

Water resources in the West Bank

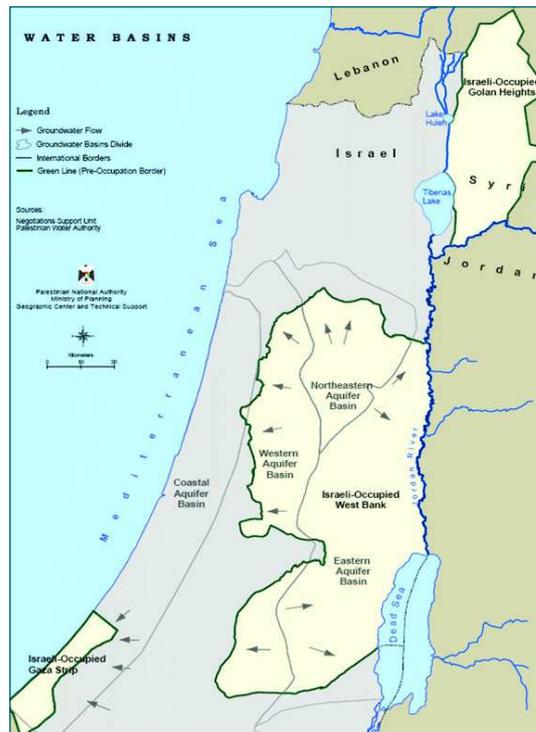
The UN General Assembly "Reaffirms the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people in the Occupied Palestinian Territory ... over their natural resources, including land and water."

UN General Assembly Resolution 62/81 (2008)

When Israel occupied the West Bank in 1967, a series of military orders brought Palestinian water resources exclusively under Israeli control. Palestinians were prohibited from developing water resources and infrastructure without an Israeli permit, including drilling wells and maintaining springs, cisterns, networks and reservoirs.

In 1982, then-Minister of Defence Ariel Sharon transferred all West Bank water supply systems to the Israeli national water company, Mekorot, for the symbolic price of one Israeli shekel.

In 1993, when Palestinians and Israelis signed the Oslo interim agreement, further discussion of water resources was postponed to final status negotiations, which were to be concluded in the year 2000 but have yet to be negotiated.



The Oslo accords also created the Joint Water Committee to manage the West Bank's shared water resources. While this committee is made up of an equal number of Palestinians and Israelis, it grants Israel exclusive veto power over water resource and infrastructure development in the West Bank.

As a result, Palestinians have been denied access to their rightful share of transboundary water resources and have been severely restricted in their ability to develop their water resources and water and sanitation infrastructure.

The Wall, roadblocks, checkpoints and other Israeli 'security measures' further restrict Palestinian communities' access to water resources and filling points.

Surface Water

Surface water flowing in the occupied West Bank is one way that Palestinians access their water resources. However, because springs are replenished by intermittent rainfall, they are not a reliable source of water. At the same time, surface water has been contaminated by unregulated wastewater dumping.

- 💧 Palestinians have been denied access to the Jordan River, their main surface water resource, since 1967.
- 💧 There are approximately 400 measurable springs in the West Bank.¹
- 💧 Sixteen Palestinian communities are dependent on springs as their only source of drinking water.
- 💧 40 per cent of surface water pollution comes from Israeli settlements in the West Bank, and from waste water from illegal settlements and Palestinian neighbourhoods in Israeli-occupied East Jerusalem.
- 💧 By far the largest single polluted valley is Wadi Nar (Kidron) where 17.5 million cubic meters a year (MCM/Yr) of sewage emerges from Jerusalem.²

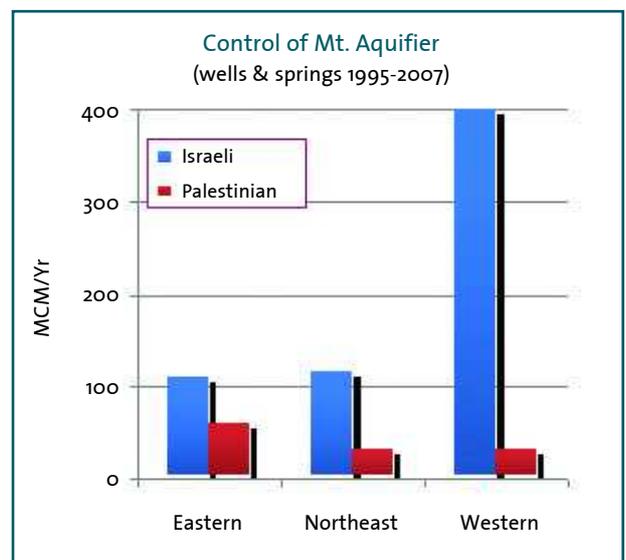
Ground Water

The Mountain Aquifer is the main groundwater resource in the West Bank. Approximately 80 per cent of the water that flows back into the aquifer, thereby recharging it, comes from the West Bank.

Israel pumps much higher quantities of groundwater than Palestinians. Indeed, it is estimated that Israel uses 88 per cent of the well water pumped from the aquifer. According to the World Bank, Israel continuously over-abstracts water from the aquifer -- some years by more than 50 per cent -- a practice that will cause irreversible long-term damage to this shared water resource.³

The Mountain Aquifer is divided into three parts: the Western, Eastern and Northeastern basins.

Since 1967, not a single permit has been granted to Palestinians to drill a new well in the Western basin, the most productive in the Mountain Aquifer. One hundred and twenty old Palestinian agricultural wells cannot be operated, lacking Joint Water Committee approval for repair and maintenance.



¹ Palestinian Hydrology Group, *Water for Life Israeli Assault on Palestinian Water Sanitation and Hygiene during the Intifada*, (2004).

² B'Tselem, *Foul Play: Neglect of Wastewater Treatment in the West Bank*, (2009).

³ World Bank, *Assessment of Restrictions on Palestinian Water Sector Development*, (2009).

Unlike the Western and Northeastern Aquifers, the Eastern Aquifer is almost completely situated within the borders of the West Bank (with no relevant in-or out-flows from or to Israel). In spite of this geographical location, Israel currently abstracts the majority of the well pumpage from this aquifer by drilling deep wells in the foothills and controlling all of the spring flow along the Dead Sea.

Continuous over-abstraction from Israeli wells, both in the Eastern Aquifer and Western Aquifer have led to severe declines in the water level and caused a number of nearby Palestinian wells and springs to dry up.

Restricting Access

Restrictions on Palestinian movement and access due to the Wall, checkpoints, barriers and roadblocks, as well as bypass roads, closed military areas, nature reserves and Area C zoning,⁴ have cut many Palestinian communities off from their water resources.

The Wall isolates over 20 Palestinian groundwater wells, 14 of which are from the governorate of Qalqilya, as well as 17 springs in Bethlehem.⁵

As a result, some communities have to rely on water delivered by tanker, which costs as much as ten times the amount of water distributed via the water network, and is not always of acceptable quality.⁶ Some households are currently paying up to 40 per cent of their household income on clean water.⁷ Consequently, domestic consumption in such communities has fallen to as little as 20 litres per person per day, well below the 100 - 150 litres the World Health Organisation recommends to ensure all health concerns are met.⁸



The Abu Qubeta family live in Lasafer, in the southern Hebron Hills, just meters away from the illegal Israeli settlement of Beit Yatir.

Israeli authorities only allow the entry of two tankers of water per week to satisfy both the domestic and agricultural needs of the 95 Palestinians living there. Due to these severe restrictions, there is not enough water available to the community or even an opportunity to clean the storage tanker.

The houses in the nearby settlement are connected to the water and sanitation networks and have no problems with water supply. The settlers' water pipeline runs just three meters away from the Abu Qubeta family home.

⁴ Area C comprises approximately 60% of the West Bank. This area is under full Israeli military control.

⁵ Information submitted to the EWASH Advocacy Task Force by the Palestinian Water Authority.

⁶ Information submitted to the EWASH Advocacy Task Force by the WASH Cluster OPT.

⁷ Amnesty International, *Troubled Waters: Palestinians Denied Fair Access to Water* (2009) & COHRE, *Policies of Denial: Lack of Access to Water in the West Bank*, (2008).

⁸ *Ibid.*

Unequal Access to Water

Palestinian domestic consumption is on average 70 litres per person per day,⁹ with Israeli domestic consumption being on average 300 litres per capita per day.¹⁰ A gross inequality exists, however, between Palestinian communities and illegal Israeli settlements.

- ◆ In the northeastern West Bank district of Tubas, average consumption of water for the 48,000 Palestinians who reside there is 30 litres per person per day. However, the residents of the illegal settlement Beka'ot, just twelve kilometres south of Tubas, consume around 401 litres daily.¹¹
- ◆ Around 52 per cent of domestic water supply in the West Bank is purchased from the Israeli water company, Mekorot. Israeli settlements are supplied by generously large, high pressure pipelines, whereas adjacent Palestinian towns with a much larger population are left with much smaller diameter pipes, which reduce the flow of water.
- ◆ Mekorot regularly reduces the distribution/quantities of water provided to Palestinian communities during hot summer months whilst settler consumption doubles.¹²
- ◆ Lack of access to adequate quantities of water, necessary for livestock herding and agriculture, leaves Bedouins, livestock owners and farmers particularly vulnerable while inhibiting food production and socio-economic development.

Recommendations

- ◆ Transboundary water resources should be shared between Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory in an equitable and reasonable manner, in line with accepted principles of international law.
- ◆ Obstacles to Palestinian water resource and infrastructure development should be removed.
- ◆ Movement and access restrictions which prevent Palestinian communities from accessing adequate supplies of safe, affordable water should be lifted.

This fact sheet was produced by the EWASH Advocacy Task Force: a sub-committee of the EWASH group (www.ewash.org), in collaboration with the WASH Cluster in the OPT. EWASH represents over 30 organisations working in water, sanitation and hygiene in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and its members include local and international NGOs and UN Agencies.

This fact sheet is endorsed by the following organisations: Palestinian Hydrology Group (PHG); Save the Children; Polish Humanitarian Organisation; The Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE); Gruppo di Volontariato Civile (G.V.C); DanChurchAid; Comitato Internazionale per lo Sviluppo dei Popoli (CISP); Asamblea de Cooperación Por la Paz (ACPP); Al Dameer; Action Against Hunger (ACF); Near East Council of Churches-Jerusalem; Applied Research Institute of Jerusalem (ARIJ); House of Water and Environment (HWE); Oxfam International.

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⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ B'tselem, The Gap in Water Consumption Between Palestinians and Israelis, (2007). Available from: http://www.btselem.org/english/Water/Consumption_Gap.asp.

¹¹ B'tselem, Waters that Cross Borders, (2009). Available from: www.btselem.org/english/Water/20090322_International_water_day.asp.

¹² WBWD water bills from 2009, issued by ICA, Bet El.

