



# **Weaponizing Water in the South of the West Bank:**

Increased Shut-Offs, Destruction  
of WASH Facilities, and Resource  
Degradation as Tools of Coercion



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## **Weaponizing Water in the South of the West Bank: Increased Shut-Offs, Destruction of WASH Facilities and Resource Degradation as Tools of Coercion**

The water crisis affecting Palestinian communities in the southern West Bank must be understood within the broader framework of Israeli control over Palestinian water resources. Israel controls more than 85 percent of Palestinian water resources, while Palestinians remain increasingly dependent on water purchased from the Israeli national water company, Mekorot. Furthermore, the water arrangements established under the 1995 Oslo II Agreement created a regulatory framework that requires Palestinian water development projects in many areas of the West Bank to obtain Israeli approval through joint institutional mechanisms, a system that has resulted in an exacerbated water dependency and constrained Palestinian water development on the one hand, while using water as a tool of pressure and coercion against Palestinians on the other.

### **1. Water Shut-Offs and Access Constraints**

Official data from the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) and Palestinian Water Authority (PWA) indicate that approximately 60 percent of the water supplied for domestic use in the West Bank is purchased from Israeli water companies, accounting for around 25 percent of the total available water supply. This dependence underscores the constraints affecting Palestinian control over and access to water resources, as well as the limited capacity to independently meet domestic water needs.

This deliberately-created dependence is particularly pronounced in the South of the West Bank. In Hebron, approximately 90 percent of the water supply is reportedly obtained through the Israeli operator, Mekorot, while local wells provide only around 10 percent. The Governorate's reliance on externally supplied water illustrates the extent to which water

availability remains vulnerable to fluctuations in supply and limitations affecting access to water resources. Similarly, Bethlehem Governorate relies heavily on purchased water from Mekorot, which accounts for approximately 63 percent of its water supply (7.553 MCM), while local sources provide only 37 percent (4.504 MCM). These local sources consist of natural springs and wells operated by the PWA. The predominance of purchased water over locally available sources in both governorates underscores the limited capacity of Palestinian water resources to independently meet local demand and highlights the extent to which water security remains dependent on externally controlled supplies.

The vulnerability of water access in southern West Bank communities is reflected in increasingly recurring disruptions to external water supplies. In June 2024, the PWA reported a reduction of approximately 35 percent in water supplied through the Deir Shaar line serving Hebron and Bethlehem. The PWA further stated that pumping was suspended entirely by the Israeli national water company for several consecutive hours, affecting water distribution across the southern West Bank. According to the PWA, these disruptions exacerbate water shortages during the summer season and affect the ability of service providers to meet local demand. This highlights how reductions in externally supplied water can significantly affect water availability in Hebron and Bethlehem, reinforcing the existing crisis in Palestinian access to water resources.

In August 2025, the Hebron Governorate was reported to have experienced a deliberate reduction of more than 40 percent in water supplied through Mekorot, contributing to increased reliance on private water tankers and raising concerns regarding water availability during the summer months.

The local implications of these supply reductions can be illustrated by developments in Idna town, west of Hebron. The town's approximately 40,000 inhabitants had experienced around 100 days without running water following reductions in the quantity of water supplied to Hebron Governorate through Mekorot. Water supplied to the Governorate had been reduced from 32,000 cubic metres to 26,000 cubic metres per day, and the water line serving Idna had been completely shut down. As a result, residents relied on rainwater reservoirs and privately purchased water tanks to meet their water needs.

## **2. Destruction of Water Infrastructure**

Water access challenges are further entrenched in Area C of the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), which remains under full Israeli control. Area C - approximately 60% of the West Bank- contains almost all land suitable for agricultural production, and is characterized by significant Israeli constraints on water access and infrastructure development. Over 70% of communities located entirely or mostly in Area “C” lack connection to the water network, compelling them to rely on costly trucked water. Recent official data from the PCBS and the PWA further indicate that restrictions also affect the development of water-harvesting infrastructure in Area C, where the construction of dams and water collection ponds is frequently constrained, thereby limiting Palestinian capacity to utilize rainwater resources.

According to OCHA, between the beginning of 2026 and 25 May 2026, about 71 percent of the approximately 400 structures demolished in Area C for lacking Israeli-issued building permits have been agricultural, livelihood-related, or water and sanitation structures.

Although data on water impacts vary across Area C, Hebron and Bethlehem Governorates are notable in this context, given that large portions of their territories fall within Area C. Approximately 67,850 Palestinians, representing around 11 percent of Hebron's population, reside in Area C, which contains approximately 51.1 percent of Hebron's agricultural land, according to 2016 data. Similarly, more than 85 percent of Bethlehem governorate is designated as Area C, placing the majority of its territory under Israeli control. Less than 1 percent of Area C in Bethlehem is covered by an Israeli-approved outline plan that would allow Palestinians to obtain building permits through the Israeli planning system. These longstanding territorial and planning arrangements continue to affect Palestinian access to land, infrastructure, and water resources in both governorates.

On 16 June 2026, the Israeli occupation demolished a rainwater harvesting well in Umm Salamuna Village, southwest of Bethlehem, on the grounds that it lacked a building permit. This highlights how practically unattainable permit requirements continue to shape Palestinian access to basic water-harvesting infrastructure in rural areas of the Bethlehem Governorate.

Beyond the structural limitations and demolitions, settler violence has emerged as an additional and increasingly significant driver of water insecurity across the West Bank. Between the beginning of 2026 and 23 April 2026, Israeli settlers vandalized over 60 Water,

Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) structures and infrastructure, including pipelines, irrigation systems, and water tanks, undermining access to water in 32 Palestinian communities.

In the southern West Bank, these settler-related attacks are reflected in Hebron governorate, particularly in the Masafer Yatta area. In Masafer Yatta, water supply to 11 communities has been disrupted since late January 2026, when settlers reportedly interfered with the main transmission pipeline, cutting off access, and this was followed by repeated acts of sabotage against the network. In March 2026, efforts to restore water access through the provision of spare parts to service providers enabled the temporary reconnection of a damaged main pipeline. However, the pipeline was reportedly damaged again within 12 hours, resulting in renewed disruption of supply and continued reliance on emergency water trucking.

Similar incidents have also been documented in Bethlehem Governorate. In the Barriyyet Kisan area, settlers destroyed a donor-funded water network serving a Palestinian herding community and blocked the community's only access road to Kisan village, leaving residents without access to water and other basic services. According to humanitarian reporting, these events formed part of a broader pattern of settler attacks, harassment, and threats that resulted in the displacement of 17 Palestinian families comprising 101 people, including 53 children.

Another recent incident documented in Bethlehem Governorate occurred on 8 June 2026 in the Khallat al-Louz area southeast of Bethlehem. According to local reports, settlers damaged an irrigation network serving agricultural land, emptied a drinking-water well with a storage capacity of approximately 250 cubic metres, damaged a water collection reservoir, and removed components of the water network. The incident demonstrates how attacks on water infrastructure continue to affect both agricultural livelihoods and water availability in Palestinian communities.

### **3. Water Degradation, Wastewater, and Environmental Harm**

Water insecurity in the southern West Bank is shaped not only by restrictions on access and supply of a vital resource, but also by the degradation of water resources and repeated attacks on water-related infrastructure. In Nahalin Town, west of Bethlehem, local sources reported that wastewater originating from the settlement of “Beitar Illit” was discharged onto agricultural lands and contaminated a natural water spring (Ein Fares) used by residents as a main resource. Local testimonies from Nahalin further

highlight these concerns. During an interview conducted by the BIHR around the time of publishing this report, a local official stated:

*“Ein Fares is one of the main water springs in the town. Wastewater from the adjacent settlement (Beitar Illit) is treated and then released into local water sources under the claim of technical malfunctions affecting Ein Fares Spring, which has now become heavily polluted. The Ein Fares area serves as Nahalin's main agricultural production zone and food basket. The leakage of wastewater from the settlement occurs approximately three days per week and has continued for the past three years. When we follow up with them (the settlement) through official channels, they claim there is a problem with the pump.”*

The ongoing contamination of Ein Fares, alongside its central role in the town's agricultural system, underscores how water resources are increasingly compromised, deepening the community's vulnerability over time.

#### **4. Human Impact of Water Insecurity: A Coercive Environment**

Beyond statistics on water supply and infrastructure, interviews conducted around this topic illustrate how water shortages affect everyday life in Palestinian communities across the southern West Bank. Participants consistently described water insecurity as robbing them of dignity while re-shaping household routines, financial decisions, agricultural activities, and psychological well-being.

##### Testimony 1: Resident of Artas Village (West of Bethlehem)

Artas Village is widely known for its abundant natural springs and agricultural heritage. Often referred to as the "food basket" of Bethlehem, the village has historically relied on its water resources to sustain agricultural livelihoods and support local tourism, including the area surrounding Solomon's Pools. Despite living in an area traditionally associated with water abundance, the interviewee described the daily uncertainty created by recurring water shortages: "I wake up every day wondering whether there will be water or not."

The witness explained that the availability of water determines how household activities are organized. Daily tasks must often be planned around water distribution schedules, while

families are forced to store water and purchase water tankers, placing a considerable financial burden on household budgets.

Describing the psychological impact of these conditions, the interviewee stated: "There is a constant feeling of anxiety throughout the day about when the water will be cut off and when it will return."

According to the witness, this uncertainty is particularly difficult for households with limited water storage capacity and contributes to concerns about hygiene and health, especially for families with young children.

The interviewee also highlighted the gendered impact of water shortages: "The burden falls more heavily on women and girls within the household, as they are primarily responsible for managing water at home."

The witness further noted that waiting for water requires significant time and effort, particularly for residents living in the eastern part of the village, where water reportedly arrives later than in other areas during distribution periods. The interviewee also explained that although water from Artas Spring is sometimes used for household purposes, it is not suitable for drinking.

#### Testimony 2: Resident of Beit Sahour Town (East of Bethlehem)

"Water is a matter of dignity."

This is how one interviewee described the impact of recurring water shortages on daily life. While according to her, water insecurity has long been a concern, the witness explained that the situation has worsened in recent months, with water outages becoming a lot more frequent and lasting for longer periods: "We have noticed that the water is being cut off much more frequently. Although we have never really felt that we had water security, the problem has worsened over the past few months, with repeated outages lasting for longer periods of time."

According to the interviewee, uncertainty regarding water availability affects even the smallest decisions within the household: "These interruptions affect even the smallest details of daily life; should I run the dishwasher or the washing machine, or not? Should I flush the toilet after every use? Should I water my plants, or not?"

The witness explained that water shortages have altered everyday routines and behaviours: "Even the way I carry out the simplest everyday tasks has changed. The way I wash dishes has changed, and the way I shower has changed. The way my child takes a bath has changed. I rush while using water in order to conserve it."

Reflecting on the broader implications of these recurring shortages, the witness stated: "The settlements are expanding, even here in our town, and they want to force us to leave our land. They use water as a tool to exert pressure on us"

### Testimony 3: Resident of Shuyukh al-‘Arrub Village (North of Hebron)

"Agriculture is one of the main sources of employment here."

This is how one resident of Shuyukh al-'Arrub described the significance of water for the community's livelihoods. According to the interviewee, local farmers have traditionally relied on a main water pool in al-'Arrub; however, declining water availability associated with drought conditions and climate-related changes has reduced its capacity to meet agricultural needs.

As a result, the witness explained that farmers are increasingly forced to purchase water in order to continue cultivating their land: "There used to be heavy reliance on a main water pool in al-'Arrub, but it is no longer sufficient because of drought and climate change. As a result, we have to buy water in order to continue farming."

The interviewee noted that the costs associated with purchasing water place an additional burden on farming households. According to the witness, one cubic meter of water costs approximately seven shekels, and agricultural activities require substantial quantities of water throughout the growing season.

While the household is partially able to cope through rainwater harvesting, the witness emphasized that water conservation remains essential: "As for water availability inside the home, thank God, we have a well that collects rainwater. We were fortunate this year to receive heavy rainfall, which helped ease the pressure. However, conserving and reducing water use remains necessary, especially for crops, because we now have to purchase water for agriculture, and it is expensive."

The interviewee further explained the scale of water needs for agricultural production, stating: "Roughly speaking, we need at least one full water tanker every week."

#### Testimony 4: Resident of Beit Fajjar Town (South of Bethlehem)

"Water only comes once every two weeks."

This is how one resident of Beit Fajjar described the reality of water access in the town. According to the interviewee, the household has no well and relies entirely on a rooftop water tank, making the family dependent on the municipal water supply and periodic purchases of water tankers: "As a resident of Beit Fajjar, water only comes once every two weeks, and we do not have a well to rely on. We depend solely on the water tank on the roof of our house. Every month, we are forced to buy a water tanker."

The witness explained that the scarcity of water affects nearly every aspect of daily life, requiring the family to continuously adjust routine household activities in order to conserve water: "Many things in our daily life have changed because of this, such as washing dishes. We constantly try to reduce the amount of dishwashing we do."

According to the interviewee, access to water determines when basic tasks can be performed, including bathing, cleaning, and laundry: "Shower times are determined by water availability and necessity (usually once every two days). We only wash down the house once a week, no more than that."

The witness further described how even routine household responsibilities become dependent on the timing of water distribution: "Even when it comes to laundry, we find ourselves waiting for the municipality's water supply to arrive in order to carry out what would normally be an ordinary household task."

#### Testimony 5: Resident of Al-Eizariya (East Jerusalem)

While this research focuses on communities in Bethlehem and Hebron governorates, similar experiences were described by an interviewee from East Jerusalem, illustrating the wider impact of water insecurity on Palestinian communities in the West Bank.

The witness had lived in Al-Eizariya for more than sixteen years and described water access as a persistent challenge that long predated the events of October 7, 2023. According to the

interviewee, water supply was limited to only a few hours on specific days of the week, requiring entire neighbourhoods to organize their lives around brief periods of water availability. Describing the situation, the witness stated: "Flowing water was available on Sunday mornings from 6 am to 9 AM, and Tuesday nights from 9 PM till midnight. In those few hours, entire neighborhoods are supposed to fill up their water tanks. Do you know how bizarre that sounds? Every neighborhood had a couple of hours a week to refill its tanks before the running water got cut off."

The interviewee explained that households depended heavily on rooftop water tanks and that shortages frequently forced residents to purchase water from private distributors. According to the witness, the cost of obtaining water placed a considerable burden on families already struggling with limited and irregular supplies. Reflecting on the financial impact, the witness recalled: "Private water distribution vendors exploit this need for water. They sell 5,000 liters of water for over 1,600 shekels."

The interviewee further stated that water access became even more difficult following October 2023, as restrictions increased and the cost of purchased water rose substantially: "Post-October 7, 2023, and with stricter water access, the price has nearly doubled."

Beyond the financial burden, the witness described the broader social consequences of prolonged water insecurity. According to the interviewee, recurring shortages contributed to a gradual departure of residents from the area, affecting the social fabric of entire neighbourhoods. The witness stated: "Because of these strangulations, many of the tenants were indirectly forcibly transferred out of Al-Eizariya, leaving entire neighborhoods vacant and hollow."

Reflecting on their own experience, the interviewee concluded: "I, too, had moved out of Al-Eizariya."

The testimony highlights how chronic water insecurity extends beyond questions of infrastructure and service delivery, affecting people's sense of stability, dignity, and ability to remain in their communities.

## **5. Applicable Legal Framework and Analysis**

Israel, in its capacity as occupying power, is bound by international law, including international humanitarian law (IHL), international human rights law (IHRL), and rules of customary international law. The International Court of Justice (ICJ), in its 2004 Advisory Opinion on the *Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory*, held that the Fourth Geneva Convention and relevant human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), are applicable in the oPt. This position was reaffirmed in the ICJ’s 2024 Advisory Opinion on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, where the Court reiterated that international human rights instruments apply extraterritorially in territories under a state’s jurisdiction or effective control and that human rights obligations complement those arising under the law of occupation. Accordingly, Israel’s conduct in the Occupied Palestinian Territory is subject to the combined requirements of international humanitarian law, international human rights law, and customary international law.

### **5.1 International Humanitarian Law**

The ICJ, in its Advisory Opinion “*Legal Consequences arising from the Policies and Practices of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem*” (2024), held that Israel’s continued presence in the oPt is unlawful under international law. This conclusion is grounded in the prohibition on the acquisition of territory by force and the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination. In this legal context, measures that restrict Palestinian access to water sources, impede the maintenance and development of water infrastructure, and disrupt water service delivery in the occupied territory must be understood within a broader framework that the ICJ found to be unlawful. These measures contribute to water insecurity and exacerbate the vulnerability of Palestinian communities, particularly in rural and herding areas of the Southern West Bank.

Article 55 of the Hague Regulations provides that an occupying power acts only as an “administrator and usufructuary” of public property in occupied territory and must safeguard such resources. This principle is particularly relevant given the extensive control over Palestinian water resources documented in this report and the heavy dependence of Hebron and Bethlehem on water supplied through Mekorot, which accounts for approximately 90 percent and 63 percent of their water supply, respectively. The reported 35 percent reduction

in water supplied through the Deir Shaar line serving Hebron and Bethlehem in 2024, as well as the prolonged water shortages experienced by communities such as Idna, illustrate how control over water resources can directly affect access to water for domestic use, agriculture, and livelihoods.

The reported water shortages and disruptions are also relevant to the obligations set out in Article 56 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which requires the occupying power, to the fullest extent of the means available to it, to ensure and maintain public health and hygiene in occupied territory. The conditions documented in this report suggest that recurrent water shortages affect not only access to water itself but also everyday hygiene practices. Interviewees described altering basic household activities and hygiene because of limited water availability, including reducing the frequency of cleaning, postponing laundry until water became available, and shortening showers in order to conserve water. Such conditions illustrate the relationship between reliable access to water and the maintenance of public health and hygiene within affected communities.

The restrictions affecting water infrastructure in Area C are also relevant under the law of occupation. Article 43 of the Hague Regulations requires the occupying power to ensure public life in occupied territory, while Articles 55 and 56 of the Fourth Geneva Convention impose obligations related to the welfare, public health, and hygiene of the occupied population. Given that more than 70 percent of communities located entirely or mostly in Area C reportedly lack connection to the water network and often depend on expensive water trucking, restrictions that impede the development, rehabilitation, or maintenance of water infrastructure have significant implications for the enjoyment of these protections.

The reported vandalism of more than 60 WASH structures across the West Bank during 2026, including pipelines, irrigation systems, and water tanks, is also relevant under international humanitarian law. Article 53 of the Fourth Geneva Convention prohibits the destruction of property unless absolutely required by military necessity. It prohibits “any destruction by the Occupying Power of real or personal property belonging individually or collectively to private persons, or to the State, or to other public authorities, or to social or cooperative organizations.” The repeated sabotage of the main water transmission pipeline serving communities in Masafer Yatta, which resulted in prolonged disruptions to water access and increased reliance on emergency water trucking, illustrates the humanitarian consequences that may arise when water infrastructure is damaged or rendered inoperable.

Beyond restrictions on physical access to water, discrimination in the allocation and management of water resources remains a significant feature of Israel's exclusive control over Palestinian water access. Recent data indicate that Israeli control over shared groundwater resources results in a highly unequal distribution, with settlements consuming approximately 80–85% of available groundwater resources. According to 2022 data, Palestinians' share of extracted water from all aquifers stood at approximately 116.6 million cubic meters, representing only about 15–20 percent of total groundwater resources, a disparity attributed to political and institutional restrictions on access and extraction. These systemic and structural disparities stand in violation of the law of occupation, which requires the occupying power to "take all the measures in [its] power to restore, and ensure, as far as possible, public order and safety" in the occupied territory. The unequal allocation of water resources between Palestinians and Israeli settlers violates the principle that essential resources must be administered for the benefit of the protected population.

## **5.2 International Human Rights Law**

Access to water is recognized as a human right under international human rights law. According to General Comment No. 15 of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the right to water imposes specific obligations on States to ensure access to water. The Committee emphasizes that "With respect to the right to water, States parties have a special obligation to provide those who do not have sufficient means with the necessary water and water facilities and to prevent any discrimination on internationally prohibited grounds in the provision of water and water services." The recurrent reductions in water supplied to Hebron and Bethlehem, the prolonged interruptions experienced by communities such as Idna, and the dependence on costly alternative sources of water raise concerns regarding the availability, accessibility, and affordability of water for affected Palestinian communities.

The discriminatory allocation of water resources also contradicts Israel's responsibilities under international human rights law. For example, Article 11 of the ICESCR guarantees the right to an adequate standard of living. Furthermore, Article 5(e) of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) requires States to guarantee equality in the enjoyment of "the right to public health, medical care, social security and social services."

Israel's control over Palestinian access to water is also directly tied to Palestinian food sovereignty, an integral part of their inalienable right to self-determination. According to the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Michael Fakhri, food sovereignty is “an expression of communities’ and Indigenous Peoples’ power to determine how they grow, prepare, share and eat food and a reflection of their relationship to land and water.” In his report on the Palestinian people’s food sovereignty, Fakhri emphasizes that Palestinians’ ability to sustain their communities is closely linked to continued access to land, water, agricultural resources, and local food systems. Viewed through this lens, restrictions on access to water resources, the destruction of water infrastructure, movement restrictions, and settler violence undermine Palestinians’ control over essential natural resources and weaken their capacity to sustain their communities and livelihoods.

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