

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict in times of COVID-19: a water analogy

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A few weeks ago, I was discussing water issues with a Palestinian water expert. The interview was mainly on the Red Sea-Dead Sea Conveyance project and on how Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) have been cooperating on the project these last few years. The end of the interview approaching, the conversation was much less structured around the key points I had prepared. While we were talking about factors that could potentially enhance peace, or at least reduce conflictual relations between the two parties, my interviewee then made a parallel between the Israeli-Palestinian cooperation on shared waters and cooperation on the COVID-19. The expert talked about the fact that due to the current situation, Israelis and Palestinians were actually actively cooperating on limiting the spread of the virus. The COVID-19 crisis induced a high degree of cooperation when both parties failed to cooperate on other fields or topics on their agenda.

¹ Figures are from worldometer.info, consulted on 12 June 2020.

² UN News, "Common coronavirus enemy, forges some Palestine-Israel cooperation, but West Bank

Viruses know no border, so should cooperation

Since the worldwide outbreak of COVID-19 with 18 569 contaminations cases in Israel and 487 cases reported in the Palestinian territories¹, Israeli authorities have feared the spread of the virus to the Gaza strip, already struck by a severe humanitarian situation. Despite on-going confrontations in the West Bank and in Gaza², cooperation between the two parties over the COVID-19 sprung in the region. For some, this bilateralism (in a conflict usually marked by unilateral moves) brings hope for the peace process in the Middle East, even though several issues are still standing in the way.

Despite some reluctance from the PA to publicly say they cooperate with Israeli authorities, due to public opinion, joint actions are held, and even with Hamas. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OCHA) has

annexation looms", United Nations, April 23, 2020. Available online at

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1062452>.

spoken about such cooperation in its first COVID-19 Emergency Situation Report released on March 24. The report stated that “since the start of the crisis, the Palestinian and Israel authorities have maintained a close, unprecedented cooperation on efforts aimed at containing the epidemic³”, adding that both governments worked together so that Israel could train Palestinian medical teams, while donating testing kits and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to the West Bank and Gaza. According to Mohammed S. Dajani, an adjunct fellow at The Washington Institute, “the Palestinian Authority also accepted \$25 million in previously withheld tax money to ease the economic impact of the pandemic on Palestinians⁴.” Israel agreed to keep on taking in Palestinians with chronic illnesses for treatment, from the West Bank and from the Gaza strip. However, significant challenges remain when dealing with the COVID-19 crisis, with health services in the Palestinian territories facing a shortage of medical equipment and personnel, due to insufficient funding.

And while a special team was established by the Israeli Health Ministry to respond to the COVID-19 crisis in Gaza, in cooperation with the World Health Organization and Doctors Without Borders, Physicians for Human Rights – Israel CEO Ran Goldstein accused Israel of making a solely symbolical gesture. Goldstein stated that the Israel action was insufficient considering the severe lack of medical supplies and training possibility for medical staff in the West Bank and Gaza⁵. Goldstein added that “Israel has a moral imperative to help the Palestinians, and called for the Health Ministry to do all it can to curb the spread of coronavirus and support the Palestinian health system.⁶”

³ OCHA, *COVID-19 Emergency Situation Report 1*, March 24, 2020, p. 4. Available online at <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/covid-19-emergency-situation-report-1>.

⁴<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/Peace-Coronavirus-Israel-Palestinians-COVID-19>

⁵ Harkov, L., “Court documents show extent of Israeli aid to PA during coronavirus crisis”, in *The Jerusalem Post*, May 7, 2020. Available online at <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Court->

The water analogy

Going back to the water issue, some actors in the region such as EcoPeace, have wished that cooperation on shared water would create a spillover effect, starting from water cooperation and ending with the larger peace negotiations, what some also call environmental peacebuilding. Working on the topic of water conflict and cooperation in my PhD thesis, the assumption was that the Red Dead canal project, a large project aimed at replenishing the Dead sea and fostering stronger cooperation between Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority, would set an example in the region and would lead to such a spillover effect⁷. However, according to my interviewee, this is not possible. As a matter of fact, according to him, the impact on the peace process would be minimal. Of course, the mega project might bring people to discussion, but when you see what governments are capable of in times of COVID-19, cooperation on water seems pale in comparison. Indeed, there is strong cooperation and communication between the Palestinians and Israelis in fighting the virus, with both parties holding joint meetings and discussions to try to find solutions to a severe problem, while cooperation and communication over water issues is relatively limited.

There is not as much cooperation on water issues despite the urgency of water scarcity in the region and the impact it has on Palestinians. What then prevents such cooperation from happening? According to my interviewee, the Palestinians don't see such cooperation as a win-win situation. In their view, it is only a win situation for Israel. As a matter of fact, for the Palestinians, access to water is a right they have been seeking for decades, while until now they have been paying a large amount of money for much of their water⁸. According to my

[documents-show-extent-of-Israeli-aid-to-PA-during-coronavirus-crisis-627224](#).

⁶ *Ibid*.

⁷ Aggestam, K., “Depoliticizing water conflict: functional peacebuilding in the Red Sea–Dead Sea Water Conveyance project”, *Hydrological sciences journal*, volume 61(7), 2016, pp. 1302-1312.

⁸ Gray, A., Hilal, J., “Water and security for Palestine”, in Lipchin, C., Pallant, E., Saranga, D., Amster, A. (eds.), *Integrated Water Resources Management and Security in the Middle East*, Dordrecht, Springer, 2007.

interviewee, Palestinians are going to pay for the quantities of water that are set to receive in planned water swaps envisioned within the Red Dead project. However, it cannot be seen as a successful outcome of negotiation, because this is a technical outcome, as a result of a lower level of negotiation that addresses the purchase of water and not the right to water. It is in a sense an economic model more than a political issue that is here at stake and will barely have a real impact on the daily life of the people in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip according to my interviewee. The water swap provides for 10 to 15 million cubic meters (MCM), while the need for all sectors in the Palestinian territories is estimated at 600 MCM. Currently, Israel sells around 270 MCM to the Gaza Strip and to the West Bank. There is therefore a gap of 300 MCM that the 10-15 additional MCM will barely begin to cover.

That way, the Red Sea Dead Sea water conveyance project will not impact the Palestinian population. For the project or the policy to be recognized as such by the population, it has to have an impact, otherwise, it will not be influential. According to my interviewee, it has to show an impact on the ground so that people can trust the peace process and the negotiations and say "It's positive, let's go ahead", which is not the case with the water issue between Palestinians and Israelis.

What environmental peacebuilding?

The spillover effect that was expected from water cooperation has not happened yet. As mentioned previously, however, such cooperation became actually palpable with the fight against the pandemic. The Israeli government have quickly realized that no matter what, when it comes to the spread of an airborne virus, the two parties are linked. Until now, the asymmetry in the relation between the two gave Israel what could be called a sense of detachment from the well-being of Palestinians. The same is true regarding water access, where for a long time Israeli

governments did not seem to care much about water scarcity in the Palestinian territories.

If today Israelis and Palestinians are cooperating on this issue, it is for the sake of the two populations, but also because the Israeli government has understood that they are tied together. You cannot prevent the virus to spread to the Israeli population without as well protecting the Palestinian population, because it would anyway in some way or the other impact Israel. The same goes with water. Ensuring access to water only for Israelis might solve the water scarcity at the national level but won't solve the regional security issue linked to the lack of water. This crisis will also impact the Israeli population if the government doesn't do anything. An example which is often cited is the multiple shutdowns of the Ashkelon seawater desalination plant in 2016 due to untreated wastewater from Gaza. The armed conflict between Hamas and Israel led to the severe bombing of the Gaza strip over the last decade. This caused the collapse of much of the infrastructure, as well as the shutdown of part of the electricity, the rest being supplied by Israel. As a consequence, most of the wastewater treatment plants have stopped functioning. Due to the water currents, wastewater has therefore started to flow through the Mediterranean Sea and has led to several shutdowns of the desalination unit up the Israeli coast⁹. These incidents happened in the summer, when these plants work at their full capacity, and the cutoff had a great impact on local water supply in Israel. From then, several politicians as well as the Israeli army have argued in favor of understanding the water issue in the Palestinian territories as a matter of national security and of solving the wastewater treatment plants problem in Gaza¹⁰.

The analogy with the COVID-19 crisis is clear: when the issue has a direct influence on its security, Israel sees an interest to negotiate and is willing to cooperate. One could see a model in what is taking place with this pandemic: that politicians can act when they want to demonstrate that cooperation is more a matter

⁹ EcoPeace, INSS, *Gaza on the Edge: The Water & Energy Crisis in Gaza*, October 2017, updated May 2018. Available online at <https://ecopeaceme.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Gaza-on-the-Edge.-May-2018.pdf>.

¹⁰ EcoPeace, INSS, *Israeli Water Diplomacy and National Security Concerns*, January 2018. Available online at https://ecopeaceme.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Water_Diplomacy.pdf.

of will than of capacity or constraints. This situation could actually be an opportunity, to take it as a case of starting the negotiations immediately without the mediation of a third country to discuss through. No one can know what will happen in the coming months or years, but the way the situation is handled will influence and affect the daily life in Israel and in the Palestinian territories.

The issue of normalization

For many of the political actors that have been cooperating with Israel since its independence, under the table negotiations has often been the norm. And the Palestinian Authority is no exception. Following the first Oslo Accord in 1993, the two governments have often managed to cooperate for the benefit of both parties. As a matter of fact, according to one observer, “it is only when both parties find themselves in front of cameras that goodwill turns into hateful words and incitement. Perhaps leaders on both sides reason that their respective populations expect hatred and conflict instead of love and peace.¹¹” While both parties have been praised for their unprecedented joint cooperation in containing the COVID-19 pandemic, cooperating and coordinating with Israel remains a delicate issue for the PA and especially for Hamas. According to *Al Arabiya*, “to save face, Hamas arrested Palestinian peace activists in Gaza for organizing an online conference call with Israeli proponents of peace. Hamas accused the Gazan activists of “normalization with Israel” and “treason¹².”

According to Israeli sources, Israeli teams have trained two teams of doctors, nurses and other medical workers in Gaza on treating COVID-19 patients. One team of doctors was related to the PA and one to Hamas. According to the Palestinian Health Ministry in Ramallah, it indeed coordinated a meeting for doctors from Gaza and from Jericho with Israeli doctors to address

COVID-19. However, the Ministry was not aware that another group of doctors and nurses from the Hamas-run Gaza government had later received training inside Israel without coordination with the Health Ministry in Ramallah. This has been “raising questions among Palestinians about whether the training came through coordination between Israel and the Hamas government in Gaza, the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah or perhaps a humanitarian group¹³.”

However, Hamas has been silent on this issue so as not to make the relations and cooperation between Israel and the Gaza government public and avoid accusations of normalization. The humanitarian side of the action has been underlined, as Israel is obliged to provide for the Strip’s humanitarian needs according to international agreements. Both parties have been acting “through Israel’s Physicians for Human Rights, which communicates directly with the Gaza government to provide certain assistance and support¹⁴.” According to *Al-Monitor*, the action of the Gaza government is somehow trying to test its relationship with Israel, through the humanitarian channel, “to examine to what extent Israel can accept a direct humanitarian path between Gaza and Israel, as both sides prefer to deal indirectly when it comes to political issues¹⁵.” If Palestinians are reluctant to deal publicly with Israel over an issue such as a global pandemic and only do so under the humanitarian hat, their will to cooperate publicly over the matter of shared waters, which is a political issue, is highly questionable.

Latest Israeli elections & halt in security coordination from the PA

Now, despite the urgency of the situation, a few elements risk impeding the current cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians. For the third time in a few months, the Israeli population went

¹¹ Abudl-Hussain, H., “Palestinians and Israelis show peace is attainable with coordinated COVID-19 response”, in *Al Arabiya*, April 14, 2020. Available online at <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2020/04/14/Palestinians-and-Israelis-show-peace-is-attainable-with-coordinated-COVID-19-response>.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Abu Jahal, E., “Hamas quietly allows Gaza doctors to get COVID-19 training in Israel”, in *Al-Monitor*, April 26, 2020. Available online at <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/04/gaza-doctors-coronavirus-training-israel-ramallah.html>.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

back to the polls and have yet again voted for the same two competing parties. After more than a year of political deadlock, the new Israeli government was sworn in May 2020, amidst protests for democracy across the country. Despite competing views and interests, the two main parties, represented by the presiding Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of the Likud party and by Benjamin Gantz, who is scheduled to take over Netanyahu's position in November 2021, for the Israel Resilience political alliance, actually agree when it comes to the annexation of the West Bank. How the new government handles this matter could have an impact on the cooperation between the two parties regarding the fight against the covid-19.

Netanyahu has stated that he would extend Israel's territory over the Israeli settlement in the West Bank. Backed by the unity government deal signed with Gantz, the Prime Minister has pushed for the annexation of some parts of the West Bank to be discussed with the cabinet on July 1 2020, and this could indeed worsen the situation¹⁶. According to UN envoy Mladenov, "moves to annex land and to accelerate settlement expansion, combined with the devastating impact of COVID-19, can ignite the situation and destroy any hope of peace¹⁷." While the annexation of parts of the West Bank has been on the table for a while now, the new government has accelerated things by promising to move on with the topic this summer. As a result, the head of the PA, Mahmoud Abbas, has ended the security coordination between the two parties¹⁸. While the implications on the cooperation to face COVID-19 might be limited, this new escalation in the confrontation could temper any spillover earned from it.

¹⁶ Holmes, O., "Netanyahu takes office in deal that could see West Bank annexation", in *The Guardian*, May 17, 2020. Available online at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/17/netanyahu-takes-office-in-deal-that-could-see-west-bank-annexation>.

¹⁷ UN News, *op.cit.*

¹⁸ Borger, J., "Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas ends security agreement with Israel and US", in *The Guardian*, May 20, 2020. Available online at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/20/palestinian-leader-mahmoud-abbas-ends-security-agreement-with-israel-and-us>.



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