

How sewage is bridging the Israeli-Palestinian divide in Jerusalem

One-third of Jerusalem's sewage runs untreated into the West Bank, ruining the historic Kidron Valley. Now an Israeli-Palestinian team is working to rehabilitate it.

By Christa Case Bryant, Staff writer / December 6, 2013



Sewage from Jerusalem and Bethlehem runs together under the Bethlehem-Ramallah road in Ubeidiyeh, standing in stark contrast with the modern solar lighting along the US-built road.

Christa Case Bryant

In Pictures [Kidron River Valley](#)

JERUSALEM; AND UBIEDYEH, WEST BANK

When 1 in 3 residents of [Jerusalem](#) flush their toilets, the sewage flows untreated through the ancient [Kidron Valley](#) and cascades down once pristine canyon waterfalls to the [Dead Sea](#), a popular bathing spot.

It has been thus for more than 40 years, despite the health and environmental risks and the historical sanctity of the valley, which skirts Jerusalem's iconic Old City and runs past one of the oldest inhabited monasteries in the world. Where the patriarch Abraham is said to have made his way from the desert up to Mt. Moriah, today an estimated 15 million cubic meters of raw sewage – roughly equivalent to 6,000 Olympic-sized swimming pools – flows in the opposite direction.

The stench is unbearable.

That much Israeli and Palestinian politicians can agree on. But over the years their attempts to address the issue have failed, because the Kidron traverses some of the most complex political territory in the conflict.

Now, however, a grass-roots team of Israeli and Palestinian engineers, architects, environmental activists, and local officials have developed a comprehensive plan to rehabilitate the valley, from wastewater treatment to environmental education to new green tourism opportunities. They're hoping to piggyback on the momentum of restarted peace talks and finally break the political impasse.

"This should be the first thing peace talks do – what's more obvious?" says former deputy mayor of Jerusalem Naomi Tsur, a key supporter of the initiative while in office 2008-13 and as ambassador of the global Green Pilgrimage Network. "If Israelis and Palestinians will not tackle the sewage in the Kidron, then they're not taking the peace talks seriously," says Ms. Tsur.

Longstanding plans

Plans for building a sewage treatment plant have been put forward ever since the Oslo Accords in the 1990s, when a new plant was built to serve most of West Jerusalem. But the sensitive location of the Kidron Valley has stymied previous efforts. In addition to abutting the city's holiest sites, it separates East and West Jerusalem and runs from [Israel](#) into the [West Bank](#).

A 1995 offer by the German government to fund a treatment plant fell flat when the [Palestinian Authority](#) (PA) claimed it would recognize Israel's sovereignty over Jerusalem, says Richard Laster, an Israeli environmental law professor and driving force behind the Kidron master plan.

And this year a Dutch company planning to build an Israeli plant in East Jerusalem backed out under pressure from the Dutch government, because it was on the Palestinian side of the 1967 Green Line.

But sewage knows no such boundaries, and – unlike other irritants in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – it can't be stopped by drawing a border or erecting a barrier. In a way, it's a problem that lends itself more than others to cooperation, because both sides stand to benefit.

"Mainly we thought this project could become a bridge," says Avner Goren, a former chief archaeologist for Israel and member of the Kidron steering committee, noting 10 different

educational projects already under way in schools in East and West Jerusalem and the opportunity for connecting diverse communities and academic disciplines.

Proposed West Bank treatment plant

The centerpiece of the Kidron initiative is a network of sewage lines leading to a proposed wastewater treatment plant in the West Bank town of Ubiedyeh, the last major population center before the Kidron flows out to the Dead Sea. The plant would treat all the sewage from Jerusalem – which accounts for about two-thirds of the total flow into the Kidron and is mostly from Arab East Jerusalem – as well as that piped in from the Bethlehem area. Up to 5 million cubic meters of the purified effluent would be used in and around Ubiedyeh, and the rest would be released into the stream.

While everyone stands to benefit from cleaning up the sewage, they disagree over who should be responsible for the costly plant and who should get the effluent, a valuable commodity in such an arid region. The Palestinian Authority, which has made opposition to Israeli settlements a key theme of their diplomacy, is loath to let Israeli settlers use the effluent for their crops downstream.

Israelis are concerned about relying on a plant, even one that is internationally run, that could end up being in a sovereign Palestinian state one day.

It also would be expensive. A [report this summer](#) by the Milken Institute, a California-based economic think tank, estimated the cost at \$355 million.

Political barriers

There are some examples of trans-boundary water management elsewhere along the Israel/West Bank seam, such as an Israeli-run wastewater treatment plant at Emek Hefer, near the West Bank city of [Nablus](#). Plant manager Eyal Amrami says he sees eye to eye with the Palestinian engineer who is his counterpart in Nablus, but such professional cooperation only goes so far until the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is solved.

“It helps that we’re meeting, talking, sitting together,” he says. “But in the end there’s a political problem. When that will be solved, it’ll be much easier.”

The Kidron team is trying to avoid politics by talking up the health problems for farmers and children if sewage were to continue to be untreated and insisting that the plant would be owned and operated by an international company. Since treatment plants are expected to last 30 to 40 years, they’re punting the question of future ownership to whoever gets the land in an eventual political deal.

“If we’re waiting for politicians to solve our environmental problems, we’ll never solve them. That’s why Israelis and Palestinians are working together to save the Kidron,” says Mohammad Nakhal, a Palestinian community organizer. “We’re not waiting for peace from the politicians.”

But because the proposed plant lies in Area C, which falls under Israeli civil and military administration, they need sign-off from Israel. Although the Israeli Ministry of Environment and the Dead Sea Drainage Authority are key backers of the project, that doesn’t mean an automatic green light because the ultimate decision is up to other branches of government.

In addition, the project needs approval from the Joint Water Committee, a group of Israeli and Palestinian representatives established under the 1995 Oslo II agreement to negotiate solutions to water issues. But the committee has been deadlocked for two years.

“We need big pressure on the Palestinian government and Israeli government to solve this problem,” says Ubiyeh Mayor Sulieman Abdullah Al-Assa, who says he spends 80 percent of his time on the wastewater issue ([See related: Palestinian mayor recruits global village to clean up sewage](#)).

The supporters of the Kidron initiative are also relentlessly optimistic, however.

“My inspiration for my work is Martin Luther King, Jr.,” says Tsur, noting the recent 50th anniversary of his “I have a dream” speech. “He looked out and did not say, we have a nightmare.... The only way to create a game-changing situation is to keep your eye on the dream.”

Staff writer Chelsea Sheasley contributed reporting from Jerusalem.