

Socio-environmental cooperation and/or conflict?

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Socio-environmental cooperation and conflict? A discursive understanding and its application to the case of Israel/Palestine

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Abstract

The existing literature faces difficulties when accounting for the simultaneity of socio-environmental conflict and cooperation. We suggest that this puzzle can be solved by more recent constructivist works, which argue that conflictive or cooperative behavior is driven by discursively constructed interests, identities and situation assessments. Based on a literature review and field interviews, we analyze and compare the dominant national water discourses in Israel and Palestine with the discourse of a transnational water cooperation project between communities from Israel and the West Bank. Our main result is that discourses are indeed crucial for understanding water-related conflict and cooperation. This finding highlights the relevance of constructivist approaches in the study of socio-environmental conflict and cooperation as well as of practices of discursive conflict transformation.

1 Introduction

Climate change is likely to alter temporal and spatial patterns of water and land availability, thus causing problems of resource scarcity in some regions of the world (IPCC, 2014). Especially in regions characterized by an arid or semi-arid climate, issues of land and water availability are often deeply intertwined for at least two reasons. Firstly, the use of a given piece of land (e.g. for agriculture or settlement) is usually only possible if access to adequate water resources is secured. And secondly, water is often closely connected to land in symbolic and legal terms (de Châtel, 2007; Derman et al., 2007).

A large body of literature has recently discussed whether the scarcity of water and/or land resources facilitates violent conflict or intergroup cooperation, and if so, how and under which circumstances (see Ide and Scheffran, 2014 for an overview). Africa has been a focal point of this discussion and the literature has documented several notable examples of socio-environmental conflict (e.g. Nyong, 2007; Schilling et al., 2012)

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or socio-environmental cooperation (e.g. Bogale and Korf, 2007; Duffy, 2006), especially in the Sub-Saharan region. However, existing research faces problems when water/land related conflict and cooperation occur simultaneously or at least in very similar geographic, ecological and political settings (see below). This is exactly the puzzle

we are seeking to address in our study. When doing so, we focus on the case of Israel and Palestine because the simultaneity of water-related conflict and cooperation is especially striking in this context, while sufficient data for our research design are available. But while the Israeli-Palestinian context is quite special in several regards (Moore and Guy, 2012), we are optimistic that our findings on the relevance of discourses for socio-environmental conflict and cooperation are valid in other contexts, such as Sub-Saharan and especially Northern Africa (whose climatic and land use patterns are similar to those in the Middle East).

There clearly exists a severe water conflict between Israel and Palestine, which is driven by disputes over the distribution of water from shared groundwater aquifers and the Jordan River (Zeitoun, 2008), over water pollution originating in the West Bank and Israel (Fischhendler et al., 2011), and over permissions for the construction and maintenance of water infrastructure in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (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).

However, there also is Israeli-Palestinian cooperation on water issues, especially on the scientific and civil society level. Such cooperation is remarkable within a political context that is characterized by mutual suspicion and hostility. It is part of a counter movement that has been developing since the early 1990s (Isaac and Shuval, 1994) and focuses on the cooperative potential of fair and mutually beneficial joint water management and its possible role for peacemaking and peacebuilding (Coskun, 2009; Kramer, 2008). This is not to say that such water cooperation is entirely un-

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problematic. Indeed, it is accused of marginalizing certain elements of the Palestinian discourse (Alatout, 2006), de-politicizing water-related inequalities (Aggestam and Sundell-Eklund, 2014) or privileging an artificial local vis-à-vis a more authentic “local-local’ and ‘everyday’” (Richmond, 2009, p. 325). But we believe that this form of cooperation is much more promising in overcoming “peace gaps” (Aggestam and Strömbom, 2013, p. 109) and realizing a more equitable sharing of water quantities and water rights than currently dominant forms of water conflict (Harari and Roseman, 2008).

The literature has problems explaining the simultaneity of socio-environmental conflict and cooperation within the same setting, particularly if water cooperation is occurring under conditions of wider political conflict. One might distinguish three broad perspectives here:

The *environmental peace perspective* argues that shared environmental challenges, such as the degradation of cross-border water resources, can stimulate cooperation (Ide and Scheffran, 2014). 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, p. 28) with a higher level of empathy and solidarity towards each other (Conca and Dabelko, 2002). However, the environmental peace perspective cannot explain why shared water problems have not facilitated the termination of the Israeli-Palestinian water conflict and more intense cooperation on the international level.

The *environmental conflict perspective* claims that the scarcity of renewable resources, such as water, increases the risk for (violent) conflict between social groups (Homer-Dixon, 1999). This is especially so if the relations between the respective groups are characterized by pre-existing political or cultural tensions, unequal access to the resources in question and/or the socio-political marginalization of one group (Barnett and Adger, 2007; Deligiannis, 2012). This is certainly the case for water relations between Israel and Palestine. But the environmental conflict perspective cannot

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explain why actors from both countries still engage in cooperative water management. One might argue that this cooperation largely takes place between NGO and academic actors, which face fewer constraints (e.g. from their constituencies, international partners or potential coalition partners) than elected politicians at the international parquet (Coskun, 2009). But such constraints also could (and do) provide incentives towards cooperation rather than conflict, while scholars and activists often experience considerable pressures when they engage in more cooperative relationships (Alatout, 2006). And even beyond this, there still is no explanation for why some scientists, local communities and NGOs in Israel and Palestine do engage in water-related cooperation, while most do not.

The *parallel perspective* highlights that water cooperation and water conflict often take place simultaneously (Zeitoun and Mirumachi, 2008). But in many cases, water cooperation only exists on a rather superficial level and tends to obscure or even perpetuate strong inequalities in power, welfare and access to water, which form the basis of (manifest or latent) water conflicts (Cascão, 2008; Funder et al., 2012). In the case of Israel and Palestine, water cooperation indeed takes place in the face of strong water-related inequalities and so far, these inequalities persist (Selby, 2013). However, many scholars and activists do actively problematize such inequitable water relations and even aim to change them, although this is far from easy (Aggestam and Strömbom, 2013). The conclusion that water cooperation often exists in parallel with, and frequently obscures water-related conflicts, also leaves unexplained why some actors engage in cooperative and others in conflictive practices when they are equally powerful and similarly affected by water problems (such as the numerous Israeli and Palestinian communities along the Green Line).

This article takes a constructivist stance in order to explain the simultaneity of water conflict and water cooperation in Israel and Palestine. It insists that characteristics and dynamics of the earth system (Rettberg, 2010), security threats (Feitelson et al., 2012) and group identities (Wittayapak, 2008) are important in shaping socio-environmental conflict or cooperation, but should be conceived as social constructs rather than as

objective facts. More specifically, we portray the dominant national water discourses in Israel and Palestine (based on a literature review) and compare them to the discourse of an Israeli-Palestinian water cooperation project, the Good Water Neighbours (GWN) project. In doing so, we contribute to the existing literature in a threefold way. Firstly, we aim at explaining the puzzle of the simultaneity of water conflict and cooperation in Israel and Palestine. Secondly, we contribute to a small, but growing constructivist body of literature in the study of socio-environmental conflicts (e.g. Fröhlich, 2012; Martin, 2005; Stetter et al., 2011; Zeitoun et al., 2013). In particular, there are very few studies focusing on the discursive/narrative dimensions of socio-environmental cooperation (Norman, 2012), especially in the context of wider political conflicts. Thirdly, we empirically test the claims of the constructivist approach. If inter-subjective factors are important in facilitating socio-environmental conflict or cooperation, then the dominant national discourses in Israel and Palestine should be significantly more confrontative and less cooperation-prone than the GWN discourse.

The article proceeds as follows: in the next section, the theoretical framework and methodology of this study are described (Sect. 2). Afterwards, we contextualize and portray the dominant water discourses in Israel and Palestine at the national level (Sect. 3) before we present the GWN discourse in greater detail (Sect. 4) and draw our conclusion (Sect. 5). Our main result is that discourses are important drivers (although not determinants) of water conflict and water cooperation. This finding needs to be more thoroughly integrated into scientific analyses of socio-environmental conflicts as well as into practices of conflict prevention and conflict transformation.

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2 Theory and method of discourse analysis

2.1 A discursive understanding of socio-environmental conflict and cooperation

In this article, we draw on the Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse (SKAD) as developed by Reiner Keller (Keller, 2011b). This framework is 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, p. 48) defines “discourses as performative statement practices which constitute reality orders and also produce power effects in a conflict-ridden network of social actors.” Discourses structure what is accepted as true by a given social group and what is claimed wrong or not considered at all. This also applies to the “subject positions” of social actors, which define the role and characteristics (that is, the identity) of individuals and social groups (Keller, 2011a, p. 49). As Jäger (2004) puts 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, p. 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). Discourses become manifest in various concrete speech acts, texts, images and symbols, but also in non-verbal practices and dispositifs. These, in turn, reproduce the very discourse they are originating from. Discourses and practices are therefore mutually constitutive, implying that discourses are simultaneously dynamic (they are reproduced by and can be changed by human action) and static (they structure human action). A discourse is termed dominant if its core state-

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ments 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, p. 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 dominant discourses. Two aspects are of particular relevance in this regard: collective identities, or subject positions in the terminology of Keller, and situation assessments. 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, p. 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 (Fröhlich, 2010, p. 38–40; Jabri, 1996, p. 5).

Situation assessments refer to the causality assumptions and perceptions of surrounding material conditions of a (collective) actor. They have shown to be highly relevant for conflict dynamics (Han and Mylonas, 2014; Janis, 1982), especially in socio-environmental conflicts where the perceived extent, causes and solutions for environmental problems are disputed between the parties (Wittayapak, 2008; Zeitoun et al., 2013). Numerous studies have shown that environmental perceptions are often contested between various actors, and that these discrepancies cannot be resolved by supposedly objective scientific data (Otto and Leibenath, 2013; Rettberg, 2010). The concept of securitization has proven especially helpful in this context. A securitization

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the principles of maximal and minimal contrasting (Keller, 2013, p. 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, p. 101–115) in order to carve out the interpretative repertoire of the GWN discourse (Keller, 2011b, p. 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, p. 143–157), that is, 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 central characteristics and dimensions, and (c) related to each other (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p. 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, p. 320).

3 The Israeli-Palestinian water conflict and its discursive foundations

The Israeli-Palestinian water conflict is shaped by political developments as well as by the region’s geographical, climatic, hydro(geo)logical and demographic realities (Feitelson, 2013; Zeitoun, 2008). The most important freshwater sources for Israel and the Palestinian territories are the Jordan River (including the Sea of Galilee) and various aquifers. The Jordan basin is international and – in theory – shared between Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, Syria and the Palestinians (Fröhlich, 2010, p. 19–23). But up to today, the Palestinians have no access to the Jordan river whatsoever (Selby, 2005). The region’s climate is arid to semi-arid, with frequent droughts which are likely to increase in the future (Feitelson et al., 2012). The biggest subterranean water reservoirs are the coastal and the mountain aquifer with 240 and 679 million cubic meters per year re-

spectively (Dombrowsky, 1998, p. 94). Both are considered crucial for the water supply of Israel and Palestine, especially during the dry summer months, and are not confined to either party's territory (Zeitoun, 2008, p. 45–59).

Ever since the systematic Jewish immigration into Palestine began in the late 19th century, and up until the 1980s, water was of high economic and political relevance for the yishuv – the pre-state Jewish community in Palestine – as well as for Israel (Feitelson, 2002; Lipchin, 2007). 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. Since then, Israel withdraws much larger quantities of water from the Jordan River and the shared aquifers than the Palestinians, while the latter are entirely dependent on Israeli permissions to develop their water infrastructure (Selby, 2005; Zeitoun and Mirumachi, 2008). The Oslo talks of the 1990s established the Israeli-Palestinian Joint Water Committee, which brought very little progress in this respect and is thus strongly criticized (Selby, 2013). The dominant water discourses in Palestine and Israel have developed in the context of this stark political asymmetry.

In the discourse that is dominant in Palestine (but marginalized at the international level), 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 the area). The Israeli control over most of the water sources, the very unequal access to water as well as Israel's capacity to veto water infrastructure projects is seen as the major cause of water availability problems in the West Bank (Alatout, 2006; Waintraub, 2009). In the Palestinian perception, the experienced water scarcity is thus entirely politically induced (Daoudi, 2009; Trottier, 1999). Israeli control over large parts of the regional water resources is considered as an existential threat to Palestinian society and hence securitized in the dominant discourse (Fröhlich, 2012).

This rather confrontative situation assessment is connected to similarly conflictive identity constructions in the dominant Palestinian discourse. Water is perceived as important primarily as an attribute of a territory that is considered rightfully Palestinian and

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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 in negative terms, since it is unwilling to grant the Palestinians the amount of water that they are not only entitled to, but also depend on to keep their standard of living and to enable at least moderate economic growth (Fröhlich, 2010; Twite, 2009). This discourse reflects a dominant mentality of siege which mirrors the Israeli such mentality (see below). One manifestation thereof is the myth of the fellah, who works and sustains his land even in the worst of circumstances – and needs water to do that, while access to water is denied by Israel (Fröhlich, 2012).

There certainly are alternative positions which challenge the dominant Palestinian water discourse (Alatout, 2006). Examples include more pragmatic voices that criticize Palestinian water management and thus acknowledge the in-group's responsibility for the water scarcity Palestine is experiencing (Fröhlich, 2010). But the dominant 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 Israeli out-group for being solely responsible for water shortages in the Palestinian territories (Alatout, 2006; Twite, 2009; Waintraub, 2009). The Palestinian dominant water discourse is thus quite confrontative.

Just like its Palestinian counterpart, the Israeli water discourse is far from homogeneous (Feitelson, 2002). However, in the dominant Israeli discourse, water is deeply interwoven with agriculture, the creation of a Jewish state/homeland and the Israeli identity. The roots of water's ideological meaning for Israel lie in political Zionism (Lipchin, 2007). The link between Zionism's main goal of a viable Jewish state on biblically promised land and water is agriculture. On the one hand, agriculture made it possible to settle and control the Jewish homeland (Feitelson, 2013). 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" (Fröhlich, 2012). 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, p. 30). A sufficient water supply hence became a vital part of the Jewish-Israeli identity (Fröhlich, 2012), even if water issues (no longer) dominate public debates and media coverage (de Châtel, 2007; Feitelson, 2013).

In addition, the holocaust and the repeated threats by Arab neighbors contributed to the development of a security discourse which conceives of the Jewish state and people as inherently threatened. The discursive securitization of diverse threats developed into one of the most powerful discursive structures in the Israeli societal discourse (Fröhlich, 2010). Generally speaking, a mentality has emerged which cultivates a perpetual state of siege (Bar-Tal, 1998). The water discourse has been taken over by this securitization trend, especially in the face of intense water-related disputes between Israel and Syria in the 1950s and 1960s (Amery, 2002). The securitization of water and its central role for the Israeli identity is complemented by a quite confrontative assessment of the water situation in the dominant Israeli discourse. The natural water resources in the Jordan basin are considered as scarce and in desperate need to be developed in order to keep the current standard of living of the region’s population (Fröhlich, 2012; Messerschmid, 2012).

Since the 1990s, the discourse partially shifted from water quantity to water quality issues (Fischhendler et al., 2011), while large quantities of additional water became available due to wastewater recycling and desalination (Aviram et al., 2014; Spiritos and Lipchin, 2013). Peace treaties and related water agreements were also reached with Jordan and the PLO (Zeitoun, 2008, p. 68–72). These developments facilitated a de-securitization of water issues, although this trend was negatively influenced by heavy droughts in the late 2000s and predictions of climate change-induced rainfall reductions in the future (Mason, 2013; Messerschmid, 2012). 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 (Feitelson and Rosenthal, 2012; Selby, 2009) and are routinely subjected to what we call a re-securitization: regardless

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of the afore-mentioned de-securitization impulses, dominant discourse structures still tie back into the much older, persistent securitizing discourse structures, which can be easily activated (Fröhlich, 2012; Messerschmid, 2012).

4 The Good Water Neighbours discourse

The GWN activists interviewed share a common discourse, although some differences between an Israeli and a Palestinian version can be detected. In this section, the GWN discourse is described along five dimensions of the phenomenal structure that emerged as particularly relevant during the analysis: relevance of water, water problems, solutions for water problems, out- and in-group images, and governments and politics.

Relevance of water. Just as the dominant national water discourses, the GWN discourse emphasizes the importance of water. Within the dominant national discourses, water is considered important due to its connections either to Zionism or to a viable Palestinian state and the fellah myth. These references are mutually exclusive, contradictory, 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:

“Water is the ingredient that made possible the explosion of life on our planet, both in the sea and on land [...] In the desert and semidesert regions such as the Middle East, the development of water systems was crucial for the development and advancement of human culture.” (Watercare, 2004, p. 4–6)¹

¹Water Care is a textbook educating middle school pupils about water in the Middle East. It was not written by GWN, but is very frequently used by the project. Several authors of the Water Care textbook are affiliated with FoEME.

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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 considered 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 of their political affiliation or nationality. In this respect, the GWN discourse is considerably less confrontative than the respective national discourses.

This inclusive understanding of the relevance of water is further strengthened by the diagnosis of strong water interdependence in the GWN discourse. 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, 13 May 2013, Battir)

The identification of water interdependence, self-interest and mutual gains in combination with the depiction of water resources as naturally scarce and vulnerable (see below) but important for all inhabitants of the region represents a significant de-securitization move. Such argumentative support for water cooperation is largely absent in the dominant discourses of both sides, which portray water interaction largely

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, 14 May 2013, Hadera)

It can be assumed that the shared understanding of Israeli government policies as key determinant of 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.

Solutions 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. Firstly, Palestinian water rights have to be acknowledged and regional water resources should be shared in a more equal way. Secondly, 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 trilateral³ water commission in which all parties would have the same rights and duties. As a contrast to the current Israeli-Palestinian JWC, the commission would be responsible for all, or at least for all transboundary water resources in the region.

“What I look for is looking at water resources and manage water resources as a unit [. . .] And then to manage them in this manner. That will be sustainable for anybody who is living on that resources. [. . .] On the other side, we have to make the governmental bodies that equal effects going to be shared and equal bodies. There is no veto right for somebody.” (Interview, 09 May 2013, Bethlehem)

³Most GWN activists advocate an integrated management of the water resources of Israel, Palestine and Jordan.

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This desire to share water resources more fairly and to manage them as integrated as possible represents another de-securitization move and provides a positive vision supportive of cooperative behavior. It also marks a clear contrast to the dominant 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, 02 May 2013, Tzur Hadassah). 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 of insecurity. This insecurity is described as being caused by extremists who resist any kind of Israeli-Palestinian cooperation. An 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, 05 June 2013, Israel)

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

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Governments and politics: As already indicated, the Israeli government is frequently criticized within the GWN discourse. 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 and the ignorance of water pollution problems. The construction of such a common negative other facilitates the development of a shared identity within the GWN project. 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, 21 May 2013, Tulkarrem)

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.

5 Conclusion

5 Based on an analysis of the existing literature, we have concluded that confrontative and mutually exclusive discourses are a major driver of the Israeli-Palestinian water conflict. This applies to the international level, but it can also explain why many communities along the border between Israel and the West Bank abstain from cooperation over local water resources. Such cooperation is taking place in the GWN project. The
10 GWN discourse is characterized by largely (although not completely) inclusive identities and de-securitized situation assessments which highlight the need for water cooperation and more equitable water sharing. Given the (political, historical, economic and ecological) heterogeneity of the communities analyzed, these findings provide support for the theoretical premises of the constructivist literature on socio-environmental conflict and cooperation discussed in Sects. 1 and 2.1.⁴ Although this needs to be
15 tested empirically, there are indicators suggesting that these findings are valid for other world regions as well. With regard to pastoralist conflicts in East Africa, for instance, several authors highlight the relevance of (discursively constructed) precipitation perceptions and exclusive identities (Ide et al., 2014; Temesgen, 2010). In the words of
20 Lene Hansen (2006, p. 214), “‘facts’, ‘events’, and ‘material factors’ did not in and of themselves produce policy.”

⁴One 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 dominant discourses.

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If discursively constructed identities and situation assessments are important explanatory factors for the occurrence of conflict or cooperation over natural water resources, attempts to find an accepted and sustainable solution to this international water conflict should focus on those discourse structures, too (Buckley-Zistel, 2006).

A mere focus on technical or functional water cooperation is insufficient at best and counterproductive at worst (Aggestam and Sundell-Eklund, 2014; Bichsel, 2009). Instead, it may be feasible to develop and apply tools of discursive conflict transformation or co-narration, 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 (Ochs et al., 1996).

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