

# Palestinian Natural Springs

## Treasures Threatened by Loss and Confiscation



By Ayman Rabi

natural springs in Palestine have been historically the main source that provides life to people, land, and habitat. Many villages and towns were built and flourished around springs, and some of these springs are even today the main source of life for major cities such as Jericho.

There used to be two times the number of springs in the West Bank than there are today (there are no springs in Gaza). The only study that documented most of the springs in the West Bank was that of the Palestinian Hydrology Group back in 1987–1989, which documented around 400 natural springs in the West Bank with an average daily discharge ranging from as little as 0.1 m<sup>3</sup>/hour to as much as 650 m<sup>3</sup>/hour. The largest 30 springs have been monitored and documented by the various ruling authorities, whereas the small and medium ones have not.

Some of the large springs were tapped and pumped to supply drinking water to major cities and towns for years, and some still supply drinking water in addition to supplying water to sustain agriculture in the respective areas. For example, Fara and Fawwar springs east of Hizma Village used to supply many neighborhoods of Jerusalem with drinking water between 1920 and 1970; Ein Qinia - Delbeh Spring supplied water to Ramallah. Until the early seventies, Zaraqa, Delbeh, and Al-Qatan springs supplied drinking water to four villages, namely Deir Ghassaneh, Beit Reema, Qarawa Bani Zaid, and Kufur Ein, where infrastructure, including pipes, are still in place in witness to the fact that these springs are purely

Palestinian and had been used by Palestinians long before the existence of Israel and Israeli settlements. Until today, Fawwar and Qelt springs supply Aqabat Jaber Refugee Camp with drinking water; Nueimeh and Aldyouk springs supply Nueimeh with both drinking and agricultural water; Ein el-Sultan is the main source of water for Jericho; Ein Beit Elma and other springs for Nablus; Al-Matwi for Salfeet; and many more – the entire list is too long to be included in this article. Small and medium springs have also been the main source of water for villages and towns where Palestinians, especially women, used to fetch water on a daily basis for drinking, cooking, and other household needs, in addition to agricultural use.

Springs are considered an important part of Palestinian natural heritage. This article will shed light on the main threats that face Palestinian springs and offer recommendations that should be adopted at a national level in

Villages and towns that are supplied through local sources, such as springs, become more water independent and more water secure even if this source supplies only enough to address a portion of their needs.

order to protect the springs, preserve our Palestinian natural heritage, and secure additional water quantities under the increasing scarcity and shortage of water in Palestine that is caused mainly by Israeli control of water resources.

The main threats that face natural springs in the West Bank can be summarized as follows:

1. Negligence: The connection of many villages to water-supply systems has affected the reliance on



*Farah Pumping house and pipes. Photo courtesy of Palestinian Hydrology Group Archive.*

springs as a source of drinking water, especially the small and medium springs, which in turn has led to the abandonment of these springs, leaving them merely as a source for watering animals, wildlife, and some limited agriculture, without paying much attention to their maintenance and upkeep. This in turn has caused the partial or complete loss of some spring water.

2. Pollution: Many springs, especially those located within the vicinity of villages and towns, have shown some bacteriological contamination

of groundwater wells, especially Israeli wells that serve settlements in the West Bank, next to or within the springs' effective zones has substantially lowered the discharge of many springs such as Fasayel, Ein Shibly, Bathan, and has even caused some of them to cease flowing seasonally or completely, such as the case of Auja and Far'a springs. This effect, combined with the natural conditions of prolonged drought, have reduced the discharge of many springs by at least 30 to 50 percent of their long-term average



Settlers swimming in Farah Spring. Photo courtesy of Palestinian Hydrology Group Archive.

resulting mainly from wastewater seepage from cesspits or those affected by wastewater flow from major Palestinian cities (Ein Qiniya, Al-Bathan), and more dangerously, from Israeli colonies in the West Bank (Al-Matwi - Salfeet), which affect the potential of using these springs for domestic or even agricultural purposes and impacts their related ecosystem and its habitat.

3. Reduced discharge: Drilling

discharge, resulting in a serious negative influence on the agricultural areas they irrigate and serious change to the ecosystem and its habitat which also depend on these springs.

4. Confiscation: One of the most dangerous threats is the new trend of Israeli settlers, backed by occupation policy, to confiscate springs and forbid Palestinian access to them. The settlers aim to foster Palestinian disconnect from their natural and

cultural heritage in an attempt to try to falsify history by claiming that these springs are part of Israeli heritage. Settlers have taken advantage of the lack of Palestinian presence around some major and even smaller springs and confiscated such springs as Al Qous Spring near the village of Nabi Saleh, which was confiscated and designated for the use of settlers only. Nwiet Al Majur Spring near Qarawa Bani Hassan is yet another historic spring that has been subject to Israeli aggression and confiscation. The main historical pond cave (called Al-Bahar by the residents of Qarawa Bani Hassan) was bombed by the Israeli army back in 2009, which unfortunately has changed the natural character and beauty of the spring and made it available for confiscation by settlers. The most stunning example is the confiscation of Far'a (Frat) Spring, east of Hizma Village, and the designation of the surrounding area as recreational area for settlers. The access road to the spring was made part of the Anatot settlement and thus cannot be accessed by Palestinians. A gate was installed, and an entry fee of 40 NIS charged from whoever wants to enter the area around the spring, which also prevents the Palestinian farmers and herders in the area from using this water as they used to do.

Deir Al-Hatab Spring, which from 1968 to 1998 had been the main source of drinking water for the village named after it, was also confiscated by settlers, and Palestinians were prevented from accessing it. Deir Al-Hatab was able to obtain a court decision that ordered the settlers to evacuate the site and return the land and the spring to its rightful owners, but this decision remains as ink on paper since the settlers still control the area and prevent Palestinian access to it. Wadi Qana springs, Ein Zarqa, and many other springs across the West Bank are under direct threat of confiscation.

Initiatives and cleanup campaigns as well as the voluntary work of solidarity groups in tree planting or the rehabilitation of springs are good tools and actions that help preserve the springs. Community commitment and continuous visits to springs are also among these very important practices.

In an attempt to revive the importance of springs as part of Palestinian natural heritage and as part of its significant natural resources and water-supply chain, the Palestinian Hydrology Group (PHG) has undertaken a number of projects with the support of several donors and local communities represented by village and municipal councils to rehabilitate and protect many springs and introduce some of these springs back into the drinking-water supply system for the villages. PHG has managed to re-establish the relation between the community and the springs and will continue to do so under its campaign Protecting Your Spring = Protecting your Heritage and Existence.

Israel is engaged in a slow but systematic policy of confiscation and control in the West Bank with regard to Palestinian land and natural resources and heritage. From an international law perspective, it is the duty of occupation to secure water for the people under occupation. In other words, supplying water to Palestinian villages is certainly the duty of the occupation authorities, and Palestinians are paying for this supply. The same law also forbids the occupier from using the natural resources of the country it occupies for the benefit of its own citizens. Yet by confiscating natural springs and designating their use to the settlers,



In Palestine, we have no choice but to protect our water resources, especially our springs, and preserve every single drop of water to be able to cope with the thirsty future that is ahead of us.

*What is left of the spring of Ras 'Ein al 'Auja, near its source. Since repairs are being made to the nearby Israeli water pump, there is more flow than usual. Photo by A. Hub.*

Israel is violating international law and causing harm to the Palestinian people.

On the other hand, Palestinians have unfortunately, although unintentionally, contributed to this loss and to the pollution of some of the springs. They have fallen into the trap of being supplied by an alternative piped water supply system and neglecting their former supply source, allowing untreated or poorly treated effluent from major Palestinian cities to reach some springs and cause serious pollution. Although Israel restricts Palestinian construction of treatment plants, it is not an excuse to pollute our natural heritage and history.

Protecting the springs is the responsibility of all governmental and nongovernmental institutions as well as the community at large. It is important to rehabilitate more springs and make them an indispensable part of the local Palestinian water supply while maintaining their dependent ecosystem and habitat. Clear policies are needed to make spring protection and preservation Palestinian public duties and to prevent their pollution under any circumstance. Governmental and nongovernmental programs should give priority to supporting spring protection, development, and integration. More

importantly, farmers' and users' rights must include wildlife and habitat to be protected and preserved through legal documentation and cases.

It is important to launch an awareness campaign related to the significance of springs and to link such a campaign with the formal education system and localize it within schools and universities. Alternative and environmental tourism should be promoted, and springs should be in the core of such a program. The Ministry of Tourism and all tourism agencies are to adopt such a program and promote it.

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