**Maat report to the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation regarding Syria**

**Submitted to:** The UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation

**Submitted by:** Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights (an organization in special consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council).

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**Preamble**

**Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights** (Egypt) is deeply concerned about Turkey's ongoing aggression against the Syrian territories, which violates Syria’s sovereignty and breaches all the international agreements and covenants. Maat also warns of the increased risk of infection with the emerging coronavirus (COVID-19) as the Turkish authorities have been cutting off the water supply to regions most under strain in Syria. Access to clean and sufficient water is a fundamental human right, and the lack of clean water threatens human life because of the diseases associated with contaminated water and poor sanitation services such as cholera, diarrhea, hepatitis, typhoid, and polio. In Syria, water pollution contributes remarkably to the spread of many diseases in different parts of the country, causing the death of many individuals as a result of diseases that afflict them due to lack of clean water resources.

Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis in 2011, 70 percent of the population does not have access to clean water resources due to the destruction of water infrastructure and the frequent water outages, in addition to the heavy rains that often pollute the drinking water sources. Water pollution in Syria is an old problem that is constantly renewed and is responsible for the spread of many diseases among citizens and water infrastructure are further targeted by the armed organizations[[1]](#footnote-1). That is in addition to the wide use of pesticides in agricultural areas in the Syrian coast and southern Syria, leading to seepage into groundwater and thus poisoning water, causing serious health problems[[2]](#footnote-2)[[3]](#footnote-3). In northern Syria, most of the population lacks drinking water and suffer from high water prices.[[4]](#footnote-4) Therefore, this report attempts to address the problem of water pollution, its scarcity and its impact on the lives of Syrian citizens in light of the outbreak of the civil war, with a set of recommendations that would limit this problem.

**Water pollution threatens Syrians’ lives**

Syria water sources are inflicted with many problems that affect water quality there. The Euphrates suffers from high salinity during the irrigation season due to drainage of irrigation effluent. Bacteriological contamination occurs occasionally as a result of wastewater disposal from urban areas such as Deir ez-Zor inside the Euphrates River, which causes many diseases. And in Al-Jabal Lake, the discharge of wastewater, nutrients, and pesticides from surrounding agricultural fields causes water pollution which threatens drinking water in the Syrian province of Aleppo. Tigris River is also polluted by the accumulation of wastewater and oil refining through the basic sources of the river, which affects the drinking water for the population in northeastern Syria, especially Al-Hasakeh Governorate. In the Coastal Basin Effluent from olive processing, factories are polluting groundwater and springs, especially in the Tartous area and Difa, threatening drinking water supply. Moreover, Lake Qattinah is polluted by industrial waste, including nitrate, phosphate and heavy metals, and water quality in the Yarmouk River is also deteriorating due to untreated wastewater disposal and agricultural drainage, which threatens thousands of Syrians.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In Idlib, and due to the ongoing air bombardment caused by civil war, sewerage infrastructure networks have completely or partially broken down, leading to saltwater intrusion into the fresh groundwater aquifers.[[6]](#footnote-6) Damascus also suffers from water pollution due to sewage water leakage to some areas[[7]](#footnote-7), also discharging factories wastewater to the sources sustaining the governorate[[8]](#footnote-8). The problem of clean water scarcity is the main characteristic of Syrian refugee camps[[9]](#footnote-9), as several camps such as Azraq camp and Dalama camp suffer from a shortage of clean drinkable water, jeopardizing the health and safety of individuals despite the high price per cubic meter of this water to about 600 Syrian pounds.[[10]](#footnote-10)

**Water scarcity in Syria ... a humanitarian catastrophe**

Water scarcity, in addition to the lack of sanitation and the contamination of basic water sources, will increase the possibility of water-borne diseases across Syria. In this context, 600 people in Wadi Barada area of ​​Damascus countryside have been infected with intestinal infections as a result of drinking from unused water wells[[11]](#footnote-11). Diseases are spreading in the village of Miznaz in the same region as a result of the spread of contaminated drinking water. [[12]](#footnote-12) Moreover, 300 thousand people in eastern Aleppo, third of whom were children, face a health catastrophe resulting from the contamination of well water and the lack of available drinking water[[13]](#footnote-13). In this context, and due to lack of water, typhoid disease has spread in northern Syria among the population[[14]](#footnote-14). And in Al-Lattakia governorate, northwestern Syria, the absence of clean water and lack of hygiene caused the spread of diseases such as hepatitis, measles and Maltese fever, and the population in the countryside of Idlib are infected with smallpox due to lack of water.[[15]](#footnote-15) Additionally, 5, 5 million people in Damascus, the Syrian capital, suffer from severe water shortages due to poisoning of clean water sources.[[16]](#footnote-16)

In this context, and as a result of the lack of water and its pollution in the Syrian countryside of Idlib, many children died because of intestinal infections as a result of water pollution.[[17]](#footnote-17) Also, pollution of well water as a result of sewage leakage in the town of Miznaz, west of Aleppo, caused the citizens to suffer from many diseases[[18]](#footnote-18), while the lack of water and sanitation facilities in refugee camps cause humanitarian crises; in the Palestinian Dar Blout camp, most refugees suffer from both drinkable and non-drinkable lack of water, as the amount of water that each family gets is not sufficient, which forces them to buy water, which price reached 100 Syrian pounds for 10 liters of water[[19]](#footnote-19). Al-Rahma camp is facing the same problem due to the lack of water tanks there[[20]](#footnote-20), and in the Syrian Mabrouka camp, most of the refugees complain about the frequent interruption of water supply, which affects all aspects of their lives[[21]](#footnote-21), this is in addition to the death cases in the Karama and Dam camps.[[22]](#footnote-22) In Al-Hol camp, the water is transported to the camp through tanks that were used in the past to transport oil, which means it is contaminated and not suitable for use.[[23]](#footnote-23)

In this context, and due to the lack of different effective mechanisms, tents have been flooded with water as torrential downpours have swamped refugee camps, it is worth noting that the water leaked to more than 537 tents in the winter of 2019 in the camps of Khirbet Al-Joz And Al-Zouf, Darkoush, Sarmada, and Kafrlusin[[24]](#footnote-24). And in Atma camp, the rains formed swamps of water and mud in the lands of the camp, which impeded the movement inside it and caused damage to some of the contents in the refugee tents[[25]](#footnote-25). Some footage of a video went viral on the internet shows the damage of refugee tents in Al Sadd camp, south of Hasaka due to the winter and the heavy rains that followed[[26]](#footnote-26); so, individuals inside these camps do not have adequate sanitation services.

While some respiratory and skin diseases such as leishmaniasis, asthma, pneumonia and some cholera cases have spread in the city of Hama in central Syria as a result of the flooding of the Orontes River with sewage and waste[[27]](#footnote-27). While the spread of contaminated water, the destruction of sewage networks and the lack of toilets and bathrooms with clean water affected citizens and infected them with Leishmaniasis across Syria[[28]](#footnote-28). In the Syrian city of Raqqa, 60 people were infected with impetigo resulting from water pollution[[29]](#footnote-29), and the people of this region suffer from water pollution, which often poisoned them[[30]](#footnote-30) and cutting off the water supply in most cases from the Syrian areas as a result of armed conflict led to the spread of diseases dramatically.

**Turkey is Weaponizing Water in Global Pandemic**

Maat for peace warns against the Turkish authorities’ failure to ensure adequate water supplies to Kurdish-held areas in Northeast Syria, which is compromising humanitarian agencies’ ability to prepare and protect vulnerable communities in the COVID-19 pandemic. The Turkish authorities have interrupted water pumping several times since the start of the year, with the latest interruption on March 29.

Turkey and Turkish-backed forces took control of the Allouk water station during the Turkish offensive on Northeast Syria in October 2019. The Allouk water station, located near the town of Ras al-Ain, serves 460,000 people in al-Hasakeh governorate, including al-Hasakeh city and three displacement camps. This station provides residents who are already considered in a precarious situation with water supplies, including in Al-Houl and Areisha camps, where tens of thousands of Syrians, Iraqis, and foreigners, who used to live in areas under ISIS's former control, live.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Refugees live in appalling conditions, suffer from toilet blockage, sewage flows into their torn tents, and displaced people drink water from reservoirs containing worms. These conditions are likely to worsen given the water shortage and the increased risks of COVID-19 infection.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) had warned that hundreds of thousands of people in northern Syria were facing an increased risk of the emerging COVID-19 infection due to the interruption of water supplies. Especially after the Al-Aluk water station for water supply in Ras al-Ain, the city on the Syrian-Turkish border that is under the control of Turkey and the Syrian factions backed by Ankara, stopped pumping water to areas under the control of the Syrian Kurdish forces. This puts the population, especially children, at risk, especially in light of the current efforts to limit the spread of the pandemic.

Maat for Peace believes that using water and water facilities by the Turkish authorities for achieving military or political gains is unacceptable, especially in light of the emerging global pandemic in Syria, where fears of a potential health disaster are increasing.

It is worth noting that during the past years, Turkey weaponized water to pressure the Kurds and the neighboring countries by building dams on the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers that flow from its lands and constitute a lifeline for millions of people in the region. Through the military operation launched last October in northeastern Syria against the Kurdish People's Protection Units, Turkey was keen to place its hand on one of the most important water stations "Al-Aluk" during the expansion of its forces along the border strip linking Ras al-Ain from Hasaka governorate and Tel Abyad that is administratively attached to the province of Raqqa.

During the ongoing military operations of the Turkish forces, they bombed the main water stations and pumps on many occasions. In February 2018, during the Turkish Euphrates Shield operation, the Turkish forces bombed the public facilities, which resulted in massive damage to the water pump that feeds the city of Afrin[[32]](#footnote-32), while Turkish aircraft targeted water transport lines from Al-Aluk station to the city of Hasaka as a result of the Turkish offensives that are constantly carried out in the context of the aggression on the Syrian lands.[[33]](#footnote-33) In this context, the Turkish army targeted the Al-Aluk drinking water station with 10 shells during the operation of the Spring of Peace, causing the station to stop its businesses[[34]](#footnote-34).

The Syrian armed opposition groups affiliated with the Turkish government also cut off water from the Syrian city of Hasaka continuously in the context of the armed conflict between it and the SDF in an attempt to gain a comparative advantage in the war at the expense of the other party, which has led to high water prices in this region and deprived residents of having access to clean and sufficient water. This comes in conjunction with increasing fears of the spread of the new Coronavirus among the residents of this region as a result of poor personal hygiene resulting from the lack of drinking water[[35]](#footnote-35). The sustained water cut is spelling a disaster for Hasakah as a result of the Turkish aggression on Ras al-Ain where wells are feeding the province and the Turkish forces are reportedly cutting off water from time to time[[36]](#footnote-36).

**Limited efforts to provide water in light of a civil war**

There are many agencies in Syria responsible for managing and preserving water resources, providing clean water and managing sanitation facilities, allowing non-proliferation of diseases caused by polluted water within the Syrian territories. Among these agencies is the Ministry of Water Resources, which was established in 2012 with the aim of monitoring and developing water resources. This is in addition to providing citizens with clean drinking water services and sewage treatment. While the responsibility of organizing and rationalizing the consumption of water resources for agricultural purposes rests with the responsibility of the Syrian Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform, and the Ministry of Environment monitors the quality of water for different uses. These ministries are assisted by the various river basin management committees and companies of drinking water in the Syrian governorates. It is worth mentioning that the Ministerial Decree No. 944 of 1925 and the Water Act of 2005 are the ones organizing the work of water bodies within Syria.[[37]](#footnote-37)

Despite the Syrian civil war results that affected the possibility of direct access to water and sanitation services to citizens, the Syrian government is making many efforts to provide clean water to citizens and provide sanitation networks, so the Ministry of Water Resources undertakes many projects in the water fields, and also responds to citizens’ complaints about water shortage, lack of clean water, and offer more effective solutions. In addition to holding a set of different workshops to follow up on the Ministry’s work in the field of water resources.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Damascus Water Supply and Sewerage Authority has also completed the implementation of the project to replace the water network in the town of Ras al-Ma`ra in the Yabrud area of ​​Damascus countryside to ensure the delivery of clean water sources to this region[[39]](#footnote-39). In the context, Maat held a training course with UNICEF for three days in the field of good drilling, which contributes to increasing the effectiveness of drilling wells and providing clean water in Syria[[40]](#footnote-40). In the same framework, the Ministry of Water Resources held a workshop to improve services provided to citizens and upgrading them in the authorities to the ministry[[41]](#footnote-41). The ministry is also carrying out several projects in the sanitation sector in addition to building water treatment plants, and among these projects is a project to replace four sewage networks in areas in Damascus at a cost of 84 million liras.[[42]](#footnote-42)

In the context, the Ministry of Water Resources is restoring and implementing dilapidated drainage networks due to the civil war in Homs, Eastern Ghouta, Deir Al-Zour and several cities in which networks have been destroyed. Additionally, the Ministry is working to rehabilitate the Adra treatment plant in Damascus and is seeking to rehabilitate the Aleppo and Daraya treatment plant, that was damaged by deliberate acts of vandalism.[[43]](#footnote-43) And in this framework, the Ministry has repaired two sewage plants in Al-Hara in Daraa countryside to reduce pollution, and protect the environment and public safety in the governorate.[[44]](#footnote-44) The General Company for Sanitation in Homs is carrying out maintenance, restoration, and repair work for the damaged sites in the city’s sewage network as a result of acts of vandalism[[45]](#footnote-45). The Syrian Ministry of Water Resources is cooperating with the Ministry of Agriculture to provide clean water for agricultural lands in many Syrian regions.[[46]](#footnote-46)

During 2019, the Syrian Ministry of Water Resources developed an investment plan worth 60 billion liras to protect drinking water from pollution through pumping stations, treatment plants, and sewage lines. And among the drainage stations that were invested is the stations of Qardaha, Salkhad, Bisirin, and Kafr Kafr Al-Ayoun and Draikish, in addition to fulfilling the implementation of sewage treatment plants in Latakia, Tartous, Al-Haffah, Jamaria, and Masyaf,[[47]](#footnote-47) while the Water and Sewerage Institution is currently conducting sterilization of wells and reservoirs across Syria to prevent the spread of the new Coronavirus.[[48]](#footnote-48)

**Recommendations**

* The international community should pressure the Turkish government to stop the aggression on Syrian land and stop bombing the Syrian infrastructure, especially water stations.
* The need to take urgent measures to prevent water pollution in the areas of water pollution sources, by preventing wastewater discharge into it, as well as preventing the discharge of waste from various factories.
* The necessity of pressuring the Turkish government to stop using water as a weapon in its armed conflict in Syria, whether with the Syrian Democratic Forces or with the Syrian government, especially in light of the outbreak of the new Coronavirus.
* The Syrian government should take measures to provide water inside the refugee camps in cooperation with the Syrian Democratic Forces and the various international agencies. concerned
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