



Water for Viable and Independent State of Palestine

Political Solutions Must Proceed Managerial and Technical Measures

Statement by : Minister Dr. Shaddad Attili -Palestinian Water Authority

2011 Stockholm Water Week

Closing session

Mr. Chairman, distinguished colleagues, ladies and gentlemen....

I want to thank the organizers of World Water Week for their kind invitation to speak at this closing session, and to congratulate them on the success of the last week's events, and on yet another excellent conference. Sweden has long played a leading role in raising international awareness of environmental and water-related issues starting as far back as the 1972 Environment Conference held here in Stockholm, and as evidenced by this conference, continues to be at the forefront of international efforts to bring international norms and respected procedures to bear on resolving disputes over water.

I also want to convey Prime Minister Dr Salam Fayyad's apologies for not being able to attend the conference or speak at its opening session. As the Palestinian government's two-year state building plan reaches its conclusion, with the success of Palestine's state building efforts receiving praise from all sectors of the international community, the message Dr Fayyad wanted me to share with you today is this: that the Palestinian government will continue to work tirelessly towards achieving the goal of statehood, and that towards this end, we have developed a comprehensive social and political plan to support our economical and institutional one.

In certain ways the water-related challenges facing Palestine are the same or similar to those facing nation after nation around the world. Fresh water availability is a critical issue in Palestine. In addition to suffering acute water shortages, we also face enormous problems in terms of water quality. Over time, these problems have become dramatically worse.

Our water woes can in part be attributed to environmental factors. We live in a region where water scarcity is an ongoing concern. Far more immediate and detrimental, however, are the numerous restrictions we face in accessing water as a result of Israel's occupation despite important international awareness from the 2009 World Bank report entitled Restrictions on Palestinian Water Sector Development, and many others. It is accurate to say that Palestinians suffer from a social, physical and political shortage of water. **Tackling our water shortages first and foremost requires a political solution, in the absence of which no managerial and technical measures can provide an adequate substitute.**



The fresh water volume available to Palestinians at present is about 70 cubic metres *per capita* annually, which is significantly less than water consumption levels recommended by the World Health Organization, and much lower than the volumes available to our co-riparians in the Jordan River basin. As a point of comparison, neighbouring Jordan often asserts that it is the 4th most water scarce state in the World, while Palestinians have on average access to significantly less water *per capita* than available to Jordanians per day. In fact, the water available *per capita* in Palestine is less today than was the case at the time of the signing of Interim Agreement with Israel in 1995.

Even this very low volume of available water for Palestinians is in reality an over-estimate, as it includes about 120 million cubic metres annually which is over-abstracted from the Coastal Aquifer in the Gaza Strip despite the fact that 90-95 percent does not meet the World Health Organization minimum standards. We have little choice but to abstract this volume as all other alternative water supplies are blocked to us by Israel's ongoing siege over Gaza. Some of you will have heard me characterize myself as the 'Minister of Virtual Water'.....my apologies and thanks to our colleague and friend Professor Tony Allan for this reference. This title is simply a reflection of the fact that we have such limited access to fresh water in both the West Bank and Gaza. Israel exploits over 90 per cent of our shared water resources for its own use, while exerting tremendous influence over the remaining 10 per cent for Palestinian use. Not only are we denied our equitable and reasonable share of water under customary international water law; Palestinians have also been prevented from developing essential water infrastructure and securing for Palestinians their human right to water as mandated in the 2010 United Nations General Assembly resolution on the same among other international instruments. And in cases such as the destruction of water cisterns, wells and other essential water infrastructure, access to water has become a weapon used by Israel to target some of the most vulnerable Palestinian communities in the occupied Palestinian territory resulting in forced migration. Together, these 'facts of occupation' greatly impact our ability to meet Palestine's domestic, agricultural and industrial water needs both now and into the future. Simply stated, the Palestinian people are Thirsting for Justice and call on all states to demand the above from Israel, the occupying Power, to bring an end to this unjust and deplorable situation.

The year 2011 is of particular importance for Palestinians. A majority of nations have already recognized the state of Palestine, and as you know, we will be seeking to have Palestine admitted as a member state of the United Nations in the coming month. At the Palestinian Water Authority – as at many other institutions in Palestine, both in the public and private sectors – we have been preparing hard for the moment of statehood. We are ready to accept and carry out our responsibilities to the full, and to cooperate with others in the region for effective management of our shared water resources in accordance with the norms of international national law and best international practice.

Let me review the major steps forward that we at the PWA have taken to achieve this readiness for Statehood – first internally within the PWA, then domestically to improve services to Palestinians, and finally externally with Israel and the broader international community.



As some of you know, I triggered a wide-ranging reform programme in the water sector in Palestine over two years ago. Notwithstanding the inherent difficulties we face under occupation, this programme is now bearing fruit. We are building our capacity to plan and implement high-quality programs for providing effective water services to the Palestinian population. Our ability to build and maintain critical infrastructure has been enhanced. We have harnessed our experience to improve our ability to respond to the emergencies and crisis which regularly occur, and to resolve internal disputes as they arise, despite the difficulties of recruiting new personnel or even paying the salaries of civil servants.

We have also invested great effort in tackling corruption and dealing with the problems it creates for an emerging state. At the PWA, we have worked hard in the last three and a half years to increase the transparency and trackability of our programmes in the water sector in particular. Despite facing significant resistance from entrenched interests in the region, we have made great progress toward eliminating corrupt practices, though more can always be done.

With this renewed institutional capability, we are attacking the most challenging problems of water scarcity and quality in the West Bank and Gaza. As I have already mentioned, in Palestine we face severe water scarcity induced by social, physical and political factors. In Gaza – where 40% of the in-country population of Palestinians live – we have the added problems of water quality and imminent aquifer collapse. The over-abstraction of the groundwater in Gaza is accompanied by serious contamination of the aquifer as a result of saline intrusion both from the Mediterranean Sea, and from the south-east due to a hydrological connection to the Avedat aquifer in Israel. This saline intrusion is getting rapidly worse over time, and the aquifer is severely threatened. In addition, Gaza's groundwater is further contaminated by wastewater percolating through the permeable sand strata. As a result of these problems, none of the groundwater in Gaza meets internationally recognised standards in terms of quality, for potable use, while most of the 1.6 million Palestinians in Gaza cannot afford to treat the groundwater. One effect of this has been a rapid increase in the incidence of water borne diseases in Gaza, especially among children.

We've examined all technical and managerial options, but most are not available in Gaza for political reasons. Prevented from importing basic construction materials, we've had to negotiate every sack of cement that comes in, taking four years to build an 'emergency' wastewater filtration pond after seven people died in the torrent of sewage after the sewage lagoon burst its banks. In the face of these obstacles, and given the desperate situation in Gaza, we recently commissioned a study that has provided us with a strategic response to these problems in the water sector in Gaza. We have improved the study through a series of consensus-building steps, and are currently seeking assistance for a number of major interventions to implement this strategy. Composed of several stages, it centres on the construction of a water desalination facility capable of servicing the water needs of Gaza's population while allowing for the coastal aquifer's rehabilitation. Although the Palestinian Authority is pleased by the recent approval of the Union for the Mediterranean to develop a Desalination Facility for the Gaza Strip, the spatial limitations in Gaza as well as the 120 million cubic meter deficit may require the exploration of an option in locating a second desalination facility in the Sinai in Egypt. This is also critical given the difficulties we face in getting materials into Gaza, as well as Israel's record of targeting essential civilian infrastructure in Gaza for



destruction. Such a facility could benefit both the people of Palestine and Egypt, and it is important to consider this option and study its feasibility.

I wish to speak now about our activities on the regional and international levels. Let me mention two specific examples that involve our relationships with Israel, and those with our neighbours more broadly in the region.

The Joint Water Committee, established through the Interim Agreement of 28 September 1995, is the only official joint forum shared by Palestine and Israel to have survived as an active entity over the intervening 16 years. Sometimes we wonder if this is a blessing, or a curse. In particular, it has been used by Israel in a bureaucratic (and rather arbitrary) way to veto and indefinitely delay PWA plans and programs aimed at providing adequate water resources for Palestinians. In recent years, however, we have played a more assertive role in this forum, compelling Israel to recognize our increased capacity and improved performance on all levels, and achieving progress in building better water and wastewater treatment systems for the local Palestinian population. Progress in this JWC forum is still modest, slow and overly bureaucratic, with heavy overtones of occupational vetoes. We look forward to the day when a new forum will allow us to interact with our Israeli counterparts as respected partners and equals, working jointly to solve problems in the interests of all.

There has also been the Camp David meetings of July 2000, and the Annapolis Round of negotiations extending from late 2007 through 2008. Throughout successive negotiations, our position has remained the same, namely that Israel must end its illegal exploitation of our shared water resources and that these same resources should be reallocated according to the principle of equitable and reasonable use – as required by customary international water law. Adherence to international law is not only a crucial first step to resolving the water dispute between Israel and Palestine, it will also help create a conducive environment for future meaningful cooperation on water related issues at both the bilateral and regional levels. Outside of international law, no other objective standard exists for what constitutes a just and lasting peace.

Several years ago, we published proposals for a Positive-Sum Outcome for the region as a whole – involving all five riparians of the Jordan River basin – which relied on three major “pillars” that accord with the principles of this conference: (1) equitable and reasonable allocation of shared water resources, (2) the development of ‘new water’ to address the current concerns, and (3) cooperative joint management among the various riparian agencies in the interests of all residents of the region. We patiently await serious consideration and a thoughtful response from Israel and the other riparian countries

To further make good on our commitment to international law, we’ve also notified the international community of our intention to ratify the 1997 UN Watercourses Convention upon becoming a state, and in the meantime both President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad have importantly called on all other states supportive of Palestine’s aspiration to be a state to ratify it as well. We repeat this call to all states that support steps toward not only the nominal declaration of a State of Palestine, but towards the creation of a viable and independent Palestinian state.



Further adding pressure to the need for peace and an end to Israel's occupation is the threat of climate change. Like other nations, Palestine is not immune to the effects of climate change. However, our ability to adapt to the challenges of climate change is significantly hampered by the severe restrictions we face under occupation. The current predictions from the Inter Governmental Panel on Climate Change suggest that we are – literally – a hot spot for future climate change. This highlights the need for Palestine to be involved in international discussions on the basis of equality and partnership. Not yet recognised as a state, however, we do not even qualify for any UNFCCC adaptation funding.

One response to these types of problems has been the triggering of a major study on a Red Sea-Dead Sea conduit. This work included Palestine as one of three Beneficiary Parties, with Israel and Jordan, thus recognising our riparian status on an equal basis in relation to the Jordan River Basin which includes the Dead Sea. Palestine remains especially keen to ensure that the Study of Alternatives at the regional level should be given high priority in order that all possible options are investigated under the broad program of the proposed water conveyance project.

In ending, I want to return to the main objective of our efforts these past three years at the Palestinian Water Authority – preparing for assuming the authority and responsibility of Statehood. Make no mistake: there can be no viable Palestinian state without our having access to, as well as control and management over, sufficient water resources capable of meeting our present and future domestic, agricultural and industrial water needs. We know what peace requires: what has been lacking up until now is the international political will to bring it about. It is this that needs to change, and I hope that this conference will help to make that change possible. We at the PWA are ready to address the water problems facing Palestine in a coherent and systematic fashion. This does not mean that we are self-sufficient. Indeed, our need for international assistance remains high. Yet despite the difficulties we face, we will continue to be a responsible partner in efforts to resolve the region's water-related problems.

Towards this end, we look forward to working with all our regional neighbours, and all of you for a sustainable future in water for all people in the region.

Thank you.