

Who can advance Israeli-Palestinian peace? Contributing actors to the peace process

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Environmental Organizations as Potential Players in the Peace Process

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Abstract

Environmental issues cross geographic and man-made political boundaries. Shared environmental problems and situations of interdependence may exacerbate conflicts between communities, but they can also offer opportunities for cooperation. This article discusses the capacity of non-governmental organizations to use environmental issues as a platform for promoting peace in the region, especially between Israelis and Palestinians. It focuses on three organizations that see Israeli-Palestinian cooperation as a central pillar of their activities: EcoPeace Middle East, the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies, and Comet Middle East. The article examines the variety of activities these organizations engage in: promoting and encouraging cooperation between political entities, education, facilitating meetings between individuals and groups on both sides, addressing energy and water-related problems (mainly sewage treatment and river pollution), and more. The notable achievements of the three organizations are also highlighted, as well as the considerable difficulties they face. This review of their activities suggests some conclusions and recommendations for organizations and for individuals interested in environmental protection and the future of relations between Israelis and Palestinians.

A. Introduction

Environmental concerns have become a major issue in recent years and are featured in almost every discussion regarding the future of the economy, food supply, healthcare provision, urban planning, education, and many other areas. The pessimistic August 2021 report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warns that global warming poses a threat to the entire world population. Over the past year, after considerable delay, global recognition of the climate crisis and its repercussions appears to have increased. Wildfires near Jerusalem, in Greece, Turkey and elsewhere around the Mediterranean

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Basin, unprecedented heat waves in Western Canada and the northern United States, floods in Europe and China, and other natural disasters illustrate the urgency of the problem. The growing awareness of the environment, and of the climate crisis, in particular, is beginning to manifest itself in international relations, as well. President Joe Biden emphasized the importance of promoting environmental issues in US dialogue with other countries and he appointed former Secretary of State John Kerry as the special presidential envoy for climate change. At a June 2021 Mitvim Institute conference, the Ambassadors of the UK and Germany in Israel emphasized their countries' commitment to "green diplomacy" and the latter's growing importance.¹ Even the dominant security discourse in Israel recently recognized the threat posed by environmental problems. For example, in accordance with a government decision, National Security Advisor Eyal Hulata began adding the impact of the climate crisis to Israel's annual national assessment report.² Former IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot warned at a conference of the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) that "Israel does not have an institutional response and strategy for the threat of a national catastrophe related to the environment and climate."³ A special military intelligence team was established recently to conduct forecasts and assessments of the impact of climate change on regional security.⁴ The preoccupation with protecting the environment is expected to increase in the near future, and the Israeli Ministry of Environmental Protection is preparing a climate law similar to those formulated and adopted by other countries.

Environmental issues cross state borders and man-made political boundaries. Studies recognize the importance of environmental factors in both inducing conflict and encouraging cooperation, even between hostile communities. On the one hand, researchers emphasize the implications of environmental and climate factors on phenomena such as poverty, famine, lack of resources and loss of livelihoods, which burden socioeconomic systems and create environmental refugees, as well as conditions that promote conflict between various groups.⁵ They note that failure to fulfill basic environmental needs undermines attempts to resolve conflicts and may even escalate into renewed flare-ups of violence.⁶ On the other hand, studies have shown that, through careful and correct management, common environmental problems, and sometimes even situations of interdependence, can create opportunities for cooperation.⁷ For example, peace parks that preserve cross-border

¹ For a recording of the encounter, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sWuxzsTrBhI>.

² For more information, see: "[For the First Time: The Climate Crisis Reaches the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee on the Knesset Environment and Climate Day](#)," Ministry of Environmental Protection website, November 16, 2021.

³ Lee Yaron, "[Former IDF Chief of Staff Eisenkot: Israel Has No Strategy for the Threat of Climate-Related Disaster](#)," *Haaretz*, June 13, 2021. (Hebrew)

⁴ Shani Ashkenazi, "The IDF will establish an intelligence body to deal with the strategic impact of the climate crisis," *Globes*, November 17, 2021. (Hebrew)

⁵ Astri Suhrke, "Environmental degradation, migration and the potential for violent conflict", in N.P. Gleditsch (ed.), *Conflict and the environment* (The Hague: Kluwer Law International/ Nordic Human Rights, 1997), 1-18; Mark Zeitoun et al., *Water Conflicts: Analysis for Transformation* (Oxford University Press, 2020); Matthias Schmidt et al., "Environmental degradation at Lake Urmia (Iran): exploring the causes and their impacts on rural livelihoods," *GeoJournal*, 86 (2021), 2149–2163.

⁶ Ken Conca and Jennifer Wallace, "Environment and Peacebuilding in War-torn Societies: Lessons from the UN Environment Programme's Experience with Postconflict Assessment," *Global Governance*, 15:4 (2009), 486.

⁷ Anaïs Dresse et al., "Environmental peacebuilding: Towards a theoretical framework," *Cooperation and Conflict*, 54:1 (2019), 99–119.

ecosystems can serve as a peacebuilding lever.⁸ Environmental catastrophes can sometimes lead parties in a conflict to put aside their differences, as was the case in Indonesia's Aceh region after the 2004 tsunami.⁹ Studies examining the educational activities of environmental organizations in conflict zones, including the Israeli-Palestinian one, demonstrate that joint activity can be used to increase trust and understanding between the parties. However, the effect of such activities is usually limited to the participants alone.¹⁰ Environmental issues have been addressed in past Israeli peace negotiations and agreements. For instance, the Peace Treaty with Jordan (1994) included a clause on water allocation. The distribution of water between Israel and the Palestinians was based on the work of a joint committee established by the parties within the framework of the Oslo Accords. During the Annapolis talks (2007-2008), a joint team was established to deal with environmental issues. Due to the increasing importance of these issues, any future peace process is more than likely to include a meaningful reference to environmental issues and to the climate crisis. However, under current political circumstances, with no peace process on the horizon, it may be possible and necessary to reverse the order of things and examine whether environmental issues can serve as a platform for non-governmental organizations to promote peace in the region, especially between Israelis and Palestinians.¹¹

More than 100 Israeli organizations and non-profits are listed as engaging in environmental issues.¹² The organizations differ in size and focus. Some deliberately steer clear of issues related to the conflict. For instance, Homeland Guards, an organization dedicated to developing a responsible, balanced, and clean energy sector, defines its activities as nonpartisan and therefore "completely avoids expressing positions on partisan issues and is home to activists from all parties on the right and left."¹³ The Society for the Protection of Nature has been criticized for failing to oppose the establishment of Jewish settlements in occupied Palestinian territories since 1967 and for avoiding a clear position on the construction of the separation barrier in the West Bank, despite the damage it caused to the environment.¹⁴

This article will focus on three civil society organizations which see Israeli-Palestinian cooperation as a central pillar of their activities: EcoPeace Middle East, the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies, and Comet Middle East. The purpose of the review is to illustrate the variety of activities they engage in – from promoting and encouraging cooperation between political entities, through education and facilitating meetings between individuals

⁸ Saleem H. Ali (ed.), *Peace Parks: Conservation and Conflict Resolution* (MIT Press, 2007); Yolanda Kakabadse, Jorge Caillaux and Juan Dumas, "The Peru and Ecuador peace park: One decade after the peace settlement," in *Governance, Natural Resources, and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding* (Routledge, 2016).

⁹ Arno Waizenegger, "Armed separatism and the 2004 tsunami in Aceh," *Canada Asia Commentary*, 43 (2007).

¹⁰ Tobias Ide and Amit Tubi, "Education and Environmental Peacebuilding: Insights from Three Projects in Israel and Palestine," *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 110 (2020), 1-17.

¹¹ See, for example: Article 6, "[A peace treaty between the State of Israel and the Hashemite Jordanian Kingdom](#),"; Zafir Rinat, "Will Israel and the PA agree at least on the issue of water?," *Haaretz*, October 10, 2011; Udi Dekel and Liya Moran-Gilad, *The Annapolis Process: A missed opportunity for a two-state solution?* (Institute for National Security Studies, 2021), p. 68.

¹² According to the index of organizations of "Life and Environment", the umbrella organization of environmental activists in Israel.

¹³ See the organization's website: <https://homelandguards.org/en/about/>

¹⁴ Yair Barak, "[Society for the Protection of Nature and Occupation](#)," *Haaretz*, October 9, 2013. (Hebrew) info@mitvim.org.il / www.mitvim.org.il / 5252226 רמת גן, תוכן 11

and groups on both sides, to addressing energy and water-related problems (mainly sewage treatment and river pollution). First, we will demonstrate how the organizations view their role as actors operating in the context of an ongoing conflict. Second, we will point to notable achievements of the three organizations over the years, but also to the considerable difficulties they face. Finally, based on this review, we will suggest some conclusions and recommendations for organizations and individuals interested in environmental protection and the future of relations between Israelis and Palestinians.

B. The role of environmental organization in promoting Israeli-Palestinian peace: Three case studies

Self-perception: peace or justice?

Each of the organizations – EcoPeace, the Arava Institute, and Comet – have a different approach and self-perception when it comes to their role as actors in the peace process. EcoPeace is perhaps the most veteran local organization in the field. It was founded in 1994, against the backdrop of the Oslo Accords and the peace agreement between Israel and Jordan, and is conceived as a joint environmental organization for the benefit of the different peoples of the region. The organization has three directors – Israeli, Jordanian and Palestinian - and its activity is cross-border by definition. As Gidon Bromberg, the Israeli director of EcoPeace, puts it, "Diplomacy is not just the job of diplomats, they don't have a monopoly". Therefore, EcoPeace advocates engaging decision makers on all sides, as well as "bottom up" work with local communities to "create the political will to promote conflict resolution." The organization's leaders regularly promote environmental solutions for improving relations in the region and present them to international forums. In 2019, for example, Bromberg and his Palestinian counterpart Nada Majdalani presented EcoPeace and its work to the UN Security Council.¹⁵ In recent years, the organization promoted their plan for a Green-Blue Deal, which included a proposal for solar power to be generated in Jordan and supplied to Israel and the Palestinian Authority in exchange for water desalinated in Israel and supplied to Jordan.¹⁶

The Arava Institute has a similar approach, believing that a non-governmental organization can sometimes have an advantage over official representatives. The institute was established in Kibbutz Ketura in 1996 by Alon Tal, a researcher in the field of environmental studies who now serves as a member of Knesset on behalf of the Blue and White party. The institute's main activities are academic education and research. In collaboration with Ben-Gurion University, the institute accepts between 50 and 60 students each semester, about a third of whom are Israelis, another third are Jordanians and Palestinians, and the rest from countries around the world. Since 2016, the institute has been conducting informal multilateral meetings, known as the Track II Environmental Forum, aimed at reaching agreements between Israelis, Palestinians, and Jordanians on environmental issues. "The environment cannot wait for peace between Israelis and Palestinians," explains David

¹⁵ For a summary of Bloomberg and Majdalani's remarks, see <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/sc13794.doc.htm>.

¹⁶ For the full document, see: <https://ecopeaceme.org/gbd/>.

Lehrer, the former director of the institute. "Working together on environmental issues is a way to promote cooperation in general and to build mutual trust." The Arava Institute strives for peace, but meetings with Jordanians and Palestinians do not necessarily focus on the peace process. This is because "often there was nothing to talk about" in terms of broader peace initiatives, as Lehrer explains. In his opinion, there is a clear advantage to focusing on efforts to solve concrete problems that affect both sides.

The Israeli-Palestinian organization Comet, founded in 2009 by activists opposed to the occupation, represents a different approach. The organization's goal is to provide basic services to Palestinian communities in Area C of the West Bank, which is under Israeli security and civilian control. Most of its activity is focused on construction and maintenance of solar energy infrastructure, but in recent years it has also begun to provide solutions for the supply of water and even internet access. Most staff members are Palestinians. Elad Orian, head of Comet, does not see promoting the peace process as one of its goals. "Peace is something that politicians do. What we're doing has more to do with justice: environmental justice, social justice, and energy justice," he says. Orian notes that had it wanted to do so, Israel could have long ago connected all Palestinians in Area C to the power grid, some of which crosses the areas where they live. While Orian does see the organization's activities as a means of building trust, Comet's main emphasis is on improving the daily lives of an impoverished population on the fringes of society.¹⁷ Contrary to EcoPeace, which advocates lobbying decision-makers, Comet is on an almost constant collision course with Israeli officials.

Partial list of achievements

The three organizations we spoke to point to significant achievements. Gidon Bromberg of EcoPeace is proud that his organization has succeeded in creating a model for co-management and collaborative work, which has stood the test of time despite the many political and security crises. This model has served as an example for organizations in other conflict zones around the world, such as the Balkans and India-Pakistan.¹⁸ One of EcoPeace's flagship programs, Good Water Neighbors, aims to raise funds and recruit the support of regional governments to reduce the amount of sewage flowing into the Jordan River. EcoPeace was instrumental in a recently signed agreement between Jordan, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates that will see Jordan generate solar power for Israel in exchange for water desalinated by Israel. When the agreement was announced, Israel's Environmental Affairs Minister Tamar Zandberg congratulated the organization and expressed her "tremendous respect for EcoPeace, which came up with the idea years ago, and was involved in its execution and realization, [providing] optimistic activism serving as a relentless engine for the benefit of the environment, our region, and the connection

¹⁷ For more information, see Chaim Levinson's article, "[All the sick evils of the occupation | Reporting from Area 918 in the South Hebron Hills](#)", *Haaretz*, September 28, 2013. (Hebrew)

¹⁸ See for example: Marina Djernaes, Teis Jorgensen and Elizabeth Koch-Ya'ari, "Evaluation of environmental peacemaking intervention strategies in Jordan-Palestine-Israel", *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development*, 10:2 (2015), 79.

between them."¹⁹ In addition to working with governments, the organization conducts extensive educational activities for various age groups, organizes meetings of Israeli, Jordanian, and Palestinian mayors and local councils around the Jordan River, and participated as a senior partner in preparing a master plan for the Jordan Valley. The organization also promoted a project led by the World Bank to build sewage treatment infrastructure in the Gaza Strip. EcoPeace's view is that resolving environmental problems benefits both sides. Therefore, the organization sought to emphasize to Israeli authorities that, since untreated sewage from Gaza often spills into the Mediterranean, treating sewage there is essential to the operation of Israel's desalination plants along the Mediterranean coast.²⁰

During their stay at Kibbutz Ketura, all Arava Institute students and interns participate in the Albert B. Glickman Leadership and Peace Building Seminar which is led by an Israeli, a Palestinian and an international facilitator.²¹ Over the years, the institute has attracted about 1,200 students, many of whom are still active in the environmental field in general and in the institute's activities in particular. In recent years, the organization has contributed to environmental projects that go beyond education or research. In what David Lehrer defines as "under the radar" activity, the institute has often succeeded – with the assistance of its graduates – in bringing sewage treatment equipment into the Gaza Strip and promoting a project to treat sewage in the Ramallah area. In October 2021, the institute, together with the Palestinian community development organization Damour, announced the establishment of the Center for Applied Environmental Diplomacy. The new center, which will combine research, regional diplomatic activity, and field cooperation among Israelis, Palestinians, and Jordanians, is supported by the European Union and Oxford University experts.²²

Comet now considers itself the "Electric Company of Area C." It operates throughout the south and central West Bank, providing electricity to 1,200 families, and maintenance services to more than 100 Palestinian communities living under harsh climatic conditions. Elad Orian is proud of the fact that "everyone we have connected to electricity still receives electricity", since the organization not only hooks up homes to power, but also maintains the relevant infrastructure.

Despite the high tensions in recent years between Israel and the Palestinians, and between Israel and Jordan, and although environmental issues did not receive much media coverage until recently, the three organizations managed to expand their activities. For example, Comet, which initially set out to supply electricity, now also provides water and internet connections. The Arava Institute has added involvement in sewage treatment projects and diplomatic activity to its research and educational focus.

¹⁹ For Tamar Zandberg's Twitter greeting, see:

<https://twitter.com/tamarzandberg/status/1460953090488680458>

²⁰ For more information on sewage treatment infrastructures in Gaza, see <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/long-breath-required-wastewater-treatment-plant-gaza-put>.

²¹ For more information on the seminar, see: <https://arava.org/peace-building-leadership-seminar/>.

²² Sue Surkes, "Israelis, Palestinians launch joint environmental diplomacy center," *Times of Israel*, 24 October 2021.

Difficulties and challenges

Along with their achievements, environmental organizations in the region encounter many difficulties. For example, all of the systems that Comet installs are under threat of demolition. In the past, Israel's Civil Administration in the occupied territories would confiscate its equipment. However, through a well-run legal battle, Comet was able to get it back.²³ The organization also has trouble recruiting high-quality and committed personnel, both because of the difficult outdoor working conditions and due to political sensitivities given the controversial nature of cooperation with Israelis in Palestinian society. Some Palestinian organizations that support BDS and other similar boycott movements refuse to work with Comet. Elad Orian points to another problem he faces: projects that lack a long-term vision. "The biggest danger are bad projects," he explains, meaning the kind that "everyone is happy with" - the donors, the organization leading it and the company contracted to carry it out. Everyone is happy, he clarifies, except the community itself, which no one helps when the installed equipment breaks down. Greater cooperation among humanitarian and civil society organizations operating in the West Bank could address the problem, but Orian highlights the importance of planning long-term sustainable projects.

David Lehrer of the Arava Institute admits that political and security tensions make it difficult to organize joint activities among Israelis, Palestinians, and Jordanians and to obtain Israeli permits for Palestinian students. Gidon Bromberg of EcoPeace feels that "for every step forward, we take two steps back." He reports that during rounds of fighting between the sides, EcoPeace staff members face attacks and threats. He is also sometimes disappointed by decision-makers in the region and the United States, who are unwilling to promote agreements and specific solutions for issues such as water, and prefer to wait for a comprehensive agreement. Bromberg emphasizes that environmental solutions are often piecemeal and incremental.

An example of an environmental problem that EcoPeace has been unable to solve so far is the pollution that originates from the sewage of Tulkarm and Nablus in the West Bank and flows into the Alexander River in central Israel. EcoPeace is critical of Israel's mechanism for treating pollution originating in the Palestinian Territories. A temporary wastewater treatment plant was established near the separation barrier in the Tulkarm area in 2004, but it has long been unable to cope with the amount of sewage generated. To fund the treatment, Israel unilaterally deducts a sum from the customs duties it collects on behalf of the Palestinian Authority, ostensibly to create an incentive for the Palestinians to take care of the sewage in their territory. In practice, municipal authorities have no incentive to address the problem because the money comes out of the PA's pocket and not out of their budgets. Instead of the existing mechanism, EcoPeace seeks a solution that will incentivize Palestinian municipal leaders to treat their sewage water so that some of it can be reused.²⁴

²³ For a boycott that has drawn international criticism, see Amira Hess's article, "[The Netherlands protested to Israel the confiscation of electrical equipment to a Palestinian village carried out by the Civil Administration](#)," *Haaretz*, June 29, 2017. (Hebrew)

²⁴ For a DemocratTV report on the subject, see "What's Behind the Turtle Bridge," July 27, 2021. (Hebrew) info@mitvim.org.il / www.mitvim.org.il / 5252226 רמת גן, תוכן 11

C. Discussion, insights and looking ahead

There is broad consensus among civil society organizations that a window of opportunity has opened up both to increase environmental awareness and to expand joint activity between Israelis and Palestinians. In addition to the growing awareness of the climate crisis, a number of political changes have taken place over the past year. The current government in Israel includes ministers committed to environmental issues and regional cooperation. Even coalition parties opposed to a two-state solution accept the principle of improving Palestinian living standards as a means of preventing flare-ups of violence. To illustrate the change in the political atmosphere, July 2021 saw the first meeting since 2014 between Israel's Minister of Environmental Protection and her Palestinian counterpart.

The 2020 US election results were perhaps the most dramatic change for non-governmental environmental organizations operating in the Israeli-Palestinian context. The Biden Administration has made environmental issues, and especially the climate crisis, its top priority. At the same time, in December 2020, the US Congress adopted the Nita M. Lowey Middle East Partnership for Peace Act (MEPPA) to promote Israeli-Palestinian people-to-people peacebuilding, allocating an unprecedented \$250 million for the program over five years. With the right kind of preparation, environmental organizations – those mentioned here and others – can try to leverage this funding to carry out projects benefitting both Palestinians and Israelis.

As the activities of EcoPeace, the Arava Institute and Comet illustrate, environmental protection can manifest itself in various types of activism – lobbying decision makers, educational activity, and field work – in order to advance renewable energy, address environmental hazards, and regenerate streams. While civil society organizations are unable to lead a political process leading to a permanent agreement between the sides, they can promote and support peacemaking in other ways. For example, they identify and offer solutions to specific problems facing communities on both sides, thereby improving the quality of life of the area's residents. They illustrate that Israelis and Palestinians can work and achieve goals together. They can drive political processes from below, by harnessing technical solutions that encourage changes in policy, creating a social network of activists on both sides who will support a political peace process once it is launched, and supporting the efforts of other actors who want to promote peace-related processes.

Insights and opportunities:

- Due to the common regional nature of many environmental problems, and considering the increased American investment in people-to-people initiatives, an opportunity presents itself for broader cooperation. Today there is an incentive for individuals, nonprofits, and environmental organizations – even those that have shied away from this in the past – to work with environmental activists and nonprofits on the Palestinian side towards solving common problems. Investment in environmental education is on the rise in many countries. The success of the Arava Institute and EcoPeace in the fields of education and training can serve as a model for other civil

society organizations to promote principles of sustainability, cooperation, and mutual respect.

- The Paris Agreement (2015) and the Glasgow Climate Conference (COP26) placed a broad emphasis on the use of renewable energy. The climate conference scheduled to take place in Sharm el-Sheikh in the autumn of 2022 is also likely to call for further steps to be taken. If Israel wishes to meet significant commitments under existing and new international agreements, it will have to invest more in the development and production of, as well as transition to solar energy. In addition, decision makers in Israel should understand the benefits of enabling and supporting the construction of renewable energy infrastructures in the Palestinian Territories. Public pressure exerted by organizations to support the transition to renewable energy could not only help reduce greenhouse gas emissions, but also decrease the dependence of Palestinian communities on arbitrary decisions by Israeli authorities. Environmental organizations can therefore promote energy justice.²⁵
- The Israel Climate Forum, established by President Herzog and headed by former Knesset member Dov Khenin, can encourage cooperation between Israeli and Palestinian organizations and institutions in order to expedite the transition to renewable energy and reduce carbon emissions in the region.
- Increased joint environmental activity can help put public pressure on Israeli and Palestinian decision makers to solve shared problems, even in the absence of a peace process at the national level. It can also exert public pressure on decision makers, especially on the Israeli side, to take into consideration both the needs of the Palestinian population and of the environment in future infrastructural planning.
- Increased energy cooperation and the creation of more renewable energy in Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian Territories; sewage treatment in the West Bank and Gaza Strip; and the reduction of pollution in the Jordan River, the Alexander River and other water sources are just some examples of joint activity that could promote the objectives mentioned above.
- It should be borne in mind that, in order to harness joint environmental activity to promote understanding and trust between the parties, cross-community cooperation must have clear and immediate benefits, such as creating cleaner infrastructure or treating environmental hazards.
- It is sometimes easier to persuade different actors to take part in cross-border activities focused on environmental issues, both because many problems require the cooperation of both sides and because solving them is of value in its own right, regardless of the absence of a formal peace process.

²⁵ Bar Rappaport, "[As with everything, Israel and the Palestinians are also connected in the field of energy.](#)" *Haaretz*, March 23, 2022. (Hebrew)