Examine any issue in the broader Middle East region today—from Turkey’s possible European Union accession to Syria’s withdrawal from Lebanon to the insurgency in Iraq—and the question remains of how to promote stability and economic development. Water is at the crux of both these concerns.

Despite the political volatility of the issue, shared water resource management between Turkey, Syria and Iraq may promote international cooperation—as opposed to interstate conflict—in the coming decades. In broader terms, the Tigris and Euphrates rivers represent an underutilized engine of economic development and integration for the region. Dr. Olcay Ünver, currently a visiting distinguished professor at Kent State University, put forward these remarkable claims during his presentation to a recent CSIS Global Strategy Institute Forum. Dr. Ünver negotiated on water issues on behalf of the Turkish government with Syria and Iraqi counterparts as part of his responsibilities as president of the Regional Development Administration, in charge of the Southeast Anatolia Development Project (GAP) from 1991-2003, and subsequently as senior advisor to the Turkish Republic’s Prime Minister from 2003-2004.

Dr. Ünver observed that during bilateral and trilateral summits with Turkey, Iraq and Syria, water is always the last topic broached because it is so potentially explosive. Each of these three riparian nations exhibits “hydro-nationalism,” fueled by underlying tensions between the states. Yet, water has played an extensive track-two diplomatic role in negotiations between the countries, and has often provided Turkey—the most upstream riparian nation—with leverage in difficult talks.

Dr. Ünver believes that in the future, water could play an even more prominent role in defining open relations between the countries. Toward that end, disproportionate water usage by one state—presumably, Turkey—could be offset by sharing with neighbors the gains from water in the form of electricity, agriculture, commerce and even educational exchange. Hydro-nationalism would change from a defensive ideology to one of shared vision and benefits, creating regional goodwill.

Over the past 50 years, Turkey has been at the center of controversy surrounding the rivers because it has moved forward with significant river basin development projects, while its neighbors have talked big and delivered little in terms of development. The conflict over water has come not because Turkey has deprived Iraq and Syria of water, but because these states greatly overestimate the water they will use in the future. According to current consumption targets put forward by the three riparian states, they intend to use a combined, impossible total of 149% of available water from the Euphrates and 112% from the Tigris.

For these reasons, Dr. Ünver supports “big” thinking about the possibilities of meeting the region’s need for better interstate relations through shared economic and human development, with water management at the core. A strong model for this is the Turkish Southeastern Anatolia Development Project (GAP), implemented in the Tigris and Euphrates river basins (the upper Mesopotamian plain)—the least developed region of Turkey. GAP is a project of “integrated sustainable human development,” a holistic approach built around not only infrastructure, but also integrating the promotion of all human development indicators, from gender empowerment issues to disease prevention to literacy.
In the interest of regional stability and avoiding future water conflict, Turkey’s development successes must flow downstream through the expansion of its river basin development programs.

The Tigris and Euphrates river basins could offer a unique rebuttal to worries over “water wars” in one of the most conflicted regions on Earth.

During this time of great upheaval and transformation in the Middle East, the Tigris and Euphrates river basins could bring about a unique rebuttal to worries over “water wars” in one of the most conflicted regions on Earth.

With the change of regime in Iraq—and the potential opening of Syria—now may be an appropriate time to focus on cross-border water issues as a catalyst for regional cooperation and economic development.

References
3. Ibid.