

# Chapter 6

## Power and Perception in Transboundary Water Politics: Analyzing Dominant Water Narratives and Ideational Power in Israel–Palestine Relations

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter investigates the role that ideational power played in transboundary water politics between Israel and Palestine. It examines power as an idea-driven force and explores how dominant water narratives from either side are portrayed in key reports through a test of two decidedly opposed frameworks. The first enumerates Israel's ability to frame water issues; the second contextualizes this as a more nuanced understanding of how poor states like Palestine come into the picture. The chapter demonstrates that the nuanced framework is better for understanding the power dynamics through a content analysis that identifies prevailing narratives*

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*and a Critical Discourse Analysis using Fairclough's three-dimensional model. By examining ideational aspects of water politics, this chapter contributes to understanding discourse in international water relations and to the broad understanding of narratives in global water policies.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

As Messerschmid and Selby (2015) do with the 2013 ESCWA-BRG report, they critically evaluate the report by showing it misrepresents the Jordan River Basin in such a way that presents Israel as favored over the other four Arab states that share the river. This report demonstrates how dominant narratives are not only forwarded by powerful actors but also sustained and reproduced by participants who would normally be thought of as challenging such perspectives (Ibid., p. 259). Later, Zeitoun et al. (2020) remark that analyses that sidestep fundamental questions rather than tackle the status quo can end up inadvertently confirming it. For non-hegemonic actors, such avoidance has the potential of spilling over to heightened tensions in conflicts as these unaddressed issues become a focus (Ibid.). Key factors are brought forward by the dynamics that surround transboundary water issues — which include the concept of power. Following Dahl's (1957) notion of coercion, however, power in International Relations (IR) often aligns with international water issues as material and geographical dominance with a state's relative place regarding water sources to that effect. However, according to Mirumachi (2018), Cascão and Zeitoun (2010), and, more generally, Zeitoun et al. (2011), other forms not so easily observable can also be sources of power: ideational power. Such power, sometimes called "*power over ideas*," is when actors are able to influence perceptions and control narratives (including imposing certain views) (Warner & Zeitoun, 2006).

However, water is not simply a thing to drink or for life but a commodity of political and ideological standing. The central role of the dominant water-related narratives between Israel and Palestine in the ongoing conflict is analyzed and examined. However, water, along with other natural resources, is not constrained by strict political boundaries or what passes for a state's sovereignty. Because water resources are so fluid, rivers, in particular, tend to cross local, national, and even international borders. The implication of sharing, if there is the insistence on over-use or pollution of shared water resources among states, can have a great impact on the other states or entire region (Cascão & Zeitoun, 2010; Hayat et al., 2022). This means that determining 'who gets how much water, when, where, and how' becomes an important issue for states (Cascão & Zeitoun, 2010). Although scholars debate how ideational power works to exert control over resources in general and in water-related conflicts in particular, ideational power represents a means of con-

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