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THE GULF WAR

WATER HIGH ON TALKS AGENDA

Turkey, Syria near agreement on Euphrates

By John Murray Brown in Ankara

WHEN Mr Kurtcebe Alptemocin, the Turkish foreign minister, arrives in Syria today there will be one issue, beyond the war, high on the agenda - water.

For the past 10 years, the Euphrates, which rises in central Turkey, has been the focus of a simmering dispute, centred on Syria and Iraq's insistence on, and Turkey's refusal to agree to, an internationally ratified agreement on sharing the water.

But with both countries now supporting the US-led coalition against Iraq, and with what western diplomats see as the growing personal rapport between President Turgut Ozal and Syrian leader President Hafez al-Assad, there are signs Turkey and Syria are feeling their way towards a new understanding.

Mr James Baker, US secretary of state, last week emphasised the important role water development will play in any post-war reconstruction of the region. And Turkey, controlling both the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, is clearly central to any such plan.

In 1987 Turkey signed a protocol committing it to provide 500 cubic metres a second at the Syrian border, at the same time initialing a border security agreement. The Syrians and Iraqis have long called for 700 cu m/sec.

In Damascus today, Mr Alptemocin will want to dispel any Syrian concerns, after confirmation by his Foreign Ministry on Friday that the flow of the Euphrates had been stopped for six or seven days for "technical reasons".

Central to the whole dispute is the Ataturk dam. Last year, relations with both Baghdad and Damascus deteriorated after Ankara diverted water to fill the dam, which is still only 20 per cent full.

The project will enable Turkey to irrigate more than 800,000 hectares, doubling the cotton crop. But the environmental impact is unknown.

Iraq has already complained about the effect on its fish stocks. There is also concern that the dam will take all the rich silt from the river.

For Turkey, the lack of an international agreement has meant that government donors have refused to support the



project - the \$6bn (£3bn) financing being raised by the budget.

Hitherto, Turkey has firmly rejected the idea of an internationally sanctioned water agreement. Prof Fahir Armaoglu, an expert on international relations, maintains the Euphrates is not an international water. "Their source is in our soil. They're fed by our climate," he says.

But more than that, Turkish policy on the Euphrates is determined by its own security concerns and what Ankara sees as Syria's backing of Turkey's rebel Marxist Kurdish Workers Party, PKK.

Today some analysts believe a rapprochement is imminent. Turkey's move to lift the ban on Kurdish language was the first real evidence that President Ozal is looking for a political solution to that problem.

Syria, for its part, is keen to secure Turkey's backing for a possible Syrian role in any revival of the CEO, the economic co-operation pact among Turkey, Iran and Pakistan - a legacy of the pro-US Baghdad Pact of the 1950s.

During the current crisis, Turkey has said that it will not use water, one of the Middle East's most precious resources, as a political lever.

Turkey's own proposal is to treat the Euphrates and Tigris as one river basin. "We told them 'Let's pretend the Ottoman empire still exists. Then let's compute our water requirements,'" says Mr Feruh Anik, head of the state irrigation department. "If we all accept that, there will be plenty of water for all three countries."