**The Importance of Controlling Water Resources in the Zionist Project**

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From the beginning of Zionist designs on Palestine, water resources played a crucial role in its strategy. The problematic for the Zionists was what land area constituted the Palestine they sought to make over into the Jewish State. The 1919 (Jewish Virtual Library) map the World Zionist Organization presented at the Paris Peace Conference was not confined to what ultimately became the final borders of the formalized British Mandate (1923-1948, de facto, 1920-1948). Rather, the Zionists defined Palestine by the location of regional water resources needed to support a proposed Jewish state. Therefore, they sought to conquer, integrate and control the territory on which they were found.

The 1919 map included all of Mandated Palestine, the Syrian Golan Heights, Southern Lebanon up to Sidon, a portion of the East Bank of the Jordan River, and a slice of the Sinai from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea. The water resources included the aquifers in Palestine, the lush confluence of water resources in the Golan Heights, the Litani River in Lebanon, and the Jordan River cutting through the Jordan Valley in Palestine and Western Jordan. The Sinai area provided strategic and trade access to the Red Sea and proximity to the Suez Canal. [Israel secured free passage in the Suez Canal in 1979 as a result of the Egypt/Israel Peace Treaty]. The 1919 map anticipated what level of water would be needed for the projected Jewish state to develop an industrial and agricultural economic base and to provide a Western style of life for Jewish immigrants. From Israel’s inception, but especially after the 1967 war, water distribution of controlled resources would become a tool to debilitate Palestinians under occupation and to destroy their livelihood, health and sanitation maintenance. Tracing the history of Zionist territorial strategy and the development of the water infrastructure demonstrates clearly the “Logic of Zionism.”

***ZIONIST/ISRAELI WATER STRATEGY***

The Zionists sought control of the water resources even before they conquered all of the territory on which they are found. It was not, however, until they completed their conquest of all of Palestine and the Syrian Golan Heights in 1967, as well as Israel’s temporary occupation of Southern Lebanon (1978, 1985-2000) that they had unchallenged control over the water resources appearing on their 1919 map. A review of this history is instructive.

After the Zionist Basel Conference in 1897 confirmed Palestine as the location for the proposed Jewish State, the World Zionist Organization encouraged Abraham Bourcart, a German engineer, to go to Palestine to study the Jordan Valley Basin and develop plans for the development of regional waters for the benefit and prosperity of the anticipated state. He spent seven months there and came up with an ambitious plan (Haddadin, pp. 7-8), which served as the basis for later Zionist proposals and strategy aimed at filling out the 1919 map. The World Zionist Organization Statement at the Paris Peace Conference (1919-1920) presented on February 3, 1919 stated:

**The economic life of Palestine, like that of every other semi-arid country, depends on the available water**

**supply. It is, therefore, of vital importance not only to secure all water resources already feeding the country, but also to be able to conserve and control them at their sources [1919 map]. The Hermon [basically, Golan Heights and surrounding water sources] is Palestine’s real “Father of Waters,” and cannot be severed from it without striking at the very root of its economic life. (Jewish Virtual Library)**

Chaim Weizman headed the World Zionist Organization’s delegation to the Paris Peace Conference and spelled out the goal and theme of Zionist water policy again in a December 1919 letter to British delegation head, Prime Minister David Lloyd George.

**The whole economic future of Palestine is dependent upon its water supply for irrigation and for electric**

**Power, and the water supply must mainly be derived from the slopes of Mount Hermon [Golan Heights], from the headwaters of the Jordan, and from the Litani River in Lebanon. (quoted in Stork, p. 1)**

He and other Zionists recognized that abundant water for modern economic activities and human waste infrastructure were important to convince sought-after European Jews that the standard of life would equal that of Europeans. These Zionists also understood completely that water was the foundation of a strong economy and hence a strong state.

The Zionist advanced many water proposals during the Mandate period aimed at their goal of controlling the water resources. However, they did not then control the territory, and they were dependent on Great Britain’s support. After the British Peel Commission recommended partition of Palestine in 1938, Britain commissioned a study of water resources in preparation for possible partition. Known as the Ionides Plan. Its main conclusion was: irrigation waters of the Jordan River were to be used primarily within the Jordan Valley Basin, not to irrigate the Negev and other areas as the Zionists wanted. (Ionides, pp. 255-259).

The constant theme of the Zionists was to extend irrigation waters from the Jordan to the Negev, an area anticipated to be a part of the future Jewish state. It is important to note here that this period further crystalized the Zionist/Israeli negotiating *modus operandi*: behave cooperatively to placate needed big power support, i.e., the UK and then the USA, but find a way to circumvent their demands if inconsistent with Zionist plans.

In 1944, the Zionists put forward a plan by American pro-Zionist, Walter Clay Lowdermilk, which called for irrigation of the Jordan Valley, diversion of the Jordan [headwaters in the Golan] and Yarmouk rivers to the Negev Desert in the south and the usage of the Litani River in Lebanon for projects in what was to become Israel after 1948. Lowdermilk confirmed the 1919 map. However, everything was on hold until the end of WW II. The post-war emergence of the US and the Soviet Union as the superpowers engaged in a Cold War for influence and control of the strategic M.E., required intricate maneuvering by the Zionists to attain their goals.

After the 1948 war, the new state of Israel was dependent on the United States and could not be seen as uncooperative with it. The US aimed to block Soviet influence in the area by appearing to satisfy all local states. The water issue demonstrates just how shrewd and cunning Israel was, how presumptuous the US was, and how impotent the Arabs were. Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria were Riparian States and hence were subject to established international principles of sharing water resources bordering and flowing into each other’s territory. Palestine ceased to exist, and could not therefore be considered a riparian. What did each of the main actors want regarding water?

**Israel.**

1. Control all water resources as per the 1919 map and the land on which they are found.
2. Thin out the Palestinian Population and other Arabs in those areas.
3. Extend the water resources from the Litani, Golan, and Jordan River beyond the Jordan Basin to the Negev and throughout Israel proper and the anticipated remaining Palestinian territories, which they were to conquer and begin colonization thereon in 1967.

**United States**

1. Ensure Israeli Statehood and everything needed to make it a viable state and valuable ally.
2. Use water resources in the area to create Arab/Israeli cooperation and Israel’s regional integration and recognition.
3. Use water strategy to resettle the 1948 Palestinian Refugees in the Jordan River Valley (not then under Israeli occupation) and thereby neutralize Palestinian right of return to 1948 Israel under UNGA Resolution 194. Israel wanted the refugees resettled but not in the Jordan River Valley, which it coveted for future conquest to expand its territory in accordance with the 1919 map and to fully secure control of the water resources. This potential conflict of interest had to be finessed with the US.

**The Arabs (Represented by the Arab League – established March 22, 1945)**

1. Get their fair share of water.
2. Avoid normalizing relations with Israel, i.e., integrating Israel into the area through shared water and development projects.
3. Avoid schemes to resettle Palestinian Refugees outside of their original homes and properties through water/jobs projects in Jordan Valley aimed at negating UNGA 194.

What follows is a review in two parts of water issue events post-1948 in the Jordan Valley and then within Israel proper post-1948 and post-1967 occupied Palestinian and Arab lands.

**Part One: Jordan Valley Water Plans**

In 1951, Israel moved illegally into the Demilitarized Zone with Syria and attempted to establish itself in the Hula (Huleh) Lake Valley area on the slope of the all-important Golan Heights. It wanted to build hydroelectric power stations and divert water to the Negev (a constant theme). Syria complained to the United Nations, and with US pressure, the process paused but did not stop permanently. The project was completed in 1958. (Seale; Major General Carl von Horn)

In 1953, Israel put forth a seven-year plan. It centered on the diversion of Jordan River Water south to the Negev Desert and the development of a unified and comprehensive water network, i.e., a national water carrier project that would cover all parts of Israel. It was based in large part on Lowdermilk’s plan, which remained Israel’s water framework.

In 1953-55, the United States sent special Ambassador Eric Johnston to work out a water plan acceptable to Israel and the Arabs. Known interchangeably as the Johnston Plan and The Unified Jordan Valley Plan. (UN, pp. 4-7) Israel was working to consolidate its position in the area during that early period. It negotiated sagaciously, avoiding alienating the US by stopping work on its national carrier project as requested by the U.S. The Arabs continued to be wary of recognizing Israel and acceding to Israeli control over Arab waters or to burying the refugee right of return. The Arabs were finally convinced after two years of negotiations that they were simply agreeing to Riparian allocations of water even though Israel got more than its fair share. However, before it could be implemented, Secretary of State Dulles came out with an announcement that renewed Arab apprehension.

**He said that in order to secure a lasting and stable peace in the Middle East, the United States would pay**

**adequate compensation to the Arab refugees, underwrite some of the expenses for a regional water development project, and guarantee new and permanent political boundaries which would replace the old Armistice lines. By publicly linking Johnston’s mission to the resettlement of Palestinian refugees, Dulles reinforced Arab refusal to recognize the State of Israel or embark on any measure of cooperation with her. (Haddadin, pgs. 15-16).**

In the end, neither the Arabs nor the Israelis ratified the plan:

**The Plan was accepted by the technical committees from both Israel and the** [**Arab League**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arab_League)**. A discussion in the** [**Knesset**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Knesset) **in July 1955 ended without a vote. The Arab Experts Committee approved the plan in September 1955 and referred it for final approval to the Arab League Council. On 11 October 1955, the Council voted not to ratify the plan, due to the League's opposition to formal recognition of Israel. However, the Arab League committed itself to adhere to the technical details without providing official approval.****(**[**wikipedia, Jordan\_Valley\_Unified\_Water\_Plan**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jordan_Valley_Unified_Water_Plan)**)**

Nonetheless, Israel and Jordan agreed to cooperate with each other in accordance with the water allocations under the Johnston plan. Israel also renewed its work on developing its National Carrier (Mekorot). The US agreed to help fund Israel’s National Water Carrier after Israel assured the US that it would observe the specified allocations between the two riparian states. Jordan also received US funding for its East Ghor Main Canal water project. It is not surprising that these two countries were able to cooperate. Jordan, after all, colluded with Israel over Palestine very early on. (Shlaim, Wilson)

As a result of the failure of Johnston’s multilateral riparian approach, unilateral development went ahead, Jordanian and Israeli cooperation notwithstanding, with Israeli efforts surpassing Arab efforts technologically. Israel extended its efforts in Arab water areas. The Israeli National Water Carrier project, Mekorot, was completed in 1964. The Carrier took water to all parts of Israel from the Jordan Valley with potential for covering future conquered areas – i.e., post-1967. The Litani River was suspended from Israel’s immediate plans, but never from its ultimate plans.

**Part Two: Israel and Water after 1948 and 1967 Wars**

In 1948, the Zionists conquered 78% of Palestine, which became Israel proper. It drew most of its water from the Western Aquifer system in Israel and the West Bank, the Coastal Aquifer (Gaza/Israel), Sea of Galilee (Tiberias) and eventually gained Jordan River Basin water as well as the Hula area in the Demilitarized Zone bordering Syria. Over time, it tied all these sources together through its National Carrier Project.

As a result of the 1967 war, Israel captured the rest of Palestine, the water rich Golan Heights where the headwaters of the Jordan River are located, and Sinai, from which it withdrew later. Israel pursued a water policy in the Occupied Palestinian territories through Military Orders 92 (1967) and 291 (1968) which allowed Israel to monopolize access to water there and to routinely deny Palestinians the right to drill wells or repair existing ones. The Golan Heights of course was its main prize, so much so that Israel annexed the area in 1981. That annexation is not recognized internationally but no action is taken against it.

The 1993 Oslo Accords initiated the faux peace process. In 1995, the Oslo II Interim Agreement, Article 40 on Water and Sewage was concluded. Its wording was masterfully vague, allowing many outs for Israel in terms of progressive resolution of water issues as in all other outstanding matters. The interim agreement institutionalized the existing system of Israeli water control and exploitation, and then some. The West Bank settlements and the Wall, which extends into 1967 Palestinian territory, exacerbate the situation. Although a Joint Water Committee composed of equal numbers of Israelis and Palestinians was established to review all proposed water projects, few, if any, of Palestinian proposed projects were approved by the Committee. By voting negative, Israeli members literally held a veto power over all proposals. The Oslo division of the West Bank into areas A (20% internally under control of Palestinian Authority), B (20% under joint control), and C (60% under Israeli control – mostly Jordan Valley area), ensured that there was no contiguous Palestinian area on which to build water and other infrastructures.

Water is clearly a bio-political tool (population restricted mobility and freedom of action) aimed at debilitating and diminishing the Palestinian people. Israel allows much less water per day to Palestinians linked to the water grid than established by the World Health Organization as the basic minimum to prevent health epidemics in the 1967 territories. Many villages are not linked to the grid, which leaves them on the hunt for water daily. Water for agricultural irrigation is limited and regularly thwarted by the Wall. Israel cuts off water distribution at will, especially during the summer months when more is required for bathing and washing clothes and house. Israeli soldiers shoot holes in roof tanks with collected rainwater. Cisterns are found rotting from within and leak bacteria and chemicals into the stored water, causing illness. The water pipes serving Palestinians in the West Bank are of a thinner gauge than those serving Israelis. Palestinians are forced to buy additional water from the Israeli National Carrier, Mekorot, which draws most of its water for local use from the West Bank Aquifers. In short, Palestinians are buying Palestinian water from the Occupying Power. Those who can’t afford to purchase water suffer the economic and health consequences. In any case, Palestinian search for water occupies much time in their daily life and limits their health and productivity. (B’tselem, Hass, Richard)

Gaza’s water supply is over pumped from the Coastal Aquifer without sufficient infrastructure to serve the 1.8 million people. War has further damaged the existing infrastructure. Little to none of the water is portable. Waste treatment plants, already insufficient, were decimated in the last war (2014). Israel blocks parts replacement to mend the infrastructure. Israel has made Gaza into a decaying and imprisoned enclave.

The 1919 map in terms of water control was almost completed. The Litani River system was still absent. Israel’s invasion of Lebanon first in 1978 and again in 1982, and its subsequent and sustained occupation of Southern Lebanon gave Israel access to the Litani. Israel withdrew from Southern Lebanon in May 2000. How much of the Litani waters it was able to direct to Israel is not publicly known. In any case, up until 2000, Israel controlled the territory and water resources on the Zionist 1919 map.

Of Israel’s three goals listed above, only the “thinning out” of the Palestinian population has remained unfulfilled even after years of sabotaging every aspect of Palestinian life. As one of Israel’s tools to control and clear, or at least minimize Palestinian presence in the area, water access control has failed thus far to do so. However, it has impaired the health and livelihood of the population. Rather than cowing Palestinians, Zionist colonial tools of control have encouraged nonviolent and violent resistance. While many Palestinians have been killed, made refugees, imprisoned, and abused physically and psychologically over the years, the Palestinian population is still found on the land of pre-Israel Palestine and are almost equal in number to Israeli Jews. This demographic fact has driven Israeli leadership to demand that Israel be recognized as a Jewish state, i.e., a state for Jews only.

Clearly, the pursuit of water resources and the territory on which they are found demonstrates the “Logic of Zionism”, the unrelenting drive to make the Zionist Settler State a permanently transformed state for Jews, minus the indigenous Palestinian Arabs. The territorial imperative was defined in large part by control of the sources of water.

Peace treaties with Egypt (signed March 1979) and with Jordan (October 1994) negate any need to fill out the 1919 map related to the Sinai and Jordan East Bank. Southern Lebanon is the only water resource area that is not directly under Israeli control. It does not mean that it has disappeared from Israel’s wish list. There is no question that water was a driving force in the Zionist project and needs highlighted recognition. It is as much of a bio-political tool as surveillance, permits, I.D. cards, discriminatory laws, settlements, land confiscation etc. in immobilizing the Palestinians. Palestinians have no option but to devise strategies of resistance to Israeli settler colonialism.

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