

# From Palestine to Michigan, water as a Form of Social Control

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**FROM DETROIT AND Flint, Michigan to Gaza and the West Bank in Palestine, those struggling against institutionalized racism and apartheid are no strangers to water struggles.**

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In Gaza, water infrastructure is bombed and water supplies are constrained. In Detroit, water is shut off from people who can't pay, and along with Flint, poisoned by lead. In each case, water is sold back at ever increasingly unaffordable rates.

In Palestine, water struggles are the undercurrent of a colonialist and imperialist project. In Michigan cities, water struggles are inseparable from American chronicles of class and race.

But in all cases these tools of oppression — whether an exercise of colonization and imperialism, or domestic structures of class and race — ultimately operate in the service of power and control.

Parallels between the weaponization of water in these separate parts of the world are obscured by the relative incomparability of their situations. Nothing in U.S. inner cities can compare to conditions caused by the complete economic blockade against Gaza, massacres on the border during the Great Return Marches, or routine Israeli air strikes that target homes and community facilities in what is described as “the world’s largest open-air prison.”

Yet weaponizing of water is one aspect of political control in which the two communities can draw similarities, amidst a worldwide campaign by companies like Veolia, Nestle, and PepsiCo to privatize water and take advantage of destruction and loss of sovereignty. Utilizing parallel although very different scales of violence, they are tools for political submission and forced eviction.

Palestine, in its 70<sup>th</sup> year of occupation, continues to actively resist today’s most brutal examples of modern day colonization. Their efforts have peaked during the Great Return Marches of 2018, where for over 30 weeks Gazans have rushed towards the border wall in attempts to break a blockade that slowly asphyxiates them.

Most, if not all, conflicts in the Middle East come back to water. The intertwining and complexity of its geopolitics and strife — of which the occupation of Palestine is a part — position the issue of control of water and conflicts ranging from the Israeli occupation of Syria’s fertile Golan Heights to

the Saudi-led blockade and attacks on water ports and infrastructure in Yemen.

## **Destroying Democracy**

In Detroit, the sprawl of glitzy development, increasing gentrification and corporatization, mainly centered around the 7.2 square mile downtown area, cohabits an urban and social environment where Detroiters have witnessed the closing of their public schools, the blighting of their neighborhoods, and, in recent years, shutoffs of their water. A similar dynamic rules Flint.

Attacking infrastructure and targeting institutional foundations of civilian life is a common tactic of war, and a routine practice of the Israeli occupation. But in the absence of overt warfare, under supposedly “democratic” institutions, neoliberal policies attempt to curtail the public’s right and access to water. This parallels the gutting of education, housing and sovereignty in governance.

While Palestinians are deprived of self-determination, citizenship and political rights, the civil rights and protections of those in Detroit and Flint have been curtailed by emergency management policies; the de facto economic dictatorship where management and mismanagement of water infrastructure took hold.

Within a year after Detroit Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr was appointed by the Michigan governor, the city faced widespread water shutoffs that Orr authorized. Decades of neoliberal policies in Detroit culminated in the 2014 crisis that levied “service interruptions” onto 100,000 homes, receiving condemnation from the United Nations for depriving hundreds of thousands of the right to drink, bathe and cook.

Neoliberal tactics and policies have gutted budgets needed to help maintain infrastructure across the United States, facilitating their takeover by privatizing entities. Enabled in large part by the economic dictatorship imposed by emergency management, privatization included a host of corporate beneficiaries, such as Nestle, paying only \$200 yearly to suck an unlimited amount of water from the Great Lakes, Nestle is also sustaining in partnership with the Israeli firm Osem.

In that same year, summer 2014, Gaza witnessed an unprecedented assault, The Israeli siege killed more Palestinians — 2314 deaths and 17,125 injuries — than any year since 1967, according to an annual UN report. Israel continued its longstanding attack on Palestinian water and water infrastructure, as it did during the 2008 siege. Reconstruction of water infrastructure was further impeded by Israel’s 2007 blockade of materials crucial to reconstruction efforts.

By the end of 2015 the number of Palestinians cut off from public water networks was estimated at around 100,000 across the West Bank and Gaza territories.

## **Expropriation and Control**

While the gravity of violence in Gaza is incomparable to Detroit or Flint, the strategy of neoliberalization in American cities served a similar objective — water expropriation and control — that wartime destruction and forced appropriation have done in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

The groundwork for water control in Detroit was laid in 2011 and 2012 when the largely gutted Detroit Water and Sewerage Department entered into interest rate swaps with major banks. This miscalculation resulted in massive debts owed to the financial institutions. With the transfer of authority to the Great Lakes Water Authority in late 2014, the scene was set for the eventual

facilitation of privatization.

With decades of rightwing state governance transferring power and resources into private hands, water became the next infrastructural target.

The Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci employed the concept of “hegemony” to encompass unspoken discourses of power and dominance wielded by institutions and reflected through social and cultural norms. This is exemplified in the control of water resources and infrastructure by the owners of the means of production, in which powerful actors deprive populations of the right to any personal or social agency.

Israel’s command of Palestinian water resources is the source as well as the manifestation of its stakes in the region. Water is the central node that determines borders, establishes economic and industrial command, and shapes the proliferation of life and activity that, ultimately defines and claims territory.

Professor Mark Zeitoun, a professor of international development at the University of East Anglia and a prominent analytical scholar of today’s water wars, wrote on “Hydro-Hegemony” as it applies to the Nile, Jordan and Tigris and Euphrates river basins.

He identifies Israel as a “hydro-hegemony” that wields its leverage over multinational water corporations, and its territorial expansion, as an example of asymmetrical command of power that consistently and predictably produces inequitable outcomes.

Discriminatory water-sharing “agreements” resulted in a colonial takeover of not only the land but the water of the West Bank territories after Israel’s seizure of the areas and their aquifers of 1967 Six-Day War. As a result, Israel was granted full control of over 71% of the areas aquifers — and Palestinians just 17%.

This inequality has solidified Israel’s hold on Palestinian lack of agency over water supplies and prices in the territories, the latter amounting to four times the amount Israelis pay. Israel has completely withdrawn and seized all the aquifers under the West Bank, and as reported by the BBC, Gaza’s water is heavily polluted and 97% of it virtually undrinkable.

The surrounding sea is polluted with sewage, leaving Gazans forced to buy water from privatized sources, such as desalination plants, at six times the standard rate.

The result is that, across cases, the poorest pay more for worse water quality. In Gaza, 33% of a family’s entire income goes to paying for water — in contrast with just an average of 0.7% of the average, middle-class family in Europe. Flint residents pay the highest water rates in America for water that is polluted, and in Detroit, incremental yearly water rate hikes have resulted in water bills that are unaffordable for many families.

Control over water supplies, systems and infrastructure, shaping the livelihoods and activity amongst affected populations, works in much the same way. By forcing populations into desperation in severing them from the right to water, aggressors not only establish the framework of political control but also attempt to stifle the will of those subjugated by such brutality to resist.

Using civilian suffering is not only a method of political and social dominance, but a tactic of war. Thirsty children cannot think to their fullest, cannot make optimal decisions, and thus are relegated to prioritizing their time, effort, and energy, in tremendous efforts to obtain a sliver of a resource that many of us take for granted.

## **The Oppressors' Narratives**

The expropriation of water in Detroit and Palestine is sustained through narratives that consistently justify water expropriation and the eviction of indigenous or marginalized populations. Class-biased narratives constantly blame Detroiters for not paying their water bills, misidentifying the problem as incompetence rather than of decreasing affordability of water caused by privatization.

Palestinians are blamed for “overuse” and mismanagement of water resources, despite consuming only a sliver of what Israelis use and extract as well as having water materials and infrastructure severely limited through the blockade.

According to IHL[international humanitarian law] provisions, objects that are essential for the survival of the population, including the water supply, cannot be targeted and in fact must be protected, even during armed conflict.

A report by 2015 NGO “Gisha” concluded: “The occupying power has a duty to protect water reservoirs in the occupied territory from overuse and compromised quality, and it must regulate water use in a sustainable and environmentally responsible manner.”

And as a Food and Water Watch statement in 2014 warned:

*“The creation of the regional authority, the Great Lakes Water Authority, corporatizes the system by putting appointed, unelected officials fully in charge of the big decisions that determine the cost and quality of service. The agreement treats water provision as a business instead of a public service. Corporatization itself is the first step to privatization. The new authority can privatize the management and operation of the water and sewer system without real city input or public approval.”*

## **Worsening Crises**

Attacks on agriculture and farmlands targeting agrarian lifestyles and self-sustaining resistance economies also work through the control of water. Water and sewage costs place severe consequences on urban farming in Detroit; Palestinian farmers are denied the subsidies enjoyed by Israeli farmers.

When not facing direct attacks on lands and trees from settlers during settlement expansions or direct airstrikes, their irrigation sources are systemically severed; 70% of agricultural wells, dependent on electricity, are unusable, endangering 69% of these lands. When Israel is not directly withholding water, it regularly floods Palestinian farms with sewage in attempts to drive them from their farms.

Detroiters are burdened with excessive drainage fees, another concession of the 2014 Great Lakes Water Authority during the city’s bankruptcy proceedings and periodic water rate hikes. City residents had to pay additional fees enabling the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department to collect \$153 million by 2019.

Water continues to be disconnected from Detroit homes in mass numbers. Last March alone, nearly five years after the shutoffs began, over 17,000 homes were slated for water shutoffs. The shutoffs have accompanied record-breaking cases of Legionnaires, Hepatitis A, and other waterborne illnesses that have plagued Southeast Michigan, and Detroiters specifically in the last few years — a correlation too telling to be coincidental.

Renewed warnings have been issued about the humanitarian situation in Gaza, reaching another level of fatal extremity as electricity and water become severely compromised and lethal conditions have foreshadowed that the situation “could explode at any minute.” More than a quarter of disease outbreaks in Gaza are attributable to poor water quality, and crop and livestock yields, sometimes totaling a family’s entire worth, continue to be completely destroyed by bombardments and water deprivation.

The burden is levied most disproportionately onto children, families and the elderly. The Henry Ford report, citing the American Public Health Association, highlighted that shigellosis deaths occur in the greatest frequency among children. Polluted water is a key leading cause of child mortality in Gaza, with as high as 12% contracting intestinal illnesses from drinking contaminated water.

In 2018, after 57 schools in Detroit tested positive for lead and copper, drinking water was cut off from all 103 public schools, forcing fountains to be replaced with emergency bottled water — this after almost a generation of attacks on children’s right to education and decades of negligence of proper testing of water facilities.

For Palestinian refugees, massive UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency) cuts — a complete cut of funding from the United States, after already having slashed UNRWA’s budget for 2018 by withholding \$65 million — cripples aid that went to vital services such as health care, schools and infrastructure.

The 2014 human rights investigation following the United Nations visit to Detroit found a “violation of the human right to water” among “other international human rights,” demanding that water to all households be reconnected “immediately.”

That same year, the commission of inquiry into atrocities in Gaza found evidence of war crimes. Since then, the crisis has only intensified. Climate change is rendering water a subject of international crisis and power struggles all over the world, with poor and oppressed communities all facing threats to their survival.

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• Against the Current n° 198, January-February 2019:  
<https://solidarity-us.org/atc/198/water/>