



Water

THE BLUE GOLD OF THE MIDDLE EAST

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Introduction

The Middle East has a long history of dispute over water resources, with the Palestinian-Israeli dispute at its core. Israeli control over the water resources is a consequence of the military power it used in the 1967 War. The region's water crisis is not merely a question of supply. It has always been linked to power structures in the region, which maintain inequality among those who share the water. To date, all negotiation attempts on the reallocation of the water supply have failed because they were not based on the right of the equitable and reasonable utilization principle.

Although the pretext is security, the desire of Israel to control water resources is, in fact, one of the main reasons why Israel is reluctant to transfer more territory to the PA. In 35 years of occupation, a growing population and ongoing settlement expansion have increased the burden on the limited water supply and worsened the already tense political relations.

Owing to its complexity and significance to both the Israelis and Palestinians, the water issue has been delayed to the final status negotiations together with other critical issues such as Jerusalem, borders, refugees, settlements and security, which have yet to be resolved. This special bulletin intends to shed light on the present water situation in the Middle East with special emphasis on the conflict between the Palestinians and Israelis.

Historical Background

With the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip (WBGS) in June 1967, Israel greatly improved its hydrological position. The occupation of the Golan Heights gave Israel control of most of the headwaters of the Jordan and their control of the West Bank provided access to the Jordan River and to three major aquifers. Soon after the occupation, Israel issued Military Order (MO) 92 (15 Aug. 1967), transferring the authority over water resources to the area military commander. MO 158 (19 Nov. 1967) forbade the unlicensed construction of new water infrastructures, and MO 291 (19 Dec. 1968) confiscated all water resources, declaring them state property. In 1982, the Israeli Water Company Mekorot took control. Palestinian wells were destroyed and supplies dried up by widespread digging and pumping from deeper wells for Israeli use. In 1986, Israel reduced the quotas for the amount of water to be pumped from wells in the WBGS by 10%, which resulted not only in widespread scarcity but also in a drop in the water table and increased salinity. Additional loss of available water due to leaky pipes is estimated at 30%.

In the context of the peace process water was considered an interim issue. The Palestinian Water Authority (PWA) assumed administrative responsibility for water resources but Israel maintained overall control of all water, including the Palestinian water supply. While Palestinians had asked for 450 million cubic meters (mcm) of water annually, Oslo II provided only 28.6 mcm for immediate domestic use. Any increase was subject to the availability of new water resources. The future needs of the Palestinians on the WB were estimated at 70-80 million cubic meters/year (mcm/yr) (Oslo II, Art. 40).

Today part of the problem in solving the water dispute is that the Oslo peace process institutionalized Israel's almost total control over Palestinian water use and planning, as well as its discriminatory allocation system.

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Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs, Jerusalem