

HIGH-LEVEL PANEL T 11

Hydrodiplomacy: Advancing the Right to Water for Peace and Stability

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1. Background

Shared water is one of the oldest forms of interdependence, and one of the most demanding. Globally, around 60% of the world's freshwater flows cross national borders, and more than three billion people live in shared river and lake basins. Beneath these visible waters, hundreds of aquifers also extend across borders, sustaining cities, agriculture, ecosystems and drought resilience with far less public attention than rivers. Long before it is measured, allocated or regulated, water moves through basins, wetlands, recharge zones and underground reserves that rarely coincide with political frontiers. Together, these figures reveal a political reality that is often easier to acknowledge than to govern: water may be administered within national systems, but water security is shaped by natural systems that no country can manage alone. The Mediterranean gives this global interdependence a particular intensity. The region is warming around 20% faster than the global average, while rainfall variability, groundwater depletion, salinisation, pollution and ecosystem degradation are placing growing pressure on already fragile balances. More than 180 million people in the region already live in conditions of water poverty, and a further 60 million face water stress; in the coming decades, the number of water-poor people could rise to around 250 million. These pressures do not stop at borders. In the wider Middle East and North Africa, approximately 60% of surface water resources are transboundary, and every country shares at least one aquifer with a neighbour. What is at stake is not scarcity alone, but the governance of water systems that are both stressed and shared, and on which food systems, energy choices, urban development, public health, ecosystems and regional stability increasingly depend.

Reliance on these same systems becomes a more complex diplomatic challenge when exposure, influence and capacity to respond are uneven. In such circumstances, hydrodiplomacy cannot be reduced to treaties, protocols or formal declarations of cooperation or goodwill. These instruments are essential, but they are only the visible part of a more demanding political and practical effort: keeping dialogue open, maintaining trust in data, enabling institutions to function, and ensuring that shared commitments remain credible when scarcity, uncertainty or mistrust increase. The effort is most demanding in basins where the costs, risks and benefits of cooperation are not felt equally, and where riparians do not share the same urgency, information, financial means or capacity to influence outcomes. Asymmetries of power, position and capacity shape the politics of shared water: geography may give some actors greater influence over flows, infrastructure or timing; technical capacity affects who produces data and who can contest it; financial capacity determines who can invest in alternatives and who remains exposed to decisions taken elsewhere. These differences are not marginal to hydrodiplomacy; they determine whether cooperation is perceived as credible, equitable and worth sustaining. Hydrodiplomacy proves its value when it creates reasons for all riparians, including those with greater leverage, to remain within cooperative frameworks built on trusted data, clear mutual benefits, parity of esteem and mutual respect, equitable burden-sharing and institutions strong enough to make shared management more valuable than unilateral action.

The same logic extends to the natural systems on which cooperation ultimately rests. Rivers, wetlands, aquifers, recharge areas, and coastal groundwater are not only sources of water supply; they also regulate water quality, sustain biodiversity, buffer droughts and floods, and protect the conditions of life across territories. When environmental flows decline, wetlands are degraded, aquifers are overdrawn, or recharge zones are damaged, the loss is not only ecological. It weakens water security itself, raises the cost of treatment and recovery, and makes essential services more fragile. For communities already exposed to scarcity, poverty or crisis, the degradation of aquatic ecosystems can therefore become the point at which environmental decline translates into a loss of

health, dignity and access to safe water and sanitation. The growing recognition of the rights of rivers and ecosystems should be understood in practical terms: not as a separate claim alongside human needs, but as part of a wider effort to preserve the living systems that make water security and long-term cooperation possible.

The Mediterranean already has legal instruments, regional platforms, basin experience and technical knowledge. The harder task is to align them around the realities of shared rivers, aquifers and ecosystems. Political commitments need to be matched by trusted data, joint monitoring, stronger basin and aquifer institutions, ecological safeguards, and financing that follows the logic of shared waters rather than fragmented project boundaries. Addressing fragmentation in donor support and financing is part of this alignment, so that investments strengthen shared institutions, service continuity and ecosystem resilience rather than remain confined within separate funding cycles or disconnected project frameworks. Environmental flows, aquifer protection and ecosystem restoration are no longer peripheral to cooperation; they are part of the conditions that allow shared waters to continue sustaining people, economies and essential services. As water scarcity deepens and ecosystems weaken, the margin for delayed or partial cooperation is narrowing. The region's stability will increasingly depend on whether hydrodiplomacy can become effective enough to manage unequal capacities, protect shared ecosystems and sustain dialogue before pressure hardens into crisis.

2. Key Challenges and Objectives

The panel will draw on Euro-Mediterranean experience, including existing instruments, institutions, basin practices and lessons learned, to examine how this experience can support more effective hydrodiplomacy in a context where shared rivers, aquifers and ecosystems are increasingly central to water security, regional stability and the protection of essential services. It will focus on the political, ecological, institutional and financial conditions that allow cooperation to remain credible when pressures increase, interests diverge and capacities are uneven, including situations marked by asymmetries of exposure, leverage and capacity. The objective is to identify what Mediterranean experience can teach about sustaining cooperation under pressure, what makes it worthwhile for all riparians, and how political commitments, institutional frameworks and financial flows can be better aligned with the realities of shared water systems.

Challenge 1 – Unequal positions, shared stakes

Riparians rarely approach cooperation from the same starting point. Their exposure to scarcity, their ability to influence decisions, their access to data and finance, and their dependence on specific flows or aquifers may differ considerably. The panel will consider how hydrodiplomacy, legal frameworks and joint institutions can help manage these structural asymmetries by building mutual respect, clearer benefits, fairer burden-sharing and greater ownership of cooperative frameworks, particularly where cooperation must remain credible despite uneven exposure, leverage and capacity.

Challenge 2 – Ecosystems and rights of rivers as conditions for lasting cooperation

The health of rivers, wetlands, aquifers and recharge areas is not a secondary environmental concern; it shapes the reliability of the water systems on which societies and economies depend. When shared waters are managed only as divisible resources, without safeguarding environmental flows, groundwater recharge and ecosystem integrity, degradation can ultimately weaken service provision and access to safe water and sanitation. The panel will explore how the growing recognition of the rights of rivers and ecosystems can be translated into practical cooperation, so that ecological safeguards reinforce, rather than compete with, human needs and long-term water security.

Challenge 3 – From political commitment to coordinated action and support

The Mediterranean has no shortage of initiatives, cooperation platforms or technical expertise. Their impact, however, depends on how well they are connected to the realities of transboundary water systems rather than remaining dispersed across isolated mandates or funding cycles. Too often, investments in water, sanitation, resilience and ecosystem restoration are designed as stand-alone projects, with limited contribution to the capacities and institutional arrangements required at the basin and aquifer level. The panel will address how joint evidence, cooperation mechanisms and

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better-coordinated support from donors, regional organisations and financing partners can be aligned with the governance of shared basins and aquifers, so that such investments strengthen cross-border coordination, common institutions and long-term collaboration rather than remaining confined within separate project frameworks.

3. Guiding Questions

Question 1: When riparians do not share the same exposure, leverage or capacity, what makes cooperation worth choosing in practice for the better-positioned party, rather than unilateral action?

Question 2: How can the rights of rivers and ecosystems be translated into practical basin cooperation, including the right to not being polluted, the right to receive seasonal flows (whether through environmental flows or naturally), and the right to carry the requisite biodiversity?

Question 3: How can development partners and regional institutions align support for shared rivers and aquifers with the logic of basins rather than the logic of separate projects?

4. Expected Outcomes

Outcome 1: A more realistic basis for cooperation under asymmetry

The panel is expected to help clarify how hydrodiplomacy can work when riparians do not share the same leverage, exposure or capacity. The discussion should support a clearer understanding of what makes cooperation worthwhile for all parties, including those with greater influence: trusted data, visible mutual benefits, equitable burden-sharing, shared ownership and institutions that make cooperative management more reliable than unilateral action.

Outcome 2: Ecosystem integrity as part of the cooperation agenda

The panel is expected to reinforce the role of rivers, aquifers, wetlands and recharge areas as foundations of long-term water security and cooperation. The discussion should help translate the growing recognition of the rights of rivers and ecosystems into practical priorities such as environmental flows, aquifer protection, ecosystem restoration and safeguards that strengthen the resilience of shared water systems.

Outcome 3: Institutions and support aligned with shared waters

The panel is expected to highlight the need for stronger alignment between political commitments, basin-level institutions and external support. The discussion should help clarify how regional organisations, development partners and financial institutions can better support shared rivers and aquifers, so that cooperation is reinforced through joint evidence, cross-border coordination, ecosystem resilience and service continuity rather than fragmented project cycles.

5. Indicative Panel Composition

Role	Name / Title / Institution	Contribution / Perspective
Moderator	Ele Jan Saaf – Senior Hydrodiplomacy Advisor, IME	To moderate the Panel from a hydrodiplomacy and transboundary water cooperation perspective, ensuring that the discussion remains focused on the practical conditions for cooperation, including mutual benefits, parity of esteem, equitable burden-sharing, joint ownership and alignment with basin realities.
Speaker 1 Regional political and institutional perspective	Joan Borrell – Deputy Secretary General for Stability and Resilience, Union for the Mediterranean	To provide a Euro-Mediterranean regional perspective on water security, cooperation and stability, and to connect the discussion with

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		regional policy priorities, ministerial processes and existing Mediterranean cooperation frameworks.
Speaker 2 – Rights of rivers and ecosystem integrity	Andreas Beckmann – Regional CEO at WWF Central and Eastern Europe (WWF-CEE)	To bring a conservation and ecosystem-governance perspective on the rights of rivers and ecosystem integrity, drawing on WWF's work on river protection, wetland restoration and biodiversity, and to show how ecological safeguards can be integrated into practical basin cooperation
Speaker 3 – Legal and institutional cooperation	Sonja Koeppel – Secretary of the Water Convention, UNECE, or senior representative of the UNECE Water Convention Secretariat	To present the role of international legal frameworks in supporting transboundary cooperation, including joint bodies, data exchange, equitable participation, environmental flows and ecosystem-aware basin agreements.
Speaker 4 – Operational hydrodiplomacy / basin practice	Ciarán Ó Cuinn – Director, MEDRC, or representative of a Mediterranean-relevant basin organisation Alternative option to strengthen gender balance and expertise: Hydrodiplomacy, water law and peace: Mara Tignino – Scientific Director, Geneva Water Hub; Senior Lecturer, University of Geneva	To provide an operational perspective on sustaining cooperation, dialogue and technical collaboration in complex or asymmetric settings. / To bring an international water law and peace perspective, with particular attention to transboundary aquifers, cooperation over shared waters and the protection of water systems in situations of tension, fragility or recovery.
Speaker 5 – Development-partner coordination and implementation support	Senior representative from an international financial institution or development partner, such as the World Bank, EIB, OECD or a regional development bank. Suggestions: Saroj Kumar Jha – Global Director, Water, World Bank Group Alternative option to strengthen gender balance and expertise: Finance, climate and donor alignment: Jennifer Sara – Global Director, Climate Change Global Practice, World Bank Group; former Global Director, Water Global Practice	To provide a senior water-sector investment perspective on financing water security, resilience, institutions, infrastructure and service continuity. / To address the financing and donor-alignment dimension, exploring how climate and development finance can better support basin institutions, cross-border coordination, ecosystem resilience and service continuity in shared water systems.

Optional Human right to water and ecosystem degradation	Pedro Arrojo-Agudo – UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation, OHCHR	To link the human right to safe water and sanitation with aquatic ecosystem degradation, poverty, dignity and essential services, and to show how protecting rivers, aquifers and ecosystems can support human security and long-term water resilience.
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6. Panel Format

The Panel will be structured as a 90-minute, high-level moderated exchange, moving from strategic framing to practical perspectives on cooperation, ecosystems and implementation. It will open with a brief introduction by the moderator, followed by short interventions from the panellists around the guiding questions. The moderated discussion will then allow the different political, legal, basin-level, rights of rivers, and development-partner coordination perspectives to respond to one another, with space for concrete examples where relevant. Audience questions will be collected through a digital participation tool and screened with the support of the organising team for a focused Q&A near the end. The session will close with one brief takeaway from each panellist on how Mediterranean hydrodiplomacy can become more operational, equitable and resilient.

Indicative timing: opening framing – 10 minutes; short panellist interventions – 25 minutes; moderated exchange – 30 minutes; audience Q&A – 15 minutes; final takeaways – 10 minutes.