

WORLD | MIDDLE EAST

## Islamic State Uses Syria's Biggest Dam as Refuge and Potential Weapon

Militants hiding high-value prisoners and sheltering senior officials at Taqba Dam in conviction U.S. won't dare unleash deluge by bombing it



A 2002 photo of the Tabqa Dam in eastern Syria, which has become a stronghold and potential weapon for Islamic State.

PHOTO: GAMMA-RAPHO/GETTY IMAGES

By **DAMIAN PALETTA**

Jan. 20, 2016 6:45 p.m. ET

Islamic State militants are using Syria's largest dam as a fulcrum of power, hiding high-value prisoners and sheltering senior officials there in the conviction the U.S. won't bomb it for fear of unleashing a giant flood, three people familiar with the matter said.

If the dam is ruptured, it would flood large parts of Iraq and "mean that there's no electricity for all of eastern Syria," said Ariel Ahram, an associate professor at Virginia Tech who has visited Middle Eastern dams for research on security and development. "That's an ecological disaster for Iraq and a humanitarian catastrophe for Syria."

The Tabqa Dam is 25 miles west of Raqqa, Islamic State's Syrian headquarters, and has been under the group's control since 2013. Created with Russian help in the 1970s, it controls the flow of the Euphrates River into southeastern Syria and northern Iraq. The construction of the dam, 200 feet tall and roughly 3 miles long, created Lake Assad, which is about 50 miles long and Syria's largest water reservoir.

Dams in arid regions of Iraq and Syria represent power. At least 11 major dams control the flow of the Euphrates in Turkey, Syria and Iraq, many of them supporting irrigation and producing energy for areas that would likely remain unpopulated otherwise.

They can also be deployed to nefarious ends. Islamic State militants recently limited the flow of water from the Tabqa Dam, shutting off access to water by Iraqis in Anbar province, according to the U.S. State Department.



Source: Institute for the Study of War

The dam is surrounded by checkpoints, heavily guarded by foreign-born fighters, and strictly off-limits to nonmilitary personnel, said an official at Sound and Picture, an umbrella group of anti-Islamic State activists in Syria.

“They keep very important prisoners there,” the activist said, especially those they want to hide from the U.S. and other governments, as they consider it difficult for foreign

intelligence agencies to learn who is being held at the dam.

U.S. officials are aware of Islamic State's operations at the dam and are concerned both about the maintenance of the facility and its use as a base of operations, people familiar with the matter said.

Some Middle East analysts and U.S. officials fear the group could detonate a dam if it felt its power was slipping.

“Of course you worry,” said Aaron Wolf, a specialist in water-resources policy, conflict

resolution and Middle East geopolitics at Oregon State University. “These aren’t the people you want controlling basically the arteries of the region.”

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Islamic State, cognizant of the perceived restraints on U.S. bombing missions, have long positioned senior leaders in places that they believe to be off-limits for an airstrike, including dams.

A U.S. official said the militant group stationed some of its senior leaders at Iraq’s Mosul Dam on the Tigris River before Iraqi and Kurdish forces wrested the structure back from the group in August 2014. U.S. warplanes dropped more than a dozen bombs that month to help Iraqis retake the facility, but the operation was led by ground troops to minimize damage to the dam.

“If that dam was breached it could have proven catastrophic,” President Barack Obama said at the time.

Islamic State, seeking to expand its foothold in Anbar province, has tried for more than a year to seize the Haditha Dam on the Euphrates in western Iraq. But U.S. warplanes and Iraqi security forces, along with Sunni tribes, have so far managed to defend it.

Retaking the Tabqa Dam from Islamic State would be much more challenging than taking the one in Mosul or defending the one in Haditha, largely because there are no allied ground troops in Syria to lead such an operation, U.S. officials acknowledge.

The U.S. and its allies have conducted thousands of bombing raids in Syria and Iraq in the past two years, hitting Islamic State convoys, buildings, and other sites. But military officials have been careful to avoid sites they believe carry the potential for considerable collateral damage. Bombing a dam would potentially unleash torrents of water and kill tens of thousands of people, experts believe.

“There is a calculation of unintended consequences and civilian casualties,” said Matthew Levitt, a former Treasury Department official who is now director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy’s Stein Program on Counterterrorism and

Intelligence. Sometimes, he said, they bear on “questions about how large of a bomb” to use.

In Syria and Iraq, both of which have large regions of arid desert, dams represent literal and figurative power. The area between the Tigris and Euphrates—sometimes called Mesopotamia, Greek for “between two rivers”—is considered one of the earliest sites of civilization, and making use of the rivers’ resources has been a human endeavor for millennia.

Hydroelectric facilities at Haditha and Tabqa provide power and water to nearby areas, and controlling them means gaining leverage over the fate of large populations.

“Dams themselves are a huge liability,” said Hassan Hassan, a resident fellow at The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy in Washington, who co-wrote a book about Islamic State. “If someone strikes that, the whole area would be affected. It would be a huge humanitarian disaster.”

**Write to** Damian Paletta at [damian.paletta@wsj.com](mailto:damian.paletta@wsj.com)

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