

Even sewage is not free of politics

By [Akiva Eldar](#)

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On the way to the sewage facility on the seam line, located on the former site of a vast mall full of Israeli bargain hunters, Raek Hamad said he deals only with sewage and does not understand politics. Unfortunately for the senior engineer from the Tul Karm Municipality, for us, even sewage is not free of politics.

For a long time, it did not occur to the Israeli occupiers to treat sewage in the West Bank. And it was only a few years ago when they realized that the lack of adequate facilities for sewage and other waste would lead to steady pollution of the mountain aquifer, which is located almost entirely within the West Bank. It is the main water-supply source for several Israeli cities, including Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Be'er Sheva and various others in the central region.

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Hamad, with the blessing of his city's mayor and the help of German funding, oversaw the construction of the sewage plant right on top of the Green Line. Before the facility was built, the sewage traveled the entire malodorous way to the Alexander River.

After a short ride on dirt paths, Hamad gets out of the old Mercedes and clears a path through the bushes. Below, under a narrow bridge, scraps and refuse appear through the foam created by the sewage flow. All of it comes from Nablus to the east, flows beneath the separation fence, and streams toward Emek Hefer.

Germans are financing the joint project with the Emek Hefer Regional Council, half of which is located on the Israeli side and half on the Palestinian side of the Line. The boycott of Hamas threatens to cause the Germans to leave here before this river of sewage is channeled to the treatment facility.

25 years lost

Hamad doesn't understand the Israelis. "Some 25 years were lost before you realized that if you don't treat the sewage and refuse, the bacteria will reach your children too. Now, when the sewage is already seeping into the groundwater - in Anabta, the municipality has already shut down one of the two wells after some children came down with contamination-related illnesses - they give us a real runaround until they give us a permit for a purification plant, because most of them are located in area C [territory under full Israeli control]."

And if that were not enough, from the other side, in the office of Nachum Itzkowitz, the head of the Emek Hefer Regional Council, colorful pictures of the Alexander River Park bustling with visitors are proudly displayed. The park has approximately a quarter of a million visitors annually. None of this would have happened, says Itzkowitz, without the friendly cooperation between him and the mayor of Tul Karm that began 10 years ago and withstood the test of the intifada and the separation fence.

Had they not traveled together to Germany and convinced the Germans to reach into their pockets, the shells of the Alexander River turtles would have continued to absorb the waste from the olive presses in northern Samaria, and the foul odor would have been overpowering.

"I don't even have a shred of a complaint against the Palestinians," Itzkowitz says.

"For all these years, we were the rulers in the area, and we didn't lift a finger to prevent pollution of the groundwater."

Every summer, people from the regional council spray the Tul Karm region with mosquito repellent. Like the groundwater and the avian flu virus, the small insects are not in the least affected by the disengagement, convergence plan, Hamas government and defensible borders.

Zecharia Tagar of Friends of the Earth, an organization that unites Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian peace and environmental activists, writes in his most recent report that "projects whose goal is to prevent pollution of the mountain aquifer, especially in the West Bank, must continue under any political scenario. In the absence of serious efforts to continue environmental projects, it will not be possible to halt the contamination. As a result of this, the only source of water for Palestinian residents of the West Bank, and an important source of water for Israel, may disappear, and unpurified sewage may contaminate the rivers and reach cities inside Israel and affect a population of approximately 1.25 million people."

No less important

The outbreak of the bird flu virus forced Israel to coordinate preventative efforts with the Palestinians, and overlook the Hamas government. Friends of the Earth argue that preventing water contamination is no less important and urgent. The cooperation is vital, because the Oslo Accords require obtaining approval from Israel for planning any infrastructure project in areas B and C of the West Bank.

The international community allocated more than \$320 million in funds for sewage infrastructure in the West Bank, but these funds will not be used if the ventures are frozen because of Hamas' rise to power. Investments of \$15.5 million made by the World Bank, the European Union and the Palestinian Authority (PA) are also in danger of being lost.

In its current state, the Palestinian economy cannot cope with the expenses involved in preventing contamination without outside help. Many of the local water sources in the West Bank have already been contaminated, and struggling communities have in many cases had to pay steep prices for water from tanks. Without further development of sewage and waste treatment facilities, the contamination will spread to additional areas and deeper into the aquifer.

The operating procedures of the agencies contributing to the PA call for close supervision of the money, and representatives of the donor countries are on site and directly involved in all stages of the projects. This is certainly not a direct transfer of funds to the PA, and the cooperation, as in the case of Emek Hefer and Tul Karm, can be between local authorities, voluntary organizations and the private sector. In the absence of progress, a vacuum will be created, and the contamination may continue for years to come.

In the meantime, the U.S. administration has frozen \$50 million in funding for a sewage treatment facility in Hebron - a punishment for Hamas' victory. Friends of the Earth say that the significance of the U.S. decision is the continued contamination of the mountain aquifer and the Hebron River, and ongoing health and environment-related problems for over 190,000 residents in Israel.

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