

## **For Six Months, These Palestinian Villages Had Running Water. Israel Put a Stop to It.**

For six months, Palestinian villagers living on West Bank land that Israel deems a closed firing range saw their dream of running water come true. Then the Civil Administration put an end to it.

*By Amira Hass*

The dream that came true, in the form of a two-inchline, was too good to be true. For about six months, 12 Palestinian West Bank villages in the South Hebron Hills enjoyed clean running water. That was until February 13, when staff from the Israeli [Civil Administration](#), accompanied by [soldiers](#) and Border Police and a couple of bulldozers, arrived.

The troops dug up the pipes, cut and sawed them apart and watched the jets of water that spurted out. About 350 cubic meters of water were wasted. Of a 20 kilometer long (12 mile) network, the Civil Administration confiscated remnants and sections of a total of about 6 kilometers of piping. They loaded them on four garbage trucks emblazoned with the name of the Tel Aviv suburb of Ramat Gan on them.

The demolition work lasted six and a half hours. Construction of the water line network had taken about four months. It had been a clear act of civil rebellion in the spirit of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King against one of the most brutal bans that Israel imposes on Palestinian communities in Area C, the portion of the West Bank under full Israeli control. It bars Palestinians from hooking into existing water infrastructure.

The residential caves in the [Masafer Yatta](#) village region south of Hebron and the ancient cisterns used for collecting rainwater confirm the local residents' claim that their villages have existed for decades, long before the founding of the State of Israel. In the 1970s, Israel declared some 30,000 dunams (7,500 acres) in the area Firing Range 918.

In 1999, under the auspices of the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, the army expelled the residents of the villages and demolished their

structures and water cisterns. The government claimed that the residents were trespassing on the firing range, even though these were their lands and they have lived in the area long before the West Bank was captured by Israel.

When the matter was brought to the [High Court of Justice](#), the court approved a partial return to the villages but did not allow construction or hookups to utility infrastructure. Mediation attempts failed, because the state was demanding that the residents leave their villages and live in the West Bank town of Yatta and come to graze their flocks and work their land only on a few specific days per year. But the residents continued to live in their homes, risking military raids and demolition action — including the demolition of public facilities such as schools, medical clinics and even toilets. They give up a lot to maintain their way of life as shepherds, but could not forgo water.

“The rainy season has grown much shorter in recent years, to only about 45 days a year,” explained Nidal Younes, the chairman of the Masafer Yatta council of villages. “In the past, we didn’t immediately fill the cisterns with rainwater, allowing them to be washed and cleaned first. Since the amount of rain has decreased, people stored water right away. It turns out the dirty water harmed the sheep and the people.”

Because the number of residents has increased, even in years with abundant rain, at a certain stage the cisterns ran dry and the shepherds would bring in water by tractor. They would haul a 4 cubic meter (140 square foot) tank along the area’s narrow, poor roads — which Israel does not permit to have widened and paved. “The water has become every family’s largest expense,” Younes said. In the village of Halawa, he pointed out Abu Ziyad, a man of about 60. “I always see him on a tractor, bringing in water or setting out to bring back water.” Sometimes the tractors overturn and drivers are injured. Tires quickly wear out and precious work days go to waste. “We are drowning in debt to pay for the transportation of water,” Abu Ziyad said.

In 2017, the Civil Administration and the Israeli army closed and demolished the roads to the villages, which the council had earlier managed to widen and rebuild. That had been done to make it easier to haul water in particular, but also more generally to give the villages better access.

The right-wing Regavim non-profit group “exposed” the great crime committed in upgrading the roads and pressured the Civil Administration and the army to rip them up. “The residents’ suffering increased,” Younes remarked. “We asked ourselves how to solve the water problem.”

The not very surprising solution was installing pipes to carry the water from the main water line in the village of Al-Tuwani, through privately owned lands of the other villages. “I checked it out, looking to see if there was any ban on laying water lines on private land and couldn’t find one,” Younes said.

### **Work done by volunteers**

The plumbing work was done by volunteers, mostly at night and without heavy machinery, almost with their bare hands. Ali Debabseh, 77, of the village of Khalet al-Daba, recalled the moment when he opened the spigot installed near his home and washed his face with running water. “I wanted to jump for joy. I was as happy as a groom before his wedding.”

Umm Fadi of the village of Halawa also resorted to the word “joy” in describing the six months when she had a faucet near the small shack in which she lives. “The water was clean, not brown from rust or dust. I didn’t need to go as far as the cistern to draw water, didn’t need to measure every drop.”

Now it’s more difficult to again get used to being dependent on water dispensed from tanks.

The piping and connections and water meters were bought with a 100,000 euro (\$113,000) European donation. Instead of paying 40 shekels (\$11) per cubic meter for water brought in with water tanks, the residents paid only about 6 shekels for the same amount of running water. Suddenly they not only saved money, but also had more precious time.

The water lines also could have saved European taxpayers money. A European project to help the residents remain in their homes had been up and running since 2011, providing annual funding of 120,000 euros to cover the cost of buying and transporting drinking water during the three summer months for the residents (but not their livestock).

The cost was based on a calculation involving consumption of 750 liters per person a month, far below the World Health Organization’s recommended quantity. There are between 1,500 and 2,000 residents. The project made things much easier for such a poor community, which continued to pay out of its own pocket for the water for some 40,000 sheep and for the residents’ drinking water during the remainder of the year. Now that the Civil Administration has demolished the water lines, the European donor countries may be forced to once again pay for the high price of transporting water during the summer months, at seven times the cost.

For its part, the Civil Administration issued a statement noting that the area is a closed military zone. “On February 13,” the statement said, “enforcement action was taken against water infrastructure that was connected to illegal structures in this area and that were built without the required permits.”

Ismail Bahis should have been sorry that the pipes were laid last year. He and his brothers, residents of **Yatta**, own water tankers and were the main water suppliers to the Masafer Yatta villages. Through a system of coupons purchased with the European donation, they received 800 shekels for every shipment of 20 cubic meters of water. But Bahis said he was happy he had lost out on the work.

“The roads to the villages of Masafer Yatta are rough and dangerous, particularly after the army closed them,” he said. “Every trip of a few kilometers took at least three and a half hours. Once I tipped over with the tanker. Another time the army confiscated my brother’s truck, claiming it was a closed military zone. We got the truck released three weeks later in return for 5,000 shekels. We always had other additional expenses replacing tires and other repairs for the truck.

Nidal Younes recounted that the council signed a contract with another water carrier to meet the demand. But that supplier quit after three weeks. He wouldn’t agree to drive on the poor and dangerous roads.

On February 13, Younes heard the large group of forces sent by the Civil Administration beginning to demolish the water lines near the village of Al-Fakhit. He rushed to the scene and began arguing with the soldiers and Civil Administration staff.

### **Border Police arrests**

Border Police officers arrested him, handcuffed him and put him in a jeep. His colleague, the head of the Al-Tuwani council, Mohammed al-Raba’i, also approached those carrying out the demolition work to protest. “But they arrested me after I said two words. At least Nidal managed to say a lot,” he said with a smile that concealed sadness.

Two teams carried out the demolition work, one proceeding toward the village of Jinbah, to the southeast, the second advanced in the direction of Al-Tuwani, to the northwest. They also demolished the access road leading to the village of Sha’ab al-Butum, so that even if Bahis wanted to transport water again, he would have had to make a large detour to do so.

Younes was shocked to spot a man named Marco among the team carrying out the demolition. “I remembered him from when I was a child, from the 1980s when he was an inspector for the Civil Administration. In 1985, he supervised the demolition of houses in our village, Jinbah — twice, during Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr [marking the end of the Ramadan holy month],” he said.

“They knew him very well in all the villages in the area because he attended all the demolitions. The name Marco was a synonym for an evil spirit. Our parents who saw him demolish their homes, have died. He disappeared, and suddenly he has reappeared,” Younes remarked.

Marco is [Marco Ben-Shabbat](#), who has lead the Civil Administration’s supervision unit for the past 10 years. Speaking to a reporter from the Israel Hayom daily who accompanied the forces carrying out the demolition work, Ben-Shabbat said: “The [water line] project was not carried out by the individual village. The Palestinian Authority definitely put a project manager here and invested a lot of money.” More precisely, it was European governments that did so.

From all of the villages where the Civil Administration destroyed water lines, the Jewish outposts of Mitzpeh Yair and Avigayil can be seen on the hilltops. Although they are unauthorized and illegal even according to lenient Israeli settlement laws, the outposts were connected almost immediately to water and electricity grids and paved roads lead to them.

“I asked why they demolished the water lines,” Nidal Younes recalled. He said one of the Border Police officers answered him, in English, telling him it was done "to replace Arabs with Jews."