

LETTER FROM JERUSALEM

Follow the Drop: Water Theft in Kufr ‘Aqab

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Abstract

This article delves into the intricate issue of internal water theft in the densely populated and neglected area of Kufr ‘Aqab. Despite being under Israeli jurisdiction, water in Kufr ‘Aqab is primarily supplied by the Palestinian Authority, leading to unique challenges. The article highlights various methods of water theft and the socio-political implications of such acts, emphasizing the vulnerability and resilience of the residents. Through a combination of personal experience and community insights, the author sheds light on the pervasive issue of water theft, its impact on daily life, and the broader context of water politics in Palestine. The article underscores the need for a deeper understanding of localized water struggles within the larger framework of Palestinian resistance against settler colonialism.

Keywords:

Water theft; Kufr ‘Aqab; Israeli jurisdiction; water politics; community resilience; greater Jerusalem.



A panoramic view of Kufr ‘Aqab, 2024. Photo by author.

On an ordinary Wednesday afternoon in the middle of the summer in 2022, my wife and I were casually sitting in our Kufir ‘Aqab apartment, watching a TV show and pondering what to order for dinner. Suddenly, I heard a subtle but audible sound of water coming from an unused extra bathroom. I immediately ran to the bathroom, took the tank cover off and saw water pouring into the central pipe. I was extremely confused. We never use this bathroom, yet water was rising in the tank and into this pipe. None of it made sense. I immediately shut the pipe valve to the toilet and called my father-in-law, who excitedly called the plumber.

When both arrived at the apartment, they asked for a retelling of the story and then began their investigation. The plumber quickly stated that the ‘awama (floaters arm, standard in every toilet) was broken. This was mystifying, as Abu Tha’ir had replaced the old ones when we moved in and we never used that bathroom. We then realized the ‘awama was a casualty of “the water thief.” We might have also been onto his game, since that week we lost only half of our water: I had closed off the water network branch oriented to that bathroom and there was no thievery. The next week, after we had the ‘awama replaced, I reopened the water valve and we had our water stolen. The following week, I closed the network branch off again and left it closed for three months. In those three months, we never had our water stolen. We had conquered the water thief!

How did we get here you ask?

The issue of water domination, control, and usage in Palestine is an oversaturated market. Every year, hundreds of university students invade their libraries and make research trips to Palestine to meet with leading NGOs and scholars, to make some landmark observation like “Israel’s water policies are apartheid.” Rarely do these researchers endeavor past the numerical and a minor case study (usually in a small herding community in the south Hebron hills or Jordan Valley), thereby allowing their readers to continue to treat Palestinian experiences with settler colonialism as a passive or isolated incident.

In this article, I seek to highlight what water domination, control, and usage mean in the Palestinian neighborhood of Kufir ‘Aqab, in northern Jerusalem. For those who did not read my piece in *JQ* 94 (2023), Kufir ‘Aqab is an extremely overcrowded and neglected neighborhood between Bayt Hanina and Ramallah. Drawn into the municipal map of Jerusalem by the State of Israel since 1967, and cut off by the Wall since 2003, Kufir ‘Aqab contains upward of 125,000 Palestinians in an area of 3.2 square kilometers. Nondescript beyond its towering high-rises built in extremely close proximity, it is what I have called home since I purchased an apartment there in mid-2022. Neither this article nor I claim to be or achieve an all-knowing authority on every drop of water in Kufir ‘Aqab. But I do want to present my personal experience in navigating the pervasive yet delicate issue of internal water theft in my neighborhood.

First, it is important to define what I mean by internal theft. I mean simply the deliberate stealing of water among Palestinians, on an unofficial and individual level.

While this problem exists all over Palestine, the pervasiveness of it in Kufri 'Aqab, and people's vulnerability as a result, seem unique. Although Kufri 'Aqab is claimed as part of (illegally) annexed Jerusalem and therefore Israeli territory, water is almost exclusively provided through the Palestinian Authority, and the theft is exclusively Palestinian-on-Palestinian. As well, unlike Palestinian-on-Palestinian water theft in other parts of the West Bank, where thieves make high profits by moving water to poor water-scarce or wealthy water-greedy areas, this stolen water remains within Kufri 'Aqab.

Driving through Kufri 'Aqab, you will notice ubiquitous large water tanks and water-related infrastructure crowding the roofs, but these tanks are an average 50 to 100 percent larger than those elsewhere in Jerusalem and the West Bank. The reason for this oversizing will be addressed later.

Despite being forced under the jurisdiction of the Israeli Jerusalem municipality, almost no one in Kufri 'Aqab receives their water from the Israeli national water carrier, Mekorot. In the first three decades of occupation after 1967, Kufri 'Aqab was an ignored and sparsely populated area, with no Israeli settlements in the vicinity to prompt connection to the Israeli national network. In the two decades since Israel built the Wall in the early 2000s, separating Jerusalem from its periphery, many tens of thousands of Palestinians poured into Kufri 'Aqab in order to maintain official Jerusalem residency. The Palestinian Authority was pressured to act and provide water to the neighborhood. The Jerusalem Water Undertaking (JWU) even opened an office in the middle of Kufri 'Aqab, mostly for registering new pipes and allocating meters.

When we bought our apartment two years ago, my father-in-law, Abu Hussam, reminded me numerous times that we would need to register our name at the JWU and to retain every payment receipt (to prove to Israeli authorities that Jerusalem is our continuous center of life). He also warned me many times to keep an eye out for water thieves and to let him know if anything came up.

Admittedly, I was perplexed by this at first. I imagined a gang of big scary men in ski masks, running around with guns and giant water tanks, threatening people in the street. Like most residents in the neighborhood, my apartment came with two fifteen-hundred-liter tanks on the roof, one for cold water for all uses and the *hammam shams* heated by solar panels for sinks and baths. My father-in-law gave me a tour of the water system on the roof and in the apartment and even went so far as to spray-paint my initials on the tanks belonging to us, I guess as a warning sign to the gangs of thieves roaming the neighborhood. He hired a plumber to check everything and ensure there was no blockage or potential problems.

Our first week, my father-in-law called every couple days asking if we had any water issues, which we did not. But during our second week, on Wednesday afternoon, our cold water disappeared. Now, I should probably mention that water is replenished once a week, typically on Saturday mornings when the JWU turns the pumps on and the water refills. So, this meant that we would have no cold water for at least three days, until Saturday morning. No water in the toilet, none for washing clothes, no temperature control for a shower, and, I would argue most importantly, no water for

the bidet. So, I called Abu Hussam and informed him. He and I went over the system again and suggested minor tweaks I could do to make life tolerable until Saturday morning. This included opening up the pipe network in the bathroom and using the main line for filling up buckets to put into the tank of the toilet for flush, and turning the hose for the hammam shams tank to the cold water tank on the balcony. None of these fixes offer much more than a little bit of a reprieve.

Like any other couple who has just lost all their water, my wife and I started to recount every liter of water we had used since Saturday, trying to figure out what we did wrong to be out of water so quickly. “How many loads of laundry did we do?” and “maybe we showered too long,” became common refrains in our house in the subsequent days. Abu Hussam even came over and started inspecting every piece of water infrastructure, acting like Sherlock Holmes. After finding no irregularities, he shrugged his shoulders and said, “It might be a thief, but I cannot tell yet.”

As Saturday rolled around, we got our water back and my wife and I were excited to be able to use the bidet again and do some laundry. Unfortunately, by Wednesday afternoon, we noticed our water had again been stolen. Abu Hussam was pissed. He immediately called Abu Jamal, the head of the *lajna*, to ask if others were suffering from a water shortage or if there were any problems with the main line. At this point, I should probably explain what the *lajna* is and how it works. Every apartment building in Kufr ‘Aqab has a building association, for which you pay a monthly fee. They are almost always residents of the building and they take the burden on themselves to listen to everyone’s problems in the building, in addition to paying communal bills such as electricity for the common areas, dealing with the elevator, making sure the lobby and stairwell are cleaned regularly, and deal with issues about the garage.

Abu Jamal assured my father-in-law there were no issues with the main water network and he had received no complaints about a water thief in months. He then gave a five-minute lecture about how we must have used too much water and not understood the limited water supply in Kufr ‘Aqab. “How many showers a day are they taking?” Then, “maybe they did too many loads of laundry. Is their washer old?” became common refrains we would hear from people on the issue.

Here we were, another week without water. I know what you are thinking, “Well, you have a *hammam shams* tank, why not just use that for showering?” The problem is, in the summer, without a cold water tank, you have just one temperature with the *hammam shams* tank – scalding hot. So, I became an expert (not for the first time) on bucket showers with a sponge. I also started asking friends to use their washing machine when needed.

When the third week with the same situation came around, admittedly, I got pissed. Every week, same thing at the same time. Abu Hussam decided to message the building’s WhatsApp group to air grievances, and I decided to start my own investigation on the roof. I saw no evidence of any theft, no drops of water, no hose hanging out of our tank, no fingerprints on the pump, nothing! Again, we were told by Abu Jamal and the group, “You must be doing something wrong, maybe you have a leak.” So we called our plumber to come by and help us figure out this mystery. Abu

Tha'ir inspected everything, from the main line to the individual pump, to both our tanks, to the network inside the apartment, to the toilets and showers, and found no leaks.

After checking everything he could, he and Abu Hussam elaborated about the different types of water thieves there are in Kufr 'Aqab and their various methods. They started with the laziest and easiest to detect and went all the way to PhD-level water thievery. I shall break it down:

1. The Water Siphoner: This is the most basic form of water theft and the easiest to repel. This involves a single guy, a hose, and maybe a ladder. He opens the desired tank from the top, inserts one end of the hose and sucks on the hose until water comes and sticks the other end in his tank. This method takes forever, leaves vast evidence, and is easily catchable.
2. Mid-Tier Thief: This involves one guy with a strong and long pipe, running up to the roof and connecting it to the individual pump or the bottom of the tank, and running it to his tank through the top. This method is faster but leaves ample evidence as well (fingerprints on the pump and water from the tank).
3. The Y-Cable Thief: Every building has at least two main pipe distribution sites, one is usually outside and the other on a mid-level floor to give more power to the pumps. The Y-Cable Thief simply attaches a pipe to your pipe and reroutes it to his, the power of the pressure ensures a very fast transfer with no evidence.
4. The Top-Tier Thief: This involves a master thief who knows how a water distribution network actually works and simply reroutes it from the source and ships it to his tank. This method is the fastest and leaves absolutely no evidence.

After discussing this over multiple rounds of coffee and cigarettes, Abu Tha'ir and Abu Hussam determined we must be dealing with type #3 or #4. They came to this conclusion based on the lack of evidence and the speed with which they were doing it. Siphoning from one tank to another can take an hour or more (I tried it later on and found out).

The next week, the same thing happened, and Abu Hussam sent another message to the WhatsApp group to try and discover if anyone else was dealing with theft. This time, one other person said it also happened to him. He said he was just going to siphon water from his hammam shams tank and deal with it that way. We even called the person who previously owned the apartment to figure out if he had any insight. He said he had occasionally dealt with a water thief from within the building during the summer, but it was never obstructive enough to cause him much of a headache.

The next week, I had a long trip to Gaza and my wife would be staying at her parents' for the whole week, so no one was in the house from Saturday until Wednesday night. This was the ultimate test: were we really using too much water as the lajna and other tenants made us believe, or was it a thief? We got to our apartment Wednesday late afternoon and within an hour of being in the house the water was gone.

I was irate, four weeks of water thievery and I was fed up. I decided: next week, I am going to hang out on the roof at the time that it happened and wait for the person, hoping they were type #1 or #2, and catch them in the act. Needless to say, when the day and time rolled around, Abu Hussam's theory was correct: the water was stolen without anyone on the roof but me, standing there bewildered. I was being confronted with a PhD-level water thief.

I should mention as well that through this month I complained, a lot, to anyone who would listen. My neighbors, people in the neighborhood in general, the guys who run the juice bar I frequent, the pharmacist, and the grocer. All had different theories and ideas of how to deal with it, but they also had a similar experience at one point or another with water theft. Some had useful tips and tricks to stop the thievery, others had suggestions for coping in the meantime. Regardless, it was stunning to me at the time that water stealing was such a widespread phenomenon. I mean, really, of all things to steal, water? Kufr 'Aqab has a reputation of being a lawless area where supposedly massive and widespread crime happens (although, personally, I think it is extremely exaggerated and levels are very low). Despite this, water stealing did not seem a prime market, but here we are. I was warned as well by everyone to keep bringing a plumber in to check things because water theft impacts the water infrastructure in apartments, and it can break down parts and materials.

After four weeks of having my water stolen, I was also hit with the monetary reality of this. What should have been a 64-shekel bill for two months of regular water use was a 128-shekel bill. Now thankfully, this sort of difference is not a big deal for us financially, but we are very fortunate in a neighborhood where most families are struggling and live paycheck to paycheck. "It was not enough our water was being stolen and we had to take sponge baths. Now we have to pay more money," I grumbled as I paid the bill at the local store.

There I was, a defeated man. I resigned myself to the fact that I was going to be dealing with a weekly water thief, intent on making my transition into Kufr 'Aqab both authentic and as annoying as possible.

Since then, we have had only one more experience with having water stolen. It occurred in mid-May 2023, when the first real heat hit Palestine. It was a familiar sight, about ten of us on the roof trying to figure out what was wrong, going through all the tired scenarios, noticing who had how much water and if any evidence was left behind. Thankfully, that was the last time I dealt with the water thief and because I was a seasoned enough professional at dealing with it, I simply grabbed a hose and siphoned water from my hammam shams tank to my cold tank and said *khalas*.

Now, as I end this account, I am sure you, the reader, may have plenty of questions. I assume your first is, "Where does all the stolen water go?" I have absolutely no idea. I know some people in Kufr 'Aqab keep an additional tank or two on their balcony, especially if they're a big family and need lots of water. The average amount they were stealing from us was about nine hundred liters a week, which would have to be stored somewhere until it was used. I simply have no good answer to this. I would like to think my water was hanging out in a lovely home being taken care of and used well, but I have no idea.

Additionally, you may be wondering, “Is there no one to stop this?” The short answer is no. While Kufr ‘Aqab gets its water from the JWU, their authority for such a thing is extremely limited in capacity and authority, and since everything is illegal in Kufr ‘Aqab already, they don’t wish to get involved in water politics. Hundreds and potentially thousands of families deal with a similar issue weekly. With no legal mechanism to confront it, they are instead forced to silently cope. I, a very tough guy (sarcasm), fantasized about what I would do if I actually caught the water thief in the act. The reality is, they would probably have the backing of friends and/or family, which makes it near impossible to really stop them without a legal mechanism or authority to take them on. Probably lost in this article is the legal reality that Israel should not only be providing water to Kufr ‘Aqab, but also fighting theft, in its “eternal, undivided capital.” But as we know, it is more than content to encourage divide and rule among isolated and vulnerable Palestinian populations and not above using something like water to achieve its goals.

Lastly, you could be thinking, “Why does the thieving happen on Wednesday, more or less at the same time every week.” I do not have a solid answer to this. Both my father-in-law and the plumber say this is typical and that it could be due to a mechanical setting they install in their pump, or it could just be a scheduled time they think is best to do it.

Honestly, I dread the day the water thief decides to target me again. The amount of time and energy my father-in-law and I dedicated to trying to catch this guy is enormous. While I feel sorry if he started targeting someone else, I am also relieved. Living in Kufr ‘Aqab with all its problems is enough; being without water further exasperates this anxiety and discomfort for the many families living there.

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