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## BRIEFING PAPER 1 27 May 2011

*Prepared by SK/AFP*

### Israel's water violations

## Providing a Voice

#### Background

Water is the most critical of all issues in the Israel/Palestine conflict because, according to world water expert Sandra Postel, this is "the most concentrated region of water scarcity in the world". Since Israel came into being, it has unilaterally stolen just about every precious water resource belonging to the Palestinians as well as water from its Arab neighbours and its water distribution policy is highly discriminatory.

There are five major water resources upon which the Palestinians depend and which the Israelis now control: three aquifers in the West Bank, one aquifer in the Gaza Strip, which is part of the coastal aquifer basin and the Jordan River.

In the Occupied Palestinian West Bank, Israel's illegal settlement building projects are making excessive demands on the available water and Israel is exploiting and expropriating every Palestinian water resource to service them as well as to re-direct water to Israel. In the Gaza Strip - which is externally controlled by Israel - both the quantity and quality of water are desperately declining causing immeasurable water and health problems for the Palestinians.

The **1997 UN convention on water** sets out a universally accepted standard that the allocation of water between parties must be equitable, fair and reasonable and Israel has failed to meet that standard. If the current inequitable allocation is allowed to continue, the water situation for both peoples will become totally unsustainable.

**According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), 100 litres of water per day is the minimum recommended per person: the 350 litres that Israelis use is far in excess of that recommendation while the 70 litres allowed the Palestinians is well below. Some Palestinians survive on barely 20 litres per day, the necessary amount for short-term survival in emergency situations. The World Bank reported in 2009 that Palestinian access to water is in decline.**

#### Effect of the Separation Wall

Construction of Israel's Separation Wall has caused some of the most serious damage to Palestinian water supplies resulting in damaged and destroyed wells and cisterns and the expropriation of some 35,000 metres of water pipes. The Wall has cut deeply into Palestinian territory affecting the agricultural districts in the middle of the northern West Bank and separating over 122,000 Palestinians from their most important water aquifers now annexed to Israel. This has caused astronomical agricultural losses to Palestinian farmers and with almost no agriculture or industry left, Israel can claim that the Palestinians have no need for water resources and therefore no reason to make any such claims in final status negotiations.

#### West Bank aquifers and the settlements

Israel has used its illegal occupation of the West Bank to confiscate 90 percent of the water coming from the Palestinian aquifers leaving the Palestinians with a mere 10 per cent of their own water supplies. Some of the largest illegal Israeli settlements have been built over the Western mountain aquifer and the path of Israel's Wall has been deliberately built to surround and annex this vital water source. The water left to the Palestinians is subject to vandalism by the illegal settlers: acts extend from pouring concrete into the wells, damaging water pipes and pumps, allowing untreated sewage to run into wells and polluting the springs with refuse such as diapers. Existing Palestinian wells are soon undermined by new adjacent Israeli wells dug much deeper to extract the water. Palestinians are not permitted to drill for new wells and their domestic water use is restricted on a quota basis forcing Palestinians to buy back their own water from the Israeli government-owned Mekorot Water Company at exorbitant prices paying "fifteen times more than Israeli consumers - a phenomenal difference for water systems managed by the same company."

Furthermore, water tankers are often prevented from reaching Palestinian areas because of Israeli closures and checkpoints or settler attacks. An ARIJ study in May 2007 has shown that **13 per cent of the Palestinian population in the West Bank is living without water.**

### **The Gaza aquifer**

The one aquifer in Gaza can provide only 55 million cubic meters of sustainable water a year for the basic needs of Palestinians. However, over 150 million cubic metres of water is being taken out of the ground every year and this over-pumping of groundwater has caused the salty waters from the Gazan Sea to infiltrate the underground aquifer making the water very saline. Israel's actions have been a direct cause of the Gazan water crisis today. Firstly, Israel constructed a dam that took the surface runoff from the Negev that would otherwise have flowed into Gaza. Secondly, Israel over-pumped wells that it had created along the Gazan border preventing freshwater from reaching the Gaza aquifer. Furthermore, Israel's destruction of infrastructure inside Gaza has severely damaged the waste-water treatment plant and some 30 million cubic metres of waste and sewage is now seeping into the aquifer causing high levels of pollution. This has terrible ramifications on the health of the population and UN scientists estimate within a decade or so, Gaza will have no drinkable water. Not only has Israel as the Occupying Power done nothing to ensure that the Palestinians have a viable water supply in keeping with the size of its population and its future sustainability, it has done everything to discriminate against the Palestinians developing their own water resources.

### **ISRAEL'S WATER POLICIES VIOLATE INTERNATIONAL LAW**

- **By depriving the local population of its water resources, Israel violates its obligations as an Occupying Power under the Fourth Geneva Convention, which requires Israel to protect and provide humane treatment for the inhabitants whose land it occupies.**
- **Israel's expropriation of water in the occupied Palestinian territory for the use of its own citizens in Israel and also the illegal settlers in the West Bank, violates numerous treaties and international law.**
- **Israel's discriminatory water allocation in favour of the illegal settlers in the occupied Palestinian West Bank, is illegal under international law.**
- **Israel's collective punishment of the Palestinian people including the destruction of water infrastructure and storage is a violation of international law.**
- **By diverting water from its catchment basin, Israel defies international law which prohibits such diversion.**

### **The Jordan Valley: water rights and environmental concerns**

The Jordan Valley is situated over the Eastern Water Basin and under international law, most of the water sources belong to the Palestinians while a few are shared with the Israelis. Over the last four decades, Israel has isolated and closed 162 agricultural wells in the Jordan Valley for security purposes and exclusively for settler use while prohibiting access to Palestinians.

A B'TSelem report in May 2011 revealed that 77.5 percent of the Jordan Valley is closed to Palestinians. They are forbidden from using the Jordan river, which would provide 250 million cubic litres of water per year. Israel is draining excessive amounts of river and wadi water to feed the huge drainage operations, and the water levels are dropping by one metre per year threatening the sea's existence.

Through its policy of water discrimination, Israel has manufactured a situation where 9000 illegal Israeli settlers in the Jordan Valley consume as much water as one third of the entire Palestinian population in the West Bank of 2.6 million. These restrictions increase when illegal settlers' water demands increase particularly in the summer months and water supply is reduced from 15 to 25% to Palestinian civilians.

By diverting water from the Jordan River, Israel has defied an important principle of international law that prohibits diversion of water from its catchment basin.

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Jordanvalleysolidarity.org

