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## Water politics within the Palestinian nation-state building

The case of the Dheisha refugee camp and the Bethlehem district (West Bank)

*Politiques de l'eau dans la construction d'un État-nation palestinien. Le cas du camp de réfugiés de Deisha et du district de Bethléem (West Bank)*

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**WATER POLITICS WITHIN THE PALESTINIAN  
NATION-STATE BUILDING**  
**The case of the Dheisha refugee camp and the Bethlehem  
district (West Bank)**

Anita DE DONATO\*

This ethnographic research investigates the structural and administrative conditions of domestic water control and supply in the Dheisha refugee camp, compared to the surrounding Bethlehem district (West Bank) where it is situated. It analyzes the vertical and horizontal social relations (Hoodfar, 1998) occurring daily among the refugees in satisfying their need for domestic water – an essential resource for survival. I will show the social changes that the new PNA's (Palestinian National Authority) organization of domestic water supply has engendered and how refugees and citizens in the West Bank locally perceive the present situation.

Water management and supply are considered as social and epistemic interfaces (Long & Van Der Ploeg, 1989; Long & Long, 1992; Arce & Long, 1993) where different lifeworlds – understood as specific configurations of space, time and experience (Arce, 1997) – intersect around water issues.

The analysis focuses particularly on the political dynamics into play in the competition for domestic water resources. Domestic water is considered as a public sphere, where the conflict for

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defining refugee status is expressed, as a political arena where the legitimacy of the rising Palestinian State – represented by the PNA – is at stake.

The research was carried out during a six months' fieldwork (from July 2009 to January 2010) as a guest of a family in the Dheisha refugee camp, through the participant observation of the daily practices through which refugees gain access to domestic water, facing the discriminating water policies implemented by the PNA and the Israeli military occupation. This ethnographic method has been completed by gathering of information through open interviews with employers of the PNA and of UNRWA (United Nation Relief and Works Agency) and with members of the Dheisha communities and the West Bank society.

Following an actor-oriented approach (Arce & Long, *op. cit.*), the analysis of the social practices that develop around water show the relations of solidarity and conflict established by the dwellers of the refugee camp. These relations shed light to the dimensions of belonging, which form the basis of the individual and collective identity of refugees, and perform the hierarchies that characterize the heterogeneous refugee community.

I will avoid an essentialist and deterministic representation of the social reality by representing its multiple characteristics, indeterminateness and unpredictability. For this purpose, it is important to underline the heterogeneity of the social units and interest groups considered, which are neither homogeneous in their perceptions, nor in their practices. The subjective choices and experiences of the social actors are considered as fundamental dimensions of analysis in order to understand the social dynamics and meanings collectively shared.

### **The water language in the conflicts for defining the refugee status**

#### *The political meaning of the infrastructure development*

The water and sewage works in Dheisha were built by the Israeli military forces at the beginning of the 1980s, while they were controlling the West Bank (from 1967 to 1994). After the creation of the PNA in 1994, in order to reduce the costs of building of

Dheisha's water supply systems, UNRWA has connected them to the pipeline built between the municipalities of Bethlehem and Hebron in 1999, thanks to a USAID (United States Agency for International Development) funding. This pipeline represents the first Palestinian water network independent from the Israeli network (Trottier, 1999) and is administered by the PNA, which supplies the water to Dheisha dwellers.

The connection between the waterworks of the refugee camp and the one of the urban space is part of the continuous process of urbanization and of infrastructure development that has physically spread the Dheisha refugee camp into the outskirts of Bethlehem. Nevertheless, the Dheisha refugee camp differs from the surrounding territory in its administration. While the area A<sup>1</sup>, where the camp is situated, lies under the PNA's administration and control, its space and resources are administrated by UNRWA. The agency has rented the land on which Dheisha was built in 1948 to the local government for 99 years. Originally the land was rented to the Jordanian government, which after the Arab-Israeli War in 1948 occupied the West Bank and annexed it to the Jordanian state (while the Egyptian army occupied the Gaza Strip). The Jordanian state lost the control of the West Bank after the Six-Day War in 1967, when the Israeli army occupied it and the Gaza Strip (Pappe, 2004).

The waterworks pipes laid by the Israeli occupation authorities under the sewage system have corroded over the years, thus allowing sewage waste filters into the water pipes; as a result water is contaminated. Moreover, the pump that channels the water from the PNA's pipeline – which runs along the main road that represents the lower border of the refugee camp – into the smaller pipes that supply the Dheisha houses is not powerful enough to carry the water

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<sup>1</sup> The Oslo Agreement of '93 decided the fragmentation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip into the areas A (under the administration and security control of the PNA); the areas B (under the administration of the PNA as regards civilian affairs, but under the security control of the Israeli military forces); the areas C (under the administration and security control of the Israeli military forces, even if they do not provide the Palestinian population with educational or health services, which are left to the responsibility of the PNA).

to the upper part of the refugee camp. Here the families do not benefit from the national water allocation. These pressure problems are not only caused by technical problems related to the natural inclination of the hill where the refugee camp is situated; they also reflect the political history of the refugee camp. Pending the resolution of the refugee issue, UNRWA established and organized the refugee camps as places with a temporary character, characterized by limited space and arranged infrastructures. Despite the camp's regulations that ban its shelters' vertical expansion, the refugee camps' shelters have expanded upwards to accommodate four generations of refugees, as in a timeless temporary place.

As an employer of the Department of Health of UNRWA told me, although the maintenance of Dheisha waterworks and sewage system is one of the UNRWA's duties, in order to overcome the structural problems of the existing waterworks, the agency is constructing together with the PNA new water and sewage pipes (with USAID funding). UNRWA's discourse about the construction of new waterworks and sewage pipes in the refugee camp focuses on modernization ideologies and on the need to improve living conditions, thus neutralizing the refugees' political issues. On the contrary, the refugees have traditionally perceived the infrastructure development as a denial of their right of return to their original homes (now in Israel), as means of resettling them (*tawṭn*) and normalizing (*taḥī'a*) the refugee camp as a proletarian suburb, or a permanent « place of exile » (Farah, 1998).

By connecting the waterworks of Dheisha to the urban water network and maintaining them, the PNA aims at extending its control over the space and over the symbolic and material resources in the refugee camp, making the refugees' body progressively more dependent on the PNA's administration. Similarly to the Jordan context analyzed by Van Aken (2012; Van Aken *et al.*, 2007), in the West Bank water projects serve the spread of the state bureaucracy in the refugee camps, thus decreasing its « refugee character » (Sayigh, 1998) according to the USA strategies for refugee resettlement. After the Second World War, the United States began to dominate the UN's practices diplomatically and economically and

believed that it was possible to solve the political problems of refugees through the economic development of the Middle East, which would have favoured their integration in the region, avoiding their right to a large scale return (Schiff, 1995).

Refugees give a political value and meaning to the UNRWA's administration and to its definitions of « camp » and « refugee »<sup>2</sup>, which are considered as symbols of the temporary nature of the refugee camp and as a guarantee that the unsolved problem of the Palestinian refugees, who are waiting to go back to their lands, will not be set aside. Nevertheless, the second and third generations of refugees – unlike the first that lived in Dheisha and sought to implement their « right of return » – accept the improvement of the living conditions inside the refugee camp, realizing their long-term permanence as guests in the liminal territory of the refugee camp.

*Shaping citizens through water scarcity*

« Is there water from the water tap today? » This is a question that the members of my host family in Dheisha usually ask each other in the morning. Most of times the answer is negative: « No, there is no national water (*mayya baladiyya*), today also ».

The houses in the Dheisha refugee camp are characterized by the presence of some metal cisterns placed on the roof of every house, where the families store water (*mayya*) in order to face the frequent long periods (up to one month) during which the water taps in the houses are dry. In order to satisfy the daily needs of domestic water, the large families living in the houses in the refugee camp, which often comprise three or four generations, have to ration the water stored in the cisterns, locally called « water of the cisterns » (*mayya al-khazzānāt*). To have a wash, every member of my host family uses a little quantity of water, drawing it from a pail with a little bowl or a glass. During my fieldwork, I learned to wash using just three or four glasses of water. People in the house flush the toilet when there are feces, but not urine, with a bowl of dirty water, used before to wash the clothes. The women usually wait to have

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<sup>2</sup> Farah has maintained the same regarding the refugee camp of Al-Baq'a in Jordan (Farah, *op. cit.*).

enough water to wash the floors in the house and the mountain of dirty clothes accumulated for weeks. When they do the washing up, they make an accurate selection of the most necessary dishes, glasses and crockery, being careful to use less water as possible. Since the availability of water to drink usually is not enough, the family drinks soft drinks like Coca Cola, which cost more or less like the « water of the city » (*mayya madaniyya*), as the water bottled and sold in the shops is locally called.

When I asked to some refugees how much does « national water » cost, the answer was always the same:

We refuse to pay for water, since we are refugees. In this territory we are guests!

While in the areas of the West Bank administrated by the PNA Palestinian citizens pay the PNA a water bill charged according to the consumption of every dwelling, the refugee status is associated with particular economic and social rights established by the Arab states and then by the PLO since decades. Refugees do not pay for domestic water, electricity, rubbish collection, waste disposal and government taxes for commercial activities within the refugee camp.

Following the death of Yasser Arafat, the first PNA President and founder of the PLO, the PNA has been trying to force refugees to pay for water, increasingly restricting water supplies to the houses. In so doing, the PNA attempts to shape and integrate refugees as citizens in proletarian suburbs (Sayigh, *op. cit.*; Destremau, 1994), extending the « hydraulic citizenship » (Anand, 2011) to them, understood as a form of belonging to the city realized by the legitimated access to water resources from municipal networks.

Dheisha dwellers resist these PNA's strategies and discourses, collectively deciding not to pay for water, in order to put the emphasis on the different status of refugees, compared to the PNA's citizens.

Mediating the relationship between the PNA's government and the interest group of refugees, water is a medium through which these two political actors compete for the definition of the status of

the refugee camp and its meaning. In the same way as it was produced, the refugee identity can be dismantled, displaying a clear example of anthropological transmutation and the importance of de-naturalizing the identity concept, which is a constantly evolving product of a dynamic process of social construction.

### **Water access and the heterogeneity of the refugee community**

#### *The fluid border between legal and illegal water*

One hot day in August, some young Dheisha refugees held a demonstration directed at the PNA in protest against the lack of water in the road in front of the refugee camp. This kind of demonstration usually is organized in summer, when the daily need of domestic water is greater and the water stored is not enough to satisfy it. During this demonstration the boys put up barricades with heaps of rubble and rubbish and burned them, impeding the traffic flow and causing damages to the road. They symbolically occupied the space outside the refugee camp, under the PNA's administration, with the aim of asserting the claims of refugees.

However, not all refugees took part in the demonstration, thus reflecting the unequal conditions of access to water inside the camp. All the people in Dheisha share their refugee condition and, facing the authorities and interest groups outside the refugee camp, claim a common feeling of cultural and political belonging, acting as a community. Nevertheless, the unequal access to water creates a discontinuity in the daily experiences of Dheisha families, which gives rise to different practices of resistance but also hostilities among them.

As I put it before, the pressure problems in the waterworks cause an infrastructure and spatial asymmetry in the access to water. The families living in the upper part of the Dheisha camp do not benefit from the national water allocation.

In order to satisfy the daily requirements of water, some plumbers belonging to these families built an illegal set of rubber pipes that diverts water from the main pipe, which supplies a nearby Palestinian private stone cutter company, to their houses. Water is diverted before it flows through the water meter of the Palestinian



private company, thus avoiding the increase of the fee that should be paid to the PNA. At the same times, the houses are supplied, irregularly, usually two times in a month, without refugees knowing the exact quantity of the water they will take. Usually there are no conflicts between families for the appropriation of the « water from the stone cutter company » (*mayya al-kassarāt*), as refugees call it, since the available water is sufficient to fill all the cisterns in their houses.

These refugees justify the stealing of water from the PNA in collusion with the municipal employees, who are aware of this strategy, as a collective practice that contributes to the refugee struggle against the PNA, by competing with the administration and its rules for the control of this resource and getting autonomy in satisfying their needs.

Water distribution within the refugee camp is unequal even lengthwise, since the taps that regulate the water flow in the pipes providing the houses in the different zones of Dheisha are opened in different moments and for different periods of time. Some families are favoured compared to others, since they are supplied with a greater quantity of water thanks to personal social ties with people involved in the PNA's administration. Thanks to their ability to provide the access to water and other public services, acting as brokers between the PNA and the local dwellers, these people re-inscribe their roles of political authority in the refugee camp and decentralize the PNA's control of water resources. Even if these relations are negotiated through the egalitarian language of hospitality and the ritualized practices of visiting (Hannoyer, 1989; Ababsa, 2001, 2009), they display a discretionary power<sup>3</sup> on which new hierarchies are built. The access to these relations, which are locally interpreted as *wāsṭu* (mediation or mediator) relations, is determined by the social status of the families and it represents a factor becoming more and more important in reflecting the status of the families.

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<sup>3</sup> « Power » is understood here as the ability to appropriate the symbolic and material realities in order to act politically.

Refugees who hold an important position in the PNA's institutions get a personal power in the local hierarchy, which enables them to mobilize a demonstration in the refugee camp and later stop it, by appealing to the low-income population that depends on them for the access to resources. By exploiting the social marginalization created by the living conditions, these actors show their ability to control the camp. So doing, they strengthen their position in the PNA's institutions, getting privileges and the opportunity to flout the law without problem. Due of this context, many refugees did not participate in the demonstration in protest against the lack of water.

*Wāsṭa* is the main local pattern of power distribution, through which refugees mediate vertical relations that regulate the distribution of resources by the PNA, UNRWA and the local NGOs. In the frame of the top-down approach that characterizes the planning of water supply, local people attempt to acquire through these practices a space for autonomy (Van Aken, 2003, 2012), adapting to new environments and bureaucracies in order to manipulate and change them from within (Appadurai, 1996; Arce and Long, *op. cit.*).

The access to domestic water resources in the refugee camp is not totally regulated by the PNA's techno-political systems, which consist of the network of environmental, technological, political and social relations that defines the legal and policy regimes of the PNA's water management. Depending on infra-political practices (Scott, 1990), understood as politically mediated acts, it exceeds and destabilizes the regimes of management, marginalization and exclusion produced by the PNA's politics of water distribution.

*The moral economy of water*

My host extended family was organizing the marriage party of one of its male members. The women complained to the men about the lack of water in the house: « We have not water even to offer a coffee! »

During the public events like marriages, funerals and conflict resolutions between families, the availability of water is considered as a symbol of the honour and status of the family organizing the

meeting, displayed and negotiated through the ritualized practices of hospitality and generosity, like the offering of coffee.

In this particular occasion, in order to satisfy the need of water, the members of the family collected money with the aim of buying « tank water » (*tank mayya*), as the water sold by private actors who own water tankers is locally called. Thanks to their wealthy condition, these citizens buy water from the PNA at the close network outlets and sell it to the people at a higher price<sup>4</sup>. During my fieldwork, the price was decided by the local water salesmen's oligopolies, favoured by the lack of national rules on water price and quality (Trottier, 1999).

In June 2012 the PNA has established rules to co-opt and control these private salesmen. Who wants to buy an additional quantity of water has to get permission from the PNA, which sends the owners of the water tankers registered under the PNA, following the chronological order of the requests. Despite the water price determination by the PNA, some salesmen continue to sell water in a private way at a higher price<sup>5</sup>, exploiting the need of people that cannot wait the long waiting list of the PNA's supply. The private management of water supply generates a black market, creating a critical locus of authority that hinders the PNA's centralization of water resources.

The new conditions of domestic water access and management, imposed by the Israeli military forces, UNRWA and the PNA, have engendered new values and meanings connected to water, and new values and criteria for the building of the authority roles in the refugee camp. The access to domestic water reflects the family status – increasingly determined by its social class – and it is grounded on the growing economic segmentation of the community of Dheisha, and the West Bank society. The resulting patterns of

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<sup>4</sup> PNA's price for domestic water in 2009: on average 2.5 shekel/m<sup>3</sup>. Price for water from tankers: 200-250 shekel/10 m<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> PNA's price for domestic water in 2012 (increasing with the quantity): from 4.5 shekel/m<sup>3</sup> (5-10 m<sup>3</sup>) to 7.5 shekel/m<sup>3</sup> (upper that 30 m<sup>3</sup>). Legal price for water from tankers: 100 shekel/10 m<sup>3</sup>; illegal price: 300-400 shekel/10 m<sup>3</sup>.

identification and exclusion among the dwellers in the refugee camp are more and more connected to their class of belonging and economic segmentation.

### **Water and the meaning of community**

As it often happens, one day my host family found the water cisterns empty. For some days we could not wash and we had to manage with the few clean clothes and dishes. Mohammed, the father of the family, decided to ask his two brothers, who live in a nearby area in the refugee camp, to give him some water. The three brothers built a temporary link between the cisterns of the two houses through a rubber pipe and a pump to transfer the water.

If the families cannot cope with the lack of water, they exchange this resource among each other. These practices usually are acted among the conjugal families (*usrāt*) comprising the extended family (*'āila*), which is the main source of social security and of resistance to the daily oppression, and represents the main dimension of belonging of each individual.

Nevertheless, these practices of mutual solidarity are not shared by all the extended family. Mohammed's patrilineal uncle does not participate because of the conflicts at stake between him and his nephew, which Mohammed explained, saying:

When we were children and our father died, we were poor. Our uncle was wealthy and dealt with us as we were inferior compared to his sons, who were better educated and dressed. When we grew up and became economically independent, we decided to break our relations with him and his sons. Until now they think to be better than us and they don't greet us.

This case illustrates an ongoing process of fragmentation of the extended family, encouraged by the allocation system applied by UNRWA, which considers the conjugal family as economically independent (Abdallah-Latte, 1998). Moreover, the spread of the waged job as main means of support makes the last generations of refugees economically more independent from the oldest male relatives of the patrilineal extended family (Moors, 1989).

# THE REFUGEE CAMP OF DHEISHA

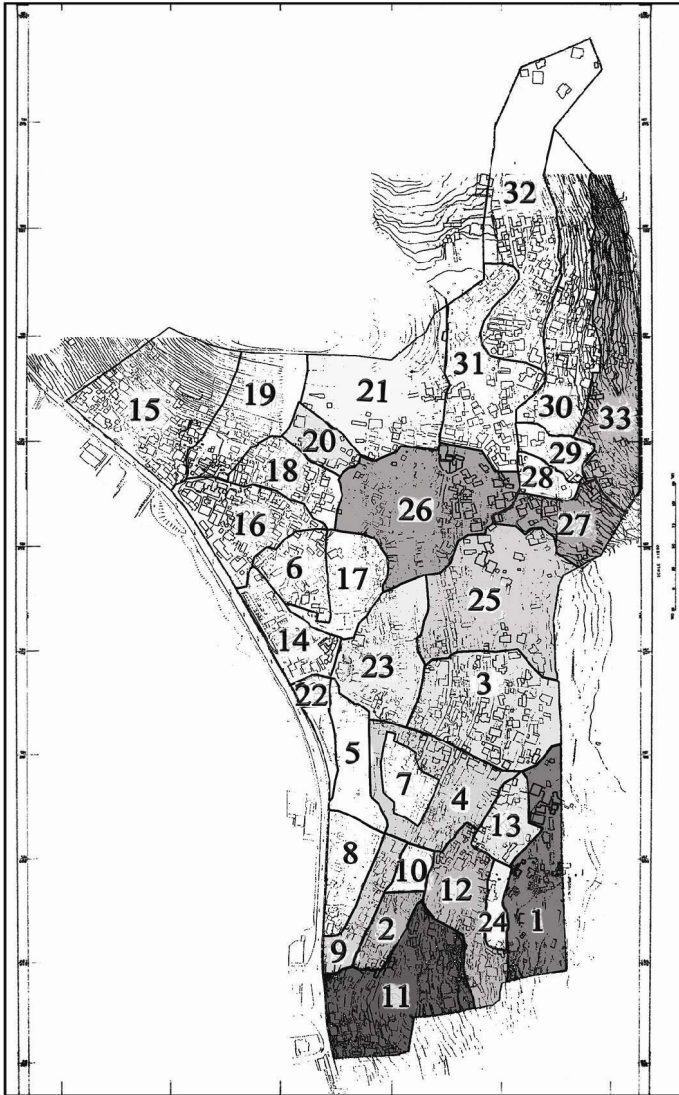


Figure 1 : Social map of Dheisha camp drawn by a local family

ILLUSTRATION OF THE SOCIAL MAP OF DHEISHA CAMP		
NAME IN ITALIC TYPEFACE : NAME OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD		n/p : NOT PRESENT
NAME IN ROMAN TYPEFACE : NAME OF THE VILLEGE OF ORIGIN		
1.	<i>HĀRAT AL-ĤAJĀJIRA</i> - AL- JŴRA - 'AJJŴUR	15.
2.	<i>HĀRAT AL-LAĤĀM</i> - BEYT 'ITĀB	16.
3.	n/p - ZAKARĀ	17.
4.	n/p - MUGHALLIS	18.
5.	<i>MANTIQTAT AL-MADĀRIS</i> (SCHOOLS' AREA)	19.
6.	<i>HĀRAT AL-AFANDY</i> - DEYR BĀN  AL-JĀMI' AL-KABŶR (THE BIG MOSQUE)	20.
7.	<i>HĀRA MIZHIR</i> - KHULDA	21.
8.	n/p - TAL AT-TURMUS - BEYT JIBRŶN - AL-FALLŴJA (IN GHAZA) - ZAKARĀ - 'AJJŴR	22.
9.	<i>HĀRAT AL-GHAZĀZUWWA</i> - GHAZA	23.
10.	n/p - RAS ABŴ 'AMMĀR - ZAKARĀ - 'ILLĀR	24.
11.	<i>HĀRAT AL-JIRĀSHIYYA</i> - JIRĀSH	25.
12.	<i>HĀRAT AL-KABŴYYA</i> - AL-KABŴ - BEYT JIBRŶN - 'ILLĀR	26.
13.	n/p - JIRĀSH	27.
14.	<i>WAKĀLAT AL-GHŴTH (UNRWA)</i> <i>IBDĀ' (NAME OF A LOCAL NGO)</i>	28.
		29.
		30.
		31.
		32.
		33.

Figure 2 : Illustration of the social map of Dheisha camp

The rubber pipes built between the cisterns of the houses in order to exchange water are material connections that also reflect the social ties among the neighbours in the refugee camp. As the following social map (fig. 1) drawn by a family at Dheisha shows, despite the close proximity of the houses, which reflects the lack of an UNRWA building plan for the refugee camp (since in the past a quick resolution of the refugee issue was expected), its space is conceived by refugees as divided in different neighborhoods (*hārāt*). Each *hāra* is called by the name of the village of origin or by the tribal group (*hamūla*) to which most of the families claim to belong.

Through this spatial organization, refugees undertake a continuous creative reconstruction of the ties on which the tribal organization of the evacuated villages was, once, grounded. They rebuild their social world and create « the universal metaphoric village of origin » (Farah, *op. cit.*: 6).

People belonging to the same tribal group are understood as tied by patrilineal kinship relations, even if these relations are not strictly genealogical. Following the dispersion of the tribal groups caused by Israeli military occupation of the Palestinian villages in 1948, refugees reshape the genealogical networks through marriages and other political strategies. The tribal group is not a social and political entity, a corporate group that has been preserved as a remnant of the past. Following a deconstructive approach (Dresch, 2009), tribalism is a model to establish and legitimize solidarity relations. It is an idiom of solidarity subject to change and a strategy to express claims related to the contemporary economic and political frame.

The sentence that a young man of Dheisha told me well expresses the role of the *hamūla* in the life of the refugees:

The *hamūla* comes and helps me if I run over someone with a car, but not if my family is dying from starvation or thirst.

During the private contexts of family hospitality, of marriage and tribal negotiation to solve conflicts among families, refugees mobilize and reinvent relations, social practices and values characterizing the tribal system of the villages before their

evacuation, and adapt them to the new context of the refugee camp. So doing, they shape a representation of their origins, whose memory is kept through generations, thus building their social identity. Refugees consider the reinvented tribal traditions and practices as symbols of a supposed cultural authenticity (Zureik, 2003). It composes a language through which they appropriate space and negotiate the meaning of home and community, which in the absence of a shared land, is grounded on the creative construction of a common feeling of cultural belonging and intimacy. Facing the asymmetrical power relations (Petee, 1994) with the Israeli military forces, UNRWA and the PNA, social practices, values and identity representations linked to the tribal organization constitute a weapon for the struggle of the marginalized group of refugees. Taking a role in civil society, through this strategy they aim at taking over the public space and express their specific cultural, social and political belonging as a form of self-determination and representation.

Nevertheless, the practices of water exchange are not shared by all the neighbours living in the same *hāra* and belonging to the same *hamūla*, due to the conflicts present between families, often engendered by the economic and status competition. Moreover, the neighborhoods are not homogeneous regarding the village of origin of the families. Families who carry out a mobility process move often out of the refugee camp (in order to live in a house that is either bought or rented), a practice that has become an index of the high social status of a family. In the lack of sharing of land and of water resources, tribal groups are fragmented by the growing economic segmentation, which overlaps with these large solidarity networks.

The changes that affected the social relations and the units of solidarity connected with the local tribal cooperative patterns of water management highlight the construction of new ideas of locality and new meanings of community, experienced by refugees in adapting to the new conditions of water availability and management, imposed by the Israeli military authorities, UNRWA and the PNA.



Water constitutes a political interface, a place for community building through the negotiation of the hierarchies, belonging dimensions and differences, all in the common language of social practices.

### **Citizens and refugees in the competition for water**

During the demonstration against the lack of water organized by young refugees, some citizens of the Bethlehem area who were driving and walking along the road in front of the refugee camp, tried to force the road blocks made by the young refugees, in opposition to the protest and coming into conflict with them. This resulted in violent clashes, stopped by some adult refugees who were controlling the demonstration.

The demonstration against the lack of water organized by refugees is not only a form of opposition to the administrative practices of the PNA in the competition for water. It also consists in the construction of a public sphere of several interest groups, each with a definition of the self and the « others ».

Explaining the reasons of their hostility against the refugees' claim of water, some citizens said to me:

Refugees have not enough water because they do not pay it. They do not want to respect the PNA's laws, they are backward, they live in a tribal way, like animals.

These citizens consider the social rights of the refugees regarding water as privileges that increase the government taxes they have to pay. The problem of the Israeli colonization is not considered. On the contrary, in the opinion of Dheisha inhabitants, being a refugee means suffering to a great extent for the lack of water compared to the citizens, who are considered luckier by refugees.

The PNA does not supply water equally. The towns like Bethlehem are favored by a greater supply of water compared to the rural villages and, in particular, to the refugee camps<sup>6</sup>. In its drive to

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<sup>6</sup> The Technical Manager of the Water Supply and Sewerage Authority in the Bethlehem district was unable to tell me the exact quantity of water supplied to each area of the Bethlehem district, since it is very variable. The

modern state building, the PNA attempts through these strategies to secure the loyalty of the local urban elites and to reallocate water from irrigation to domestic use, favoured by the international donors themselves, when providing financial support for water modernization projects (Trottier, 1999). The PNA's hydraulic policies cause a structural discrimination based on territorial differences, which establishes a hierarchy among the areas managed by the PNA. This hierarchy reflects the economic and political policies of marginalization of refugees in the building process of the « constructed » (Hobsbawm, 1990) and « imagined » (Anderson, 1991) Palestinian nation, which in Palestine served as a vehicle of elite interests (Hilal, 2002; Khalidi, 2010).

Most of the citizens consider tribal belonging and practices, which in the local collective imagination is associated with the refugee camps, as a sign of backwardness that hinders the construction of a modern democratic State. These citizens appropriate the dichotomous conception of the relation between citizenship and tribal belonging, influenced by social evolutionism and modernization theories. In the gradual restructuring of the PNA following the model of the modern western State, these ideas are diffused in particular among the more educated and privileged urban middle-class. In determining the differences from refugees in the appropriation of local resources like water, the Bethlehem citizens interpret the elements and practices of the western middle class culture as markers of social standing and new criteria for building the self and the image of the « other », which lead to

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areas are supplied by 5 different sources and 4 independent networks, whose water availability depends on the Israeli use of the sources and the natural conditions. The following data show the disproportion of water supply. Population in the district of Bethlehem (comprising Bethlehem, Beit Jala, Beit Sahour, Doha, al-Khadir, Artas, al-Walaja, Aida camp, Beit Jibrin camp, Dheisha camp): 140 000 inhabitants (18 700 are refugees). Water supplied: 12 000 m<sup>3</sup> in a day (360 000 m<sup>3</sup> in a month). Population in the Dheisha refugee camp: 13 000. Water supplied: 16 000 m<sup>3</sup> in a month (533 m<sup>3</sup> in a day). Remaining population of the Bethlehem district: 127 000. Water supplied: 11 467 m<sup>3</sup> in a day (344 000 m<sup>3</sup> in a month).

different interpretations of the local context and new practices in social interactions.

The conflicts about marital relations between Muslim refugees and Christian citizens, usually refused by Christian families, highlight how the Christian religion too is appropriated as one of the terms of differentiation from refugees, most of whom are Muslim in the competition for local resources. Christian citizens, mostly belonging to the Palestinian economic and political elites (Hilal, *op. cit.*), build an ethnic and religious belonging as a strategy aimed at preserving their economic and political power. So doing, they exclude refugees from the sharing of public spaces and local resources, the negotiation of cultural meanings and values and the distribution of the institutional and economic power.

As a reaction to these political strategies of exclusion, the Dheisha dwellers interpret the urban area of Bethlehem as an immoral place where people are more individualistic and are characterized by weak solidarity relations, because of the influence of western middle class culture. On the contrary, the refugee camps are connected to the village's ethics<sup>7</sup>, which is idealized as an expression of the Palestinian cultural « authenticity ».

The place of dwelling of the refugee camp, like that of the city, is one of the dimensions of belonging that shape the image of the self and the « other », based on the sharing of living conditions and the building of daily relations of solidarity among its inhabitants.

In the competition for water and other material and symbolic resources, the interest groups of the urban citizens and that of the refugees both use moral, cultural, and religious criteria as idioms to express differences related to various levels of belonging, like the place of dwelling and the economic segmentation that overlaps with it.

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<sup>7</sup> The same dynamics have been observed in the refugee camp of Al-Baq'a in Jordan (Farah, 1998).

### **The multiple Palestinian countries**

At a national level, the struggle for water – regarding both quantity and quality (Bellissari, 1994) – is locally perceived as the fight for independence by the entire Palestinian population oppressed by the colonialism of the State of Israel, the « Other », above all, which appropriated the largest part of water and other resources, such as the land (Dillman, 1989).

However, not all the Palestinians living in the West Bank endure problems in the lack of water. Unlike the Dheisha refugee camp, the Al-'arrūb refugee camp, situated in an area B between Bethlehem and Hebron, is under the siege of the Israeli military forces all the day long. Nevertheless, the families living in it benefit from the continuous water supply of the nearby Asiōn Israeli settlement.

The Mekerot<sup>8</sup> hooks up some Palestinian villages and refugee camps situated in the areas C and a few areas B of the West Bank to the water network of the nearby Israeli colonies. The development of the Israeli water systems is a physical expression of a « territorialization » (Trottier, 2000: 38) strategy aimed at extending the Israel State control over the West Bank territory. The integration of the basic water services in the Occupied Territories with those of Israel leads to the complete dependence of the former services on those of Israel, increasing the dependence of the Occupied Territories to the Israeli economy (Dillman, *op. cit.*).

The unequal access to water and other resources implies different experiences of deprivation, thus preventing the cohesion around resistance and solidarity practices, which are fragmented as the territory is.

The wall surrounding the West Bank, the division of its territory into different areas A, B, C, the check-points, the Israeli settlements and the roads connecting them, define a political process of fragmentation of the Occupied Territories not only horizontally but also vertically. With the attempt of creating an Israeli territorial contiguity, the Israeli « by-pass » roads allowed by the Oslo

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<sup>8</sup> The Israeli national water company.

Agreement, which connect the Israeli settlements to each other and to Israel bypassing Arab towns, divide the territory also in its vertical dimension through highways, bridges and tunnels<sup>9</sup>. While the cartographic imagination represents the territory as a two-dimensional surface, this « politics of verticality » (Weizman, 2003) imagines and creates it as a three-dimensional volume, dividing it into a layered and overlapping series of ethnic, political and strategic alienated national islands.

Following this strategy, the subterranean spaces of the Occupied Territories, containing underground aquifers, infrastructure systems, archaeological sites and other resources, have been transformed into a conflict zone. By keeping the control of the underground water resources, the State of Israel establishes a form of « subterranean sovereignty », which erodes the basics of the Palestinian national sovereignty (Weizman, *ibid.*).

These practices of control and domination make any attempt to establish a potential continuous border between Israel and the Occupied Territories impossible and hinder the possibility of a formal coherence of a territory. The PNA established by the Oslo accords is a virtual body that has not sovereignty, independence, jurisdiction and ultimate control over a contiguous territory and its resources, held by the Israeli military forces. The lack of a close correspondence between the sovereignty, the legal, political system and the territory entails a critical reflection on the specific political-cultural form of the nation-state (Clifford, 1988; Agamben, 2005), which is based on the western « sedentary metaphysics » (Malkki, 1992: 32, 1995), leading to deal with the theoretical problem of the present sense of political reality (Appadurai, *op. cit.*; Hall, 1992; Escobar, 1995).

Israel's policy of fragmentation of the West Bank constitutes borders that create discrimination among Palestinians. The permeability of these borders and the resulting possibility to get access to the territory and its material and symbolic resources like

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<sup>9</sup> Like the Tunnel Road connecting Jerusalem with the Israeli settlements of Gush Etzion and with those of Hebron, which passes under a Palestinian Bethlehem suburb called Beit Jala.

water, are linked to the nationality (Israeli or Palestinian), class of belonging, place of dwelling (Israel or Occupied Territories; area A, B, C, urban area, rural one or refugee camp), religious belonging (Jewish, Islamic, or Christian) and criminal record. These terms of differentiation are resources ever more important in defining the local forms of belonging and hierarchies.

Most of the Palestinians belonging to the new generations are confined to their homes, cities, towns, villages or refugee camps, locally called « countries » (*bilād*) and experienced as an « archipelago of large open-air prisons » (Khalidi, *op. cit.*).

According to the possibilities to experience the territory and its resources, the perception of space, time and social identity – which are built through the continuous repositioning with respect to the « others » and the material world – take different forms, disintegrating the Palestinian society.

The West Bank territory, and the Occupied Territories in general, is not experienced as one contiguous territory by its inhabitants, but as fragmented in multiple « islands of experience » (Khalidi, *ibid.*), multiple Palestinian countries. Each country (*balad*) gives shape to different conceptions of collective identity and national belonging, bringing about multiple perceptions of the political and social reality and different political prospects and hopes for the future.

## **Conclusions**

In the West Bank there is not just one kind of water. Water is « national water » (*mayya baladiyya*), « water of the city » (*mayya madaniyya*), « water of the cisterns » (*mayya al-khazzānāt*), « water from the tankers » (*tank mayya*) or « water from the stone cutter company » (*mayya al-kassarāt*), depending on the social and political relations that provide the access to it. These relations produce the cultural politics of water, which exceeds the technical-economic issues considered by the engineering, management and economics approaches (Mosse, 2009).

Water emerged as medium of the local and regional political relations in the construction and negotiation of different forms of

identification and differentiation comprised in Palestinian society of the West Bank, which is not at all homogeneous but rich in visions of « others » that are at conflict, collaborate or simply co-exist.

For the Israeli military occupation water projects are tools for the creation and domination of Palestinians as colonial subjects. On the contrary, for the PNA water policies are central in the formation of citizens in the building of a Palestinian nation, following the model of the contemporary western nation-state. The infra-political practices acted by refugees show that citizenship is not just a discrete extension of the state bureaucracy; on the contrary, it is a public process of construction that entails the negotiation of values, meanings and claims among different interest groups.

The access to domestic water is not defined by the normative regime of the modern state and liberal citizenship. Depending on the unstable negotiation and articulation of the effective regimes of political and social relations and on the technological and environmental dimensions, the different conditions of water access produce a set of differentiated citizenships and multiple meanings of the state and the political collective belonging experienced by local population.

The political practices regarding water appropriation and supply, which include a few social groups and exclude « others », strengthen the formation of different solidarity networks, connected with the place of dwelling and in relations to the definition of the « others ». This situation contributes to the growing social differences, disaffection and estrangement among the local Palestinian population, and prevents cohesion in the practices of resistance to the Israeli occupation and in the building of a common feeling of national belonging.

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### Summary

This ethnographic research investigates the structural and administrative conditions of domestic water control and supply in the Dheisha refugee camp, compared to the surrounding Bethlehem district (West Bank). It analyzes the vertical and horizontal social relations occurring daily among the refugee community in satisfying their need for domestic water. I will show the social changes that the new Palestinian National Authority's organization of domestic water supply has engendered and how the present situation is locally perceived by refugees and citizens of the West Bank. Water emerged as medium of the local and regional political relations in the negotiation of different forms of identification and differentiation in the Palestinian society of the West Bank, which is not at all homogeneous but rich in visions of « others » that are in conflict, collaborate or simply co-exist.

**Key-words:** water, political relations, identity, national belonging, refugee, Palestine.

### Résumé

Politiques de l'eau dans la construction d'un État-nation palestinien. Le cas du camp de réfugiés de Deisha et du district de Bethléem (West Bank)

Cette enquête ethnographique interroge les conditions structurelles et administratives du contrôle et de l'approvisionnement en eau dans le camp de réfugiés de Deisha, en le comparant avec le District de Bethléem (Cisjordanie). La recherche analyse les relations sociales verticales et horizontales qui se tissent quotidiennement au sein de la communauté des réfugiés pour satisfaire leur besoin en eau. J'illustre les changements sociaux engendrés par l'organisation de l'Autorité palestinienne et la manière dont la situation actuelle est localement perçue par les réfugiés et les citoyens de la Cisjordanie. L'eau apparaît comme un médiateur des relations politiques locales et régionales dans la négociation de modalités

différentes d'identification et de différenciation de la société palestinienne en Cisjordanie ; cette dernière n'est pas homogène mais elle confronte une multitude de visions des « autres » qui sont en conflit, collaborent ou simplement coexistent.

**Mots-clefs : eau, rapports politiques, identité, appartenance nationale, réfugié, Palestine.**

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