

## 7. From water to shit

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[0] The subterranean spaces of the West Bank are inhabited by underground aquifers, archaeological sites, and infrastructure systems, as well as sacredness hidden from view. The underground has been transformed into a conflict zone, whose undercurrents affect the patterns of inhabitation of the terrain above.

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### Deep water

One of the most crucial issues in the Israeli- Palestinian conflict takes place below the surface: about eighty per cent of the Mountain Aquifer, the region's largest reservoir, is located under the West Bank. Yet this massive resource supplies approximately forty per cent of Israel's agricultural waters and almost fifty per cent of its drinking waters. Indeed, it is the main source for its large coastal urban centre. Indeed, it is the main source for its large coastal urban centre.

During the Oslo and Camp David negotiations, Israel insisted on keeping control of the underground resources in any permanent resolution. A new form of subterranean sovereignty, which erodes the basics of national sovereignty, is first mentioned in the Oslo Interim Accord.

The 1995 Accord transferred responsibility for the water sector from Israel's civil administration to the Palestinian Authority. But in practice, the scope of Israeli control of this sector did not change. A Joint Water Committee (JWC) was set up to oversee and approve every new water and sewage project in the West Bank. The Committee is comprised, in equal number, of representatives of Israel and of the Palestinian Authority. All its decisions are made by consensus. No mechanism is established to settle disputes where a consensus cannot be attained.

This might seem a sensible compromise. But through the Committee, Israel can veto any request by the Palestinian representatives to drill a new well, or to obtain the additions stipulated in the water agreement.

However, the Israeli settlements in the West Bank have access to pumping wells which do not need JWC permission. They represent approximately ten per cent of the West Bank population, and use some thirty-seven per cent of this West Bank water, leaving the remaining sixty-three per cent for the 1.9 million Palestinians.

### The politics of shit

There has been a recent and deliberate breaking loose of sewage systems across the West Bank. The strong topography allows Israeli settlements and Palestinian cities to spill their sewage through the valleys toward each other.

The Palestinian municipality of Hebron was awarded a sewage-recycling farm from the German government. But its operation was halted. According to agreements, the project was still regulated by the Joint Water Committee. It needed Israel's permission, and Israel might demand a quota of the water. Since then, to put pressure on Israel to concede the waters, the municipality of Hebron has been spilling its residential and industrial sewage into the Hebron River that flows, via three settlements, to the outskirts of Beer Sheva in Israel proper.

Non-existent or disintegrating underground pipes allow sewage to flow overground the length of some Palestinian refugee camps. This visible shit testifies to day-visiting official guests of the Palestinian Authority of an inhumane permanent neglect, the everlasting problem of the refugees, consequence of the yet unresolved conflict.

Efforts by different NGOs and UN departments to repair this system of infrastructure with permanent underground plumbing have often been rejected by the Palestinian Authority. They can allow no real improvement or investment in infrastructure until the refugee camps are considered permanent settlements.

Sewage is a political weapon when dislocated from the bowels of the earth to the overground. When shit is invisible underground, it is merely sewage, running through a technically complex system of public plumbing. But let it only break loose over the surface, and sewage becomes shit again.

The latitudinal co-ordinates affirm the nature of the substance. When sewage overflows and private shit, from under the ground, invades the public realm of the street, it becomes simultaneously a private hazard and a public asset – to be used as a tool by the authorities.

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