

In Gaza, Israel has turned water into a weapon of mass destruction

Monday 22 January 2024, by [BISHARA Amahl](#), [MURRAY Nancy](#) (Date first published: 16 January 2024).

By denying Palestinians safe water since the war began, Israel has created an unparalleled health crisis and risks causing irreversible ecological damage.

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Palestinians collect drinking water in the city of Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip, December 23, 2023. (Abed Rahim Khatib/Flash90)

In November, only a month into Israel's assault on Gaza that has now surpassed 100 days, Pedro Arrojo-Agudo, a UN Special Rapporteur on the right to safe drinking water and sanitation, [warned](#) that Israel "must stop using water as a weapon of war." "Every hour that passes with Israel preventing the provision of safe drinking water in the Gaza Strip, in brazen breach of international law, puts Gazans at risk of dying of thirst and diseases related to the lack of safe drinking water," he implored. The death toll resulting from the lack of water and its impact on public health, Arrojo-Agudo added, could surpass that of the Israeli bombardment itself.

Denying water to Gaza has been a key tactic of the war from the very beginning, with Israel [shutting off the pipes](#) supplying the enclave on October 7. Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant [announced](#) that Israel was "imposing a complete siege on Gaza. No electricity, no food, no water, no fuel. Everything is closed. We are fighting human animals, and we are acting accordingly."

The weaponization of water is recognized in South Africa's [accusation](#) — heard last week by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) — that Israel's assault on Gaza amounts to the crime of genocide. This allegation has also been made by other [scholars](#) and human rights figures including Craig Mokhiber, the former director of the New York office of the UN High Commission for Human Rights, in his [resignation letter](#) in October.

As South Africa's petition points out, what has unfolded in Gaza is an intensification of longstanding policies of violence against the Palestinian people. The deprivation of water and the destruction of water and sanitation infrastructure have long been part of the Israeli effort, in both the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, "to make the daily process of living, and dignified living, more difficult for the civilian population," as a UN Fact Finding Mission [stated](#) in 2009.

Palestinians walk with water bottles which were distributed in Rafah, south Gaza, December 12, 2023 (Mohammed Zaanoun/Activestills)

Past Israeli military operations in both of these occupied territories have also led to the [destruction](#) of water resources. And for decades, Israel has used [water grabbing](#) to dispossess Palestinians of

their land and ways of life — impeding [Palestinian agriculture in the West Bank](#) and for [Palestinians inside Israel](#). But Israel's weaponization of water within the framework of its current offensive on the Gaza Strip is on an entirely different scale, with the capacity to cause an unparalleled public health crisis and irreversible ecological damage.

A health and ecological catastrophe

Gaza's near-total dependence on Israel for water and energy renders it particularly vulnerable to the weaponization of basic resources. About [30% of Gaza's water supply](#) is typically purchased from Israel, and the rest is reliant on electricity and fuel — the entry of which Israel also controls — for purification.

Since the start of the war, Israel's [tightened siege](#) and bombardment have caused a massive shortage in the water supply. On Oct. 14, the World Health Organization (WHO) [stated](#) that the cutting off of electricity meant there was not enough power to operate water wells, desalination and purification plants, and sanitation services. It further reported that strikes had damaged six water wells, three water pumping stations, a water reservoir, and a desalination plant serving over 1.1 million people.

UNICEF, which [had opened that desalination plant](#) in 2017, [stated](#) that people were forced to drink highly salinated water from the sea, which was further contaminated by vast amounts of untreated wastewater being discharged into the sea every day. Within two weeks of the war starting, OCHA [estimated](#) water consumption per person in Gaza — for drinking, cooking and hygiene — at just 3 liters per day, while those cramming into UN shelters [had access](#) to only 1 liter per day; International standards recommend at least 15 liters per person each day.

Palestinians fill water from pipes provided by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in the Rafah refugee camp, Southern Gaza Strip, January 25, 2023. (Abed Rahim Khatib/Flash90)

And with bottled water unavailable and large desalination plants not functioning, OCHA [wrote](#): “People have resorted to consuming water extracted from agricultural wells, increasing exposure to pesticides and other chemicals, placing the population at risk of death or infectious disease outbreak.”

Even during the seven-day “humanitarian pause” in hostilities at the end of November, when 200 aid trucks per day — less than half the number that entered daily before the war — were permitted into Gaza, bottles of clean water were still in lamentably short supply. “Despite the pause, there was almost no improvement in the access of residents in the north to water for drinking and domestic purposes, as most of the main water production facilities remained shut, due to the lack of fuel and some also due to damage,” OCHA [noted](#).

The ramifications soon became clear. At the end of October, an [internal U.S. State Department report](#) expressed concern that 52,000 pregnant women and over 30,000 babies under the age of six months were being forced to drink a potentially lethal mix of water polluted with sewage and salt from the sea. Since then, Palestinians in the Gaza Strip have been severely weakened by [rampant hunger and disease](#), as well as the physical wounds inflicted on nearly [60,000 people](#) and the mental stress of ceaseless bombardment that has taken more than [23,500 lives](#). All of this renders Palestinians in Gaza even more vulnerable to water-borne illnesses.

By the end of December, as [WHO](#) reported, the more than [1 million](#) displaced Palestinians sheltering in the southern city of Rafah had access to, on average, one toilet for every 486 people, while across

Gaza one shower [served](#) an average of 4,500 people. Sewage flows through the streets and contaminates the hastily erected tents in which hundreds of thousands of people now live throughout southern and central Gaza. Those who are menstruating face [intense hardship](#), with menstrual products, toilets, and water all in direly short supply.

Tents as far as the eye can see in the southern Gaza city of Rafah, January 9, 2024. (Mohammed Zaanoun)

Another disturbing — and potentially long-lasting — tactic that Israel has deployed in recent weeks is [pumping sea water](#) into Gaza tunnels. The ostensible goal is to destroy the tunnels and flush out Hamas operatives, but The Wall Street Journal reported that the action could “also threaten Gaza’s water supply.”

Although the extent of the pumping operation remains unclear, South Africa’s submission to the ICJ expresses “extreme concern” about this particular use of water as an offensive weapon, stating: “Environmental experts have warned that the strategy ‘risks causing an ecological catastrophe’ that would leave Gaza with no drinkable water, devastate what little agriculture is possible and ‘ruin the conditions of life of everyone in Gaza.’”

The South African submission also noted that the UN Special Rapporteur for the right to water reportedly compared this Israeli plan to the mythical Roman “salting” of the fields of Carthage, which aimed to prevent the growth of crops and render the territory uninhabitable.

Palestinians at an UNRWA camp in Rafah after heavy rainfall, in the southern Gaza Strip, November 14, 2023. (Abed Rahim Khatib/Flash90)

Access to clean water is integral to staving off famine and disease, and with the massive destruction of water infrastructure in Gaza — including drinking supply lines, pumping stations, and wells — a full-blown humanitarian catastrophe is at hand. In the words of the South African petition to the ICJ: “These conditions — deliberately inflicted by Israel — are calculated to bring about the destruction of the Palestinian group in Gaza.” Indeed, public health experts are [warning](#) that half a million people — a quarter of Gaza’s population — could die from disease within a year.

Upholding water as a human right

Human rights activists and organizations must unequivocally oppose Israel’s weaponization of water. As activists with the US-based [Alliance for Water Justice in Palestine](#) and [1for3.org](#), we have seen how Israel’s discriminatory water policies have long been used to [control](#) Palestinians and [drive them](#) from their land. Yet we have also seen how activism around water can [mobilize](#) people across many continents to campaign for justice.

Take the example of [Aida refugee camp](#), in the Israeli-occupied West Bank city of Bethlehem, where during some summers water has only flowed through its pipes every two weeks. As in so many parts of the West Bank, people store water in tanks on their roofs. When it runs out, costs skyrocket and indignities pile up, while settlers in sight of the refugees’ homes never experience such water scarcity.

Residents of Aida Refugee Camp fill plastic bottles with water from a public tap to compensate for lack of access to running water in their homes, July 13, 2012. (Ryan Rodrick Beiler/Activestills)

Recognizing this problem on a community level has led to the creation of a community hydroponic

garden, heightened awareness about environmental justice, and community initiatives of [water testing](#) in which water experts from Boston have participated. Activists in the Boston area have also organized around water justice to stop a [water partnership](#) between Massachusetts and Israel.

As the ICJ considers the charges of genocide against Israel, we call on water scholars and activists to consider signing [this open letter](#), which outlines Israel's discriminatory water policies over the decades and calls for an end to the weaponization of water in the Gaza Strip.

We recognize that water is but one tool in Israel's genocidal war, but it is a vital one. Integral to public health and life itself, the human right to water is [grounded](#) in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. International law is invigorated when people strive together to end Israeli apartheid – including by promoting environmental justice and upholding the human right to water.

Nancy Murray and Amahl Bishara January 16, 2024

P.S.

- +972. January 16, 2024:
<https://www.972mag.com/gaza-israel-water-weapon/>

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- Our team has been devastated by the horrific events of this latest war – the atrocities committed by Hamas in Israel and the massive retaliatory Israeli attacks on Gaza. Our hearts are with all the people and communities facing violence.

We are in an extraordinarily dangerous era in Israel-Palestine. The bloodshed unleashed by these events has reached extreme levels of brutality and threatens to engulf the entire region. Hamas' murderous assault in southern Israel has devastated and shocked the country to its core. Israel's retaliatory bombing of Gaza is wreaking destruction on the already besieged strip and killing a ballooning number of civilians. Emboldened settlers in the West Bank, backed by the army, are seizing the opportunity to escalate their attacks on Palestinians.

This escalation has a very clear context, one that +972 has spent the past 13 years covering: Israeli society's growing racism and militarism, the entrenched occupation, and an increasingly normalized siege on Gaza.

We are well positioned to cover this perilous moment – but we need your help to do it. This terrible period will challenge the humanity of all of those working for a better future in this land.

Palestinians and Israelis are already organizing and strategizing to put up the fight of their lives.

Can we count on your [support](#)? +972 Magazine is the leading media voice of this movement, a desperately needed platform where Palestinian and Israeli journalists and activists can report on and analyze what is happening, guided by humanism, equality, and justice. Join us.

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