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FRIEDRICH NAUMANN FOUNDATION For Freedom. Türkiye

HUMAN RIGHTS ACADEMY

Summer School 2026 Mardin

POLICY PROPOSALS: SECURITY AND / OR HUMAN RIGHTS

HUMAN RIGHTS ACADEMY
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Disclaimer

The views and recommendations presented in this chapter were developed by participants during the Summer School based on a fictional scenario. They do not necessarily reflect the institutional positions of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom or the Human Rights Academy. This document is available free of charge and not intended for sale.

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In today's rapidly changing world, the relationship between security and human rights remains one of the key challenges of our time. Climate-driven displacement, AI-enabled surveillance, and the growing securitisation of natural resources have created new challenges for governments and societies. Finding ways to address these crises while protecting human dignity and freedom remains a global debate. It was in this context that the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom (FNF) and the Human Rights Academy (HRA) organised the 6th International Summer School on "Security and/or Human Rights: Navigating Freedom in a World of Polycrisis". The Summer School took place in Mardin, Türkiye, from 8 to 12 June 2026.

The event brought together young professionals from all over the world. Participants explored the difficult questions that arise when security measures affect fundamental rights. The programme encouraged critical thinking and practical solutions, focusing on showing that security and human rights do not have to be treated as opposing goals. During the week, participants discussed issues such as border militarisation and the right to asylum in the context of climate-driven displacement. They also examined the challenges posed by AI-powered surveillance and the right to privacy, as well as conflicts over water and other natural resources in fragile and conflict-affected countries.

This booklet brings together the main discussions and policy recommendations developed during the Summer School. Participants worked in three regional groups covering Wider Europe, the Indo-Pacific, and the Middle East. Each group analysed key actors and human rights challenges and developed recommendations for three fictional but realistic crisis scenarios. These included a flood-driven border crisis at the edge of the European Union, an AI-based urban surveillance system introduced after terrorist attacks, and a drought-related conflict over access to water. The participants' proposals highlight the importance of international and regional cooperation, strong legal safeguards, independent oversight of new technologies, and greater dialogue between governments, civil society and security actors. They also emphasise the need for security responses that protect rather than restrict fundamental rights.

As crises linked to climate change, technology, and resource scarcity continue to evolve, the ideas presented in this publication aim to support policymakers, academics and civil society organisations in developing responses that are both secure and humane. The Summer School in Mardin showed the importance of balancing security and freedom. Protecting human rights must remain at the heart of efforts to address today's and tomorrow's crises.

We hope this document will serve as a useful resource for everyone working to protect human rights in an increasingly security-conscious world.

October 2026
Elif Menderes, Founder, Human Rights Academy (HRA)

We would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to everyone and every organisation that contributed to the success of the **6th International Summer School on Security and/or Human Rights 2026**, held in **Mardin**. This event would not have been possible without the support, dedication, and cooperation of everyone involved.

First and foremost, we would like to thank the **FNF Global Security Hub** for their continued support throughout this initiative. Their contribution was essential to the success of this year's Summer School.

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Our warmest thanks go to all the participants for their dedication and active engagement, as well as to our trainers for sharing their valuable knowledge and expertise. In particular, we would like to thank **Prof. Dr. Çiğdem Üstün** for her insightful sessions, thoughtful moderation and academic support throughout the programme. Her contribution added great value to the programme and helped shape our discussions.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge the energy and passion that everyone brought to the Summer School. Without your enthusiasm and commitment, this initiative would not have been as meaningful or successful.

Abstract

This policy proposal paper examines the relationship between security and human rights. It draws on insights from the 6th International Summer School on "Security and/or Human Rights: Navigating Freedom in a World of Polycrisis", organised in Mardin, Türkiye, by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom (FNF) and the Human Rights Academy (HRA). The programme was guided by the expertise of its trainers. The paper brings together key findings from three regional group workshops covering Wider Europe, the Indo-Pacific, and the Middle East. During these workshops, participants examined whether current and emerging security responses to crises are compatible with human rights principles. The analysis draws on scholarly literature and three fictional but realistic crisis scenarios discussed during the event. These scenarios focused on a flood-driven border and asylum crisis, an AI-driven urban surveillance system, and a drought-related struggle over access to water. Based on these discussions, the paper proposes a framework for developing security responses that remain grounded in human rights standards. The recommendations seek to balance state security and institutional resilience with the responsibility to protect human dignity, privacy, and access to essential resources. The paper also highlights the importance of independent oversight, transparency, and continued dialogue between policymakers, scholars, and civil society when responding to overlapping and interconnected crises.

Keywords: security and human rights, polycrisis, migration, displacement, border militarisation, AI surveillance, water governance, emergency powers, civil society oversight

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Fictional Scenario: The Flood Border Crisis

35 yıl
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Introduction

Why the "Wider" Europe?

The group's name refers to the region it covers, "Wider Europe", as well as to the reactions to these debates on migration, which trigger strong emotions among many citizens. Migration has become an increasingly important topic in recent years. Whether the cause is economic, political, environmental, social or educational, migration is a global phenomenon everyone is acquainted with.

This paper focuses on a fictional scenario of migration because of extreme flooding in Southeast Europe. As a result of this natural disaster, thousands of people are displaced and attempting to cross into a European Union member state.

The government declares a state of emergency, sends the military along the borders, and temporarily suspends asylum processing. In addition, media narratives frame the situation as a "hybrid threat" potentially manipulated by foreign actors. The following issues resulting from the flooding are being analysed, mainly focusing on the questions of what kind of issues the people are facing and how these are in correlation with the violation of their human rights with regard to the receiving state, especially considering the security measures being taken and the narratives formed by the media and people.

Furthermore, this paper examines different issues and dilemmas based on a fictional state located in Southeast Europe. The destination is an EU member state located in Western Europe. Ultimately, it offers theoretical and practical suggestions for managing the migration issue.

It is important to identify the key actors in this scenario. There are two types of actors:

- **Decision-makers**, meaning those who initiate the policies implemented in the scenario.
- **Multiplicators**, meaning those who will amplify certain phenomena through their reactions to the decisions made by the decision-makers.

Both play an active role; the distinction between them lies primarily in the phase in which the actor operates. The decision-makers are, first and foremost, government authorities:

- **Authorities of "receiving states"** (in the sense that it is where the refugees are sheltered): countries that are not EU members but that are facing the crisis because they see refugees on their soil seeking to enter the EU, sometimes as a transit country. In our scenario, it can be a Southeastern European state.

- **EU Member States have a dual responsibility:** first, as members of an organisation seeking to establish a common migration policy; second, as states that receive refugees entering the EU. Some states are more vulnerable than others for geographical reasons (such as Greece, Italy or Poland, which are located at the EU's maritime and land borders). Their decisions can affect the receiving countries, their own populations, and, most importantly, the refugees themselves.
- **The EU institutions** themselves are called upon by other actors to serve as the organisation responsible for coordinating migration and reception policy. The EU has various instruments at its disposal, such as FRONTEX and the EUAA (EU Agency for Asylum), which do not necessarily align.

More and more diverse stakeholders are involved. These include:

- **Economic actors** and private capital, which can be called upon to manage the crisis logistically and facilitate post-crisis reconstruction.
- **Humanitarian and** h**uman rights organisations**, such as the Red Cross and Amnesty International, prioritise protecting people's rights and safety above all else, through advocacy and logistical support. They serve as points of contact for the authorities but are not direct decision-makers.
- We can also mention all the actors shaping public opinion. First, the media, for whom public opinion is the most important factor in a crisis. Also, those spreading disinformation, particularly via social media, tend to capitalise on crisis situations and reactions to immigration to spread fake news for political purposes. These actors can be states or private individuals.

2. Key Issues

2.1 For the non-EU state

As a consequence, the Southeastern state is forced to take necessary measures to deal with this crisis. Usually, they need to repair the damage caused by the flooding. This is necessary to ensure the safety of their citizens. However, if the necessary resources are not available, citizens are forced to evacuate, leave their homes behind, and find a new place and a new way to live. Because of this, many actors can be affected by this crisis, which can lead to further issues and dilemmas.

2.2 For individuals

Displaced people are the first to be affected by flooding. They fear for their own lives in the face of natural hazards, but that is not all. They face many other risks.

- **Food security:** Are there sufficient resources to feed all those affected?
- **Health security:** Are there risks of disease, or even epidemics or accidents caused by the flooding and displacement?
- **Human security**: In a context where basic necessities are in short supply, is individual safety being **safeguarded**? What about the most vulnerable groups, who are even more at risk during an exceptional event like this? Are public institutions and humanitarian organisations equipped to ensure that every individual can enjoy their fundamental rights without relying on family or informal support networks? Are individuals effectively protected from one another and from the authorities?

2.3 For the EU state

Western states fear they would not be able to provide homes for their new arrivals. From an economic perspective, the state needs to ensure sufficient infrastructure. Having more citizens in a critical situation complicates the use of its resources. Governments may worry about pressure on housing, public services, and infrastructure, particularly when reception capacities are limited. Finding a balanced solution comes with additional costs and therefore jeopardises the state's existing security.

Displacement may also create challenges related to social inclusion, integration and community cohesion, particularly when large numbers of people arrive within a short period. Adapting to a new culture can be difficult. Nowadays, one major issue of migration is the acceptance of immigrants because of many different aspects. Recent developments in several European Union member states show a structural shift in political views and values. Another aspect to consider is that not every state is willing to accept and welcome immigrants. A fundamental issue is that not every state considers this issue part of its responsibility. This, on the other hand, leads to a fear of abandonment of the non-EU state since it is forced to use its own resources without an additional supply from other member states, as well as of the immigrants who are forced to leave their homes with no destination in prospect.

In general, accepting immigrants can lead the receiving state to fear jeopardising its stability. This can lead to fragility and a loss of power.

3. Core Dilemmas

Other potential developments in this crisis include the militarisation of borders. In addition to the usual border guards, some states may deploy armed forces near their borders. This is what Hungary did during the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015, stationing soldiers and erecting barbed-wire fences along its borders with Serbia and Croatia. This episode fits the scenario perfectly: an exceptional migration movement, division amongst European states over who should take responsibility for them, a security-first response, and the desire to push refugees back beyond the EU's borders. In that case, we face a further dilemma: is it the role of the armed forces to prevent civilians from entering a territory? Or is this a new form of national border defence? And if the army is deployed, is it capable of carrying out missions to assist the population and ensure individual safety?

There have been other instances of the armed forces being deployed in response to migration flows, notably in Poland in 2021-2022, on the border with Belarus. This episode also raised the issue of migration being used as a hybrid threat by third countries, in this case, Russia and Belarus, to undermine the security capabilities of Poland and the EU. However, this episode has also highlighted the dilemma between security and human rights: if we take seriously the fact that the arrival of refugees is the result of a hostile strategy (which would therefore require a security-based response), can we nevertheless disregard the basic rights of individuals attempting to cross the border, who are not responsible for the hostile actions of certain governments?

This dilemma between human rights and security is central to debates on immigration in general. While the two concepts may appear to conflict in certain situations, they are fundamentally linked. Indeed, what use are human rights without security? And similarly, what is the point of security if human rights are not respected?

This dilemma is illustrated by the issue of emergency powers, that is to say, a state's exceptional capacities to manage a situation (in the event of a terrorist attack or a natural disaster, for example). Within a democratic system governed by the rule of law, as in our scenario, the decision-making process prioritises legitimacy over effectiveness. However, a state of emergency can be used precisely as an exceptional tool of coercion in times of crisis. In our example of a migration crisis following a natural disaster, emergency powers would be debated, whether by the non-EU country or by EU member states. Here, the dilemma arises once again: To what extent may a state temporarily restrict or derogate from certain rights in response to an emergency, and what legal safeguards must continue to apply?

This question of using emergency powers arose in a very specific situation, similar to our scenario. In May 2014, exceptional torrential rain caused the worst flooding in decades in the Balkans, killing more than 60 people and forcing the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of people. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia declared a state of emergency after widespread destruction of infrastructure, homes and transport networks. The international community swiftly mobilised emergency aid to tackle this major humanitarian and economic disaster.

4. Narratives

However, this tragic event took place before 2015 and the migration crisis that had shifted a large part of public opinion in Europe. If the same disaster were to occur in a context where there is generally much greater rejection towards migration across Europe, how would decision makers have reacted? We have already considered public opinion to be an important factor in our mapping. Public opinion is particularly susceptible to narratives, whether positive or negative towards refugees. In the past, we have seen episodes of spontaneous solidarity with people in distress (including in 2015, but also in 2022 following the outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine). But narratives surrounding migration are often rather negative, as there is a tendency to play on people's fears. In our workshop, we attempted to categorise the fears that might be drawn upon in this context. We have identified a dual-sided fear.

4.1 Feeling of threat (in particular before the crisis): it can be the fear of state incapability, of external powers weaponising the situation/people, of the lack of infrastructure and of safety for primary needs, the fear of not being able to develop as a state (in particular for non-EU countries), the fear of fragile stability, of overlapping grievances in some contexts.

4.2 Feeling of abandonment (before/during the crisis): it can be the fear that international organisations are neglecting the situation, that no state authority is taking action in the people's interest.

The Kapıkule crisis in February-March 2020 illustrates the diversity of narratives employed by various actors. Türkiye opened its borders with Greece, leading to the arrival of thousands of migrants heading toward the EU via the Kastanies/Pazarkule border crossing, creating a massive influx that Greece repelled by force and temporarily suspending the right to asylum. This crisis is used as leverage to put pressure on the EU to secure more financial aid and support in Syria, using migrants as a tool in a game of geopolitical bargaining.

The narratives mobilised the "defence of European borders" on the Greek side against "humanitarian responsibility" on the Turkish side, with each side accusing the other of violating international law while serving their respective strategic interests, reminiscent of our crisis scenario involving EU member states and a non-EU country. This example shows us just how important it is, as citizens, to take control of the narratives. That is why, in this final section, we will identify alternative narratives that, in the long term, can reshape public opinion and, therefore, the measures governments take.

5. Solutions and Alternative Narratives

Alternative narratives aim to present crises not as the responsibility of any particular actor, but as a problem best addressed through cooperation among actors. For example, involving human rights organisations and private capital in the aid and reconstruction process can relieve the burden on the receiving state, which would otherwise be exposed to the concerns mentioned above. Next, it is important to highlight examples of bottom-up solidarity, which are generally inspiring and can be found in a wide variety of cases. Indeed, it is not uncommon for states that are on poor diplomatic terms to begin cooperating in response to a natural disaster (by facilitating the delivery of equipment needed for relief and reconstruction). Why not expect the same sort of situation to arise in the context of a migration crisis? Finally, from a more dialectical perspective, it is important to emphasise the interdependence between human rights and security, so that the tension between these two concepts is not viewed simply as a dilemma or a balance to be achieved.

6. Conclusion

Our workshop enabled us to identify and explore the challenges and key players in the scenario presented, and to understand, both in theory and in practice, the dilemmas and points of tension. Finally, we discussed solutions to this sort of situation, keeping in mind the need to consider both people's safety and human rights. While the range of solutions put forward may seem abstract, we have also examined real-life examples of cooperation in managing this sort of crisis. Since the 2014 floods in the Balkans, the EU has worked closely with countries in the region to improve irrigation and flood defences, as well as early warning and civil protection systems, under its Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance. The EU has also adopted a new Pact on Migration and Asylum, which entered into application in June 2026 and introduced a new framework for asylum and migration management, including revised rules on responsibility, solidarity, border procedures and fundamental-rights safeguards. These examples show that solutions exist at many levels to prevent poor crisis management. However, alongside practical solutions, progress must also be made on the narratives presented to public opinion.

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Summer School Group 2 – Indo-Pacific Region

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Fictional Scenario: Smart City, Silent Surveillance

1. Introduction

Following a series of terrorist attacks, the government of a major Indo-Pacific city introduces an AI-driven surveillance system based on facial recognition and predictive policing. The objective is straightforward: identify suspects more quickly, prevent future attacks, and reduce crime. The system improves public security, but it also sparks criticism from civil society, journalists, and human rights organisations.

The main concern is not the technology itself, but how it is used. Facial recognition allows authorities to monitor people in public spaces on a large scale, while predictive policing relies on algorithms that may reinforce existing policing biases. Without clear legal limits and independent oversight, these technologies can disproportionately affect minorities, invade citizens' privacy, and make it difficult to challenge automated decisions. This scenario raises a central question: How can governments use AI to improve public security without violating fundamental rights? To answer this question, the following sections identify the key actors involved, examine the main dilemmas between security and human rights, and propose policy recommendations that seek to balance both objectives.

2. *Theoretical Background*

The tension explored in this paper sits within the broader theoretical debate on securitisation: the process by which an issue is framed as an existential threat, thereby justifying extraordinary measures that would not be acceptable under normal politics. AI-driven surveillance is a clear example of this dynamic, since counterterrorism concerns are used to legitimise wide-reaching data collection that would otherwise raise significant legal and ethical objections. At the same time, the right to privacy and the principle of non-discrimination remain binding legal standards regardless of the security context invoked. Balancing these two logics, security as an exception and rights as a constant, is the central challenge running through this proposal.

2. Scenario and Actors

2.1 Review of the Crisis Scenario

The scenario describes a major Indo-Pacific city deploying an AI-driven urban security system that combines facial recognition and predictive policing following a series of terrorist attacks. The system reduces crime as intended, but activists raise objections. It enables mass surveillance, disproportionately targets minorities, and operates without legal safeguards. The city, therefore, faces not only a crisis of security but also of governance. Several sides are involved in the scenario, whose interests intersect and conflict.

The government and law enforcement are driving the deployment; technology companies are designing the system, while civil society and the constitutional court are acting as limited and largely reactive checks, and minorities are bearing the greatest risk. In reviewing the scenario, developments in different parts of the Indo-Pacific, including debates surrounding surveillance technologies in Hong Kong and security policies in the Philippines, offer relevant points of comparison. While these contexts differ significantly from the fictional scenario, they illustrate broader regional debates concerning security, privacy, state surveillance and the protection of vulnerable communities.

These real-world examples highlight the questions the scenario forces us to confront. Even though the state clearly has a duty to prevent terrorist attacks, does that duty entitle the government to know everything about its citizens, including information that serves no security purpose? The system is effective for the problem, yet its costs, such as misidentification, over-policing, and potential persecution, fall disproportionately on minority communities. This raises the question of whose security is actually being purchased, and at whose expense. And when a technology this powerful is misused, who answers for it? The officials who used it, or the companies that built it? These questions ultimately form the foundation of the scenario's core dilemmas, which are examined in detail in the following sections.

2.2 Actors

Our scenario involves several actors whose roles and interests intersect, and at times conflict, in the balance between security and human rights: the state (government), law enforcement (police and related bodies), technology companies, civil society, minorities, and the constitutional court as an oversight mechanism. Each plays a distinct part in shaping how the surveillance system is designed, implemented, and challenged.

The government is the central actor behind introducing the AI-driven surveillance system. Facing a series of terrorist attacks, it mandated the rollout of facial recognition and predictive policing technology across the city, framing security as its primary responsibility toward citizens.
Law enforcement agencies, particularly the police, are the system's direct users. They rely on it to identify suspects, monitor public spaces, and anticipate potential threats. While this increases operational efficiency, it also gives officers considerable discretion over decisions shaped by an algorithm-driven process.
Technology companies design and maintain the surveillance system. As private actors driven partly by commercial interests, they hold significant technical knowledge but operate largely outside direct democratic oversight, raising questions about accountability when the system fails or is misused.

Civil society organisations, including human rights groups and independent journalists, monitor how the technology is used and publicly raise concerns about mass surveillance, lack of transparency, and potential abuse of power. They serve as a check on both government and corporate actors, although their capacity to bring about lasting institutional change remains limited.

Minorities and vulnerable communities are the actors most directly affected. As seen in comparable cases, minority groups have often been disproportionately targeted by such systems, whether treated as security risks or singled out due to their identity, making them the ones bearing the greatest personal risk.

The constitutional court, or an equivalent oversight body, is responsible for reviewing whether these surveillance practices comply with constitutional protections. In this scenario, its role remains limited and largely reactive, reflecting the broader gap in independent oversight that the project's recommendations aim to address.

3. Core Dilemmas

On the one hand, the security challenges facing the city, and on the other, the solutions proposed by the government and other stakeholders (e.g., technology companies) to address these challenges, give rise to several fundamental dilemmas. At their core, these dilemmas stem from the following tension: to address significant national security threats, the government develops innovative and efficient technological solutions; however, these same solutions create risks for citizens, particularly for vulnerable groups

.

3.1 Security vs. the Right to Privacy

On the one hand, the government must establish a system capable of responding as effectively as possible to national security threats and preventing or minimising the risk of terrorist attacks. An AI-powered facial recognition system can improve preventive counterterrorism measures and help identify potential suspects. At the same time, however, it may threaten the fundamental right to privacy. AI-driven surveillance technologies carry an inherent risk of enabling mass surveillance. In such circumstances, the government may gain access to all available information, including data not necessary for legitimate security purposes, and continuously monitor virtually every action of its citizens.

3.2 Efficiency vs. Fairness

AI-powered facial recognition systems may offer operational advantages, including the ability to process large volumes of data rapidly and help identify individuals of interest.

It may also contribute to discriminatory profiling, disproportionate policing, or the targeting of minority and vulnerable communities

3.3 Innovation vs. Accountability

Alongside the introduction of effective technological innovations, important questions arise regarding the accountability of governments and other relevant stakeholders. Innovation is inherently valuable, particularly when it strengthens the state's capacity to respond to national security threats. However, technologies of this nature, especially those that approach the scale of mass surveillance, often fail to meet even the most basic standards of accountability. Governments may exploit emergency powers to advance their own political interests. Without effective accountability mechanisms, including political and legal accountability for responsible officials, it remains unclear who should bear responsibility for abuses motivated by political, religious, or ethnic discrimination, or even for the unintended errors of automated systems. For this reason, robust accountability mechanisms are essential to safeguard citizens' fundamental rights against both the abuse of state power and technical or algorithmic failures.

Overall, we have chosen to pursue a solution that simultaneously recognises the legitimate requirements of national security while imposing clear legal and policy constraints on the use of AI-powered facial recognition systems and on the public authorities and private actors responsible for their deployment. Our proposed approach to addressing these challenges is presented in the following recommendations section.

4. Recommendations

4.1. Independent Oversight

Establishing independent oversight mechanisms provides a necessary institutional check on both state authority and the private technology companies designing surveillance infrastructure. This oversight ensures that automated systems do not operate entirely outside democratic scrutiny and directly monitors which populations these tools target. By tracking these applications, an independent body can prevent the government from unfairly singling out minority groups or exploiting tech platforms to advance its own political interests.

4.2. Sunset Clauses in the Legal Framework

A defined legal framework incorporating sunset clauses is essential to preserve the rule of law and restrain the unwarranted expansion of emergency state powers. Temporary mandates introduced during a crisis must not persist indefinitely to become broader instruments of permanent social control. Clear legal constraints ensure that the state's reach remains bound to legitimate counterterrorism needs, preventing public officials from gathering excessive personal data that serves no security purpose.

4.3. Transparency and Public Scrutiny

Promoting transparency allows civil society, independent journalists, and citizens to audit the algorithm-driven processes utilised by law enforcement and corporate actors. When the inner workings of predictive policing and facial recognition are open to public scrutiny, it reduces the risk of unchecked bureaucratic discretion and hidden algorithmic biases. Ensuring access to this information empowers individuals to challenge automated decisions, thereby enforcing legal and political accountability for any systemic errors or discriminatory abuses.

4.4. Regular Impact Assessments

Regular impact assessments provide an objective tool to analyse the real-world consequences of these technologies on individual liberties. These assessments must systematically measure operational costs, such as misidentifications and patterns of over-policing, to ensure that the system operates fairly. Analysing the actual impact prevents the state from justifying institutional discrimination or automated technical failures under the blanket rhetorical guise of national security efficiency.

Ultimately, balancing public security and human rights requires ensuring that technological innovation remains bound by strict accountability, transparency, and independent checks. A state's duty to prevent terrorism does not grant it an absolute right to unlimited surveillance. True security is achieved only when public safety measures actively respect and safeguard individual rights against institutional overreach.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, using AI to tackle national security problems offers both important opportunities and serious challenges. Modern technologies such as facial recognition and predictive policing can help governments prevent terrorist attacks and improve public safety. However, without clear legal rules and effective oversight, these tools may also threaten privacy, increase discrimination (particularly against ethnic and other minorities), and reduce public trust.

As this paper has shown, security and human rights should not be treated as opposite goals. A successful security policy must protect both public safety and fundamental freedoms. For this reason, governments should introduce strong legal safeguards, independent oversight, greater transparency, and regular reviews of AI systems. These measures can reduce the risk of abuse while allowing authorities to benefit from new technologies. Ultimately, AI should support democratic values rather than weaken them. Achieving the right balance between security and human rights is essential for building safe, fair, and accountable societies.

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Summer School Group 3

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Fictional Scenario: From Scarcity to Security: Water, Rights, and Governance in the Middle East

1. Introduction

Water insecurity poses a significant threat to security in the Middle East, particularly in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. This issue endangers human security, economic development, and regional stability (Gleick, 2014). Water scarcity in the Middle East arises from a combination of environmental, social, economic, and political factors (Selby et al., 2017). Climate change, population growth, pollution, inadequate infrastructure, and institutional inefficiency have increased demand for clean water while reducing its availability.

This paper examines the causes and consequences of water scarcity and insecurity in specific regions, focusing on Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. Water insecurity has persisted throughout history, yet current conditions have introduced additional complexities that hinder short-term resolution. Over-exploitation, weak institutional frameworks, inadequate infrastructure, and limited governance capacity have contributed to the challenges in Syria and Iraq (Allan, 2001; FAO, 2021). In contrast, although Lebanon has relatively abundant water resources, insufficient infrastructure, pollution, and economic hardship constrain its ability to provide adequate water services (World Bank, 2017; UNICEF, 2022).

Armed conflict has further strained water resources and management in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, as military activity frequently damages essential public infrastructure (ICRC, 2015; UNDP, 2013). In Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, prolonged conflict and institutional pressures have weakened public authorities' capacity to maintain and restore essential water infrastructure, though the scale and nature of these challenges vary across the three countries. Addressing these challenges requires substantial resources and institutional capacity, which are frequently insufficient. Consequently, states must explore strategies that enable them to restore water security, promote stability, enhance legitimacy, and support long-term political and economic objectives.

2. Why Water Became a Security Issue

Transboundary rivers and control over their flow have become a significant source of security competition in the Middle East. Türkiye plays an indirect yet influential role in regional water security as the upstream riparian state of the Tigris-Euphrates river basin, whose headwaters originate in Türkiye before flowing into Syria and Iraq (Hameed et al., 2019).

Since the 1970s, Türkiye has implemented the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP), a large-scale development programme consisting of 22 dams and 19 hydroelectric plants. The project has given Türkiye substantial control over the basin's water resources, regulating about 90% of the Euphrates' annual flow and 40-50% of the Tigris' flow (Kibaroğlu & Scheumann, 2013).

This upstream advantage has created an asymmetric distribution of control, leaving Syria and Iraq highly dependent on water decisions made beyond their borders.

Combined with rapid population growth, expanding agricultural demand, and increasingly frequent droughts, this imbalance has remained a persistent source of political tension. Syria and Iraq have long worried that Turkish upstream control could translate into downstream water shortages, a concern realised most visibly in January 1990, when Türkiye closed the Atatürk Dam's reservoir gates for roughly a month to fill it. These dynamics illustrate how asymmetries between upstream and downstream riparian states can affect water availability, bargaining power, and regional cooperation (Daly, 2014).

Some scholars have analysed water allocation as one element within the broader security relationship between Türkiye and Syria, particularly during periods of heightened bilateral tension in the 1990s. This has contributed to longstanding downstream concerns in Syria and Iraq about the potential political implications of upstream water management, even where water availability is shaped by multiple climatic, technical and policy factors.

Beyond the Tigris-Euphrates river source tensions, Syria and Iraq have faced the securitisation of water infrastructure, particularly during armed conflict, illustrating the infrastructure damage mentioned above (ICRC 2015; UNDP, 2013).

In 2014, ISIS seized the Fallujah Barrage on the Euphrates and briefly captured the Mosul Dam on the Tigris. They controlled water flow rates in downstream areas to restrict flow toward populated centres as a coercive measure (Fanack Water, 2025). The worry once was water scarcity; however, in conflicts like this, water sources have become a tool of military strategy. Water insecurity and resource scarcity have become part of the conflict dynamics and long-term anxiety in the region.

Lebanon's water scarcity and insecurity are different from those in Syria and Iraq. Unlike its neighbours, Lebanon doesn't depend on the Tigris-Euphrates or any other downstream water resource. Lebanon is a water-resource-rich country with rivers, springs and groundwater (Merheb et al., 2024).

Lebanon's water security issue stems from underinvestment in water infrastructure, inadequate research and development, and pollution of water sources, all intensified by an economic crisis that has left public services unable to invest in and repair infrastructure (UNICEF, 2022).

Syria and Iraq have a transboundary control issue, whereas Lebanon faces an internal governance and capacity problem.

These mechanisms across the region showcase why water became a security issue over time. Upstream control of water sources creates strategic leverage over vulnerability, armed conflict weaponises water resources, and institutional insufficiency creates public health and environmental risks.

In each case, water insecurity threatens human security, human rights, economic stability and state security, linking a shared resource problem to three distinct pathways of insecurity.

3. Regional Context

As outlined previously, while these three countries follow distinct pathways to water insecurity, ranging from transboundary disputes to internal infrastructural collapse, their fates remain deeply intertwined by shared river networks and regional instability.

The hydropolitical linkage extends beyond the Tigris-Euphrates dependency on Türkiye. Lebanon and Syria, for instance, are physically connected via the Orontes River, which originates in the Lebanese Bekaa Valley and flows into Syrian territory, creating a shared riparian vulnerability (UN-ESCWA & BGR, 2013). They are also linked by the Al-Kabeer Al-Janoubi River, which rises from numerous springs in Syria and the Lebanon Mountain range and forms the north-south border between Lebanon and Syria for approximately 40 kilometres before flowing into the Mediterranean Sea.

The river faces significant environmental and security challenges, as it is heavily polluted, experiences recurrent flooding, and has long served as a route for human smuggling. Similarly, Iraq's water deficit is not solely a product of upstream Turkish damming; it is compounded by Iran's systematic diversion of eastern tributaries, such as the Sirwan and Little Zab rivers. This multi-front riparian pressure illustrates a broader Middle Eastern paradigm in which upstream hydro-hegemony consistently dictates downstream states' capacity and internal stability.

Furthermore, the permeability of borders among these three states ensures that localised water crises rapidly cascade into regional resource shocks. The weaponisation of water infrastructure during the Syrian civil war and the subsequent territorial expansion of ISIS effectively erased conventional borders, subjecting both Syrian and Iraqi populations to identical asymmetric tactics of resource deprivation (von Lossow, 2016).

Concurrently, the mass displacement resulting from these conflicts severely altered the region's demographic distribution and water demand. Lebanon, despite its relative hydrological abundance, absorbed over a million Syrian refugees, placing unprecedented, rapid stress on its already deteriorating municipal water grids and wastewater management systems (World Bank, 2016; UNHCR, UNICEF, & WFP, 2021). Consequently, localised conflict in one state translates into an immediate infrastructural and public health crisis in a neighbouring one, inextricably linking their water security trajectories.

Zooming out to the broader Middle East and North Africa, it becomes clear that the struggles of these three countries are just the sharp edge of a much larger crisis. The entire region faces a harsh new reality: steadily rising temperatures, endless droughts, and rapidly draining aquifers.

Gulf states have also become increasingly important actors in regional water and infrastructure investment. Through development finance, investment, and technical cooperation, they can help strengthen water resilience in the Levant and Mesopotamia. At the same time, as with other forms of external financing, such engagement can have broader political and economic implications, highlighting the importance of transparency, local ownership and accountability (Lazard & Bin Shahid, 2026).

The water crises across these three states offer a stark preview for the rest of the Middle East. Unless governments build institutions capable of managing severe scarcity, climate pressures will shape regional security long before diplomats get a say.

4. Stakeholder Analysis

Water governance in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon involves a diverse range of stakeholders. At the national level, governments and public authorities manage water distribution, agricultural policy, and emergency response. However, states' ability to ensure equitable access to water for all population groups is often constrained by fragmented governance, centralised decision-making, and the prioritisation of specific interests (UNDP, 2013; World Bank, 2017).

Regional governments and the Gulf States also play significant roles in water governance in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. Türkiye, as the upstream country for the Tigris-Euphrates river system, exerts considerable influence on water flows in downstream states through dam operations and irrigation systems (Zawahri, 2006; Zeitoun and Warner, 2006). Regional governments and the Gulf States also shape the wider political and institutional setting for water governance.

Unlike Türkiye, their influence is usually more indirect, through development cooperation, investment, and broader regional political ties. These outside efforts can help build infrastructure and resilience. However, if governance and accountability are weak, they can also strengthen existing institutional dependencies and power imbalances (UNDP, 2013). While these interventions may enhance water service availability and promote political stability, limited transparency can also increase dependence on the Gulf States.

Economic actors are also central to water governance in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. The agricultural sector, as the region's largest consumer of freshwater resources, plays a particularly prominent role (FAO, 2021).

In Iraq, the state prioritises the oil industry, which requires considering the population's needs for electricity, water, and food. The World Bank exerts significant influence on water governance in these countries through its financial and technical support for projects aimed at improving water security (World Bank, 2017).

Military organisations and armed groups can significantly affect water governance, especially in contexts where state authority is limited. Control over water resources enables these groups to acquire power and resources and may also generate income by providing water services to the population (ICRC, 2015; Gleick, 2014). Consequently, political, financial, economic, and military dynamics shape water distribution in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon.

Two further stakeholder groups deserve explicit attention in this analysis: households (and within them, women and girls) and young people. Across the region, women and girls typically secure water for drinking, cooking, cleaning, and household care (Fanack Water, 2026); displacement sharpens this responsibility rather than easing it, as it can force women into more frequent or more exposed water-collection routines. A 2025 survey of women in displacement camps in Hasakah, north-east Syria, found that over a third reported harassment or unwanted attention from water-service staff while collecting water (Syria Direct, 2025).

Young people, who make up a disproportionately large share of the population across the region, are similarly exposed to water insecurity in ways that shape their long-term prospects, yet continue to be treated mainly as beneficiaries of water programming rather than as governance actors; recent initiatives such as UNESCO's Water Youth Dialogue have called for formal mechanisms to close this gap (SIWI, 2025; UNESCO, 2025). Water governance frameworks that do not account for these two dimensions risk producing policies that are technically sound but poorly matched to how water is actually managed, rationed and defended within communities, and to who holds a long-term stake in the outcome.

5. Core Dilemmas

A central governance dilemma concerns the relationship between political stability, institutional capacity and equitable resource distribution. In fragile and conflict-affected settings, highly centralised or politically influenced resource allocation can create perceptions of unequal access and deepen existing grievances.

This survival strategy often leaves marginalised rural communities and peripheral provinces bearing the brunt of the shortages. When these water-insecure communities mobilise, as seen in the recurrent, violent water protests in Iraq's Basra region (Human Rights Watch, 2019) or the early rural uprisings that preceded the Syrian civil war (Kelley et al., 2015), states face a difficult governance dilemma.

These domestic choices rarely remain purely internal. Water management decisions taken to preserve internal stability can inadvertently undermine regional security. Measures such as dam construction or river diversion, often employed in the competition over the headwaters of the Tigris, Euphrates, and Orontes rivers, can effectively weaponise the water supply of downstream states. This can create a zero-sum security environment in which any unilateral attempt to address a national water deficit is perceived across the border as a hostile act. Consequently, water insecurity can make it increasingly difficult to separate internal policy from foreign threat: a domestic drought management strategy can rapidly escalate into a transnational diplomatic or military crisis.

State weakness also reshapes the balance of power between governments and non-state actors. When state institutions fail to provide reliable access to water, they create a governance vacuum that armed groups and militias quickly fill. From ISIS in the Euphrates valley (von Lossow, 2016) to various paramilitary factions across Iraq and Lebanon, non-state actors have recognised that, in the absence of state-provided basic services, control over water functions as a proxy for legitimate governance. By providing or withholding access to water, these groups can both manage and coerce local populations.

As a result, struggling governments face an additional strategic trade-off: launching military operations to reclaim vital infrastructure often risks destroying the very dams and pipelines the country desperately needs. However, tolerating these groups effectively cedes national sovereignty, allowing militias to build political legitimacy and finance their activities by providing essential water services.

6. Policy Recommendations

To tackle water insecurity in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, countries need to work together at national, regional, and international levels. Policies should mix urgent humanitarian aid with long-term reforms that build resilience, accountability, and cooperation in the region.

National governments should set up clear rules to limit illegal and unsustainable groundwater use by gradually registering and licensing unapproved wells and monitoring their use. Since many people rely on informal water sources due to weak public services, these rules should go hand in hand with investments in water-saving farming, new job opportunities, and improved public water systems, not just strict enforcement (FAO, 2021; UNDP, 2013). Governments should ensure everyone has access to safe drinking water, cooking water, and basic hygiene, with special attention to rural areas, displaced people, hospitals, schools, and other vulnerable groups. To avoid excessive central control, local water councils, composed of municipalities, civil society groups, farmers, aid organisations, and experts, should help monitor water distribution and identify local needs.

Regionally, countries need to work more closely together on shared water resources. Türkiye, Syria, and Iraq should improve the way they share water from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers by openly sharing data, providing advance notice before releasing water from dams, managing droughts together, and jointly monitoring river flows and water quality (Zawahri, 2006; Zeitoun and Warner, 2006). They should also invest together in water infrastructure, early-warning systems, and climate adaptation to help prevent future conflicts over limited water. At the same time, regional cooperation should include measures to protect critical water infrastructure from capture or manipulation by non-state armed actors, as demonstrated by ISIS's strategic use of water infrastructure in Syria and Iraq (King, 2015).

Internationally, the United Nations, financial institutions, and donors should step up diplomatic efforts and set up independent oversight. Monitoring systems should track water access, attacks on civilian infrastructure, environmental harm, and unfair water distribution, ensuring help reaches those most in need and adheres to international humanitarian and human rights standards (UNCESCR, 2003; ICRC, 2015; UNEP, 2019). Monitoring should also assess who benefits, who may be excluded, and whether distribution is perceived as fair and conflict-sensitive, in line with a Do No Harm approach. International financial support should be tied to transparency, accountability, and governance reforms, while stronger diplomatic engagement is needed to promote compliance with international law and cooperation over shared water resources.

In the short term, the main goals should be to ensure everyone has basic access to water, protect key infrastructure, repair damaged systems, and improve how humanitarian groups work together. In the medium term, priorities are to formalise water extraction, engage more local people, update distribution systems, and boost technical cooperation across the region. In the long run, efforts should build climate-resilient infrastructure, manage groundwater sustainably, create stronger regional water-sharing deals, and support institutions that can manage water as a public service and a key part of human security.

7. Bridging Human Rights and Security

Access to safe, sufficient, acceptable, physically accessible and affordable water for personal and domestic use is recognised as a human right. As stated in General Comment No. 15, the right to water requires access to sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible, and affordable water for personal and domestic use (UNCESCR, 2003). The UN General Assembly later recognised water and sanitation as human rights, reinforcing the need for non-discriminatory minimum access in conflict-affected settings, particularly for rural communities, IDPs, hospitals, and schools (UNGA, 2010).

In this context, when people lose reliable access to water, the effects extend beyond humanitarian concerns and affect public health, food production, employment, displacement, and trust in institutions. Security should be built on sustainability, since lasting security is impossible without steady access to water and other basic services. In fragile contexts such as Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, persistent shortages and unequal distribution can deepen existing grievances, while rights-based and equitable provision can strengthen institutional legitimacy and social resilience (UNCESCR, 2003; Gleick, 2014; UNDP, 2013).

This perspective is particularly important for climate-related migration. Drought, lower crop yields, floods, and failing infrastructure can all lead to displacement, especially when combined with conflict, job loss, and weak government. Climate mobility should not be seen mainly as a security problem, since displaced people are often the first to suffer from both environmental and institutional breakdowns. Policies should focus on tackling the root causes, such as helping people adapt to climate change, protecting jobs, building stronger infrastructure, and providing humanitarian support, rather than relying mainly on security measures and border controls (Kelley et al., 2015; Selby et al., 2017).

Transparent and independent media play an important role in building resilience. When the media report accurately on shortages, pollution, damaged infrastructure, and unfair distribution, people can make better decisions and hold authorities accountable.

During crises and conflicts, threats to journalists, censorship, and misinformation can leave people without reliable information and reduce public trust (UNESCO, 2024). Transparency helps strengthen security, since informed people and accountable institutions can respond better to crises.

Water access is closely linked to safety and unity in cities. In urban areas already dealing with displacement, housing shortages, youth unemployment, inequality, and weak local governments, unfair access to basic services can make social divisions worse. Supporting local governments, public services, and inclusive institutions can help create lasting stability, more so than relying only on force. Protecting the right to water should be seen as part of security policy and as a way to build trust in institutions, strengthen communities, and support long-term peace (World Bank, 2017; UNDP, 2013).

8. Conclusion

The dilemmas we looked at; how governments choose who gets water, how armed groups hijack infrastructure, and how neighbours turn rivers into points of contention, show that this isn't just a technical problem. This cannot be fixed with more dams or better pumps alone. As long as water is kept behind closed doors as a political bargaining chip, the region will remain trapped in a cycle of shortages and unrest.

The path out of this requires a fundamental change in how these governments operate. It means being transparent about how water is shared, giving local communities and younger generations a real say in managing their resources, and treating water as a public service rather than a political reward. It is important to recognise who really manages water in homes and communities. Women and girls are usually the ones responsible for getting water in most households. Young people also make up a large part of the population and will live with the results of decisions made today. Both groups should be included as active participants in water governance, not just seen as recipients of aid.

Regionally, the current "my water, your problem" mindset is a dead end. Real security will only come when countries move toward data-sharing and joint management, recognising that they share a hydrological reality that ignores national borders.

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WHO ARE WE?

Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom Türkiye Office:

The Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, established in 1958, promotes liberal values through political education in Germany and abroad. Since 1991, FNF has been working in Türkiye with partners from civil society, academia, business, and politics. Given Türkiye's historical and strategic importance to Germany, Europe, and the transatlantic region, FNF supports liberal-minded individuals and organisations to help foster a more liberal, democratic, and prosperous society. The Foundation's office, initially in Ankara, moved to Istanbul in 2002 and continues its mission of promoting liberal values across Türkiye.

Human Rights Academy:

The Human Rights Academy was founded in 2020 to institutionalise human rights courses and create a regular structure through cooperation between civil society and academia. A Consultative Committee composed of experts has been established. The Academy aims to fill gaps in undergraduate and graduate human rights education through various activities, advance and disseminate human rights knowledge in Türkiye, and provide human rights education to individuals in various fields who need this training.

Impressum

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