

Let It Flow

The Sabotage of Gaza's Water and Sanitation Sector



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routinely deny or restrict the entry of much-needed materials and items for such interventions, projects are being delayed for months or years – if not abandoned.

Dual-use items: an Israeli security narrative that denies Palestinian water rights

As a measure to enforce its blockade, the Israeli government severely restricts the entry into Gaza of “dual-use items” – materials and equipment that Israel believes could be used for purposes other than civilian ones (or, according to the Israeli definition, “goods and items liable to be used, side by side with their civilian purposes, for the development, production, installation, or enhancement of military capabilities and terrorist capacities”). The list is comprehensive – well beyond international standards – and vague. In addition to the numerous materials on the list, others can also be added

While the import of materials and equipment for essential water and sanitation projects is restricted, 1.8 million Palestinians in Gaza only have access to as little as 86 liters of water per day – 100 being the World Health Organization's minimum standard. Approximately 100,000 people remain disconnected from the water network. The aquifer continues to deteriorate.

at the sole discretion of Israel. For instance, “service vehicles” can include well-drilling equipment and vacuum trucks to empty cesspits, whereas

As the Israeli blockade enters its tenth year, Gaza's taps run drier and drier. The illegal Israeli blockade that inflicts collective punishment on 1.8 million Palestinians in the Gaza Strip also means that houses lack the most essential items needed to provide clean water: pumps to abstract water; chemicals to purify it; and vehicles to empty sewage septic tanks that overflow or seep into the groundwater. How can water flow into Gaza's pipes again as long as there is a siege?

Since 2007, the Israeli blockade of Gaza has hindered the maintenance, rehabilitation, and development of the water and sewage infrastructure. As the Israeli authorities



Gaza City outskirts, April 2015: Children playing around the Wadi Gaza. The once fresh water river has turned, since the Israeli blockade, into an open sewage outlet carrying about 26,000 cubic meters a day of sewage to the sea. Photo by Massimo Berruti/VU for AFD.

“electromechanical equipment” can be interpreted as pumps needed to empty low-lying areas in case of flooding. Little of what is needed in the sector is left out.

Along with vehicles and pumps, Israel considers **70 percent of the materials and equipment for essential water and sanitation projects** to be “dual use” – projects that could mitigate the catastrophic water situation in Gaza. In order to be allowed entry into Gaza, the 23 items needed for the water and sanitation sector that are found on the dual-use list require Israeli approval, which can only be granted – if granted

at all – after the list of materials and the project itself are submitted for approval to the Israel authorities through the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism (GRM). As restricted items for the water and sanitation sector are very numerous and much more technically complex than the construction materials for which the mechanism was initially set up following the 2014 war, an answer can easily take months. Of 30 water and sanitation projects that have already been approved by the Israeli authorities under the GRM, 12 are at serious risk of not being implemented for lack of materials.

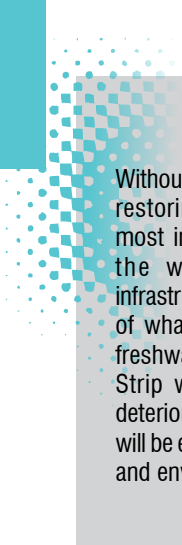
Stenchy Summers

Hazem hates summertime – the season of diseases and sewage stench. A father of five, Hazem lives in the village of Al-Qarara, east of Khan Younis. Just like 28 percent of the Gaza population, Hazem’s house is cut off from the sewage network, mainly as a result of war damages and lack of materials to carry out repairs. As a temporary solution, Hazem built a septic tank to collect the sewage – but as the tank is too small, wastewater often overflows onto the street.

“We do not want sewage to seep into the streets and harm our children. We have suffered enough; we just want to live like other human beings, free from microbes and harmful insects. Wastewater causes diseases and overburdens us with concerns about the future of our children.” *Hazem from Gaza*

Gaza, Khan Younis, April 2015: Children are playing among the rubble produced by the collapse of a water tanker destroyed during the 2014 war. Photo by Massimo Berruti/VU* for AFD.





Without access to materials for restoring, maintaining, and – most importantly – developing the water and sanitation infrastructure in Gaza, the quality of what is essentially the only freshwater supply for the Gaza Strip will rapidly continue to deteriorate, and people in Gaza will be exposed to a humanitarian and environmental disaster.

The sewage system and other water infrastructure, as well as the sole Gaza Power Plant, were targeted by Israeli attacks during the past three wars on Gaza, in complete disregard of international law that states that it is prohibited to “attack, destroy, remove or render useless objects indispensable to the survival of a civilian population, such as [...] drinking water installations and supplies and irrigation works.” Such attacks left wastewater treatment plants and networks damaged, if not destroyed. As a result, millions of liters of raw sewage have infiltrated the groundwater and damaged with nitrates Gaza’s only source of fresh water, the Coastal Aquifer. This, compounded by the intrusion of saline water resulting from over-abstraction, polluted the aquifer by 96.4 percent, which means that only 3.6 percent of it is fit for human consumption.

Given the struggle required to bring materials into Gaza, and the routine dramatic electricity shortages, wastewater treatment plants still cannot function properly. The Northern Gaza Emergency Sewage Treatment (NGEST) plant, for instance, was approved in 2004 to respond to a health and flood risk emergency resulting from a wastewater lake that had formed in

the area due to lack of wastewater-treatment facilities. Yet 12 years later the facility, whose progress was deemed “unsatisfactory” by the World Bank, which provides partial financing, is still not operating. The main reasons for this include “restrictions on the entry of critical construction materials and equipment” and “hostilities resulting in suspended works and damages to already completed infrastructure.” As a result, the lake, which had been drained at the beginning of the project, is now filling up again – putting at risk (again) the aquifer and the health of people who live close by. But this is no exception. In Gaza, around 100 millions cubic meters of raw or partially treated sewage pour into the Mediterranean Sea every day, marring Gaza’s summers.

Although the international community donates funds for the reconstruction and recovery of Gaza’s water and sanitation sector, and considers making further financial commitments to new large-scale projects that require huge amounts of materials, it is doubtful whether such projects will ever be completed or function as planned, or whether the collapse of the aquifer can be avoided – given the lack of political action to hold Israel accountable and pressure it to lift the blockade.

In the meantime, for yet another summer, people in Gaza will swim in seawater polluted with sewage, rinse themselves with salty tap water with dangerously high levels of nitrates, and quench their thirst with a glass of expensive yet bio-contaminated water.

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