

Abdullah's Spring: Control of Water in Israel and Palestine

I LAND IN TEL AVIV IN THE NUMBING HEAT OF AUGUST. The 45-minute drive into Jerusalem is dry and desolate, but the cabdriver says he will take me to Abdullah's Spring. We veer off to the side of the road and stop at a vigorous trickle coming straight out of a rock. I cup my hands under it, fill them, and drink the cold water. I pour it over my head, fill my hands again and wash my face. Other people are here too, filling bottles from the spring and loading them into their cars to take home.

For me, this is a refreshing dip in biblical waters after a long flight. For these people, it is water for their basic needs. Nidal, a waiter in my Jerusalem hotel, tells me that he gets up at 1:00 am to fill water bottles during the one hour each day that the taps are turned on in his town.

The water issue in Israel/Palestine is not about privatization; it is about control. But it still comes down to a negative impact on peoples' access, water quality, and the health of the environment.

Control of water

Water is life in such a dry land and Israel holds tight control over access to it. Palestinians have never been allowed to pump as much water as they need for domestic consumption and agriculture. After the Six Day War in 1967, a string of military laws clamped down on Palestinians' access to water, and these remain in place today.

Wells were seized when their owners were identified as "absentee." Water authority was taken away from municipalities, governors and village councils and assigned to Israeli area military commanders. Palestinians were pro-

hibited from developing new water infrastructure without an Israeli-issued permit — and permits have been granted for only 23 new wells in the last 39 years. Pumping quotas on Palestinians wells were put in place, and then lowered in the 1980s.

A farmer going to work in Jayyous. KAIROS



The "Road Map to Peace" didn't help. The Oslo II agreement, signed in September 1995, called for "the equitable utilization of joint water resources," but this has never happened. "The defect is in [the terms of] the Oslo peace process," notes Amjad Alewi, a hydrologist at the Palestinian Water Authority. "The fact is we can't even drill a well without approval from Israel,

while they pump all the water they like into the settlements."

When construction on the Separation Wall began in 2003, access to water grew more difficult. It is not a coincidence that the Wall follows the boundaries of one of the West Bank's major aquifers, nor that Palestinian farmers have found that their wells are now on the wrong side of the barrier.

So what does all this mean for the average Palestinian, in a society that is mostly agricultural? Abdul Latif Khaled, a hydrologist with the Palestinian Hydrology Group (PHG) says that Palestinians are simply not allotted enough groundwater to meet their needs, even though much of the water in the aquifers originates in the West Bank. So they must buy back water from Merkorot, Israel's water authority, while the rest of the water is slated for use by the numerous illegal Israeli settlements scattered throughout the occupied West Bank.

Israel also has control of surface water, and the Palestinian Authority has no access to information about how much is taken. Even a recent request for permission



By Sara Stratton and Hanadi Loubani

to build a reservoir to collect rainwater during the stormy seasons was denied.

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends 100 litres of water per person per day as the minimum for basic consumption. According to B'Tselem (the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories), per capita water consumption for Palestinians in the occupied West Bank is just 70 litres per person per day. In some West Bank villages the allotment is 21 litres per person per day. In contrast, average per capita use in Israel reaches 350 litres per day.

Conflict = pollution

In Gaza, one of the most densely populated areas on Earth, water is pumped from the aquifer at double the sustainable rate. As a result the aquifer is becoming contaminated with salt water; hydrologists suggest it will take 50,000 years to replenish.

To make matters worse, Gaza's infrastructure is unable to adequately deal with sewage and industrial waste, so it drips through the sandy soil into the water table. I remember the look of disgust on Abdul Latif's face as he said that he must include this wastewater when he calculates what resources are available for domestic water use.

Peace, fair access to water, and the very health of water itself, all depend on each other. On both sides of the border, on both sides of the Wall, Palestinians and Israelis are struggling to achieve all three. The struggle has no end in sight, and indeed the human and environmental damage brought on by the conflict has only worsened in recent years.

Yet Israeli women and men dedicated to a peaceful, two-state co-existence continue to work with Palestinians of the same mind. Both Palestinians and Israelis share a profound attachment to this holy land and the scarce water it offers to its peoples. In that, and in their refusal to give up their vision of peace, lies the hope.

Abdullah's Spring, too, is a lesson in persistence. Long used by Palestinian villagers, it had been cut off in the construction of a "protected" highway for Israeli travel

WHAT WE CAN DO

LEARN about the complex situation in Israel and Palestine. See "Countries of Concern" on the KAIROS website (www.kairoscanada.org) for materials on Israel and Palestine.

CONSIDER purchasing fair trade products from Zatoun to support Palestinian farmers and peace initiatives in the region. Go to www.zatoun.com

only. Yet, as springs do, it surfaced again in another spot along its underground path, this time along a road that could be used by Palestinians.

1. Quoted in "Deadly Thirst", Chris McGreal, Guardian online, 13 January 2004. See also A Thirst for West Bank Water, posted on The Nation: www.thenation.com



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Recommended resources

(available on the KAIROS 2006-07 CD or on the sites listed):

Water and Sanitation Hygiene Monitoring Project:
www.phg.org/campaign/about/about.html

B'Tselem (The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories): www.btselem.org