

# Water

## SNAPSHOT

Palestinian access to water is severely restricted as a result of Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories. Rather than utilizing their own water resources, which are fully under Israeli control, Palestinians are forced to buy water from Israel at full price. This is largely because the Israeli government hinders the development of infrastructure within the Palestinian territories.

**The discrepancy in water consumption between Jewish settlements within the West Bank and Palestinians is staggering: some settlements consume around 400 liters per capita per day, compared with 73 liters per capita per day for Palestinians residing in the West Bank.** This discrepancy is starker with Bedouin Palestinian citizens of Israel, whose consumption is as low as 10-20 liters per capita per day.<sup>1</sup> **Within Area C of the West Bank, the area controlled by Israel, 113,000 Palestinians are not even connected to the water network.**<sup>2</sup>

In the summer of 2016, the Palestinian Authority claimed that Israel cut off water supply to large parts of the West Bank during the holy month of Ramadan, a period of fasting during which the temperature had exceeded 35 degrees Celsius. The executive director of the Palestinian Hydrology Group claimed

that people in some areas did not receive water for more than 40 days. Palestinians instead relied on purchasing water from water tankers.<sup>3</sup>

The Gaza Strip suffers from extreme deprivation of water resources. The Oslo Accords created a situation whereby the Gaza Strip is meant to be entirely self-reliant and is not allowed to depend on water supply from the West Bank, where the major Palestinian water aquifers are located.

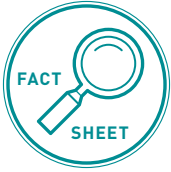
## BACKGROUND

Water in Israel/Palestine has always been a source of tension. The Oslo Accords in 1993 set out guidelines for how water would be managed in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

The Oslo Accords led to the creation of a Joint Water Committee (JWC) to manage the shared water resources between Israel and the Palestinian territories. The JWC is made up of an equal number of Palestinians and Israelis, but the latter retain the power to veto any infrastructure development in the West Bank.

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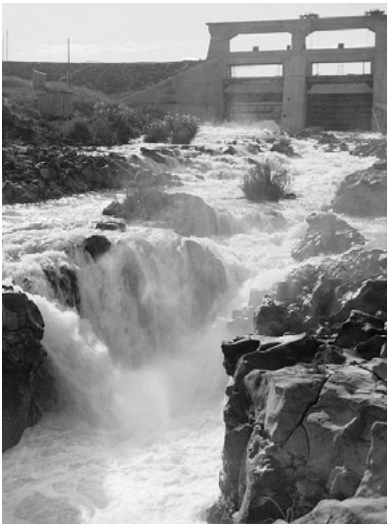




Palestinians require JWC approval to receive financing from international donors and are thus reliant on the system instituted by the Oslo Accords. On the other hand, Israel has routinely failed to seek permission to improve and construct pipelines and wells. Israel's national water company, Mekorot, does not seek Palestinian approval for any of its developments in Israeli-controlled Palestinian areas. This means that the Mountain Aquifer remains under Israeli control.<sup>4</sup> These procedures institutionalize asymmetry and lead to imbalance in the utilization of national resources.

According to the Oslo Accords, in the West Bank, Palestinian water supply should come from two sources:

1. Extraction from existing drills; and
2. Development of new drills, which would allow for extraction from the Eastern Basin of the Mountain Aquifer, a previously unused source of fresh water. It was agreed that until this can be completed, Israel would be responsible for supplying Palestinians with approximately 25 million cubic meters (mcm) of water a year.



Yet existing drills barely allow for the extraction of sufficient quantities of water to meet demand. Given that the Oslo Accords had been designed for a five year transition time, allocations under those provisions are also far below what is needed today. Furthermore, Israeli restrictions on drilling activities have hindered the development of the new designated drills.<sup>5</sup>

Within Area C, which accounts for 60% of the land of the West Bank, Israel retains nearly exclusive control over law, planning and construction.<sup>6</sup> **More than 70% of Palestinian communities located in Area C of the West Bank are not connected to the water network and have to rely on tanked water at higher prices.<sup>7</sup> Consumption of water in some of these communities can fall as low as 20 liters per capita per day, a mere one fifth of the**

**quantities recommended by the World Health Organization.<sup>8</sup>**

The Oslo Accords stipulated that the Gaza Strip would constitute a separate water sector.<sup>9</sup> By this the Accords meant that even though the Gaza Strip is an integral part of the Palestinian territories, it cannot enjoy the Palestinian resources located within the West Bank. This has created a situation where, apart from the meager quantity of water that Israel sells to Gaza annually, Gazans must meet the rest of their demand using the resources within Gaza itself.

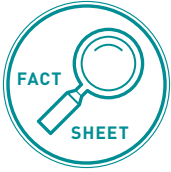
The Gaza Strip therefore relies almost entirely on the coastal aquifer for its water. Such a heavy dependency on a single aquifer means that this body of water is over-pumped. This has led to the infiltration of seawater and increased salinity. Annual abstraction of water from the coastal aquifer is almost twice the sustainable rate.<sup>10</sup> Due to high levels of pollutants such as nitrates and high levels of chloride from the seawater, **95% of the water coming from Gaza's only water source, the coastal aquifer, is unfit for drinking.**<sup>11</sup> The UN has also found that unless immediate action is taken, the damage caused to the aquifer may be irreversible by 2020.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, water infrastructure within the Gaza Strip has been severely degraded through intermittent shelling from Israel as well as a restrictive blockade that has hindered sufficient maintenance.

## CURRENT ISSUES

### Israeli Restrictions

Around 18% of the area of the West Bank is designated as a closed training military zone - roughly the same percentage of the West Bank that comes under full Palestinian control.<sup>13</sup> These zones, designed as "firing zones," have no water and sanitation service



infrastructure, which results in over 90% of the population facing water scarcity.<sup>14</sup> Over half of inhabitants have access to less than 30 liters of water per capita per day.<sup>15</sup>

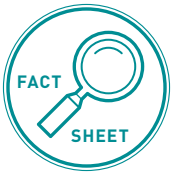
The water situation in the West Bank is further exacerbated during summer months when, to ensure constant water supply, the Palestinian Water Authorities must set the population on water rotation. This means that communities must handle long periods in the heat when they have no access to water.<sup>16</sup> The Palestinians do not have access to Israeli recycled water available for settlements, and so must use more expensive water supplies. **In the event of water shortages, valves supplying the Palestinian communities are turned off, while those of Israeli settlers are not.**<sup>17</sup> Forcible takeovers and vandalism by Jewish settlers also severely limit Palestinian access to water. In March 2012, the UN Officer for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs noted that 30 springs in the vicinity of settlements had been totally taken over by settlers, without any reprisals from the Israeli government.<sup>18</sup>

Israeli restrictions on the Gaza Strip differ greatly from those in the West Bank. The blockade on the Gaza Strip, in place since 2007, means that there are chronic shortages of electricity and fuel. This aggravates contamination and other water problems.<sup>19</sup> During the 2014 Israeli operation on the Gaza Strip, Gaza's only electricity generator was damaged, resulting in daily power cuts. The Gaza Strip faces blackouts between 12 and 16 hours a day,<sup>20</sup> severely impacting wastewater treatment plants.<sup>21</sup> As a result, only 25% of wastewater in Gaza is treated. This means that around 90,000 cubic meters of raw or partly treated sewage is released daily into the Mediterranean.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the 2014 offensive damaged 20-30% of water and sewage networks, and damaged the water desalination plant in Deir al-Balah.<sup>23</sup> Untreated water dumped into the sea tends to find its way back into the overworked coastal aquifer, which continues to act as the sole source of water for this coastal enclave.

### **Inadequate Infrastructure**

In the West Bank, the lack of infrastructure is particularly devastating. In Area C, about one third of the West Bank's water supply was lost due to leakage and theft in 2014.<sup>24</sup> Work to improve such conditions depends on foreign aid and getting permission from both the JWC and Israel's Civil Administration, often a lengthy process. Even approved plans may take years to process due to bureaucratic red tape. For instance, plans to build a facility in western Nablus, in the West Bank, were submitted in 1997, but it wasn't until 2013 that the plant finally began operating.<sup>25</sup>

Standards placed by Israel on the means for infrastructure development also have detrimental consequences. In one instance, the Israeli government had imposed on the Palestinian Authority pipes that were narrower than needed, making it impossible to connect communities in Area C to the water infrastructure in the West Bank.<sup>26</sup> Within the Gaza Strip, the inadequate infrastructure limits the potential of supplying Gaza with more water despite the available demand.<sup>27</sup>



## PALESTINE REFRAMED



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