

# Hasankeyf Briefing

*Based on a visit by Julie Ward MEP, Prof. Felix Padel, and Henry Brooks (Kurdish Solidarity Cymru), 13-16 July 2019. For questions please contact Peace in Kurdistan on [estella24@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:estella24@tiscali.co.uk) or Kurdish Solidarity Cymru on Twitter [@KSCymru](https://twitter.com/KSCymru)*



*Figure 1: Soldiers at Hasankeyf surrounding protesters not long before speakers were due to start on the day of the Big Jump. After negotiations the army agreed to allow the speeches but not for anyone to jump into the river.*

This year, on 14<sup>th</sup> July, a date marking worldwide campaigns to save and preserve vital freshwater ecosystems, the three of us joined over a hundred local and international activists at Hasankeyf in southeastern Turkey.

Hasankeyf is an ancient and spectacularly beautiful town in a gorge on the Tigris river. Despite sustained protests for over 20 years - which persuaded Balfour Beatty and other foreign companies and banks to withdraw from this project<sup>1</sup> – the Turkish government has built the massive Ilisu Dam 77 kms

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/balfour-beatty-pulls-out-of-turkish-dam-project-9215856.html>

downstream, which is imminently due to drown Hasankeyf, along with 199 villages (of which 85 will be completely submerged), and a hugely diverse range of wildlife, including a rare species of river turtle (the soft-shelled Euphrates turtle).<sup>2</sup> Media reports say that authorities have started to fill the Ilisu dam since our visit in mid-July.<sup>3</sup>

Hasankeyf, as we will stress below, is itself a uniquely significant historical site. But what is also immensely important is how Hasankeyf highlights and exemplifies a number of intersecting crimes and abuses by the Turkish state. Historical monuments will be submerged under the waters of the dam as Turkey buries Kurdish villages under rubble. Ecosystems are destroyed for their inconvenience, as are communities, languages, and cultures. Water is controlled in a cynical geopolitical ploy for domination while Turkey continues to maintain one of the largest armies on the planet, frequently using it against those it deems disadvantageous to its strategic social and political aims.

The struggle around Hasankeyf is of crucial importance not only for the pressing facts which align with its unfortunate fate but also due to the multiple struggles and campaigns which intersect in its vicinity. Hasankeyf has become a flashpoint bringing together activists from many different backgrounds: environmental activists, Kurdish activists, trade union activists, artists and cultural activists, political parties, etc.

From the 13<sup>th</sup> July 2019, Hasankeyf witnessed an unprecedented incursion of several hundred armed police and soldiers, with about 30 armoured vehicles. The government refused to allow the planned 'Big Jump' into the river – the first time they have prevented this annual show of solidarity with Hasankeyf. A solid

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<sup>2</sup> Background information for this Report taken from a wide variety of sources, including *Report on the current status of the Ilisu Dam and Hydroelectric Power Plant Project and the counter campaigns*, by Save Hasankeyf and Tigris Valley, 27/5/2019, updated 21/6/2019, at <http://www.hasankeyfgirisimi.net/?p=861> and *Outstanding Universal Value of Hasankeyf and the Tigris Valley* by Drs Zeynep Ahunbay and Ozge Bayniz, at <http://www.dogadernegi.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Outstanding-universal-value-of-hasankeyf-and-the-tigris-valley.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> 'Filling of the Ilisu dam has started!' *Save the Tigris*, 26 July 2019, at <https://www.savethetigris.org/filling-of-ilisu-dam-has-started/>

line of police in riot gear prevented anyone entering the water. Luckily violence was averted, and negotiations took place.



Figure 2: Activists at Hasankeyf on the day of the Big Jump. Opposite them were a few hundred soldiers with automatic rifles. Behind them were more soldiers guarding the river. Julie Ward MEP (UK Labour Party) delivered a speech alongside Ayşe Acar Başaran and Mensur Işık from the People's Democratic Party (HDP).

We stood in solidarity with local people for about an hour in the sun, facing the police and journalists, while Julie and other representatives, including an MP from the HDP (Peoples' Democratic Party), made speeches and statements. As Julie and others said: It's not too late to save Hasankeyf! Big dams like Ilisu do not represent real progress for local populations. Quite the opposite: it has been extensively documented that they destroy far more than they 'develop' in terms of biodiversity and people's livelihoods. Several of us travelled 50 kms after this action to make a 'big jump' into a tributary of the Tigris.<sup>4</sup>

Julie Ward MEP had also visited Hasankeyf the previous month, on 8<sup>th</sup> June, when it had been announced that inundation would commence. Then too, in the presence of a prominent international witness, violence was averted. Sadly four days later, when the youth wing of the HDP organised a protest in Hasankeyf, in co-ordination with the Mesopotamia Ecology Movement, a young

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.hasankeyfgirisimi.net/?p=1043&fbclid=IwAR2fKUoc-ErkiWTlpmu\\_nX2tB5H\\_usFiuFRgcjrJJFZMyDLc3h8SxABK3j4](http://www.hasankeyfgirisimi.net/?p=1043&fbclid=IwAR2fKUoc-ErkiWTlpmu_nX2tB5H_usFiuFRgcjrJJFZMyDLc3h8SxABK3j4)



man we met who was at that action (on 12<sup>th</sup> June 2019) sustained serious injuries from about 20 plastic bullets and was hit with truncheons and kicked by police whilst peacefully protesting.



*Figure 3: Soldiers guarding the Tigris river on the day of the Big Jump, stopping the peaceful protest from taking place.*

Hasankeyf has long been a symbol of the Kurdish, Syriac, and Turkmen culture that has been savagely suppressed by the Turkish state for decades. Yet the present population of Hasankeyf of about 3,000 people actually represents a harmonious synthesis of Arabic and Kurdish identities, with three languages (including Turkish) spoken; and the most iconic monuments – seven of which have now been moved to a higher site a few kms away – are mostly Islamic or Byzantine.

The most spectacular and unusual monuments however, that will nearly all be flooded, are more than 5,000 caves that honeycomb the cliffs. These were created in ancient or medieval times. Some have early Christian or Yazidi symbols carved on their walls. Many have staircases, and some are still inhabited, especially by shepherds, many of whom use the caves for keeping their sheep and other livestock. The shepherd family that runs an exceptionally beautiful ‘Mezopotamya Café’ in a set of caves just above the town say that nearly all of them were born and grew up in these caves. Local memory attests to many more families living predominantly in caves until the 1960s; and

travellers' accounts from the C19th-1920s record large numbers living in these caves, especially Syrian and Armenian Christians and Yazidis.

Like the vast majority of caves, the iconic remains of an early medieval bridge is also due to go under water. These have recently been 'renovated' to protect them while submerged. Considerable plans that have been drawn up for developing tourism on the Ilisu reservoir include an idea for glass-bottomed boats to enable visitors to look down on these remains. A company called BRJ has drawn up plans for an 'antique harbour' around the old citadel. To 'protect' this from the flood-waters expected to rise up the relatively soft-stoned cliff, the base of this part of the cliff has been encased in an enormous ugly concrete support-wall, whose construction has involved the destruction of hundreds of caves. One week after our visit, on 21<sup>st</sup> July, a fire engulfed this citadel, devastating the plentiful wildlife in the area and presumably doing considerable damage to the numerous caves and buildings there, many of which had wooden beams still in place, including remains of the 4<sup>th</sup> century Roman/Byzantine palace. Local suspicion fell on BRJ, supposedly taking charge of 'developing' the site for tourism.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> 'Why didn't they intervene in Hasankeyf fire with helicopters?' by Evrim Kepenek, *BIA News*, 22 July 2019, at <https://m.bianet.org/english/environment/210736-why-didn-t-they-intervene-in-hasankeyf-fire-with-helicopters>



*Figure 4: The fire around the citadel, 21st July 2019.*

The inhabitants of Hasankeyf represent descendants of a very diverse population. The citadel of Hasankeyf, that towers above the town, dates to at least the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, when under the name of Kephos, the Romans built the fort and palace here, probably on much more ancient foundations - sadly, archeological exploration of all the Hasankeyf sites has been far too limited. After Arab conquest in the 640s AD, and during Byzantine and Turkish times, Hasankeyf was a major city, that among other things, was famous for the weaving of carpets (*kilims*) – an important centre where middle eastern weaving traditions developed. The upper city of Hasankeyf, known as the *Kale* (fortress) contains remains of hundreds of houses part-built into caves, and many have signs of looms.

This weaving tradition continues among a considerable number of families in the lower town that is due to be flooded. Tourism plays a prominent part in the local economy, with many people earning their living by making and selling a wide array of beautiful, traditional objects, and serving as guides for tourists, who mostly come from other parts of Turkey, but with a steady trickle of foreign visitors from Europe and more distant countries such as America, as well as nearer countries, including Iran.

Shepherds still abound, some dwelling or keeping animals in the caves, and some carrying on a semi-nomadic lifestyle inherited from the ancient past. Many local families are also involved in farming, and have been for generations. A farmer we spoke with, whose land adjoined a ruined Roman or Byzantine-era villa at a level bound to be flooded, said this land has been in his father's family as far back as anyone can remember. Mulberry and fig trees are among his many cultivated crops. The land around the lower town is exceptionally fertile – locals compare it to 'the Garden of Babylon' as it has been carefully cultivated for thousands of years.

The loss of such ancient farmland, trees and houses provokes a grief that is palpable among inhabitants. On the surface, it might seem that the Turkish government has done its best, building about 700 houses on higher land on the hillside opposite, along with flats, hospital and school, and a museum, whose first rooms have recently opened, near the seven monuments recently moved from around the lower town. These monuments (moved by a Dutch company called Bresser and reconstructed professionally yet in a way that completely loses the original character) and the museum receive very few visitors as yet, and their siting on a barren, treeless hillside seems decidedly unattractive. Inhabitants say that the workmanship in the housing is shoddy, with electricity and water supply way behind schedule. In mid-July when we visited, families had moved to 60 of the 700 houses, which are all identical – a brutal contrast to the ancient, spacious, widely varied houses in the town that will have to be vacated.

Those families who are receiving compensation also attest that the money they are being offered is far less than the price they have to pay for the new housing, necessitating an immediate descent into steep debt. For this reason, it seems certain that a large proportion of the local population is bound to move away, and New Hasankeyf will be full of newcomers, with the old inhabitants dispersed and rapidly becoming a minority. Meanwhile, some families have reportedly refused compensation as they continue to attempt a legal challenge to the dam.

The neolithic site of Hasankeyf is of comparable age and significance to Göbekli Tepe, famed as the oldest 'temple complex' site in the world, (~10,000BC), where the first domestication of wheat occurred, and Nevala Çori, which was submerged by the Ataturk dam on the Euphrates in the 1990s. The various sites at Hasankeyf have only received minimal excavation, despite their significance for the development of human civilisation, up to and including the development of Islamic civilisation. Apart from Hasankeyf there are officially 289 more archaeological sites in the dam affected Tigris Valley. Only 15 excavations – all incomplete – have been carried out.

The loss of biodiversity is hard to exaggerate: about 400 kms of riverbed are being inundated (136 kms of the Tigris, the rest on its tributaries), in a region that was badly deforested decades ago, and where plant and fauna species are concentrated around the life-giving rivers – 123 species of birds alone have been identified around Hasankeyf. The big dams built on the Euphrates several decades ago wiped out many fish and other aquatic species. The stagnant water, as in the case of other dams, will be of very low quality, and is likely to have serious negative impacts on the local climate.

The Ilisu Dam will also destroy a great deal of traditional farming, as did the Euphrates dams. 199 other villages/settlements will be inundated by the Ilisu reservoir in addition to Hasankeyf. Resettlement housing has been created only for inhabitants of three of the others. In Hasankeyf the resettlement housing is offered to only about a third of the present residents, the others being classed as 'not suitable'. We visited the flats and houses that residents are moving into, which they claim, and we saw, are extremely inadequate in many ways.

Damming the Tigris will also vastly deplete the flow of water to people who depend on it in Syria and Iraq. Since 2016 the Turkish government has frequently cut off Euphrates water flowing into the autonomous Democratic Confederation of Northeast Syria (of which Rojava is a part), in effect using river water as a weapon of war. This is likely to happen with the Tigris too, which flows along the border with Northeast Syria before entering Iraq, where many



groups have campaigned against the Ilisu Dam. The reduction in water flowing in the Tigris river bed is likely to have particularly devastating effects on the marshlands where the Marsh Arabs live in south Iraq.<sup>6</sup>

As we descend further into the climate crisis, access to water will only become a more and more contentious issue. A cynical reading of the geopolitics behind the Ilisu Dam would perhaps say Turkey is preparing for a future of increased water scarcity, with water access rights becoming even more important. As Julie Ward says, "Water could be the new oil."

En route to Hasankeyf, we visited Diyarbakir, where we saw the same pattern of destruction/construction parallel with what is happening at Hasankeyf, giving an insight into the cultural genocide taking place in Hasankeyf and throughout



*Figure 5: Soldiers surrounding protesters on the day of the Big Jump.*

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<sup>6</sup> 'A message on Ilisu dam from Iraqi civil society to the Turkish government', *Save the Tigris*, 10 July 2019, at [https://www.savethetigris.org/a-message-on-ilisu-dam-from-iraqi-civil-society-to-the-turkish-government/?fbclid=IwAR2ohUqgFJ844hhvh4Wc2wch\\_vCxMBasNG\\_Ni3iWeKBnGuInYpozfa6hVDY](https://www.savethetigris.org/a-message-on-ilisu-dam-from-iraqi-civil-society-to-the-turkish-government/?fbclid=IwAR2ohUqgFJ844hhvh4Wc2wch_vCxMBasNG_Ni3iWeKBnGuInYpozfa6hVDY)

the largely Kurdish area slated for inundation from the Ilisu Dam. We witnessed the building of new mass housing in Sur (the old city of Diyarbakir), in one of the oldest quarters, which was damaged in fighting against the local Kurdish rebels three years ago. The Turkish state damaged more buildings intentionally after the fighting had ended. Julie Ward visited the city in October 2016 as part of a fact-finding mission with EGAM<sup>7</sup> and was informed by the local AKP administration that the bulldozing of historical districts was for so-called 'safety reasons' and that the young Kurdish activists who continued to protest were making things difficult for themselves and their families.

This part of the old city, between the Urfa and Yeni gates, has seen an influx of Kurdish refugees from some of the 4,000+ villages destroyed in fighting against the PKK since the 1980s. Two ancient churches were also badly damaged in recent years: a restored Armenian church, the largest in Asia, and a Chaldaean church. The Armenian Catholic Church and the Hasirli Mosque have been destroyed completely. It is clear to us that the demolition of ancient neighbourhoods and their replacement with new housing – all identical, just as the 700 houses in New Hasankeyf are all identical – is a conscious attempt to erase local memories, identities and communities.

Many groups in other countries and in other parts of Turkey – in total 30 - performed 'big jump' actions on 14<sup>th</sup> July in solidarity with Hasankeyf.<sup>8</sup> The campaign against the dam has existed for decades. Hasankeyf offers a staggering example of the intersections between multiple crises perpetuated by the hands of the Turkish state: the threat to Kurdish speaking minorities in the region, as well as other minority communities, such as the Arabic speaking inhabitants of Hasankeyf; the environmental threat, for miles along the Tigris and its tributaries; the control over that most precious of resources, water, as the whole world begins to witness the force of the climate crisis; the police and military repression that are witnessed at actions against the dam - an all too frequent occurrence in the lives of the activists we met during our trip.

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<sup>7</sup> [http://yihr.hr/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/EGAM-Turkey-report-2016\\_ff.compressed.pdf](http://yihr.hr/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/EGAM-Turkey-report-2016_ff.compressed.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.hasankeyfgirisimi.net/?p=1043&fbclid=IwAR2fKUoc-ErkiWTlpmu\\_nX2tB5H\\_usFiuFRgcjrJJFZMyDLc3h8SxABK3j4](http://www.hasankeyfgirisimi.net/?p=1043&fbclid=IwAR2fKUoc-ErkiWTlpmu_nX2tB5H_usFiuFRgcjrJJFZMyDLc3h8SxABK3j4)

But as the activists we met continue to defiantly proclaim: It is not too late for Hasankeyf! Momentum is building and many are viewing the campaign against Ilisu Dam as a flashpoint for broader struggles, without forgetting the specificity and importance of Hasankeyf itself. One of the HDP activists remarked to us that she was glad so many police and soldiers had turned up to search, harass, and intimidate the protesters, since it shows that the protesters are doing something right and the state is scared.

Now, more than ever, Hasankeyf needs international solidarity. It is only because of silence that regimes like that of Erdogan and the AKP can get away with erasing communities from the map.

### **Recommendations**

We call on concerned citizens and social movements to underline to the Government of Turkey the extent of international concern over the Ilisu Dam project and to urge that the filling of the reservoir be put on hold pending:

- a) a mutual agreement with Iraq and Syria guaranteeing sufficient downstream water flows to safeguard water supplies, agriculture and ecosystems (notably the Mesopotamian Marshes) in Syria and Iraq;
- b) the outcome of a broad, participative, inclusive and transparent discussion with representatives of affected communities, both within Turkey and regionally, aimed at evolving policies for the sustainable and equitable use of the Tigris;
- c) the adoption and implementations of a resettlement plan in line with international standards, including compensation and housing for all those affected, not just land-owners.

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Julie Ward is a Labour MEP, representing the North West of England. She was first elected in 2014 and re-elected in 2019. She is a Vice Chair of the European Parliament's Culture and Education Committee and a patron of Peace in Kurdistan.

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