

Fertile Jordan Valley Thirsts for Pure Water Supply

ISR, WB
GZ
AB

The early rains that have fallen in the region are welcomed by Palestinian farmers. After a dreadful farming season last year, hopes are now high that much of last year's losses can be compensated for.

Yet, problems still abound for the Palestinian farmer. Caught between a shortage of cultivable land due to the abundance of Israeli settlements and a shrinking market due to Israeli restrictions on produce entering its borders or leaving for the Arab world, farmers are also facing the ever-decreasing supply of water. A shortage of water is perhaps the most serious of obstacles facing farmers, particularly in the Jordan Valley, this season.

Water

The question of the availability of water for Palestinian farmers is a much-publicised issue, with direct relation to the Israeli military occupation. Israeli authorities, through total control of the amount of water allowed to be pumped by Palestinian farmers, restrict the farmers to an inadequate water supply. New wells are rarely allowed to be dug, and even when permitted are dug no deeper than 120 metres.

Water control regulations are very stringent, according to agricultural engineer Azmi Ja'abari. In an interview with *Al Fajr*, Ja'abari said that the authorities survey farmers' lands to determine how much water they are allowed to pump. Water metres are then placed on their wells to make sure they abide by the regulation. Farmers who want to expand their farm are allowed no additional water. Furthermore, if certain wells don't pump the allotted amounts, farmers are not permitted to get water from another source. Their only alternative in such a situation is to buy tanked water, which is often so expensive it is not practical.

A number of natural springs have dried up since 1967. Palestinian farmers who used to draw water from the Ouja spring in the Jordan Valley blame Israeli settlement wells which are dug deep for the drying up of the Ouja spring. Israeli experts, however, say there is no relation

between the spring drying up and the digging of additional deeper settlement wells.

One farmer, Ahmad Saideh from the Ouja area, had to move north to Jiftlik to take advantage of a greater water supply. The move not only means a much smaller strip of land to farm but also means greater expense since he has to travel more than 30 kilometres north of his home. It has also meant a 50-kilometre drive with produce to the Jericho central market.

Saline Water

Another problem is the high salinity level of water available to Palestinian farmers. Agricultural experts say that in recent years the water shortage crisis has partly subsided as a result of the increased use by Palestinian farmers of newly-developed drip irrigation methods. The problem, however, is that the quality of this water has deteriorated. The salty water now available to farmers restricts the type of agricultural product they can grow. Experts say that salty water forces farmers in the valley to primarily plant tomatoes and eggplants.

Israeli farm settlements in the Jordan Valley, on the other hand, have no problems either with the quality or quantity of their water. Swimming pools which overlook the dried-up Palestinian farms are perhaps the best example of this overabundance of water for the Jewish settlers. While Palestinian artesian wells are restricted to 90,000 cubic metres of water a year, the settlers are allowed an unlimited supply.

Most wells dug by settlers go down as far as 300-500 metres deep, compared to the maximum 120 metres allowed by the military for Palestinians. Israeli military authorities gladly kept the Jordanian pre-1967 limit on well digging and have applied it to Palestinians currently under their occupation.

By digging much deeper wells than the Palestinian farmers, the Israelis not only drain the water supplies used by Palestinians but also are able to get much cleaner water. Water further underground is filtered and has a much lower level of salinity.

Palestinian farmers say that the deeper wells not only give the Israelis

better water but also increase the salinity of the shallower Palestinian wells. Engineer Ja'abari told *Al Fajr* that the process of digging the deeper settler wells affects the structure of the earth underneath and loosens stones, which in time affects the shallower Palestinian wells.

Bad Season

Israeli restriction on the type of agricultural products planted by Palestinian farmers, also a direct result of their saline water supply, was among the main reasons for the bad farming season this past spring and summer. Last year's winter was very short so that Palestinian tomato farmers ran into market competition when Israeli products produced on the coastal line continued to be available much later than usual. Thus, when the Palestinian-produced tomatoes were available in February, farmers discovered that the market was already glutted and, as a result, were unable to get good prices. Most Palestinian farmers actually left their produce to rot on the vine, since picking and transportation costs were higher than what the sold tomatoes would have brought at market prices.

Another reason for the bad '83-'84 season can be blamed on geopolitical factors. The year before, in '82-'83, Palestinians enjoyed a bumper crop and open market. For the first time since occupation, south Lebanon was open for local produce to pass through Israeli agents. Farmers were also able to sell tomatoes in Jordan, Syria and north Lebanon, all through the Jordan River crossings.

All of this changed, however. The south Lebanon borders were closed by the Israelis. Jordan, under pressure from its own farmers, also closed the bridges. Syria's relations with Jordan were at a low level and so no tomatoes coming through Jordan to Syria were allowed. Iraq, under the pressure of debts incurred in its war with Iran, agreed to buy Palestinian produce on condition that it paid two years later. The condition, however, wasn't feasible for Palestinian farmers.

mid-east press report vol V no 45

The Israeli market, to which Palestinians are not allowed to export except with a government permit, was open for only one week last year instead of the usual one month.

MO's 1015 and 1039

Israeli military officers in charge of agriculture have attempted to deal with this problem through military legislation. In 1983 Military Orders 1015 and 1039 were issued in order to control the quantity of cultivated land. The orders force all Palestinian farmers to obtain a permit before they are allowed to plant, thus placing the control of Palestinian agriculture directly in the hands of the Israeli military.

Azmi Ja'abari said that in a "normal situation regulating the areas to be planted and the type of plantation is a positive act, but in our situation the problem is different." Ja'abari said that without any help in the area of marketing, the Palestinian farmers face a situation of unfair competition. "The Jordan Valley, for example, was allowed only 9000 dunums to plant tomatoes last year," he said, "while the Israeli settlers have unlimited freedom to plant." He added that this year Israeli authorities have reduced the amount to be planted by 15 percent. So Palestinian farmers in the Jordan Valley will only be allowed to plant 7500 dunums with tomatoes.

Alternatives

The difficult situation of Palestinian farmers forces them to look for alternatives. While many farmers have given up farming and joined the labour force working in Israeli factories, others have insisted on finding greener pastures in other areas of the West Bank. The Jiftlik area, with its rich farming land, has become a target for many farmers. The availability of large supplies of water from the Fara'a springs has made it a natural attraction. Water is distributed to farmers through open channels for a limited number of hours, depending on the size of the land. But all is not well in Jiftlik. A Bir Zeit researcher who recently completed a study of the Fara'a canal has concluded that the drinking water is contaminated, resulting in many cases of parasites being found in farmers and their families. In the conclusion to his research, issued in September 1984,

Chris Smith says that "67 percent of stored water samples [at Fara'a] had fecal coliform levels greater than 100 fc/100 ml." He says that the World Health Organisation's standard for an acceptable unchlorinated supply is only 10 fc/100 ml.

Jiftlik farmers have even more immediate problems, however. The homes of some 1000 individuals who immigrated from the Jenin and Tulkarm areas to the fertile region are threatened with demolition by the Israeli authorities. According to a Ramallah lawyer defending the farmers, authorities began harassing the farmers back in 1980. At first, authorities asked the farmers to live in one location, to which they agreed and moved. Now the Israeli planning department says that it has no room for the farmers' huts and that the area is a military zone too near to the borders. Farmers say Israeli settlements are just as near to the borders.

The latest demolition threat came from the authorities on October 15. The farmers have not left their homes, however, and so far there has been no demolition.

Palestinian farmers continue to jump from one crisis to another. While the Israeli settlement policy has sharply reduced the number of farmers because of the decreasing availability of land, farmers who have hung on still face major problems. Without the ability to dig deeply for clean water supplies, the Palestinian farmers are restricted to limited products which have an unstable market. Unless a consistent means of marketing or perhaps canning of the overabundant tomato and eggplant crops can be carried out, more farmers will find themselves at the mercy of Israeli factory labour, which in today's economy is a shaky prospect for work.

Early winter rains will not go far enough to dispel farmers' fears of a dry season this year. *Al Fajr's* Daoud Kuttub looks at water problems in the Jordan Valley where Israeli restrictions on the water supply are forcing many farmers off their lands.

AFTER A 13-YEAR SEARCH

Army Arrest Senior
Fatah Military Officer

Israeli authorities revealed October 24 that Ali Khalil Reba'i, 38, was arrested September 4 in

Dura in the Hebron area. News of the arrest was suppressed because the Israeli army spokes-

person believed Reba'i was the military coordinator for the Fatah wing of the Palestine Liberation Organisation.

The spokesperson said the Palestinian fighter had been eluding them for 13 years. A wide spread search operation using helicopters and an Arab-owned car was used to finally detain Reba'i in the Dura mountains. A number of Palestinians in the Hebron and Jerusalem areas were arrested in connection with Reba'i.

Israel Radio said that Reba'i is responsible for recruiting *fedayin* in the Hebron area and supplying them with weapons. He is also accused of having carried out a number of military operations against Israel.

Reba'i is said to have been a close associate of Bajes Abu Atwan, a legendary Fatah leader who was martyred by the Israeli army after years of search in the same area.