

How “Historic” Israel-Jordan Water Deal Leaves Palestinians High and Dry

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The Dead Sea’s unique ecology could be further damaged – along with Palestinian water rights – by new Israeli-Jordanian deal. (Colin Tsoi/[Flickr](#))

World media recently lauded a new project, backed by the [World Bank](#), that will allegedly “save” the [Dead Sea](#) and prove that peace is possible through cooperation to manage natural resources. But the scheme only threatens to make an already disastrous situation worse, as well as robbing Palestinians of their right to water.

The Dead Sea, the fabled salt lake bordered by [Jordan](#), present-day Israel and the occupied West Bank, is shrinking at an alarming rate of around 1.5 meters per year. As a result, hotels built right at the shoreline just a few years ago are now dozens of meters from the water’s edge.

Environmental assessment studies show that some of the damage done — for instance to the Eastern Aquifer Basin — is already irreversible. To slow and reverse this catastrophe, Israel and Jordan proposed in 2002 to build a 180-kilometer canal to replenish the Dead Sea with water from the [Red Sea](#). They claimed — falsely — that the project would prevent the destruction of the Dead Sea, but the plan never addressed the most obvious and direct cause: the diversion of the upstream waters of the [Jordan River](#), which feed the salty lake, mainly by Israel.

As a consequence the natural flow of the Jordan River — the body of water in which Christian tradition holds that Jesus was baptized — has dropped from 1,350 million cubic meters (mcm) per year of fresh water to the Dead Sea, to a mere 20 mcm.

That is just two percent of its original flow. And even this sad remainder is mostly made up of raw sewage and brine — salty water — injected by Israel south of Lake Tiberias. Additionally, Israel’s Dead Sea industries — and on a smaller scale Jordan’s — extract potash (used for fertilizer) and other minerals from the southern end of the lake. This large-scale mining operation is greatly accelerating the disappearance of the Dead Sea. Palestinians, meanwhile — although they share the Dead Sea’s shore — have never been allowed to share in the region’s mineral wealth, nor to draw fresh water from the Jordan.

Devastating environmental consequences

On 12 December 2013, Israel, Jordan and the [Palestinian Authority](#) signed a memorandum of understanding in Washington. This deal should not be confused with the plans long floated by the World Bank for a Red Sea-Dead Sea mega-project.

The new deal outlines much smaller initiatives to develop a desalination plant located in [Aqaba](#), Jordan's port on the Red Sea. This would produce fresh water which would be sold to the adjacent city of Eilat in present-day Israel.

The agreement also includes a general suggestion for the construction of a pipeline to transport the desalination brine, a byproduct of the process, from Aqaba to the ever-diminishing Dead Sea. This component is as of yet only an option. The alternative would be to dump the brine into the Gulf of Aqaba whose fragile coral reefs could suffer devastating damage as a result.

In "exchange" for the Aqaba-Eilat deal, Israel would export more water to Jordan in the Lake Tiberias area, in the north, although the source of this extra water is as of yet unclear and it may require further treatment in Jordan.

The cost for the Aqaba desalination project is conservatively estimated at \$400 million, while the World Bank's notorious Red Sea-Dead Sea Canal project was estimated to cost well over \$10 billion.

The World Bank's scheme — officially known as the Red Sea-Dead Sea Conveyance Project (RSDSCP) — would, [Palestinian groups and water experts warn](#), do irreversible environmental damage and help Israel further dispossess Palestinians of their water rights. However, Israel, and especially Jordan and the World Bank advertise the Aqaba desalination and water swap deal as a "pilot scheme," or even as a first stage to test the environmental impact of adding the mix of Red Sea water and desalination byproducts to the Dead Sea.

It is clearly an effort to attract funding for their old RSDSCP.

Palestinians excluded

It should be emphasized that Palestinians are excluded from both the Aqaba and the Tiberias deals. Palestinian requests to be included in the northern supply scheme were brushed off by Israel. Hence, this project is purely a bilateral deal between Israel and Jordan. A side deal, however, involves potentially selling additional water to the Palestinians.

This water would come from as yet undisclosed sources out of the "Israeli system" — most probably not fresh water, but prohibitively expensive desalinated water from the Mediterranean Sea. Thus the riparian rights of Palestinians — the right to use the water because their territory borders on the banks of the Jordan and the shores of the Dead Sea — are exchanged for the opportunity to subsidize Israel's mushrooming desalination industry.

Ironically, the Israeli chemical and petroleum conglomerates heavily involved in this industry include the Israeli Dead Sea works responsible for much of the environmental destruction in the region.

Falling short

The planned Aqaba plant would provide only moderate amounts of desalinated water (30-40 mcm per year) to Jordan, which is suffering from acute water shortages. Meanwhile, neighboring Eilat, which already has twice the domestic water consumption rates of the rest of Israel, would get a similar amount.

On the other hand, the Aqaba plant would only channel some 200 mcm per year to the Dead Sea, falling far short of reversing or even stopping the drastic declines in the lake's water levels — while risking further damage to the region's unique ecology.

Today, instead of international pressure to reverse the decades-long diversion and mismanagement of the Jordan River — which caused the unfolding environmental catastrophe — both Jordan and the Palestinian Authority are signing deals to make this untenable situation permanent. Their scheme also ignores the concerns — and rights — of the other riparians, Lebanon and Syria.

Neither the governments making the agreements, nor media lauding their plan, have seriously examined its consequences or the alternatives.

Nor do they question the conventional wisdom that more water is needed in a desperately parched region with a rapidly growing population.

Israel's water surplus

The modest amount of water Jordan would gain from Israel in the north would be scarcely enough to meet the needs of the growing population, especially when there is an influx such as the hundreds of thousands of refugees from Syria currently in the country. As noted, Palestinians, would likely only get access to Israeli desalinated water at very high cost.

Neither Jordan nor the Palestinians would gain any increase in their share of Jordan River waters under this deal, only cementing a grossly unfair *status quo* in which Israel diverts the lion's share.

Indeed the structure of the deal is very revealing: during the past decade, Israel has developed into a regional water power with a large water surplus. This is due to its large-scale desalination and waste water re-use, in addition to its long-standing total control over all freshwater resources in historic Palestine.

Israel therefore does not “need” water, let alone more water: it now has a reverse interest of exporting and selling water. It will, in effect, be selling to the Palestinians and Jordanians water supplies that ought to be theirs by right.

No wonder Israel's energy and water minister [Silvan Shalom](#) hailed the deal as an “[historic agreement](#) that realizes a dream of many years and the dream of [Zionism founder [Theodore](#)] [Herzl](#).”

No gain for Palestinians

There are many contradictions in the different press releases and statements on the December deal. It would appear that all the parties have an interest in keeping the terms of this memorandum a secret.

Israel has good reason to celebrate this scam as an historic breakthrough — for their interests, however, rather than for peace. So do the Americans who have little else to show for their “peace process” efforts.

Cash-strapped, water-poor Jordan is desperate for any additional water and banks on the hope that the “peace and cooperation” packaging will attract international donors to pay the

enormous infrastructure costs.

The Palestinians, however, have nothing to gain, which makes it even more baffling why the Palestinian Authority presents it in a positive light.

Why would Palestinians need to lend legitimacy to the false promise that this was a regional water deal, when it is simply deepening their dependency on the occupier under unfavorable terms and risks that continue to strip them of their historic water rights? Of course, under the occupation, Palestinian leaders have little or no access to badly needed additional water sources.

But why is this deal not disclosed and discussed in public? Why does the PA so mistrust the people it is supposed to represent? Instead, once again the PA is placing Palestinian fate into the hands of Israel, the United States and the World Bank?

Palestinian authorities ignore Palestinians

In October 2013, Palestinian organizations from the water sector voiced their fervent opposition to the World Bank's Red Sea-Dead Sea canal mega-project. They urged the PA and the Palestine Liberation Organization to condemn and halt all forms of cooperation with the World Bank scheme and its partners.

In return, the Palestinian Authority, represented by the Palestinian Water Authority, ignored and completely excluded them from consultations and decisions and surprised them with the new Aqaba-Tiberias agreement.

Finally, why did the PA feel compelled to sign a deal where none of its demands, let alone strategic "historic" interests were even remotely addressed or met? Could it be that, once again, as so often before, the PA was coerced into signing?

With Israel and Jordan's king strongly backing the deal, PA leader Mahmoud Abbas would have felt himself under intense pressure not to spoil the desalination exchange.

The Israel-Jordan-Palestinian Authority water deal exemplifies the features common to all the other agreements signed during the "peace process": it sacrifices Palestinian rights on the altar of Israeli and foreign interests, accommodates the unjust *status quo* and repackages further dispossession and discrimination as steps toward "peace."

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