

Water conflict or water cooperation?

A discursive understanding of water conflict and cooperation in Israel and Palestine

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The water conflict between Israel and Palestine is severe, although not violent, and deeply embedded into the confrontative structures of the wider Israeli-Palestinian conflict. At the same time, there are efforts to cooperate over shared water resources between Israeli and Palestinian communities, such as the Good Water Neighbours (GWN) project. Existing theories of socio-environmental conflict and cooperation fail to explain the simultaneity of cooperative and conflictive interactions under similar political, economic, historical, geographic and ecological circumstances. Based on previous works in constructivist peace and conflict research as well as discourse theory, we develop a discursive understanding of water conflict and cooperation which solves this puzzle. We then go on to test the validity of this approach by comparing the hegemonic discourses at the national level in both societies with the dominant discourse among the GWN activists. Our main result is that the water cooperation within the GWN project is indeed embedded into overwhelmingly cooperation-prone discourses, while the international water conflict between Israel and Palestine is facilitated by confrontative discourses.

1 Introduction

The non-violent, but still severe water conflict between Israel and Palestine is driven by disputes over the distribution of water from shared aquifers¹ and the Jordan River (Zeitoun, 2008), over water pollution originating in the West Bank and Israel (Fischhendler et al., 2011), and over permission for the construction and maintenance of water infrastructure in the occupied West Bank (Selby, 2013). Water is one of the topics which has proven very contentious in past Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and has always been postponed to the final status talks (Lautze et al., 2005). The water conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians is embedded into and closely connected to the dynamics of the wider Israeli-Palestinian conflict which has been going on for almost a century (Moore and Guy, 2012). Due to this deep interconnectedness with the overall conflict, and the in-group/out-group structures embedded in it, the dominant understanding of the water issue on both sides is that of a zero-sum game, which is illustrated in the respective hegemonic water discourses. However, there also is cooperation on the water issue, which is all the more remarkable within a political context that is marked by mutual suspicion and hostility. For instance, Israeli and Palestinian communities cooperate over shared water resources under

¹ An aquifer is an underground rock or sand layer that stores and channels water.

the Good Water Neighbours (GWN) projects (see below). They are part of a counter movement which has been developing since the Oslo talks and which focuses on the cooperative potential of joint water management and its possible role for (environmental) peacebuilding.

How can this occurrence of water cooperation in a context that is largely marked by inter-group (water) conflict be explained? The environmental peacebuilding perspective argues that shared environmental challenges, such as the degradation of cross-border water resources, can stimulate cooperation and thus improve the relations between hostile groups (Conca and Dabelko, 2002). This is the case because environmental problems affecting several groups either provide material incentives (e.g. benefits created through coordinated water management) to engage in cooperative behavior, or because they produce a 'community of sufferers' (Fritz, 1996: 28) with a higher level of empathy and solidarity towards each other (Lejano, 2006). While this might hold true for the movements promoting water cooperation (such as GWN), the environmental peacebuilding perspective cannot explain why under very similar political, economic, historical, geographic and hydrological circumstances, water conflict rather than cooperation prevails on the international level between Israel and Palestine.

This puzzle can be solved through the environmental conflict perspective. It claims that a scarcity of renewable natural resources, such as water, increases the risk for (violent) conflict between social groups over this resource (e.g. Homer-Dixon, 1999). This is especially the case if the relations between the respective groups are characterized by pre-existing political or cultural tensions, unequal access to the resources under question and/or the political marginalization of one group (Carius et al., 2006: 36-40; Barnett and Adger, 2007). All this certainly holds true for the Israeli-Palestinian water conflict, but again the question remains why some local communities cooperate over water issues within a quite similar context?

This article provides a new perspective that helps to explain the simultaneity of water conflict and water cooperation between Israel and Palestine, and thus, by extension, the occurrence of socio-environmental conflict and cooperation more generally. A recent wave of studies utilizing constructivist approaches has highlighted the relevance of identities (Green, 2010), ethnic stereotypes (Wittayapak, 2008), different interpretations of the extent and causes of environmental degradation (Murtinho et al., 2013), securitization processes (Stetter et al., 2011; Fröhlich, 2012) and legitimacy constructions (Horowitz, 2009) for understanding socio-environmental conflict and cooperation. We draw on the insights gained by these approaches as well as on discourse theory and constructivist peace and conflict research in order to develop a discursive understanding of socio-environmental conflict and cooperation. The main supposition of this approach is that the decisive factor for the occurrence and development of socio-

environmental conflict or cooperation is not an objectively perceivable ecological or social reality, but rather how interests are constructed by the hegemonic discourses of the respective groups.

After introducing our theoretical framework in the following section, the validity of this approach in explaining water conflict and cooperation is tested. First, we will depict the hegemonic water discourses in Israel and Palestine and explain how they facilitate confrontative behavior. Then, we analyze the discourse of a movement which favors Israeli-Palestinian water cooperation over conflict, namely the GWN project. Our conclusion is that analyzing the hegemonic discourse structures of the respective groups is indeed a precondition for understanding why socio-environmental conflict or cooperation occur in identical socio-political settings.

2 A discursive understanding of socio-environmental conflicts

In this article, we draw on the Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse (SKAD) as developed by Reiner Keller (Keller, 2011b). This framework was chosen since it combines the strengths of the Foucaultian discourse analytic approach with the insights of the sociology of knowledge in the tradition of Berger/Luckmann (Keller, 2011b). In addition, Keller (2013) provides explicit definitions for his key concepts as well as a comprehensive set of methodological tools and criteria, something which is not the case for all discourse approaches in peace and conflict studies (e.g. Milliken, 1999).

Keller (2011a: 48) defines ‘discourses as performative statement practices which constitute reality orders and also produce power effects in a conflict-ridden network of social actors.’ This is to say, a discourse is a set of rules about what is accepted as true and becomes manifest in various concrete speech acts, texts, images and symbols (the production of which is conceived of as a form of human action). Discourses define what is sayable and what is claimed wrong or is not considered at all in a given situation and (historical) moment; as Jäger (2004) put it, a discourse is the flow of social knowledge through time. This drives the conclusion that ‘everything we perceive, experience, sense is mediated through socially constructed and typified knowledge’ (Keller, 2013: 61) – in other words, through discourse. Discourses thus execute significant power effects, since they structure (but not determine) social actors’ perceptions and interpretations of reality as well as the actions (or practices) emerging from these interpretations and the manifest structures that are the results of these actions (dispositifs).

Practices and dispositifs, in turn, reproduce the very discourse they are originating from. This understanding of a reciprocal connection between discourses and actors/actions implies a conception of discourse as dynamic and persistent at the same time. Discourses are dynamic because they must be reproduced by human actors who own the capacity to reflect, resist and modify the meanings provided through specific discourses. At the same time, discourses are

persistent, since human action is enabled and structured by already existing discourses, thus implying a certain kind of reproduction of the hegemonic discursive structures. A discourse is termed hegemonic if its core statements are accepted as true by a large majority of the members of a certain social group (Keller, 2011a).

This understanding of discourse and the discursive construction of reality can be connected to constructivist conflict theory. Dietz et al. (2006: 565), for instance, write:

‘we observe the existence of a conflict when an actor constructs his or her [...] interests in such a way that these cannot be made compatible with the [...] interest of another actor.

Conflict is therefore discursively constructed.’

In line with this definition, we understand every conflict as driven by mutually incompatible interests. But interests are neither primordial nor rational; instead, they emerge from the perceptions and interpretations of the respective groups (Hansen, 2006; Jabri, 1996), which are constructed by the hegemonic discourses. Especially the discursive construction of collective identities and situation assessments is relevant for how social groups define their interests. Identities encompass ‘the formal and informal rules that define group membership [...], the goals that are shared by the members of a group’ and relational comparisons with other identity groups (Abdelal et al., 2006: 696). In short, collective identities define how the respective groups understand themselves in relation to others and how they define their interests (Buckley-Zistel, 2006; Morozov and Rumelili, 2012). Thus, collective identities are integral to the onset and reproduction of conflict (Jabri, 1996: 5; Fröhlich, 2010: 38-40).

However, interests are also shaped by situation assessments, which define how a group perceives its social and material environment (e.g. Is there degradation of water resources, and if so, who is responsible for it? Which capabilities can be mobilized by the respective groups?). The concept of securitization has proven especially helpful in this context. A securitization exists if a valued reference object (e.g. national sovereignty) is portrayed as existentially threatened, leading to the acceptance of measures which are usually considered as inappropriate or exaggerated, e.g. the use of violence (Stritzel, 2007; Buzan et al., 1998: 21-47).

Cooperation exists ‘when one or more parties engage in jointly coordinated actions with other actors to secure shared’ interests (Ravnborg et al., 2012: 349). Again, we understand interests as shaped by identities and situation assessments. We see cooperation as a social continuity, since cooperative – like conflictive – behavior is enabled and shaped by hegemonic discourses (Jabri, 1996; Kaufman, 2006), which evolve slowly over time and hardly undergo dramatic changes in short periods.² As a consequence, identities and situation assessments cannot easily be

² This is not to deny that often a precipitating event is necessary for discourses to become manifest in concrete conflictive or cooperative actions (Hislope, 2007: 150-154).

manipulated by elites, since they ‘have to be connected, in credible ways, to people’s personal experiences’ (Eriksen, 2001: 61), which are structured by already existing discourses.

The transformation of a conflictive into a cooperative discourse is possible whenever the interests of the parties involved are constructed as mutually compatible by the hegemonic discourses of the respective groups. This is the case when the inclusion/exclusion boundary between in-group and out-group is blurred, thereby feeding a counter-discourse which deconstructs and de-legitimizes hitherto valid myths of unity, duty and conformity (Jabri, 1996: 7). However, it also remains possible that groups continue to view each other in mutually exclusive terms, but cooperate on an ad-hoc basis, since their discursively constructed situation assessments leads them to the conclusion that they have a shared interest regarding a certain issue.

3 The Israeli–Palestinian water conflict and its discursive foundations

The Israeli-Palestinian water conflict is based on the region’s geographical, climatic, hydro(geo)logical and demographic realities. These are factual circumstances; however, the term ‘water’ not only stands for the chemical element H₂O and seemingly ‘objective’ data, but also for countless social, material and symbolic mediation processes, for the resource’s different functions and the stakeholder interests connected to them (Fröhlich, 2010; Mehta, 2005).

In terms of freshwater, Israel and the Palestinian Territories depend mostly on the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan basin, which consists of the river Jordan, its sources and tributaries as well as a number of aquifers. The basin is international: Banyas and Hasbani, two of the Jordan river’s sources, rise outside of the green line, i.e. Israel’s pre-1967 borders. Another important tributary to the Jordan river is the Yarmuk, which originates in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The river itself is – in theory – shared between Jordan, Israel, Syria and the Palestinians, but up to today, the Palestinians have no access to the river whatsoever. The region’s climate is arid to semi-arid, with frequent and – due to global warming (Feitelson et al., 2012) – increasing droughts. The biggest subterranean water reservoirs are the coastal and the mountain aquifer with 240 and 679 million cubic meters per year respectively (Dombrowsky, 1998: 94).

Ever since the systematic Jewish immigration into Palestine began in the late 19th century, and up until the 1980s, water continuously gained economic and political relevance for the *yishuv* – the pre-state Jewish community in Palestine – as well as for Israel. Similarly, control over water is perceived by many Palestinians as crucial for a viable Palestinian state as well as for improved living and economic conditions in Palestine. It was one of the main outcomes of the Six-Day-War of 1967 that Israel brought 80% of the regional water resources under its control; this situation remains unchanged to this day. The Oslo talks of the 1990s established the so-called

Joint Water Committees, which are strongly criticized (especially by the Palestinian side) nowadays and brought very little progress in this respect (Selby 2013).

The hegemonic water discourses in Palestine and Israel have developed in the context of this stark political asymmetry, as have the fundamentally different perceptions of water scarcity which dominate them respectively.

3.1 Palestine³

In the Palestinian hegemonic discourse, the existing natural water resources are believed to be sufficient at least for a major improvement of the Palestinian standard of living (which is not to deny the general limits of water availability in an area with an arid to semi-arid climate and a rapidly growing population). The Israeli control over most of the water sources as well as Israel's capacity to veto water infrastructure projects in the JWC is seen as the major cause of water availability problems in the West Bank. In the Palestinian perception, the experienced water scarcity is entirely politically induced. Israeli control over large parts of the regional water resources is considered as absolute and as an existential threat to Palestinian society and hence securitized in the hegemonic discourse. The insufficient access to the natural water resources of the West Bank and the Gaza strip (prior to the disengagement) is, according to this argument, a threat to the viability of a Palestinian state.

This rather confrontative situation assessment is connected to similarly conflictive identity constructions in the hegemonic Palestinian discourse. Water is perceived as important primarily as an attribute of a territory that is considered rightfully Palestinian and thus crucial for a Palestinian state and identity, but has been under Israeli control since 1967. Consequentially, the Israeli out-group is at least implicitly portrayed as selfish and unfair, since it is unwilling to grant the Palestinians the amount of water that they not only rightfully own, but also need to keep their standard of living and to enable at least moderate economic growth. These hegemonic discourse structures reflect a dominant mentality of siege which mirrors the Israeli such mentality (see below). One manifestation thereof is the myth (or identity) of the *fellah*, who works and sustains his land even in the worst of circumstances – and needs water to do that.

These hegemonic discourse structures influence practically all patterns in Palestinian water discourse. There certainly are more pragmatic voices that criticize Palestinian water management and thus acknowledge the in-group's responsibility for the water scarcity Palestine experiences. But the hegemonic discursive pattern is to construct water availability as crucial for the Palestinian identity and future state, to securitize Israeli control over the majority of the natural water resources and to blame the out-group for being solely responsible for water shortages in

³ This chapter is based on Fröhlich (2010; 2012).

the Palestinian territories. The Palestinian hegemonic water discourse is still quite confrontative vis-à-vis Israel and has not received any major de-securitization impulses as yet.

3.2 Israel⁴

In the Israeli hegemonic discourse, water is deeply interwoven with agriculture, the creation of a Jewish state and the Israeli identity. The roots of water's ideological meaning for Israel lie in political Zionism, which is shaping the political decisions of the State of Israel until this very day (Lipchin, 2007). Water had a central role in Zionism, since the movement's goal – the creation of a Jewish state – could not be achieved without sufficient water resources. The link between the goal of a state territory on biblically promised land and its settlement by Jews was agriculture. On the one hand, agriculture made it possible to 'take the land into possession' in the literal sense. On the other, Jewish immigrants could, by working with the land and owning it, shed their European, Western, urban image and substitute it through a new identity: that of the *chalutz*, the pioneer, who helps to build a Jewish state and thus contributes to the redemption of the 'chosen people'. However, both for the immediate survival of the numerous immigrants and for agriculture, a secure supply of fresh water was indispensable. Thus, both settlement and agriculture aided the fact that water as a resource melted together with the 'Zionist[...] ethos of land, pioneer heroics, and national salvation' (Rouyer, 1996: 30). Zionism rooted the idea of 'settling the land' and 'making the desert bloom' as some of the Jewish state's central concerns in Jewish collective memory. A sufficient water supply thus became a value in and of itself, a symbolic practice and a vital condition for Jewish-Israeli identity.

This central role of water for the Israeli identity is complemented by a quite confrontative assessment of the water situation. The natural water resources in the Jordan basin are considered too scarce to keep the current standard of living of the region's population, let alone improve it. Natural water scarcity is perceived to be absolute. Consequentially, to grant the Palestinians more water rights (that is, to allocate control over more water resources to the Palestinians) remains unsayable in the hegemonic discourse. The holocaust and the repeated threats by Arab neighbors to 'drive Israel into the sea' contributed to the development of a security discourse which conceived the *yishuv* as inherently threatened from very early on. The discursive securitization of diverse threats developed into one of the most powerful discursive structures in the Israeli societal discourse; security has become a cultural master symbol. Generally speaking, a mentality has emerged which cultivates a perpetual state of siege (Bar-Tal, 1998: 34). The water discourse has been taken over by this securitization trend. Growing immigration, developing water scarcity, the myth of the *chalutz* and discursive incidents such as the British White Paper of 1939 or efforts

⁴ This chapter is based on Fröhlich (2010; 2012).

by the Arab states to cut off the tributaries to the Israeli part of the river Jordan (Amery, 2002) have contributed to this.

After the six-day-war in 1967, a certain de-securitization of the resource began, which was enhanced by technical progress, especially the development of affordable desalination technologies in the 1990s, and a stronger focus on issues of water quality (Fischhendler et al., 2011). In Israeli hegemonic discourse, the peace agreements between Israel and Jordan and the Palestinian Authority are generally perceived as a successful solution to the water conflict. Water, according to this argument, has lost large parts of its emotional and ideological charge and has thus been de-securitized considerably. However, while the Oslo accords did establish some kind of cooperative structure between the different stakeholders, it did very little to alleviate the overall asymmetry between Israelis and Palestinians with regard to the natural water resources (Selby 2013). Attempts to achieve more tangible water equality, for instance by conferring parts of the mountain aquifer onto Palestinian control or allowing Palestinians to unilaterally implement water infrastructure projects in the West Bank, remain unsayable and are routinely subjected to what we call a re-securitization: Regardless of the afore-mentioned de-securitization impulses, hegemonic discourse structures still tie back into the much older, persistent securitizing discourse structures, which can be easily activated.

4 Israeli-Palestinian water cooperation: the Good Water Neighbours project and discourse

4.1 The Good Water Neighbours project

The Good Water Neighbours (GWN) project was initiated by Friends of the Earth Middle East (FoEME) in 2001 with the goal to stimulate local water cooperation between Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian communities. This cooperation aims at contributing to the conservation and improvement of local, cross-border water resources and initiating contact and collaboration between people from hostile societies, thus increasing mutual trust and understanding (Harari and Roseman, 2008). By 2013, 27 communities work with each other under the umbrella of GWN, including nine from Israel, eight from the West Bank, one from the Gaza Strip and nine from Jordan (FoEME, 2012). In this study, we focus on cooperation between communities from Israel and the West Bank.

By the time of writing, cooperation in water resource management has not been achieved by any of the Israeli-Palestinian community pairs due to administrative obstacles and lack of political support. However, common activities on issues as diverse as water-related education and awareness raising, the development of cross-border conservation areas, the initiation of water infrastructure projects benefiting both sides, or the prevention of construction works in

ecologically and hydrologically sensitive areas have been undertaken (FoEME, 2007; Kramer, 2008). The hindrance of the construction of the separation wall around Battir, agreement between Baqa al Gharbia and Baqa al Shrakia to use the new sewage treatment plant in Gharbia jointly, and a stop of the regular flow of sewage from the Israeli settlement Beitar Elite to the fields of Wadi Fuqin are among the most visible outcomes of the GWN project (FoEME, 2007; Frehse, 2013).

But why are the people engaged with the GWN project showing such cooperative behavior and low willingness to engage in water conflict compared to the national-level Israeli-Palestinian water interaction? If the discursive understanding of socio-environmental conflict and cooperation outlined above is valid, we should be able to explain this by significant differences between the hegemonic national discourses on both sides and the dominant GWN discourse. This discourse will be analyzed and contrasted with the national Israeli and Palestinian water discourses in the following sections.

4.2 Methodology

In order to create the corpus for the discourse analysis, we first collected reports, documents and press releases available on the GWN website. In addition, we conducted 38 semi-structured interviews with 44 activists involved into the GWN project, either as professional staff, as volunteers, or as supporters from the local bureaucracy. Since we wanted to keep the sample as representative as possible an almost equal number of Israeli (25) and Palestinian (19) activists from five different community-pairs and the national GWN offices in Bethlehem and Tel Aviv was interviewed. In order to single out the influence of discourses, we used the diverse case technique (Gerring, 2007: 89-99) when selecting the five community-pairs, i.e. we conducted interviews in communities with great differences in location, size, population structure, history, political affiliation and economic structure. Figure 1 provides an overview of the locations and numbers of the interviews conducted. Communities represented by the same symbol are cooperating with each other (the national offices are marked by a circle).



Figure 1: Locations of the Interviews with GWN Activists

When analyzing the material, we largely followed the suggestions made by Keller (2013) and complemented them with elements of the Grounded Theory procedure (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). We went back and forth between examining the structure of the corpus in order to get an overview as well as to interlink the various parts of the data (macro-analysis), and intensively analyzing particularly representative text passages (micro-analyses) (Keller, 2013: 89-112; Jäger, 2004: 171-196). The selection of material for the micro-analyses was guided by the previous macro-analyses and by the principles of maximal and minimal contrasting (Keller, 2013: 129f.). For both the macro- and the micro-analyses, we utilized the procedures of open, axial and selective coding (Böhm, 2012; Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 101-115) in order to carve out the

interpretative repertoire of the GWN discourse (Keller, 2011b: 240-252). Since we conducted parts of the discourse analysis before and during the field research, we were able to apply the idea of theoretical sampling (Corbin and Strauss, 2008: 143-157), meaning that the interview questions and document sighting priorities were adjusted to hypotheses and blind spots which emerged during the preceding (and preliminary) analysis.

The analysis of the GWN discourse was considered saturated when several categories (or codes) relevant for the research question were (a) identified, (b) developed in terms of their relevant characteristics and dimensions, and (c) related to each other (Corbin and Strauss, 2008: 148f.). Finally, we shared the preliminary results of the discourse analysis with our interview partners, asked them for feedback ('member check') and carefully reviewed our analysis in case of disagreement (Steinke, 2012: 320).

4.3 Results

The GWN activists interviewed share a common discourse, although some differences between an Israeli and a Palestinian version can be detected. In this section, this GWN discourse is described along seven categories that emerged as especially relevant during the discourse analysis, namely: relevance of water, water problems, water situation, solution for water problems, out- and in-group images, governments and politics, and local support, resistance and knowledge.

Relevance of water:

Just as the hegemonic national water discourses, the GWN discourse emphasizes the importance of water and thus attributes a high symbolic relevance to the resource. However, the reasons for this high relevance are different. Within the hegemonic national discourses, water is considered important due to its connections either to Zionism or to a viable state and the *fellah* myth. These references are mutually exclusive, contradictive, and eventually confrontative. This stands in sharp contrast to the GWN discourse. Here, water is first and foremost framed as a means to sustain life in general and human life in particular:

'The existence of water on the Earth's surface provides our entire world with the most precious gift of all: life. Water is the ingredient that made possible the explosion of life on our planet, both in the sea and on land.' (Watercare, 2004: 4)

Within the Palestinian GWN discourse, water is in addition described as crucial for sustaining the concrete, often agricultural livelihoods of the people in the region. Within the Israeli GWN discourse, water is also described as an important part of a healthy and livable environment. So despite some differences, all three dimensions of the relevance of water as constructed in the GWN discourse (enabling life, securing livelihoods, raising the

quality of life) are clearly non-exclusive since they refer to (benefits for) all inhabitants of the region, regardless their political affiliation or nationality. In this respect, the GWN discourse is considerably less confrontative than the respective national level discourses.

Water problems:

The hegemonic Palestinian water discourse focuses overwhelmingly on problems of water quantity, while in Israel, an essential concern about sufficient water availability is combined with high (and growing) attention to water quality issues. In the GWN discourse, issues of water quantity and quality are highlighted as well (although Israeli GWN activists tend to emphasize water quality and Palestinian activists water quantity issues). There is agreement that Israelis are facing no water availability problems at the moment, but are threatened by the pollution of cross-border streams and the mountain aquifer. Palestinians are portrayed by the GWN discourse as struck by the same, but more severe problems of water quality and in addition by alarmingly low water availability. The inclusion of water quality concerns into the set of relevant issues broadens the range of topics available for discussion, and thus facilitates cooperation, especially since water quality issues can more easily be framed as a positive-sum game.

When it comes to the reasons for the existing water problems, the GWN discourse first refers to a bundle of geographical and demographic factors (e.g. arid climate, growing population), which is largely in line with the national hegemonic discourses. Water resources are also portrayed as 'highly vulnerable to pollution' (Tagar and Qumsieh, 2006: 3). But in addition, Israeli and Palestinian GWN activists agree that Israeli policies are responsible for water problems. The insufficient water availability in the West Bank is largely described as a function of the Israeli control over water resources, the unwillingness of the Israeli government to share the water equally and Israeli restrictions on water projects in the West Bank. In the words of an Israeli GWN activist:

'Then, unfortunately, we had 1967 another war. And this time, Israel occupied, or take, took over the Westbank, and occupied. And since then, Israeli had no, no intention of letting the Palestinian really survive in a proper, decent way [...] To get the pump to a village, to pump water, it will be a procedure of paper work of half a year, or a year, and now the couple of years before they let you do it.' (interview 16)

The Israeli government is also held responsible for the water quality problems originating in the West Bank. As a Palestinian GWN activist states:

'In the Westbank, yes, we have a, problems with, especially with the springs inside the villages. There is deterioration, there is the pollution, mainly because of the lack of sewage systems [...] All these sanitation projects require Israeli approval. And in many cases, we

have donors willing to put money, we have the budgets, but we lack the Israeli permit to proceed ahead with these projects.’ (interview 13)

However, it is important to mention an important difference between the Israeli and Palestinian GWN discourses here. Palestinian GWN activists describe the natural scarcity of water and especially Israeli policies as the main sources of water problems in the West Bank. Consequentially, and in line with the hegemonic discourse on the national level, the responsibility of any Palestinian group or institution for the scarcity or pollution of water in the West Bank is denied. Within the Israeli GWN discourse, by contrast, Israel is described as being better off in terms of water not only because it utilizes water resources from the West Bank, but also because of its high administrative, organizational and technological capabilities:

‘And the, the good thing about it, Israel, is: We always knew how to use the money. They [the first Jews migrating to Israel] were pioneers in the sense that they would not accumulate in their own pocket [...] And as a result, we managed to get our water, among other things, our water system probably one of the most developed in the world’ (interview 16)

It can be assumed that the shared understanding of Israeli government policies as responsible for water problems in the region, and especially in the West Bank, facilitates cooperation within the GWN project. However, disagreement regarding the importance of technological and administrative causes of water problems has the potential to hamper cooperation between GWN activists.

Water situation:

Although an asymmetry in water-related problems (and capabilities) is recognized, the GWN discourse is characterized by the diagnosis of strong water interdependence between Israelis and Palestinians. This is especially true with regard to the mountain aquifer. An Israeli GWN activist was quite explicit about this when reporting about the benefits of establishing a sewage treatment system in the West Bethlehem region:

‘Because currently, this village, like all the, the other villages, they are actually polluting their own water [...] But the Israeli mayors will also want that the sewage issue will be dealt with, because Israel also drinks from that same water. So, I think all of our work, the strength of our work, we are identifying self-interest [...] And we are identifying that self-interest in a, in a manner that speaks to mutual gain.’ (interview 12)

The identification of water interdependence, self-interests and mutual gains in combination with the depiction of water resources as naturally scarce and vulnerable provides strong argumentative support for water cooperation. This support is largely absent in the hegemonic discourses on both sides, which portray water interaction largely as a zero-sum game, thus denying the possibility of mutual gains.

Solution for water problems:

When it comes to the question as to how the water problems in the region can be solved, the GWN discourse favors a solution based on two principles. First, Palestinian water rights have to be acknowledged and regional water resources should be shared in a more equal way. Second, following the ideas of strong water interdependence, water as the object of a positive-sum game and lack of coordination as a possible source of water problems, a transnational integration of water resource management is promoted. This management is envisaged to be carried out by a bi- or trilateral⁵ water commission in which all parties would have the same rights and duties. As a contrast to the current Israeli-Palestinian Joint Water Committee, the commission would be responsible for all, or at least for all transboundary water resources in the region.

This desire to share water resources more fairly and to manage them as integratively as possible clearly provides a positive vision that is highly supportive of cooperative behavior. It also provides a clear contrast to the hegemonic national water discourses on both sides which clash over the recognition of Palestinian water rights and are more concerned with the allocation (and, in Israel: quality) rather than with the common management of water resources.

Identities and out-group images:

Within the Israeli GWN discourse, Palestinians are mostly described in positive and empathic terms. They are usually not referred to primarily as Palestinians, but as neighbors and fellow humans. Sometimes, the boundaries between both identities are even blurred symbolically, for instance when Israelis and Palestinians are said to be ‘all son of the earth’ (interview 9). Following this logic, many of the Israeli government’s measures which complicate the lives of Palestinians from the West Bank, such as the system of checkpoints, the construction of the wall or the lack of permits to work in Israel, are criticized.

But Palestine is also portrayed as a place of corruption, clientelism, lack of work ethos, and at times even of insecurity. This insecurity is described as being caused by extremists who resist any kind of Israeli-Palestinian cooperation. A good example of these aspects of the Israeli GWN discourse is provided by the following quote:

‘So, the Palestinians have a very difficult, have a very big difficulty to operate construction plant for sewage, sewage construction plant. They do not have the, the culture for this, the habit for this, they do not have the how to, to collect taxes to maintain the, the projects. And they do not have the, the motivation to do it.’ (interview 29)

⁵ Most GWN activists advocate an integrated management of the water resources of Israel, Palestine and Jordan.

Another aspect of the Israeli GWN discourse is the description of Palestine as an underdeveloped country:

‘Yah, and they are less developed economically. So, you know the, all the dealing with environmental issues is parallel to economic situation. As much as your situation is good, you, you are free to deal with the environmental things.’ (interview 6)

The meaning of this development frame is ambiguous. On the one hand, it constitutes another distinction (‘developed-underdeveloped’) which constructs Israelis as superior to Palestinians. On the other hand, it implies that the water management problems observed cannot be read as an indicator for a supposedly negative Palestinian character trait. Rather, these problems are depicted as typical for poor countries which either lack capabilities or opportunity to improve their water situation.

The Palestinian GWN discourse is characterized by a clear-cut division of the Israeli out-group. The Israeli *people* are positively described as neighbors who deserve to ‘live in freedom, security, peace and respect’ (interview 20). Especially for the period prior to the onset of the second Intifada in 2000, relations between Israelis and Palestinians are described as tight and mutually beneficial. However, the Israeli *government* and *settlers* are portrayed as ruthless, fanatic and seeking purely their own advantage:

‘There are good people in Tzur Hadassah and the people of Wadi Fuqin want to be connected. They do not want to be separated [...] The people I know, I am happy and I want to work with them 100 years more [...] Netanjahu and his government are very, very difficult and they do not want peace.’ (interview 19)

The fact that Israel is a democracy and that the government (and its settlement policies) are elected by the majority of the Israeli people is not reflected in the Palestinian GWN discourse.

It can be concluded that the Israeli and Palestinian GWN discourses contain a predominately (but not completely) positive image of the out-group, especially compared to the respective national-level hegemonic discourses (e.g. Bar-Tal, 1998; Kaufman, 2009). This largely empathic construction of the ‘other’ as neighbors, humans and partners is obviously a facilitating condition for water cooperation.

Governments and politics:

As already indicated, the Israeli government is portrayed in negative terms by the GWN discourse. It is depicted as ruthless and heavily biased. Concrete allegations include the occupation of the West Bank, the settlement policies and the construction of the separation barrier, but also the unequal distribution of water, the ignorance of water pollution problems and the preferential treatment of Israeli agriculture. The construction of a common negative ‘other’ facilitates the development of a shared identity. The Palestinian Authority, in contrast, is either

described as supportive and helpful (Palestinian GWN discourse) or as lacking capabilities (Israeli GWN discourse). The absence of Palestinian critique of the Palestinian Authority represents a contrast to the Israeli GWN discourse, which also blames the Palestinian side as responsible for the water problems occurring within their territory. This is in line with the disagreement about the causes for water problems in the West Bank between Israeli and Palestinian GWN activists and the partially negative out-group images in the Israeli GWN discourse, thus representing a potential obstacle to cooperation.

Politics in general is described as a predominantly negative realm (also in Palestine, where the evaluation of the government is quite positive). According to the GWN discourse, political activities are often inspired by a top-down approach, which is less effective and ignores local realities. Related to that, politicians are described as not knowing or not even caring about the lives and thoughts of 'normal' people. Rather, they are pursuing goals motivated by ideology or the interests of some particular groups. In the words of a Palestinian GWN activist:

‘The politicians do not know really what is going on ground. Really, they do not know [...] Whether they are the small-rank or the high-rank, have lost the feelings. When they become politicians, they lose the feeling of simple or normal humanitarian, or human, humanity.’
(interview 33)

It is likely that the appreciation of bottom-up approaches as well as skepticism about the established political actors' willingness and capacity to solve water problems provides a motivation for the GWN activists to engage in cooperative problem solving.

Local support, resistance and knowledge:

Within the GWN discourse, the local surroundings are described as supportive of the project and its activists. The Israeli interview partners usually mention a large number of passive bystanders as well as some supporters in their communities, but deny the existence of active resistance. In Palestinian GWN discourse, it is reported that at the beginning, people in the local communities were skeptical about the water cooperation. But this resistance is described as having transformed into support over time. Either local residents were convinced by the concrete benefits the GWN project brought to them, or GWN activists persuaded other members of their communities personally:

‘Indeed, there were some people that are, that were saying that [a local GWN activist] is talking with the Jews, is working with the Jews. And I went to them and said that these Jews are helping the village and it is very important and I am not, I am not hiding it [...] I convinced them.’ (interview 19)

This description of local support for the project also strengthens two other elements of the GWN discourse identified above. Firstly, it underscores the negative depiction of politicians as

out of touch with local realities, since they have been unable to implement widespread water cooperation despite the fact that local support exists or could be generated. Secondly, the claim that Palestinians were convinced of concrete benefits of the GWN project underscores the character of water interaction as a situation of interdependence and as a positive-sum game.

Furthermore, the GWN discourse depicts the knowledge about environmental and water issues within Israel and Palestine as rather low (at least before local GWN projects started). This even applies to very local water problems. The GWN activists therefore describe themselves as environmental pioneers and knowledge mediators who educate local people about the environmental hazards they face. These positive identities constructed by the GWN discourse as well as the description of a supportive social environment are likely to raise the motivation and willingness of the activists to engage in further cooperation.

5 Conclusion

In this article, we have shown that the Israeli-Palestinian water conflict is driven by confrontative and mutually exclusive discourses, while largely (although not completely) cooperative and mutually benevolent discourses which foster water cooperation exist at the same time and within the same setting. These findings provide strong evidence for the discursive understanding of socio-environmental conflict and cooperation outlined above. One might argue that the respective discourses are not a facilitating factor for, but rather an outcome of cooperative behavior between the GWN communities. We regard this as unlikely because discourses structure how people essentially conceive the world (and consequentially act towards it). Moreover, they are historical phenomena that only change slowly over time. In line with this, groups are very unlikely to cooperate with worldviews and motivations as confrontative as the ones we have identified in the Israeli and Palestinians hegemonic discourses. Thus, our research suggests that the discursive construction of the identities and situation assessments of Israelis and Palestinians have a higher explanatory power with regard to the occurrence of socio-environmental conflict or cooperation than the actual physical or material realities.

To name just one example from the analysis presented above: The same physical water reality is depicted as a zero-sum game in the national discourses and as a situation of interdependence and possible mutual gains in the GWN discourse. These different discursive constructions influence the respective actors' behavior either to perpetuate conflict or to initiate cooperation. Consider the cooperation between Tzur Hadassah (Israel) and Wadi Fuqin (West Bank): Construction activities as well as the lack of sewage solutions put stress on the shallow aquifer below Wadi Fuqin and thus endanger the main source of irrigation water for the village. Although a local hydrologist confirmed to us that the 'Wadi Fuqin aquifer' is quite narrow and not connected to

Israeli groundwater sources (Haviv, 2013), residents of Tzur Hadassah still describe water interdependence as one of their motivations for cooperation:

‘First of all, geologically, it [the sewage] contaminating the [...] groundwater. [...] It is not only the village problem. On the very immediate results, the village springs will be ruined. But no doubt, that is only the beginning. We all live from that, the same groundwater. It is all connected.’ (interview 15)

So if conflict or cooperation over natural water resources in Israeli and Palestine can best be explained by analyzing the underlying discourse structures, attempts to find an accepted and sustainable solution to the water conflict should focus on those discourse structures, too. It was John Vasquez (1997: 672) who wrote that an analysis which is based on the discursive construction of reality has to assume, by its very own logic, that war (or unconstructive conflict in general), since it has been created by mankind, can also be ‘de-created’ or even extinguished by us. Thus, conflicts can be transformed when the respective viewpoints and interests are changed in a way that makes them compatible (Diez et al., 2006; Buckley-Zistel, 2006). It may be feasible to develop and apply tools of ”discursive conflict transformation”, which alter discourse structures in a way that lessens confrontative identities and situation assessments and opens up ways to cooperate in spite of conflict lines which have developed over decades. A starting point for such a program of discursive conflict transformation is provided by the work of Ochs et al. (1996: 109), who suggest that the ability of practices to produce socially significant re-framings of hegemonic discourses emerges from the process of co-narration:

‘Audiences [...] co-own the narrative as an interactional product and [...] share control over cognitive and verbal tools fundamental to problem solving itself. Co-ownership [...] involves sharing control as well as a commitment, however temporary, both to the activities of co-narration and collaborative problem solving and to the product, that is, the story.’

Positive re-framings of confrontative discourses can be induced by a variety of actors on all levels of society, including schools, universities, civil society, NGOs and government institutions. As we have shown above, the GWN activists have largely transcended the confrontative discursive structures which facilitate the Israeli-Palestinian water conflict and have replaced them with identity constructions and situation assessments which favor cooperative behavior. The resulting cooperation can hardly be explained by focusing on non-discursive factors, thus providing support for Lene Hansen’s (2006: 214) claim that ‘[i]n short, ‘facts’, ‘events’, and ‘material factors’ did not in and of themselves produce policy.’

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