

## Poisoning Access to Water in the Gaza-Palestine Communities: A Threat to Defence and Humanity

*Felix Nana Kofi Ofori*  
(Sunderland University in London, UK)

**Abstract:** This article argues that water signifies peace, security and dignity, which have eluded the Gazans and Israelis since the commencement of the October 7th, 2023, conflict. It contends that, although water is in limited supply throughout the region; yet Israeli bombardments of Palestinian communities are destroying existing water sources and infrastructures in violation of international law, thereby exacerbating the crisis engulfing the communities. As a major factor to many wars across regions of the world, the article examines the water-conflict nexus; stating that the Gaza-Israeli conflict not only compounds the health challenges confronting the Gazans but also extends to the Israelis a share of the hazards for which peace must be urgently secured. With contiguous borders straddling Gaza-Israel, this article holds that the water-crisis in the region has the sinews of distorting human activities critical to the Israelis because of the symbiotic relationship characterizing both factions irrespective of the military gains one faction procures over the other. Furthermore, as a finite resource in the arid-region, the article opines that without peace and stability between Gaza and Israel, the socio-economic status of the peoples will remain disjointed, deepening human sufferings and fabric of the region. As a strategy to gender peace between Gaza and Israel, the article proffers that reconciliation anchored in equitable and fair solutions are fashioned as a precursor to stabilizing the region with major western acting as guarantors.

**Key words:** water, peace, humanity, defence, misery and health

**JEL code:** Q

### 1. Introduction

The problem of access to water has assumed an alarming global proportion with shortages of its supply in Europe, parts of Asia, Africa and the Middle East; particularly in Gaza because of the current Israeli-Gaza conflict, which begun on October 7, 2023. Major factors attributable to this phenomenon are namely: poisoned water sources, bombed water resources and facilities, environmental degradation and drought, occasioned by climatic conditions in Gaza (WHO, 2023). Also, the scarcity of water in Gaza and its surrounding communities has dire health, environmental and socio-economic implications for the Gazans as well as pose covert security threats to the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), and by extension the entire region (Varvitsioti, 2024, p. 5). While the Gazans face acute health-problems stemming from polluted water sources in the area, the war has compounded general human misery in the region by introducing water-borne diseases and related health hazards with far-reaching security

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Felix Nana Kofi Ofori, Ph.D., Sunderland University in London; research areas: international economic law, WTO law: TRIPS and GATS agreements. E-mail: [Ofori.ofori@sunderland.ac.uk](mailto:Ofori.ofori@sunderland.ac.uk).

threats to the communities, and military in general (Hall et al.,2024). Against that backdrop, this article examines the nexus between human dignity and water security, gendered by the ensuing war in Gaza. This article is thus organised as follows. First, it examines the status of water supply in Gaza; second, the water and conflict nexus is explored; third, the relationship between defence, water and human health is considered; while section four proffers some recommendations to stem the crises, and lastly a conclusion.

## 2. The Status of Water Supply in Gaza

The management and distribution of shared water resources can significantly affect social cohesion and risk of conflicts. Between Palestine and Israel, several conflicts had been fought over water resources down the years. In this regard, Zeitoun, opines that “It is almost impossible to believe that the Gaza Strip was ever an oasis. But Gaza’s fresh sweet groundwater has been nourishing inhabitants for over 3,000 years. It was always the first stop of conquerors leaving Egypt for the riches of Syria. Like the Pharaohs before him, Alexander the Great sought the cool wells of Gaza at the end of his trek across the Sinai desert. Wadi Gaza and Wadi Beit Hanoun, that used to run clear with fresh water, now stagnate like cesspits” (Zeitoun, 2007). Reflecting on the status of water supply in Gaza betrays a sordid picture of human miseries evidenced as follow. First, “As early as 2017, Unicef estimated that 96 percent of the water from Gaza’s sole aquifer was unfit for human consumption. Before Israel launched its Gaza offensive last October, that underground water source provided 81 percent of the enclave’s supply. Three desalination plants and three pipes from Israeli water company Merkorot provided the remaining five per cent and 14 percent, respectively.” (Yasmine Hafez, & Marianne Dhenin, 2024). In contrast to its glorious past where water supply was in bounteous and pristine condition for human wellbeing, Hafez and Dhenin (2024) argue that coupled with expansion in population growth, increased agricultural activities and lately the raging war, have polluted water sources and damaged other water supply facilities in Gaza, thereby deepening the health and social crises of the people and affected areas (Hafez, & Dhenin, 2024). Second, GlobalWaters has characterised the paucity and dire state of water supply in Gaza; saying that: “... while in Gaza, 95 percent of water from the main aquifer does not meet basic standards for human consumption, only 31 percent of the Palestinian population in the West Bank is connected to a sewerage network, and only five to ten percent of Palestinian wastewater is treated. Estimates suggest that 90,000 cubic meters of raw sewage flows from Gaza into the Mediterranean Sea, or percolates into the central aquifer every day, which increases the risk of outbreaks of waterborne disease.” (GlobalWaters.org, 2022).

The symbiotic relationship between human health and access to wholesome water in Gaza is demonstrated by the outbreak of contagious diseases spreading among the indigenous people; as well as illustrates the tragic state of health confronting the people in turmoil and depravation (Ofori, 2021). Although, within this limited time and space, one cannot chronicle all data and arguments to highlight the dire status of water supply in Gaza; yet, it is problematic to attribute the entire current water and related problems to the ensuing war without examining the role of the political authorities — past and present — in Gaza and external powers to decipher those accountable and responsible for the crisis. In that vein, a commentator opines, that “This problem too is not new. In the past, periodic cuts to the energy supply, often following direct Israel-Hamas confrontations, led to outages or malfunctions in the sanitation systems. In 2006, cuts to the fuel supply affected the operations of water pumping stations, as well as sewage treatment. Following Operation Cast Lead (2008-2009), the Gaza Coastal Municipal 901 Shira Efron, Jordan R. Fischbach, and Giulia Giordano Water Utility (CMWU) warned of the risks of an

impending water and sanitation crisis in the Strip, including a growing danger of infectious disease outbreaks among the population.” (Oded Eran, Gidon Bromberg, & Michal Milner, 2014). Notwithstanding consensus among military experts, diplomats, academics, peace-negotiators and humanitarian organisations represented by the UN and affected factions, the acuteness of water supply in Gaza and its environs are partly due to the strategic leadership failures of successive governments to devote resources to maintain water facilities and prospect for alternative water sources in securing the dignity of the people (Felix Nana Kofi Ofori, 2021, pp. 66-77). However, one cannot also gloss over the major factors, constituting the water-conflict nexus.



### 3. The Water, Conflict and Health Nexus

Military expeditions, such as those currently unfolding in Gaza and its neighbouring environs compromise human livelihoods. Since the invasion of Gaza post-October 7 2023, water shortages induced by bombardments and destruction of water facilities by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) have culminated in pollution and contamination of water sources, thus creating severe health challenges and outbreak of a plethora of diseases, injurious to the Palestinian population (A. Kayum Ahmed, 2023). While water is indispensable and a critical resource with opportunities for the Gazans to engage in socio-economic activities, including sanitation needs; it is also a malleable instrument deployed by war-mongers and adversaries to subjugate and inflict miseries and hardships against opposing forces in war (Seeberg, P., 2024). An example of such vicious strategy is evidenced by the destruction of water treatment plants and equipment in the prevailing war which deny thousands of Gazans access to sustainable water, fomenting health and sanitation challenges for the people (Abdul Samad, L., Butcher, M., & Khalidi, B., 2024). Also, water stress, particularly availability of freshwater has been designated as key promoter of domestic, neighbouring and regional conflicts in contemporary history over the centuries (Messerschmid, C., 2011). As an illustration, the Israeli government, which provides water to the Gazans, callously cut off access as a military strategy to weaken and paralyse the people's health and socio-economic activities, with view to subjugating and forcing the Gazans to succumb to Israeli demands by releasing the hostages (Peter H. Gleick, 2014, pp. 331-340). Located in a semi-arid region with irregular supply of water, the nexus between water and conflict manifests more pronouncedly as majority of the people, especially children,

women and the elderly, contract life-threatening diseases in the face of limited water supply (Gleick, Peter H., & Morgan Shimabuku, 2023). The asymmetric socioeconomic development between Israel and Palestine, coupled with the latter's dependence on the former for water supply, in some cases, emboldens the former's hands to weaponised its control over water resources to suppress, weaken and punish the Gazans inhumanely (Feitelson, E., 2002, pp. 293-318). Furthermore, without sounding bias and partisan with the prevailing conflict in Gaza, Israel's determination to establish a hegemonic status over Palestine and other states in the region, inclines it to wield control over water resources as a convenient strategic tool to realise military objective (Seeberg, P., 2024, pp. 33-46). This is because without access to water, the people in the region are unable to engage in agricultural and other socio-economic activities critical for their subsistence livelihood; thus limiting their prowess to challenge Israel's military authority and dominance (Felix Nana Kofi Ofori, 2021, pp. 66-77). The huge number of human deaths, outbreaks of diseases and maims recorded since the prosecution of the war illustrate firmly and profoundly the water-conflict nexus (Water Front Daily, 2022). Moreover, Freshwater has long been a vital and necessary natural resource, and it has long been a source of tension, a military tool, and a target during wars. For example, in December 2015, Russian Federation Forces reportedly bombed the Al-Khafsa water treatment facility in the city of Aleppo cutting off water supply for millions of people (Peter Gleick, 2015). Considering the global climate threats, socio-economics, politics and rapid population growth challenges confronting humanity, the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF)'s persistent destruction and pollution of water sources through bombardments in Gaza have adverse implications not only for the Gazans and their livelihoods, but also on Israel, especially the defence forces too.

#### **4. The Defence-Water Nexus**

The conflict over water resources has an extended link to defence purposes because water plays critical roles in the organisation of military expeditions (Peter H. Gleick, n.d.). For example, all military sites, including airfields, naval dockyards and barracks blocks, training grounds and facilities, including maintenance of military equipment, require adequate and constant supply of water to achieve success on the battle field, including the wellbeing of military personnel (Lee Harris, 2024). Thus, the callous and insensitive nature of destroying water sources and water treatment facilities, together with water sources in Gaza, may have reverse impacts on the operations and capabilities of the Israelis' in the foreseeable years (Peter H. Gleick, n.d.). This is because water resources are not only finite but also changes due to climatic and environmental conditions of the Middle East, including global climate challenges, might conspire to render the Israelis, particularly the military susceptible to acute water and military hardships (Jon Donnison, 2024). However, the protagonists of the Gazan war, especially Netanyahu and some western states — US and UK included — appeared to have sacrificed diplomacy and political-will to stem the carnage, thereby exacerbating fatigue among the IDF and vital but limited water resources in the region (Nina Lakhani, 2024). One caveat worth stating here is that this article is not intended to defend the position of Israel or Palestine; however, it is common knowledge that the US and UK, if politically desired, could exert reasonable force on Netanyahu and his administration to end the war as well as protect the water resources for which both the military and civilians depend on for sustenance (Oxfam International, 2024). Although the IDF has superior advantage over the Palestinian military in the current war; however, that advantage depends on availability of adequate and constant supply of quality water to meet the needs of the military personnel and operational requirements (Damian Gayle, 2023). For example, major aquifers straddle the

geographical boundaries between Palestine and Israel, therefore bombing water sources will in turn pollute groundwater systems in Gaza, consequently poisoning water resources in Israel to compromise water requirements of the IDF (Bronte Alexander, 2024), manufacture of munitions and military equipment, effluents and sanitation purposes. The implication is that water supply to the IDF on the battle field would be rationed dramatically (Rachel Wilson, Mark Oliver, & Alex Newman, 2023). Short of any military victory over its foe, the Gazans, the fact remains that water is a key resource the shortage of which augers adversely against military expeditions. In that respect, it is contested that humanity in every region of the world is not extricated from the fangs of water crisis much as the military in conflict times, because water holds the human and environmental ecosystem together.

## 5. The Human-Water Dimension

Besides military expedition, human dignity and welfare is often undermined by limited access to water occasioned by conflicts and destruction of facilities, as unfolding in the Middle East, especially Gaza (Rachel Wilson, Mark Oliver, & Alex Newman, 2023). Since human beings constitute one precious and vital resource in every society, it behoves on leaders of the international community, together with governments of the developed states — US, UK, Germany and France among others — to initiate and lead on moral, international law and human-centred strategies to curb those conflicts plaguing the Middle East; so that, peace and stability return to protect the peoples with water as a vehicle driving socio-economic prosperity (Charles Hine, 2022). The human-water relationship is crucial in every respect, however, conflicts mar the beneficial rewards expected to accrue to the world on socio-economic and political planes. Also, water is an important resource capable of promoting human sustenance because it facilitates agricultural activities and social projects upon which the Gazans and by extension some Israelis, depend to support themselves, their families and other populations, including the IDF (Kofi Annan, 2021). Without adequate provision of food, vegetables, fruits and other forms of edible resources, there is little chance that the Palestinians and Israelis will survive to wage wars against each other; thus, destroying, poisoning and polluting water bodies in Gaza is akin to covertly stifling the lives and basic sources of the peoples' existence (Felix Nana Kofi Ofori, 2021). Beyond losing their economic sustenance which is enormous threat to humanity and society, there is also the danger of outbreak of numerous diseases — diarrhoea, cholera and skin rashes — which could combine to distort functional aspects of humanity and society; while the military forces on both factions would become severely immobilised (Selim, L., 2022). However superior, technologically advanced and well-drilled a military force is, there is a human component to it, requiring good and constant supply of nutrients to engage; yet, with poisoned and polluted water sources, the supply of such critical resources may be hampered, thereby impeding the warfare (Selim, L., 2022). Furthermore, human deaths and destruction of livestock are endured examples of the human-water dimension. By its arid nature together with the extensive pollution of water sources in Gaza, several thousands of livestock had died due to thirst and bombardments. The implication is that Gazans, especially children, who need nutritional protection in the forms of proteins, vitamins and minerals to grow and develop physiologically are stymied (Felix Nana Kofi Ofori, 2020). Similarly, it means that socioeconomically, the Gazans are muzzled out of earning their livelihood because some of them rear and depend on the sales of livestock for their upkeep and those of their extended families. Depriving them of those critical means of livelihood and subsistence is susceptible to denigrating their worth as humanity (Peter H. Gleick, n.d.). Moreover, the deployment of chemical weapons by the IDF and the use of retaliatory

weapons by the opposition forces, which may impact not only the combatants, but also the general civilian population who are not party to the conflict undermine human worth (Ganesan, K, S.K. Raza, R. Vijayaraghavan, 2002). Chemical weapons can cause severe damages to combatants on both sides and by extension the innocent populations by causing blisters, burns, respiratory disorders and nerve problems to restrict oxygen absorption among the people with the dire consequences of incapacitation and deaths (Ganesan, K., Raza, S. K., & Vijayaraghavan, R., 2002). This demonstrates the fact that war (s) originated from water-related conflict is not only damaging to those engaged in it, but extends its vicious threats to populations beyond the theatres of the war; and, in this case, both innocent civilians in Gaza and Isarel are duly affected socio-economically and politically. Since humanity is a vital asset with vast utilities to society, businesses and the environment, it is in the interest of the defence community, peace organisations, including the international community, to find lasting solutions to stem the carnage as the following recommendations seek to proffer.

## 6. Recommendations

First, contrary to the established premise that water is a source of conflict, it can also become a key element in negotiating the end of conflict, even if water did not precipitate it. With negotiation and cooperation sponsored by defence experts, diplomats, international community, backed by the United Nations (UN), the Gazans and Israelis should be led into discussing their differences with a viewing to achieving permanent peace; which in turn, will protect the dignity and socio-economic wellbeing of the peoples in the region. For example, the contiguous borders straddling Palestine-Israel should gender stability and peace favourable to the defence community, businesses as well as protect the health requirements of the communities in the region (Winsemius, H. C., Aerts, J. C. H., Van Beek, Bierkens, L. P. H., Boumann, J. C. L. et al., 2015, pp. 1204-1218). The cooperative relationship between Senegal–Guinea; India–Pakistan in some cases, as neighbouring communities, can be adopted as a framework by the defence experts, peace organisations, including the international community, to supervise open discussion, aimed at solving the protracted conflict between the two warring states (MacAlister Charlotte, Baggio Guillaume, Perera Duminda, Qadir Manzor, Tainga Lina, & Smakhtin Vladmir, 2023). Without peace and stability in the region, socio-economic activities which support the dignity of Gazans and Israelis is thwarted, further deepening the woes of the peoples, including the military. Another strategy that can be adopted to eliminate or minimise the conflict is to shore up the level of trust between the Palestinians and Israelis. By this approach, a comprehensive agreement should be formulated to resolve the crisis in a peaceful and harmonious manner that is critical to enhancing the social, economic, political and cultural wellbeing of the region (Fisher-Yoshida, Beth, & Ilene Wasserman, 2006). One prominent obstacle impeding peace and stability between Palestine and Israel and the entire region is the heightened distrust between the warring factions. With pervasive distrust between the factions, peace is sacrificed while huge debts resulting from war-related crises distort societal development, including the military and defence authorities (Orend, Brian, 2013). Furthermore, a commentator opines, that: “Moral obligations are associated with a proscriptive morality, which reflects concerns over what people should not do, and are aligned with an avoidance-orientation tendency. Moral ideals thus motivate people to achieve positive outcomes that connote rewards, goals, incentives, and other desirable end-states” (Mashuri, Ali, and Esther van Leeuwen, 2021). The misery and savagery characterising the Gaza conflict demand a moral and brave leadership to end it. Barring political and expedient arguments as to the legitimacy of pursuing the war, it is not lost on the conscience of leaderships within the army, UN, humanitarian organisations and scores of diplomats,

that the war should end (Spector, Bert, 2019, pp. 123-131). However, it appears that the US and the UK, which wield the moral authority and leadership to exert pressure on the factions, especially Israel, to stem the carnage appear impotent and indifferent. Ironically, huge sums of money, equipment, food supplies, bottled water, medical items and clothing, are being donated and shipped to reduce the suffering of the victims in Gaza and affected communities. The truth is that no humanitarian aid can replace the benefits of peaceful reconciliation between the Gazans and Israelis and the entire region. Therefore, it is the opinion of this article, that an immediate cease-fire is urgently required; and that can only be achieved by altruistic leadership which sees the worth of the warring factions through the prism of humanness, transcending geo-political, hegemonic or personal interests (Peter G. Northouse, 2022, p. 427). Although there is no limit to the spectrum of strategies to stem the conflict; however, the recommendations in this article might contribute to augment peace and stability in the region should all the stakeholders, especially US and UK lend their political will to it.

## 7. Conclusion

Water is a shared resource, with critical benefits to humanity, livestock, agriculture, climate and the environment. This article has examined the nexus between water and conflict within the context of the Gaza-Israel debacle as well as relating to the current status of water supply in the area. It also explored the defence -human dimension with a view to highlighting the vicious implications of conflict on society and water resources; while, some recommendations were proffered to guide policy-makers craft novel-humane agreements to stem the conflict. The article concludes that post-conflict illnesses and hazards, which are not only injurious to the victims (Gazans) may transcend boundaries to infest the Israelis too; because, water sources polluted by chemicals and toxins emitted from weapons during war travel across contiguous borders swiftly. Thus, to secure stability to promote the welfare and socio-economic development of the peoples and region, a forceful leadership that offers peace, hope and a vision of change; and one, that commands the respect and confidence of the Palestinians and Israelis to negotiate for a peaceful agreement satisfactory to the factions is crucial.

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