EcoPeace held a special panel moderated by the journalist Smadar Peri the Middle East Desk Chief of Yediot Ahronot, as part of the Sderot Conference about the Gaza water and sanitation crisis and its impact on Israel. Participants in the panel discussed with residents of the communities around Gaza the possible ramifications and solutions to the crisis.

Prof. Nadav Davidovitch, Chairman of the Public Health Doctors Organization in Israel and Head of the Public Health School at Ben-Gurion University, opened the session and noted that "the residents of Gaza deserve the right to clean water, but of course it is also an Israeli interest. Last summer, a 5-year-old boy died in Gaza after swimming in a pool of polluted water... People in Gaza live below the red line and are at high risk of respiratory and intestinal diseases. At the moment there is no cholera in Gaza, but it is enough for someone who is sick to arrive to Gaza for the disease to spread. The conditions on the ground will cause the disease to spread like wildfire".

Rotem Caro Weizman from EcoPeace explained: "The Coastal Aquifer, which supplies 95% of Gaza's drinking water, is in a state of overuse. Water pumping rates are more than three times higher than renewable supply. As a result, sea water penetrates the aquifer, and salinity levels are much higher than those defined by the World Health Organization for safe drinking water. Approximately 100,000 cubic meters of untreated sewage from Gaza flow from the Gaza Strip into the Mediterranean Sea and the coast of Israel. The Ashkelon desalination plant, which supplies about 15% of our drinking water, has been closed several times. Gaza's sewage managed to do what Hamas missiles failed to do- paralyze an Israeli strategic infrastructure. The crisis in Gaza will not remain in Gaza alone but will threaten and harm Israel and the regional stability- it is one of not just health and environmental factors but of national security".

Ahmed Yaakobi, a senior water expert from Gaza, reflected the reality of those living in the Gaza Strip: "There is a large gap between demand and supply. There is no clean water for everyone. Gazans drink seawater mixed with drinking water and this is a source of pollution...There are many diseases that are very difficult to treat in Gaza."

Prof. Shaul Mishal, Head of the Middle East studies program at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya tackled the issues of advancing given the relations between the parties - Israel and Hamas: "We cannot reach an agreement or direct contact for a solution. We are not listening to the regional tune- we don't need to choose- the entire Middle East needs to be involved in finding a solution for Gaza.” Yoni Eshpar, political advisor to the UN's Office for the Middle East Peace Process, agrees that there must be a change in the regional political reality: "Gaza must return to a state of a single Palestinian control. The UN is operating on the ground, but it worries about investing money in Gaza where four players are trying to gain control - the PA wants to control
the money, Hamas in the field, and Israel and Egypt - what goes in and out. Agencies that are trying to operate in the field, not only the UN, are facing tremendous difficulties in creating a change in the region."

MK Maj. Gen. (res.) Eyal Ben-Reuven noted that it is impossible and incorrect to separate the military-security reality from the humanitarian one and agreed that the regional efforts should be sought to solve the humanitarian crisis and that Israel should lead these efforts: "We are much closer to fire and war than to reconciliation. Gaza is a ticking time bomb. In the winter and summer there are 6-8 hours of electricity a day and this is a terrible situation for the general population, especially the children. This impasse lays the groundwork for hatred and terror among these children - the evils we wish to eradicate. In Israel, when we talk about Gaza, we only talk about the security situation and we do not talk about the humanitarian issue - it's not published in the media. Israel has a deep interest in forming and leading an international humanitarian campaign on this issue - to connect the regional and international components that are willing to take part in this effort."

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