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Mediating International River Disputes

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Mediating International River Disputes

Through a comparison of the Indus, Jordan, Euphrates, Tigris, and Yarmouk Rivers, this paper examines the role of third parties in mediating international water disputes between adversarial states. The existing literature on the management of international river conflicts points to an important role for third parties in mediating water disputes (Yoffe, Wolf, and Giordano, 2003). After all, the World Bank mediated the most successful example of sustained and active cooperation, the Indus Waters Treaty between India and Pakistan over the management of the Indus River system. The United States and United Nations have been very active in mediating water disputes between Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria over the Jordan River system. The outcomes from these mediations have been mixed, because at times these states resorted to conflict and then cooperation. Finally, there has been minimal third party mediation between Turkey, Syria, and Iraq over the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers. Consequently, these riparian states have resorted to conflict. Through a comparison of these cases, this paper argues that a third party mediator is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for cooperation. The mediator can possibly settle a specific dispute, but it cannot lead to stable cooperation. To achieve long-term sustainable cooperation, states require an institutionalized mechanism, such as a joint river commission. To appreciate why an institutionalized mechanism is needed, the paper examines the nature of the problem structure confronted by states sharing international rivers.