

# The Water of Life – Not in Palestine

A KAIROS Perspective



By Hind Khoury



## Palestinian thirst for justice

It is obvious that the centrality of water is crucial for life and human dignity. However, Israeli apartheid policies and practices contribute to an alarming water shortage that denies Palestinians their most basic rights, threatens their very existence on their land, and is leading to a “drying out” of Palestine. Since 1967, existing shared groundwater resources in historical Palestine (Israel proper and the occupied Palestinian territory) are inequitably and unjustly exploited to serve Israel and its colonial settlers who are given access to 80 percent of the water, according to Al-Haq, a Palestinian human rights organization. In addition, all the surface water provided by the Jordan River is diverted to Israel, whereas Palestinians are totally denied access to this vital resource.

## Gaza, a growing human catastrophe

The groundwater resource in Gaza has been depleted from overuse as Israel, since 1956, has impeded the natural flow of groundwater that runs into this aquifer. Since 2007, as part of its water embargo, Israel has surrounded the borders of the Gaza Strip with many deep wells that divert the waters of Wadi Ghaza to Israeli agricultural fields in the Negev Desert prior to their arrival in Gaza.

For many years, water and sanitation infrastructure in Gaza have been the regular targets of Israeli attacks and destruction. Overcrowding, the three recent wars, and the military siege have led to a total contamination of the groundwater, making it unfit for human consumption and leading to waterborne diseases, thus precipitating in Gaza one of the worst catastrophes in the world related to the lack of drinking water.

palestine lies in a desert area of the world and historically has been a parched land where water has been and continues to be the genuine source and essence of life. Hence it is no coincidence that water has significant symbolism for the monotheistic faiths, for water is a source of life and a gift of God to all: “To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.” (Revelation 21:6)

Christians, for example, are launched in their faith through baptism in water; and in the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman (John 4:4–10), the dialogue between Jesus, a Jew, and the Samaritan woman makes it very clear: water is life and should be distributed equally to everyone irrespective of his or her cultural, religious, or ethnic background. One can even draw the conclusion that everyone is responsible to work for access to water for all in this world. In today’s world, we call this right to have access to water a human right.

UNICEF’s Convention on the Rights of the Child lists access to safe water as a basic right.





Photo by Basel El Maqousi.

### In the footsteps of Gaza

After decades of occupation, the water issue is one of the most basic problems also in the West Bank, where Palestinians are barely given access to 20 percent of this important resource.

With the Oslo process, which divides the West Bank into areas A, B, and C, things have become even worse. A so-called Joint Water Committee has been established in order to distribute West Bank water resources equitably to both Israelis and Palestinians. Israel has never applied this principle to Area C, which constitutes 61 percent of the West Bank area. Any development project in Area C requires the Israeli Civil Administration's approval, which is usually denied to Palestinians for so-called security reasons – but which is surely approved for Israeli settlements. In fact, the water consumption of

colonial settlers, with their agricultural and industrial investments, quality housing, lawns, and swimming pools, exceeds that of Israelis living within Israel proper.

According to Ma'an Development Centre, Israel as the occupying power has furthermore isolated hundreds of wells and prohibits Palestinians from using them. The Israeli administration decides the location and depth of new wells – and these decisions are generally granted in favor of Israeli settlement companies. Israeli fruit and vegetable exporters, such as Mehadrin or Arava, produce fruits like dates, bananas, grapes, tomatoes, and a lot more for the big European supermarket chains, while Palestinian farmers have to manage with the little land and water they are allowed to use and hence produce even too little for the domestic market.

### Impunity and double standards

It is surprising that Israel, with total impunity, has been allowed to adamantly pursue such policies for almost half a century of military occupation in spite of the dire consequences its actions have on the Palestinian people's health, quality of life, and livelihoods. These policies and practices are the main reasons why agriculture, a stable Palestinian economic sector that historically has been the source of food for the population and has provided employment especially for women, is in a state of constant and dangerous shrinkage. Israel's denial of the Palestinian right to the water of life is a well-known fact, well documented by the United Nations and other international organizations. In this context, the main questions become: *Why was Israel allowed to*

Kairos is a Greek word that refers to urgent action NOW and was adopted from the New Testament. Kairos Palestine followed the example of the churches in South Africa as they participated in the anti-apartheid struggle.

*pursue such acutely discriminatory policies in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with total impunity, and Why is international law selectively imposed on some and not on others?*

It is also important to underline that in order to justify such policies and practices, Israel uses religious narrative that gives it an unconditional exclusive right to land and resources in this country and even the right to oust and dehumanize the Palestinian people. While it is an oxymoron for a modern nation state to draw legitimacy from the Bible, Kairos Palestine (KP) also calls for "repentance: to revisit fundamentalist theological positions that support certain unjust political options with regard to the Palestinian people. It is a call to stand alongside the oppressed and preserve the word of God as good news for all rather than to turn it into a weapon with which to slay the oppressed." (KP: 6.1)

### A Kairos call for resistance

The Kairos Palestine document, launched in 2009 by Christian Palestinians from the heart of Palestinian suffering, is a call to Palestinians and the world to resist the injustice of Israeli occupation as a right and a duty. "Seeing the image of God in the face of the enemy means taking up positions in the light of this vision of active resistance to stop the injustice and oblige the perpetrator to end his aggression and thus achieve the desired goal, which is getting



back the land, freedom, dignity, and independence.” (KP document: 4.2.3)

As a movement that calls for non-violent resistance to the occupation and to injustice, Kairos Palestine advocates for creative resistance in the logic of love and draws on all energies to make peace. “The culture of love is the culture of accepting the other. Through it we perfect ourselves, and the foundations of society are established.” (KP: 5.4.3) This is a humanistic approach that allows an exit from the cycle of violence and concentrates on correcting the evil done to people, their lives, and their livelihood.

Palestinians have opted to resist creatively through their Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement to halt the occupation’s discriminatory and unjust policies and practices, as did their brethren in South Africa and in the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. Many organizations and institutions are rightly engaging in divestment and the economic and commercial boycott of what is produced by the occupation. It is hard to accept that there are international entities that support occupation and discrimination. For example, Mekorot, the Israeli public water company, enjoys massive international investments as it has cooperation agreements with countries around the world. We at Kairos Palestine understand that divestment and boycott integrate the logic of love and peaceful resistance. Its objective is not revenge but rather to put an end to the existing evil and ongoing impunity, hence liberating both the perpetrators and the victims of injustice. Freeing both peoples from extremist positions of different Israeli governments brings both justice and reconciliation.

### **The World Council of Churches (WCC) speaks out**

In our struggle for justice we need a conscientious world that lives true to its responsibilities. Hope comes from

justice-driven entities that stand up for Palestinian rights and justice for all as the only way to true peace. In this context, the WCC launched its seven-week campaign entitled Thirst for Justice – A Pilgrimage of Water Justice in the Middle East. The campaign was launched last year during Lent – the fasting period for Christians that precedes the Easter celebrations. This



*People living in Area C have access on average to only 20 l/c/d, only one fifth of amount recommended by the WHO. Photo by Basel El Maqousi.*

campaign aimed to draw the attention of Christians around the world to the plight of the Palestinian people in accessing their water and to pressure Israel to change its policies and practices. “The primary objective of the Lenten Campaign was to engage people on the issue around World Water Day, celebrated on March 22, which always falls during Lent,” says Suna who has been the Ecumenical Water Network

documented... we are highlighting the plight of Palestinians with regard to access to water. The occupation is responsible for this injustice in water distribution. We are urging the Israeli authorities to address this issue.”

Many forces and entities around the world are increasingly engaged in action to restore life and dignity to the Palestinian people. Alongside Kairos

Palestine, many adopt a practical, action-driven approach to express their solidarity. Hence, our hope and our faith are strong that the right to life will eventually be realized also for Palestinians to confirm what Martin Luther Jr. said: “The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice.”

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