

# Water Diplomacy

Rosa Cuppari, visiting scientist at the International Centre for Water Resources and Global Change

## Water Diplomacy – what is it?

‘Water diplomacy’, or ‘hydro diplomacy’, has become a popular buzzword, used by foreign ministries, think tanks, and journalists alike. Its usage has been accompanied by the growing prominence of water-related risks. Since 2011, when flooding was placed on the World Economic Forum’s top 5 risks in terms of likelihood or impact, water-related crises have been on the list each year. Although most uses of the phrase water diplomacy are ambiguous, so what is it exactly?

Part of the reason the term is not clearly defined is the variety of actors that use it. Water diplomacy for a government may differ from water diplomacy undertaken by an NGO. For the purposes of this brief, water diplomacy will be defined as the elevation of water issues to a foreign policy, or aid, agenda with long-term objectives that have a scope broader than just water, like increasing stability within a region. Water diplomacy can be undertaken at all stakeholder levels and unites technical knowledge with political priorities, allowing it to present solutions to water-related issues when water resources have been politicized or securitized. It can lead to, or stem from, water cooperation.

***Preventive water diplomacy is third party engagement in a basin with the goal of hedging the risk of future conflict.***

### Impacts

#### **Water as a fundamental resource**

There are 286 transboundary rivers in the world, shared by 151 countries, and 592 transboundary aquifers shared by more than two countries.<sup>1</sup> These provide drinking water, irrigation, hydropower, and water for industrial purposes, connecting them to a country’s agricultural production and food security; sustainability and energy security; and water security.

#### **Water, gender and poverty**

Women are usually responsible for collecting water, and using it for domestic purposes and subsistence agriculture. Globally, women spend millions of hours fetching water daily.<sup>2</sup> More access to water gives women,



and other water fetchers, the time to attend school or pursue a job. This in turn can boost their self-confidence and ability to participate in local water management schemes, making them more effective.

#### **Water to promote peace**

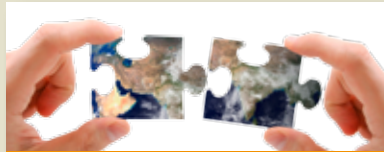
Every person in the world needs water, which may be why sharing water resources has historically led to significantly more cooperation than conflict.<sup>3</sup> As such, water diplomacy has the long-term objective of stability and peace in a region. As an example, the Indus River Treaty between India and Pakistan has survived wars and terror attacks, making it one of the most significant pieces of cooperation between the two countries.

## The 'Crisis Curve': One Way to Water Cooperation



### Conflict

- Unilateral action by one riparian impacts another
- Over-appropriation of resources
- Water quality and quantity diminish



### Water Diplomacy

- Mediation
- Facilitation
- Third party/NGO engagement
- Negotiation
- Arbitration
- Adjudication



### Cooperation

- Joint data collection
- Joint-management
- Treaties, agreements
- Sharing technical expertise
- Integrated, basin-wide planning

Adapted from: UNESCO-IHP. Hydrodiplomacy, Legal and Institutional Aspects of Water Resources Governance. (2016) (1st ed.). Paris.

## Diplomacy: Building Trust

### Science: establish confidence

- Joint-fact finding missions, or missions led by a neutral and respected third party, give riparians a mutually agreed upon foundation from which to proceed
- Clarifying protocol for what data to collect, and how to collect it, subsequently provides a way to keep data collection and presentation transparent and reliable after initial joint-fact finding

### Politics: begin collaboration

- The creation of a space for, or the institutionalization of, regular, high level dialogue, based on the premise that transboundary water management is an opportunity to create value, as opposed to a zero sum game of dividing value, gives all riparians a vested interest in collaboration
- Side-payments from a third party can incentivize the more powerful riparian to compromise, and give a weaker party more bargaining power
- Donor countries can make funding conditional on joint management of projects and rivers

### Institutions: make a long-term difference

- Establishing information sharing networks – using procedures, experts, and platforms that both parties agree to – maintains shared scientific views to support future collaboration
- Incorporating stakeholders at all levels ensures that water management agreements do not further discriminate against one segment of the population or result in local backlash

***Water – being international, indispensable, and emotional – can serve as a cornerstone for confidence building and a potential entry point for peace<sup>4</sup>***

1 Explore Layers - [ihp-wins.unesco.org](http://ihp-wins.unesco.org). Retrieved 28 March 2017, from <http://ihp-wins.unesco.org/layers/?limit=100&offset=0>

2 UNDP. (2006). UN Human Development Report 2006. New York City: Palgrave Macmillan. Retrieved 28 March 2017, from <http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/reports/267/hdr06-complete.pdf>

3 Wolf, A. (1998). Conflict and cooperation along international waterways. *Water Policy*, 1(2), 251-265. Retrieved 28 March 2017, from [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/s1366-7017\(98\)00019-1](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/s1366-7017(98)00019-1)

4 Wolf, A. T., Kramer, A., Carius, A., & Dabelko, G. D. (2006). Water can be a pathway to peace, not war. *Navigating Peace*, 1, 1-6. Retrieved 28 March 2017, from <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/NavigatingPeaceIssue1.pdf>

## Case Study: Blue Peace Middle East

In 2011, the Strategic Foresight Group (SFG) published the “Rethinking Middle East Water” report, sponsored by Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), on the notion that water could be a cause for cooperation rather than conflict in the region. It listed ten recommendations for improving the political situation in the Middle East by addressing its water management problems. In 2013, another SFG report concluded that countries that manage their shared water resources jointly do not go to war. During the same period, the SDC launched the Blue Peace Initiative as part of their Global Programme Water. Its stated goal is “to create a link between security and development.” Today, Blue Peace is operational in several regions, encouraging a shared political vision for water management to complement technical cooperation.

In the Middle East, the countries involved are Israel, the Palestinian territories, Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon. They are separated into circles of cooperation in SFG’s model: two groups from which to start smaller level coordination with the hopes of expanding or overlapping when pragmatic and politically feasible. The Northern Circle contains Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon. The smaller circle involves Israel and the Palestinian territories with the intention of including

Jordan later on. Even within the circles of cooperation, there are several phases (from short to long-term) with goals that build on each other. One of the fundamental problems for the existing water governance systems was that they remained purely technical, directed at water allocation and quality.

The SFG’s complex recommendations require time and trust, but many are already underway, despite the ongoing conflict in Syria. The initial priority of creating a political cooperation council, funded by Switzerland, began when the SFG and the SDC brought together high level government officials along with local stakeholders like civil and media representatives. The creation of a council was approved, with the initial High Level Group of informal representatives transformed into a formal High Level Forum of policy makers. The Forum has convened for several meetings and workshops, and affirmed seven principles of cooperation. The Blue Peace Media Network, which publishes articles and broadcasts television programs, is estimated to have reached more than 30 million people in the area over the last two years. A second starting project was integrated management of the

Orontes River. The SDC continues to work on fully establishing the cooperation council; joint data collection, management, and exchange; water cooperation over the Tigris River; and shared water management in the Yarmouk Basin.

Despite the obstacles obstructing Blue Peace, its community of ministers, former ministers, parliamentarians, government officials, experts, and media leaders from Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon are working together to further its goals. For now, the confidence and trust between policy makers is already building.

### References:

- Strategic Foresight Group. (2015). Blue Peace in the Middle East: Progress Report. Retrieved 28 March 2017, from <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/187403/84807140109-website.pdf>
- Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. (2014). Global Brief: Water for Peace. Berne. Retrieved 28 March 2017, from [https://www.eda.admin.ch/dam/deza/en/documents/publikationen/briefing-papers/global-brief-2014-01-wasser-frieden\\_EN.pdf](https://www.eda.admin.ch/dam/deza/en/documents/publikationen/briefing-papers/global-brief-2014-01-wasser-frieden_EN.pdf);
- Waslekar, S., Vishwanath, A., Bakshi, G., & Motwani, P. R. (2011). The Blue Peace: Rethinking Middle East Water. Strategic Foresight Group. Retrieved 28 March 2017, from [http://www.strategicforesight.com/publication\\_pdf/40595Blue%20Peace\\_Middle%20East.pdf](http://www.strategicforesight.com/publication_pdf/40595Blue%20Peace_Middle%20East.pdf)



Tigris River at Diyarbakir, source: wikimedia commons, Bjørn Christian Tørrissen



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



International Centre  
for Water Resources and Global Change  
under the auspices of UNESCO

**International Centre  
for Water Resources and Global Change**

Federal Institute of Hydrology  
P.O. Box 200253 • 56002 Koblenz • Germany

Telephone: +49 (0)261/1306-5313  
Telefax: +49 (0)261/1306-5422

[contact@waterandchange.org](mailto:contact@waterandchange.org)  
[www.waterandchange.org](http://www.waterandchange.org)