

Water

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-how israeli policies hurt west bank arabs

BY SARAH GRAHAM-BROWN

The thorny question of autonomy for the West Bank promises to be further complicated in the forthcoming negotiations by Israel's concern to maintain control over perhaps its most crucial natural resource — water.

Prime Minister Menachem Begin recently told a Herut Central Committee meeting that "the Green Line no longer exists — it has vanished for ever". He added, "We offer the Arabs all their rights in Eretz Israel but no rights on Eretz Israel." He might well have added that the Arabs would be offered no rights to what lies under "Eretz Israel". Begin's framework for autonomy published earlier this month includes a clause which says, "Whereas water resources affect the entire area and require regional planning, Israel will be responsible for planning water administration" with the administrative authority of the Palestinians.

In a semi-arid region, water is crucial for survival. Control of land without access to water has little practical meaning. This affects Israel's view of the West Bank in two ways — firstly, almost 30 per cent of water currently used inside Israel's pre-1967 borders originates under the hills of the West Bank; and secondly, Jewish settlements on the West Bank need water and, if they are to survive, must preclude the possibility that an autonomous administration could withhold water and thus "dry" them out. It is, however, the first issue which is now attracting attention in Israel as a matter with serious implications for the country's economic future.

Short term implications

Israeli Water Commissioner Meir Ben Meir is, not unnaturally, one of those who are most concerned that Israel should retain future sole control over sources of water on the West Bank. He claims that many Israeli politicians have not yet fully grasped the significance of the water question and are at present more concerned with the short-term political implications of the autonomy proposals although Agriculture Minister Ariel Sharon, under whose ministry the Water Commissioner works, is well aware of the problem. The Water Commissioner does not have direct responsibility for West Bank water management, but he advises the military governor through the Agriculture Ministry and his advice as an expert is generally taken.

The reason Ben Meir insists so strongly



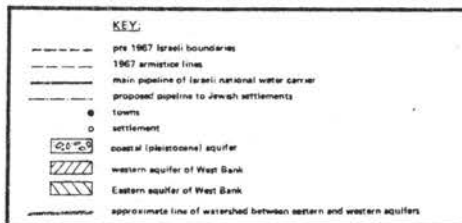
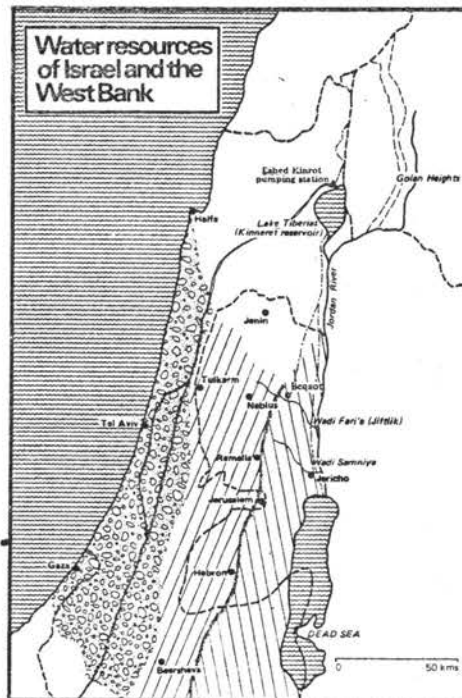
Agriculture Minister Sharon wants dual Arab-Israeli control of water

on direct Israeli control of these water sources, and rejects the Begin proposal also advocated by Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan and by Sharon, for some form of dual control with the autonomy administration, is ironically connected with Israel's reputation for having "made desert bloom". Israel has already strained the natural sources of water available to it to the limit — and almost 75 per cent of this water is used for agriculture. Forty per cent of the sweet water supply comes from the Kinneret reservoir, which serves much of the west and south of Israel, including the Negev, by pipeline. The rest is pumped from two groundwater sources — an aquifer (underground water reservoir) under the coastal plain which is recharged in part by water running off the West Bank hills, and a limestone aquifer under the western slope of the West Bank which is tapped by deep wells on the plain and supplies 20 per cent of Israel's water. These groundwater sources are already being used to the maximum — excessive pumping would lower the water table below the level, making the aquifers saline and therefore unusable.

Ben Meir points out that short of a massive desalination project which would be very expensive and, if nuclear power were used, politically sensitive, the Israeli economy and particularly agriculture must continue to depend on the maintenance of all the present sources of sweet water, including the 25 per cent to 30 per cent which originates under the West Bank. Politically speaking, such a judgment clearly implies that Israel would not voluntarily countenance a transfer of power in the long term to any Palestinian authority, not only for often-cited political and security reasons but also because this would jeopardise its water sources.

Policy impedes West Bank growth

In the short term, this also means that while Israel continues to control the West Bank there can be no significant development of agriculture or industry in the area which uses water from the western aquifer, the major one in the region. The policies of the Israeli military authorities on the West Bank already reflect this preoccupation. West Bank water is already being prevented from expanding the use of water, especially for agriculture. Both domestic water consumption



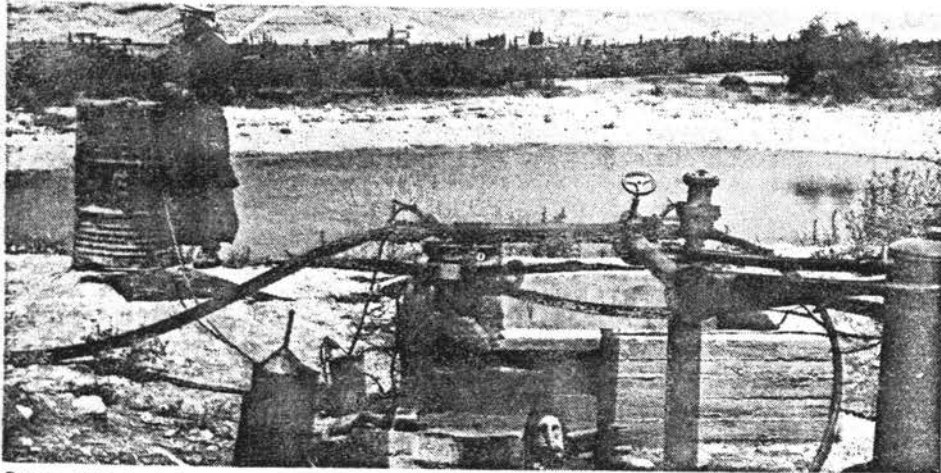
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Israeli settlers turn the taps



Arab woman draws her water — no rights to what lies under "Eretz Israel"



Better off Palestinian farmers have installed drip irrigation systems

tion and irrigated agriculture have increased since 1967 although overall consumption is still far below the Israeli level. Population growth and the expansion of towns like Ramalla and Nablus have increased the demand for domestic water but the Israelis have generally been reluctant to allow the drilling of new wells by municipalities, particularly if they are to be drilled in the western aquifer.

The most obvious example of this policy has been in Ramalla where the military authorities have refused to allow the drilling of a new well to supplement the existing wells at Ain al Sammiya on the eastern slopes of the hills which are said to be drying up. The site for the new well, which the municipality offered

to finance itself, was, however, said to be on the north western side of Ramalla near Abu Sukheidim which would have tapped the western aquifer. Instead, in order to fulfil its water needs, the municipality has been obliged to accept water from Meqorot, the Israeli water company. All other towns on the West Bank have so far resisted Israeli attempts to have Meqorot supply their water needs on the grounds that this would increase Israel's political hold over their municipalities. Nablus municipality has been granted permission to sink a well, but informed sources in Nablus said that it would be situated on the eastern aquifer where the West Bank hills slope down to the Jordan valley.

The Israeli water commissioner states categorically that West Bank towns will have to accept piped water from Israel in the future if the only alternative is tapping the western aquifer. The use of water for agriculture on the West Bank has already been curtailed and all Arab wells, springs and pumps are now metered, with penalties for over-pumping.

Overall, only 5-6 per cent of agricultural land on the West Bank is irrigated, mainly in the Jordan valley, the Jiftlik area of Wadi Far'a and the Jenin-Tulkarm region. The restrictions on water use, combined in some areas with the appropriation of agricultural land for Jewish settlements, has led some better off Palestinian farmers to install drip irrigation, the most sophisticated and economical way of using water. The Israelis, however, appear to be reluctant to allow or encourage even projects aimed at making better use of water for agriculture, perhaps on the grounds that in the longer term, this would lead to a more generalised demand for the expansion of intensive Arab agriculture.

Some foreign voluntary agencies have also come under attack for funding or encouraging such projects. An article in the Hebrew daily *Maariv* on 12 February claimed that "the aim of these bodies is, in the eyes of Israeli experts, transparent to make difficult, as much as is possible the Israeli development and settlement activities in Judea and Samaria, by putting the tap in Arab hands".

feature: water

One scheme that the Israeli authorities have at present refused to countenance is the substitution of a pipeline for an open concrete channel taking water down Wadi Fari'a east of Nablus which irrigates the fertile Jiftlik valley near the Jordan. The pipeline would eliminate wastage of water through evaporation, seepage and pilfering. According to Wahid al-Masri, a local landowner and chairman of the Wadi Fari'a Water User's Committee, the scheme, which was to be assisted by a US voluntary organisation, had originally been given the go-ahead for a preliminary survey by the local military governor, but was subsequently blocked after it had been referred to higher levels in the Israeli government.

Settlements "a secondary issue"

In the overall context of the water question, the supply of water to the Jewish settlements in the West Bank appears to be a subsidiary issue, although their existence and expansion is a considerable, political and economic irritant and constitutes another important aspect of the Israeli rationale for continuing to control the area. The western line of settlements, the so-called Likud Bloc, has so far not established a substantial agricultural base and as a result uses a negligible amount of water for domestic purposes, most of which is piped from Israel, so they do not make use of the crucial western aquifer. The other two groups of settlements (apart from the urban settlements around Jerusalem) — those in the Jordan valley and those in the hills along the Allon road — have, on the other hand, established quite strong agricultural bases and most of their cultivation is irrigated or hot-house production of flowers and vegetables — all of which are very water intensive. The settlers do not appear to be restricted in the amount of water they can pump from deep wells drilled in the eastern aquifer. Some of the settlements in this area are affecting sources of supply for Palestinian farmers — sometimes by taking over land on which there are wells which previous owners had used and sometimes by drilling deep wells close to shallow village wells or springs, thus depleting the flow of water to the latter, and lowering the water table.

"A political ploy"

A plan has now been drawn up to lay a pipeline from the Kinneret reservoir to the Jordan valley settlements and up into the hills to supply settlements as far as Beqaot. One reason for this is clearly to secure the settlement's water supply against political change and also to preempt criticism that the settlements are taking water from West Bankers. Ben Meir, however, considers the move is largely a political ploy which will not be worth its considerable expense.

Oil finds brighten Oman's outlook

BY JOHN WHELAN

Oman's political and economic importance to the West has been transformed by dramatic new appraisals of its oil potential. Sultan Qabous can now look forward to an output from his oilfields in the early 1980s equal to the bonanza of the early 1970s when the government pushed rapidly ahead with modernisation.

The forecasts by Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), the country's only oil producing company, are based on 1978's year of success in Dhofar where new oil fields will come on stream in mid-1980 adding 70,000 barrels a day (b/d) to capacity.

Yet two years ago when the World Bank sent a mission to Oman, PDO was talking a different language. At that stage it looked as if Oman, which produces only 0.05 of world production, would be down to less than 200,000 b/d by 1981. PDO's managing director, Bob Jetses, never known for anything but extreme caution in predicting oil output, is now predicting a build-up back to 350,000 b/d in 1981. Even that may be on the conservative side since PDO's engineers can hardly believe that in 1978 they discovered all the oil there was to find in Dhofar.

The oil news is likely to restore the balance of payments to surplus in the early 1980s. In 1979 a budget deficit of RO 108 million (\$313 million) is expected and this could be even greater since Arab aid to Oman is likely to be cut as a result of Sultan Qabous' support for the Egypt-Israel peace treaty. Arab aid was starting to play an important, though not essential, role in development and helped finance a 320-kilometre gas pipeline from the northern oil fields to the capital area which was completed last year. Government officials are now bullishly confident that with the improved economic prospects the international capital market can be tapped for funds. In the pipeline is a \$150 million borrowing which the lead banks are hoping to syndicate at ¾ per cent above the London inter-bank offered rate (Libor). The reception this loan receives will be a good indicator, coming as it does against a background of disenchantment with the Euromarkets on the part of many Gulf states including Qatar, which have found the interest charges higher than expected. With little in the way of foreign assets to liquidate, apart from the private fortune of the ruling

elite, Oman's best course is probably to raise extra funds abroad in the form of commercial borrowing and bilateral aid. With the Arab aid unavailable to the immediate future Oman can make a powerful case to allies such as the US for assistance. The Carter administration is already offering \$15 million in military sales financing "in the light of the changing security situation in the region" and diplomats in Muscat believe more will follow.

The British connection

Qabous can also rely on the continued support of the UK which has both a direct and an indirect military involvement dating back to the successful containment of the Dhofar rebellion. A UK Ministry of Defence white paper commits the UK to a "gradual reduction of our military assistance to Oman . . . as Omanis are trained to occupy positions held by British personnel on secondment." Most recent figures show that there are about 180 seconded UK officers and commissioned personnel serving in Oman together with more than 400 British officers recruited through private agents. The UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office has made it quite clear that there is a final date for UK withdrawal from Oman. Indeed Qabous has been most anxious in his private exchanges with British officials to ensure that no date is fixed for withdrawal. The Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher is unlikely to change this policy. Despite the presence of a ranking Omanis in the military hierarchy any visitor to Muscat arriving at International Airport is immediately aware of the depth of the British military commitment. Officers in military fatigues mill around the arrival lounge waiting to meet the latest intake. As a British diplomat confided: "This country owes me very much of Hong Kong."

The Chinese presence in Oman is the second Gulf state to recognise Oman. It is a discreet villa in the main quarter of Ruwi. The red flag is carried out by taxi drivers though it is easy to miss the makeshift embassy. The first Chinese ambassador Yuan presented his credentials on 28 April as yet no bilateral programme of co-operation has been announced. The embassy is intended, diplomats say, as a listening post for China in