

# Israel, Palestine and the environment



Israel's claim of 'making the desert bloom' has been made repeatedly – often as actual justification for its colonisation of Palestine – but the reality has proved to be very different. Succeeding Israeli governments have pursued policies of expansionism, industrialisation and urbanisation that have taken precedence over sustainability and conservation. Since 1967, when Israel occupied and began to colonise the West Bank and Gaza, the whole of historic Palestine has been affected.

## Water: inequality and pollution

The World Health Organisation suggests that 100 litres per person per day is a minimum requirement for every human being on the planet. The average Israeli enjoys a domestic supply of 280 litres per day, while a Palestinian on the West Bank gets on average only 60 litres. The problem is less one of availability of water than one of decades of overpumping by the Israeli water authorities. They use deep wells that affect the long-term quality of the water and lead to the traditional, shallower wells used by Palestinians drying up. Chronic overpumping along Israel's coastal plain means that the water table has dropped and the void is being filled by seawater and, increasingly, by wastewater.<sup>1</sup>

Since the West Bank was occupied in 1967 the Israeli authorities have taken control of most of the water resources there: they have prevented Palestinians sinking any new wells, while allowing the illegal settlements a

water supply that provides them with swimming pools and lawn-sprinklers. Some Palestinian communities are reduced to buying back what is rightfully their own water from the adjacent settlement.

Marauding settlers not only destroy crops and stop Palestinian farmers working on their land, they also damage precious water reserves. The Israeli army rarely intervenes.

In Gaza, not only is the municipal water supply contaminated, so that those who can afford it buy drinking water; power cuts mean people have to carry all water up several flights of stairs to their flats.

The situation is also especially acute in the Jordan Valley, where the illegal settlements virtually monopolise the available water, effectively depriving the indigenous Palestinians of their livelihood.

The river Jordan, which once nourished the Jordan valley and fed the Dead Sea, is now a salty and polluted trickle. The Dead Sea is receding by a metre every year, and is further contaminated by raw sewage flowing via the Kidron valley. A project has already been launched to link the Dead Sea with the Red Sea in the south, but local environmentalist groups, such as Friends of the Earth Middle East (see [www.foeme.org](http://www.foeme.org)) are concerned this could be potentially damaging.



Water tanks on a Palestinian home in Hebron punctured by Israeli settlers (14 April 2009). Photo: [palestinesolidarityproject.org](http://palestinesolidarityproject.org)

## Waste as a weapon

The siege imposed by Israel on the Gaza Strip since Hamas' victory in the 2006 elections has meant that the facilities for treating sewage are completely inadequate for the 1.4 million inhabitants. Most of the sewage either flows into the sea or builds up behind high walls of earth, threatening the adjacent homes.

In March 2007 one of the dikes gave way, and a tidal wave of sewage engulfed Umm al-Naser, a village of 3000 people; five were drowned.

A UN report (30 April 2008) stated: "This sewage cannot be treated due to



Collecting water in Gaza. Photo: International Red Cross



*Umm al-Naser: searching for survivors amid the sewage*

lack of a steady supply of electricity within the Gaza Strip, Israel's restrictions on fuel imports and prohibitions on the import of necessary spare parts".

An international project was launched to repair the main sewage plant in northern Gaza, but this was badly damaged in Israel's three week-long assault on Gaza in the winter of 2008–9, which killed over 1,400 Palestinians, most of them civilians, and wounded nearly 5,000. The cost of repair to the plant is estimated to be about £140m (*The Guardian*, 28 January 2009). Since the Abu Eida cement works, the largest in Gaza, were also flattened in the attacks and since the import of cement is banned by Israel, it is not clear how repairs to this and other elements of Gaza's basic infrastructure can be undertaken.

The sewage lake in N. Gaza is now one kilometre long, with a depth ranging from eight to 13 metres and contains 2.5 million cubic metres of effluent.

In the West Bank the situation is only marginally better. The military occupation, with its hundreds of roadblocks and closures, has had a severe effect on attempts to develop the basic infrastructure, including municipal water supplies and waste disposal.

In addition, the illegal Israeli settlements, typically located on hilltops, dump untreated sewage and wastewater into the valleys, polluting Palestinian water sources and agricultural land (see [www.palweg.org](http://www.palweg.org)). A 2004 report by Friends of the Earth Middle East found that only 6% of these settlements adequately treated their sewage.

Israeli army bases in the Occupied Territories are also a major source of contamination. In May 2009 Issac Ben David, Deputy Director at the Israeli Ministry of the Environment, reported that three bases near Ramallah, Jerusalem and Hebron and two fuel dumps were a cause for concern: "In a recent inspection conducted by the ministry inspectors of [Israeli army] bases in [the OPT] we discovered a bleak picture of neglect and severe damage to the environment due to leakage of fuel and oil. This severely damages the soil and ground water... Our inspectors found that this is not due to lack of infrastructure but to criminal neglect on the part of the persons in charge." It is not known if any action has been taken.

## The politics of dumping

Tons of rubbish are taken daily by lorry from Israel to the Occupied Territories, to avoid the strict environmental laws that control operations within Israel.

One major dumping ground is Shuqbah, a village of 5,000, not far from Ramallah. According to the Deputy Director of the Palestinian Environmental Authority, Jamil Mtoor: "For several years Israeli companies have been dumping solid and hazardous waste there." He added: "The subsequent burning of toxic waste including items such as x-ray films releases carcinogens into the environment, and this has affected the population, with many people developing asthma and related illnesses."

The Environmental Authority claim that carcasses of thousands of chickens infected with the avian flu virus were dumped near Nablus and that they have also uncovered 500 barrels of insecticide near Hebron, in the south of the West Bank.

The disposal sites used by the Palestinian population of the West Bank have often been blocked off or closed by the Israeli military presence and by the segregated road system (UN report, 28 March 2007). If a site is located near an illegal Jewish settlement then it risks being closed by the Israeli military. The largest West Bank landfill of al-Bireh, near Ramallah, was closed and restrictions imposed on finding an alternative: the resulting build-up of garbage in residential areas threatened the health of nearly 100,000 people.<sup>2</sup>

## Industrial zones and toxic waste

As part of Israel's economic colonisation of the West Bank, vast industrial complexes are being created, largely on Palestinian land — contrary to international law. Palestinian workers can be employed at less than the minimum wage in Israel, and health and safety standards are poor.

The Occupied Territories are an especially attractive option for industries considered toxic or undesirable in Israel. It has been estimated that there are over 200 such factories inside the West Bank, including: aluminium, leather tanning, textile dyeing, batteries, fibreglass, plastics, and other chemical industries of which the



*Palestinian children demonstrate against the dumping of waste in their village, from the Kedumim settlement and a nearby Israeli industrial zone. Photo: [www.stophthewall.org](http://www.stophthewall.org)*

Palestinians receive the poisons but see no financial return.<sup>3</sup>

Barkan, near the West Bank settlement of Ariel (population 20,000), is one of the largest industrial zones. Over 120 companies are based there, regularly discharging thousands of cubic metres of untreated wastewater, often contaminated with hazardous materials, toxic heavy metals and pigments onto the nearby agricultural lands of three Palestinian villages.

In addition to the industries implanted by Israel, there are hundreds of stone quarries in the West Bank, supplying 80% of the material needs of Israel's construction sector, including settlement construction. In the 'seam zone' especially, i.e. between the pre-1967 Green Line and the illegal Wall, Palestinian farmland is simply dynamited for stone to be used in the settlements.

For detailed studies of specific Israeli companies see the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre ([www.business-humanrights.org](http://www.business-humanrights.org)).

## Neglect and discrimination

Israel itself is not immune to pollution and environmental disasters. When a bridge over the Yarkon river which flows from the West Bank down to Tel Aviv collapsed in 1997, many surviving the initial accident died later of acute respiratory diseases caused by industrial and agricultural pollutants in the water.

On the Red Sea the uncontrolled expansion of Eilat has led to the destruction of most of the adjacent coral reef. And across Israel thousands of brownfield sites have been rated too contaminated for development.<sup>4</sup>

Although most homes and businesses in Israel have been linked to a central sewage system, much of the untreated waste has been simply dumped into the closest stream or river. By 1967 practically all the streams south of the Galilee were already utilised as sewage conduits. However, the majority of Arab villages in Israel are not even connected to a sewage system and have to rely on cesspits, despite paying taxes as Israeli citizens.

At the bottom of the environmental heap are the Bedouin of the Negev Desert, who are officially Israeli citizens. However, their traditional grazing grounds and farmland have been either expropriated by the Israeli government or polluted by the highly toxic waste from

the industrial zone of Beer Sheva.<sup>5</sup>

Half of the 140,000 population have been forced onto reservations and the rest are, at best, denied the basic infrastructure which is made available to Jewish Israeli settlers in the area. At worst, their homes are simply demolished. In 2004 bedouin farmers near Beer Sheva had their crops sprayed with herbicide by the Israeli Lands Authority as a further 'incentive' to leave their land.<sup>6</sup>

## Nuclear weapons — the big issue

Israel's nuclear programme is shrouded in mystery. The country's leaders have always refused to confirm or deny its existence, but satellite photography shows a heavy-water reactor and plutonium reprocessing facility at Dimona in the Negev Desert in southern Israel, built in 1963 with French assistance. Mordechai Vanunu, an Israeli technician employed in the plant, was jailed in 1988 for 18 years for revealing details of the programme. He published pictures and detailed descriptions of the interior of the reactor, estimating Israel's arsenal at 200 weapons, including enhanced-radiation (neutron) and even hydrogen bombs.

The US-based Center for Defense Information and the UK-based *Jane's Defence Weekly* have published information on the probable types and quantities of Israel's nuclear arsenal and its capability of delivering warheads by land, sea and air.

Israel does not allow visits by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and is not a signatory to the treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

Environmental and health issues related to the nuclear programme are naturally difficult to investigate, but a number of Israeli families have filed charges against the Israeli government and the reactor's administration, demanding compensation for the death of workers at Dimona, due to radiation exposure. Precise figures for cancer victims in the wider community are not known, but around Hebron, to the east of the Negev, increased rates of cancer have been reported, together with a higher sterility rate than elsewhere in the West Bank. Similarly, over the border in southern Jordan the authorities report a much higher incidence of cancer than in more northern areas of the country.

The Palestinian Authority has accused Israel of burying nuclear waste near to Palestinian towns. In 2005 it stated that Israel had buried 80 tons of nuclear waste 300 metres from the West Bank city of Nablus in the north and was continuing to bury waste in Hebron.

## The green façade

Israel seeks to project a 'green' image to the world, and there is indeed a National Master Plan for Parks and Nature Reserves, which has set aside large areas for parks and forests, that cannot be built on. In fact these have purposes beyond the ecological and recreational. Many have been established on the sites of Palestinian villages razed to the ground after 1948, so that their inhabitants cannot return to their homes.

The 1,700 acre Canada Park (financed by gifts from Canadian supporters of Israel), north of Jerusalem, was



Negev farmer with photo of aerial spraying



built on the site of three Palestinian villages. These were occupied and destroyed following the 1967 war with Egypt and the 5000 inhabitants were expelled, in violation of international law. There is nothing to acknowledge the origins of the park. Only a mosque remains at the entrance — wrongly labelled a Roman bathhouse.

An area may also be set aside as a 'nature reserve' (often doubling as a military zone) in order to limit the expansion of a Palestinian community; this is one of the commonest reasons given for not granting planning permission — permission much more rarely withheld from Jewish communities within Israel. The use of what S E Cohen calls "a tactic of land control" is widespread in both Israel and the Occupied Territories: "Israel is seeking to block Palestinian expansion on the one hand, and increase Israeli settlement on the other. The planting of forests by the JNF [Jewish National Fund] creates a reserve for future Israeli building."<sup>7</sup>

The slow-growing native olive tree, of great symbolic as well as economic significance, has suffered badly at the hands of the colonisers. In the Occupied Territories, the Palestinian Independent Commission for Human Rights reports that since 1967 Israeli authorities have uprooted or destroyed more than one and half million trees, 70% of which were olive trees, the staple crop of rural communities.



A common sight in the West Bank

Today's visitor to the West Bank is struck by the multi-lane highways that, contrary to international law, cut deep into the Occupied Territories to link settlement to settlement and paralyse the growth and movement of Palestinian communities.

The settlements themselves stand fortress-like on the hilltops or sprawl across acres of what was once arable and grazing land, scarring the ancient landscape. Perhaps the worst eyesore is the illegal apartheid wall, 400 miles long and eight metres high, complete with watchtowers, parallel military roads and electronic sensors. Condemned by the International Court of Justice and the UN but still under construction, it effectively annexes the fertile land and water resources of what many Palestinians once hoped could have been a viable and independent state.

It is claimed repeatedly that love of the land is one

of the basic pillars of Zionism. What is being done to Palestine looks more and more like rape and pillage.

August 2009

[www.palestinecampaign.org](http://www.palestinecampaign.org)

1. See Mark Zeitoun: *Power and Water in the Middle east: The Hidden Politics of the Palestinian Israeli Water Conflict*, 2008 and papers of the Palestinian Hydrology Group: eg their 2003 report, funded by Oxfam and the EU: [www.phg.org/campaign](http://www.phg.org/campaign).
2. Foundations for Middle East Peace, Washington DC: *The Socio-Economic Impact of Settlements on Land, Water and the Palestinian economy*, 1998.
3. Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East (CJPME), *Industrial Zones and Israel's Colonial Strategy*, October 2005.
4. Alon Tal: *Pollution in a Promised Land: An Environmental History of Israel*, 2002, pp 6–13.
5. Ibid p266.
6. See the Arab Association for Human Rights 2004 report, *By all means possible*: [www.arabhra.org](http://www.arabhra.org).
7. S E Cohen: *The Politics of Planting*; University of Chicago Press 1995, p191.

## On the ground

A number of international and local organisations monitor and report on the effects of Israel's occupation and military incursions. The most relevant here are:

- **The UN Environment Programme**, who recently sent a team to Gaza. See [www.unep.org](http://www.unep.org) for report
- **Amnesty International**, whose most recent report, 'Operation Cast Lead: 22 days of death and destruction' includes details of the use of illegal weapons, white phosphorus and the destruction of farmland in Gaza: [www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org)
- **The International Committee of the Red Cross**: [www.icrc.org](http://www.icrc.org)
- The EU-funded **Applied Research Institute** in Jerusalem (ARIJ) who collect detailed data on the impact of the settlements throughout the OPTs: [www.poica.org](http://www.poica.org)

## Want to know more? Want to get involved?

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