

Re: Aharon Zohar's representation of the water situation in Israel
Global Issues Project November 7, 2008
Judith Deutsch, President Science for Peace

I have a number of critical comments, questions, and deep concerns regarding the selection of Aharon Zohar as a keynote presenter at this year's Eric Fawcett conference, organized by Pugwash with the endorsement of Science for Peace. As a preface, I include here a recent communication from Physicians for Human Rights/Israel that questioned the helpfulness of any involvement with Israeli issues when not based on explicit acknowledgement of the centrality of Israel's occupation of Palestine. Along this line, a discussion of water needs to include facts about Israel's apartheid policies, its multiple violations of international law including Geneva conventions specific to exploitation of resources, the illegality of the separation wall and its effects on water distribution (International Court of Justice, 2004), and the viability of the one-state solution in terms of equitable water sharing.

Mr. Zohar did not speak about Israel's treatment of Palestinians in his keynote address. Before his talk on Friday night, I asked Mr. Zohar about his views of an equitable multi-ethnic power-sharing solution in Israel, such as in South Africa and Northern Ireland, and he said that this could never be as it would mean the end of the Jewish state. I spoke with him about my recent trip to attend the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme/World Health Organization international conference on the siege of Gaza and spoke about the Bedouin families I met whose houses had just been demolished. Without a pause he said that they did not have building permits. Actually, one of the demolished houses was built during Jordanian rule. Further, Mr. Zohar must know that Israel never provides building permits to Palestinians and that the army, with complete impunity, routinely justifies wanton destruction of Palestinian property with this permit excuse.

Misinformation, disinformation, partial information is so rife that critics of Israel invariably begin by distinguishing between myth and fact, image and reality. Clemens Messerschmid, a German hydrogeologist working for the UK Department for International Development and the Palestinian Water Authority, states that there are five myths about the Israeli water situation: that Israel is a dry country (vs well-supplied by aquifers and varied in terrain,) -- that the water sector suffers from dryness and drought while in reality parts receive as much rain as Paris and Germany; that it is a responsible state of the art water manager, whereas there is a great deal of waste, including agro-industrial cultivation of water-intensive export crops (such as avocados and flowers for the European market); that it made the desert bloom; that Palestinians do not exist.

Selected facts about Israel's illegal and punitive water regime in Palestine:

- Israel's "matrix of control" extends to water. In spite of international law that forbids an occupying power to utilize the resources of an OT, Israel takes about 30% of its water from the West Bank and Gazan aquifers. 80% of the water coming from the WB goes to Israel and its settlements; only 20% to its 2.5 million Palestinians.

- The Western Aquifer is the single most important groundwater resource in the whole of Israel and Palestine, pumping around 360 million cubic metres a year. Since 1967, the Israeli occupation, Israel has more or less completely forbidden any drilling activity by Palestinians. During the period between 1967-1990, only 23 wells were drilled by Palestinians in the whole WB; 20 were exclusively for drinking water purposes and were often under the indirect control of Israel. Israel has approximately 500 strongly flowing deep wells, and Palestinians make do with about 159 old wells which are less deep and less productive. Israel prohibits Palestinians from rehabilitating old wells and drilling new wells.
- The Separation Wall cuts off Palestinians from the most productive area for drilling for Western Aquifer water. In addition, the Wall separates people from their land. “As a result of the wall, then, the Palestinians stand to lose not only three quarters of their present well production from the Western Aquifer, but also the whole of the basin’s future potential for groundwater development, which is confined to this narrow productive strip along the Green Line. **It seems likely, then, that Israeli planners were not so much concerned with annexing present resources when they designed the route of the wall, as they were with expropriating their neighbours’ future.**” (Messerschmid). Only 6% of the available land is presently under irrigation. As a result, the agricultural sector can only absorb 11% of the active population. The only way these figures will change for the better is if more water is made available for irrigation.
- Israel developed the desalination plan to supply drinking water to the West Bank after Oslo allocated 80% of the West Bank Western Aquifer to Israeli use. Desalination is the means of retaining control of the aquifer. Israel wants the US to fund desalination. Leading hydrologists contacted by *New Scientist* “point out that desalinating seawater and pumping it to the West Bank, parts of which lie 1000 meters above sea level, would cost around \$1 per cubic metre. ‘The question is whether an average Palestinian family can afford it,’ says Arie Issar, a water expert at Ben Gurion University. ‘It would be foolish to desalinate water on the coast and push it up the mountain when there are underground water resources up there, which cost only a third as much.’ Tony Allan of King’s College London, a leading authority on Middle East water, agrees: “Pumping desalinated water to the West Bank is not the best technical or economic option.” Messerschmid also states that donor money for desalination plants goes to Israel. Further, it is well known that desalination requires enormous energy.
- Under Oslo, Palestinians are allotted 57 cubic metres of water per person/year vs Israelis’ 246 cubic metres per person/ year. WHO standard is 100 L/day water; the average for Palestinians is 60 L/day and in some areas the amount is 35 L/day. As for the claim that Palestinians fail to give priority to waste water projects as opposed to drinking water projects, it should be noted that this accusation completely disregards the extremely heavy lot of the Palestinian population with regard to access to sufficient and suitable drinking water supply (not to mention water for irrigation) – a basic human right.

- During forty years of occupation, Israel failed to invest in the infrastructure of the Palestinians in the West Bank, be it water supply, waste water or solid waste facilities. Israeli policies obstruct, delay and often prevent implementation of projects. “This was the case even before the Intifada. An example: Obtaining a license for a German well-drilling project in the Eastern aquifer took almost three years (from 1995 -1998), due to the heavy bureaucracy and the lack of good-will to promote such projects. Suitable well locations were not accepted by the Israeli partner in the Joint Water Committee, sometimes even openly reasoning that this location was already earmarked for drilling a new settlement well (which is of course strictly illegal according to International Law). And even after having changed the location under application several times and after having obtained approval from the Joint Water Committee, it took another year until the responsible representatives from the Civil Administration were willing to sign the license.” (reported by Clemens Messerschmid).
- Even the donors themselves suffer from this policy. To give one example: In 2002, it took the USAID more than 3 months of intensive coordination to be able to access the site of a drilled, but yet undeveloped, well just to carry out tests and install some equipment.
- Example of how permit system is an avenue for cruelty: “Israel requires permits not only for drilling new wells, but also for rehabilitating old wells and for any development that requires cement. Each time Israel has granted permission to Palestinians to develop new water resources or rehabilitate existing water resources – after more than six months and sometimes years of seeking approval from ministry after ministry – written permission has never been given. This policy has interfered with Palestinians’ ability to bring in necessary equipment for approved water development and means that Israel is able to renege it decisions at any time without legal recourse.” (reported by Dr. Shaddad, Director of the Palestinian Water Authority). Israel has never permitted Palestinians to drill deeply for water. In many parts of the West Bank, Israel does not even permit cisterns – they do not allow Palestinians to collect rainwater.
- Conditions in Gaza are even worse. In 2005, Israel’s illegal settlers left Gaza underneath tonnes of rubble, rendering the land uncultivable. At present, because of Israel’s control of electricity, water is often available for only several hours/day and waste water plants are not functioning. In 2007, a sewage overflow in the Bedouin village of Beit Lahiya killed four people and destroyed nine-six homes. Over one hundred Canadian health professionals have signed letters in 2006 and 2007 demanding an end to the siege of Gaza.

Lastly, I recommend the work of 1) Mike Davis¹ for a historical perspective about root causes of famine and 2) Mark Zeitoun² from the Centre of Environmental Policy and Governance at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His research

¹ Davis, Mike (2002). *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Nino Famines and the Making of the Third World* Verso: New York.

² Zeitoun, Mark (2008). *Power and Water in the A Middle East: The Hidden Politics of the Palestinian-Israeli Water Conflict*. I.B. Tauris Palgrave MacMillan: New York.

group formulates a framework of Hydro-Hegemony, showing that existing tactics to control water are leading away from peace and towards continued domination and a squandering of this vital resource. “[Hydro-hegemony] posits that power relations between bodies competing or cooperating over transboundary water resources is a prime determinant of the outcome. It is calling into question the effectiveness of international regimes, the Integrated Water Resources Management paradigm and traditional conflict resolution techniques. Preliminary findings surfacing from the tensions of all involved in transboundary water governance is a culture of sharing...” “We must continue to question regimes that preserve inequity, treaties that are ineffective ‘paper tigers’, and organizations designed chiefly as sinks for lending and donor agencies. We will be doing the world no great service if our gaze shifts to under-qualified examples of cooperation and away from the root cause of water conflict. We should be wary of applying the ‘cooperation’ label to transboundary interactions where asymmetric cooperation merely poisons relations and prolongs unfair arrangements.” Zeitoun comments favourably on FOEME’s small-scale project of equitable cooperation amongst Israeli, Jordanian, and Palestinian mayors. Nonetheless, “We must be careful not to divorce small-scale cooperation from the broader water conflict within which it takes place, however. At the state level, the distribution of transboundary freshwater between Israel and the Palestinian territories remains an inequitable 90-10 split [this, despite the fact that Palestinians now outnumber Israelis within the boundaries of historic Palestine]. The Israeli-Palestinian Joint Water Committee (JWC) established following the 1995 Oslo II interim agreement gives the Israeli side an effective veto over even basic rainwater catchment projects (for instance, in the southern West Bank). Multiple USAID, European, and UN development projects remain stalled because they have not cleared the JWC’s triple hurdle requiring that all water-related projects obtain Israeli technical, political and military approval. Jan Selby (2003) insists this is not cooperation, but ‘domination dressed up as cooperation.’”

It is important to appreciate the role of internationals in supporting Palestinians and in restraining Israel. Currently Canada undermines peace and security by its uncritical support of Israel: Canada was the first to boycott the unity government elected in 2006. Contrast Canada’s position with James Wolfensohn, Special Envoy for Disengagement to the U.S. Foreign Relations Committee (March 15, 2006): “the collapse of health services and the education system, which addresses the needs of one million children, would be a total failure for the new government, and would have tragic consequences for the Palestinian people. This should not be permitted under any circumstances.”

To those unfamiliar with the degree of discrimination and violence inflicted on the Palestinian people, including the theft of water, there are many up-to-date reports from the UN (UNRWA, OCHA), Oxfam and other human rights groups. Israel’s “new historians” (Benny Morris, Ilan Pappé) document the planned ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from 1948 on; and Zochrot and other NGOs document Israel’s policy of erasing evidence of the Palestinian presence by renaming and re-mapping, razing buildings, desecrating cemeteries (at its most hypocritical, the Wiesenthal Foundation is now building a Museum of Tolerance over a Palestinian cemetery). A small group of Israelis acknowledge and protest these crimes: the Olga Document signed by two hundred eminent Israelis, states: “If we muster within ourselves the appropriate honesty and requisite courage, we will be able to take the first step in the long journey that can

extricate us from the tangle of denial, repression, distortion of reality, loss of direction and forsaking of conscience... We are united in the belief that peace and reconciliation are contingent on Israel's recognition of its responsibility for the injustices done to the indigenous people, the Palestinians, and on willingness to redress them. The State of Israel was supposed to tear down the walls of the ghetto; it is now constructing the biggest ghetto in the entire history of the Jews... [I] it has set up a colonial structure, combining unmistakable elements of apartheid with the arbitrariness of brutal military occupation."

I have several questions about the Israel Pugwash group. In an internet search I could not find information about the group's position on Israeli nuclear weapons or on its chemical and biological weapons. In terms of Israel's apartheid policies, Israeli Pugwash members Aharon Zohar and Shaheveth Freier both support the establishment of industrial parks. This is what Jeff Halper, professor of anthropology at Ben Gurion University and Chair of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions says about industrial parks: "At first glance this would seem a positive development. The industrial parks are intended, however, to blunt Palestinian aspirations for self-determination by giving the average worker employment and a living wage. By allowing some of its First World economy to trickle into the Palestinian areas, Israel can rob a Palestinian entity of its economic vitality, guaranteeing its continued dependence on Israel itself. The industrial parks allow Israel's most polluting and least profitable industries (aluminum factories, metal works, plastic and chemical concerns, slaughterhouses, and the like) to exploit cheap Palestinian labor while denying it access to Israel. Because of lax environmental standards in the Occupied Territories, they also afford continued opportunities to dump industrial wastes into the West Bank. As economic anchors, the industrial parks breathe new life into isolated [illegal] settlements, whose residents manage their plants."

As president of Science for Peace, I would hope that this organization align itself with the most progressive and critical voices in Israel, Palestine, and elsewhere, based on knowledge of the entire historical situation.

Addenda on Gaza

1. Gaza sewage, water disaster looms

MEL FRYKBERG

Middle East Times

January 03, 2008

More than 1.4 million Gaza Palestinians are facing an impending health disaster from decaying sewage and water systems that lack vital spare parts, fuel, and maintenance work, due to an Israeli economic siege on the Gaza Strip.

'We are a one-generator-failure away from disaster,' Michael Bailey, an Oxfam spokesman, told the Middle East Times.

'The situation is verging on critical. There are 35 sewage pumping stations operational in Gaza. If one of the pumps breaks there is no way to replace it, because of a lack of spare parts,' said Bailey, whose organization works with Gaza's Coastal Municipalities Water Utilities. 'This would mean sewage backing into homes and onto the streets and the resulting health problems associated with it.'

In March an earth embankment around a sewage reservoir in the northern Gaza Strip collapsed spewing a river of waste and mud that killed at least five people.

Since July, the CMWU which maintains the majority of water and waste water networks, pumping stations, and water wells in the Gaza Strip, has been unable to perform normal functions because it does not have spare parts.

The World Bank and UNICEF have reported that despite repeated requests Israel has forbidden the importation by any means -- sea, air, or by land across the Egyptian border -- of consignments of pumps, metal pipes, air and oil filters, and other goods that need to be obtained from outside Gaza; while allowing only a few basics to be trucked through the Erez crossing with Israel in the northern Gaza Strip.

“We are worried about how we will cope with a flood from sewage pump stations, water shortages, and other problems, because we know that we don’t have the materials to respond to urgent needs. We are unable to make the necessary repairs or carry out preventative maintenance, Monther Shoblak, CMWU’s general manager told the Middle East Times.

2. Oxfam 10/21/08 Water and sewage services continue to be constrained by shortages of fuel and spare parts. The UN reports that 50% of CMWU drinking water wells have no fuel and rely totally on electricity to operate. In Middle Gaza 250,000 people have severely restricted drinking water supplies because there is no fuel available for the 5 wells they depend on. (10/21/08)

3. Oxfam 11/04/08 Water and sewage services continue to be constrained by shortages of fuel. Severe rain caused localised flooding in Jabalia and Khan Younis. Because of severe constraints on purchasing fuel CMWU relied on an UNRWA donation of 30,000 litres of diesel to run hired generators to pump out the flood water.

4. Oxfam 11/11/08 Israeli authorities stopped transfer of fuel and humanitarian supplies into Gaza, in response to the rocket and mortar fire, from 5 November until the time of writing. Industrial diesel for the power plant is being allowed into Gaza on 11.11.08. No other fuel transfers have been authorised according to local information from Gaza. An Israeli military spokesman is reported as saying that international journalists are not allowed to enter Gaza. The Foreign Press Association in Israel has complained that there is no plausible explanation for the extended lockdown for the past 5 days during which international journalists have been excluded from Gaza. Water and sewage services continue to be severely constrained by shortages of fuel.