



مركز الميزان لحقوق الإنسان
AL MEZAN CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Fact Sheet

Water Shortage in the Gaza Strip Amid COVID-19 Outbreak



© Anne Paq

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Introduction

This fact sheet addresses the deteriorating living conditions in the Gaza Strip as a result of Israel's 14-year blockade and recent punitive measures, notably the ban on fuel entry to the Strip,¹ and their repercussions on the provision of municipal services, particularly water and sanitation. In addition, the fact sheet sheds light on the struggle of low-income families to access alternative sources of water to offset the intermittent supply of municipal water amid a full lockdown imposed on Gaza to fight the spread of COVID-19, which further exacerbated these families' financial troubles.²

Background

Last year, Al Mezan Center for Human Rights conducted a comprehensive survey of the Gaza Strip's municipalities to assess their operational capacity in light of the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Gaza. The survey showed that provision of services in 25 municipalities have been directly affected by the Palestinian political division as well as Israel's 14-year blockade on Gaza, which have plunged all surveyed municipalities into a financial crisis clearly reflected in the vast difference between their actual revenues, which have steadily decreased during the blockade, and their operational expenditures. When comparing the revenues of the first quarter of 2017 to the revenues of the first quarter of 2020, the municipalities have reported a significant decrease in revenues, notably, 53 percent drop in the municipality of Gaza City, 66 percent drop in the municipality of Khan Yunis, 25 percent drop in Rafah municipality, 30 percent drop in Deir al-Balah municipality, and 14 percent drop in Jabalia municipality.

Municipalities can no longer pay full salaries to their employees who are currently receiving between 30 to 50 percent of their contractual monthly salaries. As a result, 80 percent of surveyed municipalities have accumulated debt owed to their employees over a period ranging from three up to 15 months.

¹ The ban on fuel entry ran from 13 Aug. to 31 Aug. 2020 when Qatar brokered a cease fire between Israel and Hamas.

² Article 5 of Decree No. 14 relating to the Water Law affirms that "1. Every person has the right to obtain his needs of suitable quality drinking water for utilization at specific prices set in accordance with the Tariff Regulation issued by the Cabinet of Ministers. 2. Water Service Providers shall take the necessary measures to ensure this right and prepare the plans required for the development of services in this regard, in accordance with the General Water Policy.

Further, officials have referred to a dire shortage of funding for projects and procurement of equipment necessary to ensure sustainability of municipal services. Statistics suggest that 124 pollution abatement projects are put on hold for lack of funds, including installation of 2,211 additional dumpsters and procurement 111 garbage trucks.³ The financial crisis and lack of funds prompted officials to use hundreds of animal-drawn carts for garbage collection, instead.

The Israeli blockade and its repercussions amid COVID-19 outbreak

On 13 August 2020, the Israeli authorities launched a series of punitive measures on Gaza, most notably, a full ban on fuel shipments to the Strip, leading to a severe shortage in the power supply as Gaza's sole power plant shut down after the plant's fuel reservoir ran out. Some two million Palestinians in the Gaza Strip had to survive on approximately four hours of electricity followed by at least a 16-hour power cut. The electricity crisis has hindered the provision of municipal services across crucial sectors such as water and sanitation. Residential buildings experienced water shortages, as the operation of water pumps feeding the municipal water supply experience prolonged down time due to power cuts. Detection of the first COVID-19 cases in the general population on 24 August and the ensuing lockdown further compounded the crisis as the shortage of water raised serious concerns for the health and hygiene of the population. Anwar Al-Shaer, Head of Rafah Municipality, spoke to Al Mezan with respect to the water shortage:

"the ongoing electricity crisis has drastically prevented the municipal water network, including the three main water storage tanks and 13 water wells, from operating sufficiently. With only four hours of daily electricity available in Gaza, the network produces only 40 percent of its capacity. With the intermittent electricity supply, the water supply to households has become all the more irregular and unpredictable, too.⁴ The municipality is therefore working closely with Gaza Electricity Distribution Corporation (GEDC) to arrange a schedule whereby water is pumped to residential premises an hour and a half before they are supplied with electricity so that residents can operate residential pumps to fill up water containers that are typically installed on their roof tops. Even though the crisis is not severe

³ The results of a comprehensive survey, conducted by Al Mezan at the beginning of 2019, through a special questionnaire distributed to the administrations of municipalities in the Gaza Strip, with the aim of identifying the effects of the blockade and internal division on their work.

⁴ Due to such irregularity in water supply, residents typically resort to storing water in roof-top water tanks, but they need electricity to run their residential water pumps to pump municipal water up to the water tanks for storage.

in Rafah, there are areas that do not receive adequate amounts of water supply, and the municipality is working on alleviating the situation.⁵

The alarming increase in poverty and unemployment rates driving mainly by the Israeli blockade on Gaza has diminished the residents' ability to afford municipal services and overwhelmed them with unpaid bills, leading to the noticeable decrease in the municipalities' revenues especially as both governmental and international funding continue to decline as well. In this context, Naim Abdul Latif Qawash, Head of the Water and Sanitation Department in Nuseirat Municipality, told Al Mezan:

"The municipality cannot supply water on a regular basis due to the electricity crisis. We are trying to overcome the power deficit by buying fuel to run the generators necessary to operate water pipes and pumps. This would entail the use of about 500 liters of diesel every day, and the municipality is struggling to afford the new daily expenses, with less than 12 percent of water bills being paid by residents. We have tried to pump water to residential houses in the area before the power supply runs out so that residents can pump water to their storage tanks. However, many families live in abject poverty and cannot afford storage tanks let alone pumps to fill them in with water. These families are particularly suffering amid the current crises.⁶"

The Coronavirus pandemic has imposed unprecedented financial burdens on municipalities, and to avoid the complete collapse of municipal services and to maintain their provision within the available resources, urgent financial support is needed, especially to cover the salaries and wages of municipality employees who continue to work during the lockdown. Dr. Yahya Al-Sarraj, President of the Union of Municipalities of the Gaza Strip and Mayor of Gaza City spoke to Al Mezan about the latest developments:

"The lockdown following the first COVID-19 confirmed cases among the general population and the electricity crisis have placed considerable pressure on the municipalities' work and hindered the provision of water and sanitation services. The current situation, which is posing a severe risk to public health and environmental sustainability in the Gaza Strip, may get out of control at any moment. In that case, water will not be supplied in adequate quality"

⁵ Testimony by Anwar Al-Shaer, Head of Rafah Municipality, interviewed via phone by Basem Abu Jrai, Al Mezan's researcher, 2 September 2020.

⁶ Naim Abdul Latif Qawash, Head of the Water and Sanitation Department in Nuseirat Municipality, interviewed via phone call by Basem Abu Jrai, 2 September 2020.

and levels to households, sewage may be pumped into the sea untreated as treatment facilities lack sufficient power supply to operate at adequate capacity, and garbage will not be collected from streets as the municipalities remain unable to compensate their employees and workers for their labor. In fact, some employees reported being unable to afford transportation fees to work. The municipalities are in dire need for urgent financial support, estimated at a total of six million dollars: two million dollars per month for three months in order to mitigate the crisis and cover expenses.⁷

The low quality of tap water, rendered unfit for human consumption, forces Gaza residents to purchase desalinated drinking water from private vendors who desalinate the water and truck it to households, but with the Israeli ban on fuel destabilizing power supply to households, and the mandatory lockdown, residents are struggling to obtain drinking water and pump it to their house roof tanks. Families who contract the coronavirus are strictly ordered to self-isolate at home, with police officers preventing them from leaving, which exacerbates their struggle to obtain drinking water.

A 25-year-old man from Jabalia, North Gaza, told Al Mezan that his family house is home to 24 people, including three women and 16 children. Everyone in the house was ordered to self-isolate after his aunt, one of the house residents, tested positive for coronavirus. They have not been able to go out to buy desalinated water since then and have accordingly suffered from a severe shortage of water. The family has complained multiple times to the police force guarding the house and to the competent authorities, and contacted Al Mezan regarding the issue until the authorities stepped in and filled the family's storage tanks with 4000 liters of desalinated water.

Similarly, Laila Ahmed Abu Shaweesh, 63, spoke to Al Mezan about the implications of the dire economic situation compounded by the current pandemic and power crisis on Gazans' access to clean water. She said,

"I live with my husband and son in a single-room tin-roofed house in Al-Nuseirat camp in Middle Gaza. We have two water storage tanks on the roof, but we don't have ground tanks or pumps, so when the electricity supply worsened, I had to purchase water. It costs me 15 shekels to fill up one tank. I have also reduced my water consumption and used plastic bottles and containers to store water. My whole lifestyle has drastically changed; I can't

⁷ Dr. Yahya al-Sarraj, Mayor of Gaza City, interviewed by Basem Abu Jrai, 29 August 2020.

clean the house as often, and maintaining proper hygiene in this pandemic is a constant concern for all of us.”

The precautionary measures against the spread of the coronavirus have confined breadwinners to their homes, which means that the financial stability of more than half of Gaza’s population and their access to water are undermined. Jamil Abu al-Saud, a 35-year-old father of two children and a taxi driver from Deir al-Balah, said in his testimony to Al Mezan,

“These daily 16-hour electricity cuts have made it very hard for us to obtain water which is supplied to the neighborhood once every three days and lasts about two to three hours only. We can no longer store water in the roof tanks because water pressure in the pipes is weak and requires an electric pump. I have resorted to using plastic containers and kitchenware to store water inside the house. In the past couple of days, we ran out of all stored water. I can’t afford to buy desalinated water from water trucks. I drive someone else’s taxi for a living and make approximately 20-25 shekels per day. I have been confined to my house since officials in Gaza announced the mandatory lockdown.”

The socioeconomic crises that are amassing as a result of Israel’s ongoing closure and blockade on Gaza have only been made more profound by the Coronavirus outbreak. Limited access to water affects handwashing, and raises the risk of disease, particularly for children, which is especially dangerous in densely populated areas like Gaza. In this context, Ismail al-Tatari, 25, from North Gaza expresses his concerns about the health risks facing the children in his family due to poor hygiene amid the water crisis:

“I live with a family of ten, five of whom are children, in a three-story house. It’s almost impossible to fill the roof tanks with water as the three-hour municipal water supply coincides with power cuts most of the time, which means we can’t operate the water pump. Lack of water has immediately subsided the family’s ability to shower and keep the house clean. We are particularly worried because we are aware that a proper hygiene, especially for our children, is a priority to fight the spread of the pandemic, but without water, it is a huge challenge to shower, keep the toilets clean, and do laundry. We have been buying and storing drinking water to use for cleaning instead of tap water. This is tremendously expensive, and I can’t afford it if the situation lasts longer.”

Conclusion and recommendations

Al Mezan is deeply concerned for the population's health and wellbeing, in particular the impoverished populations in Gaza amid the declining municipal services and COVID-19 outbreak, and calls on:

1. The Palestinian Authority and concerned agencies, NGOs and international bodies to mobilize support for residents of the Gaza Strip, whose lives are threatened by the unprecedented coronavirus outbreak, and to improve the living conditions in Gaza and support the Strip's municipalities;
2. The international community to exert pressure on Israel, the occupying power, to immediately and unconditionally lift the blockade and closure and cease all punitive measures; and
3. The Gaza Electricity Distribution Corporation (GEDC) to liaise with the municipalities to ensure water supply that is more regular and efficient to households, and prioritize the provision of power supply to municipal wells and networks to better equip residents with the amounts and quality of water necessary to fight the COVID-19 outbreak.