

World Water Day 2024

Water for peace? Peace for water in Gaza!

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Bonn, 20 March 2024. This year's theme of the United Nations' World Water Day is 'water for peace'. In one of the world's most water-scarce and conflict-affected regions, Israelis, Jordanians and Palestinians work together across geographical, religious and other boundaries to make steps towards securing their joint water-dependent future. This initiative called EcoPeace Middle East and which has been nominated for the 2024 Nobel Peace prize used water resources to promote peaceful living together.

Water as a weapon

Today, water has become a weapon in Gaza and in the West Bank. In its response to the Hamas-led attacks, Israel has deployed it in three ways: through flooding, contamination, and by making access to clean water almost impossible.

Flooding has also been used as a weapon in Ukraine and in Iraq. In Gaza, in order to destroy Hamas' massive tunnel network, Israel Defense Forces (IDF) pumped thousands of cubic meters of seawater into



the underground network. As experts in Nature warned, this could not only destabilize buildings, but also lead to irreparable contamination of groundwater with salt water. Besides this, the tactical viability of such measures is uncertain.

Water contamination is another effective and cruel weapon. In Gaza, water and wastewater treatment plants are either destroyed or cannot operate due to lack of fuel. Untreated sewage and hospital waste combined with heavy metals from tens of thousands of missiles has polluted Gaza's groundwater resources. Highly toxic white phosphorus dropped by Israel, as well as human remains, asbestos and unexploded munitions are poisoning soils and aquatic ecosystems. Where water reservoirs are destroyed and desalination plants are not operating, the population relies on whatever water they can find for their survival, including chemically polluted and highly saline water from agricultural wells. Waterborne diseases including cholera, typhoid and antimicrobial resistance (AMR) are rapidly spreading, children are particularly affected. The WHO has warned that water pollution could potentially cause more casualties than the military interventions.

Cutting access to water is also a long-established military tactic. Shortly after the Hamas attacks, Israel completely cut off water provision through pipes. In the Oslo B Accord of 1995, Israel committed to supply 5 million cubic metres per year to Gaza. According to Human Rights Watch, this provision was partly taken up again, but due to power cuts and widespread destruction, very little clean water can be provided. Israeli authorities have reportedly obstructed efforts to repair the damaged water infrastructure. Seawater desalination plants in turn, which provided the majority of clean drinking water before the war, have been either destroyed or are unable to operate due to the fuel embargo. In addition to the tremendous suffering and destruction in Gaza, the lack of clean drinking water threatens another death sentence for those who survived the military attacks.

As the UN special rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation Pedro Arrojo-Agudo and others have warned, the use of water as a weapon in Gaza constitutes a violation of a number of humanitarian and human rights principles.

Impacts on Israel

The environmental disaster unfolding in Gaza will have long-term impacts on water and land resources.

Strongly increased pollution, salinization and water scarcity as well as the destruction of agricultural land make it hard to imagine healthy living in Gaza in the future. Since water and environment ignore political boundaries, this is impacting Israel too. Israeli experts have already warned that the environmental destruction in Gaza and the West Bank on water, soil and air quality will have negative repercussions for health and food security in Israel. The untreated sewage flowing into the Mediterranean Sea and from there to the Israeli coast and to the intake of desalination plants, as well as soil pollution and aquifer salinization, are all matters of common concern. Environmental concerns seem secondary given the horrific humanitarian situation in Gaza, but they are here to last and need to be addressed.

Water and Peace

Water for peace requires mobilizing (human) rights-based approaches, negotiations and agreements based on an adequate stakeholder representation to balance the different interests. The setting is, however, a 'hydro-hegemony': even before the current escalation of violence, 7 million Israelis got 90 percent of the region's available water resources, and 3.5 million Palestinians received the remaining 10 percent, a situation that is accepted by the international community as set out in the Oslo Accords. 'Water for peace' arguably remains wishful thinking under these asymmetric conditions.

Nevertheless, options for using the resource as an entry-point for collaboration exist. But in the current situation in Gaza, it is more a case of 'peace for water.' This requires a ceasefire and a suspension of arms transfer to Israel to make humanitarian aid including water provision possible, and stop war-related environmental pollution. Both measures have also been demanded by Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and by 200 international parliamentarians; four European countries have already stopped their arms sale. There then should be a thorough assessment of the environmental damage and its long-term impact on natural resources and living conditions on both sides. This needs to result in the fair allocation of water and related costs in a very unequal setting. Only then can water become a source of peace and of cooperation in the common interest of both populations, for a sustainable future.