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Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies

# Water Scarcity in Iraq Illogical Calculations and Compound Pressure

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Al-Bayan Center Studies Series

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# Water Scarcity in Iraq Illogical Calculations and Compound Pressure

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Dr. Ali Faris Hameed \*

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## Introduction

The issues related to research on scarcity still represent the most influential variable in the orientation of countries. They represent that obsession that may cost them one of their pillars of survival from a strategic standpoint or that may make them lose the effectiveness of their action in relation to their surrounding environment, as the scarcity of resources pushes the states to respond to these variables and the movement of interests without the ability to think superiority of other choices or their entailed opportunities and profits.

Formally, the issue of water scarcity is one of the variables affecting Iraqi-Turkish relations, in fact, some researchers believe that Iraq's behavior is largely dependent on the Turkish water policy, especially in matters related to the need or shortage of the quantities of water reaching Iraq, as it usually forces decision-makers in Iraq to resort to the options that reduce the chances of friction of Turkish interests in Iraq so that water policies not to be affected by the movement of variables. however, the water policies that Turkey follows with Iraq need to re-establish a philosophy and vision by Iraq itself that suits the extent of the change in these policies.

The questions that can replace a major issue based on dealing with water scarcity and rarity are almost clear as follows: why has Iraq weakened its options in dealing with water scarcity? And why did Iraq ignore the alternative options it could adopt to strengthen its negotiating position with Turkey on the water issue? In line with these questions, managing the water file from technical and political perspectives has had a significant impact on increasing water scarcity in Iraq and the emergence of crises from time to time; due to considerations linked with the lack of perception and weak diagnosis of the movements of variables, and its consequences on the regional environment dealing with the water issue.

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The hypothesis that this research is based on is that the issue of water in Iraqi political performance should not remain linked to the aspect of rights alone but should be closely linked to politics and political acumen, with monitoring changes in priorities and adapting internal needs to suit the nature of the transformations associated with Turkish water policy.

Based on the research problems and hypothesis, analyzing Turkish perspectives and their role in generating the so-called water crisis and the nature of the Iraqi perspectives and their consequences will help identify the causes of water scarcity or shortage in the future. In addition, it will contribute to the development of feasible ideas that can assist experts in managing the water file.

## **The Turkish Perspectives on the Water Issue**

The Turkish perspective on water issues and its impact on political relations with Iraq has a significant influence on the course of bilateral relations, including agreements and cooperation. Despite the numerous agreements between Iraq and Turkey on water and water resource sharing, Turkey does not adhere to the agreements and protocols signed between the two countries, even though there are legal clauses that clarify the possibility of arbitration as a mechanism for resolving disputes that may arise between the two parties and settling them.<sup>1</sup> The nature of commitments and the changing interests contribute significantly to the adoption of negotiation and bargaining, which helps to settle matters temporarily and relatively in accordance with the changing regional environment and the course of priority interests.

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1 [1] Hamid Obaid Haddad, Turkey's Role in the Water Crisis in the Middle East: Iraq as a Model, Strategic Studies Series, No. 117, Center for International and Strategic Studies, University of Baghdad, 2011, p. 58.

According to the Turkish perspective, the Turkish government believes that it has absolute sovereignty over the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers within its territory as an upstream country and that the water flows through its territory for a long distance compared to the downstream countries. Based on this perspective, it allows itself to have absolute control over the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates, without considering the rights of the “riparian” states with it, whether Iraq or Syria<sup>2</sup>. moreover, international legal practice in this field confirms that a shared river that passes through the territories of more than one state is the common property of these states. Therefore, no state has the right to undertake any action that would deprive the other states of the legitimate benefits and rights to which they are entitled in this river. It is not acceptable for any single state to engage in such actions to deprive others of their rights and benefits without prior agreement between the states concerned<sup>3</sup>.

Legal texts in this field are one of the most important foundations on which Iraq relies in dealing with the water file, while Turkey does not recognize these texts and considers them not applicable to the description of the rivers it shares with Iraq.

The Turkish approach to escalation and dealing with the water issue according to the Turkish vision is based on the view of the Republic of Turkey that the Tigris and Euphrates rivers do not qualify as international rivers to which the rules of international law apply and describe them as transboundary waters. However, international law, in its various sources, has defined an international river as a river whose parts are located in different countries. Therefore, the Tigris and Euphrates rivers are international rivers whose waters should be shared between the three countries according to the rules of international law.<sup>4</sup>

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2 Jalal Abdullah Muawad, *Decision-Making in Turkey and Arab-Turkish Relations*, Beirut, Center for Arab Unity Studies, 1998, pp. 194-195.

3 Ali Ibrahim, *Law of International Rivers and Watercourses*, Cairo, Dar Al Nahda Al Arabiya, 1997, p. 127.

4 Tareq Al-Majzoub, *Contemporary Arab-Turkish Relations «Arab-Turkish Cooperation in the Field of Infrastructure Projects: Water, Energy and Electricity»*, Al-Mustaqbal Al-Arabi Magazine, No. 188, Center for Arab Unity Studies, Beirut, 1994, p. 71.

Despite the clarity of international law research and studies on the issue of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, it is actually difficult to determine this approach as a course of action between Iraq and Turkey; because the latter does not deal with Iraq according to this description, and in addition, it refuses arbitration or recourse to international law to resolve the disputes that arise between it and Iraq on this issue.

Based on the foregoing, Turkey, in its opposition to the principle of water division to determine the shares of the three countries, believes that the talks between them should focus on how to implement the concept of optimal water use, which requires, according to the Turkish point of view, adopting a plan that was later known as the (Three-Phases Plan). To implement this plan, Turkey proposes the formation of several subcommittees whose task is to conduct detailed field studies in the countries that share water with Turkey: (the status of water resources, the area of agricultural land, soil types, future plans for current and future engineering projects, the economic feasibility of projects, setting specific criteria for the land allocated for water, and identifying specific types of crops that should be grown in each country) <sup>5</sup>

In the same context, it is known that the standards and practices related to the issue of soil classification or study have diverse implications. Therefore, it is natural for each country to choose the standard that is appropriate for its circumstances and the nature of its capabilities. Therefore, it cannot be expected that the countries sharing the same river will adopt unified standards and practices. Moreover, studies related to soil classification are very complex in nature and take a long time to complete, and their results cannot be conclusively proven before reaching their final detailed stage. <sup>6</sup>

Therefore, Turkey, according to the plan it seeks to implement with the countries that share with it on the water issue, allows it to reassess the requirements and needs according to its own vision and perspective on the issue of water management, and deprives the countries of a large part of their political vision in this field, which was strongly rejected by Syria and Iraq; because it represents direct interference in the regulatory affairs of their countries.

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5 Muhammad Nur al-Din, *Hijab and War of Kemalism and Identity Crises in Turkey*, London, Riyad al-Rayss for Books and Publishing, 2001. P78

6 Abdulaziz Shahada Mansour, *The Water Issue in Syrian Policy towards Turkey*, Beirut, Center for Arab Unity Studies, 2000. P150

The foundations included in the Turkish plan may be applicable if adopted within the framework of a single state only, due to the existence of fundamental differences in the economic assessment of projects in each country and in economic and agricultural policies, as well as in what it needs of specific types of agriculture and crops. Therefore, Iraq rejected this plan, because it could not lead to a fair and reasonable solution to the problem.

Turkey aims, through its insistence on applying this specific concept of (optimal use), to exclude vast areas of agricultural land in Iraq that are irrigated by the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates from water quotas, on the pretext of the infertility of those lands and the exclusion of the cultivation of certain crops, arguing that they consume large quantities of water <sup>7</sup>.

Iraq sees the Turkish vision as at odds with scientific developments that provide the potential to increase land productivity by improving its fertility, and therefore changing its classification according to what modern technological means allow. In this regard, Iraq emphasizes that the issue of soil fertility and quality, known as (soil type), which can be treated through integrated reclamation operations and washing of saline soil, and planting it with remedial agriculture for more than one season if it suffers from high salinity, deterioration of its type, and increasing appropriate fertilizers to improve its fertility.<sup>8</sup>

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7 Muhammad Abdullah Al-Douri, *The Legal Center for the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in light of the Provisions of International Law*, Symposium on Water Problems in the Arab World, Arab Research and Studies Institute, Cairo, 1994, p. 37.

8 Sobhi Ahmed Zaher Al-Adely, *The International River: Concept and Reality in Some Rivers of the Arab East*, Center for Arab Unity Studies, Beirut, 2007. p. 320.

The nature of the difference in vision and water perspective between Iraq and Turkey is one of the most important reasons for the lack of permanent understanding between the two parties on the water issue. Turkey is keen to invest in water and use it as an element of pressure and bargaining in the context of a regional strategy aimed at increasing its influence in the region, while the Iraqi view is that Turkish water policy is aimed at reducing Iraq's share to pressure it, change its policy and strategic relationship with regional powers. This can be observed by tracking the historical path of Iraqi-Turkish political performance in this field.

It is based to a large extent on the information possessed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in this regard. When negotiating the water issue between Iraq and Turkey, Turkey's vision for the legal status of the Tigris River must be determined, as well as the legal materials that govern the relationship between them in light of the vision adopted by the two parties. Hence, considering the river as an international river or dealing with it through the logic of the distance travelled by the river in Turkey and Iraq according to the rules of international law and the vision of the two parties to the relationship is essential in setting the negotiation tracks. In light of this, the other tracks that the experts should deal with to secure Iraq's water needs are determined.

### **The Iraqi Assumptions for Water Management:**

The political perception of water as a resource of power has not risen to the importance that water holds in Iraq, given its agricultural and industrial levels, not to mention its effects in other areas related to tourism and social and cultural heritage. The narrow limits within which political and social perception of water is formed is based on the assumption that rights are acquired and permanent, and do not change or alter with changes in the manifestations of international relations and international strategies in the fields of development and economic modernization or investment. This is what has made most of the assumptions that have shaped the Iraqi political mind in the field of water narrow and do not rise to the level of thinking about the threat or risk management in case it occurs.

In the same vein, it can be observed that legal perceptions attempt to adapt the status quo to a permanent legal situation without considering the logic of interests imposed by the values of others, which would reframe strategic calculations to a level that was not previously present or acceptable.



The complex nature of the Iraqi economy and the persistent problems in the areas of development and economic reform have contributed significantly to the sustainability of random policies governing the successive governments' approach to the issue of water scarcity. No culture of water use has been established, nor have options been provided that can be dealt with in the field of storage, making the water crisis and water scarcity an issue whose severity is determined by fate rather than political or technical expertise in this field.

From another perspective, Iraq has not taken advantage of its strategic relationship with the Islamic Republic of Iran to secure alternative options for any compromise or pressure it faces in the field of water policy with Turkey. The preoccupation with the water issue with Turkey and the attempt to establish temporary solutions have weakened the opportunities for employment and strengthening the political and technical cards through the Islamic Republic of Iran in this field, and even the possibility of developing coordination opportunities was not present in the minds of the negotiator or experts in this matter.

Iraq's loss of the possibility of obtaining additional cards to deal with the issue of water scarcity through the employment of strategic relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran, made the latter re-draw the water transit map between it and Iraq, which left new negative effects, and reduced Iraq's opportunities to strengthen its negotiating cards in this field. It is noted that the negative effects of Iranian water projects on Iraq are based on the projects that were established on the courses of the shared rivers, which caused great losses to Iraq, as represented by the following <sup>9</sup>:

- 1- The high concentration of salts originating from Iran has detrimental effects on modern irrigation projects. Moreover, the decrease in water flow to the Shatt al-Arab has led to the alteration of border markers, expanding Iran's territorial waters in the river. This, in turn, has negatively impacted Iraqi ports and caused severe environmental damage due to the decline in revenue.
- 2- The Iranian government views its water projects as having economic and environmental significance, particularly in arid regions. However, it disregards the detrimental effects these projects have on Iraq, especially in the Marshland region. The drying of some areas in the Maysan Marshlands has resulted in an increase in sandstorms, with repercussions extending to neighboring areas.

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9 Salman Shamran Adhab Al-Issawi, *The Tigris and Euphrates Water Crisis between the Ambitions of Geographical Neighborhood and International Law*, Zain Human Rights and Literary Library, Beirut, 2016. P.199.

3- Iraq bears the financial burden of constructing water transfer projects to irrigate its agricultural border areas, which is hindering the expansion of agricultural land investment.

Capitalizing on its abundant water resources, Turkey is seeking to establish a prominent regional role for itself. By leveraging its water influence, Turkey can pressure major regional powers to support its strategic initiatives and strengthen its negotiating position in this domain. The significance of water in the region explains Turkey's assertive stance, mirroring Iran's approach in this area.<sup>10</sup>

This assertion is corroborated by the statement of Kamran Inan, the official in charge of the GAP (South-eastern Anatolia Project) Development Project, who remarked: "Water is an extremely scarce resource in Middle Eastern countries. As Turks seek to assess their sources of strength in a world where Europe views their surplus labor as a burden, their strategic importance within NATO diminishes with the disintegration of the Eastern Bloc, and the Kurdish issue in south-eastern Anatolia threatens their territorial unity, and the United States establishes a direct border with them in Iraq, they find their strength in water."<sup>11</sup>

Turkey's water policy in the Tigris and Euphrates basins has received significant international and regional support. This is evident in the substantial financial backing for the GAP (South-eastern Anatolia Project) from countries such as the United States, Canada, Japan, France, and Germany, totalling \$2.5 billion.<sup>12</sup>

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10 Hussein Hafez Heib, «Turkey and the Policy of Critical Bargaining Between Arab Oil and Turkish Water,» Quarterly Journal, No. 25, Center for International Studies, University of Baghdad, 2000, p. 40.

11 Quoted from: Hamid Faris Hassan Salman, «Turkish Foreign Policy after the Cold War,» Unpublished PhD Thesis, College of Political Science, University of Baghdad, 2006, pp. 243-244.

12 Fathi Ali Hussein, Water and the Cards of the Political Game in the Middle East, Cairo, Madbouli Library, 1997, p. 30.

In this regard, Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres asserted: “The equation that will govern the new Middle East will consist of Saudi oil, Egyptian labor, Turkish water, and Israeli brains and technology.”<sup>13</sup>

### Iraqi Water Policy Challenges

One of the most critical factors Iraq must consider in response to Turkey’s water policy is the impact of water scarcity on food security, particularly in regions with soil that requires intensive irrigation.

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The unique challenge to water security stems from limited control over shared surface water resources and the deterioration of water quality due to pollution of groundwater and surface water by industrial waste, the imbalance between water resources and increasing demand, and the growing risk of inefficient water use.<sup>15</sup> These factors collectively have a detrimental impact on food security.

Turkey’s unilateral construction of projects on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, without any consultation or coordination with Iraq, and its continued procrastination in reaching a balanced agreement on the sharing of water resources pose a threat to Iraq’s national security.<sup>16</sup> This threat manifests itself on multiple levels, most notably in the food and economic sectors, as well as in social aspects, making it a sustainable threat due to the limited options available to address it.

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13 Suleiman Abdullah Ismail, *The Water Policy of the Tigris and Euphrates Basin Countries and Its Implications for the Kurdish Issue*, Kurdistan Center for Strategic Studies, Sulaymaniyah, 2004, p. 125.

14 Hani Ahmad Abu Qadis, *Integrated Water Resources Management Strategies*, Strategic Studies Series, No. 93, Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, Abu Dhabi, 2004. p. 94.

15 Muhammad Jawad Ali, *Arab Water Security: The Magnitude of the Danger and the Paucity of Preparations*, Strategic Papers, No. 12, Center for International Studies, University of Baghdad, 1999, p. 10

16 Ullman h. Richard. *redefining security*. International security., 1983. p.p129-13316

The reduction of water supplies to Iraq is likely to create a state of social instability, which could then lead to political and security instability. The failure of Iraqi citizens to obtain sufficient water, especially for agricultural purposes, will have repercussions, perhaps the most serious of which is the abandonment of villages and rural areas. Turkey, by adopting the idea of a water-for-oil swap, seeks to achieve the following objectives:<sup>17</sup>

A. Transforming Turkey into a Waterpower: This term is becoming increasingly synonymous with the importance of oil-rich states in contemporary strategic and economic readings.

B. Utilizing water to assert Turkey's regional leadership, especially as oil companies begin investing in most oil fields, presenting Turkey with double opportunities to leverage new resources that could rival the political and economic significance of oil.

From another perspective, the decline of agriculture's significance at the local level and the weakness of government support for it have made the Iraqi market reliant on imported agricultural goods for extended periods, diminishing the importance of water once again in the calculations of Iraqi decision-makers. Instead of supporting the agricultural sector for development and advancement, support has shifted to other accounts related to the needs of these segments.

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17 Abbas Qasim, «The Covetousness of Arab Water and Its Geopolitical Dimensions,» The Arab Future Magazine, No. 174, Beirut, Center for Arab Unity Studies, 1993, p. 30.

## Options for Managing Water Scarcity in Iraq:

### A. The Blue Peace Initiative:

Switzerland launched an initiative for cooperation between Middle Eastern countries in the field of water under the slogan “Blue Peace.” The outlines of the initiative were included in a report prepared by the Indian Strategic Forecasting Group with a Swiss-Swedish mandate, which reached a number of conclusions based on a report from countries in the region (Turkey, Iraq, and Syria).

Rising temperatures in the region over the coming years could increase by 2-3 degrees Celsius, leading to an accelerated evaporation process in surface water. The consequences of this include a decrease in rainfall and rapid desertification in both Iraq and Syria. Another finding of the study was the formation of a water resources cooperation council limited to Iraq, Syria, and Turkey.<sup>18</sup>

Under the Blue Peace Initiative, managing water resources will enhance coordination between water-sharing countries to reduce disputes, and strengthen the foundations of cooperation and integration. This is one of the most important options that experts in Iraq and Turkey can adopt to expand the scope of cooperation and mutual interests between them.

### Second: The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)

The International Islamic Court of Justice (IICJ) is one of the organs of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), as mentioned in Article 14 of the organization’s charter. Established in Kuwait in 1987, the IICJ is the organization’s main judicial body, effective upon the entry into force of its statute. Similar to the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the IICJ has both optional and compulsory jurisdiction under Articles 25-26 of its statute. It applies Islamic law and international law to resolve disputes brought before it.

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18 Muhammad Sharif, An Initiative Seeks to Turn Water into a Factor for Peace in the Middle East, an article published on the international information network “Internet”

<https://www.swissinfo.ch/ara>

Turkey seeks to support the activities of the OIC and strengthen its ties and relations with Islamic countries. In this context, one of the options that suits the relationship between Turkey and Iraq is to resort to this court whenever the requirements for such recourse are met. This may achieve some results, but it will not be as effective as expected, as the organization itself does not represent a strong and effective entity in the international system.<sup>19</sup>

### **Third: Expanding Turkish-Iraqi Cooperation**

In mid-2010, Iraq and Turkey signed an agreement to drill 45 wells in the Rumaila field in southern Iraq under a contract worth more than \$300 million. According to the CEO of the Turkish state-owned company, Mohammed Yuseel, the negotiations between Turkey and Iraq contributed to the signing of a contract with the South Oil Company of Iraq to carry out the drilling work.<sup>20</sup>

The Iraqi Minister of Oil at the time, Dr. Hussein al-Shahristani, also confirmed to Turkish companies to carry out the redevelopment of oil fields in the Kirkuk and Basra provinces. He said in a press statement: The Turkish state-owned energy company "Tpaö" has been commissioned to develop Iraqi oil fields, pointing to the establishment of several other projects within the framework of this initiative. He added that there is a lot of work that needs to be done, including the construction of oil pipelines, storage facilities, oil stations, and oil refineries. He stressed that many projects can be implemented in Basra, which is a center for oil production, as well as other cities, adding that Turkish companies are qualified and have extensive experience, having carried out work in Iraq before, and can play important roles in the cities of Basra and Kirkuk. He added: Iraq is making efforts to increase the volume of oil exported through the Kirkuk-Jihan pipeline.<sup>21</sup>

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19 Walid Radwan, *The Water Problem Between ...*, previously cited source, pp. 169-180.

20 Sot al-Iraq newspaper, an article published on the Internet information network under the website: <http://www.sotaliraq.com/business.php?id=32>.

21 The development of Turkish-Iraqi relations in the field of oil, a study published on the electronic link:  
<https://www.aa.com.tr/ar>

One of the most important options that can be resorted to in dealing with Turkey is the exchange of benefits through joint investment between Iraq and Turkey, which makes both parties in the relationship tend to the need to strengthen cooperation sustainability options as an alternative to the pressure strategy. Economic cooperation and mutual investment can contribute to arranging bilateral options and joint consensus in the field of coordinating economic and water policies. Among the options that can be resorted to in this regard is the investment of Turkish agricultural companies in Iraqi lands and granting licenses for investment in areas that are exposed to water scarcity, which ensures the access of appropriate quantities of water to these areas, in addition to supporting the adoption of modern methods of agricultural development.

Such a step can establish competition in the Iraqi local market by making landowners rely on modern technologies in the field of agriculture; This reduces the gap in visions between Iraq and Turkey in the field of water, in addition to establishing common interests that can gradually move towards new sectors, strengthening opportunities for integration between the two countries or towards options that establish permanent consensus regarding the crises that arise in bilateral relations.

The standards of political thinking on the issue of scarcity or scarcity of resources weaken institutions and make them face great difficulties related to the ability to make trade-offs between options. This obsession weakens the decision-makers' margin of maneuver and forces them to respond in some cases to many options in this field.

One of the areas that can be clearly seen in terms of its impact is that the reduction in the quantities of water flowing into Iraq has made it consider the nature of Turkish priorities and its interests, especially security interests. Iraq was not able to deal with Turkish options without taking them into account, as in the case of the Sinjar agreement, where Turkish options were inclined to take Turkish interests into account before starting any negotiations related to water.

It seems that preoccupation with security and extremism has distanced the decision-maker from the possibility of dealing with alternative options and rushing towards new directions that work to reduce Turkish pressure instead of increasing it without the existence of channels capable of absorbing it, especially with regard to the Islamic

Republic of Iran. As shared water resources with Iran can increase the severity of Turkish pressures, in addition to strengthening Iraq's negotiating position in new directions.

The challenges facing Iraq's water situation may have future social and demographic implications due to the effects that may result from water scarcity in different regions, which doubles the risks in the southern Iraq and Middle Euphrates regions. This also calls for thinking about the inability of the residents of these areas to continue in the face of the state's weakness in providing economic assistance to address the crises that arise in these areas due to the scarcity of water reaching them.

Due to the water scarcity resulting from Turkish water policies and based on the logical calculations on which they are based, Iraq remains compelled to respond to Turkish political action. Iraq's negotiating position does not allow it to maneuver or adopt negotiating tactics that force the other party to change its water policy, whether economically or otherwise.

**Dealing with the scarcity of the water resource and its repercussions and effects on Iraqi political performance cannot be done without thinking about the following procedures:**

1- Iraq should reopen its negotiations with the Islamic Republic of Iran on water and try to change some of the water routes that have been closed to Iraq in order to form elements that enable Iraq to contain Turkish pressures to the extent that reduces the effects resulting from the shortage of water quantities coming to Iraq.

2- Dialogues with the Turkish side should be based on mutual benefit and within the framework of the priorities that each side is looking for. While Turkey's priorities are related to investment and increasing economic influence, Iraq's priorities are related to food and water security, in addition to other aspects that the dialogues may include.



3- Turkish investment in Iraqi agricultural lands by Turkish companies contributes greatly to finding new channels to influence the Turkish side on the issue of water scarcity and enhances Iraq's chances of obtaining additional quantities of water, in addition to its direct role in improving local irrigation methods.

4- Trying to find new options that can generate an approach capable of reconciling the visions and perceptions that Iraq disagrees with Turkey on the issue of water through developmental and reform projects for land and regional initiatives that show the possibility of understanding and achieving visions through which logical solutions can be found for both parties.

5- Any increase in Iraqi investments by regional countries, whether Saudi Arabia or Kuwait, will have a great impact on increasing the elements of Iraq's negotiating strength, especially if Iraq deals with the issue of investments in the aspects that ensure the improvement of production and the exploitation of groundwater, which reduces Turkish pressures.