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Centro de Estudios de Oriente Medio
Fundación Promoción Social de la Cultura

CEMOFPSC SEMINAR
Women's participation in water access and
management:
"The case of Palestine"



The policy of artificial water scarcity

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Thank you. I join the thanks of my colleagues and I also want to thank the translators up there for facilitating.

Each summer or almost each summer, I write about water. I write about water problems or water crisis in Palestinian communities. Each summer, and the summer begins very early when it comes to water problems, it can begin in April or May. I know I repeat myself because I go to a community and I write what it is like to run a house for two, three weeks and one month without running water, and I repeat myself telling about desperation of the people. I repeat myself writing about how people have to buy water in tanks and pay 5 times, 10 times more than we would pay to the water company. I repeat myself when I describe how people are offended. It's not just the difficulty, but it is about being emotionally hurt because you have to live in such a degrading situation: ten people living in a house without running water in the toilet or in the kitchen. I repeat myself and I have to do it because this is a repetitive situation that has happened since I remember myself reporting from the Palestinian territory about 25 years ago, only to see it become more and more difficult.

Yet, what has become even more poignant and standing out are the lies of the Israeli officials and the lies of the Israeli authorities. As a journalist, whenever I write something which is contested I have to get a response from the authorities. So, very dutifully, I write a list of questions to the Israeli representatives most usually in the Civil Administration and in the Water authority and Merkorot. For example, last summer I had to ask about the situation in Selfit area which was not the only place with a crisis, but the only place where I really worked on the crisis,



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on the water crisis. And I asked if it was true there were no communities off Selfit area to the West of the West Bank because you want to make sure that settlers get their daily supply of water, and you control the common pipe. There is one pipe to both settlements, Israeli settlements and Palestinian communities and you just make changes in the pipes, so that more water reaches the settlements and less water reaches the communities. Of course, it was denied even though I did hear it from Palestinian workers who are employed by the Civil Administration, they would not give me their names but admitted they saw them doing this lowering of the pressure in the pipes which lead to the Palestine communities. It means less water available for the Palestinian communities and more water for the settlements.

So each year when I write about water I face the Israeli lies. Every centre of power, every government, every official lies. This is part of their job to lie and it is even more so when it comes to a military occupation, an imposed military occupation which has no accountability towards the people it controls. But my discovery as a journalist is that when it comes to water Israel lies the most. They say it is due to mismanagement of the Palestinians. Some of the lies are half truths and we know what half truths are. There is mismanagement and corruption, yes, and they say Palestinian steal from the water pipes in certain areas where Palestinian often connect illegally because they don't have any other choice. Sometimes there are people who are doing this for their personal profit. Yes, it exists everywhere, but the basis is different, this half lie, half truth, is that it always ignores the core issue: the Palestinians are not allowed access to water beneath their feet.

Why would they lie so much? Why is it that Israelis lie especially on water issues on all levels? If I had had time I would have shared with you much more about these lies. They lie about water more than they lie about other issues that concerns Israeli domination over Palestinians maybe because it is the only area where they cannot give the security pretext. There are many things where they can give the security pretext. You bomb Gaza and murder two thousand people in three weeks or six weeks, security reasons, they launched me shells, which is true. Even in the beginning the settlements had a military pretext, a security pretext. We need this for our defense; we need this for our protection. Then, you have closure, you close Palestinian cities. You don't let people move. You have checkpoints. It's for security reasons. These things may convince you with some difficulty. However, when it comes to water and to this outrageous inequity and outrageous theft of water, you cannot be convinced. As a journalist who is not very loved by the authorities, I don't get secret documents that tell me what is behind the Israeli water policy. No, I don't get this information, I have some colleagues who always have Israeli documents to disclose. My documents are the facts on the ground, which give me the proof, which allow me to analyze Israeli policy because the facts are on the ground.



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What is behind the Israeli Palestinian permanent water crisis, an artificial crisis by the fact that is man- made crisis? It is not a true crisis because although we have droughts, Israelis never go thirsty like in places in Africa, but Palestinians do. If Palestinians don't go thirsty, it's because the world pays for the piped water from the Israelis. Israelis stole this water in the first place from the Palestinians, so that's why they don't go physically thirsty.

Gaza was already mentioned and what I want to do is just give an example of some of the basic policies of Israel when it comes to water for the Palestinians and then explain what is behind this policy as I see it. The main important thing about Gaza is that from 1967 Israel expected Gaza to be an autarchic regime, like a separated regime, a water regime that is not connected to the rest of the country. The same aquifer, part of the shore aquifer that supplies Gaza with water is the same one that served the Palestinians in 1947, before the establishment of Israel. That was when seventy thousand people lived there, seventy thousand. Then in 1948, the Nakba, the expulsion of Palestinians from their villages in today's Israel, raised the population in Gaza by three times. 200.000 refugees came to Gaza after 1948. Still the aquifer that we are talking about in the confines of the Gaza Strip was enough for this 300.000 people. Now we are talking about 2 million, the same aquifer has to serve 2 million people. Now this is crazy, we know it.

Israelis could have known these 20 years ago. Israelis are known to be high-tech or smart up nation, etc. These things could have been taken into consideration and the most natural thing is to remember that Gaza geographically is part of the country. It is not an island somewhere in the Pacific Ocean. It is part of this country whatever we call it Holy Land, Palestine, Israel, Eretz Israel; it is part of the country, so there should be a responsibility in sharing the water with this very important part of the country. Gaza has never been developed. There were times when water was given to the settlers from Israel in Gaza, and then water transferred to Gaza from Israel as compensation for the water that settlers took from the same aquifer, but now what is being sent from Israel is negligible.

One of the basics of the Oslo Agreement was to divide the West Bank into categories of control. So Palestinian authority would have policing authorities and administrative authorities in areas called A, then areas called B, a category of which would be under Israeli overall security, security authority but administratively it would be Palestinian authority, so Palestinians can issue for example permits to build, but it's the Israeli army which is running around, and then the largest part area called C both Israeli military policing and administrative authorities. By 1990 this should have been over. Almost 20 years later, 62% of the land of the West Bank is still Israeli. Palestinian authority doesn't have any permission to build, to develop, to plan. It is not only a matter of access to water or



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permits, it is about the inability to plan for itself. So this is the second policy of Israel: disconnecting the Palestinian regions, the Palestinian regions where the Palestinian Authority does have some control. Around 62% of the Palestinians live in area C but since 1967 Israel does its best not to allow Palestinians to live there and one of the ways is not to allow communities in those area C to connect to water, to reach water to the extent that when people even dig systems to collect rainwater Israel comes and demolishes those systems, to the extent that when people have a tractor which goes to a nearby spring to bring water, Israel confiscates the tractor and the people have to pay a very high sum in order to release the tractor and bring it back to the community, to the extent Israel confiscates water tanks which goes from the spring to those communities because they say it's not allowed.

Another policy is to dig so deep in the Israeli wells that the natural springs get dry. Up to now many Palestinians use the natural springs, but these springs get dryer and dryer with the years because Israeli pumping and drilling is so deep and developed. So what Palestinians are using as a natural way to access water is also getting less and less. To the extent that in some areas in the Jordan Valley I know farmers who leave, their sons cannot be farmers like themselves. When you compare the Jordanian part of the Jordan Valley, to the Israeli occupied part, you see how it could flourish with agricultural communities because it's so rich with water.

The sum up of all this is that because Palestinians cannot plan, they cannot develop. Palestine is always restricted by those Israeli policies. And my answer to why Israel has this water policy in all these areas is also very simple. All these policies lead to one conclusion: Israel in tandem with the Oslo process supposed to be a peace process pursues one main objective, that is, to fragment Palestinian society and territory completely in order to foil the two-state solution. This was the main Israeli intention from the start of the Oslo negotiations, from the start and I, after 25 years, I feel positive enough to say that this was, from the start the aim. The aim was not to reach a two-state solution, on the contrary it was to foil it. The Gaza example is the best example and water is not the only issue. All the examples that I brought attest to the fact that Israel is fragmenting. Area C is about fragmenting, about depopulation, making people leave 60% of the land, not allowing others to go back. Many Palestinians who live in the areas B or even A have land in area C. I mean area C is the natural reservoir of land for all the Palestinian communities so you do not allow the Palestinian communities to further develop and to solve problems for example of population density. As a result, this policy is emptying area C.

Then you have a policy of disconnecting Palestinian regions one from each other since Oslo. And I dare say that here you see what actually Israel is consolidating



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day after day and the water is always an important example. What Israel is consolidating is an internal Israeli compromise. It is a compromise between the wish, the dream to see Palestinians seize this country and the realization that it's not possible, that we cannot repeat 1948. I mean mass expulsion is not feasible now for political reasons; I'm not talking about moral reasons, I'm talking about political reasons, so the Israeli compromise, internal compromise, is to create enclaves, reservations, Palestinian reservations. This is the reality that we see today and one of the main tools is in the control of water and creating a water situation that is very different from one place to the other. So you don't have the ability to plan, you make each case a unique case and finally, you generate all kind of problems.