

An NGO Monitor Report

# WATER

Myths & Facts

NGOs and the Destructive Water Campaign Against Israel

NGO MONITOR

Making NGOs Accountable

# **Myths vs. Facts:** *NGOs and the Destructive Water Campaign Against Israel*

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**NGO Monitor's mission  
is to provide information  
and analysis, promote accountability,  
and support discussion on the reports  
and activities of NGOs claiming to  
advance human rights and  
humanitarian agendas.**

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## INTRODUCTION

**N**on-governmental organizations (NGOs) have increased their exploitation of the water issue in their political warfare campaigns against Israel. This includes false accusations of water “discrimination” and “stealing water”; pressure on international corporations to boycott the Israeli national water company, Mekorot; and blatant distortions of binding international agreements between Israelis and Palestinians.

As a result of these NGO campaigns, Dutch water company Vitens [canceled a planned agreement to collaborate with Mekorot](#). An Italian water corporation, ACEA, also faced [similar pressure](#), and campaigns against Mekorot also took place in the [UK](#) and [Argentina](#).

### Background

Questions and disputes relating to water rights are not bound by international borders and lines on a map. Close cooperation and coordination between all parties are required in order to creatively and constructively address problems and ensure equitable, maximal access to clean and safe water. Additionally, the complexity and centrality of the water issue in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict are heightened by regional water shortages. Indeed, within the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict, a Joint [Israeli-Palestinian] Water Committee (JWC) was [established](#) to “deal with all water and sewage related issues in the West Bank.” The decision making mechanism of the JWC is based on “consensus, including the agenda, its procedures and other matters.” Likewise, a central tenet of the [1994 Israel-Jordan Peace Treaty](#) is that “co-operation in water related subjects would be to the benefit of both Parties and will help alleviate their water shortages.”

Unfortunately, despite the existence of cooperation between Israelis, Palestinians, and Jordanians, water has also become a destructive weapon in the hands of political advocacy NGOs, which use allegations regarding water rights and availability as part of their delegitimization and anti-normalization campaigns against Israel. NGOs present a distorted narrative of the water issue, ignoring the negotiated agreements between Israel and the Palestinians (e.g. the 1995 interim agreement, “Oslo II”) that determine water arrangements, internal Palestinian dynamics, and other complexities – in order to falsely accuse Israel of violating international law relating to water rights, while in reality Israel’s supply of water to the Palestinians is actually “far beyond its [Israel’s] obligation in the Water Agreement.”

This narrative also falsely accuses Israel of blocking Palestinian water development projects, including waste water treatment plants (WWTP), creating a “water crisis” in Gaza, and providing Palestinians with the “minimal quantity needed to survive in

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humanitarian-disaster areas,” but supplying settlers with generous amounts of water. In many respects, the NGO campaigns have parroted the [Palestinian political agenda](#).

The NGOs leading these campaigns include Al Haq, Palestinian Center for Human Rights (PCHR), BADIL, Coalition of Women for Peace/Who Profits, and EWASH (a coalition of Palestinian NGOs, international development organizations, and UN agencies). International and European NGOs, such as [Human Rights Watch](#), Amnesty International and [United Civilians for Peace](#) (UCP – an umbrella group comprised of Dutch NGOs [ICCO](#), [Oxfam Novib](#), Pax (formerly IKV Pax Christi), and [Cordaid](#)), also accuse Israel of denying the Palestinians “[fair access to water](#)” and make distorted claims regarding Israel’s alleged obligations vis-à-vis Palestinian water rights.

In many instances, the NGOs acknowledge that they are motivated by politics and demonizing Israel, not by improving Palestinian access to clean water. For instance, EWASH opposed an EU-funded desalinization project in Gaza, which would dramatically improve the water supply, [on political grounds](#), claiming that it would “accommodat[e] the occupation” and “legitimize Israeli actions.” EWASH also claimed, contrary to evidence, that desalination is an “interim solution,” which is belied by regional efforts to expand desalination as a [permanent solution for water shortages](#).

## FREQUENTLY CITED NGO MYTHS

**Myth:** “Mekorot profits from Israeli control over a Palestinian captive market under occupation. The Oslo Accords prevent the Palestinians from developing their own water and sanitation sector and erase the possibility of purchasing water from neighboring countries or international corporations” ([Who Profits](#), 2013); “Israel actively prevents the construction and maintenance of water infrastructure in 59 per cent of the West Bank, earmarked Area C...through the systematic denial of permits for any construction or rehabilitation of water infrastructure” ([Al Haq](#), 2013).

**Reality:** Israel’s involvement in the water sector in the West Bank, supplying water to some Palestinian communities and to settlements, is entirely dictated by the 1995 Interim Agreement (Oslo II) mutually agreed to between Israel and the Palestinian Authority and guaranteed by the international community, which states the exact obligations of both sides. Contrary to NGO claims, this agreement does not “prevent the Palestinians from developing their own water and sanitation sector.” Article 40 of the agreement states that approval of water projects in the West Bank is made by the Joint Water Committee (JWC) through mutual agreement. The Palestinians are free to build any and all components of the water and sanitation sector, subject to the approval of the JWC. Once approved, Israel has no further

authority over projects in Areas A and B (Palestinian military and/or civil control). Palestinian water projects in Area C (Israeli civil and military control) require permits from the Israeli Ministry of Defense Civil Administration (CA). However, in most cases, implementation of the projects is the responsibility of the PWA. In many cases the Palestinians refrain from implementing projects, which have been authorized and for which funding is readily available, due to political reasons including intra-Palestinian conflict and heavy lobbying by the Palestinian agricultural sector.

Since 2000 the CA has approved 73 of 76 permit requests in Area C. Correspondence between CA and PWA officials shows that projects approved in 2001 had still not been implemented as of 2009. A further 44 projects approved by the JWC (in Areas A and B) include several waste water treatment plants (WWTP), trunk lines, water distribution networks for several villages and towns, and water reservoirs, have also not been implemented.<sup>1</sup>

Additionally, Mekorot does not profit from supplying water to the Palestinians. The price at which the Palestinians purchase water from Mekorot was mutually agreed upon in the Oslo II accords. This price, set at NIS 1.66 per cubic meter (1996), has since been adjusted to NIS 2.85 per cubic meter (as stipulated in the agreement), reflecting increases in production costs (drilling, energy, maintenance, etc). Mekorot's total overhead as of 2013 is NIS 4.16 per cubic meter, meaning Mekorot is selling water to the Palestinians at a loss. In contrast, Israelis pay NIS 8.89 per cubic meter, and in effect, subsidize the Palestinians.

**Myth:** “Israeli-imposed blockade on Gaza, restrictions on import to the Gaza Strip of materials and equipment necessary for development and repair of infrastructure have led the water and sanitation situation to reach crisis point”(EWASH, 2015); “The blockade prevents Gaza’s children from having normal opportunities...to drink clean water” (Save the Children/MAP, 2012); “Stringent restrictions imposed in recent years by Israel on the entry into Gaza of material and equipment necessary for the development and repair of infrastructure have caused further deterioration of the water and sanitation situation in Gaza, which has reached crisis point”(Amnesty, 2009).

**Reality:** The Oslo Accords dictated that the management of the water sector in Gaza was given over in its entirety to the Palestinians (with the exception of Israeli settlements and military bases), with Israel providing 5 MCM annually to the Palestinians there. As such, following the 2005 Disengagement, the Hamas government and the Palestinian Authority bear full and sole responsibility for the situation in Gaza.

Despite incessant rocket attacks against Israeli civilians from Gaza by Hamas and

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this issue see: Haim Gvirtzman, “The Israeli-Palestinian Water Conflict: An Israeli Perspective,” *Mideast Security and Policy Studies*, No. 94 (January 2012), <http://www.biu.ac.il/SOC/besa/MSPS94.pdf>

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other terrorist groups, Israel continues to uphold its obligations as stipulated in the Oslo Accords. Furthermore, despite attacks targeting them, Israeli water authority personnel continue to [repair and maintain](#) the water supply to Gaza.

A major factor in the water shortage in Gaza is the poor maintenance of the water and sewage infrastructure in Gaza itself, resulting in losses of more than 40% (compared to 3% in the Israeli system and 33% in the Palestinian-run network in the West Bank). Addressing this issue would vastly improve the water supply in Gaza, and improvements can be implemented immediately with no outside assistance. Wastewater treatment and reuse, drip irrigation, and meter installation would also immediately improve the local water situation in Gaza.

In the long term, desalination is likely the only permanent solution for providing a reliable and safe source of water for Gaza (as is true for Israel). The international community has offered to build such facilities; however the Palestinians and advocacy NGO partners refuse to cooperate on this issue, claiming that it would “accommodat[e] the occupation” and “legitimize Israeli actions.”

Israel, despite its security concerns, has been [allowing](#) equipment for [water projects](#) to [enter Gaza](#), and has completed the construction of an additional pipeline, capable of supplying an additional 5 MCM annually, into Gaza.

**Myth:** Mekorot exploits Palestinian water sources, supplies the settlements and transfers Palestinian water across the Green Line ([Who Profits](#), 2013); “In recent years, Palestinians have bought some 50 MCM water per year. This water is extracted by Mekorot from the Mountain Aquifer and Palestinians should be able to extract for themselves if they were allowed to dig and maintain their own wells” ([Stop the Wall](#), 2013).

**Reality:** The Water Agreement allows the Palestinians to dig and maintain their own wells, and the majority of wells in the West Bank are owned and operated by the Palestinians. Mekorot drills in the West Bank, as agreed upon by the Palestinians in the JWC, in order to provide water to both Palestinians and Israelis regardless of nationality. None of this water is transported by Mekorot outside of the West Bank. The water is supplied solely to Palestinian and Israeli West Bank residents. In fact, of the approximately 57 MCM that Israel sent to the West Bank Palestinians in 2013, only approximately 10 MCM originates from West Bank wells. The rest is transferred from within Israel into the West Bank.<sup>2</sup> In other words, Israel uses significant amounts of its own water to supply the Palestinians and not the reverse as claimed by the NGOs. The NGO claims regarding the “Palestinian water sources” (in this case the mountain aquifer – the only major source of water in the West Bank) are also baseless. The mountain aquifer is a joint aquifer; two-thirds fall under Israel, and the remaining third under the West Bank.

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<sup>2</sup> Some of the 10 MCM from West Bank wells goes to Israeli settlements.

**Myth:** “Seventy percent of the water allocated to settlements in the occupied Jordan Valley originates in Mekorot drillings” ([Who Profits, 2013](#)); “Israeli wells in the Jordan Valley produce around 40 MCM annually...used almost exclusively by the roughly 9,000 settlers operating agricultural settlements in the valley” ([Human Rights Watch, 2010](#)).

**Reality:** Israeli residents in the Jordan Valley are given approximately 10 million cubic meters a year **less** than the volume of Jordan Valley well water that was explicitly approved for their consumption by the 1995 Oslo Accord. At the same time, approximately 7 million cubic meters of water from Israel's National Water Carrier are annually supplied to the Palestinians in communities (including Jericho, Uja, Bardale, and others) in the Jordan Valley. That being said, the supply of water to Jordan Valley settlements, as well as the drilling of wells in that region, are all in accordance with the water agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, and are conducted under the authority of the JWC. Mekorot is not depriving the Palestinians of water in the Jordan Valley or anywhere else. The vast majority of water that Mekorot supplies to the West Bank (to both Palestinians and Israelis) is sent from Israel (via Israel's National Water Carrier). Furthermore, the Palestinians have drilled less than 50% of their approved aquifer water from wells in the Jordan Valley. The annual extractions from the Eastern Mountain Aquifer, which supply both Palestinians and Israelis in the Jordan Valley, remain far below the supply-capacity of the aquifer.

**Myth:** Mekorot enables extensive agricultural production in illegal Israeli settlements ([Who Profits, 2013](#)).

**Reality:** [Approximately 60%](#) of all water used in Israeli agriculture in the West Bank is either treated sewage wastewater or is sourced from other non-potable sources (i.e. saline brackish water, flood runoff), and this water is provided to the settlements in accordance with internationally binding agreements. In contrast, the Palestinians refuse to use treated wastewater and solely use potable water for agricultural use, accounting for 50% of Palestinian fresh water consumption and thus exacerbating the water crisis. In many instances, especially in the northern West Bank, farmers use water extracted from illegal wells and do not pay for it, which allows them to squander water irresponsibly. Additionally, even when funding from international bodies or foreign governments is readily available, the PA [has not advanced](#) (p.5) plans to build wastewater treatment plants (WWTP), which could provide additional water sources for agricultural needs and reduce pollution to natural water sources, as well as the flow of raw sewage into Israel.

**Myth:** “Mekorot provides much more water to settlements than to Palestinian communities” ([Who Profits, 2013](#)).

**Reality:** This claim is a blatant distortion of the water supply system in the West Bank. The PWA is responsible for supplying water to Palestinian communities. Israeli

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water supply to the settlements is part of Israel's allocation of water as stipulated by the Joint Water Committee, and does not affect the supply to the Palestinians in any way. In general, Mekorot provides more water annually to the PA (57 MCM) than it is obligated to according to the water agreement (29 MCM, of which 5 MCM are provided to Gaza). This is in addition to the water produced by the Palestinians themselves (approximately 140 MCM/Y).

**Myth:** To service settlers, Mekorot restricts water supplies to Palestinian communities (Who Profits, 2013); Mekorot regularly reduces the distribution/quantities of water provided to Palestinian communities during hot summer months whilst settler consumption doubles ([EWASH](#), 2011).

**Reality:** Israeli water supply to the settlements is part of Israel's allocation of water and does not affect the supply to the Palestinians in any way. Additionally, Israel supplies less water to Israeli citizens in the West Bank than stipulated in the Oslo Accords and transfers the remaining quota to the Palestinians.

**Myth:** Mekorot applies discriminatory water prices, charging Palestinians higher rates than Israelis (Who Profits, 2013).

**Reality:** This claim is completely false. As stated above, Mekorot sells water to the PA at a loss, charging NIS 2.85 per MCM (as stipulated in the water agreement) while the production cost for Mekorot is NIS 4.16 per MCM.

Mekorot charges Israeli citizens NIS 8.89 per MCM for domestic use.

**Myth:** 30% of the water leaks from Palestinian supply pipes – because Israel refuses to allow their renewal ([Friends of the Earth Palestine/PENGON](#), 2014).

**Reality:** The PWA loses 33% of water in its system per annum (compared to 3% in the Israeli system) due to theft within the Palestinian Water Authority's water network and poor maintenance. Israel does not prevent the Palestinians from repairing their own pipe system. Many of the PWA water pumps are maintained poorly and are shut down for repairs for long periods of time, due to a lack of technical ability to repair the pumps, and a lack of concerted effort to do so.

Water theft by Palestinians, from both the Israeli and Palestinian networks, is a major source of water loss. Over 250 illegal drillings are known to exist in the northern West Bank alone. The Israeli water authority disconnects 600 of these connections a year. Israeli requests to reinstate the Joint [Israeli-Palestinian] Supervision and Enforcement Teams (JSETs) in order to combat water theft have been denied by the Palestinians. Minutes of JWC meetings show that in many instances the PWA had committed to shut down illegal drillings but did not follow through. When the CA eventually demolished them, the PWA protested. In addition, many of the PWA water pumps are maintained poorly and are shut down for repairs for long periods of time due to

lack of technical ability to repair the pumps and refusal to accept Israeli assistance in some cases.

**Myth:** “Mekorot’s extensive pumping is reducing the water quantity in Palestinian springs and wells” (Who Profits, 2013); Israel limits the amount of water annually available to Palestinians...while it has continued to consistently over-extract water for its own usage far in excess of the aquifer’s yearly sustainable yield” (Amnesty International, 2009); Over-extraction of water by Israel has caused a drop in the water-table in the West Bank ([Human Rights Watch](#), 2010).

**Reality:** Israel does not reduce water availability to the Palestinians in the West Bank. Mekorot’s well water extractions within the West Bank are far below the stipulated amounts that are carefully set by water experts and approved by the Israeli-Palestinian Joint Water Committee.

Reductions in the aquifer’s supply capacity can occur as a result of consecutive years of low rainfall in the region. As noted above, Israel responds by supplementing more water from Israel’s own resources rather than risking over extractions from wells in the West Bank.

In contrast, [hundreds of unapproved](#) Palestinian water pumps (pp.10-11), especially in the northern part of the mountain aquifer in the West Bank, have lowered the water level in the Mountain Aquifer, threatening to deteriorate the water quality. At the same time, Mekorot has reduced its pumping from the Mountain Aquifer over the past years, in order to maintain sustainable water extraction levels.

At the same time, despite having received permits in 2000 for wells in the underutilized Eastern Aquifer, the PWA has drilled less than half of the approved wells. Israel has also offered the Palestinian Authority to build a desalinization plant on Israeli land near Hadera in order to supply their needs; the Palestinian Authority refused this offer.

Moreover, the PWA has not installed water meters in approximately 50% of Palestinian homes and on most agricultural pumps, and therefore cannot monitor usage and collect payment from customers.

**Myth:** Mekorot’s policy and operations ignore the Green Line (Who Profits, 2013).

**Reality:** All of Mekorot’s operations in the West Bank are carried out in the framework of the 1995 agreement and according to consensus decisions of the JWC. Mekorot provides water to both Palestinian and Israeli communities in the West Bank, and it provides water above and beyond the amount agreed upon in the Oslo Accord, an internationally recognized agreement. In contrast, the PWA ignores its responsibility to provide water solutions for Palestinian citizens, violates the water agreement in many ways, allows most of the Palestinians’ wastewater and

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pollutants to flow into Israel (blatantly ignoring the Green Line), and lays the blame for their shortcomings at Israel's feet.

## **CONCLUSION**

Given the importance of water for all people of the region, it is disconcerting that NGOs use it as a tool for furthering anti-Israel political agendas.

Questions relating to water were addressed in great detail in the 1995 water agreement, under the auspices of the international community. Subject to further negotiations between the parties, the stipulations and mechanisms agreed upon then are fully binding and should be respected. NGOs claiming to promote human rights should stick to the readily available and easily accessible facts, and call on the Palestinian Authority and the Hamas government in Gaza to accept their responsibility towards Palestinian citizens in this regard.

The vast international campaign on this issue, which disseminates false and distorted information, is an integral part of the attempt to demonize and delegitimize Israel. The NGOs at the fore of these efforts do not promote peace, nor do they help the Palestinians improve their access to clean and safe water.