All Quiet on the West Bank? Hydropolitics in the Jordan River Basin

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Abstract

This paper examines the past, present, and future of hydropolitics in the Jordan River basin. Specifically, it seeks to determine how the three major riparian entities on that river—Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority—have developed its water resources in the past and how they plan to address water shortages in the future. The Jordan River is often cited as one of the transnational water sources that is most likely to generate conflict in the upcoming years. I argue that this “water wars” hypothesis is misleading because it ignores the major ways that such conflict has been averted in the past. Three factors have acted in combination to prevent conflict from breaking out over the past six decades. Those factors are regional hegemonic stability, which decreases the utility of violence when it comes to obtaining natural resources; the arrival of large-scale desalination technology, an expensive but palatable alternative for nations seeking to increase their water supplies unilaterally; and finally, increases in “virtual water” imports—that is, water consumption avoided by importing food and other water-intensive items rather than producing them domestically. Using the available literature, statistics, and interviews with water management experts in Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority, these three factors are established, explained, and placed in historical context. Although the Jordan River is admittedly a very unique case study, these factors are present in other river basins and transnational aquifers around the world and as such should be viewed as important caveats to the general theory of “water wars.”