

A Nation Under Construction:
Turkey's Infrastructural Development,
Hydropower and the World Bank

Turkey's post-war enthusiasm for hydropower had reached a summit with the Keban Dam built on the Upper Euphrates in the early 1970s. Earlier constructions were no small matter of course, but this new mega-infrastructure easily dwarfed all of them. Its 207m high wall, Turkey's tallest at the time, singlehandedly carried the country into the era of mega-dams. Admired as a shining icon of progress, it was the pride of engineers participating, both literally and figuratively, in the construction of their nation.

Financed by the World Bank and other international loaning institutions, designed by the New York-based industrial firm EBASCO Services Inc., built on site by an international and experienced team of technical experts, Keban constituted a learning experience for young Turkish engineers under the supervision of the relatively new DSI, as well as temporary work for more than 2,000 manual labor, Kurds for the most part recruited across Eastern Turkey.

A Nation Under Construction uses an unexplored archive of documents recently declassified by the World Bank concerning the international institution's involvement in the building of infrastructures in Turkey after World War II. It takes as a case-study the Keban Dam—one of the most important projects financed in the country—to examine the manner in which infrastructural development and hydropower have been key to Turkey's modernization successes and failures then and now.

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On its inauguration date, the Keban Dam was producing 25% of the country's electricity and became, thanks to another \$25 million World Bank loan for transmission lines sending electricity from Eastern Turkey to Ankara and Istanbul, the centerpiece in the reorganization of the country's power grid. Once finished, Keban was celebrated as an engineering feat and a dream come true for politicians, a key in Turkey's energy policy and economic strategies.

Besides producing electricity for the west, it was hoped that the infrastructure would also transform Elazığ, the region's largest city located 40km to its east. Included in its budget were the extension of the city's airport, the construction of a new central boulevard, the expansion of a large cement factory, the relocation of inundated roads and rail tracks, as well as schools, hospitals and other public buildings in the region.

If not yet in its fullest form, this first dam on the Upper Euphrates also announced what would become full-fledged state-sponsored "development" in Eastern Turkey. First implemented in 1984, less than a decade after the construction of the Keban Dam, the *Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi* (Southeast Anatolia Project or GAP) is a state-financed project designed around dam construction in order to

“develop” the mostly Kurdish provinces of Southeastern Turkey. Beyond the provision of water and electricity, the goals of GAP have evolved over the years to now include an ambitious remodeling in the region of life itself, be it economic, political, cultural, or social.

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Like other dams, however, Keban had many unexpected and unpredictable effects. In the early 1970s, the more than 30,000 villagers forced to relocate due to the reservoir’s rising waters quickly rushed to the nearest city for jobs and housing. Extensive studies of the local people most affected were undertaken in order to help them adjust to their new surroundings. Keban thus represented more than the building of an infrastructure but an experiment in human-engineering, a social project designed to supposedly improve local lives. Far from having the anticipated effect of “modernizing” the city, however, Elazığ’s population quickly swelled causing a housing shortage accompanied by a lack of municipal services and public infrastructures.

In addition, its reservoir (Turkey’s third largest lake at the time) accentuated an already existing boundary between the city of Elazığ and the region of Dersim to its north populated in its large majority by Alevi Kurds. The mountains and valleys of Dersim have served over the year as a refuge for contested social identities and political ideologies in Turkey, sheltering many anti-government sympathizers. While supposedly helping to “develop” Elazığ, a Turkish-speaking, Sunni Muslim town connected “infrastructurally” to the rest of the country, the Keban reservoir would further alienate Dersim’s Kurdish Alevis, still considered rebellious and “backward” today by the rest of the nation.

Dams have sparked public discontent and social unrest in different places across Turkey. The book returns in more details to the “Campaign to Save Munzur” against dams planned in a supposedly protected national park just north of the Keban reservoir. In the Black Sea provinces, people have rallied around protesters in Yusufeli against a series of constructions that would destroy the region’s green valleys. In Western Turkey, archaeologists joined forces with local people in the unsuccessful attempt to prevent the destruction of the Roman settlement of Allianoi in 2011.

The long list of natural habitats and cultural heritage threatened by their constructions does not end here of course. But if there were only a few during the 1990s, anti-dam protests have multiplied ever since, also taking a broader dimension on new social media. Once the proud providers of water and electricity to all, dams today have become questioned and disputed, incessantly opposed in protest marches across Turkey. No longer part of the utopian dreams of nation-states, these mega-infrastructures are instead associated with the broken hopes of displaced people and the destruction of ecological habitats.

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