The power of the “sanctioned discourse” – a crucial factor in determining water policy

A. Jägerskog
Department for Water and Environmental Studies, Linköping University, SE-581 83 Linköping, Sweden
(E-mail: andja@tema.liu.se)

Abstract The water relations in the Jordan River Basin are an often-analysed case of decision-making under terms of water scarcity. However, most of these studies fail to address the underlying structures, which are the focal point in the formation of each of the basin parties’ water policy. This paper argues that it is necessary to analyse the domestic structures of the parties since the policies pursued in the international arena are likely to be a reflection of the domestic discourse. Particular emphasis is put on how domestic structures affect and create sanctioned discourses and how these in turn affect foreign policy decision-making with regards to water. The various dominant discourses in three of the parties in the Jordan River Basin – Jordan, Israel and the Palestine Authority – are analysed. Failing to acknowledge the explanatory power of this line of thinking runs the risk of reaching simplified conclusions, such as – “the policy-makers do not understand water issues” – instead of acknowledging that the power of the discourse perhaps gave them little choice. The paper draws on a variety of disciplines such as international relations theory, sociology and science studies.

Keywords Discourse; Israel; Jordan; negotiation; Palestinian authority; sanctioned discourse; structures; water rights

Introduction and aim
The purpose of this paper is to analyse how the sanctioned discourse1 (i.e. the prevailing dominant opinion and views, which have been legitimised by the discursive and political elite) in a society influences and determines water policy. In particular, specific emphasis is put on how domestic discourses affect foreign policy decision-making on water. In addition, these ideas are also useful in explaining why seemingly good and rational advice from outsiders (meaning international water advisors) is sometimes unexpectedly turned down.

An often-analysed case in foreign policy decision-making in the area of water is the Jordan River Basin. However, the lion’s share of the studies deals with the international level, treating every state/nation as an unproblematic singular unit. It is argued that this approach is a gross simplification. In order to understand why nations choose the policies they pursue in the international arena, one needs to thoroughly study the domestic political context since the policies pursued internationally are likely to be a reflection of the domestic discourse. Thus, the need for governments to be in line with their respective domestic constituencies in their pursuit of international policies is key to understanding foreign policy. In the words of Stein (1988, p. 230) “… analyses that ignore the context in which negotiations take place, …the impact of cultural, social, institutional, political and psychological factors or processes of communication and choice, are inadequate as explanations of international negotiations.” In the water negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians and Israel and Jordan an understanding of the role of the respective sanctioned discourses and what constitutes them is indispensable.

1 Sanctioned discourse is a term coined by Charles Tripp (1997), School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.
The theoretical framework

In the 1970s the French social scientist Michel Foucault adequately distinguished between coercive power (which usually rests with the state through the military forces) and “discursive” power. While the former refers to the use of force, the latter is a result of the interaction of interests, which form a consensus on an issue. Discourse is thought to cover all forms of spoken interaction – formal and informal – as well as written texts of all kinds. The language is seen as active and thus carries with it political implications and meanings (Potter and Wetherell, 1994). Thus the language helps to construct versions of the social world.

The discourse becomes accepted or “sanctioned” within a society. It is argued that the discourse sets limits within which policies have to be pursued, i.e. it indicates what avenues may be politically feasible (Allan, 2001a). It represents what may be said, who may say it and also how it shall be interpreted. Turton has usefully described sanctioned discourse (when talking about water) as something that is best understood as a form of “hydropolitical ideology”. This is a particularly useful term as it is associated with, and draws from, other ideologies in society such as nationalism (Turton, 2002). It is helpful in explaining why people who are confronted with the same scenarios or events nevertheless describe their experience in quite different ways. The reason for explaining events in one way or another is often a result of the surrounding social context and the particular ways of viewing the world that has been sanctioned. In a related line of thinking the sociologist Bourdieu (1986) argues that the dominant knowledge or view in a society is dominant not because it represents a “higher level” of knowledge but because it is formulated from a social position that enjoys a strong power position in the social hierarchy. This position depends on economic, social and cultural capital.

The concept of sanctioned discourse also seems to be related to Kuhn’s (1962) description of a scientific paradigm in which certain methods and ways of viewing the world have become institutionalised and thus effectively work as “boundaries” for what is feasible. While it is extremely hard (if not impossible) to put forth ideas that run contrary to the sanctioned discourse in a given society it is similarly hard to try to challenge and indeed change the ruling scientific paradigm.

In the creation of the sanctioned discourse various “discursive actors” are active in the arena with special interests or stakes. However, interests and power positions as elaborated by Bourdieu above will determine the outcome of this “discursive battle”. While politicians, both in democratic and non-democratic regimes are in a position to influence the discourse they are not able to exercise full control over it. The discursive line of thinking is useful in explaining why they sometimes choose not to carry out water policies which would seem to be the most rational. Allan (2001a) argues that the role of politicians is mainly to legitimise “that which is determined by the ‘discourse’”. While that is true one may add, arguing along the lines of Bourdieu, that the politicians have a stake in the discursive battle as they possess certain economic, social and cultural capital. A useful distinction when analysing how discourse affect policy is the one made by Hajer (1995) who argues that actors in a given area (such as the water sector) create coalitions that subscribe to the same narratives. He calls these “discourse coalitions”. These coalitions can consist of government officials, water professionals, journalists, etc.

Thus it is of interest to analyse the domestic (and international) actors and domestic and international structures of concern for water that are active and have the economic, social

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2 Domestic structures are presumed to be, for example, socio-economic and security situation, national attributes, national ideology as well as strong interests groups (of which the farming community is especially relevant with regards to water). The international structures are presumed to be, for example, the international system (dealing, in essence, with power relationships), international water law, world opinion, influence from donors etc.
and cultural capital to influence the internal discourse within states and thereby set the
stage for their foreign policy. Jönsson (1990) argues that it is helpful to locate different
individual cognitive orientations within their ideational system of national cultures, which
are constituted in the discursive domain. The actors obviously reach for support from the
structures in their creation of narratives or story lines. Hence the structures function as an
enabling (or de-enabling) tool for the actor who simultaneously, in the “discursive
process”, reforms and re-creates the structures in what can be described as a mutually con-
stituting process.

For a deeper understanding of why certain discourses become sanctioned it is useful to
include aspects of risk theory. Some issues, related to water, might be termed risks
although from a scientific perspective they would not be characterised as such. This is so
because it fits the sanctioned discourse. Thus actors use the notion of risk as a tool for sanc-
tioning their respective story line. Accordingly, risk is something socially constructed by
those actors that possess the discursive power (Jägerskog, forthcoming).

Sanctioned discourse among the parties in the Jordan River basin

Turton (2002) argues that due to the strategic importance of access to, and control over,
freshwater in a river basin with limited supply, states are likely to develop a hydraulic
mission, which feeds in to a hydropolitical ideology. In this section the various features of
the sanctioned discourse/hydropolitical ideology among the parties in the Jordan River
basin are outlined.

It is argued by Feitelson (2002) that the discourse in Israel was largely determined by
ideology from the 1940s up until the 1970s, which implies a strong emphasis on water
allocation to agriculture since it represents a central feature in Zionism. Even though
Feitelson argues that there has been a shift in the discourse towards more economic reason-
ing he maintains that the ideological preference for farming is still reflected in a dispro-
portionate political power that the agricultural sector enjoys in Israel. Arguing along the lines
of Bourdieu (1986) the agricultural sector possesses the cultural capital needed to have that
political power. This is personalised by the former Israeli Water Commissioner, Meir Ben-
Meir, who now acts as an advisor to the Israeli Prime Minister Sharon on water issues, and
who argues that the Israeli emphasis on agriculture is here to stay both for cultural/ideolog-
ical as well as strategic reasons (Ben-Meir, 2001; Shavit, 2001; Rinat, 2001). The strategic
argument connects very much to the perception that giving up farming in the remote areas
of Israel would constitute a strategic risk. Keeping agricultural settlements in the remote
areas of Israel is important since they are seen as a “buffer zone” against potential enemies.
However, one may argue that the policy of using agricultural settlements as a tool in the
strategic defence of the state has proven counter-productive. This was exemplified in the
1973 war when many Israeli soldiers were busy evacuating agricultural settlers in the
Golan Heights rather than fighting the Syrians. The inadequacy of buffer zones was also
effectively shown during the Kuwait war in the early 1990s when Iraq sent missiles directly
into the heart of Israel. Hence, the policy of keeping agricultural settlements in strategic
areas of the State seems to be based on a misguided perception of the strategic importance
of them and is perhaps better explained by other political reasons. Indeed, it suits the argu-
ment of the farming community, which is interested in keeping its allocations at a high
level. Hence Israeli water policy can be seen as driven by a farming/military discourse
coalition to borrow the term of Hajer (1995). Although this perspective does not exclude
co-operation on water issues in the region, Israel’s main interest in the negotiations is to

maintain as high an allocation as possible. Consequently, the room for compromise solutions are limited. Furthermore, the idea of importing virtual water, which is the water embedded in water intensive foodstuff, is not taken into full account. While the farming community and the strategic establishment seem to make up a discourse coalition, it is also possible to trace the root of their arguments in the domestic structures of the State. A structure of main importance is the ideological dimension – Zionism – in which a basic ideal is to settle the land and to make the desert bloom. Perhaps, needless to say, this discourse coalition is interested in maintaining a fairly high water consumption in general and in particular for agriculture. Thus ideas of importing “virtual water”\(^4\) are not prime in Israel.

However, today it is possible to find challenges to the sanctioned discourse in Israel. It can be described as a “discursive battle”\(^5\) in that sense there is a differentiation\(^6\) between various experts and water professionals in Israel (as well as in Palestine). On the Israeli-Palestinian water issue there is also, besides the military/farming coalition, a strong group of Israelis (and also Palestinians) arguing for extended joint management of the shared aquifers (Haddad, Feitelson, Arlosoroff and Nassereddin, 1999). This group emphasise the risk aspect when they argue that joint management is the only way to counter the risk of non-reversible decline in the water quality of the shared aquifers. Arguing along a similar line is the current Water Commissioner of Israel, Shimon Tal (Tal, 2001; Rinat, 2001) who also argues for cuts in allocation to agriculture as a mean to countering the water crisis. However, because of the influence of the dominant discourse, requests for cutbacks on agricultural water are often denied (Cohen, 2001).

The Palestinians, on the other hand, are stuck in the prevailing discourse that the starting point of any negotiation ought to be water rights for the Palestinians (Jägerskog, 2002; Haddad, 1997). Haddad points to the fact that the Palestinians have for long been denied their self-rule and right to develop and manage their natural resources. A water negotiator, Amjad Aliiewi, argues that it is possible to discuss other issues such as pollution after the water rights of the Palestinians are clearly established (Aliiewi, 2002). This is iterated by another Palestinian water negotiator, Shaddad Attili, who maintains that the core of the Palestinian negotiating position is to do with securing water rights (Attili, 2002). The history of conflict, in which the Palestinians have been subject to inequality and repression, and the strong history of farming among the Palestinians is an integral part of the domestic structure in Palestine. Hence the idea that water rights ought to be the starting point in any negotiation is deeply rooted in the history of the conflict. This very strong paradigm effectively sets the boundaries for what is feasible. Needless to say there are various discursive actors reinforcing this view thus bolstering the sanctioned discourse.

Inevitably, a negotiation in which one discusses water rights as a main principle must be based on figures of current allocation and use. Today the difference in allocations between Israel and the Palestinian areas is considerable. Thus the water rights that the Palestinians may obtain in a negotiation run the risk of being far too limited. However, a shift on the part of the Palestinians towards the principle of equitable utilisation is likely to render a better outcome (Allan, 2001b). But this is definitely not part of the dominant Palestinian water discourse and consequently not on the table in spite of international advisors pushing for it.

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\(^4\) This is a concept introduced by Tony Allan, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, which deals with the water that is embedded in, for example, agricultural products such as wheat.

\(^5\) An elaborate discussion on the various competing Israeli discourses can be found in Feitelson (2001).

\(^6\) This is a concept used originally in anthropology but introduced in the transboundary water problematique by Tony Allan (2001b).
may well be so that the power of the sanctioned discourse indeed prevents the Palestinians from obtaining the best agreement possible. Another dominant feature in the Palestinian discourse is that it is almost exclusively because of Israel that the Palestinians have water problems (Trottier, 1999). This rhetoric is found among academics, water professionals, and the media as well as government officials. This is, of course, also a result of having been deprived of rights and self-rule by Israel. Nevertheless, it is not a productive stand in a negotiation situation. Nor is it helpful in the work to improve Palestinian water management.

In Jordan a strong argument is that the water scarcity in the country is man-made. It is estimated that the Hashemite Kingdom absorbed around 450,000 Palestinians after 1948. Perhaps, needless to say, irrigation was a main feature in accommodating them thus bringing pressure on Jordan’s limited water resources (Haddadin, 2000). Along this line of thinking it is argued that Israel is partly responsible for Jordan’s water shortage. This is iterated by Dureid Mahasneh, who argues that it is not fair that Palestinian refugees from the West Bank should get Jordanian water while the occupants are getting their water (Mahasneh, 2002). However, Jordan and Israel have always maintained diplomatic contacts on water issues, which has led to a tacit understanding between the parties (Haddadin, 2001). It is argued that the peace agreement from 1994, in which water was a central part, only institutionalised the water regime that was already tacitly working (Jägerskog, 2002). Both Israelis and Jordanians saw co-operation with Jordan on water as something good since Israel had long wanted a peace with Jordan while Jordan also had wanted peace with Israel. The dominant view among the discursive elite in Jordan was that peace would be beneficial since it would bring about US economic and military aid (Ryan, 1998). As in Israel and the Palestinian areas the virtual water proponents are not strong in Jordan. This is, however, to be expected as Jordan, as well as the other entities, has a strong tradition of farming even though the agriculture today contributes a fairly small part (3–5%) of the GDP. In addition, the food security argument, emphasising a strong domestic base in food production, is strong in the Jordanian discourse (El-Nazer, 2002).

Conclusions

Any analysis of foreign policy decision-making with regards to water (and other issues as well) needs to include features of domestic discourse in order to be realistic. It is argued that the domestic structures to a large extent set the “boundaries” within which policy decisions are taken. Therefore, it is imperative to analyse the factors that are deemed to affect the water discourse in various countries. In Israel, it is found that there exists a form of farming-military coalition, which argues that continued high allocations to agriculture are important for both cultural and strategic reasons. In Palestine, the dominant discourse tends to blame many of its water problems on Israel (which to some degree seems reasonable) but subsequently fails to address their own management problems in a sound way. Obviously, the Palestine Water Authority (PWA) is content with this line of thinking as it eases the pressure being brought upon them.

In sum, it is found that the idea of looking at discourse, and indeed to identify the “sanctioned discourse”, is crucial to understanding water policy decision-making (as well as decision-making in other sectors). Failing to acknowledge the explanatory power of this line of thinking runs the risk of reaching simplified conclusions, such as – “the policymakers do not understand water issues” – instead of acknowledging that the power of the discourse perhaps gave them little choice.

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