



# THE RIGHT TO WATER IN PALESTINE: A BACKGROUND

## C E S R

The Israeli confiscation and control of Palestinian water resources is a defining feature of the Israeli occupation and a major impediment to a just resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict. Furthermore, Israel's control of Palestinian water resources undermines any possibility for sustainable development and violates Palestinians' human right to safe, accessible, and adequate drinking water. Israel's discriminatory water policy maintains an unequal allocation of water between Israel, illegal Israeli settler communities and Palestinians living in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), while appropriating an ever greater portion of Palestinian water resources for its own use. In a water-scarce region, Israeli water policy hinges on finding more water to maintain present consumption levels – regardless of the sustainability of current patterns of water use by Israelis and settlers. In 1993, the Israeli State Controller said that the West Bank is the "principal reservoir of drinking water for the Dan region, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Beersheba" and the "most important long-term source in the [national] water system"<sup>1</sup>

- Israel controls a disproportionate amount of the two water systems it shares with Palestine. It effectively controls **100 percent of the Jordan River basin** and more than 80 percent of underground water resources from the Western (Mountain) aquifer.<sup>2</sup>
- Israel uses **85% of groundwater resources** available in the West Bank – accounting for 25 percent of Israel's water consumption.<sup>3</sup>

## HISTORY

- In **1964**, Israel completed the construction of the National Water Carrier; begun in 1953. This enormous water project, a network of pipelines, pumping stations, reservoirs and canals extending from the Sea of Galilee to the Negev, diverts 75 percent of the waters of the Jordan River to Israel. While Syria and Jordan are allowed to use 160 mcm per year and 320 mcm per year respectively, Palestinians are prohibited from using any water from the Jordan River.<sup>4</sup>
- After **1967**, Israel took control over all water resources in the newly occupied Palestinian territories by a series of military orders that negated all previous and existing settlements of



Courtesy Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs (PASSIA). Adapted from: "Water and War in the Middle East" Info Paper no.5, July 1996, Centre for Policy Analysis on Palestine/The Jerusalem Fund, Washington D.C.

water disputes, set pumping quotas and forbade construction of new wells by Palestinians without permission from the area Israeli military commander. Since 1967, permits have been granted for only 23 new wells.<sup>5</sup>

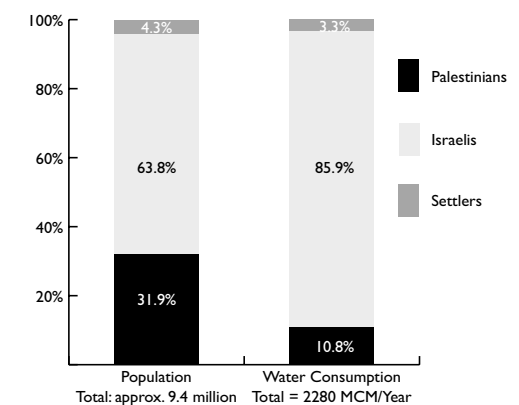
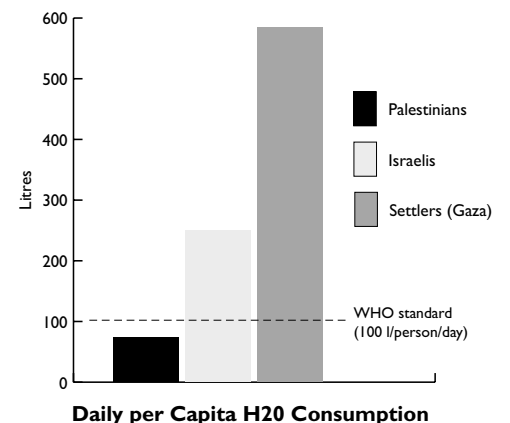
- In **1982**, the Israeli national water authority, Mekorot, took control of Palestinian water. While many existing Palestinian wells were being destroyed, digging and pumping for deeper wells for Israeli use continued – effectively drying up older Palestinian wells.
- In **1986**, Israel reduced the quotas for the amount of water Palestinians could pump from their wells by 10%, resulting in widespread water scarcity.<sup>6</sup>
- In **1995**, under the Oslo II Accord, division of water sources was designated as an issue for "final status negotiations" – a device used by Israel to continue illegal appropriation of Palestinian water resources from 1995 until the present (the "final status negotiations" of Oslo have never been reached). A Palestinian Water Authority (PWA) was set up, but Israel maintained control of the total flow and volume of water to the oPt. While the PWA has no

ability to manage water resources and just allocates the limited supply made available by Israel, the PWA, rather than the Occupation, is blamed for water scarcity. Moreover, the Oslo II agreement does not call for redistribution of existing water sources nor require any reduction in water extraction or consumption by Israelis or settlers.

- Since **2000**, after the onset of the Second Intifada in September, the Israeli army has intensified the destruction of water infrastructure and confiscation of water sources in the West Bank and Gaza.<sup>7</sup>

## COMPARING WATER USE<sup>8</sup>

Both absolutely and proportionately, Israelis use a far greater amount of the region's total water resources. Settlers use nearly 600 litres of water each day. Palestinian water use does not even meet the minimum daily standard of 100 litres as recommended by the World Health Organisation.



Percentage population vs. water consumption

1 LAW, "An Overview of the consequences of Israeli Occupation on the environment in the West Bank and Gaza," 2000.  
 2 B'Tselem, "Thirsty for a Solution," 2001.  
 3 Jad Isaac and Mohammad Ghanyem, "Environmental Degradation and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," ARIJ 2001.

4 PASSIA Special Bulletin, "Water: The Blue Gold of the Middle East," July 2002.  
 5 LAW, "An Overview of the consequences of Israeli Occupation on the environment in the West Bank and Gaza," 2000.  
 6 PASSIA, "Fact Sheet – Water and Environment," 2001.

7 Palestinian Environmental NGO Network "Apartheid Wall Campaign, Report #1" November 2002.  
 8 Figures calculated from PASSIA Special Bulletin, "Water: The Blue Gold of the Middle East," July 2002; B'tselem, "Thirsty for a Solution," 2000; and UNEP "Desk Study on the Environment in the West Bank and Gaza," 2002.

## VIOLATIONS OF PALESTINIANS' RIGHT TO WATER

While Israelis and settlers get continuous water supply from Mekorot all year-round at subsidized prices, Palestinians face these situations:

- **Irregular water supply** across the West Bank, particularly in the water-scarce summer months.
- **Depleted/contaminated/salinated water** in Gaza because of over-extraction of the Coastal Aquifer – due in part to the fact that Palestinians are not allowed to develop or repair water infrastructure.<sup>9</sup>
- **Water distribution network losses of 30 – 50%** because of deteriorating networks and leaky pipes in dire need of repair.<sup>10</sup>
- **No piped water at all** for 215,000 Palestinians in 150 West Bank villages (26% of West Bank households).<sup>11</sup>
- Many Palestinians **must buy water** – either from Mekorot, or from private suppliers selling expensive and unregulated trucked water. Even within the oPt, Mekorot's prices are different for Palestinians and Israeli settlers.<sup>12</sup>



Water tanker trucks such as these are often prevented at Israeli checkpoints from collecting and delivering vital drinking water to Palestinian communities. (Photo courtesy John Reese © 2002)

## SINCE THE SECOND INTIFADA: IN THE NAME OF "SECURITY"

- **Destruction of water infrastructure.** The Israeli army have bulldozed pipelines and destroyed at least 15 wells in the West Bank and Gaza since September 2000 – eliminating the largest water source for many Palestinian villages and towns. Between March and May of 2002 alone, the World Bank, UNDP and USAID estimate that damage to West Bank water supply and sewerage infrastructure by the Israeli military reached US\$7 million.<sup>13</sup>

- **Limited access to trucked water.** Israel's policy of 'closure' severely limits access to water carriers in a context where more than a third of all Palestinians rely on buying water from private or municipal tankers for their water needs.<sup>14</sup>
- **Increased price of water.** Water tankers delayed at checkpoints raise their prices by almost 80% because of the increased transportation time due to closure.<sup>15</sup> With 70-90% of the workforce unemployed, Palestinians spend as much as 39% of their household expenditure on purchasing water.<sup>16</sup>



A section of the 'Separation' Wall that will come between many Palestinians and their water and land. (Photo courtesy John Reese © 2002)

- **Ban on drilling wells.** In October 2002, Israeli infrastructure minister Efi Eitam banned Palestinians from drilling for water and placed a freeze on the issue of future permits for wells.<sup>17</sup>
- **Separation from water sources.** In June of 2002, the Israeli government authorized a plan to build a 'security wall' - more accurately referred to as a 'Separation Wall' or 'Apartheid Wall' - with electric fences, trenches and security patrols along the entire 220 mile length of the West Bank. However, the Wall is not being built along the 'Green Line' (the de facto pre-1967 border between Israel and the West Bank) - but rather *inside* the West Bank. The Wall separates thousands of Palestinians from their land and water sources. In the first phase of the wall, several agriculture-dependent villages in the northern West Bank will lose access to 30 groundwater wells.<sup>18</sup>
- **Increase in water-borne diseases:** Recent surveys have found infection rates from water-related diseases as high as 64% in certain communities in the West Bank.<sup>19</sup> A recent study shows that over a quarter of rural households in the West Bank has a member suffering from diarrhoea; over half of these households had not had adequate bathing water for over two weeks.<sup>20</sup>

## POLLUTION OF PALESTINIAN WATER SOURCES BY ISRAEL<sup>21</sup>

- **Israeli settlements** in the West Bank and Gaza are mostly located on hilltops and dump manure, untreated sewage and wastewater into the valleys – polluting Palestinian water sources and agricultural land. According to 1997 figures from the West Bank, settlers were 6 times more polluting than Palestinians (300,000 settlers produced 30 mcm of wastewater a year, while in the same period, 1,870,000 Palestinians produced 31 mcm of wastewater).
- **Highly polluting Israeli industries** are being relocated to the West Bank (again, on hilltops) to avoid Israeli environmental regulations. At least 200 industries in 7 industrial zones in the West Bank send untreated industrial effluents and wastewater into Palestinian streams and agricultural land.
- In February 2001, **Israel discharged 3.5 million** cubic meters of untreated wastewater mixed with rainwater into northern Gaza strip towns.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

The **Palestinian Hydrology Group** (PHG) has launched the Palestine Water for Life Campaign to promote worldwide awareness of the water and sanitation situation in Palestine, as well as to develop coordinated, comprehensive responses to the water crisis among donor, development, relief, human rights, and other NGOs. Please visit the campaign website at [www.phg.org/campaign](http://www.phg.org/campaign) for more information about how you can support their efforts.

The **Palestinian Environmental NGO Network** (PENGON) has initiated the Apartheid Wall Campaign to raise awareness of and organize opposition to the "Separation Wall" which is threatening Palestinians' access to and control over their own water resources. Learn more about the Campaign and how to support PENGON at [www.pengon.org](http://www.pengon.org).

**Educate your community!** Organize teach-ins about water issues in Palestine with experienced speakers at schools, congregations, and community centers.

**Contact the media!** Call radio programs, write letters and opinion pieces, and meet with reporters and editors to ensure that they cover the assault on Palestinian water resources.

**Visit our website** at <http://www.cesr.org/PROGRAMS/waterpalestine.htm> to learn more about the water crisis in Palestine.

9 Jad Isaac and Mohammad Ghanyem, "Environmental Degradation and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," ARJ, 2001.  
10 UNEP, "Desk Study on the Environment in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, 2002."  
11 PASSIA, "Fact Sheet – Water and Environment," 2001.  
12 Jad Isaac and Mohammad Ghanyem, "Environmental Degradation and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," ARJ, 2001.  
13 Palestine Hydrology Group, "WaSH Report #6: December

2002," and UNEP, "Desk Study on the Environment," 2002.  
14 Palestine Hydrology Group, "WaSH Report #6: December 2002."  
15 Ibid.  
16 Oxfam Briefing Paper 28: Forgotten Villages – Struggling to Survive under Closure in the West Bank, September 2002  
17 Jessica McCallin, "Israel bans new West Bank wells," Sunday Herald October 28, 2002.

18 PENGON, "Apartheid Wall Campaign, Report #1," 2002.  
19 Disease rate for Rantis (Ramallah), Palestinian Hydrology Group, "WaSH Report #7: March 2003."  
20 Oxfam Briefing Paper 28: Forgotten Villages – Struggling to Survive under Closure in the West Bank, September 2002.  
21 Jad Isaac and Mohammad Ghanyem, "Environmental degradation and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," ARJ, 2001.