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The Politics of Water Under Occupation: Israel in Palestine

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The International Court of Justice released its historic advisory opinion on 19 July 2024 just as I was finishing my essay on Israel's theft and abuse of the water resources of Palestine.

The 80-page opinion, "Legal consequences arising from the policies and practices of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem," unequivocally states that "the State of Israel's continued presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory is unlawful" and should come to ".an end "as rapidly as possible

The "Exploitation of natural resources" section (V/B.4, 124-133) was of particular interest to me. In it, the Court confirmed what I had set out to disclose, that Israel has used, misused and abused its illegal control over the water resources of Palestine to gain a permanent hold over all of the land.

The Court concluded that the occupied West Bank (especially Area C), rich in natural resources, has been used by Israel to the exclusive benefit of its own population, while disadvantaging Palestinians and their communities. Area C covers 61 percent of the West Bank and is under the complete control of Israel.

Furthermore, the ICJ determined that Israel must relinquish control over all aspects of Palestinians' lives, including its most vital natural resource, water.

The concept of water is deeply etched in the culture, politics, religion and mythology of the Middle East. For example, it is a tradition, in the extreme summer heat, to leave a jug of water outside the front door or gate in neighborhoods as an offering to the thirsty.

In Islam, water is a treasured resource. It played a central role in the birth of the new religion, in its narratives and rituals. Extreme drought may have been decisive in contributing to the upheavals in ancient Arabia and in the societal change from which Islam emerged in the early 7th century.

Water is central to the mythology of Islam. In Muslim lore, it was the bubbling waters of the Well of Zamzam in the Arabian peninsula that kept the young prophet, Ismael (son of Abraham and Hajar) alive. The well, located in the Masjid al-Haram in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, continues to miraculously generate water after 4,000 years. Water from the well is also distributed to the Prophet's Mosque, Masjid al-Nabawi, in Medina, the resting place of the Prophet Mohammad.

Muslims in Gaza, much like the world over, stand prayerful in the direction of the two venerated mosques five times daily. However, Israel's relentless bombing campaign since October 2023 has made access to ablution water impossible.

To fully understand the gravity and pain that Palestinians have endured it is essential to remember what they have lost.

Since European Zionist migration to Palestine in the early 20th century, life for its indigenous people has been changed.

Israel's founders were mindful that their colonizing dream in Palestine was sustainable only if they secured hegemony over the water that flowed above and beneath the land.

At the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, ending World War I, Zionist leaders stated that a future Jewish state depended upon dominion over the Naqab (Negev) Desert, Syrian Golan Heights, the Jordan Valley, Litani River in Lebanon and the West Bank.

The Mount Hermon basin—whose mountain range is located on the border between Syria and Lebanon—was seen as essential to their colonizing ambitions. It is in this basin that its streams and rivers merge to become the Jordan River.

In December 1919, Russian-born Chaim Weizmann, Israel's first president (1949-52), wrote to the British prime minister, Lloyd George, that “the whole economic future of Palestine is dependent upon its water supply for irrigation and for electric power, and the water supply must mainly be derived from the slopes of Mount Hermon, from the headwaters of the Jordan and from the Litany [Litani] River.” The Latani is the primary and largest watershed in Lebanon.

After seizing 78 percent of historic Palestine in the 1948 war, Israel moved quickly to implement its prepared plans to control the water resources of Palestine, which were nationalized and rationed in 1949.

The Arab-Israeli War of 1967 also had its origins over water. Israel began work in 1953 to build an elaborate water system, the National Water Carrier (NWC), to transport water from the Upper Jordan River in the north to the center of Israel and to planned colonies in the arid South. And in 1963, it began pumping water from the Sea of Galilee (Lake Tiberius) into the NWC, which posed a grave threat to Syrian, Lebanese and Jordanian water resources. As a consequence, Israel and the Arab states engaged in numerous clashes in what came to be known as the “War over Water” (1964-1967).

To thwart Israel's scheme, in 1965, Syria and Lebanon implemented the Arab League plan to divert water from Jordan River sources (Banias and Hasbani Rivers) to their own territory

In his memoirs, Israeli general and former prime minister (2001-2006), Ariel Sharon, revealed that the 1967 war was launched in response to Syria's plan to reroute the headwaters of the Jordan. Israel attacked construction sites inside Syria that same year, leading to the war.

Completed in 1964, the National Water Carrier diverts 75 percent of the waters from the Jordan River to Israel, while Palestinians are prohibited from using any of it.

Israel's military victory in June 1967, had the effect of placing much of the Mount Hermon basin, the entire West Bank and Gaza Strip under Israeli control. It then declared the water resources of the captured land to be property of the state, putting them under complete military authority.

When it illegally annexed the occupied Syrian Golan Heights in 1981, Israel secured direct dominance over the headwaters of the Jordan River, fulfilling its early Zionist designs.

Israel has also coveted and remains determined to seize the water of southern Lebanon—the Litani River and the Shebaa Farms. The Shebaa Farms area has abundant ground water that flows from the slopes of Mt. Hermon.

Historical records from the 1950s indicate that then chief of staff of the Israel “Defense” Forces, Moshe Dayan and others, favored conquering and annexing southern Lebanon up to the Litani.

For that reason, Israel invaded Lebanon in 1978 (Operation Litani) and again in 1982. The Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon continued until its forces were driven out by Lebanese Hezbollah in 2000.

Claiming that the Shebaa Farms are part of the Golan Heights, Israel annexed it in 1981. Hezbollah continues to battle for the liberation of this 16 square miles on the western slopes of the Hermon Mountain range.

The Occupied West Bank

Israel's objective has always been to decrease the supply of water to Palestinians so that they will inevitably have to leave.

Tel Aviv's apartheid water policies were set in motion by the interim Oslo peace accords of the 1990s, which gave Israel control over 80 percent of the West Bank's reserves. Under the Oslo II Accords, division of water resources was designated as an issue for "final status negotiations." Final status and a future Palestinian state were never reached, as Israel continued to illegally appropriate Palestinian land and water resources.

The 1995 accords, meant to last five years, have remained entrenched. As a result, Israelis have access to water on demand, while Palestinians receive predetermined allocations set out in the "peace agreement," that do not reflect population growth, climate change or average daily water consumption needs.

As the occupying power, Israel has defined responsibilities under international human rights law to respect Palestinians' right to safe, sufficient and accessible water. Israel has never ended its illegal occupation or lived up to its obligations.

Israelis consume ten times the amount of water than West Bank Palestinians. Israel and its colonies (settlements) consume 87 percent of the water from West Bank aquifers, while Palestinians are allocated just 13 percent. And while they do not have enough water to bathe their children, Jewish children splash about in community pools.

The national Israeli water company, Mekorot, has forced Palestinians to depend on Israel for their water needs. It has systematically tapped springs and sunk wells in the West Bank to supply its population, including squatters, with a continuous supply of water, while Palestinians receive water sporadically. The company routinely reduces the Palestinian supply and shamelessly, sells them their own water at inflated prices. To counter the chronic water shortage, 92 percent of Palestinians store water in tanks on their rooftops.

Since 2021, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Israeli authorities have demolished nearly 160 Palestinian reservoirs, sewage networks and wells across the West Bank and East Jerusalem. While Israel continues to dig more wells, it has denied Palestinians' drilling rights and blocks them from harvesting rainwater.

The expansion of Jewish colonies, Israeli industrial and military zones have contributed to water contamination, which has severely undermined the Palestinian agricultural sector. As Palestinian farms wither from a paucity of water, Israeli farms receive unlimited amounts, often to produce such water-guzzling crops as tomatoes, oranges and cotton.

The Gaza Strip

The catastrophic water crisis in Gaza today predates the October 2023 war. Israel's 16-year blockade contributed to severe water shortages. And potable water was hard to find after decades of Israeli invasions.

With no surface sources of water, the coastal aquifer, on the brink of collapse, provided 81 percent of the enclave's supply. Three desalination plants and three Mekorot pipes provided the remainder. Families had to buy often questionable drinking water from street vendors at high prices. On 9 October 2023, Israel cut off the piped water it had been sending Gaza.

Since Israel withdrew in 2005, it has conducted five major wars on the small densely-populated Strip, destroying much of its infrastructure. And for years, Gazans have lived with depleted, contaminated and salinated water because Israel has restricted the entry of construction and other materials like cement and iron needed to repair, maintain or develop the enclave's water infrastructure.

The United Nations currently estimates that 70 percent of Gaza's water and sanitation plants have been destroyed or damaged, including all five wastewater treatment facilities, water desalination plants, sewage pumping stations, wells and reservoirs. Those remaining are short on fuel to continue operating. Tons of untreated sewage have seeped into the ground or has been pumped into the Mediterranean Sea.

According to the UN, 95-97 percent of the underground water is not fit for human consumption. Most people are now getting drinking water from private vendors who operate small desalination facilities powered by solar energy.

According to Euro-Med Monitor, Palestinians have access to just 1.5 liters of water per person per day for all needs, including drinking and personal hygiene. It is worth noting that the established international emergency water threshold is 15 liters per person per day.

The inability to dispose of garbage, treat sewage and deliver uncontaminated water, in sweltering 90 degree (Fahrenheit) heat, has produced disastrous health consequences, including Hepatitis A, cholera, typhoid, diarrheal and skin diseases, and a stench that has made Gazans ill. Crowded together in tent camps, Palestinians are finding it difficult to sleep because of flies, cockroaches and fear of scorpions and rodents.

Conclusion

Ten months of unabated bombing has ravaged the ecosystem of Gaza and its population.

The recent advisory opinion of the UN's highest Court has unequivocally confirmed that Israel's presence in occupied Palestine is unlawful and must end, that it must cease "settlement" expansion and evacuate all "settlers," that reparations are owed Palestinians and that nations are obliged not to "render aid or assistance" in maintaining Israel's presence in the territory.

Most UN member states honor their obligations under international law. There is little reason to believe that Israel and its chief enabler, the United States, will comply, since both have a history of disregarding UN resolutions, including an ICJ ruling in 2004 that Israel tear down a concrete barrier wall it had erected in the West Bank to separate itself from Palestinian cities and towns.

For half a century, Israel, with U.S. support, and the mercenary corporate media, has had free rein to expand and grow economically fat on the stolen natural resources of Palestine.

It is as simple as drinking a glass of water; so the saying goes. But not in Palestine, where the people have been imprisoned between birth and death—for now. There are finally signs, however, of an epilogue to the tragic Palestinian al-Nakba (the catastrophe).