

# Woman at well would have trouble getting water

## Israel restricts flow of West Bank's wells from Palestinians

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*Editor's note: All but unreported in the Western press is the role water will play in the Middle East peace talks. Journalist/anthropologist Barbara Nimri Aziz has spent a great deal of time in the area studying the water issue and she analyzes it here. As she says, the water in the land Israel holds may be as important as the land itself in the peace process.*

By **BARBARA NIMRI AZIZ**  
Special to the National Catholic Reporter

**WEST BANK** — A 5-inch diameter pipe protrudes from the dry, rocky soil of the Palestinian town of Sa'ir. At its base is a heavy, metal box that accesses the main pipe. Both are securely locked.

The surrounding fields of Palestinian farmers are dry except when winter rains fall. No water flows from the pipe, however, because the valve below is controlled by Israeli authorities. Palestinians are prohibited from touching the pipes buried beneath their land.

"This water," explains a villager, "is not for us. It taps a pipe that runs between those Israeli settlements." He points to Kiryat Arba, one of the largest West Bank colonies of Jews, stretched out on a ridge to the north. "This pipe links Kiryat Arba and Asfra, over there four miles south, in the opposite direction," he explains.

Like most Israeli settlements in the West Bank, these towns sit on elevated points of the landscape and draw water from the aquifer deep below the surface.

With the growth of Israeli colonies throughout the West Bank, water to the two communities — Israeli and Palestinian — is supplied by independent systems,

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tems, although from the same source. In recent years, the Palestinian supply has fallen short. Increasingly, more water drawn from Palestinian lands goes to nourish the European life-style of the new arrivals. Israel restricts the operation of deep wells by local Palestinians.

Jewish settlers are said to consume nine times more than their Arab neighbors. "Put another way," says Abdul Fattah, hydrologist at Bir Zeit University, "the 120,000 Jews in the West Bank consume as much as the total Palestinian population of both the West Bank and Gaza: 1,700,000. An Israeli's daily consumption is 400 liters, whereas a Palestinian's is barely 40."

The struggle for water is not limited to occupied Palestinian lands. "Israel has for years avoided addressing its water shortage; it is one of the most wasteful water users in the area." This is according to a report issued by the office of outspoken Israeli Comptroller Miriam Ben-Porat, longtime critic of what she charges

is an irresponsible water policy.

Hydrologist Kamal Abdul Fattah has for years been trying to gain world attention of the misuse of regional water resources, risking his liberty at home by airing the issue abroad. "Israelis have come to rely on the aquifer under the West Bank," he said, so that by this time, close to 80 percent of its water needs are drawn from the West Bank, leaving the million Palestinian farmers and townspeople there with less than 25 percent for themselves."

The problem extends still further. Israel is draining water from other occupied territories as well — Lebanon's Hasbani River and Litani River in the south; Golan Heights' Yarmouk River; the River Jordan. All now feed into Israel, which has been building facilities for that

## Analysis

purpose. It could be that the water in these lands held by Israel is at least as important as the land itself.

Here lies the reason behind one of the regional meetings decided by Middle East peace negotiators last month in Moscow. Water management is high on the agenda. In the spring, it was decided that a multilateral meeting between Israel and Arab states is to address water needs.

Thomas Naff, historian and Middle East water specialist at the University of Pennsylvania, points out that "only if some peace is secured between Israel and its neighbors can the pressing issue of mutual water use be addressed.

now, no controls have been possible."

Israel is not the only water-deficient area. Neither can all shortages be attributed to Israel's illegal drainage. North Africa and the Fertile Crescent that arches from Palestine north into Syria and across to Iraq need more water.

The Gulf states, largely arid desert, are now using their long coastline to develop desalination facilities on their shores. Valuable to Gulf development, these offshore plants, some say, suddenly seemed less secure after the recent war in the region.

Finally, growing population and the search for a higher standard of living (water usage is one index of living standard) increase demands. ■