

By Khalil Shaheen

Jafar Sadaqa, a leading Palestinian journalist, lives with his wife and five children in the village of Dura Al-Qari', eight kilometers north of Ramallah in the West Bank. Late in 2007, Sadaqa received a remarkable bill in the mail: It listed his total monthly water consumption for the period from May to October 2007 as zero. The charge for this "zero consumption" totaled 400 shekels (US\$114) — 400 shekels for water that he, his wife and five children did not consume.

This was no billing error. Sadaqa had to pay his bill or face having his water turned off.

A year later, in the summer of 2008, Sadaqa faced the same problem — paying bills for water that Jerusalem Water Undertaking, headquartered in Ramallah and Al-Bireh District, failed to provide him because of ostensible shortages and pumping problems. For the second year in a row, Sadaqa says, almost half of the families in Dura Al-Qari' (2,740 inhabitants in 2006, according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics) find themselves deprived of water during the six-month period from May to October, but are billed for it anyway. In the beginning of 2008, the Jerusalem Water Undertaking disconnected the meters of many homes in the village because the families refused to pay for water they never received.

Another example of unjust water distribution that villagers in Dura Al-Qari' must deal with is because of a man who lives at a lower elevation in Dura Al-Qari'. Thanks to the effects of gravity, he has the advantage of receiving water that flows down the streams from the upper slopes onto his property. He collects this water in a well in his backyard and sells it — without a license — to neighbors living on higher elevations for 24 shekels per cubic meter (US\$7), about 5 times the official amount charged by Jerusalem Water Undertaking to consumers in that area, which is 4.9 shekels (US\$1) per cubic meter.

A Wider Problem

Dura Al-Qari' is just one example of the many Palestinian communities in the West Bank that suffer an additional burden because of an Israeli policy that deprives them of their water rights. There also is a lack of effective administration, transparency and fairness in water distribution, and inconsistent pricing by the Jerusalem Water Undertaking. These problems of water access for villagers in the West Bank highlight the daily impact of

corruption and mismanagement on fundamental human rights.

One of the basic tasks of the Jerusalem Water Undertaking is to provide all citizens with running water, but, as of now, 11 percent of Palestinians in the West Bank do not have access to safe sources of water and 160 local communities are deprived of water distribution networks.

A review of the water-consumption average per person reveals wide gaps between local communities, even those located in the same district. The same problem applies to water prices. For example, the average daily water consumption in Sabastia, located north of the West Bank, is 105 liters per person, while the average is 50 liters per person in Bzaria in the Tulkarem district. Consumption is only 16 liters in neighboring Borqa village. In the Ramallah district, each person in Upper Beit 'Ur village is provided with 91 liters of water daily, but each person in Lower Beit 'Ur receives only 11 liters daily. These vast discrepancies occur in an area that occupies less than 6,000 square kilometers.

The reason for these disparities is that these local communities purchase water from the Israeli Mekorot Company through the West Bank Water Directorate. This arrangement weakens the Jerusalem Water Undertaking's control over the amount of water they can provide.

Unfortunately, the disparities exist even between communities who get their water from the same source, the Jerusalem Water Undertaking, which has the authority and control over the water supply in such cases. For instance, each person in Dura Al-Qari' is provided with 59 liters daily, while the quantity jumps up to 144 liters in neighboring Ein Senia and to 152 liters in Jifna, two other communities who receive their water from the Undertaking.²

The pricing problem is connected to water resources and distribution mechanisms. The West Bank Water Directorate purchases water from the Israeli Mekorot company for 2.4 shekels (US\$0.68) per one cubic meter and sells it to suppliers (municipal bodies) for approximately 2.6 shekels (US\$0.74), but without any control or supervision over the prices paid by the final consumer.

The Jerusalem Water Undertaking sells one cubic meter of water to the Birzeit Municipality for 4.2 shekels (US\$1.20) which then sells it to citizens for 4.9 shekels (US\$1.40). But in Nablus (further north), citizens purchase water at

prices that vary between eight to 10 shekels (US\$2.28 to US\$2.85) per one cubic meter.³

All Palestinian suppliers of water are under direct supervision of the Palestinian Water Authority (PWA). The suppliers are required by law to obey PWA rules regarding water pricing, but many municipalities and local councils do not complain about pricing discrepancies.

Shadad Al Atele, head of the PWA, admits that the complete absence of pricing “references,” as called for in PWA’s governing laws, is responsible to a great extent for this situation⁴. According to the law, water policy is to be set by the Water National Council, which the President of the Palestinian Authority (PA) chairs. Unfortunately, the council has not held a single meeting since its establishment in 1996, leaving the PWA unable to issue many essential laws and regulations, such as a unified tariff system.

Corruption at Large

The issues surrounding the water supply are only one symptom of the widespread corruption that afflicts Palestinian society. The lack of a legal framework, along with mismanagement, weakness, corrupting influences within the judicial system, and the cover-up of corruption combined with a lack of transparency, are some of the reasons that corruption is one of the main issues in Palestinian society.

Although the Palestinian government in the West Bank, headed by Salam Fayyad, pledged to implement a reform policy, there is still a lack of willingness to implement the law and to punish those involved in corruption.

Other cases of corruption and their impact on Palestinian society are too many to list entirely here, but the following serve as among the most significant examples:

On March 18, 2008, the public was shocked by a corruption case involving Rouhi Fattouh, former speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council, who served as President Mahmoud Abbas’s “personal representative.”

Fattouh’s official vehicle was seized by Israeli custom officers at the “Allenby Bridge,” allegedly being used to smuggle thousands of cellular phones from Jordan into the West Bank. Fattouh denied any link to the phones and blamed his driver for the smuggling attempt. Nevertheless, Abbas suspended Fattouh from his job, pending a criminal

investigation. A few days later, Fattouh apologized to the people and the Attorney General blamed the driver but confirmed the investigation would continue. Months later, the outcome of this investigation remains unsettled.

In another case, in February 2008, Palestinian security forces confiscated large amounts of expired medicine that had been smuggled into the West Bank, mainly from Israel. Dozens of physicians, pharmacists and officials were interrogated for their alleged role in this scandal. As of now, no one has been arrested or accused. The same situation applies to the tons of expired food confiscated almost on a daily basis.

The results of a poll, conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR) in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip between June 5 and June 7, 2008, revealed that 77 percent of Palestinians believe that corruption exists in PA institutions controlled by the PA president and his government. Among those who believe corruption exists in the PA, 60 percent of respondents believe this corruption will increase or remain the same in the future. Moreover, a majority of 59 percent describe the PA's handling of the Fattouh case as an attempted cover-up while only 28 percent describe it as a sign that the PA is actually fighting corruption.