



# IN FOCUS: THE EFFECTS OF ISRAEL'S MILITARY OFFENSIVE ON GAZA'S WASH FACILITIES

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مركز الميزان لحقوق الإنسان  
AL MEZAN CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS



In focus: The effects of Israel's military offensive on Gaza's WASH facilities

Al Mezan Center for Human Rights is an independent, non-partisan and non-governmental human rights organization established in 1999. Al Mezan is dedicated to protecting and advancing the respect of human rights, with a focus on economic, social, and cultural rights, supporting victims of violations of international law through legal initiatives, and enhancing democracy, community and citizen participation, and respect for the rule of law in Gaza as part of occupied Palestine.

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Between 10-21 May 2021, Israeli forces carried out a full-scale military offensive against the Gaza Strip. The bombardment was characterized by a disproportionate use of force and deliberate attacks targeting civilians and civilian objects, in clear violation of the fundamental principles of distinction, proportionality, and humanity enshrined in customary international humanitarian law and amounting to apparent war crimes and crimes against humanity.

During the military campaign, Israel targeted and damaged numerous civilian infrastructures, including Gaza's sewage treatment stations and networks, rendering some of them inoperable. As reported by Al Mezan, the Gaza Electricity Distribution Company (GEDCO) announced that its power supply services will be intermittent due to the diminishing supply of fuel used to generate electricity, caused by Israel's fuel-entry ban.<sup>1</sup> As a result of the growing deficit in power supply and limited capacity of alternative generators, at the time of reporting municipalities throughout the Gaza Strip are pumping raw or partially treated sewage water directly into the sea, thus blighting one of Gaza's few recreational spots, namely its shoreline. As a result, nearly two million Palestinians residing in Gaza face a looming public health emergency and are denied Gaza's only outlet.

**Among the most affected facilities during Israel's military offensive against the Gaza Strip are water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services. According to Al Mezan:**

As a result of Israel's attacks, 18 sewage water pumps were damaged, including six that were completely destroyed.<sup>2</sup> During the offensive, four of Gaza's central sewage treatment stations became inoperable after employees were unable to travel to their workplace due to the intense physical insecurity and the damage to

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<sup>1</sup> Al Mezan Center for Human Rights (Al Mezan), 'Energy crisis worsens humanitarian conditions in Gaza', 30 May 2021, available at <http://mezan.org/en/post/23999>

<sup>2</sup> Figures reported in a preliminary survey from the Ministry of Local Government in Gaza obtained by Al Mezan on 31 May 2021.



sanitation networks.<sup>3</sup> Israel's targeting of vital paved roads and other infrastructure in Gaza caused damages to some 18,734 meters of the sewage networks. The sewage treatment stations will not be able to operate at full capacity again until the networks are repaired.<sup>4</sup>

In order to operate power stations and compensate for GEDCO's intermittent power supply, an increased fuel supply is required. However, the Israeli authorities continue to ban fuel shipments into Gaza, including on the local market for consumption by citizens and various institutions.<sup>5</sup> The electricity crisis persists despite the fact that GEDCO's supply has increased after Israel repaired the main power lines, still leaving Gaza with a deficit of 69% of its demand. At the time of reporting, the population in Gaza is receiving electricity in six-hour time slots, followed by at least 12-hour power cuts. Until Sunday evening, 30 May 2021, the population received only three to four hours of energy at a time followed by 16 hours of power cut.<sup>6</sup>

The lack of electricity seriously hampers the running of municipal services, which rely on consistent power supply.<sup>7</sup> For instance, due to the ongoing electricity crisis, Gaza's municipalities continue to pump wastewater through eight main and nine temporary marine pumps. Combined, these pumps receive wastewater from 87 different stations across the Gaza Strip, eventually pumping around 70,000 cubic meters of untreated sewage into the sea on a daily basis.<sup>8</sup>

For instance, during the offensive, Israeli forces destroyed the Al Muntada pumping station belonging to the Gaza municipality and, as a result, the

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<sup>3</sup> Ahmed Abu Ras, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Local Government in Gaza, interviewed by Al Mezan on 26 May 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> See supra note 1.

<sup>7</sup> GEDCO's daily report on the state of power line leading to 9:00pm on Sunday, 30 May 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Baha al-Din al-Agha, Director at the Water and Environment Quality Authority in Gaza, interviewed by Al Mezan on 30 May 2021.



municipality started to pump 13,000 square meters of untreated sewage into the sea every day.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Israeli forces bombed the carrier line of the Amer pump in the al-Sudaniya area serving the Jabaliya and Beit Lahiya municipalities. As a result, the pump began pouring 10,000 square meters of untreated sewage into the sea daily.<sup>10</sup>

Should the electricity crisis continue, and until the damaged stations and carrier lines are repaired, official authorities predict that the quantities of untreated sewage pumped into the Mediterranean Sea will reach 110,000 cubic meters per day.<sup>11</sup> Yet such predictions are hardly surprising in Gaza, where WASH services have been on the verge of collapse for years due to Israel's illegal closure and repeated military attacks. Gaza's chronic water and sanitation crisis has already increased sea contamination: as reported by the Environment Quality Authority (EQA) of the Palestinian Ministry of Health in their most recent examination, in August 2020 the percentage of sea pollution had reached 63% in the total coastal area.

While no examinations have taken place yet this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic and Israel's sea closure, the next one, which should be held in the coming days, will most likely register an increase in the level of pollution in light of the current crisis.<sup>12</sup> In the meantime, the EQA has asked citizens of the Gaza Strip not to swim in the sea because of the high rate of pollution. Similarly, Gaza's

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<sup>9</sup> Information gained from Anwar al-Jundi, Coordinator of the General Administration of Water and Sanitation in Gaza Municipality, interviewed by Al Mezan's researcher Bassem Abu Jayy on 26 May 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Information gained from Atef al-Sultan, Director of the Health, Water and Sanitation Department in Beit Lahiya Municipality, interviewed by Al Mezan's researcher Hussein Hammad on 26 May 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Khaled al-Teibi, Director of the Health and Environment Department at the Ministry of Health, interviewed by Al Mezan's researcher Hussein Hamman on 30 May 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Baha-al-Din al-Agha, General Director of the General Administration for the Environmental Protection at the EQA, interviewed by Al Mezan's researcher Hussein Hammad on 30 May 2021.



municipality also warned the population about water pollution and confirmed that it started pumping untreated sewage into the sea on Saturday, 29 May 2021.<sup>13</sup>

**Accordingly, Al Mezan calls on:**

- a. The international community to promptly intervene in support of civilians and the infrastructure needed for their survival, especially WASH facilities and services; to pressure Israel to allow the necessary fuel into Gaza for the operation of the power plant per the electricity demands, and to enable the municipalities to carry out their necessary and vital activities, especially those related to WASH service and infrastructure projects.
- b. The international community and specialized INGOs to address the situation by urgently finding solutions to the root causes of the current water and sanitation crisis, which has led to the pumping of untreated sewage into the sea and increased water, air, and ground pollution.
- c. The competent authorities to increase the level of coordination and cooperation in order to address the impact of the Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip, notably by giving priority to the reconstruction process and reparation of vital facilities, including electricity, water and sanitation networks.

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<sup>13</sup> See supra note 3.