

An Appeal to Stop the Weaponization of Water

THE GENEVA WATER HUB | Is water misery or dignity; life, or death? The incessant denial and destruction of water systems in Gaza obliges an answer. Let us use water to extinguish the flames

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Is water misery or dignity; life, or death? The incessant denial and destruction of water systems in Gaza obliges an answer. Our response is to call for a water ceasefire and an end to the weaponization of water.

The norms that the world has built to preserve humanity can be used to open the door to political resolution of any conflict. But the 'complete siege' that the Israeli government has imposed on Gaza has done more than just cut off fuel, water and food. It has taken the weaponization of water to an extreme that cannot be ignored. Water towers have been bombed, water treatment plants allowed to run out of fuel, and only a trickle of bottled water has been allowed in through Egypt. Meanwhile, sewage overflowing in the pipes percolates back through the sand to the aquifer, and the [predicted spread of waterborne disease](#) has prompted a [host of UN agencies](#) to issue an urgent plea for a very basic ask: the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure.

Water repair crews risk their lives trying to keep the water flowing and the reservoirs full. Seeing the [water flow through the streets](#) when a water tower was bombed in northern Gaza on 6 November 2023 seemed particularly offensive, particularly when the average resident is [reduced to three litres](#) per day. The minimum threshold for sanitation and dignity is between 60 and 80 litres.

The situation is all the graver because water in Gaza was already undrinkable before this last round of fighting. We are a long way away from the days when Alexander the Great or the [British](#) stopped in Gaza to replenish their armies as they advanced or retreated through the Sinai desert in Egypt. The hundreds of thousands of people forced into Gaza during the *nakba* and creation of the state of Israel in 1948 pushed Gaza's sweet waters beyond their sustainable limits.

The aquifer has been under pressure ever since, despite decades of efforts by the Palestinian Water Authority and Coastal Management Water Utility to build the water and wastewater treatment plants necessary to satisfy the people's needs. The biggest restrictions to sustainable development of the water sector in the West Bank and Gaza were 'exogenous,' a [World Bank study](#) found in 2009, largely stemming from the Israeli occupation following the Oslo Accords. Today, even the notion of sustainable development has been obliterated. The Palestinian-Israeli Joint Technical Committee has been singled-out for allowing dual development of water in the West Bank. The mechanism has conditioned approval of Palestinian projects to provide water to villages that have been without water for centuries on Palestinian approval of Israeli projects to supply water to brand-new settlements.

All who are interested in a lasting peace in the region must therefore consider the weaponization of water from within the politics of the Palestinian-Israeli fight over territory and for self-determination.

We cannot evaluate whether the motives to destroy and deny water in Gaza are military or political. According to Ha'aretz, [the idea](#) of depriving Gaza's population of water had been floated in 1967, in order to get them to 'leave.' Fortunately, the idea was never acted on.

What we do know is that there is an ample body of international law meant to prevent the misery that accompanies the destruction of water systems. Israel, as the occupying power, is obliged under International Humanitarian Law (IHL) to take all measures in its power to restore and ensure, as far as possible, public order and civil life. IHL calls for protection of objects 'indispensable for the survival of the civilian population' (ICRC's study on [Customary IHL, Rule 54](#)), prohibits collective punishment ([CIHL, Rule 103](#)), and requires that unimpeded access be granted to repair crews ([CIHL, Rule 56](#)). The UN Security Council Resolution 2573 adopted in 2021 pushes in the same direction: critical civilian infrastructure must be protected in all circumstances, so that civilians do not suffer like the combatants who wage the war.

The [Geneva Principles](#), which gather other international environmental norms, make a clear call for combatants 'to negotiate water ceasefire agreements in order to allow the safe passage of humanitarian relief personnel, including those involved in water-related activities' ([Geneva Principles, Principle 17 \(4\)](#)), as occurred in Ukraine in 2014. This is a call we support with all our hearts.

We also know that the [reverberating effects of urban warfare](#) on water systems endure long after the dust has settled, that the Palestinian will for self-determination will be neither fulfilled nor stopped by the killing of civilians, and that how this war is waged will shape the discussions which inevitably set out the political future.

Let us use water to extinguish the flames, instead. The killing must stop. Combatants must respect humanitarian law. Humanitarian assistance must be provided without delay. From a water perspective, we join the ever-growing chorus of calls for a ceasefire to restore the dignity of the people in Gaza, and to begin the honest discussion and compromise required to address the root causes of the conflict.

*On behalf of the Geneva Water Hub, a Centre of Competence on Water for Peace.

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Our objective is to build bridges to prevent and resolve water-related conflicts and to promote the use of water as an instrument of peace.

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