

## Palestinian mayor recruits global village to clean up sewage

Mayor Sulieman Abdallah Al-Assa and engineer Maher Abu Sarhan are working with international organizations as well as Israeli experts to build a wastewater treatment plant in Ubiedyeh.

By [Christa Case Bryant](#), Staff writer / December 6, 2013



Ubiedyeh Mayor Sulieman al-Assa and city engineer Maher Abu Sarhan have been working together since 2007 to solve the wastewater issue in their town.

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### **UBIEDYEH, WEST BANK**

Sulieman Abdallah Al-Assa, the mayor of this West Bank town, slows his municipal vehicle to a halt and city engineer Maher Abu Sarhan points to the home on the nearby slope. There is a long pipe running over the ground from the home to a makeshift hole in the ground, covered with assorted wood scraps.

“That’s a cesspit,” Mr. Abu Sarhan tells me from the front seat.

Is that legal?

“No,” admits the young environmental engineer with a hint of resignation; there’s not a lot he or the mayor can do about it. “There is no other option. We try to pressure people to make a lining or concrete box or a septic tank.”

Raw sewage is seeping into the ground across Ubiedyeh, where most people can’t afford septic tanks and there is neither a city sanitation system nor a larger network for the city to connect to. Yet.

But Abu Sarhan and Mayor Al-Assa, who came to office in 2007, have launched an international campaign to improve sanitation, wastewater treatment, and other environmental and health issues in this city of about 12,000, which lies southwest of [Jerusalem](#) on the main road between Bethlehem and Ramallah. In one success, the US-built road is dotted with solar lighting, but in another challenge 15 million cubic meters of raw sewage from Jerusalem and Bethlehem flow annually through the three culverts underneath the road. “We like to be a friend of the environment, this is our goal,” says Abu Sarhan. “This is the goal of the whole world.”

The mayor, a former building contractor, was pressuring the municipal council to improve sanitation even before he came to office in 2007. Since then, he and Abu Sarhan have prioritized wastewater issues, staying late at the office instead of working the normal six-hour days. Al-Assa says 80 percent of his time is devoted to wastewater.

“This is not normal work.... It’s a challenge,” says the mayor. “This is our challenge now, to achieve our goal.”

He and Abu Sarhan have been to conferences from Rio de Janeiro to the World Water Forum in Marseille, France, and many delegations from those events have since paid them a visit. The duo is working closely with international organizations and experts as well as Israeli engineers, architects, environmental activists, and tourism promoters to [rehabilitate the Kidron Valley](#) – which runs from Jerusalem past Ubiedyeh and out to the Dead Sea – and to pressure the Israeli government to allow them to build a wastewater treatment plant in Ubiedyeh. In addition, Al-Assa has gotten several local Palestinian mayors to back the Kidron master plan, which supporters say would not only improve health and environment, but also open the possibility for green tourism and economic development.

Their willingness to work with Israelis as well as foreigners to solve environmental and humanitarian issues is a courageous step at a time when many Palestinians still working – or just talking or playing soccer – with Israelis are being pressured to cut ties until the Israeli occupation of Palestinian areas comes to an end. (*Editor’s note: This paragraph was updated to more accurately reflect the scope of their work.*)

“We are talking about humanity, environment, health – not politics,” says Abu Sarhan. “We don’t talk about the occupation, we refuse the occupation. But we cannot refuse any human thinking.... We are always thinking about the humanity.”