

# Poisoning the Wells: Zionist Biological Warfare, International Law, and the Continuity of Colonial Violence

In the mythology of modern Israel, the events of 1948 are often framed as a war of survival, a moment of national birth amidst existential threat. But beneath this narrative lies a darker, well-documented history of war crimes — including the deliberate poisoning of Palestinian wells and water supplies. Far from isolated aberrations, these acts formed part of a broader strategy of depopulation, deterrence, and territorial consolidation — one that continues today through the destruction of water infrastructure in the occupied West Bank and the total siege of Gaza.

Poisoning water sources, especially with biological agents, is not merely a battlefield tactic. It is a war crime under international law, a weapon of mass suffering, and a crime against human dignity. In 1948, these acts were already illegal under the **Hague Convention IV (1907)** - to which Israel, by continuity of obligation and later accession, is bound. This essay lays out the documented history of Zionist water poisoning operations, their legal implications, and the continuity of this tactic from the Nakba to the present.

## Biological Warfare in 1948: Poisoning as Policy

### Acre (May 1948): Typhoid in the Water

In May 1948, as Zionist forces laid siege to the Palestinian city of **Acre**, the Haganah's covert *Science Corps (Hemed Bet)* deployed a typhoid-based biological agent into the city's water supply. The goal was to weaken the civilian population, create panic, and accelerate flight.

- **Method:** Typhoid bacteria grown in labs were inserted into the municipal water system
- **Impact:** Dozens of civilians fell ill with typhoid. The Red Cross intervened
- **Perpetrators:** Unit 131, under the authority of the Haganah leadership
- **Documentation:** Israeli military archives, Red Cross records, and Israeli historians such as Benny Morris, Avner Cohen, and Thomas Segev confirm the operation

This was the first known use of bacteriological weapons by Zionist forces during the war. It was not the act of rogue operatives, but a planned military operation targeting civilians.

### Gaza (June 1948): A Foiled Bioterror Plot

Shortly after Acre, the same unit attempted to carry out a similar typhoid poisoning operation in **Gaza**, then under Egyptian administration. This time, the operatives were arrested

by Egyptian security forces before they could deploy the pathogen.

- **Objective:** Destabilize Gaza, block Arab reinforcements, and signal Zionist reach
- **Discovery:** Egyptian authorities confiscated the bacterial agents and arrested the agents
- **Documentation:** Thomas Segev, *1949: The First Israelis*, and Egyptian security reports

Though the attack failed, it demonstrates a clear pattern of biological warfare tactics coordinated across multiple fronts.

### **Biddu and Beit Surik (Spring 1948): Contaminating Village Wells**

In the lead-up to the Nakba, Palestinian villages northwest of Jerusalem — including **Biddu** and **Beit Surik** — reported attempts by Zionist forces to poison or sabotage local wells. These villages were strategically located along the supply routes to Jerusalem.

- **Evidence:** Oral testimonies collected by Walid Khalidi and local Palestinian records
- **Intent:** To depopulate or deter return by making local resources unusable
- **Outcome:** The villages were eventually depopulated; residents fled or were expelled

While microbiological evidence was never recovered (likely due to time and destruction), the pattern fits the known operational profile of Zionist sabotage in rural areas.

### **'Ayn Karim (1948): Mass Illness after Reservoir Sabotage**

Located just west of Jerusalem, **'Ayn Karim** experienced a sudden outbreak of illness after Haganah raids targeted the water reservoir in the village.

- **Details:** Residents fell sick days after the raid; symptoms suggested contamination
- **Unconfirmed:** No pathogen was officially identified, but mass illness was widely reported
- **Source:** Palestinian Red Crescent, survivor testimonies

This incident illustrates how psychological and biological tactics were used in tandem, not only to cause harm but to sow fear and encourage flight.

### **Ein al-Zeitun (April–May 1948): Destruction of Water Infrastructure**

In the Galilee, the Palmach attacked **Ein al-Zeitun**, killing many residents and expelling the rest. In the aftermath, Zionist forces destroyed the village's wells and water conduits to ensure no return.

- **Tactic:** Scorched earth - not biological, but equally aimed at long-term displacement
- **Sources:** Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*

The destruction of water sources was not just incidental damage. It was a calculated strategy to depopulate villages permanently.

### **Broader Galilee: Planned Poisoning of Springs**

Declassified IDF records show that Zionist forces planned to poison or disable water sources in multiple Galilee villages, particularly those near armistice lines.

- **Goal:** Prevent re-infiltration by expelled Palestinians
- **Means:** Destruction or planned contamination of water points
- **Sources:** Israeli military archives, cited in works by Nur Masalha and Salman Abu Sitta

These plans show that water poisoning was part of a broader doctrine ("Plan Dalet"), not limited to one or two isolated incidents.

## **Legal Implications: Multiple Violations of International Law**

The actions outlined above constitute clear and multiple violations of international humanitarian law, in effect at the time of the 1948 war:

### **Hague Convention IV (1907) - Ratified and in effect**

- **Article 23(a):** Prohibits "the employment of poison or poisoned weapons"
- Zionist biological attacks (Acre, Gaza) directly violate this article

### **Customary International Law**

- The prohibition on poisoning water sources and targeting civilians is part of customary law, binding regardless of treaty ratification
- The attacks meet the threshold of war crimes under contemporary standards

### **Biological Weapons Convention (BWC, 1972) - Israel signed but did not ratify**

- Prohibits the development, production, and use of biological weapons
- While the BWC came after the Nakba, the use of typhoid as a weapon was already condemned under the Geneva Protocol (1925) - which Israel did not sign, but which reflects broader legal norms

### **Rome Statute of the ICC (1998) - Not signed by Israel, but applicable to OPT**

- Poisoning civilians through water qualifies under **Article 8(2)(b)(xvii)** as a war crime
- The ICC has recognized jurisdiction over the occupied Palestinian territories

## **Continuity of Tactics: From Wells to Siege**

The weaponization of water did not end in 1948. It evolved, becoming a central feature of Israel's occupation infrastructure.

## **West Bank: Settler Violence Against Water Infrastructure**

Israeli settlers in the occupied West Bank routinely destroy or contaminate Palestinian water tanks, wells, and irrigation systems.

- **Methods:** Shooting cisterns, smashing pipes, poisoning livestock watering points
- **Motivation:** Displacement through unlivable conditions, especially in Area C
- **Protection:** Often occurs under IDF escort or passive complicity
- **Documentation:** UN OCHA, B'Tselem, Amnesty International

Water denial has become a core tactic of settler colonial expansion, following the same logic used in 1948: control the land by cutting off life.

## **Gaza: Siege as Environmental and Biological Warfare**

In Gaza, Israel has enforced a total siege since 2007 - one that has targeted not only borders and electricity, but water purification, sanitation, and medical infrastructure.

- **Actions:**
  - Bombing sewage treatment plants and desalination facilities
  - Blocking materials needed to repair water systems
  - Preventing fuel needed to power water pumps
- **Effects:**
  - Over 97% of Gaza's water is undrinkable (WHO)
  - Children suffer from chronic waterborne diseases
  - In 2021, UN agencies declared Gaza "unlivable"

The siege transforms water - essential to life - into a weapon of punishment. It is the modern continuation of a doctrine first deployed in the poisoned wells of 1948.

## **Ethical Clarity: Fact Is Not Hatred**

It is true that the accusation of "well-poisoning" was once a malicious antisemitic libel, used to justify the murder of innocent Jews in medieval Europe. But to acknowledge real, documented cases of Zionist forces poisoning Palestinian water is not to resurrect that libel. It is to speak truth to historical and legal reality.

Criticism of Israeli military and settler tactics - including biological warfare - is not antisemitism. It is a moral obligation rooted in international law, historical accountability, and the lived experience of Palestinian victims. Silence in the face of such crimes does not protect Jews - it protects war criminals and dishonors the victims of real antisemitism throughout history.

## **Conclusion: Water as a Weapon, Memory as Resistance**

From Acre to Gaza, from sabotaged village wells to the slow suffocation of Gaza's aquifers, the use of water as a weapon defines the logic of Zionist settler-colonialism. It is a tactic of removal, deterrence, and domination - and it has never stopped.

To poison water is to poison life. And to remember the poisoned wells of Palestine is not to invoke ancient libels, but to confront modern crimes - with truth, with law, and with the demand that water, and justice, flow freely again.