

Hydro-diplomacy: A new approach to water security and sustainable de-velopment in the Arab region

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Hassan Aboelnga (Middle East Water Forum*), Hazim El-Naser (Middle East Water Forum), Mufleh Al Alaween Al Abbadi (Swiss Development Co-operation), Almotaz Abadi (Union for the Mediterranean), and Shammy Puri (Centre for sustainable Solutions in Practical Hydrogeology)

A large portion of the world's population depend on neighboring countries for their water. This is particularly the case in the Arab region, which also happens to be the most water scarce region in the world. The Arab region is also facing political instability and is very vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. International conventions on collaboration over transboundary water don't appear to be meaningful and many people are now calling for better water diplomacy in and between countries in the Arab region. Here, Hassan Aboelnga, Hazim El-Naser, Mufleh Al Alaween Al Abbadi, Almotaz Abadi and Shammy Puri set out the case for a new outlook expressed by the term hydro-diplomacy.

The Arab region is one of the most water scarce regions in the world. It also has to deal with political instability, conflicts, fragility and wicked water governance. As two thirds of the water resources originate from outside the Arab region, transboundary water interactions are inherently political, and are determined by the broader geo-political context of countries sharing these resources. This creates a dire need not only for reforming water institutions in the region but also the need for a new holistic framework, and other tools of water diplomacy, to achieve water security and sustainable development for all.

Water is at the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Securing water for people, productivity and the environment is a necessary condition for sustainable growth, ending poverty and hunger, and fully achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Despite progress, nearly [87 million people still lack access to safe water and hand-washing facilities in the Arab region](#). Intermittent operation of water supply networks is common in

many Arab countries like Jordan and Lebanon, in which people receive water only once or twice per week.

Sharing waters and gaining benefits

Around the world, three-quarters of UN Member States share rivers or lake basins with their neighbors. There are more than 270 shared river basins, which provide freshwater for almost 40% of the globe's population, including the Nile, the Indus, the Ganges, the Euphrates-Tigris, and the Mekong. The Arab region has 27 shared surface water basins and 14 of 22 Arab countries are riparian states with a shared water body. Groundwater in the region plays a vital role in surface water basins, a link which is often overlooked. Shared aquifers cover almost 58% of the Arab region in terms of surface area.

Today, the Arab region is at a perceptible risk of running out of water, leading to a new serious crisis. Loss of access to water is recognized as the greatest risks to business continuity and growth. Climate change is adding pressure on already limited water resources as a 'crisis multiplier' with profound implications for regional peace and stability.

Currently there is no water-related legal instrument relevant to the specific needs of the Arab region. UN-Water warns that progress on safely managed water and sanitation (SDG 6) remains uneven and that we are not on track [to reach the 2030 Agenda](#). Failing to achieve water security will [jeopardize meeting all the SDGs](#).

Major water challenges in the Arab region

Arab countries cover 10% of the world's area and are home to 6% of the world's population but receive less than 2% of the world's renewable water supply. Two-thirds of the Arab region's water supplies (163.2 BCM) [originate outside the region](#). Consequently, Arab nations need to import more than half of their food; they are among the greatest importers of cereal in the world.

The already scarce water resources in the Arab region are being depleted by rapid population growth, the accompanying demands of urbanization, and irrigated agriculture. Moreover, climate change, bringing greater climate variability and more frequent and severe droughts and floods, will exacerbate the already precarious situation created by chronic water scarcity. The Arab region is considered one of the world's poorest regions in terms of water availability and globally, is most likely to suffer from water crises. Over the next 20 years, freshwater resources per capita are estimated to keep declining steadily unless a fundamental shift occurs. This poses the question: is there a different approach, that moves away from focusing solely on the allocation of water among riparians, and addresses instead sharing the benefits that accrue from the sound use the scarce water? Would this allow the countries to shift from the competitive zero sum game to a positive positive-sum game, and create incentives for a new form of cooperation?

UN Watercourses convention: Moving from theory to practice

In 1997, more than one hundred nations joined together to adopt the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational uses of International Watercourses (UN Watercourses Convention). The Convention provided a flexible and overarching global legal framework that establishes basic standards and rules for cooperation between watercourse states on the use, management, and protection of international watercourses.

The Arab Strategy for Water Security adopted by Arab Ministerial Water Council (AMWC), League of Arab States in 2011, calls for the pursuit of suitable legal agreements and arrangements that support shared water resources management between Arab States.

Only nine Arab countries ratified this convention: Syrian Arab Republic, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Iraq, Qatar, Tunisia, Morocco and Palestine. Even though there are major transboundary aquifers in the region (some of largest ones, eg the Nubian Sandstone Aquifers System) – there are exceptionally, some cooperative mechanisms in place – a precursor to sound hydro-diplomacy. The UN 1997 Convention does not have a Secretariat, nor a permanent technical team of supporting experts. The discourse over shared waters in the Arab region is dominated by issues of quantity and allocation, rather than issues focusing on collaboration over shared water resources.

On the other hand, the 1992 [UNECE Convention on Protection and Use of Transboundary Water Courses and International Lakes](#) (which originated in the European & North American region) does have a well-established Secretariat. In the recent years, the Member States of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) agreed to open this convention for adoption by countries outside of the UNECE region. Several countries (Senegal, Chad) have acceded to this Convention and the Secretariat of the UNECE have been keenly promoting this Convention.

In March 2020, a series of stakeholder meetings were held in Beirut for the Middle East & North Africa (MENA) region to promote the adoption of the UNECE Convention by countries of the region. However, as [the findings of the Middle East Water Forum MEWF webinar](#) in 2020 might suggest, do global instruments deliver what these countries want?

Hydro-diplomacy in MENA

The provisions for ‘reasonable and equitable use’ in these instruments can sometimes imply fear of having to ‘share when there is not much to share anyway’. Therefore, might the countries of the region focus on bi-lateral or multi-lateral hydro-diplomacy? The (new) concept of hydro-diplomacy is altogether different from sharing. Hydro-diplomacy is about trading mutual benefits, thus moving from the zero-sum of water competition to the positive-sum game that will incentivize cooperation

To promote these new ideas of hydro-diplomacy, capacity, knowledge learning to trade benefits, [Blue Peace Middle East](#) supports the [Water Diplomacy Centre](#) (WDC). The Centre was established at the end of 2019. It aims at coordinating research and providing training for cooperation and negotiation skills in the field of water and the new MENA region specific approach to hydro-diplomacy.

The existing structure of the Blue Peace initiative is a three-tiered structure. It is chaired by HRH Prince Hassan bin Talal of Jordan, and the top-tier Policy Advisory Committee is made up of influential regional political leaders. On the second tier, the Managing Committee works with support institutions to identify thematic areas of concern and to set priorities in the field of water resources. In the third tier, the Coordination Office supports the Managing Committee in facilitating planned activities. The Coordination Office also works in close collaboration with the National Focal Points.

The [UfM \(Union for the Mediterranean\) Water Agenda](#) provides a series of technical and financial recommendations around four regional priorities for action to leverage investments and improve sustainable and integrated water management in the region through. These include the promotion of the Water-Energy-Food-Ecosystems Nexus approach for its implementation and financing in UfM Member States and the region; and the promotion of Water and Climate Change Action.

The SPICC framework for supporting Arab water diplomacy

For the reasons we have discussed here, there is an urgent need for improved hydro-diplomacy in the Arab region. However, we believe what is needed for the future is not a new or additional institution. The answer is in putting our proposed SPICC framework into action while raising awareness at all levels (and developing capacity building programs) on the benefits arising from effective hydro-diplomacy. This includes raising awareness in local civil societies, refugees and host communities as well as with all forms of media to achieve sustainable and equitable solutions.

SPICC stands for:

- **Strengthen** the science-policy dialogue in multi-track water related hydro-diplomacy processes for improving transboundary water cooperation and collaboration in conflict-affected areas.
- **Proactive** prevention through analytical studies and measures (requires strengthening of all forms of water relevant hydro-diplomacy)
- **Information** and data exchange between the riparian countries as the first key element in trust building and cooperation
- **Capacity building** for diplomats and institutions focusing on how hydro-diplomacy can yield mutual benefits
- **Coherence** and integration of adaptation efforts across borders and sectors.

Hydro-diplomacy should thus be a process which can be operated by regional institutions like the League of Arab States and the Union for the Mediterranean. It ultimately requires the involvement from governments, but it also unlocks cooperation among multiple stakeholders including media, donors, municipalities and civil society.

Working broadly as a multi-level governance process, hydro-diplomacy can better integrate government priorities for water security and sustainable development, while providing a means to integrate climate adaptation into water management.

More information: hassan.aboelnga@mewf.de

Hassan Aboelnga is the Vice Chair of the Middle East Water Forum. **Hazim El-Naser** is the Chair of the Middle East Water Forum. **Mufleh Al Alaween Al Abbadi** is the Water Advisor for the Swiss Development Co-operation. **Almotaz Abadi** is the Managing Director for Water at the Union for the Mediterranean Secretariat. **Shammy Puri** is Director of the think tank Centre for Sustainable Solution in Practical Hydrogeology.

* **The Middle East Water Forum** is a pioneer platform with a regional perspective on raising public awareness and enhancing management of water challenges in the Middle East by adopting Effectiveness, Efficiency, Integration and Sustainability through the exchange of data, expertise and innovative technologies without the need to cross borders. Its mission is to promote best practices for cooperation and exchange of knowledge among the various parties and stakeholders involved in water issues and actions through an online forum that ensures the impartial and transparent dissemination of information towards sustainable water security in the Middle East and the Arab region.

More information: <https://www.mewf.de/>

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Banner image: In the Arab region, the most water scarce region in the world, water security may well depend on the diplomatic skills of one country to work with government in the next. (Image by [Squirrel_photos](#) from [Pixabay](#))

