

About Gheit's address at the opening of the sixth edition of Cairo Water Week

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Your Excellency Mr. Sameh Shoukry,

Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Arab Republic of Egypt

Your Excellency Dr. Hani Sweilem,

Minister of Water Resources and Irrigation of the Arab Republic of Egypt

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased to participate in the opening of the sixth edition of Cairo Water Week. This international conference holds a prominent status as the foremost water event in the Arab region. This recognition is due to the relentless efforts of the Egyptian government, which has consistently worked towards the development of the conference and the enrichment of its discussions since its inception in 2018.

I wish to express my admiration for the positive outcomes it has yielded, which we are committed to presenting periodically within the Arab Ministerial Water Council's framework. The conference has played a pivotal role in bolstering the collaborative efforts of the Arab nations in the field of water.

Today, we meet in Cairo while our thoughts are with the suffering in Gaza. Once more, Israel has committed a new crime that has drawn the attention of the world. This adds to a lengthy record of systematic violations, dating back to the Nakba, in its pursuit to displace the population of Gaza, who originally consisted of refugees. This displacement is being carried out not only through indiscriminate bombings but also by depriving them of their most fundamental human rights, including access to water, food, and healthcare.

History will bear witness once again to Israel's ruthless implementation of a "scorched earth policy," deliberately targeting water and sewage facilities, as well as hospitals, across Gaza from north to south, using highly destructive weaponry to forcibly displace Palestinians. This is done in a bid to obliterate their cause at the expense of their rights and to the detriment of neighbouring countries. The extensive destruction of essential infrastructure reflects a disturbing intent to cause chaos and render what remains of Palestinian territories uninhabitable, all in the misguided belief that spreading despair through inhumane policies will force surrender.

Israel continues to target Palestinian infrastructure, much as it has done in the past in southern Lebanon and Syria. These actions take place without any regard for international humanitarian law and are conducted without any constraints. It is worth noting that international humanitarian law, specifically Article 54 of the Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions, explicitly criminalises attacks on or disruptions of essential materials, including water facilities and irrigation networks. Furthermore, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court classifies the destruction of infrastructure and water networks as war crimes. Various international conventions also prohibit the use of water as a weapon against civilians.

The recent attack has laid bare the double standards employed by some who attempt to justify Israel's actions of targeting water, sewage, and electricity networks as acts of self-defence. These same individuals condemn similar actions in other contexts. It's important to note that this double standard is not unique to the issue of water but is also seen in various other Arab water-related matters. For instance, when Egypt asserts its right to access water for its population, the discussion often shifts to Ethiopia's right to development. When Arab countries undertake strategic water projects, they are often met with criticism and concerns about their potential environmental impact.

This is not the first instance of Israel weaponising water. In addition to appropriating Arab water sources, Israel has systematically targeted all water facilities, fully aware of the critical importance of this essential resource for sustaining life, stability, and development. These actions are motivated by a desire to keep Palestinians in a state of vulnerability, subjecting them to thirst, hunger, and disease.

The League of Arab States recognises the gravity of these practices that pose a threat to Arab water security. The League is actively engaged in addressing these concerns through the Arab Ministerial Water Council. One of the most recent initiatives undertaken in this regard involves the studies conducted by the Arab Water Experts Network, operating under the auspices of the Council. The General Secretariat of the League has diligently secured the necessary funding for the preparation of these studies.

It is essential to recall that the findings of these studies were presented in July 2022 at the General Secretariat of the League's headquarters. These findings served as a stark warning about the deplorable state of water and sewage networks in Gaza, brought about by recurrent Israeli attacks. The situation in Gaza was already dire two years ago, marked by its disastrous condition. The question that arises is: what are the conditions today, especially in light of the horrifying scenes that have come to our attention?

Ladies and gentlemen,

Arab water security remains under a growing threat, posing a concerning decline in water resources in a region already struggling with water scarcity. These challenges are intricate and interconnected, necessitating increased investments in the water sector within Arab nations. It's crucial to bolster collaborative Arab efforts, particularly in sharing experiences, uniting against global water challenges, and launching initiatives for water conservation. Arab countries have demonstrated commendable efforts in this regard, both on national and international fronts.

I'd like to highlight Egypt's endeavours during the COP27 climate summit in Sharm El-Sheikh. Egypt successfully rallied international consensus around three focal points of interest for developing countries. These encompass the creation of a Loss and Damage Fund, incorporating water as a tool to combat climate change through the Water for Climate Adaptation (AWARe) initiative, and the adoption of the Early Warning for All initiative presented by the United Nations.

In the context of early warning systems for natural disasters, we all remember how Hurricane Daniel led to the catastrophic collapse of the Derna Dam in Libya. It is imperative that we work on enhancing Arab warning capabilities, preparing for worst-case scenarios, given that the costs of disaster preparedness are significantly lower than the losses incurred. However, a real challenge arises from the geographic distribution of dams in the Arab region, with many located outside its borders. Arab countries often lack sufficient information about the status and maintenance requirements of these external dams.

In closing, I must emphasise that this conference's agenda includes an Arab preparatory meeting for the World Water Forum, scheduled to be hosted by Indonesia in May 2024. Additionally, there will be a meeting of the high-level joint technical committee for water and agriculture, arising from the joint meeting of Arab ministers of water and agriculture. I extend my best wishes to all of you for a successful and fruitful event.

Thank you,