

Shaddad Attili



In the midst of the disappointing lack of vision in Palestine today, Dr. Shaddad Attili represents a ray of hope. A geologist by training, Dr. Attili is an internationally regarded activist and expert on the issue of water rights. He holds a master's degree in industrial geology from Al Yarmouk University (Jordan) and a doctorate in science and industrial technology from Orléans University (France), where his dissertation focused on the impact of heavy-metal waste on water resources.

Born and raised outside the occupied Palestinian territories, Dr. Attili was determined that his professional career should benefit Palestine. He served between 1993 and 1995 as a policy adviser on environmental and water issues within the PLO's economic department in Tunisia. In 1999, immediately after receiving his doctorate, he came to Palestine, only his second trip to his country of origin, to work with the PLO's Negotiations Affairs Department on the development of a negotiation strategy

on water issues, supported by a UNDP fellowship. In time, he became a senior policy adviser on environment and water at the negotiations support unit where he led the drafting of a strategy for the negotiation of natural resources until 2008.

In April 2008, Dr. Attili was appointed chairman of the Palestinian Water Authority (PWA). At that time, many Palestinians and members of the international community were excessively influenced by Israeli narratives about the water situation. Israeli communications often reflected the relationship between the two sides as an example of positive cooperation, albeit simultaneously claiming that the Palestinian water problem was a product of Palestinian mismanagement. The Israeli narrative was so effective that many internationals, as well as uninformed Palestinians, would often believe that the failures in water and sanitation-services provision simply required technical solutions and more projects. The new chairman understood that water – like all other permanent-status issues highlighted in the Oslo Agreement – could only be addressed through political solutions. He was fully aware of the fact that day-to-day Palestinian efforts in the field of water supply were completely limited by the predominant constraint posed by a lack of access to water resources, such as the aquifers in the West Bank and the Jordan River, where utilization was still prohibited under Israeli military orders, in contravention to international law. British academic Dr. Jan Selby described the Israeli-Palestinian water conflict as “domination dressed up as cooperation.”

Recognizing that overcoming the inherent power disparity would require strong international political and donor support, Dr. Attili directed the PWA to undertake a communications campaign to challenge the pervasive Israeli narrative on water and simultaneously set out a reform agenda to increase the overall effectiveness of the water sector within the political constraints. Dr. Attili asked the World Bank to expand the scope of its movement and access report series with the goal of publishing an analysis on the Palestinian water sector. In April 2009, the World Bank issued the landmark “Assessment of Restrictions on Palestinian Water Sector Development,” which succeeded in reframing the Israeli-Palestinian water narrative for the international community. Although the government of Israel vehemently contested the World Bank report (as well as the subsequent unprecedented number of reports on water and development in Palestine issued by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, B'Tselem, UNEP, Al Haq, etc., all encouraged by the PWA), the months immediately following this publication witnessed the Israeli civil administration's approval of long-stalled permits for several dozen water projects for the West Bank. The reports published by the World Bank, Amnesty International, and other bodies created not only important reference documents that evidenced Israeli domination, they also provided a momentum that enabled the PWA to enhance its mobilization of the international and donor communities to support activities and projects in the Palestinian water sector. Dr. Attili had re-oriented the PWA towards being an active advocate of Palestinian water rights, linking them with human rights and the right to development in the context of the ongoing occupation. He proceeded with the clear goal of leveraging international awareness in order to develop the Palestinian water sector and attempt to compel changes in the coercive policies and

demoralizing water practices of the government of Israel.

In parallel, Dr. Attili was the driving force behind a national program of reform of the water sector endorsed by the council of ministers and supported by the international community. In 2012, ten donors co-signed with the prime minister a memorandum of understanding on the reform of the water sector that outlined an institutional reorganization with the establishment of several new institutions. The aim of the reform was to make the overall sector more effective in the provision of water and sanitation services by transferring important functions and responsibilities held by the dominant, and traditionally over-centralized, PWA to these new institutions. The reform aimed to devolve the powers of the PWA and its chairman, yet strengthen PWA's core mandate of strategy and planning, and maintain its key role of interfacing with the government of Israel and the international community. The result is a new water law, issued in 2014, that mandates the establishment of several critical institutions to assume the management of water resources and of water and sanitation-service provision, which include the Water Sector Regulatory Council as an independent regulator and the yet-to-be-established National Water Company.

Dr. Attili is known for his candid manner of speaking and human approach in undertaking the lead role in the water sector. He often visited West Bank villages on weekends and held town discussions on the water situation. When the PWA was informed of a quality-control issue in the water supplied by Israel, Dr. Attili not only mobilized Palestinian water technicians to verify and resolve the issue with Israeli counterparts, but he also drove to each village to sample the water publicly and reassure the community of its safety. Yet as the role of a Palestinian minister often involves dealing with harsh criticism for failure to provide

water and sanitation under occupation, Dr. Attili – in conversations with farmers from the Jordan Valley – has admitted that the PWA failed to fulfill promises of increased water supply to many in the Jordan Valley who were greatly dependent on water for their livelihoods. Even though Dr. Attili was never allowed to visit the Gaza Strip during his tenure, he would always highlight the dire water crisis that impacted the entire Gaza Strip and call for international action to lift the siege.

In 2010, under Dr. Attili's direction, an initiative with a special focus on Gaza was launched that aimed to include all water-sector stakeholders in the analysis and development of solutions to address the ongoing water crisis in the Gaza Strip. In front of the international community, Dr. Attili was outspoken about the harsh water realities in Gaza, where more than 95 percent of the available water supply does not meet World Health Organization standards, and evidence reflects ever-increasing incidences of water-related illness. His initiative has resulted in a consensus-based sustainable water-supply program with the strategy to coordinate nine interrelated interventions (ranging from a health monitoring program to the development of large-scale desalination infrastructure projects) that since 2011 has been utilized to mobilize the political, financial, and technical support of the international community.

As testimony to his strong advocacy for Palestinian empowerment, Dr. Attili has been vilified by Israel officials as a sensationalist, as well as an obstructionist of the two parties' history of "cooperation." Ironically, he is most notably attacked for the government's decision to limit the scope of Palestinian participation in the Israeli-Palestinian Joint Water Committee (JWC); a platform now infamous as a result of the World Bank and Amnesty International reports about the Israeli demands that the approval of Palestinian water and sanitation

projects be linked to corresponding Palestinian approval of water projects in Israeli settlements which are illegal under international law. This important instruction was in fact a 2010 decision of the Prime Minister and his cabinet.

Following more than five years of implementing a progressive agenda for the water sector, the office of the president appointed Dr. Attili to take on the post of Deputy Secretary General of Environment and Water at the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), whose 43 member states had endorsed a large-scale desalination facility for Gaza as the regional organization's flagship project. When Dr. Attili arrived at the UfM headquarters in early November 2013, Palestine was enduring a harsh drought during the traditionally heavy winter rainy season. As a result of this, the then newly-appointed Palestinian prime minister recalled him to again lead the PWA. Thus forgoing a prestigious opportunity to embark on an international career, Dr. Attili returned from Barcelona in early 2014 to resume his post at PWA. As is the way of politics, Dr. Attili was dismissed over subsequent discord with the prime minister's office only six months later.

Dr. Attili has persistently been in the forefront in mobilizing the international community and donors to support a progressive reform of the sector, provide increased financial support to water and wastewater infrastructure, urge the international community to respond to pressing development needs, and address the Israeli limitations placed on Palestinian access to natural freshwater sources. "Unlike other ministries of water in the world, we do not manage water resources. Rather, we manage a crisis – as long as the occupation remains," he is quoted as saying.

For distinguished service and accomplishments, French President Francois Hollande awarded Dr. Attili the Légion d'Honneur, considered the highest decoration presented by the Government of France.