

# Palestine is not short on water - just the right to use it

Palestinians have ocean coastline, a river and a sea, and yet Israel keeps them thirsty

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Visitors bathe at the Dead Sea in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. Reuters

Israel's control over the natural resources of the territories it occupies – whether in the Syrian Golan or in Palestine – has been one of the most important elements guiding Israeli policies, including the construction of the illegal annexation wall or the declaration of vast zones of the Jordan Valley as closed military zones.

Any peace plan has to take into consideration sovereign Palestinian rights over such resources. The so-called plan and “vision” presented by the US, however, not only ignore these rights, mainly with respect to water, but also endorse the Israeli vision of theft and the rejection of meaningful co-operation.

As per the bilateral negotiations that have long taken place between Israel and Palestine, water is considered a “permanent status issue”, meaning it is fundamental to a lasting resolution. While Israel has relied on the benefits it gains from controlling Palestinian natural resources thus far, this is not compatible with the idea of a sovereign Palestinian state.



An Israeli activist holds a banner during a protest against the US peace plan for the Middle East, in front of the US ambassador's residence in Jerusalem, on May 15, 2020, as Palestinians commemorate the 72nd anniversary of the 1948 Nakba, which left hundreds of thousands of Palestinians displaced by the war accompanying the birth of Israel. AFP

In order to design a coherent legal and policy strategy, we on the Palestinian side have engaged with some of the most respected water experts in the world, including Professor Stephen McCaffrey, who was an architect of the 1997 UN Convention on the Law of Non-Navigational Uses of International Transboundary Watercourses, the main international legal reference for such matters.

Explaining the Palestinian position on this is not complicated: we are demanding what is rightfully ours.

Palestine and Israel share three aquifer basins that go through the West Bank, in addition to a coastal aquifer underneath Gaza. We also share the Jordan River basin along with Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. The four Arab countries with rights over the basin, including Palestine, are signatories to the 1997 UN convention.

Any solution has to be in line with a basic principle: what is shareable has to be shared, and the quotas per country have to be established based on the rules that form the basic principles for peaceful relations between states.

Israel's near-monopoly over Palestinian water resources has been catastrophic for our economy in general and to our people in particular. Few are aware that we need Israeli permission to dig a new water well or even to rehabilitate an existing one. This has led to a situation whereby Palestinians have the lowest water consumption per capita in the region.

The water available to us in Gaza, moreover, is not even fit for human consumption. This was well documented in one UN report titled *Gaza 2020: a Liveable Place?*. Access to clean water and sanitation is a human right – surely, that is beyond dispute.

The team in Washington behind the US's proposal had access to all of this information, but their goal was not to bring about a peace plan. It was rather a vision to normalise Israel's control over Palestinian people, land and natural resources through annexation.

Although I understood that Washington was ideologically adamant about giving Israel all of Jerusalem and its illegal settlements, even I did not expect that it would totally dismiss Palestinian rights to water under international law.

### ***“The water made available to us in Gaza is not even fit for human consumption”***

The annexation of the Jordan Valley and the Palestinian part of the Jordan river should not be considered a mere “security procedure”, but rather a mortal blow to Palestine's water rights and the possibility of reaching our full potential, which requires sovereign control over all the aspects of our economy.

Water, as demonstrated in the negotiation process, is an issue that calls for Israeli-Palestinian and Arab co-operation.

In several multilateral forums, including negotiations over the Red Sea-Dead Sea Water Conveyance project, an international initiative to prevent the shrinking of the Dead Sea, Palestinians managed to secure our riparian rights in the Jordan River basin and the Dead Sea. Israel was required to recognise them in order to become a part of the project.

Today, Mr Trump's plan is telling us: “Forget it”.

The plan states that each party ought to recognise the right of the other to its “remaining water”. But if even Palestine's maritime borders are under Israeli control, what water remains for us? It dictates, furthermore, that Israel and Palestine explore desalination and the treatment of wastewater – all the while, Israel will consume our legitimate water resources.

The Trump plan ignores the importance that the Jordan River has for any Palestinian economic model, including any ability to benefit from our heritage sites. It denies us Al Maghtas – an important Christian pilgrimage site – as well as the Dead Sea and its minerals.

The agreement between Jordan, Israel and Palestine that I personally negotiated and signed in December 2013 on the Red Sea-Dead Sea project is set to become, in accordance with Mr Trump's vision, a bilateral agreement doomed to fail.

Fulfilment of Palestine's water rights is a basic requirement for a just and lasting peace. As signatories of the 1997 UN convention we believe that the main outlines of a peace agreement between Israel and Palestine should not be, as presented by the Trump administration, legitimisation of theft, but rather an equitable and reasonable allocation of water resources. Is that too much to ask?