

Water Shortages and Conflict

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The Mediterranean basin is one of the regions that most suffer from a shortage of water resources in the world, and the circumstances are only expected to worsen. Until now, the situation has been at its worst on the south coast, which is more arid than the European shore, but there are now also extremely dry areas on the northern shore which are in an irreversible process of desertification, especially on the east coast of the Iberian Peninsula. The water shortage is provoking situations of conflict that we must try to resolve and avoid. These conflicts can be either national – between regions or economic sectors – or international, and may even have been caused by the use of this vital resource as a weapon of war and domination. Recent examples show us that in order to confront these situations we will have to use currently both existing tools and propose new ideas for the future. The most serious situation has been the use of water as an instrument of war in Iraq. The United States/Great Britain coalition, beginning in the Gulf War, from the conflict in Kuwait in

1991 until the 2003 invasion, bombed and destroyed much of the water infrastructure in order to pressure the Iraqi population and weaken Saddam Hussein's government, and some resistance groups are currently using the same tactics in order to oust the occupying powers and stop them from gaining control of the country. Today the Iraqis are still paying a high price in terms of health and welfare due to the lack of water.¹

The Israeli government is destroying Palestinian water infrastructure in order to pressure the population and to establish Jewish settlements. They are also using restrictions on consumption of domestic and irrigated water to proportion the Israeli population and Jewish settlers a higher consumption and to punish the Palestinian population. And the apartheid wall that is being built means a continuation of their appropriation policy of water resources and wells. The Israeli company in charge of distributing water makes money from the resources of the occupied territories, and currently there are even multinational companies that participate in this exploitation by taking water from the Golan. In the south of Lebanon, despite the retreat of the Israeli army, the government of Tel Aviv attempts to maintain control of water consumption from the Hasbani and Wazzani, tributaries of the Jordan River. This part of Lebanon needs a

great deal of help in order to return to normal after so many years of Israeli occupation and armed clashes. In October 2002 the Beirut administration opened a pumping station on the Wazzani River in order to supply some twenty towns with water. The Israeli government threatened military action if they started to extract water from the river, despite a United Nations report stating that Lebanon had not violated any international resolutions by taking water from the rivers.² Once again, the dispute over water was to take on a military dimension, making it difficult to manage the resources and threatening the peace. On the Golan the military occupation is also related to the water situation, as many politicians and Jewish settlers have refused to return the Golan Heights territories to Syria, using the excuse that they need water from that area. Thus, along the Golan the invasion and occupation of territories are connected to the conquest of water by military means.³

The ultimate victims of these armed conflicts are the civilians, and the use of water to attack them is no exception to the situation. As long as aggression toward civilians is part of the war strategy, water will be a military target. For this reason the International Law that protects unarmed people in conflicts must be respected, and the United Nations and other worldwide powers that are able to intervene should set an

¹ For more about the use of water as a weapon in Iraq see «Special report: water under siege in Iraq. *US/UK Military Forces Risk Committing War Crimes by Depriving Civilians of Safe Water*». Centre for Economic and Social Rights (CESR), New York. <http://www.waterobservatory.org/library/uploadedfiles/Special_Report_Water_under_Siege_in_Iraq.pdf>

² Washington, 4th November 2002 «United States Mediator Returns in Water Conflict Between Israel and Lebanon» (EFE).

³ An extensive report on the conflict over water in the hydrographical bowl of the Jordan Rives and the aquifers of Palestine can be found in: Ferran Izquierdo (2002) «Guerra y agua: objetivos y actitudes de los actores en el conflicto por Palestina», doctoral thesis published on: <<http://www.tdx.cesca.es/TDCat-0221103-210631/#documents>>

example. The problem is that the example of the Iraqi situation has demonstrated quite the contrary: in order to achieve political and military objectives, civilian infrastructure, including the water system, was destroyed, and the welfare of the population attacked, resulting in illness, death, famine and chaos. The guilty parties have not been made to take responsibility. In fact, quite the opposite is true, in Iraq the rebuilding of the destroyed infrastructure has become big business for some North American companies, and all this could open the floodgates for the privatization of water by these big companies. Protecting civilians means protecting vital resources, of which one of the primary, if not the most important, is water. The water infrastructure cannot be a target or an instrument of war, and it cannot become plunder for the occupying forces.

The same thing has to be pointed out in the case of the occupied territories in Palestine. The water resources, like the land, are still an object of colonial appropriation on the part of Israel. International Law explicitly prohibits what the Israeli army is doing in Jerusalem, Cisjordania, the Gaza Strip and Golan Heights, and the agreement adopted by Palestinian National Authority and the Israeli government also prohibits such acts, specifically in order to protect the water infrastructure.⁴ In spite of this, water continues to be a means of collective punishment, of repressing the population and of plunder for the Israeli forces of occupation. Once again we can see that it is necessary to impose measures of protection for the civilian population and a basic principle Law: the illegality of collective punishment. The first step in that direction is to respect the fact that water is a vital resource, and should therefore be safeguarded and not used as a weapon or

an instrument of power. The Economic and Social Council of the United Nations took an important step in this direction in 2002, when they declared water a human right.⁵

Without coming to such virulence, the water shortage has opened conflicts between regions and sectors of consumption. Occasionally water sources are shared among many states, like in the Middle East, and the controversy therefore becomes international. Even though in these cases the conflict is more complicated to resolve, that does not mean that the parties involved must turn to violence. Experience has shown us that in the absence of other military and political confrontations the population's water and well-being does not become a motive for war. On the other hand, it does not become a motive for cooperation either, not even when the survival of the population is in danger. And this is a serious problem, since it is a problem of shortages that we can only confront efficiently if all the members of the hydrographic basin participate in the management of the resources. In the arid lands of the eastern Mediterranean the Palestinian and Jordanian populations have already reached the vital minimum, but the pacts signed with Israel are not about cooperation, or even about a fairer distribution of the resources. They are pacts that freeze the status quo in Israel's favour, and in the case of the occupied Palestinian territories they are pacts that are not even met.

Within individual states, regional competition can also cause conflict. The closest example we have in Spain is the National Water Plan. But it is not the only example, since wherever there is shortage distribution is always controversial, and in the Mediterranean basin water is becoming a precious commodity. Competition among the

sectors of consumption is also increasing. Currently, close to 70% of fresh water is still used for agriculture, even in the driest areas. There are regions with extreme shortages of water that produce irrigated crops: fruit, vegetables and flowers for exportation, and thus in reality they are exporting water. And this production is often subsidized, either directly or through the price of water. At the same time, other sectors within the same society are paying extremely high prices for domestic or industrial water consumption. There also exist examples of direct subsidies for water exportation, as in the Tordera basin, where large multinational companies in the upper part of the region sell and export the water from Montseny, drying out the rivers and aquifers, and causing such supply problems that in the lower part of the basin, in Blanes, people have to pay to desalinate and consume poor quality water, which subsidizes the sale of water from Montseny.

The current water shortage on the Mediterranean shores forces us to think of new models for management. The on-going national and international conflicts show us that the search for new sources and the redistribution of the already available resources are no longer enough. Some regions are already at their limit and others will soon be there. We have to think about water in a different way: as a vital, precious and limited resource. It is therefore a resource that must be protected and managed giving top priority to the population and the environment. Indeed, this is the other major conflict: the clash between our own use of water and the necessities of our natural surroundings. Desertification, pollution, dying flora and fauna, and loss of rivers and aquifers are becoming traits of the Mediterranean region. We are losing the battle between human

⁴ Israel-Palestinian Joint Water Committee, «Joint Declaration for Keeping the Water Infrastructure out of the Cycle of Violence» (31st January 2001).

⁵ Economic and Social Council / Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (E/C.12/2002/11 31st January 2003) *General Comment No.15 (2002) The right to water (Articles 11 and 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights)*

«Introduction: 1. Water is a limited natural resource and a public good fundamental for life and health. The human right to water is indispensable for leading a life in human dignity. It is a prerequisite for the realization of other human rights. The Committee has been confronted continually with the widespread denial of the right to water in developing as well as developed countries. Over one billion persons lack access to a basic water supply, while several billion do not have access to adequate sanitation, which is the primary cause of water contamination and diseases linked to water. The continuing contamination, depletion and unequal distribution of water is exacerbating existing poverty. States parties have to adopt effective measures to realize, without discrimination, the right to water, as set out in this general comment.»

use and natural use because we do not understand that the natural environment is also our environment.

The water conflict between states, regions and social sectors, or between human beings and Mother Nature only has one valid solution: to find the confluence of interests so that its management is appropriate for everyone. We have to understand that the water cycle runs a full circle, and if one part fails the other parts not only fail to benefit, but will end up paying dearly. A path must be forged toward a new wa-

ter culture, a global and cooperative management of the basins on the parts of all the sectors involved and the environment affected. Without this new management model, water will continue to be used as a military and political weapon, and there will continue to be conflicts over its distribution. Furthermore the desertification will worsen and people living in the Mediterranean basin will suffer as a result of further and more severe shortages. Over the last year the conflicts over water around the Mediterranean shores

have got much worse and some areas are heading toward the point of no return. To find solutions, for the areas most affected by shortages, from eastern to western Mediterranean, increasingly louder voices call for a change in the way water resources are managed must be delayed no longer, and that a new water culture must be adopted to ensure a sustainable future. The concern expressed by the United Nations is a step forward, but the actions of the governments do not yet encourage optimism.