FROM THE RIVER TO THE SEA: CHALLENGES OF CROSS-BORDER ENVIRONMENTAL PEACEBUILDING IN THE LEVANT

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Abstract - For decades, issues of water and sanitation have been a source of conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. In response, one of the most renowned environmental NGOs of the region, EcoPeace Middle East (formerly Friends of the Earth Middle East) brings together Israelis, Palestinians, and Jordanians to transform the conflict over water into a tool for cross-border cooperation and inter-cultural dialogue. This paper is part of a broader study on the successes and challenges of cross-border environmental peace building between Israelis and Palestinians. The said study critically assesses the work of EcoPeace Middle East using theories of environmental conflict, cross-border cooperation, and multi-tier peace building. Qualitative data was collected during a three-months expedition to Israel and the Palestinian territories. The paper provides a synopsis of some of the research findings with a special focus on the political, physical, and social challenges of cross-border environmental cooperation in the Levant.

Keywords - Israeli-Palestinian water conflict, cross-border environmental cooperation, environmental peacebuilding

I. INTRODUCTION

For decades, issues of water and sanitation have been a source of conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Rather than being an appropriate regional management structure for cross-border water resources, the Israeli-Palestinian Joint Water Committee, established as part of the Oslo peace process, has proven ineffective and ill-equipped for the ecological and humanitarian challenges of the region. The reason for this lies not in the technical aspects of solving the water problem, but ties into the political context of a seventy-year-long conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

After years of adapting to the arid, water scarce climate of the Middle East, Israel has catapulted itself onto the top of the water technology field. With the help of salt water desalination, water recycling, and drip-irrigation, the country has managed to decrease its dependency on the region's natural water resources to such an extent that its production of drinking water now exceeds its total rate of consumption. Israel's issue of water scarcity, once designated a matter of national security, has been transformed into a pioneering example of water efficiency.

Why, then, should Israel even concern itself with the cumbersome task of making a water agreement with the Palestinians? Put simply: because the environment knows no borders. Solving the supply and demand equation is only one part of the quest for water security. Rather, where bodies of water cross national boundaries, countries must invest in a concerted, inter-sectoral and regional approach to establish effective management structures for shared water basins (see Figure 1). By providing clean and sufficient water for its citizens, Israel has taken the first step towards water security on the national level. On the regional level, however, bad governance and the irresponsible treatment of cross-border water resources have cause deco logical mayhem and may further become a source of far-reaching political and social instability.

In the past, Israel has been able to pursue a strategy of unilateral environmentalism that required little to no cooperative efforts with the Palestinians, with which it shares many of its fresh water.

This approach, however, has proven toothless against any environmental damage inflicted on water resources that lie outside of Israel's borders. As a downstream riparian, Israel receives much of its natural water supply from sources that originate with in the West Bank (see Map 1).

There, the situation is nowhere near a state of water security. On the contrary, water resources in the Palestinian territories are scarce, subject to irregular spatial and temporal distribution, and often contain high and dangerous levels of pollutants. Consequently, much of the water that crosses the Green Line into Israel has to undergo major treatment in order to be repurposed, while some cross-border streams are subject to such heavy pollution (especially during olive harvest season) that even the toughest water treatment plants cannot sufficiently clean them.

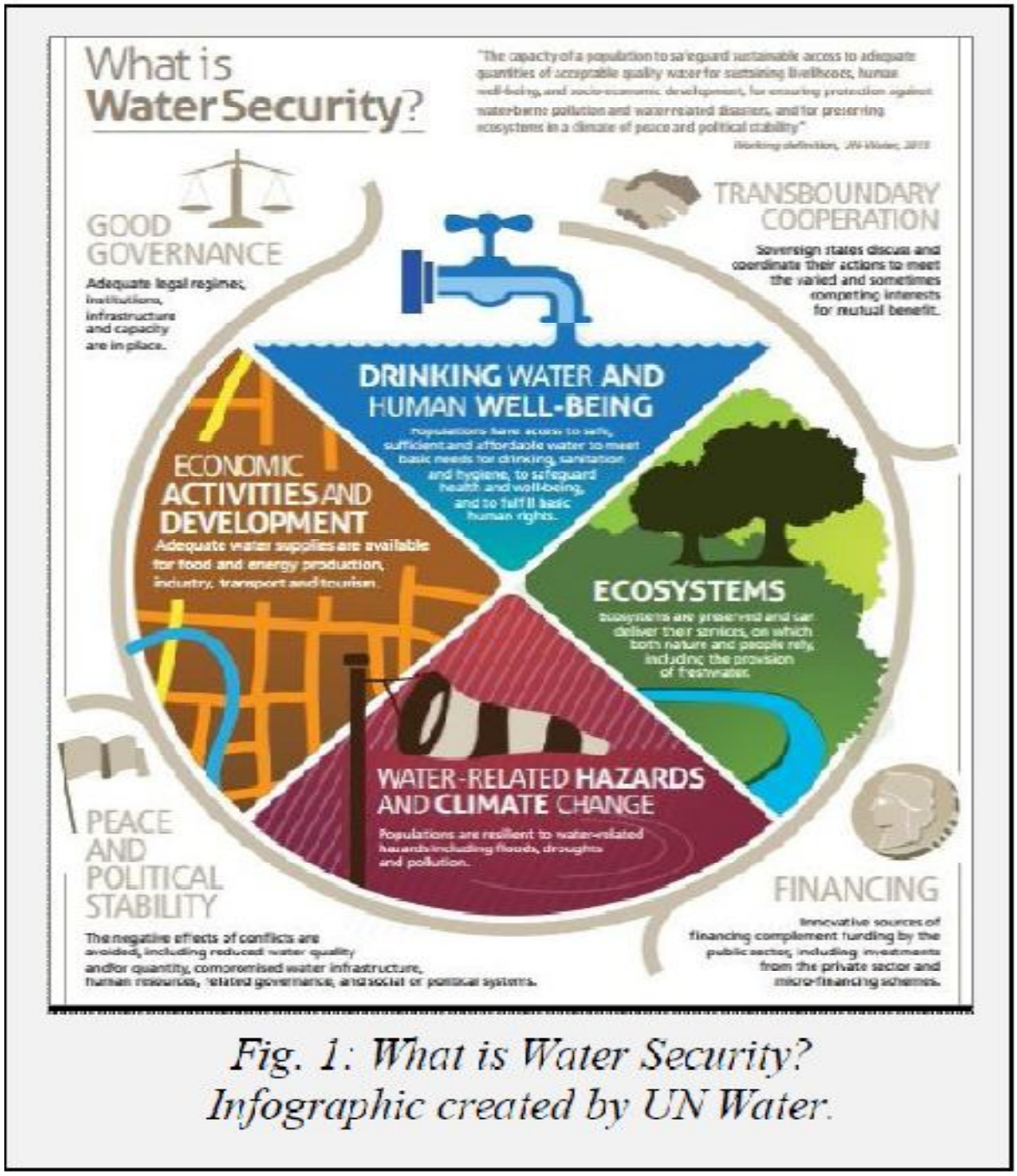

Fig. 1: What is Water Security? Infographic created by UN Water.

The situation is most dramatic in the Gaza Strip, where more than 95 percent of all water resources are currently unfit for human consumption. Widespread pollution and water-borne diseases are threatening to topple the humanitarian and social stability of the densely-populated Strip. Israelis not immune to these dangers. Several of Israel's beaches and desalination plants had to be temporarily shut down due to large amounts of raw sewage that had been washed up from the Mediterranean Sea.

If the establishment of an effective, regional environmental management system continues to be shunned, the implications could be felt through many layers of society, including the economic, ecological, and humanitarian sectors. Worst case scenario, they could lead to the political and social destabilization of the entire region. Above all, environmental activists and political scientists agree: a thirsty neighbor is not a good neighbor. Should the water and sanitation situation in the Palestinian territories continue to deteriorate, it may well act as a catalyst for widespread social uprisings and renewed violent conflict.

II. DATA COLLECTION AND METHODOLOGY

This paper is part of a broader study on the successes and challenges of cross-border environmental

peacebuilding between Israelis and Palestinians within the context of Eco Peace Middle East, a tri-lateral environmental organization. The said study draws on theories from the field of environmental conflict and cooperation, protracted ethnic conflicts, as well as civil society engagement and multi-track peacebuilding approaches.

Data was collected throughout a three-months long expedition to Israel and the Palestinian territories. Semi-structured interviews lasting from thirty to sixty minutes were conducted with 17 participants (seven Israelis, six Palestinians, and four Jordanians). Interviewees were either staff members or beneficiaries of EcoPeace Middle East.



Map 1: Transboundary Watersheds. Map created by EcoPeace.

Additional data was collected as part of a three-months long unpaid internship at EcoPeace's Tel Aviv office with frequent visits to its Palestinian office in Bethlehem (now Ramallah). All data was subsequently analyzed using qualitative data analysis. The research project focuses primarily on EcoPeace's community-based approaches to cross-border environmental peacebuilding. Most of the respondents were EcoPeace Community Coordinators or beneficiaries of its Good Water Neighbors Project. Conversations with participants focused on their involvement with EcoPeace, the challenges which

they face as part of their work on cross-border water cooperation, and the impact that participating in the organization has had on their views towards members of their own and the other two societies.

The results that are presented in this paper focus on three particular challenges that EcoPeace staff members and beneficiaries encounter throughout their work on cross-border environmental cooperation. The complete study will be published in the form of a master's thesis in the pursuit of a degree in Peace and Conflict studies at the University of Manitoba and University of Winnipeg, Canada.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For over twenty-three years, EcoPeace Middle East (formerly Friends of the Earth Middle East), an environmental non-governmental organization with offices in Tel Aviv, Amman, and Ramallah, has brought together Israelis, Palestinians, and Jordanians to jointly work on fair and sustainable solutions for the region's most pressing environmental problems.
Using a dual-strategy of top-down advocacy and bottom-up grassroots initiatives, the organization approaches the issue of water security from a cross-border, cross-sectoral perspective. Through its Water-Energy-Nexus (WEN), just to name one example, EcoPeace advocates for a holistic approach towards regional resource management by making use of Israel's technical know-how in the water sector, complemented by Jordan's vast desert space and solar potential as a source for renewable energy.
One of its most successful initiatives on the grassroots level, on the other hand, is the Good Water Neighbors (GWN) project. As one of EcoPeace's longest-running initiative, the GWN coordinates cross-border projects in almost thirty Israeli, Palestinian, and Jordanian communities, using a community-based approach to environmental education and activism. Throughout its seventeen years since its inception, EcoPeace has established a network of hundreds of volunteers and beneficiaries who are actively working alongside the organization to promote an ecologically sound, rights-based approach to regional environmental management.

Today, EcoPeace is globally known and esteemed as one of the most influential environmental organizations of the Levant region, not least because examples of successful cross-border cooperation between Israel and the Palestinians are generally a rare phenomenon. Still, all of what the organization has achieved in the past two decades has been the result of many years of hard work and what often feels like an up-hill battle. To this day, EcoPeace continues to face a number of challenges and obstacles, many of which are a by-product of the wider Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

This paper focuses on three challenges that have been identified as particularly cumbersome for EcoPeace's work on cross-border cooperation. The first challenge relates to the physical and legal fragmentation of the West Bank. The second challenge pertains to the rising social and political backlash from anti-cooperation and anti-normalization camps, while a final point will be made on the controversial status of Israeli residents within the West Bank.

A. A Fragmented West Bank

Since the signing of the Oslo II Accord in 1995, the political structure of the West Bank has resembled a patchwork blanket of three different areas, disjointedly scattered across the landscape, and each equipped with differing levels of Palestinian and Israeli authority. This political fragmentation of the West Bank has created a landscape of incoherent jurisdiction, in which a lack of enforcement and infrastructural inconsistency further exacerbate any attempt of regional environmental management.

Incoherent jurisdiction/Dual-permit system*:* Part of the Oslo II Accord was the establishment of the Israeli-Palestinian Joint Water Committee (JWC), whose goal was to jointly administer the water resources in the West Bank. The JWC was set up as an institutional framework to equally represent Israelis and Palestinians by investing each with a veto power. In reality, however, the concept of equal representation and veto poweris completely nullifiedby the additional power that was given to the Israeli Civil Administration (CA).

The CA, which governs more than 60 percent of the West Bank in what is known as Area C, is responsible for the issuing of permits that allow for the construction of new Palestinian water infrastructure, as well as any form of maintenance on existing pipes, wells, and water treatment facilities. Records have shown that the process of this dual-permitsystemfor obtaining permits for Palestinian water infrastructure has been disproportionally lengthy and has resulted in years of delay for many of the much-needed treatment facilities in the West Bank.

Lack of enforcement and legal vacuum*:* Roughly half of the environmental laws that apply within the State of Israel are not part of the CA's governance system in the West Bank. Similarly, those areas that are under the control of the Palestinian Authority suffer from low environmental regulations and lax enforcement mechanisms. Consequently, the legal vacuum and inadequate punitive measures have resulted in the unregulated discharge of sewage and over-extraction of water resources and have even created certain economic incentives for West Bank residents to dispose of their litter in unregulated landfills.

Infrastructural inconsistency and redundancy: In order to stop the amassment of uncontrolled landfills and the contamination of trans boundary water basins, the West Bank is in desperate need for new and effective environmental infrastructure, such as waste disposal sites and water treatment plants. The dual-permit system that is in place throughout more than half of the West Bank, however, continues to constitute a bureaucratic obstacle to the development of coherent and sensible water infrastructure.

Amid concerns about the high levels of pollutants that make their way across the Green Line, Israel continues to build water treatment plants close to the separation barrierin order to stop the contaminated water from reaching nearby Israeli communities(one example is the Shoket Waste Water Treatment Plant near the southern border of the West Bank). Once equally effective treatment plants are built within the West Bank, however, the amount of pollutants that cross the Green Line into Israel will be significantly reduced, thus resulting in infrastructural redundancy.

B. Anti-Cooperation Lobbies

Many of those that are actively engaged in Israeli-Palestinian cross-border activities have had to endure substantial backlash from anti-cooperation and anti-normalization groups across the region. One group in particular, the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, has gained momentum and global popularity throughout the past few years. Because of their outspoken campaign against almost all forms of cross-border cooperation between Palestinians and Israelis, many Palestinian members of EcoPeace have been subjected to heavy criticism and even threats for their involvement and cooperation with Israelis. Even those that would directly benefit from EcoPeace's work have shied away from engaging with the organization out of fear of being labeled normalizers or traitors.

On the Israeli side, anti-cooperation lobbies have exploited the general lack of awareness on the special environmental and legal situation in the West Bank to run a campaign against what they call "Palestinian ecological terrorism". Israeli staff members of EcoPeace have experienced public abasement from members of anti-cooperation groups and even government officials for their outspokenness on the regional ecological mayhem and the role that Israel plays in its augmentation.

The growing influence that anti-cooperation groups have gained over the years has been especially obstructive to EcoPeace's cross-border activities. As part of its Good Water Neighbors project, the organization brings together Israeli, Palestinian, and Jordanian students at cross-border environmental camps, which are mostly held in Jordan for logistical reasons. Since the Palestinian Ministry of Education disapproves of such cooperative projects between Palestinian and Israeli students, many Palestinian members of EcoPeace face great difficulties when trying to take their Palestinian students to cross-border events that also involve Israelis.

C. Israeli Communities Within the West Bank

In the past, EcoPeace has been vocal about its support of a two-state solution and the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state alongside Israel. Based on this political viewpoint and EcoPeace's role as a tri-lateral organization representing Israelis, Palestinians, and Jordanians alike, the organization has chosen to exclude those Israeli citizens (including children) who reside in Israeli communities across the West Bank. With this decision, the organization joins a long list of organizations and countries that view the continued construction of Israeli settlements as an illegal undertaking according to international law, and obstructive to the proposed two-state solution and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

The continued development of Israeli towns across the West Bank does not only have far-reaching consequences for the overall peace process, but further comes at large ecological as well as economical costs for the Palestinians. As the number of Israeli settlements in the West Bank has grown significantly throughout the past decades, the amount of arable land and water resources that are available to the Palestinians has shrunk accordingly. Above that, large sections of the separation barrier cut deep into West Bank territory, isolating dozens of its ground water wells and springs and severely restricting the access of Palestinians to their farmland.

While the reasons for EcoPeace's stance on these issues are plausible, the categorical exclusion of more than 400,000 Israeli citizens based on their place of residence raises some questions that should not be easily dismissed. For one thing, the term 'settler' is an agglomeration of many distinct groups of Israelis that have moved across the Green Line for a variety of reasons. More than often the term is falsely used to portray a homogenous group of ultra-orthodox Jews who reside in the West Bank out of ideological conviction. In reality, however, a much larger portion of Israelis who reside in the West Bank have decided to relocate for financial reasons.

Secondly, contrary to the belief that the steadily increasing number of settlers is the result of internal migration, the growth of the Israeli community in the West Bank is largely due to the high fertility rate among settlers. Fifty years after the Six-Day War, many of those that reside in the West Bank today are part of a second, sometimes even third generation of Israeli settlers. Because the route of the separation barrier was built to include dozens of these settlements on the Israeli side of the wall, an

astoundingly high number of Israelis are unaware of the fact that their houses are actually located on Palestinian land.

Thirdly, about one quarter of all Israelis within the West Bank are members of Israeli kibbutzim, many of which were founded prior to the Six-Day War. Traditionally based on agriculture, many of these kibbutzim have invested considerable efforts into the development of sustainable agricultural and industrial practices. Hatzerim, for instance, a kibbutz west of Be'er Scheva, became the birthplace of Netafim, a global manufacturer of irrigation systems and pioneer of low-flow drip irrigation.

Even though the different motivations for why Israeli citizens choose to relocate to the West Bank is no excuse for the fact that they are residing on Palestinian land, the decision to exclude hundreds of thousands of Israelis should be weighed against the benefits of an inclusive environmental peace building process. It could even be argued that the discourse on environmental matters should include the widest most possible array of Israel's society. Even those, or especially those, that fall outside of EcoPeace's normal target group.

CONCLUSION

Issues of water and sanitation constitute yet another major point of contention between Israelis and Palestinians. More than two decades after the establishment of the JWC, no adequate institutional framework for the joint management of shared water resources has been set in place, all the while many of the regional rivers and aquifers suffer from pollution and over-extraction.

For years, the notion that asolutionto the water problem is contingent on a comprehensive peace deal between Israelis and Palestinians has caused the water conflict to be held hostage as a political tool. EcoPeace Middle East has been among those who have raised their voices against the continued mismanagement of regional water sources and the countless missed opportunities to engage in regional environmental cooperation. The interdependence and transboundary nature of the region's water resources have been the reason for why Israel's technological advances, impressive as they are,can only partially shield the country from theenvironmental and humanitarian hazards that threaten its environment and its people.

EcoPeace Middle East, as one of the most renowned environmental NGOs in the Levant has a long and proud history of successful cross-border environmental cooperation between Israelis, Palestinians, and Jordanians. However, despite its many success stories, the organization continues to face a number of political, physical, and social obstacles, most of which are by-products of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and are likely to persist in the near future. What the organization must do in response, is to reach out to every member of the Israeli, Palestinian, and Jordanian society to deconstruct inter-group barriers, defy those that mislabelcross-border cooperation as normalization, and seed hope for a new generation of regional leaders.

With time and perseverance, EcoPeace's approach of advocacy and grassroots activities; its investment in the education of young Israelis, Palestinians, and Jordanians; and its search for innovative and holistic ideas to alleviate the present environmental problemswill resonate with those that want to be part of a more peaceful and healthier future. A solution to the water conflict, whether as part of a peace deal or preceding such, is both possible and in the interest of all those that wish to continue living in the land between the river and the sea.

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