PART 13

CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT

Civil society organizations have begun to focus on building a "culture of peace" around water issues from the grassroots. Several organizations have taken up the challenge of working across the border over key transboundary issues such as pollution of groundwater and wells, wastewater management, cross-border streams, and the management of shared water resources. Given the differences in the political and social makeup between Israelis and Palestinians, civil society organizations focused on water necessarily have different priorities and means to be effective. While Palestinian NGOs necessarily focus on humanitarian and infrastructure development work, Israeli NGOs are more geared toward pollution prevention and habitat protection through advocacy-based and legal approaches. Though Palestinian NGOs have a strong focus on water conservation, surprisingly little attention is given to addressing water demand issues by the environmental movement in Israel. This part considers the range of organizations that are in a position to make important contributions toward developing creative and equitable solutions to regional environmental problems at a time when respective governments are mired in conflict and inaction.
The Role of Civil Society in Addressing Transboundary Water Issues in the Israeli-Palestinian Context

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And we must show that water resources need not be a source of conflict. Instead, they can be a catalyst for cooperation.

—Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations, 2005

In an area of conflict where governments have difficulty discussing civil issues of all kinds, it becomes the role of the civil society to become a voice for these concerns and proffer solutions. The urgency of the water crisis developing in the Middle East, which is inherently transboundary in nature, and the low level of negotiations between governments at this time necessarily bring civil society into the spotlight. The ongoing relationship between Israelis and Palestinians working in civil society on water issues can offer an invaluable alternative forum for addressing this crucial public health and environmental issue, where governments are failing.

This essay describes the activities of Palestinian and Israeli NGOs and grassroots initiatives focused on water issues. It explores where their activities in their respective societies differ and where they intersect. We specifically highlight examples of transboundary cooperation, its successes and failures, with a focus on Friends of the Earth Middle East (FOE-ME) and its Good Water Neighbors program. We also look at the future of the water conflict and the role of NGOs in formal decision making. This includes the importance of recognizing the cross-border NGOs as important players in resolving conflict and fostering solutions.
Water and Civil Society in the Palestinian Territories

The major NGOs focused on water in the Palestinian Territories are the Palestine Hydrology Group (PHG) and the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committees (PARC), with offices all over the West Bank and Gaza. These organizations both preceded the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1994 and were established to do the essential work needed to provide water supply and infrastructure across the West Bank and Gaza Strip in the absence of an overarching authority at the time. They are responsible for drilling wells and providing water for basic needs. Due to Israeli control over much of their water resources, these organizations must deal with Israeli officials on a regular basis.

Since these organizations are service providers with no ultimate decision-making authority, there is subsequently a close but tense relationship with the Palestinian Authority. For example, the Water Authority has at times applied for projects through the PHG. This tension is heightened by the fact that the Palestinian Authority has little capacity for enforcing regulation, especially in areas of the West Bank that are still under Israeli control. It is also heightened by the fact that both PARC and PHG are affiliated with left-wing groups and not Fatah.

The Palestinian Authority is also beholden to the international donors that fund many of the water infrastructure projects. In the aftermath of the Hamas election victory in 2006, the situation was complicated by the creation of parallel Fatah and Hamas ministries and the fact that international donors refused direct aid money to the Palestinian Authority, channeling it instead through NGOs. Fortunately, this situation has mostly been resolved.

The acute water scarcity in the Palestinian Territories means that the major work of environmental NGOs has to focus on emergency relief, humanitarian, and development issues. This is especially true of organizations that operate in Gaza, which also include the Environmental Protection and Research Institute and Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR) who have published reports on water issues in Gaza.

A significant problem in the Palestinian territories is the lack of trained experts and solid research on water availability. Work to rectify this is being carried out by organizations including the Land Research Centre and Applied Research Institute Jerusalem (ARIJ). ARIJ is also a research organization focused on water demand and supply issues as well some practical agricultural projects, including drilling wells. In terms of advocacy work, the House of Water and Environment, a scientific research organization based in Ramallah, has worked with Friends of the Earth Middle East to campaign for the protection of the Mountain Aquifer, highlighting pollution from olive mills, tanneries, and raw sewage. However, this is not an easy issue to resolve when polluters lack other means of disposing of their waste and the Palestinian Authority does not prioritize the enforcement of environmental regulations. In general, safeguarding water courses is considered to be the role of the authorities and not the responsibility of civil society.

While civil society organizations can lobby the Palestinian Authority to take action, there is little scope for NGOs to take legal action against either the Palestinian Authority or polluting companies, something that is increasingly
common in Israel. Most Palestinian NGOs are unaware of this course of action, with considerable debate as to whether this is, in fact, technically possible. In any case, with no precedent, this would be an unlikely course of action for a Palestinian environmental NGO.

**Water and Civil Society in Israel**

Water has become a key issue for the environmental movement in Israel over the last decade. All the major environmental organizations include some activities focused on preventing pollution, restoring habitat, and raising public awareness about the health of Israel’s water courses. This includes the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI), which campaigns against the continued degradation of Lake Kinneret; Adam Teva V’Din, which has taken legal action to prevent the pollution of the Kishon Stream and taken municipalities to court across the country for releasing sewage water into streams; and Sustainable Negev, which focuses on pollution in the Beersheva Stream. One organization, Zalul, founded in 1999, is solely devoted to protecting Israel’s marine and freshwater environment.

Grassroots-led initiatives have also developed to address water issues, for example, the Citizens for the Environment in the Galilee, which promotes activity to prevent pollution of streams with sewage in Jewish and Arab towns in northern Israel. This work highlights the lack of infrastructure in Arab municipalities within Israel, especially in north and south of the country. The Galilee Society, which campaigns on environmental justice issues for Israel’s Arab community, uses this platform to call for equal access to clean water and sewage treatment.

Israeli organizations primarily focus on the environmental and health affects of pollution of water courses, with far less energy targeted toward conservation measures. The exception to this is Israel’s Green Party, which is launching a campaign on the municipal level on water conservation, water quality, and public health issues. Recently, the SPNI and an Israeli multinational engineering and water management company, TAHAL, won a tender from the Israeli Water Commission to run a campaign on water conservation, which is now in its pilot stages.

Almost all the organizations mentioned have focused their legal and advocacy efforts solely on pollution in Israeli and Israeli polluters, with little analysis on transboundary water issues. The major mechanisms for action by Israeli NGOs have been both public awareness campaigns and use of legal means to sue the government for inaction. This approach was made possible with a change in the law in the mid-1990s and has been pioneered by Israeli lawyers working primarily through Adam Teva V’Din.

From the outline above, it is clear that Israeli and Palestinian NGOs working on water issues play a very different role in their respective political entities. While Israeli NGOs often find themselves both funded by and confronting the Israeli government through legal channels, Palestinian NGOs often find themselves simply replacing the government where service provision is lacking, and they are funded by international funding sources and development agencies.
Israeli-Palestinian Cooperation on Transboundary Water Issues

In the wake of the Oslo Accords, funding became available for joint work on environmental issues, including water. During this optimistic period, the idea of linking environment to peace-building and mutual tolerance as a rallying call for both Israelis and Palestinians became highly attractive. As a result, several joint organizations with both Israeli and Palestinian leadership developed in the immediate aftermath of Oslo focused on environmental issues, including some of the largest and best-funded NGOs in the Palestinian territories. Friends of the Earth Middle East, then known as EcoPeace, was established in 1994; the Palestinian-Israeli Environmental Secretariat (PIES) was formed in 1997 as a project of the Palestine Council on Health (PCH) and the Israel Economic Cooperation Forum, themselves both post-Oslo transition-era institutions. The focus of PIES included providing a forum for joint work, working with industry, and finding a means to transfer expertise and technical skills to the Palestinian environmental community from Israel.

Another joint initiative at this time came from a well-established organization, the Israeli-Palestinian Centre for Research and Information (IPCRI), which had been founded in 1988 in the worst days of the first Intifada. In 1992, IPCRI founded its Water and Environment program and hosted a series of joint discussions, “Our Shared Environment,” bringing together experts from both Israel and the Palestinian territories for the first time. Consequently, this work led to small collaborative efforts on environmental issues funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), a Canadian organization. A further initiative of IPCRI was the Joint Environmental Mediation Service (JEMS), designed to train Israelis and Palestinians in the technique of environmental mediation and, thereafter, to offer mediation to Israeli and Palestinian stakeholders in conflict over environmental issues. Other environmental organizations that began high-profile joint work at this time included Bird Life International.

The changing political climate in the wake of the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, the election of a right-wing government in Israel, and, ultimately, the outbreak of the Second Intifada has threatened and somewhat diminished the enthusiasm for joint initiatives. While some joint organizations and projects fell afloat of the changing times, such as PIES, which collapsed completely within a year of the Intifada, many others are weathering the storm albeit in a more low-key way, and many of the connections developed in the preceding years have continued. In the current climate, however, it has become much harder to bring together Israelis and Palestinians simply to meet without encountering bureaucratic difficulties.

Indeed, in 2002, another cross-border NGO was founded, the Israeli-Palestinian Scientific Organization (IPSO), which has also focused on transboundary water issues. In 2006, IPSO participated in a UNESCO project to bring together six Israeli and Palestinian and other experts to establish a framework for joint projects focused on writing a common history for water management in the Middle East.

The major work of cross-border organizations with joint leadership, such as IPCRI and Friends of the Earth Middle East, has been to provide a bridge where
Beginning shortly after the outbreak of the Second Intifada, this project faced significant challenges: mistakes were made and the project had to be flexible enough to adapt to the constantly changing circumstances. Developing community involvement and trust was a slow process, with some participants being intimidated for taking part in activities and with a sense of outrage at the violence perpetrated on both sides of the conflict being a significant barrier. For this reason, the regional cooperation aspect of the project was initially kept at a low profile, with a focus on real investing in physical improvements in the communities and hiring locally respected workers. As trust developed over time, regional meetings became not only possible but “desirable,” with the “other side” becoming a point of intrigue rather than a source for suspicion.

A powerful example of how these grassroots connections have developed through the Good Water Neighbors project, beyond simply the water connection, is the story of the West Bank village of Wadi Fuqin. Here, the villagers, with the vocal support of the FOEME and the neighboring Jewish community of Tsur Hadassah, have taken legal action to prevent the Separation Wall from being built beyond the Green Line, which would have affected the recharge area of the streams that flow into the village and cut villagers off from their olive trees. The court did not contest the petition and the wall has subsequently not been built there. These two communities are now developing a joint “development plan” for the area which includes environmental, economic, and social considerations as well as a sustainable tourism initiative. Meanwhile, joint initiatives in Enrek Hefer and Tulkarem, between the Jordan River Valley mayors, and between Baka al Gharbia and Baka al Sharkia have yielded direct funding for cooperative projects, generating real solutions to ease the water and sewage problems of all residents.

In future years, funding is being made available by USAID and the European Union for more grassroots work based on this model of incorporating peace-building into development and community-assistance projects, such as water management. Such funding to develop more projects like these can only be of benefit to the region.

**Joint Work from a Palestinian Perspective**

Joint work is also not always relevant in the Palestinian context. Since the two political entities are at such different levels of socioeconomic development and civic education, it is understandable that there is not always “common ground” between Israeli and Palestinian NGOs. Priorities for one are likely to be discounted or ignored by the other. Besides, Palestinian organizations take accusations of “normalization” seriously—the implication being that by cooperating and working with Israeli organizations they are accepting the status quo of the Israeli occupation. Further, from a political perspective, it remains a fact that until the Palestinians receive full independence and a resolution over shared water resources with Israel, it will be a challenge for Palestinian organizations to engage in long-term planning for water management.
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There is also, however, a widespread understanding that in the current context, water access and sanitation are basic humanitarian issues, and that some degree of cooperation with Israel is necessary due to the transboundary nature of the issue. Even the Hamas-led government in Gaza has indicated that they are open to discuss water management issues with Israel through a mediator. Therefore, some major Palestinian water-focused organizations, such as PHG and ARIJ, have worked on joint projects with academic institutions in Israel. Palestinian organizations, such as the German-government-funded GLOWA project, have also worked together in the context of large regional projects focused on the future of the Jordan River Valley.

**Joint Work from an Israeli Perspective**

With plenty of work to be done to protect water courses and prevent pollution from sources inside Israel and the disappointment of the collapse of the peace process, it is perhaps not surprising that for most Israeli environmental organizations, cross-boundary issues are not currently high on the agenda. In some cases this is organizational policy: for example, Adam Teva V'Din does not work over the Green Line, although it did take one case against the establishment of a landfill for Israeli waste being established in a settlement on the West Bank.

Notably, few Israeli peace organizations have comprehensively addressed water issues except for humanitarian efforts. For example, several years ago the Givat Haviva Institute of the HaShomer HaTsair youth movement provided tankers of water to provide relief for West Bank villages facing drought. Several Israeli human rights organizations do, however, address this issue. B'Tselem and Yesh Din both address the issue of Palestinian access to the shared water sources of the Jordan River and the Mountain Aquifer from a human-rights-based perspective.

In terms of joint research initiatives, the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies, based in southern Israel, continues to draw students from both Israel and the West Bank and has also carried out joint research on shared water resources, most notably a stream restoration project on the Alexander/Zunnar River with students based both in Israel and the West Bank, supported by a Middle Eastern Research Council grant from USAID. Another USAID-funded project ran from 2001 to 2004 between Hebron University, the Technion in Israel, and the Royal Scientific Society in Jordan to reduce the environmental impact of olive-mill wastewater in the region, a major transboundary pollutant.

Since 2007, the Towar's Association for Environmental Quality in Sakhnin, Israel, has worked in partnership with the Centre for Environmental Diplomacy in Ramallah to support Palestinian water engineers in establishing wastewater treatment facilities in their own communities, with support from the Adam Institute and the European Union. This work builds on a previous USAID-funded project to promote appropriate technology for wastewater treatment with project partners in Egypt, Israel (Sakhnin), and the Palestinian territories.

In 2008, an Israeli research institute, the Van Leer Institute, established the joint Israeli-Palestinian Study Group on Protection of the Environment in cooperation
with the Palestinian Peace and Freedom Youth Forum. The aim is to further involve Israeli civil society in transboundary environmental issues, and it brings together students to study environmental issues and dilemmas of common interest, including water, solid waste, and the ecology of the Dead Sea.

Joint initiatives between academic institutions and NGOs and cross-border NGOs focused on transboundary environmental issues have clearly been invaluable in keeping discussions open and pushing toward a shared vision, especially at times when the conflict has been most fierce and official channels have been restricted and unconstructive. It is evident from the experience of the last 15 years, however, that such projects are vulnerable to the rapidly changing political situation, which sets the tone for how open and straightforward or how complicated such cooperation can be.

The Role of Palestinian and Israeli Civil Society in Future Peace Agreements

NGOs working on transboundary water issues with many years of experience of joint work often have a far better grasp of the issues and the need for long-term equitable solutions than the officials designated to make decisions, who are mostly driven by short and expedient political thinking. This presents a challenge for NGOs attempting to become involved in the formal political process. Where they can most influence the agenda is through solid research and innovative thinking.

Examples of innovative thinking abound, such as the call by Friends of the Earth Middle East for the Dead Sea to be declared a UNESCO World Heritage site or for the foundation of a joint Israeli-Palestinian Water Committee to represent major stakeholders and function as an advisory board for both the Israeli Water Commission and the Palestinian Water Authority.

A further example is the water annex of the Geneva Accords: an attempt by civil society to draft a peace agreement acceptable to both Israelis and Palestinians in order to influence the peace process. However, this project has also highlighted several key points of disagreement both between participants and between a short- and long-term vision. Drafted by water experts David Brooks and Julie Trottier, the water annex has not yet been agreed on by other participants in the process, with the Israelis wanting minimal cooperation with a focus on hydrology and the Palestinians wanting hard numbers of how many million cubic meters of water they would receive in an agreement. The draft annex itself is much more holistic, highlighting “water for people,” followed by “water for nature,” and only then “water for agriculture.” Neither Israeli nor Palestinian negotiators can agree, however, to prioritizing water for nature over water for agriculture, instead prioritizing economic needs above the needs of the environment and the vital ecosystem services it provides.

There is a general agreement among Palestinian NGOs that the Oslo Accords did not result in a just outcome on water issues. For this reason, water organizations have lobbied hard to be included in any new peace negotiations toward a final status agreement where water must be a component. In 2007, the Palestinian
Steering and Monitoring Committee, which led negotiations with Israel, invited civil groups, including NGOs, research organizations, and business organizations with an interest in water issues, to be involved in discussions on the final status negotiations. Meanwhile, during the good years of the Oslo process, Friends of the Earth Middle East was informally invited as an observer to Joint Environment Committee meetings and asked to contribute ideas. In 2005, the Water Commission also became more open for dialogue on transboundary issues. While Friends of the Earth Middle East has always pushed the government to move forward on the peace process and prepared documents with creative ideas on how to resolve transboundary environmental issues, other Israeli organizations have shown less interest in being formally involved in the process.

A final way in which civil society can influence the peace process is through encouraging international involvement. This could include international mediation by a neutral third party—an idea suggested independently by both the World Water Council and Green Cross International. This could be invaluable if both sides were willing to accept that, left to themselves, they may have difficulty in reaching a mutually acceptable agreement.

Conclusion

In the light of population growth, existing water stress, and climate change, it would not be unreasonable to propose that without cooperation on water management between the Israelis and the Palestinians (and their neighbors) both sides face an uncertain future. Cooperation to improve water infrastructure, to share technologies for desalination and recycling effluent, to promote an ethic of water conservation and preservation of water resources, and to find a resolution to disputed transboundary water sources offers some hope of a sustainable future for the people living in the region and for the environment.

Civil society organizations, especially cross-border organizations, offer a way to move beyond the political crisis and address water issues without the heavy political baggage that surrounds the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They can also offer innovative ways beyond the impasse, including engaging international civil society. Practical contributions by civil society organizations toward resolving the conflict include generating shared research as well as offering practical support through technology transfer and capacity building.

On a grassroots level, connections between neighboring communities forged by groups such as Friends of the Earth Middle East are invaluable in terms of raising awareness of the environmental justice issues. Perhaps the most important role of civil society toward resolving the transboundary water issues is, therefore, the personal connections and trust forged in communities and by environmentalists and scientists who have worked together on common concerns over the years. Such work has led to shared understandings and assumptions about these issues and has provided a forum for ongoing discussion, despite the changing political situation.
Areas of shared interest include the following:

- Avoiding damage to shared water sources (both streams and groundwater) through both sewage treatment and prevention of overpumping is important to both sides. Both Israeli and Palestinian NGOs are focused on preventing pollution. For Palestinians, this issue is framed in terms of creating the relevant infrastructure to avoid contamination, and for Israel this issue is framed in terms of protecting the environment and preserving open-air spaces.

- There are some forums for cooperation. Some Israeli and Palestinian NGOs recognize the value of building long-term and personal connections and creating "water and environment community" of experts, academics, and officials, and their members work together based on shared assumptions in spite of the political situation.

- Greater voice in the peace process is an area of shared interest for Palestinian NGOs keen to avoid another situation like the Oslo Accords, for joint Israeli and Palestinian organizations, and for Israeli NGO's focused on environmental justice and human rights issues.

Areas of disagreement include the following:

- Due to the drastically different socioeconomic situations in Israel and the Palestinian territories, NGOs from each respective political entity often have different priorities.

- Most Israeli environmental NGOs are not interested in addressing Palestinian water issues, apart from where they impinge on Israel. Most Palestinian environmental NGOs have no choice but to deal with transboundary water issues.

- Palestinian environmental NGOs are keen to influence the peace process based on a desire to achieve an equitable and reasonable agreement over transboundary water issues. In Israel, only human rights organizations and cross-border NGOs are interested in influencing the peace process.

References


Editors’ Summary

Palestinian NGOs for many years essentially filled the vacuum created by the absence of local governance in the occupied territories, making Palestinian civil society unusually well developed, in general, and particularly impressive and professional in the water sphere. Israel’s nongovernment sector has also flourished due to a combination of openness by the central government and court system, support from international Jewish philanthropy, and a highly engaged citizenry. This happy symmetry between Palestinian and Israeli civil societies has already been manifested in a litany of joint projects in the environmental and water spheres. Palestinian and Israeli academics have been especially involved in joint research and professional gatherings, responding positively to a variety of internationally funded programs encouraging academic cooperation.

Palestinian and Israeli water experts have been meeting and working together for years. The resulting collegiality and ability to articulate a common perspective should be exploited in regional efforts to resolve water conflicts. This can be done through the continuation and expansion of programs that encourage joint research, activism, and educational initiatives. Groups like Friends of the Earth Middle East and IPCRI have proven the potential of cooperative work. The broad network of national NGOs, especially in Israel, should be encouraged to become engaged regionally in these areas as well and compete for resources and support. But the contribution of the so-called third sector should go beyond the scope of the projects which have been undertaken to date.

The role of civil society worldwide has expanded over the years. There is no reason why Palestinian and Israeli NGOs should not be appointed as formal representatives to sit on the Joint Water Committee with full-membership authority—and not only with observer status. This would probably contribute to the reduction in the level of polarization and politicization in deliberations. Funds should be made available to ensure the quality and integrity of NGO participation. Public interest groups can play an essential role in monitoring and generating data as well as disseminating information to the public.

There is no need for NGOs to lose their independent “watch dog” status as they are integrated into a regional water management system. The peace process needs civil society’s forthright ability to speak plainly and to set environmental and hydrological considerations above political constraints. It would seem that the Palestinian and Israeli nongovernmental communities are ready for this new and expanded challenge.