

The importance of water politics in the Israel-Palestine conflict

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ANA HUERTAS FRANCISCO, OCT 6 2010

Water has always been a very important factor in the Israel-Palestine conflict, and as the dynamic of the conflict developed, water politics changed accordingly. The issue of water has been a problem on its own due to the increasing desertification of the area. Given the importance of agriculture for both economies, whoever had access to water would obtain access to land once they managed to cultivate it. The Jews used this as a strategy for land appropriation in Palestine before the official creation of Israel, but after 1948, water politics transformed to attain other national goals. Water politics have been used both as a strategy to assure Israeli security, but also as a form of terrorism against the Palestinian population. However, equally important for the overall conflict are other factors such as the inability of the existing peace accords to reach a viable settlement on the issues of the Occupied Territories, Palestinian refugees, the security wall built by Israel, or the status of Jerusalem.

The land that once belonged to the Palestinian nation remains strategically important because of its “significance for the world’s three monotheistic religions” (Doumani, 2007: 29). The Israel-Palestine question, the cause and fundamental part of the wider Arab-Israeli conflict that has been ongoing since 1948, is a many-fold contest with complicated roots and conflicting claims that is often presented as unsolvable. At the core of the problem lies the fundamental pretension to self-determination and territorial sovereignty put forward by two different nations over the same area of land (Sharoni and Abu-Nimer, 2004: 170), namely what used to be known as Palestine. The issue at hand is not a mere political or military dispute: since its very starting point, it became an intricate and inseparable part of peoples’ lives and has been so for the last three generations. Because of this, the conflict acquired a totally different dimension and underlined the importance of many more factors that must be taken into account apart from the land-based issue.

The historical examination of the conflict has been argued by some as causing a negative effect when trying to obtain an objective understanding of what the main factors of the quarrel are (Fernea and Hocking, 1992), because the versions of both parties can appear to be mutually exclusive and often seem irreconcilable. The Zionist settler mission was based on a “constructed myth of Palestine as sparsely populated”: the native population was disregarded as though it did not exist and Palestine was therefore pictured as a territory there to be taken by the Jews, the “people without land” (Abdo and Yuval-Davis, 1995: 291). Even before the state of Israel was officially formed, early illegal Jewish immigration to Palestine represented a problem for the Arab population because they bought land very cheaply; Jewish immigrants took away the Palestinians’ tenancy rights and, with them, their only source of income (Goldschmidt Jr., 2004: 61). Furthermore, the tactic behind land purchase sought to weaken the political bargaining power of the Arab leadership that opposed Zionism (Smith, 2007: 129). Of course, the seeming willingness of the land sale was primarily economic, because while Zionist immigrants were supported from overseas and had ready access to funding from other countries, the sole wealth of the Palestinians was the land they owned, and the whole economy relied on agriculture even when only “one third” of the total area of Palestine was considered cultivable (Stein, 1984: 3). A lack of liquidity linked to a decrease in agricultural production in the state after the First World War gave Zionists the opportunity to seize positions of power through land acquisition (Abdo and Yuval-Davis, 1995). That is to say that, even before the state of Israel was officially created Zionist Jews were already intricately linked to the economics of Palestine.

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Many commentators in the field have underlined the benefits brought to the Middle East by Zionist colonization prior to 1948. During the British mandate period, the extensive land purchase from the Arabs allowed the Jews to increase the agricultural yield thanks to the novelty of their methods and the inflow of investment from overseas (Dorra, 1946: 100). In theory, taxes collected from the Jews, plus the revenue from land sales, could have revived the Palestinian economy and had an overall positive impact. However, history has proved otherwise. Since the very beginning, Zionist settlers advocated a policy of “economic separateness”, namely of segregated labour (UN Special Committee on Palestine, 1947: 19), by which no Arab was allowed to work in Jewish-owned land and Arab produce was systematically boycotted. Therefore, although the Jewish settlements in Palestine were very important for the overall economic performance of the state, in reality their economic system was totally separate from the Palestinian one (Weinstock, 1973) and created a social structure that very much resembled a system of apartheid (Coconi and Bondia, 2009: 5). Given the increasing amount of land they owned and the consequences for the overall agricultural market, the Zionist settlements’ autocratic policies could not be ignored for long because they were strictly dictated along nationalistic lines and reflected a deeply racist outlook towards the inhabitants of the land they had occupied (Gabbay, 1959). The Zionist identity and national sentiment were clearly augmented because they held a powerful and independent economic sector, which meant an increased (and slowly indisputable) hold over the Promised Land. With the strengthening of the Zionist identity, also came an increased opposition towards the Arabs, and gave rise to the discursive practices that defended (and still do) the Jews as the legitimate people of Palestine (Eisenzweig, 1981). We must not forget that the main interest that drove the colonisation of Palestine was not, unlike European colonialism, economic expansion and raw materials. However, we must also note that it was the economic performance of Zionists (compared to the Arabs) that allowed the subsequent subjugation and expulsion of the Palestinian people, the main factor of the Israeli-Palestinian (and wider Arab-Israeli) conflict.

The land of Palestine, the Holy Land, the “land of milk and honey” (Warriner, 1948: 52), is a dry, resource-poor and almost barren area. Desertification had already started taking its toll on this area due to intensive deforestation and water desalination in the early 20th century, making the Palestinian economy quite weak within the wider Middle East region due to insufficient productivity (Stein, 1984: 3). The Israel-Palestine conflict thus started even before the creation of Israel was a reality: the occupying peoples, far from helping to reconstruct the Palestinian economy, rather aggravated the ecological environment by the rapid usage of resources and the confiscation of land. The reason for this aggressive occupation has no fundament other than the psychological idea that the Holy Land belonged to the Jews: on theoretical grounds, the occupation would not guarantee by any means a ready access to any kind of resources or cheap labour (Weinstock, 1973: 53), even though when the Zionists managed, as already stated above, to make the land more productive using innovative technology and more efficient agricultural methods. Crucially, given the advanced state of desertification in Palestine, the need to control all available hydric resources acquired a different and more imminent dimension as years have passed by for both Israel and the Palestinians (Palestinian Embassy in Argentina, 2009).

The destruction of the environment has come as a clear disadvantage for the Palestinian people, aggravating their situation in terms of their security, and water politics therefore can be said to play a very important role for the overall conflict. Over the years of Israeli occupation, and especially since its creation in 1948, the new state of Israel has been an insatiable dark hole for water: it uses up to 73% of the overall available water resources in the territory, while Palestinians are left with a mere 17% (Palestinian Embassy in Argentina, 2009), which translates to less than 70 litres of water per Palestinian, when the World Health Organization recommends a minimum of a 100 (Amnesty International, 2009). The politics of water acquisition followed by Israel have become more aggressive in recent years, especially after the Arab states with whom it shares the Jordan River Basin (Jordan, Syria and Lebanon) attempted to divert the flow away from Israel. The consequences of this failed attempt had once again the biggest impact on the Palestinian population, especially for those living in Jordan, when Israel built a wall around the West Bank that gave Israel control over the water supply from the Jordan River that corresponded to the Palestinian refugees (Gleick, 1993).

Levi Eshkol, the Israeli Prime Minister in 1967, reportedly stated that the control of water supplies was a basic matter regarding Israel’s survival (Lowi, 1993). This is definitely true bearing in mind that Zionist expansion was made possible in the first place thanks to a comparatively bigger agricultural output than that of the Palestinians, a sector that accounts for 80% of the total water consumption (Dillman, 1989: 47). The state of Israel is in continuous

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expansion, and for that to remain that way, water is indispensable to ensure that the new settlements are sustainable enough to prevent a Palestinian takeover. In this light, Gleick underlined that fact that “approximately forty percent” of the water that is vital for Israel comes from the territories occupied during the 1967 War (1993: 85), and this is especially important bearing in mind that Israel uses up almost completely its own renewable water resources (Dillman, 1989: 46). The implications of this statement can lead us to think that competition over secure water supplies in such a dry region as the Middle East can easily spur a violent conflict, and even more so when relations are as tense as in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Water politics have been used in various forms during the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The basic definition of “water politics” presents them as policies that are made based on the availability of water and the best strategies to grant access to it (Lawrence et al., 2002: 3). In the light of Israel’s vast consumption of water, the fact that there is a “mutual reliance” (Berman and Whibey, 1999: 2) on such a scarce resource and that there is not enough water for both communities (Bellisari, 1994: 53) has often been exploited for different political purposes, and has certainly not contributed to taking a step towards the stabilization of the region. Water politics have been used both by Israel and Palestine, although much more aggressively by the former than by the latter. The Palestinian population has doubled since 1967 (ibid: 54) but Israel, who is required by law to provide water to the Occupied Territories, has maintained a level of water supply that has not grown according to the increase in population density in Gaza and the West Bank (Berman and Whibey, 1999: 5). The reasons behind this policy, which is not the fruit of a miscalculation, can be explained as being part of a wider plan to force the remaining Palestinians to leave the Occupied Territories.

Water politics thus slowly become terror politics, by which people are forced to live in increasingly bad conditions not only because of the amount of water supply, but also because of the poor quality of the water itself: for example, Amnesty International reported that between 90 and 95% of the water supply is not apt for human consumption (2009: 3). Furthermore, although the whole region depends on the small quantity of water available, the Israeli government has been known to deplete water in order to prevent the Palestinian population from adapting in any way to water scarcity (Goeller, 1997): the water infrastructure in the Occupied Territories is often harmed or destroyed, preventing not only the access to drinkable water, but also any prospects for agriculture or a healthy livestock (Amnesty International, 2009). In this sense, the politics of water followed by Israel have somehow contributed to the continuation of the conflict, for which the Israeli national goal of achieving control of the whole of Palestine remains central.

Water politics have been used for varying strategic goals during the Israel-Palestine conflict. It must be noted here that water *politics* is not the same concept as water *wars*. The works of academics such as Allan (1998) focus on the fact that although water has been a central issue on the Israel-Palestine conflict and the wider Middle East region, there have been no armed conflicts *over* water. In this sense, wars on water, namely the escalation to an armed confrontation has played a minor role in the overall dynamics of the conflict. However, water politics remain central to both contending parties, and although the conflict has never been expressly about water, this sort of politics have been largely used for strategic objectives that had the capacity to either continue the conflict or engender co-operation. The water politics followed by Israel have been divided into four stages by Mostafa Dolatyar (2000): first, bargaining for water in the years before the official creation of the state, followed by the development of its own and shared water resources. The third stage, quite importantly, was marked by territorial occupation and the geo-strategic control of the main water resources around Israel. In recent years, tactics have shifted once again to bargaining for water. This can be quite important for the development of the conflict because it opened the possibility to stretch the reach of peace accords: so far the continuous “appropriation” of Palestinian (and other Arab) water resources have been an unavoidable obstacle to attain peace (Bleier, 1994). This shift in the ideology of water politics has seen some promising advances for a hypothetical step towards a consensus between Israel and Palestine.

The Oslo Peace Accords of 1993 had already aimed to set the foundation for water sharing between Israel and the remaining of Palestine (Weinthal and Marei, 2002), and recent developments aimed to make the Palestinians manage their own water supplies and sewage infrastructure with the water that Israel would provide for them (Amnesty International, 2009). The main issue concerning water politics is that both parties have different understandings of what should be achieved through a policy of water sharing: the Israeli government defends it has

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already done what international law required it to do (Foreign Ministry of Israel, 2009), while the Palestinians focus more on water rights and a thorough compensation for the aggressive water policies followed by Israel in the past (Weinthal and Marei, 2002). This clash of interests shows that although water politics are presented as being central to the overall conflict, they continue to be used as a means for achieving national interests: in the case of Israel, securing water supplies remains linked to basic security concerns over the settlements that allow Israel to maintain its hold over territory; in the case of Palestine, water politics and claims of water rights represent the possibility of increasing their bargaining power in the light of achieving land concessions from Israel (Dolatyar and Gray, 2000: 66).

It then becomes obvious that although water is presented as the foundation for a possible resolution of the conflict, it is a resolution of the conflict what would be needed before water issues can be resolved. Shaheen is one of the commentators that most fervently defend the idea that the main cause of the conflict remains the “loss of Palestine to Zionism” (1997: 237). Therefore, the prospects of water being the possible foundation of a long-term solution seem bleak bearing in mind that water has been used as a cause for war and not the cause of war itself (Sherman, 1999: 85). The failure of the numerous peace accords to make Israel withdraw from the Occupied Territories, and the evident exclusion of the Palestinians from the decision-making process in these peace talks, is the reflection of the core issue that concerns the existence, sovereignty and international recognition of a Palestinian state. The Palestinians had turned to the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) in the aftermath of the Arab defeats in 1967 for them to be the independent representatives of the national objectives and claims (Sharoni and Abu-Nimer, 2004: 182), which was the only way to achieve some sort of international recognition for the Palestinian issue in bodies such as the UN. The first step was the UN Security Council Resolution 242, which in its “deliberate ambiguity” served the wider interests of the Cold War dynamics (Smith, 2007: 310), failed to force Israel to withdraw from the territories previously taken by force and did not achieve a settlement on issues such as religious enclaves or Palestinian refugees. Similarly, the Camp David Accords of 1979, in which Israel and Egypt signed a peace treaty, were far from resolving the conflict that involved the Palestinians: the PLO was still not officially recognised as the sole Palestinian representative and thus was not allowed to take part in the negotiations to defend the issue of Palestinian autonomy (Lesch and Tessler, 1989). The result in terms of the conflict was highly negative for the Palestinian people in the light of Israel’s impunity after the Accords when the Israeli government increased the land under occupation by building new settlements. This expansion signified a clear detriment in living standards in the Occupied Territories, not only in terms of access to housing, sanitation or education, but also by the increased dependency on Israel as a supplier of water (Nakhleh, 1980).

The growing Palestinian dependency on Israel and the continuous Israeli refusal to recognise the authority and legitimacy of the PLO were crucial for the overall Israeli-Palestinian conflict, even more than the aggressive water policies pursued by Israel in order to sustain the creation of new Israeli settlements after 1979. Although by this time the PLO was ready for some sort of political settlement (Sharoni and Abu-Nimer, 2004: 183), its history of guerrilla fighting against the Israeli authorities was the excuse that allowed Israel to reject any sort of treaty. It must be noted here that the willingness of the PLO to reach an agreement mainly came hand in hand with the overall development of the wider Arab-Israeli conflict: the organisation was forced out of Jordan after they attempted a coup d’état, and Lebanon was invaded in 1982 by Israel in order to destroy the PLO’s headquarters after many cross-border attacks had taken place (Cobban, 1984). A minority of scholars have underlined that there is a possibility that the invasion in Lebanon was carried out following a longer term policy to secure the water resources in the Litani area: the area was denominated “a security zone” since and attacks have been carried out to expel as many inhabitants as possible from it (Bleier, 1994). However, it would be misleading to understand water as the main goal of this operation and others alike, or to overestimate its influence on the overall development of the conflict. Apart from the seizure of land by war, there are many other aspects of the conflict that are still far from resolved which perpetuate the confrontation.

The Palestinian refugee problem is without a doubt a very important factor for the continuum of the conflict with Israel. The establishment of the state of Israel and Jewish migration before and after caused mass population movements forcing more than 60% of the Palestinian population to become diasporas since 1948 (Hill, 1983: 293). Currently, this number has risen to at least 4.7 million displaced people, scattered between the Occupied Territories and other Arab states (UNRWA, 2009). As already mentioned above, the refugee problem is one of the issues that prevent any possible resolution, especially taking into account that none of the proposed treaties to date have

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managed to embody a viable solution for it. The prospect of a separate and independent Palestinian state, which could have been part of a long-term lasting solution, continues to be rejected by Israel (Yorke, 1990). Instead, an "apartheid wall" for "self-defence" was built by Israel (Rogers and Ben-David, 2005: 1) in an attempt to continue a policy of exclusion of the Palestinian people that allows Israel to further consolidate its position as a strong regional power without having to return any of the Occupied Territories (Usher, 2005). The problem of refugees and the separation wall goes hand in hand with the issue of who is to keep the religious enclaves such as Jerusalem, important for Judaism, Christianity and Islam (Wright, 1926). The Jews advocated for a united city under Israeli control, but it is unlikely that such a resolution would please the majority of Palestinians. Bearing in mind the centrality of this city in terms of religion, culture and economic importance for both communities, it is a reflection of all the different aspects of the conflict, and therefore there will be no durable peace agreement until the issue of Jerusalem is solved (Whitbeck, 1996), regardless of whatever water politics each side is willing to follow.

Water politics are very important for the Israel-Palestine conflict since they played a part both in the beginning and in the continuation of the confrontation until today. Water was crucial for the viability of the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine, because otherwise the extent of desertification in the area would have made it impossible to survive there. Maybe more importantly, water politics have been used as a way of resource appropriation not only in Palestine, but also in Jordan and Lebanon. However, water politics by themselves do not drive the conflict, and although it has been attempted to use water as the milestone for some cooperation plans, the main issue remains the presence of Israel and the landless Palestinian refugees. The conflict continues because this issue, hand in hand with the policies of exclusion incarnated in the Israeli security wall, remains unsolved.

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Written on: March 2010