**Water: the solution to the Israeli / Palestinian conflict**

Andy Rowell

The world has watched this month as Israel reluctantly relinquished its grip on the Gaza Strip and handed it back to the Palestinians. Many hope that this could be the first of several strategic withdrawals that could see the beginning of the end of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They hope they are witnessing a true turning point in history.

As so often before, those hopes will be cruelly dashed. When the dust finally settles on Israel’s pull-out, the stark reality is that, although Gaza may be gone, the West Bank is not going to be next. Although Israeli soldiers cleared four isolated settlements in the West Bank this week, Israel will not give up the more prominent and larger settlements. In fact Israel is poised to increase its population in certain settlements. Last week, Ariel Sharon promised to expand Jewish settlements in other areas of the West Bank.

 As much as the conflict between Israel and Palestine is about religion and access to land, it is also about resources and who controls those resources. A primary one is water.  The issue of water remains a central part of the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis.

“Water has been a major issue in the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations since the early 1990s, but to date, little progress has been made on either the bilateral or the multilateral track” argues Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi, the Head of Passia, the Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs*.*

There is a simple reason why Ariel Sharon won’t give up the West Bank. Nearly a third of Israel’s water comes from aquifers underlying the area and these have been strictly controlled by Israel since 1967.

Israel’s control of water means that for hundreds of thousands of Palestinians the fundamental right of access to water is a daily struggle, especially during the summer. Whilst Israelis enjoy water on-tap, many Palestinians have to wait for unreliable water supplies from water tankers. The result is that Palestinian per capita water consumption is a fifth of that consumed by Israelis.

The Palestinians in Gaza know this only too well. Back in 1967 Israel had declared all water resources to be state owned and controlled by the military. Israelprohibited the Arab population of Gaza from drilling new wells without a permit. Palestinian water consumption was also regulated by strict quotas, with thousands of citrus trees up-rooted. Meanwhile the Israelis in Gaza had no restrictions on water consumption. Palestinians paid as much as twenty times what Israeli settlers used to pay, adding to the feeling of resentment.

In the last few years, Palestinians have suffered because of the drought afflicting the region and have become reliant on a very unreliable water supply from water tankers. In some areas of the West Bank the situation is getting critical.

Muhammad Hamamdeh is the water supervisor for the Yatta municipality, in the Hebron District. He says that Yatta is suffering from a “sever water shortage”. He only has one water tanker to supply the town.  “As a result, each family receives water about one week every four months, or only once during the summer” he says.

It is not just the Middle East though that is gripped by a water crisis. As the world has watched the Gaza pull-out, many in southern Europe have been preoccupied by a crisis of their own. Southern Europe and North Africa are in the grip of a severe drought too. Many parts have not seen rain for over a year. The drought in Spain is the worst in sixty years with the highest temperatures ever recorded. Agriculture and tourism have been badly affected.

Farmers in southern Spain have requested permission to dig new wells as they fear the loss of over 50,000 hectare of citrus and fruit tress, some 80 million trees, if the drought continues, which there are all the indications that it will.

Even sturdy crops are suffering. Maize yields will be reduced in both Spain and South West France, with Spanish yields some one million tones lower compared to last year. The Spanish [olive](http://www.met-office.gov.uk/cgi-bin/newsid?article=15010082&epoch=1121385600)o[il](http://www.met-office.gov.uk/cgi-bin/newsid?article=15010082&epoch=1121385600)harvest is also down 30 per cent from the previous yearFrance is experiencing severe problems from forest fires that have caused 10,000 tourists to be evacuated from camp-sites. Plagues of locusts have eaten farmers’ crops.  Since mid-July, over half of

France has been ordered to ration water. France’s Environment Minister Nelly Olin has called the situation "very tense and fragile."

Portugal is also witnessing one of its worst droughts in history, with some 97 per cent of the country experiencing “severe drought” and the country on the verge of declaring a “national disaster”. There have also been widespread crop failures and vicious forest fires. Even tourist swimming pools are being left to go empty, despite restriction of farmers irrigating their crops which was meant to prevent such an occurrence

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Farmers in Northern Italy have not escaped either. Half of all watermelon and melon crop has been destroyed, as well as a further 20 per cent of plums, apples, apricots and pears.  Salad crops have also been hit hard because of the drought. The Italian grain harvest is also likely to be hit. "People are very concerned about the drought, particularly for maize," says one north Italian grain trader.

Across the Mediterranean, Algerian and Moroccan farmers are set to see their biggest shortfall in grain production following the severe drought. The Moroccan harvest has experienced losses of 57 per cent of its crops, while Algeria has lost nearly 38 per cent of its expected harvest. Moroccan citrus fruit harvests could also be in trouble. Farmers in the south of the country where sixty per cent of the country’s citrus orchards are located say that the lack of water could pose serious problems.

It is too early to tell whether the drought that stretches across North Africa, the Middle East and Southern Europe is just part of a natural cycle of because of climate change. What we do know is that climate change is occurring and all the indications are that it will increase average temperatures by 2-3 degrees Celsius over the next 75 years, and bring longer and more deadly droughts; heatwaves, water shortages, forest fires, health problems and crop damage.

We also know that climate change will make water a scarcer commodity. More than half of humanity will be living with water shortages within 50 years because of a worldwide water crisis, the United Nations has warned

Just as wars were fought over oil in the 20th Century, so wars will be fought over water in the 21st Century. Water has been called the “oil of the 21st century” a precious commodity that will determine the “wealth of nations”.  Without water there will be no wealth, there can be no nation.

It is here that the similarities between Europe and the Middle East end. Because there is a fundamental difference between Southern Europe, for example, and Palestine. The rich nations of Europe will adapt to climate change because they can afford to. In contrast, the poor nations of Africa and the Middle East will struggle to cope.

The rich will avoid water shortages by building desalination plants, which ironically are so energy intensive they will just add to climate change. The poor will just go thirsty.

For the Palestinians, climate change will just make their conflict with Israel even worse. Access to water is already a major source of contention. As water becomes scarcer it will add to the conflict. Who controls the access to the water resources will control the power.

So if Israel continues to deny Palestinians access to the basic human right of access to clean water, they will deny Palestine its right to be a nation. It will mean there will be no peace. So as well as pulling Jewish settlers out of Gaza, Ariel Sharon should think the unthinkable and give the Palestinians equal access to the water resources of the region. And that would be a true turning point towards peace.

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