Conceptualizing the politicisation of transboundary water governance

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Introduction

‘Politicisation’, or the notion that water issues have become ‘politicised’ (see e.g. Husseini, 2007; Allan, 2007), has been attributed to the failure, and occasionally the success, of transboundary water governance in many different forms. Several authors identify poor management and political processes rather than technical or hydrological failure as the main reason for the existence of water problems (Human Development Report, 2006; Molle et al., 2008). Characteristically, when Middle Eastern hydro-politics is considered, the onus for governance failure is more often on politics than on hydrological realities (Allan, 2001), overtly linking politicisation to water problems and crises. Other authors however argue that better water governance asks for engaging politics and ‘repoliticising’ river basin governance (Molle, 2009). Politicisation tends to occur due to the fact that water resources are scarce and access may be contested. Patterns of access and allocation may be asymmetric and shift over time (Rathgeber, 1996; Zeitoun, 2008, Molle, 2009), which makes a ‘high political’ variable [...]” (Dinar, 2000: 386).

But what seems to have been ignored in literature, is that the wide usage of the term and its use in many different contexts has rendered politicisation an ambiguous and hollow concept. In addition to this literature that carefully explains the relationship between politicisation and water governance seems to be missing too. A closer examination of this relation is needed to get more insights in the ways transboundary water governance becomes politicised, actually operates and how the implications of it must be assessed. The aim of this paper is therefore to conceptualise the politicisation of transboundary water governance to facilitate a more thorough examination of the relationship between the politics of transboundary water resources and the way these watercourses are governed. This can help us to improve our understanding of politicising behaviour of state and non-state actors in areas such as the negotiation of treaties and outcomes of joint management policies.

In the next section we clarify our research approach which will be followed by a short overview of relevant literature. Following things we conceptualize politicisation into three dimensions which we use in an analysis of Israeli-Palestinian water relations. We conclude this paper with a discussion on the usefulness of our approach.

Research approach

A grounded theory approach was used to theorise politicised transboundary water governance. This essentially means snowballing through relevant literature. Political science, particularly the branch that studies international relations (IR), was used as point of departure for two lines of reasoning. First, that politicisation is propagated by politics—the object of study of political scientists—and second, that we especially need to look at IR theory (and more specifically regime theory) since this addresses the ‘international arena’ where interaction over transboundary water resources is taking place. Here, clues can be found that will reveal what politicisation may look like for transboundary water governance.
Part of our grounded theory approach is making sense of what is relevant. The rich history of IR theory in political science has produced many different perspectives and ways of thinking about international politics through archetypes like realist, pluralist, or globalist thinking (Viotti & Kaupi, 1993; Hasenclever et al., 1997). Politicisation—in its complex, messy and often implicit manifestations—does not fit neatly into any of these schools of thought. In order to conceptualise it, one must adopt a more “pragmatic ethos” that better captures the “complexity and messiness of real-world [interstate politics]” and “interactions among different types of causal mechanisms normally analysed in isolation from each other within separate research traditions” (Sil & Katzenstein, 2010: 412). This fits the strategy of a grounded theory approach.

In order to refine our literature-based framework we have conducted a case study on Israeli-Palestinian water relations. Through a case study, insights that have a more general applicability can be obtained (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 227). We assume that politicisation will be manifest in this case since the Jordan river basin is marked by violent conflicts (Schiff, 1989), infringement by political motives (Jägerskog, 2007), disputed claims on water and sovereignty (Shapland, 1997), a perceived asymmetry in access and use of the available water resources (Zeitoun, 2008) and ideological ideas about water governance that differ (de Chatel, 2007). Moreover, both the Israelis and the Palestinians have a per capita water availability far below the indicator for water stress (Falkenmark et al., 1989; Tal, 2006). We found that an appropriate empirical data source are the meeting minutes of the Joint Water Committee—the forum where joint Israeli-Palestinian water governance is shaped. These minutes reflect the interaction between Israelis and Palestinians on shared water issues more than any other source would, however, for 2005-07 no data were available. As the documents are not open to the public a non-disclosure agreement was signed stipulating that no published work which is part of this study can quote from the minutes directly. The minutes available have been coded using the concepts resulting from our literature review.

**Politicisation of transboundary water governance in literature**

As said, a clear conceptualisation of politicisation cannot be found in literature. According to the Oxford dictionary it may be described as “giving something a political character”. In order to refine this definition for the context of transboundary water governance we will briefly reflect on this context. First, we realise that international relations scholars consider politics too be messy and anarchic in its nature (Viotti & Kaupi, 1993). The absence of a central authority on the international stage is seen as an inevitable source of conflict (Hurrel & Kingburry, 1992) opening up the field for states to try and gain control over other states, alter power balances, seek relative advantages and strive for zero-sum outcomes (Krasner, 1976; Gilpin, 1981; Keohane, 1984; Zartman, 1991). Politicisation can be used as a means to this end, and a ‘struggle for power’ is the underlying rationale for politicising transboundary water governance.

More recent IR-studies show an important role for actor pluralism. Increasingly, states are no longer seen as unitary actors, or the most dominant ones in the arena—and consequently not the appropriate unit of analysis for study (O’Neill, 2009). Nor are they the sole or main agents of the interests pursued in this arena. Rather, a heterogeneous state and non-state actor setting, where protecting the environment is a collective end, characterises international politics. Within this setting the establishment of transboundary water regimes (Krasner, 1983; Conca, 2006; Hasenclever et al., 1997) is a strategy for taking collective action. An environmental regime settles on an authoritative statement of a problem, establishes a body of official knowledge and embraces universal scientific knowledge as “the most important way of knowing about environmental problems, their effects, and their potential solutions.” (Conca, 2006: 52) In other words, regimes prompt states to concede part of their self-interest ideology in favour of solutions to transboundary problems that are brought forward by knowledge generated by the regime.

Creating such regimes is challenging since states are forced to converge differing positions on governing water—e.g.: state-centred versus market approaches (Blatter & Ingram, 2000) that either stress water as a social good or economic commodity (Allan, 2001). Different priorities of functions of
water (like hydropower or irrigation) have to be reconciled too. Conflicting governance paradigms can fundamentally divide riparian states and even prevent regime-formation to take place. Once regimes are in place, disputes may still arise over the possible solutions to water management problems, since these tend to be “wicked” with multiple definitions and conflicting solutions that compete with each other (Rittel & Webber, 1973; Freeman, 2000). Advocates of a potential solution need to bring water governance into their domain of authority and decision-making power. Technocratic water experts will do so by depoliticising water governance, whereas politicians and non-experts will do so by politicisation. The latter implies that debates over water issues will be subjected to debates over other societal issues. In the case of depoliticisation a debate on water issues will be limited to the hydrological aspects.

Three mechanisms of politicisation

Politisation not only becomes manifest in societal discourses (Molle, 2008; Molle, 2009), but conflicting views on water governance and competing solutions to water problems’ may also enable different parties to enter into negotiations to make trade-offs on these differences (cf. Dinar, 2000; Fischhendler et al., 2004; Song & Wittington, 2004; Daoudy, 2009; Katz & Fischhendler, 2011). Apart from this, as politicisation of discourses may happen iteratively and over time, it may also result in institutional change. This makes it necessary to look at the institutional arrangements of the governance landscape as well.

The politicisation of discourse

A discourse is an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena, and which is (re)produced through an identifiable set of practices (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005). Discourse can be found in the way things are framed in public debates, narratives, metaphors and rhetorical devices (Dryzek, 2005; Hajer, 2006). The narratives in which (environmental) issues are framed reveal whether they are seen as political problems or just natural phenomena; whether they are incidental or structural. Which informs if political action is needed (Hajer, 2006). Additionally, information entering discourses preceding negotiation and policy-making can be selective or distorted, emphasised and de-emphasised.

Expert networks are relevant in defining discourses. These experts develop a common identity, meaning they “shar[e] a belief in a common set of cause-and-effect relationships as well as common values to which policies governing [these] relationships will be applied” (Haas, 1989: 384). Experts are functionally-rational in their core and thus, in theory, tend to frame ‘reality’ in a technocratic way. Technocratic is favoured over depoliticised because “[u]nder complex interdependence, everything is actually or potentially politicised […]” (Haas, 1980: 360). Experts will realize this. And so in discourse, debates over water issues will be subjected to debates over other societal issues. This invites the dismissal of experts from competing knowledge domains or, more commonly, downplaying and distortion of expert opinion—e.g. simplifying technical details for the public’s understanding. This, we qualify as politicisation, also when it is done by the experts themselves, and, of course, says nothing about whether such politicisation is inherently good or bad. For the record, debates that are limited to the hydrological aspects are seen as entirely depoliticised. But such debates virtually do not occur in public discourse.

Table 1 summarises which discursive elements are discerned and how they can indicate politicisation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discursive element</th>
<th>Indicator for politicisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Framing of problems</td>
<td>Environmental problems are considered a societal issue, and therefore belong in the political domain. Nature-society relations are emphasised.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Framing of resources  
A water resource is viewed as public property; should be regulated by state legislation. Emphasis is on water rights; claims on portions of water through rights instead of needs.

Framing of information  
Hydrological information becomes distorted and abused to fit a certain political narrative.

Use of expert knowledge  
Expert opinion is ignored, simplified, downplayed and/or does not influence the way water issues are discussed in the public and political domain.

**Linkage politics**

Water issues are inherently multi-faceted and therefore involve linkages to other water or non-water related issues (Katz & Fischhendler, 2011). Subjecting water to other domains is exactly what happens when water issues are linked to non-water issues, whereas moving water back into the direction of its purely hydrologic domain is what happens when water issues are linked with other water issues. An example of water related issue-linkage could be the linking of hydropower development to flood control (Katz & Fischhendler, 2011), whereas a non-water related linkage could be a shifting political alliance in return for certain annual volumes of water flows from an upstream neighbour (Daoudy, 2009). Linkage politics proves to be a successful strategy for enhancing cooperation in international relations under conditions of self-interested behaviour, something which makes it especially well-suited for negotiations over water (Fischhendler et al., 2004). Linkage politics allow actors to make concessions on issues they care less about in exchange for gains on issues that are more important to them, which gives the actors involved leverages (Katz & Fischhendler, 2011). It also reduces or neutralises existing asymmetries in countries’ expected benefits of cooperation (Bernauer, 2002), making cooperation more appealing to both parties.

Enlarging the spatial scale of water management allows for linking intra-basin issues with wider trans-basin issues, parties and areas—often this means the inclusion of more (political) actors—ensuring that the benefits end up with more parties. On the other hand, reducing spatial scale excludes parties and areas from the management’s jurisdiction whose inclusion might incur high political and transaction costs (Fischhendler & Feitelson, 2003). A simple example is when one party forgoes claims to a body of water in exchange for rights to a different body of water in the same basin (Katz & Fischhendler, 2011).

Table 2 shows the indicators for the politicisation of linkage politics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Linkage type</th>
<th>Indicator for politicisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competing functions of water</td>
<td>Alignment of various functions of the water resource is demonstrably in favour of basin-hegemon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inter- and intra-basin linkages</td>
<td>Water is linked with non-water issues, or vice-versa (water is dragged into another domain of politics).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The politicisation of institutional arrangements**

Institutional arrangements are sets of rules, decision-making procedures and programmes that define social practices, assign roles to the participants in these practices, and guide interactions among the occupants of individual roles (Young, 2002). Since a transboundary water course can be characterized as a common pool resource, collective action is considered necessary to set up institutional arrangements (Ostrom, 1990; Benvenisti, 1996; Feitelson, 2005).

These institutional arrangements can become politicised in different ways. First the dominant governance paradigm that reflects the underlying paradigmatic and normative justifications of actions taken by states can enable politicisation. When the accountability of the state to society forms the basis
for joint management schemes, politicisation is likely to occur. In addition to this, water pricing becomes politicised in cases in which governments do not accept market prices but interfere for equity or other reasons. Underlying balances of power and hegemony also matter. Institutional arrangements can be identified as moving into a politicised direction if the power balance is skewed in favour of the strongest nation—e.g. in terms of allocation and control over supply. Decision-making procedures and approval mechanisms can also contribute to politicisation. On one hand these institutional elements increase predictability among participants (Ostrom, 1990) which may have a depoliticising effect, but on the other hand rules in practice may enable control-seeking, zero-sum games and the pursuit of relative advantages over other (regime) participants. The existence of a veto rules is an example of this. Rules and procedures about appropriation and access can become politicised in a similar way. Finally, institutional bargaining and functional structure reflect politicisation in cases in which an issue is moved up to a higher political echelon (e.g. from a civil servant to a high level official in the ministry).

Table 3 shows the indicators for politicised institutional arrangements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutional element</th>
<th>Indicator for politicisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dominant governance paradigm</td>
<td>Politicisation of the governance paradigm occurs when governance is dominated by societal needs and wishes over hydrological rationalities. Thus transboundary water governance is dominated by a riparian’s objective to satisfy domestic societal water functions. This also manifests into legitimacy for actions through statist presumptions about authority and territory. Stressing a country’s sovereignty in a multilateral setting, such as a regime, is a clear example of this type of politicisation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water pricing, commoditisation</td>
<td>State-centric approaches instead of market approaches are favoured for water-pricing. Water is considered a social good and not meant for commoditisation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Underlying balance of power</td>
<td>Politicisation is indicated by the presence of hegemonic or counter-hegemonic strategies, control-seeking, zero-sum games and actions aimed at gaining relative advantages over other participants in the water regime.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approval mechanisms, decision-making; rules and procedures about appropriation or access</td>
<td>Politicisation is evident when control-seeking, zero-sum strategies and seeking relative advantages, rather than functional-rational considerations, are behind the setup of these institutional arrangements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enforcement and monitoring</td>
<td>There is politicisation when (political) obstacles are in the way of institutions that regulate enforcement, monitoring and sanctioning; participants and non-participants do not feel incentivised enough to follow the rules and the institutional response to free-riding, cheating and sabotage fails.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional bargaining</td>
<td>Bargaining becomes more politicised when it is done at higher political echelons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional structure</td>
<td>The functional structure becomes more politicised when technical (hydrological) matters are forwarded to higher political levels.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Varying degrees of politicisation*

Politicisation within each of these three mechanisms can be conceived in varying magnitudes with technocratic manifestations at one end and entirely politicised manifestations at the other end of the spectrum. Degrees of (de)politicisation are thus arrayed on a continuum which functions as a heuristic to probe cases of politicised (or depoliticized) transboundary water governance. We have attempted to visualise this in figure 1.
An important question for using this heuristic model is asking how variation in politicisation can be gauged. As a starting point we formulate the axiom that whenever discourse, linkage-politics, or institutional arrangements promote, emphasise and display statist presumptions about authority, territory and sovereignty, or involve control-seeking, zero-sum games to gain a relative advantage over other regime-participants there is a movement towards a more politicised situation. Whenever discourse, linkage-politics, or institutional arrangements promote, emphasise and display functional-rational considerations, or intend to increase predictability among people and practices there is a movement to a more technocratic—depoliticised—situation.

Drivers of politicisation

Five factors may function as triggers or drivers of politicisation. They are expected to cause variance in politicisation of transboundary water governance. First, scarcity leads to politicisation on all levels of water governance (Gleick, 1993; Allan, 2007). Water scarcity prompts decisions about access to and allocation of the water resource (Molle, 2009) and involves actors at the intergovernmental, governmental, regional, community, and household levels (Rathgeber, 1996). Second, hydro-geographical asymmetry will play a considerable role in the relations among nations over water (Dinar, 2000). That is, the upstream / downstream dynamic tends to influence the strategies and behaviour of parties in a transboundary basin (Cascao, 2008; Daoudy, 2009; Dinar, 2009). In a similar way, existing power asymmetry between riparian states may trigger politicisation as a strategy for compensation or exacerbation. Fourth, the presence of conflict between riparian states, is a driver too. Although violent conflict over water itself is uncommon (Wolf, 1998), conflicts in other domains may spill over to domains of water governance. And when conflict involves politics—as it often does—water governance becomes politicised. But also within the water domain conflict of interests arises as a result of the contested nature of the resource. Finally, external events matter. In line with Kingdon (1995), we argue that issues on the political agenda are susceptible to the influence of sudden events. The unpredictability of (sudden) external events renders them a driver of politicisation. Such an unpredictability increases uncertainty and can prompt quick decisions or ad hoc solutions otherwise politically unimaginable or feasible.

Table 4 shows the drivers we have found and their impact on politicisation.
Table 4 Drivers and their impacts on the politicisation of transboundary water governance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Driver</th>
<th>Impacts on politicisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scarcity</td>
<td>Phenomena like draughts, water shortages and other scarcity-related occurrences inform discourse, justify issue-linkages or affect institutional arrangements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographical asymmetry</td>
<td>Upstream advantages or downstream disadvantages are used to influence the discourse of negotiations, e.g. by stressing the responsibilities of an upstream country, or spur linkages with non-water issues or affect institutional arrangements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power asymmetry</td>
<td>The stronger party in conventional terms (military and economic power) pushes for linkages or institutional arrangements it cannot achieve without exercising power because the weaker riparian is not advantaged by cooperating. The weaker party uses counter-hegemonic strategies in response.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>Conflicts from outside the regime (spill-over or even violence from non-water domains) can be reflected in discourses, linkages and the institutional arrangements. Within a regime disagreement may occur through polarising positions e.g. on normative issues or access to the resource.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External shock events</td>
<td>Exogenous events, such as election outcomes, violence, etc. are pointed at, or used as a rationale, for framing discourse, justifying issue-linkages and changing institutional arrangements.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In sum we argue that: “transboundary water governance will be at risk of becoming (more) politicised under conditions of increased water scarcity and asymmetric geographical configurations in the basin; unbalanced power-relations between riparian states, increased conflict, and external events.”


Before applying our framework in an assessment of the politicisation of the Israeli-Palestinian Joint Water Committee, we will first briefly introduce this case.

The Oslo Agreements and the Joint Water Committee

Prior to the 1995 Oslo agreements, Israeli-Palestinian water relations were not institutionalised in an official joint body or platform. With the signing of the Oslo II Accords in 1995, i.e. the Interim Agreement on water, de facto legislation that governs joint Israeli-Palestinian water interests has been put in place. Following the Accords a fragmented system of control over water resources was set up on the West Bank. The Palestinian Authority (PA) has full control over area A that includes the larger Palestinian cities. Palestinians have civil control over area B, which covers most Palestinian towns and villages, but security control is done jointly with the Israelis. Area C is under full control of the Civil Administration (CA), a branch of the Israeli Defence Forces. The settlements—many of which are adjoined to Jerusalem—and Israeli military bases are located in area C. There are no Israeli settlements in
areas A and B. These areas are not contiguous, however, making makes the West Bank a complicated landscape for water management.

Under the Interim Agreement the Joint Water Committee (JWC) is the primary forum for negotiations, decision-making and joint management (Katz & Fischhendler, 2011). The Interim Agreement mandates the JWC to serve as a vehicle for cooperation through data sharing, joint fact finding, and the resolution of water-related disputes. However, the procedures for achieving these aims are not specified. Hence the JWC meets infrequently and there are no fixed time-windows for it to reach a decision. Indeed, some issues are parked for more than 10 years. Moreover, the JWC does not disclose any minutes of its meetings to the public, and there are no provisions for third-party observation or review. (Brooks & Trottier, 2012).

Table 5 The mandate of the JWC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The JWC</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The JWC is comprised of an equal number of representatives from each side. All decisions of the JWC shall be reached by consensus, including the agenda, its procedures and other matters. The function of the JWC shall be to deal with all water and sewage related issues in the West Bank including, inter alia (Kneseet, 2000):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Coordinated management of water resources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Coordinated management of water and sewage systems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Protection of water resources and water and sewage systems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Exchange of information relating to water and sewage laws and regulations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Overseeing the operation of the joint supervision and enforcement mechanism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. Resolution of water and sewage related disputes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g. Cooperation in the field of water and sewage, as detailed in this Article.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h. Arrangements for water supply from one side to the other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. Monitoring systems. The existing regulations concerning measurement and monitoring shall remain in force until the JWC decides otherwise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>j. Other issues of mutual interest in the sphere of water and sewage.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The JWC has mainly focussed on the transboundary mountain aquifer which underlies most of the West Bank and parts of Israel (figure 2). This karstic system contains high-quality water with relatively rapid flow rates and is mostly exploited by deep drilling. Most of the 679 million cubic metres (MCM) annual recharge comes from precipitation in the upstream parts of the West Bank (Knesset, 2000). Figure 2 shows that the mountain aquifer is divided into a western aquifer, with groundwater flow to the Mediterranean; the northern aquifer with a flow to the Jordan Valley and the eastern aquifer which lies almost entirely under the West Bank. Since abstraction rates are far greater than recharge rates the resource is under stress. Pollution through salinity, littering, poor sewage systems and lack of wastewater treatment in the West Bank worsen this situation.

Although both the Israelis and the Palestinians have to deal with low water availability, consumption rates are much higher on Israeli side (Zeitoun et al., 2009). Israel abstracts from the mountain aquifer only the quantities specified in the Interim Agreement, and is less dependent on the mountain aquifer as it takes most if her water from other sources and reuses most of it. The country has been successful in developing technologies allowing for comfortable livelihoods with little water, whereas the Palestinians were not able to develop as fast mostly because of lacking financial and organisational resources (Eckstein & Eckstein, 2003) and negligent management (Gvirtzman, 2012). Palestinians in the West Bank are almost entirely dependent upon the mountain aquifer and denied access to the Jordan River. The JWC has failed to address these problems and has been struggling to implement many projects precisely because water is highly sensitive for both sides and inevitably linked to higher politics (Levy & Meyer, 2007). In practice, the JWC has mainly dealt with sewage and waste water treatment (Brooks & Trottier, 2012).
**The politicisation of the JWC**

In 22 meetings we found 74 indications for politicisation. The minutes from these meetings were systematically coded, first by identifying the three mechanisms involved—discourse, linkages, or institutional arrangements—and subsequently by linking them to the likely driver. Figure 3 indicates how many indications of politicisation of the JWC could be found over the years. A slight peak in politicisation occurred in 1996-97 in which discussions took place about price calculation and the returning of VAT collected on behalf of the Palestinian Authority (PA), sewage treatment and well-drilling. The violent intifada years (2000-2004) show the lowest degree of politicisation. The JWC met infrequently during these years, and, after 2001, the JWC also started meeting informally without keeping minutes (Brooks & Trottier, 2012). The issues dealt with in this period were mostly technical and urgent (Jägerskog, 2007). The last period (2009) seems to be the most politicised. We notice a more explicit role of the Civil Administration and encounter issues like pending permits for well-drilling (a frustration for Palestinians), illegal wells and lacking sewage treatment in the West Bank (the latter two are frustrations expressed by the Israelis). In contrast to the earlier years there are a few instances where conflict over settlements is an explicit driver. We must however bear in mind that much more and better quality data was available for 2008-09.

![Fig. 3 Politicisation over time in 38 JWC meetings (1995 and 2009).](image)

Illustrations for politicisation through discourse are few. On one occasion, when Israel approves an urgent Palestinian request for the installation of 9 filling points a problem of scarcity is framed as a humanitarian issue. In the early, there was much discussion on the pricing of water. Although the Oslo Accords clearly state the price for water should be based on their real cost, i.e. viewed as a commodity, Palestinians nevertheless argue attention should be given to the payment for water as part of total income of the population. Here, the resource is implicitly framed as a social good. No instances were found where hydrological information was distorted or where expert opinion was ignored.

Surprisingly, we also found no instances where the alignment of various functions of the water resource is demonstrably in favour of the basin-hegemon Israel. This may be due to the fact that Israel is not dependent on the mountain aquifer, which allows them to stress the environmental quality of the mountain aquifer. We did find occasions where a potential intra-basin linkage is ignored. In one such case, Palestinians refuse to accept an Israeli proposal to transport sewage from Tulkarem on the West Bank to Israel for treatment, explaining that they view the wastewater as their own water resource which should not be treated in Israel.

Most illustrations of politicisation found concern institutional arrangements. Each of the institutional elements mentioned in table 3 was found at least once. Sovereignty seems to be favoured in the dominant
governance paradigm and prevents wastewater treatment from being seen as a strictly environmental problem. The Israelis have expressed disappointment about the lack of Palestinian sewage treatment. Palestinian waste water is flowing into Israel as by 2009, only one wastewater treatment plant had been built on Palestinian territory. The Palestinians on the other hand state that sewage from the Israeli settlements is also leaking into the aquifer. Politicisation of institutional arrangements has also taken place to the favour of the hegemon. Israel collects VAT on behalf of the PA and occasionally withholds the return to the PA arguing that this is a way to apply the polluters pay principle (also see Schalimtzek & Fischhendler, 2009). Approval mechanisms became politicised the moment Palestinians suggested to approve projects in the JWC, even the cases in which the CA has refused to grant permits. Israelis responded to this, arguing that it is pointless to approve projects without the CA permits. In this example, the JWCs approval mechanisms and decision-making rules do not contribute to an increase in predictability among participants as they are subjected to external influences. Another example concerns themulti-layered structure of the JWC and its subcommittees. Scope and mandates of certain committees tend to be vague, which creates uncertainties. Joint Technical Committee (JTC) meetings have moved discussions on projects and issues to general JWC meetings or political echelons outside the JWC, such as a discussion on well applications. Without any motivation in the minutes, the latter was forwarded to the Israeli Ministry of Defence.

Drivers of JWC politicisation

According to our framework, politicisation in our case study could have been brought about by scarcity, geographical and power asymmetry, conflict or external events. In the 74 observations of politicisation at total of 100 drivers could be found. Single observations of politicisation could have been triggered by more than one driver. In 10 occasions, scarcity was a driver. Apart from loss through leakages limited recharge makes water scarce in the West Bank area. Palestinian West Bank dwellers drill illegal wells, often because of a lack of immediate alternatives. Israelis stress that the PA has a responsibility to fix leakages and only allow well drillings at approved locations. Meanwhile, the institutional response (i.e. JSETs) to prevent illegal drillings is clearly failing.

Conflict and power asymmetry seem to be the most likely drivers for politicisation (in 39 and 46 occasions). Confictual positions formed the basis of politicised framing in discussions on the calculation for the price of water. Where Israelis were inclined to specify and charge the real costs of water, as stipulated in the Oslo agreement, Palestinians were pushing to take into account their ability to pay in relation to their income. Another example of conflict being the underlying driver occurred when Palestinians opted not to connect to pipelines that also served a settlement. We found power asymmetry to be inherent in the Oslo Accords, which allow, for all intents and purposes, Israel with administrative tentacles in the West Bank area. The Civil Authority, the Israeli water company Mekorot, the Israeli Defence Forces and Israeli VAT collection are examples in case. This has implanted power asymmetry into the JWC which invites politicisation from both sides. Politicisation as a result of geographical asymmetries hardly occurs. Only 2 instances were found, both involving sewage streams flowing into downstream parts of Israel. This geographical asymmetry tends to be subordinated to the existing power asymmetry; literature supports this hypothesis by stressing that conventional measures of power, like military, political and economic strength often seem to determine the regional power balance between nations in a transboundary water context (e.g. Giordano & Wolf, 2003; Dinar, 2009). Furthermore, the JWC regime seems to be resilient against increased politicisation as a result of external events, with only 3 instances found. These being hostilities and violence during the beginning of the intifada years.

As said before above illustrations of politicisation may not be representative for the overall modus operandi of the JWC. Due to limitations in the available data it is hard to say whether the evidence found for the occurrence of politicisation is commonplace, rare or somewhere in between.
Discussion

Since the term politicisation seems to be used ambiguously, we have tried to conceptualise it, specifically for the context of transboundary water governance. We have introduced an analytical approach, in which we look at the mechanisms of politicisation as well as the drivers behind it. Our application of this framework in a case study illustrated its usefulness, but also made clear that further refinement is needed.

Some elements of politicisation of discourse could not be traced in our empirical material. We found no indications that hydrological information was distorted and abused to fit a certain political narrative nor did we find dismissal of expert opinion. This doesn’t mean that distortion and ignorance of experts has not taken place. Minutes of meetings are probably a limited source of data to find these manifestations of politicisation. Additional interviews with key informants or records of public debates may shed more light on the presence of these discursive elements. It also proved challenging to make a distinction between the indicators related to the “framing of problems” or “framing of resources” on one hand and the underlying dominant governance paradigm on the other. Obviously paradigms feed into the framing, however, “framing”, here, relates to how something is construed through discourse, whereas the “governance paradigm” in this context refers to held core beliefs that influence decision-makers. Moreover, in our case study we found more indications of politicisation through institutional arrangements than in the other two mechanisms. This is probably due to the fact that we have opted for the JWC as unit of analysis. It is likely, for example, that a focus on media sources and public documents would have stressed the importance of politicisation through discourse.

Next, we haven’t addressed the mutual relationships between the discerned drivers. We were not able to gauge the relative weight of each driver. We have found that power asymmetry and external conflict provide ample room for politicisation to occur, but they may be related. And that power asymmetry, certainly in conventional measures, can obfuscate geographical asymmetries. Another point left mostly unaddressed is the influence of depoliticising phenomena. The latter is beyond the scope of this paper, but we found a substantial number of manifestations of =de-politicisation.

The framework we have developed deserves a further elaboration. This can be done by applying it in studies of transboundary water governance in other conflict-prone and power asymmetric basins like the Mekong, Euphrates, Tigris or the Nile, but also in studies addressing less controversial cases such as water relations between Belgium and The Netherlands. By comparing different cases we may get a better insight in the relative weight of each of the drivers, and new drivers may be added. Based on such analyses we may also acquire insights into the normative aspects of politicisation and reveal in which ways and under which conditions politicisation may result in better or worse water governance. The framework we have elaborated upon in this paper has provided some initial starting points to study such an instrumental role of politicisation.

References


