



MAAN Development Center



# The Environmental Crisis of the Jordan River and Palestinians' Right to Access

- **60:** today's dismally low water flow, measured in million cubic meters (MCM), of the Jordan River
- **0:** percentage of Jordan River water allotted for Palestinian usage
- **97:** percentage of the river's water that is diverted by Israel, Syria, and Jordan
- **50:** percentage of the river's biodiversity is lost due to pollution and misuse
- **33:** percentage of total Israeli water consumption originating from the Jordan River – mostly for agricultural purposes
- **47.4:** amount of water, in MCM, that Palestinians in the West Bank (excluding East Jerusalem) purchased from Israel in 2009 alone

*The Jordan River is a regional lifeline. Historically the river was the primary water source for communities throughout mandate Palestine, Syria, and Jordan. Today, however, the river has been transformed from a significant regional water supply to a polluted and weak stream, access to which has been greatly restricted. Indeed, the Jordan River faces an existential environmental crisis; severe pollution and constant over-diversion of water threatens the future of this natural resource. Furthermore, the Palestinian people are still denied their right to access this water source.*

## **The Environmental Crisis**

The Jordan River is about 360 km in length, and once carried an average of 1.3 billion cubic meters of fresh water to the Dead Sea every year. Today, river flow is as low as 20-30 MCM of fresh water per year, as mass amounts of water are diverted from the river. <sup>1</sup> Seventy-five percent of the Jordan River's water is used for agriculture – particularly from the lower Jordan River in Israel and Jordan. <sup>2</sup> The lower part of the river, which flows through the West Bank's Jordan Valley, starts at the southern most point of the Sea of Galilee and flows about 100 km to the Dead Sea. Though only 3% of the Jordan River's basin lies within Israel's pre-1967 borders, <sup>3</sup> Israel diverts substantial amounts of water from the River, including around 700 MCM from Lake Tiberias. <sup>4</sup>

Overall, Israel, Syria, and Jordan divert an estimated 98% of the river's historical flow per year. In large areas of the river, there is almost no water flow at all. In other parts, remaining water flow is contaminated with saline water, raw sewage, polluted fishpond water, and other wastewater.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the Jordan River now presents a public health risk due to pollution from nitrates and high levels of coliform bacteria, indicating high levels of human waste and bacterial diseases. Due to widespread abuse of the river's ecosystem and misuse of its water resources, it has already lost 50% of its biodiversity.<sup>6</sup>

The Yarmouk River, from which Israel, Syria, and Jordan all benefit, is one of the major tributaries of the lower Jordan River. Unfortunately, like the Jordan River and the Dead Sea, the Yarmouk River has suffered from declining water flow for the past several decades. Unsurprisingly, Jordan, Syria, and Israel have all tried to maximize its potential.

The significant decrease in the Jordan River's water flow can be attributed to a number of regional water projects and water sharing agreements.<sup>7</sup> For instance, a number of Syrian water projects since the 1970s have increased Syrian use of the Yarmouk to around 90 million cubic meters per year.<sup>8</sup> Jordan's King Abdullah Canal and the Al Wahda dam, diverts another 377 million cubic meters from the River. Israel, through agreements made with Jordan as part of the Jordan-Israel Peace Treaty, receives around 25 million cubic meters from the Yarmouk River and about 361 MCM of residual water from the Jordan River.<sup>9</sup> Water resources from the Jordan River account for around 33% of the fresh water consumed by Israelis.<sup>10</sup> Palestinians are allocated 0 MCM of water from the Jordan River.

### **Palestinian Access to Water**

The denial of Palestinian access to water is a recognized violation of international law. In July 2010, the UN Human Rights Committee affirmed that the denial of access to water and sanitation is a violation of the international Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), concluding that "in the case of Israel, they amounted to violations of the right to life and the right to equal protection under the law."<sup>11</sup>

The Jordan River is one of several sources of water for the state of Israel; however, Palestinians in the West Bank are systematically denied access to this needed resource - afforded only limited access to the region's Mountain Aquifer as a sole water source.<sup>12</sup> In the Jordan Valley, the precise area in which the Jordan River flows, water consumption amongst Pal-

estinians reaches as low as 10 liters per day – constituting a serious risk to public health.<sup>13</sup> Despite this growing crisis, the Israeli government continues to withdraw water from the occupied Palestinian territories to provide Israeli cities and towns, and Israeli settlements with water supplies.

Without access to the limited above-ground resources, such as the Jordan River, Palestinians are forced to purchase expensive water from Israel. Surplus water, not used by Israelis, is sold back to Palestinians from the Israeli water company *Mekerot*, at extremely inflated prices.<sup>14</sup> The 46% of Palestinians in the West Bank who are not connected to a formal water network, for example, are forced to rely on the delivery of expensive water from this company. The water from *Mekerot* costs almost 10 times as much as piped water.<sup>15</sup> The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics estimates that in 2009, Palestinian purchased about 47.4 MCM of water in the West Bank, excluding East Jerusalem.<sup>16</sup>

### **Endnotes**

- 1 Isaac, Jad and Walid Sabbah. "The Intensifying Water Crisis in Palestine". (Jerusalem, Applied Research Institute – Jerusalem, 1994), 6.; Friends of the Earth – Middle East, "All Across the Jordan: Trans-boundary Master Planning of the Lower Jordan River Basin," (presentation, *SWIM Launching Workshop*, December 2011).
- 2 Global Nature Fund, "Jordan River Rehabilitation Project", last modified April 2, 2012, [http://www.globalnature.org/29890/PROJECTS/Nature-Conservation-Biodiversity/Rehabilitation-Jordan/02\\_vorlage.asp](http://www.globalnature.org/29890/PROJECTS/Nature-Conservation-Biodiversity/Rehabilitation-Jordan/02_vorlage.asp).
- 3 Isaac, Jad and Walid Sabbah, "The Intensifying Water Crisis...", 6.
- 4 MA'AN Development Center, *Destructive Environmentalism*, (2011), 10.
- 5 MA'AN, *Destructive Environmentalism*, 3.
- 6 Gilad Safier, Executive Summary: *Roadmap for the Rehabilitation of the Lower Jordan River*, (Friends of the Earth – Middle East, 2011), 4.
- 7 Karen Hudes, *Shared Water Resources in the Jordan River Basin*, 4.
- 8 Hudes, *Shared Water Resources in the Jordan River Basin*, 13.
- 9 Hudes, Karen. "Shared Water Resources in the Jordan River Basin." P 4.
- 10 Mekerot, "Israel's Water Supply System," <http://www.mekerot.co.il/Eng/Mekerot/Pages/IsraelsWaterSupplySystem.aspx>.
- 11 Emergency Water Sanitation/Hygiene (EWASH) – Middle East North Africa (MENA), "Palestine: UN Human Rights Committee says Israel denying access to water", published in August 2010, <http://washmena.wordpress.com/2010/08/27/palestine-un-human-rights-committee-says-israel-denying-access-to-water/>.
- 12 "Press Release on the Occasion of World Water Day," *PCBS*, March 22, 2009, 1.
- 13 MA'AN, *Diary 2012*, (2012).
- 14 MA'AN, *Diary 2012*, (2012).
- 15 MA'AN, *Restricted Access*, 7.
- 16 "Press Release on the Occasion of World Water Day," *PCBS*, March 22, 2009, 1.