By Jamie Ingram

"The next war in the Middle East will be fought over water, not politics". Dr Boutros Ghali's famous 1985 prediction has since been proven wrong but many believe the point is still valid. Observers forecast that increasing populations in an already water-stressed region will inevitably lead to conflict. The Tigris-Euphrates river basin has been highlighted as particularly susceptible to violence, but would its three riparian states (Turkey, Syria and Iraq) really go to war over access to its water?

Over the last 25 years rising populations, coupled with upstream States like Turkey developing rivers through the building of hydro-electric power stations and dams, have greatly increased pressure on many international rivers. Downstream States are understandably concerned that the flow of water reaching them may be disrupted. Fears abound that this could erupt into violence; especially in times of drought. Despite these well founded concerns international rivers have actually been the cause of very little conflict; the opposite is in fact true. The 20th century saw the signing of over 145 water-related treaties, the amount of violent conflicts over water? Seven minor skirmishes.

Crucially no international law governs the use of international rivers. While the 1997 UN Convention on International Watercourses contains useful principles, such as "Equitable and Reasonable Utilisation and Participation" few countries have signed up to it and it is not internationally binding.

Turkey, mainly thanks to its upstream position, is the hegemon of the Tigris-Euphrates and considers the rivers to be Turkish as approximately 90% of their flow originates within its borders. It traditionally utilises its geographical advantage through heavy development of the rivers, building numerous dams in an attempt to equalise the country's development; most controversially with the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP). Turkey's development of the Tigris-Euphrates has traditionally been unilateral and its co-riparians fear it is at their expense. If Turkey's actions lead to a significant reduction in flow downstream Syria or Iraq might take violent recourse.

The importance of the two rivers to Iraq is particularly evident as its agricultural sector is heavily dependent on irrigation from them. Its precarious position at the mouth of the rivers led to violent rhetoric from Iraq over Syria's damming of the Euphrates in the 1970s and towards Turkey's GAP scheme in the 1990s. The words never translated into physical conflict.

There are signs that Turkey's traditional dominance over the rivers is being challenged, forcing a move from unilateral control to bilateral and trilateral cooperation. One of the earliest signs of genuine cooperation over the Tigris-Euphrates was the signing of the 1987 bilateral Protocol between Turkey and Syria. The agreement commits Turkey to a minimum allocation of 500m³

per second of the Euphrates' waters to Syria. What prompted Turkey to sign this agreement? Syria's agreement to stop supporting Kurdish separatists' military operations within Turkey. Syria's issue-linkage helped break the impasse over the Tigris-Euphrates, demonstrating that various political issues can be used as leverage to secure access to water.

Recent political developments in Turkey suggest that they may be more amenable to cooperating over the rivers. The Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) swept to power in the November 2002 elections, bringing an end to the more secular politics that had characterised the Turkish republic since its establishment in 1923. Over the last two years especially the AKP has sought to move closer to the Islamic world, attempting to cultivate closer ties with neighbouring Islamic countries such as Syria. The AKP sees Turkey not just as part of the Islamic world, but as its leader, and the normalisation of relations with Syria and Iraq can act as a springboard for further engagement with the Middle East.

Turkey's newfound aspiration to become the leader of the Islamic word has naturally led to a dramatic shift in foreign policy. Rather than seeing its co-riparians of the Tigris-Euphrates merely as weaker neighbours it now desires their respect and allegiance; water is an important bargaining tool in this stratagem. Offering further guarantees of water will foster goodwill with Syria and Iraq, while jeopardising the flow would only create resentment, severely damaging Turkey's standing in the Middle East. Turkey is competing with Iran to become the self-styled leader of the Islamic World; to succeed they require the support of their Islamic neighbours.

While the short term prospects appear positive with minimal underlying conflict being overshadowed by constructive cooperation, it is impossible to predict the longer term dynamics. The vagaries of climate change and continuing population growth are likely to increase pressure on the region's water supplies; increasing the risk of violence. There are however some grounds for cautious optimism. Governments dislike admitting to water shortages as it suggests failure on their part, this has led to the rise in virtual water trading to free up water supplies for the population. Virtual water trading is the importation of goods, such as foodstuffs, rather than States producing them domestically.

Further development of the rivers will undoubtedly lead to minor political conflicts between the riparians, but the risk of military action being undertaken is minimal. As Turkey seeks to increase its standing with its neighbours we can expect to see more treaties being signed and an increase in tri-party meetings such as the September 2009 gathering of the three countries' water ministers.

History suggests that water has been a cause of cooperation more than of violent, inter-state conflict and so far this has been as true along the Tigris-Euphrates as within any other river basin. Recent political developments in Turkey have improved relations between the three riparians and this trend looks set to continue due to the AKP's emphasis on improving relations with other Islamic states. The risk of war over the Tigris-Euphrates' waters is minimal, with the signing of a trilateral treaty governing utilisation of the rivers the more likely scenario.

The UK Defence Forum's original 'Wars downstream' article can be accessed here .