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West Bank in troubled water

By David Elstein and Sharon Goulds

Israel's story 8-11-1981

Between the River Jordan and the Mediterranean 70% of the population is Israeli. Yet Israel uses 85% of the available water, and it has no intention of reducing this share, whatever may result from the talks about Palestinian autonomy. In itself this is one reason why these talks are unlikely to succeed. Arab water rights were barely mentioned in the Israeli election campaign. Few Israelis are even aware that Arab farmers on the West Bank have been allowed no extra water since 1967. Fewer still know the problems that Arab villages and towns have experienced in the 14 years of Israeli occupation. Those in charge of Israel's water policy defend it vigorously, and have no intention of being deflected from it by external criticism.

There should be no shortage of water in the West Bank. Beneath the Judean hills lie underground reservoirs -- aquifers -- which are replenished by the winter rains. Their capacity is more than enough for all the foreseeable agricultural, domestic, and industrial needs of the West Bank Arabs. The problem is that the West Bank's main aquifer extends just into Israel. A concentration of Israeli pumps along the old border extract 90% of that aquifer's water: water that constitutes 30% of Israel's consumption. Before 1967, the underdeveloped Arab economy had no need to tap this aquifer. Since 1967, Arab drilling there has been forbidden by Israel. Nor do Arabs fare any better in the next largest aquifer system, between the West Bank's central mountain ridge and the Jordan river. There, almost no Arab farmer has been allowed to drill for water since 1967, while a string of Jewish agricultural settlements in the Jordan Valley has steadily increased its consumption.

The last published consumption by Jewish settlements in the Jordan Valley (since 1979 the figures have been a military secret) was 17 million cubic metres a year. Arab experts believe that it has since grown to over 27m for a few thousand Jewish farmers. All the Arab farmers on the West Bank (which has a population of 700,000) are allowed no more than 30m between them: a figure that has not changed since 1967. Israel's farmers are allowed 1,200m cubic metres of water a year.

Israel defends this blatant piece of discrimination in five ways, none of them convincing.

1. Israel's water commissioner, Meir Ben Meir, claims that West Bank farmers are no worse off than their Jewish counterparts inside Israel, who have also been allowed no extra water since 1967. Seemingly even-handed; but in fact enshrining a profoundly unequal status quo. Half of Israel's cultivable land is irrigated. The comparable figure in the West Bank is 4%, even though agriculture is far more important to the West Bank's economy than to Israel's.

2. Israel argues that restrictions on Arab drilling and pumpage were inherited from the Jordanian administration. But water resources Jordanian restrictions were to prevent new wells being drilled too close to existing wells (a rule Israel has flagrantly ignored with its own wells on the West Bank) and to limit pumpage in two small areas on the West Bank. By refusing licences for new Arab wells, and by placing meters and quotas on existing wells, Israel has put a straitjacket on Arab agriculture never envisaged by Jordanian law.

3. Israeli officials, from Meir Ben Meir downwards, solemnly proclaim that the Jewish settlements on the West Bank are drawing water from a "new" aquifer, so deep that no Arab individual could afford to drill down to it. This conveniently ignores the fact that the so-called "new" aquifer was known about long before 1967; that the Jordanians were drilling down to it when the Six Day War halted operations; that Arab attempts to bring in foreign aid for their irrigation projects have been systematically obstructed by Israel; and that the Israeli government itself (whilst claiming sovereignty over the West Bank) is only willing to spend money on deep wells for Jews, not for Arab farmers who live there and need water.

4. In admitting that it may be seen to have discriminated in favour of its own settlements on the West Bank, Israel has announced that it will build a pipeline from the Sea of Galilee (entirely inside Israel's borders) to the West Bank so as to avoid the need to drill new Jewish agricultural wells there. Yet, at the settlement of Shiloh, a new well has been drilled which yields nearly one million cubic metres of water a year: far more than the settlers need for drinking purposes.

Shiloh plans to use the surplus water to cultivate up to 5,000 acres of land, if it can get permission from the water commissioner. The water officer in the West Bank military government believes Shiloh will get its permission.

5. There are Israelis -- including some "doves" -- who argue that no Arab individual has actually lost any water rights since 1967, and that the government of the day has the right to allocate "new" water. After autonomy, the Palestinians can decide for themselves how to allocate water. Such an argument (which in essence is a crude endorsement of "might is right") rests on two increasingly improbable assumptions: that there will be autonomy, and that autonomy will include control of water resources.

The new Begin government, which will depend on the least compromising parties for a majority in the Knesset, is almost certain to exclude Palestinian control of the West Bank's water in its definition of "autonomy". The most that Meir Ben Meir is prepared to concede the Palestinians is joint Arab-Israeli administration of the West Bank's water. This unattractive prospect is based on two contradictory arguments: first, that the West Bank's water is "part of" the total water system west of the Jordan River, and so subject to Israeli veto; second, that the Palestinians can have no say over Israel's own use of water.

Arab objections

The Arabs object to both these arguments. Israel in the 1950s invested heavily in water projects and subsidised agriculture, and grabbed the major share of the region's water. The West Bank's Arabs are now expected to forego any parallel development of their own, other than through more efficient use of the tiny proportion of water Israel will allow them for irrigation. They are now told that there is a scarcity of water, though their own consumption plays only the smallest part in any shortages. Meanwhile, the West Bank's agricultural labour force has been reduced by a third, as workers are displaced by rising costs and can only work as unskilled labourers in Israel. (30,000 of them are bussed across the border and back every day.)

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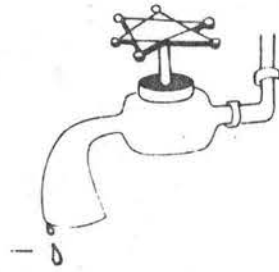
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By Israeli standards, an insignificant amount of water is needed to make West Bank agriculture thrive: but it is never forthcoming if it entails Israel cutting back by one drop. Meir Ben Meir will not tolerate any "reduction in the Israeli map" as he calls it. That is why Israel will not risk restoring Arab control of their own water. There are dark warnings about Arab sabotage of Israel's water supplies after autonomy "competitive drilling" -- if control were relinquished. Quite what Israel imagines the Palestinians would do with any water beyond their own minimal needs is hard to see: "throw it in the sea?" asks one Arab hydrologist, laughingly.

Given the terms on offer, it is hardly surprising that Arabs regard the whole autonomy exercise as a sham. They know the outcry any Israeli cabinet would face if it exposed Jewish settlements in the West Bank to the danger of having their water cut off by an autonomous Palestinian government. They also see the Israeli intent to administer water for the West Bank's towns as evidence of an underlying determination to integrate the territory into the Israeli economy, or at the very least to control its lifelines.

Ramallah, for instance, has waited nine years for a much-needed new well to be drilled and come on-stream. Arabs and Israelis blame each other for the delay: it is hard to decide who is at fault. What is not in doubt is that the consequent water shortage has forced Ramallah to pipe half its water supply from inside Israel-water, of course, which is pumped from the "shared" aquifer in which only Israel is allowed to drill. The mayor of Ramallah complains of being at the mercy of Israel as long as the town is dependent on Israeli supplies. His fears are more understandable when one sees a Jewish settlement built across Ramallah's main pipeline (from which the Israelis have already helped themselves), and an army camp constructed around Ramallah's main reservoir (a special military pass is needed for the town to check its own water level).

The scale of Israeli investment in its own settlers, as



compared with that devoted to the Arabs in the West Bank, is astonishingly unequal, given Israel's claim to sovereignty over the entire area. Or rather, it would be astonishing, if the World Zionist Federation's master plan for the West Bank did not refer to the Arabs there as "the minorities" (they constitute 98% of the West Bank's population). Israel rightly points out that, since 1967, West Bank domestic use of water has doubled, and is planned to double again, as more villages are connected to the mains. However, even the projected increase will still leave Arabs far behind Jews in their domestic consumption (Israeli per capita domestic use is reckoned by Meir Ben Meir to be five times higher than Arab use on the West Bank).

By contrast with the million-pound wells drilled for settlements housing a few hundred Jews, Israeli investment in Palestinian drinking supplies has been positively niggardly. In Arab eyes, this offence is compounded by repeated examples of official delay in approving water schemes which cost Israel nothing, but which depend on permission to bring in funds from abroad. Even where the water and pipeline are Arab, there is still an Israeli hand on the tap.

Any occupation is unpleasant. As far as water is concerned, where the Arabs suffer is in the assumption by Israel -- past master at creating facts -- that the status quo in relative consumption cannot be disturbed. Underlying that assumption is a subtle, but unmistakable, racism: Israeli needs come first. Sometimes this expresses itself in "horror stories". The village of Bardala was dried out by an Israeli well drilled upstream. The fields of Auja were left to rot in a drought, while neighbouring Jewish settlements flourished, refusing to divert any of their plentiful water supplies to Arab farmers. Such horror stories can be cured: attitudes are harder to change.

David Elstein and Sharon Goulds produced and researched the Thames TV documentary *Whose hand on the tap?*, transmitted on 7 July in London.

From Middle East International

... in June, a Dohy
mass in a church this month and
mass rallies by the Islamic move-
ment.

The government-guided Cairo press said the violence was meant to damage Egypt's reputation abroad and give the impression of government weakness during President Sadat's absence in Britain and the United States.

President Sadat, caught between Christian support for a secular state and Muslim fundamentalist demands for a fully Islamic society, has made some limited concessions to the Muslims.

Last year a constitutional amendment made the *Sharia* (Islamic law) the main source of all legislation and a committee was set up to bring old laws into line. So far the practical changes have been minimal.

There have also been changes in the universities. Al Azhar, secularised by the late Gamal Abdel Nasser, now segregates lectures by sex. Islamic dress for women became compulsory this spring.

Four of the country's 26 provinces have outlawed the sale of alcohol and stewards on the national airline, Egyptair, have won the right to opt out of serving alcoholic drinks.

Government banks have opened sections for Islamic transactions which offer investors dividends on their savings rather than interest, banned by the *Sharia*.

Islamicisation

Islamic societies at the universities want the president to act faster towards Islamicisation. The societies were founded in the early 1970s and can now draw crowds of up to 30,000 for demonstrations.

They dominate all student councils and enjoy broad support outside the universities.

The societies accuse the government of favouring the Christian community by encouraging the building of churches, subsidising Evangelical schools and showing leniency towards what they regard as Christian excesses.

Al Daawa magazine, the mouthpiece of an older fundamentalist organisation, the Muslim Brotherhood, has gone even further. It has accused the Christians of insulting Islam, spreading anti-Islamic beliefs and stockpiling arms in churches.

Against the fundamentalist charge that the Christians are pampered can be set the reality of their influence in Egyptian life.

They hold a disproportionately low share of senior government and army posts and, according to diplomats, a prominent Copt such as Deputy Foreign Minister Boutros Ghali is unlikely ever to reach President Sadat's inner cabinet.

A high rate of Coptic emigration and a comparatively low birth rate have diluted their numerical strength. Where earlier this century Christian prime ministers were accepted, the idea is today almost inconceivable.