
Case Analysis

Behind the Curtain: Syria's 1979 Mediation in the Yemen Dispute

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The literature on international mediation emphasizes the crucial role that mediator impartiality and interest play in a mediation's success. Building on this literature and focusing on the case of Syria's role in resolving the Yemen dispute, my research seeks to demonstrate how a mediator's relationship with an external actor can change the level of the mediator's impartiality and interest and, ultimately, the mediation outcome. Syria's first attempt in 1979 to resolve the Yemen dispute through mediation failed, but its second attempt in the same year was successful. This article describes how Syria's relations with the Soviet Union changed the level of Syria's interest and impartiality toward the dispute between North Yemen and South Yemen. It also explores how and why the Soviets clandestinely helped Syria to become an effective mediator for the dispute. Drawing upon the lessons of this case, I discuss how external factors other than a mediator's bilateral relations with the parties can increase the mediator's impartiality and interest in a dispute.

Keywords: mediation, Yemen dispute, Syria, Soviet Union, Cold War, North Yemen, South Yemen, international mediation, mediator impartiality

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Introduction

“Mediation is a process through which a third party assists two or more others in working out their own solution to a conflict” (Slaikue 1995: xiii). Its primary goals are to prevent conflicts from escalating or to terminate them through a peaceful negotiation. Mediators’ roles and strategies vary with each mediator and dispute. However, notwithstanding the range of roles and strategies employed by mediators, certain variables play a uniformly central role in explaining mediation outcomes. One of these variables is the relational characteristics of the mediator.

The international mediation literature discusses two relational characteristics as significantly affecting the course of mediation: mediator impartiality and mediator interest. One group of scholars has argued that impartiality is a necessary condition for disputants to accept mediation and mediated terms (Hopmann 1996). These scholars assert that mediators must be perceived as impartial in order to be accepted and to continue to serve as mediators (Princen 1992). They must strive to promote the interests and needs of all disputants, not neglecting those of any party, because biased mediators and their proposed mediated terms are likely to be rejected (Mayer 2004). Regardless of mediators’ abilities and/or power, for mediation to be successful—these scholars argue—parties must perceive the mediators as impartial in the dispute. The Beagle Channel dispute in 1952 is pointed to as an example of the importance of impartiality; in that case Chile and Argentina rejected U.S. mediation but accepted the Vatican as their mediator (Carnevale and Arad 1996).

Other scholars have argued to the contrary, asserting that biased and/or interested mediators are as successful as those who are impartial. According to these scholars, evidence from international disputes shows that mediation participants are rational actors whose behavior is driven by their own interests. When mediators get involved in a dispute (whether they are asked to mediate the dispute or offer themselves as mediators), they seek to promote or protect their own interests while acting in this third-party capacity (Bercovitch 1996). The apparent motive for involvement is abatement of the dispute, which legitimizes the mediator’s intervention. The great deal of political, moral, and material resources that the mediator expends along with the significant risk that the mediator takes suggests that one mediates a dispute for more than just the sole purpose of abating a dispute on terms that benefit the disputants (Touval and Zartman 1985). As Thomas Princen (1992) and Saadia Touval and I. William Zartman (1985) noted, an individual’s key motive for serving as a mediator accords mostly with one’s self-interest in the dispute. Such interests include extending the mediator’s influence or protecting the mediator’s standing. In an effort to protect or extend their interest, mediators are often willing to use their resources to help two adversaries reach a

peace agreement by making a settlement more attractive, or by rewarding or punishing the parties for their cooperative or uncooperative behavior. In turn, the parties are more likely to make concessions they would not have made without positive or negative inducement from the mediator.

Examples supporting the importance of mediator interest include American mediation in the Arab–Israeli conflict, Anglo-American mediation between Italy and Yugoslavia over Trieste between 1948 and 1954, and Soviet mediation between India and Pakistan between 1965 and 1966. In all of these instances, mediators were far from impartial but still were accepted and effective (Touval and Zartman 1985).

Although the necessity of interest and impartiality in mediation is still rigorously debated, all the measures used to determine the level of interest and impartiality consider only the mediator's bilateral relations with each of the disputants. Some scholars used disputants' political ties to mediators such as S-scores¹ of alliance portfolio similarity (Signorino and Ritter 1999) to measure the level of mediator impartiality and interest. Others focused on economic relationships between disputants and mediators (Savun 2008; Gent and Shannon 2009; Melin 2011). Conflict history between mediators and disputants, democratic ties, geographical ties, and mediators' previous involvement in disputants' negotiation also have been considered as some of the valuable measures of mediator impartiality and interest (Savun 2008; Svensson 2009; Melin 2011). Although diverse variables have been used to estimate bias, current research does not consider external factors that may play a significant role in changing the relational dynamics between the mediator and disputants and, consequently, the level of the mediator's interest and impartiality.

By evaluating Syria's qualification as a mediator in the Yemen dispute, this research seeks to demonstrate how a mediator's relationship with an external actor can change the level of the mediator's impartiality and interest and, ultimately, the outcome of the mediation. While examining whether Damascus was sufficiently impartial and interested in the Yemen dispute, this study reveals that it was not merely Syria's bilateral relations with each of the disputants that determined its level of impartiality and interest. This research illustrates how Syria's relations with the Soviet Union helped Syria improve its impartiality and interest to become an effective mediator in its second mediation attempt in the Yemen dispute.

The Yemen Dispute

For decades before its unification in 1990, Yemen was divided into two sides: the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) in the north and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) in the south. In 1967, when Egypt was no longer able to aid North Yemen's republicans in their fight against Saudi-backed royalists, South Yemen gladly took Egypt's place

(Katz 1984). North Yemen's republicans, in turn, supported the South Yemenis when the former recognized the latter's newly independent government (Gause 1988). Nonetheless, this friendly relation between the two sides was short-lived.

Growing ideological differences between Sanaa of North Yemen and Aden of South Yemen appeared to be a primary cause for contentious relations between the two parties (Lee 2019). In YAR, the leftists were unpopular while the left party, the National Front, was the major political power in PDRY (Gause 1988). Sanaa was closely tied to Washington and Riyadh whereas Aden was aided by Moscow and Damascus (European Institute for Research on Mediterranean and Euro-Arab Cooperation 2017). However, mere ideological differences did not cause a rift between the two Yemens. Such differences became a cause of fighting when each party meddled into the other's domestic affairs in an attempt to change the other's ideology (Lee 2019). A series of disputes erupted between YAR and PDRY when each side aided the other's domestic rival group in efforts to overthrow each government and provided asylum for the exiled opponents of the other Yemen (Martin 1984; Gause 1988).

Following such disputes between the two Yemens, there were many attempts to unify them; yet all had fallen short of uniting Yemen. To put an end to a low-intensity border conflict between Sanaa and Aden that broke out in September 1972, the Arab League offered to mediate the dispute in October 1972, hoping to work toward unification of the Yemenis within one year (Martin 1984; Gause 1988; Tillema 1991). In spite of both Yemens' pledge to the unity plan, neither party, President Abd al-Rahman al-Iryani of Sanaa or Chairman Salim Rubayya Ali of Aden, appeared to make any effort to work toward unification one month later (Martin 1984). Although the Arab League's mediation managed to stop the fighting between the parties temporarily, the unity plan was never solidified (Lee 2019).

Another border conflict between Sanaa and Aden erupted in late February of 1979 when Aden launched a large-scale attack on Sanaa along with North Yemeni exiled groups who moved to Aden after failing to assassinate President Ali Abdallah Saleh of North Yemen and plotted the overthrow of Saleh's government (Lee 2019). In an attempt to end a week-long war, on March 2, 1979, Iraq, Syria, and Jordan hosted mediation talks. Contentious exchanges between Saleh and Abdel Fattach Ismail continued; the leaders of both Yemens accused the other of starting the war. Nonetheless, the presidents of both sides agreed to a cease-fire to go into effect on March 3, and promised to withdraw their troops from the other's territory according to special arrangements to be determined at an emergency conference of foreign ministers of the Arab League in Kuwait two days later (Howe 1979; Keesing's Contemporary Archives 1980;

Litwak 1981; Stookey 1982; Cordesman 1984; Martin 1984; Burrowes 1985; Gause 1988; Tillema 1991; Bercovitch and Jackson 1997). More detailed plans² that were devised at the foreign ministers' meeting in Kuwait signaled promising prospects for both Yemens to move toward restoring normal relations. Yet, three days after the cease-fire went into effect, Aden resumed its attack on Sanaa, and Sanaa retaliated (*Financial Times* 1979).

Another mediation attempt was made by the emir of Kuwait, Jaber al-Ahmad al-Sabah, on March 29, 1979 (Lee 2019). Despite disagreeing on a few issues in the draft constitution for a unified Yemen, both parties pledged to follow the step-by-step timeline toward unification (*New York Times* 1979a; Tingay 1979a; Stookey 1982; Cordesman 1984; Martin 1984; Tillema 1991; European Institute for Research on Mediterranean and Euro-Arab Cooperation 2017). As a gesture of goodwill, President Ismail of South Yemen proposed that Sanaa be the capital of the new unified state and Saleh its president. Ismail's proposal also aimed to earn trust from North Yemenis in the merger process (Keesing's Contemporary Archives 1980). Nevertheless, this apparently amicable relation was short-lived as South Yemen allegedly continued to aid the exiled group of Sanaa (Lee 2019) and no significant progress was made toward unification or the attainment of the other resolutions (Keesing's Contemporary Archives 1980). In late October of the same year, it was reported that both Presidents Ismail and Saleh realized it would be better to "postpone the unification until circumstances are mature for the merger" (Keesing's Contemporary Archives 1980: 30199).

However, Syria's mediation effort in December 1979 changed the course of the unity plan—Sanaa's and Aden's resolve toward unification was bolstered (Keesing's Contemporary Archives 1980; Bercovitch 2004) and "the unity talks were stepped up again in early 1980" (Keesing's Contemporary Archives 1980: 30197). Syria's first mediation attempt along with Iraq and Jordan nine months earlier resulted in a cease-fire that lasted only for three days. Syria's solo mediation in December succeeded in getting Sanaa and Aden to take a step toward the unification process by early 1980 (Keesing's Contemporary Archives 1980; Cordesman 1984). What had changed?

A number of factors can explain why the March 1979 mediation led by Iraq, Syria, and Jordan was not satisfactorily successful. One may attribute the lackluster unification process in mid-1979 to the conditions of Sanaa's domestic politics. It was speculated that Saleh saw the nine-point resolution reached between Aden and Sanaa as an opportunity to lessen North Yemen's reliance on Riyadh as well as the tribes of North Yemen (Bidwell 1983; Burrowes 1985). Although the Saudis supported the cease-fire between the two Yemens, they would never approve the establishment of a new state of Yemen by Sanaa and Aden because the

unification would diminish their influence over North Yemen (Bidwell 1983; Gause 1988). In response to Saleh's readiness to unify Yemen, the Saudis withheld the American weapons that were set to be delivered to North Yemen (Bidwell 1983; Katz 1984; Gause 1988). They also stopped sending financial aid to the Sanaa government and pressured Saleh to reverse his decision to move forward with a unified Yemen (Keesing's Contemporary Archives 1980; Gause 1988). The tribal leaders also formed a group called "Islamic Front" to oppose the unification process (Gause 1988: 42). It could be argued that these domestic activities in Sanaa distracted Saleh from his efforts on the unity plan and ultimately brought the unification process to a halt in late 1979.

In explaining why the March 1979 mediation of the border dispute between Sanaa and Aden was not as successful as the mediation the following December, this study focuses on Syria's qualification as a mediator. What changed Syria from a somewhat effective mediator in early 1979 to a truly effective mediator later that year? This study demonstrates that Syria's relations with the Soviets account for the changes from early to late 1979 in Syria's qualification as a mediator. Moscow's generous (but conditional) military and economic aid to Syria raised Syria's level of interest in the dispute. Around the same time, despite Syria's reputation as a strong supporter of Aden's policies during the border dispute, it became less biased as Sanaa and Moscow became friendly. Thanks to the increased level of interest and impartiality it exhibited, Syria appeared as an effective mediator in resolving the two Yemens' border dispute.

Mediation in March 1979 and December 1979

Syria, Iraq, and Jordan offered to mediate the border dispute between Sanaa and Aden in early March of 1979. At first, mediation appeared to be effective; both sides agreed to a cease-fire and pledged to restore normal relations with the other. Yet such agreement lasted only for three days. Syria's solo mediation in December 1979 was more successful, leading the two Yemens to move toward the unity plan in early 1980.

Syria's Interest: March 1979 and December 1979

The main objective of Syria—as well as Iraq and Jordan—in the March mediation was the unification of all Arab states against Egypt, which had made peace with Israel (Lee 2019). As a founding member of the "Rejection and Confrontation Front" that opposed Egypt's and Israel's efforts toward a peace treaty (Halliday 1990: 171), Syria sought to mobilize Arab states to bring sanctions against Egypt (Tingay 1979c). To Syria, Egypt was "enemy number one" and Israel was next (Halliday 1990: 170). In its efforts to get other Arab states to commit to sanctions against Egypt, Syria faced three obstacles: its decade-long feud

with Iraq that pulled Arab states in opposite directions; Saudi Arabia's reluctance to impose sanctions against Egypt; and the border conflict between Sanaa and Aden that not only divided the region but weakened Arab unity (Lee 2019). Syria's priority was to overcome these obstacles.

To surmount these stumbling blocks, Syria took several actions. To mend Syria's relations with Iraq, President Hafez al-Assad visited Iraq's President Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr in October 1978; the meeting went so well that both leaders began to contemplate a political and military merger of the two states (Moreau 1979; Lippman 1979b). To put pressure on the Saudis to sanction Egypt, Syria walked out of the Arab ministers' meeting in Baghdad when the Saudis refused to agree to such sanctions (Randal 1979). Syria also warned the Saudis that it would let South Yemen continue to instigate conflicts with North Yemen unless the Saudis joined other Arab states in sanctioning Egypt (Randal 1979). Lastly, Syria, along with Iraq and Jordan, offered to mediate the border dispute between Sanaa and Aden. The Yemen dispute not only created a rift between Syria and Saudi Arabia and weakened Arab unity; it also had the potential to bring non-Arab states into the region such as the United States and the Soviet Union (Lippman 1979a; Stookey 1982; Gause 1988). Fortunately for Syria, although the two Yemens received a variety of assistance from the United States and the Soviet Union, they wanted the mediation of their conflict led by one or more Arab states (Tingay 1979b).

When Syria, along with Iraq and Jordan, offered in March 1979 to mediate the border dispute between the two Yemens, its primary interest was not to mend relations between the two sides. Rather, the resolution of the dispute would be a step toward uniting the Arab states against Egypt. Although as an ally of South Yemen, Syria was concerned about Aden's security, settling differences between the two Yemens was a secondary goal. Sanaa and Aden's conflict was merely one of a number of obstacles for Syria to overcome to achieve its paramount objective.

Between March 1979 and the start of Syria's mediation in December 1979, the context in which Syria came to its stance on the Yemen dispute had changed. Due to old Baathist rivalries and mutual distrust, Syria and Iraq slowly retreated from their potential political merger. This split affected Syria in two ways. As Iraq was preparing to take up leadership in the region after Egypt's demise, Syria had hoped to be Iraq's "junior partner" (Tingay 1979c). Syria's deteriorating relations with Iraq prevented this possibility. More importantly, as a result of the declining relations, Syria's need for Soviet military assistance did not abate. Syria secretly wished to move away from the Soviets and had hoped that a political merger with Iraq would allow it to do so (Tingay 1979c). With the merger talks falling apart, Syria was forced to continue to seek Soviet military support and assistance. After Syria's President al-Assad visited the Soviet Union in early

October 1979, Syria received such aid. In addition, the Soviets forgave a \$500-million debt that Syria had incurred for military equipment (Deming et al. 1979). The Soviets provided the aid and forgave the debt despite knowing of Syria's wish to sever ties with them (Lee 2019). Syria's receipt of such aid and the Soviets' motive in providing it explain why Syria's interest in the Yemen dispute increased between March and December.

The Soviets had been searching for a partner in the Middle East that could help them expand their influence in the region (BBC Summary of World Broadcasts 1979a). Egypt had been a close Soviet ally for decades until Gamal Abdel Nasser's death in 1970, at which time then-vice president Anwar Sadat assumed the presidency. Although Sadat had been a loyal confidant of Nasser for years, upon assuming the presidency he moved away from Nasser's vision for the country. One of the radical decisions Sadat made was to expel the Soviet advisors from Egypt, choosing to ally with the United States instead (Rabinovich 2011). The Soviets knew that Washington had tried to rally Syria to its side as well and Moscow critically needed reliable Middle East allies.

Frustrated with the lack of assistance from its ally Saudi Arabia, North Yemen turned to the Soviet Union for help during the 1979 conflict (Bidwell 1983; Sunayama 2007). Frustrated with its failed political merger with Iraq, Syria also sought Soviet military assistance in late 1979. The Soviets saw the perfect opportunity to finally execute their long-held plan of expanding their influence in the Middle East and viewed mediating the Yemen dispute as one way to do so. South Yemen was a Soviet ally and a communist state (*New York Times* 1979b); the Soviets aided North Yemen militarily. However, the Soviets did not want to provoke the United States (which recently had extended its five-year economic agreement with the Saudis), so they took a circuitous route to expanding their influence—one that did not inflame Washington (Lee 2019). In return for aiding Syria, the Soviet Union hoped that Syria would mediate the Yemen dispute on its behalf. Both Syria and the Soviet Union recognized that Soviet aid to Syria was not a generous gesture that merely aimed to ease Syria's hardship. Providing and receiving aid were calculated moves that each party took to advance its own interest. Syria's receipt of Soviet military and financial aid led directly to Syria's increased interest in the Yemen dispute; its motivation for success in the December 1979 mediation was pure self-interest. The only way for Syria to obtain needed Soviet aid was to mediate the dispute.

Syria's Impartiality: March 1979 and December 1979

In its March mediation, Syria sought to unite all of the Arab states—including North Yemen and South Yemen—against Egypt. Yet, Syria was partial toward South Yemen, its close ally; both were close Soviet allies and shared similar political ideologies (Lee 2019). Syria supported South

Yemen's left party, the National Front, which was accused of assisting North Yemen's exiles by attempting to overthrow Saleh's regime (Stookey 1982; Martin 1984). Because of their relationship, Syria was able to induce concessions from South Yemen in the March mediation, notwithstanding the fact that President Ismail was known for refusing to make concessions in return for development aid (Apple 1979; Burrowes 1985; Lee 2019). North Yemen was aware that Syria favored its opponent. However, North Yemen still participated in the March mediation because although two of the three mediators—Syria and Iraq—were biased toward Aden, the mediation was led by Jordan, which favored Sanaa (Lee 2019).

As noted above, by December 1979, North Yemen and Syria were both on friendly terms with the Soviet Union, having turned to Moscow for financial and military assistance. Although Syria and North Yemen did not share similar political ideologies, the Soviets' request that Syria mediate the Yemen dispute on its behalf ensured Syria's impartiality. Syria's objective in its December mediation was to please the Soviets, not to advantage one party over another.

As illustrated by Table One, the mediation led by Syria, Iraq, and Jordan in March 1979 resulted only in a three-day cease-fire, while Syria's solo mediation in December 1979 brought about a full peaceful settlement between the two Yemens. This study demonstrates that such outcomes were determined by the interests of a party external to the mediation—the Soviet Union—which through its involvement altered the levels of the mediator's interest and impartiality. The ultimate goal of the March mediation was to unify the Arab states in imposing harsh economic sanctions against Egypt. In December, however, Syria's interest in the Yemen dispute was one of pure self-interest. Three mediators in the March mediation favored one or the other Yemen. In the December mediation, in spite of its shared political ideology with South Yemen, Syria was mostly impartial toward both Yemens as both parties were allies of the Soviet Union, from whom all parties in the mediation received military and financial assistance.

Discussion

In a mediation conducted in March 1979 to resolve a border dispute between the Yemen Arab Republic and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, the combined efforts of Iraq, Syria, and Jordan led to a cease-fire that lasted only three days. Another mediation attempt was made by Kuwait, which helped the two states reach a partial peace agreement in late March; yet neither party made any meaningful progress toward a unified Yemen and talks were suspended. However, Syria's solo mediation in December 1979 led to a full peaceful settlement between the two adversaries and persuaded them to begin discussions on Yemen unity. Building off the current literature that emphasizes the crucial role

Table One
Mediator Interest and Impartiality in March, 1979 and December, 1979

Mediation	Mediators	Interest	Impartiality	Outcome
March 1979	Syria Jordan	Unifying all Arab states against Egypt	Favored South Yemen Favored North Yemen	Three-day cease-fire
December 1979	Syria Behind the scene: the Soviet Union	Maintaining good relations with the Soviet Union and obtaining Soviet military and financial assistance Using Syria to expand its influence in the Middle East	Favored South Yemen Less biased as North Yemen became a Soviet ally Allied with all participants in the mediation	Peace agreement

mediator impartiality and interest play in successful mediations, this research investigated the changes in Syria's qualification as a mediator between March and December.

In early March of 1979, Syria, as one member of the three-member mediation team, favored South Yemen, with which it shared similar political ideologies. Although Syria's bias was compensated by Jordan's close ties with North Yemen, thus allowing the March 1979 mediation to take place, the resulting cease-fire lasted only three days. By the December mediation, Syria's relationship with North Yemen had become significantly more friendly. Despite its partiality toward South Yemen as another Middle East state allied with the Soviet Union, Syria was considered more impartial in the second mediation between the Yemens. Syria could help Sanaa and Aden reach a full settlement in December 1979, which revived the two parties' talks on unifying the two Yemens in early 1980.

In March 1979, Syria's interest in mediating the Yemen dispute was the unification of all Arab states against Egypt, which was exploring peace with Israel; the border dispute between the two Yemens hindered Syria's efforts. By December 1979, Syria's self-interest in the Yemen dispute grew and it was more invested in peace between the Yemens. Syria desperately needed military and financial assistance from the Soviet Union following the failure of its planned merger with Iraq and the Soviets conditioned such aid on Syria's willingness to mediate the Yemen dispute.

This case sheds light on how an external actor can alter the relations among all mediation participants. Syria's relations with the Soviets, not its bilateral relations with Aden and Sanaa, altered its level of impartiality and interest in the dispute. All participants in the mediation—Syria and the two Yemens—were receiving Soviet military and economic aid by late 1979. Although Syria was partial to South Yemen based on political ideology in early 1979, it became less partial as Moscow provided Sanaa with arms and North Yemen's relations with the Soviets improved. In other words, Syria became friendly toward Sanaa when Sanaa became a Soviet ally. In December 1979, Syria's stake in resolving the dispute heightened as its political and economic survival was in the hands of the Soviets. The Soviets increased Syria's interest and impartiality in the mediation, which, as a result, brought about a full peaceful settlement and launched unity talks between the two Yemens. In December 1979, Syria became more interested in the fate of the Yemen border dispute because Soviet aid, and thus its national security, was at stake.

Conclusion

The events of this case highlight the importance of considering factors other than a mediator's bilateral relations with the disputants in accounting for the mediator's impartiality and interest. External factors may

change the relational dynamics between the mediator and disputants and, thus, alter the mediator's qualifications to resolve a dispute. Yet, to estimate the level of mediators' impartiality and interest, the current mediation research uses a variety of measures—such as mediators' political, economic, and historical ties to disputants—and disregards external factors. Measuring the levels of Syria's impartiality and interest by its political, economic, and historical ties to both Yemens does not explain the difference in outcomes of the March mediations and the December mediations; such factors were constant in the intervening time. This study demonstrates how an external actor—the Soviets—increased the level of Syria's impartiality and interest in the Yemen dispute and in doing so helped Syria successfully mediate the conflict.

NOTES

1. After positioning two states in the policy space of one or multiple dimensions (issues) according to their policy positions, the S-score measures how close together or far apart the two states are positioned in the policy space and normalizes that figure so that the values of the S-score fall between -1 and 1 (Signorino and Ritter 1999).

2. In a ten-hour debate, the foreign ministers agreed upon a nine-point resolution that "(1) approved the ceasefire brought about through joint Iraqi, Syrian and Jordanian mediation; (2) demanded the withdrawal of the armed forces of both Yemens within 10 days; (3) called for an end to the propaganda war between the two countries; and (4) demanded the re-establishment of trading and other relations and free passage between the two parties involved" (Keesing's Contemporary Archives 1980: 30197).

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