resulted in the signing of the MoU for the “construction of a joint dam on the Orontes River under the name friendship dam.” Yet, as already said, the MoU on the friendship dam was not the only outcome of the HLSCC's first meetings. It was part of a package of 50 MoUs, agreements, and protocols.

Therefore, to the question of whether Turkey's approach to foreign policy with the HLSCCs is bilateral or multilateral, according to the criteria of “generalized principles of conduct,” the approach would

be bilateral. This is because, as Aslanli and Akgün (2020) noted, “HLSCCs are institutional mechanisms that serve economic cooperation and power-building at the regional level from a pragmatic and liberal functionalist perspective.” Although a series of HLSCCs involve three or more states, Turkey’s approach to foreign policy houses bilateralism since it segments relations into multiples of dyads and compartmentalizes them. One could see Turkey’s overall approach to multilateralism as being via these high-level bilateral channels. This high-level bilateralism lends itself well to the utilization of the friendship concept. As noted by van Hoef and Oelsner (2018), friendships are produced and reproduced through existing bilateral interactions.

## 5.6 | Asymmetry

The MoU for the Friendship Dam did not include technical specifications, so Turkey and Syria established a joint technical working group (comprised of experts from the Turkish DSI and the Syrian General Commissions of Water Resources [GCHS]) to determine the dam’s technical characteristics (Scheumann & Shamaly, 2016). Scheumann and Shamaly (2016) assessed the proposed allocation of benefits and costs of the Friendship Dam, concluding that, although both countries would benefit from hydroelectricity production, the dam would largely favor Turkey via flood control and water for irrigation, and the negative externalities were predicted to largely impact Syria, as the planned reservoir would mainly flood Syrian territory. When negotiations over the dam paused in 2011, the technical specificities of the Friendship Dam had not been yet confirmed. Additionally, an analysis by Sümer (2015) states that planning for the Friendship Dam did not involve environmental impact studies, consultations with local stakeholders, consideration of resettlement issues, nor consideration of the impacts of climate change. A third characteristic of strategic friendship, as defined by Koschut and Oelsner (2014), is asymmetry, which is exemplified in this case by the proposal of a joint dam with unequally distributed benefits and negative impacts.

## 6 | CONCLUSIONS

Historical institutionalism and process tracing have aided in distilling the key political variables that were important for creating the conditions for hydropolitical cooperation and the concurrent application of the “friendship” label to a joint dam, allowing us to better understand the process of cooperation that led to the Syria-Turkey Friendship Dam project. This approach highlights the added value of cross-fertilizing the theoretical lenses of hydropolitics and friendship in international relations. On the one hand, it highlights the importance of considering variables outside of the water box when seeking to understand hydropolitical processes. On the other hand, our case study offers an empirical insight into the strategic friendship framework.

Tracing the history of cooperation over the Syria-Turkey Friendship Dam project has shown that the friendship dam label may be employed to instrumentalize water for other purposes, such as

security and economic gains. Future research may therefore explore questions such as how can the friendship label facilitate the instrumentalization of water resources in the context of wider political processes and power relations? and, how does such instrumentalization depend on multiple levels and scales?

For unraveling the case of the Syria-Turkey Friendship Dam, it becomes evident that the politics of scale (Moss & Newig, 2010; Swyngedouw, 2004) can also be an insightful analytical tool to understand ongoing processes. Based on our analysis, we identify new assumptions related to the strategic use of scales by parties in structuring the Friendship Dam process. For instance, we can assume that Turkey saw the derivation of benefits from the joint dam at a variety of strategic scales. Through our historical analysis, we see that Turkey was involved in processes related to EU accession, while simultaneously looking to Syria to bolster trade and therefore needing to clearly delineate a border to facilitate their bilateral free trade agreement. It was at the highest level, through a bilateral council that the Friendship Dam was conceived of, so scale is not only an important perspective but also an important tool in defining existing narratives related to such dams.

Through this contribution, our aim was to better understand the meaning of an underexplored construct, the Friendship Dam label. We believe that such type of analysis can shed interesting light on and provide an enhanced understanding of hydropolitical processes. Going beyond the water box and cross-fertilizing literature from international relations, diplomacy and hydropolitics, our aim is to provide new analytical perspectives on complex and rather messy processes. Applying the concept of strategic friendship in international relations illuminates the linkages between the two political variables that drove cooperation over water and the “friendship” label that was applied to the most visible and physical manifestation of that cooperation. The analysis suggests that the label of “friendship” applied to the joint dam project is an operationalization of the concept of strategic friendship through instrumentalization, functionality, and asymmetry. State-to-state friendship can be an agent of change in international politics (Koschut & Oelsner, 2014). It is this potentially transformative nature that perhaps motivated its use in this case—as a strategic tool to achieve desired outcomes, such as security and protection from flooding. We believe that the limited set of friendship dams across the world offers exciting qualitative and comparative research avenues to understand how friendship narratives are shaped in hydropolitics, how they evolve and a how and why those narratives are positioned by actors at different strategic levels.

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## ORCID

Hannah Haemmerli  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4419-2337>



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