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On Dialogue and Beyond: Positive Environmental Peacebuilding in Palestine

Elsa Barron*

In Palestine, environmental management has been used as a tool of military occupation and oppression. Yet even within that context, many community-based organizations have established programs relating to environmental peacebuilding. Of these initiatives, environmental dialogue programs have received significant attention and resources, even more so since the war in Gaza began in October, 2023. However, a deeper interrogation of these programs reveals the danger that dialogue and collaboration devoid of a critical analysis of power and injustice further perpetuates systemic oppression. Moving these programs into the realm of positive environmental peacebuilding requires a willingness to engage in this structural analysis. This article analyzes a series of eleven interviews with environmental researchers and advocates in Israel and Palestine representing seven different organizations or interest groups to assess existing approaches to environmental peacebuilding. Addressing the roots of violence and injustice is critical to creating peacebuilding programs that are durable long-term by building peace deeper than the surface. There are fruitful opportunities at the intersection of dialogue, collaboration, and empowerment that critically interrogate structural violence while building up sustainable development, justice, and peace at the local level.

Keywords: Environmental peacebuilding, positive peace, Palestine, Israel, dialogue, solidarity

Introduction
Collaboration around the environment has been identified as a tool for peacebuilding, ranging from aiding the creation of international treaties to local conflict resolution (Dresse et al., 2019; Carius, 2011). Areas of focus have included resolving conflicts over resources, preventing violence against environmental defenders, resolving and preventing resource-financed conflicts, addressing climate change, and bringing conflicting parties together for dialogue around the environment, among others. These areas of focus provide numerous examples of the way that environments, violence, and peacebuilding are connected, but they can sometimes fall short of a holistic peacebuilding framework that focuses not only on negative but also on positive forms of peacebuilding.

As defined by Johan Galtung, negative peace is the absence of direct violence/war while positive peace is the presence of stabilizing forces in society such as a well-integrated and equitable communal fabric (Galtung, 1964; Galtung, 1996). In the context of the environment, positive peacebuilding includes creating environmental justice, sustainable development, and meaningful relationships between communities (human-human and human-ecosystem).

Palestine and Israel are frequently analyzed and cited as a case study for environmental peacebuilding. Since the war in Gaza began in October 2023, existing environmental peacebuilding efforts in the region have gained even more attention, with suggestions that such efforts could de-escalate conflict or improve humanitarian conditions for communities facing environmental crises such as dire water scarcity in Gaza (Chouliaraki Milner, 2023; Lipchin and Friend, 2023). Ecopace Middle East was nominated for a Nobel prize in early 2024 for their work building trust through environmental cooperation (Jaffe-Hoffman, 2024). However, the ongoing and devastating violence reveals an important truth—existing environmental peacebuilding...
programs have not been able to prevent or respond at scale to the violence and injustice unfolding currently in Palestine. A deeper structural analysis is required.

Today’s violence cannot be understood without an understanding of the region's history of direct and structural violence over time. Multiple generations of conflict have led to the geographic and social segregation of populations living in proximity (Newman, 2002). Palestinians and Israelis share much of the same landscape and similar environmental conditions, yet they have very different experiences and rights when it comes to land and movement. Much of this separation is by design. The movement of Palestinians in the West Bank is heavily controlled by checkpoints and physical barriers such as the “separation” or “apartheid” wall. Many peacebuilding organizations have identified this separation as a fundamental barrier to peace and have focused their efforts on creating dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians, classified as people-to-people projects (Maoz, 2004). These programs align with the contact hypothesis of peacebuilding, which asserts that exposure and dialogue between conflicting populations can reduce intergroup prejudice (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006). This contact approach has been identified as a key strategy of environmental governance in post-conflict scenarios and has been promoted as an effective tool of peacebuilding (Krampe et al., 2021). Within these programs, communities not only engage in dialogue but also work together to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes or superordinate goals (Kirkland et al., 2023). These goals may contribute to bridging group divides with the potential to contribute to a new shared group identity.

However, collaborative dialogue programs that rely heavily on the contact hypothesis may still struggle to address the structural violence of occupation and oppression that shape the experience of Palestinians, including their access to, management of, and relationship with the environment. Over the history of the modern conflict, the Zionist movement has relied on the displacement of Palestinian people from their homelands to facilitate the “peaceful” settlement of Jewish communities (Pellow, 2018). Even after the creation of two states, environmentalism has played an important role in the continued military occupation of the West Bank, as the state of Israel has effectively annexed land through the creation of national parks or conservation areas. Greenwashing, in this case, sanitizes the underlying theft of land while allowing for the dispossession of Palestinians to continue (Green and Smith, 2016).

These strategies are not unique. Settler colonial movements around the world have utilized a characterization of local populations as poor environmental managers to justify land and resource grabbing (Gasteyer et al., 2012). For example, in the United States, national parks were created on the ancestral lands of Indigenous populations, enacting the violence of dispossession for the sake of conservation (Kantor, 2007). This forced displacement is an example of environmental violence itself. To address it, a deeper analysis of positive forms of environmental peacebuilding, their implementation, and continued roadblocks to effective solutions is required. This study examines the efforts of grassroots environmental organizations and interest groups in Palestine and Israel to engage in environmental peacebuilding both through, and beyond, dialogue.

**Methodology**
Over three months, from May to July 2019, I conducted a series of eleven interviews with environmental researchers and advocates in Israel and Palestine representing seven unique
organizations/interest groups. From these interviews, I assessed the subjects’ programs and perspectives on environmental peacebuilding.

### Table 1
**Organizations/Interest Groups Interviewed**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization Name</th>
<th>Description of Work</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Palestinian Museum of Natural History (PMNH)</td>
<td>A Palestinian ecological center in Bethlehem for workshops, volunteering, education, and research opportunities surrounding the local environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Galilee Society</td>
<td>A Palestinian organization in Israel that engages with Arab-Israeli, Jewish, and Palestinian communities through an Environmental Justice Center that focuses on meeting local environmental needs and expanding environmental education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Towns Association of Environmental Quality (TAEQ)</td>
<td>An Arab-Israeli organization that focuses on environmental conflict resolution, proactive peacebuilding, and sustainable development across six towns in the Beit Netofa Basin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tent of Nations</td>
<td>A Palestinian family farm and Christian organization outside of Bethlehem focused on creative nonviolence, sustainable agriculture, and education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development</td>
<td>A Jewish-founded organization in Jerusalem that seeks to engage diverse faith traditions and leaders around shared environmental values.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scientists in Israel and Palestine (Anonymous)</td>
<td>Collaboration between scientists in Israel and Palestine focused on transboundary protection of environmental and human health.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecopeace Middle East</td>
<td>An organization based in Israel, Palestine, and Jordan that engages in grassroots peacebuilding through programs such as Good Water Neighbors that bring cross-border communities together to protect their shared environment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Results and Discussion
Aligning with much of the literature regarding environmental peacebuilding in Palestine and Israel, environmental organizations and advocates highlighted the importance of dialogue between communities in order to build peace in the region. When asked how the environment and peace are connected, Mahmoud Driaat, a representative from the Ramallah office of Ecopeace Middle East responded without hesitation: “That connection exists because the water and the environment know no borders” (Driaat, 2019; see also Alterman, 2024). From that perspective, dialogue around shared environmental challenges becomes an obvious touchstone of environmental peacebuilding.

*The Galilee Society* similarly expressed that common environmental challenges build bridges for peace, and *TAEQ* used the same term “bridge” to describe their opportunity as an Arab-Israeli
organization to mediate between Jewish and Palestinian communities (Galilee Society, 2019; TAEQ, 2019). TAEQ uses the traditional Sulha conflict resolution technique to mediate environmental disputes within Arab and between Arab and Jewish communities in Israel. The key to this methodology is strong communication and the engagement of elders and other leaders in the community throughout the process, especially as mediators, which can be an effective way of resolving disputes and preventing conflict (Zoughbi, 2019).

However, dialogue is not only about mediation. It can also be a powerful tool for imaging and building toward more just, peaceful, and sustainable futures: a key component of positive environmental peacebuilding. In addition to their environmental conflict resolution programs, TAEQ has created a forum for joint planning between Arab and Jewish mayors called, “From Back to Back to Face to Face.” Rather than planning separately and duplicating their programs, towns can work together for the common good in shared environments.

Ecopeace engages in similar programs, but at a transboundary level, working with Israeli, Palestinian, and Jordanian communities to collaboratively solve environmental challenges. Through their Good Water Neighbors Project, Ecopeace works to create bottom-up decision-making through dialogue and collaboration between transboundary communities managing the same environmental resources. Driaat explains shared responsibility that informs dialogue, “The water is crossing here and doesn’t know that this is Israeli land or Palestinian land, or this is Jordanian land… The pollution of the water knows no borders. So, it’s the responsibility of everybody to take care of this region” (Driaat, 2019; see also Alterman, 2024).

Even as communities collaborate to address the problem of water pollution, administrative barriers often stand in the way of scientists wishing to collaborate across the border on similar issues. Despite the challenges, one Palestinian scientist shared why he continues to engage in collaboration: “Science cannot wait, science is science wherever you go. Environment and pollution [are] the same [for Israelis and Palestinians], there is no boundary for them” (Anonymous, 2019). An Israeli scientist highlighted the importance of relationships in the continuity of research throughout political instability, noting that “I know Palestinians, they know me, and we never felt that if something happened then we would stop our collaborating” (Arnon, 2019).

The Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development takes yet another approach to dialogue and action on the environment, based on their conviction that faith is one of the most powerful forces for inspiring a groundswell of support for environmental issues amongst diverse communities (Dee, 2019). They focus on engaging within many communities of faith through environmental education, regardless of the other cultural or political identities held by those communities.

However, in the case of Palestine and Israel, dialogue and environmental collaboration do not take place on an even footing. For Palestinians facing the structural violence of occupation, dialogue can be a distraction that fails to address the root of oppression. At Tent of Nations farm, the Nassar family, the Palestinian owners of the farm, perpetually battle for their land in the court system while adapting to water and electricity cutoffs imposed for unspecified security reasons. In contrast, those living in the neighboring settlements can access these resources even beyond their
basic needs. Daoud Nassar shared a story of when he was approached by a neighbor seeking dialogue:

The first thing she said was “we are neighbors, we could live together.” I didn’t want to point a finger at her and say you are taking our land, etc. I said, “yes of course, but good neighbors must be treated equally.” She said, “what do you mean by that?” I said, “I have no drinking water here, but you have a swimming pool in your house or at the settlement.” She said, “I didn’t know that you don’t have drinking water here, I didn’t believe it at first.” …I said, “you can build a house on land that does not belong to you, and I’m not allowed to have a tent on my land.” This was new information for her (Nassar, 2019).

In this case, the Israeli neighbor came with good intentions for dialogue but entered the conversation without a deeper understanding of the structural inequality separating herself from the experience of her Palestinian neighbor. If dialogue is not accompanied by meaningful interrogation of power and inequity, it can further entrench the oppression of Palestinian communities by normalizing these injustices.

Mazin Qumsiyeh of the Palestinian Museum of Natural History explains the danger of normalization, saying that dialogue, “is what we do… We welcome participation, collaboration, joint struggle” but:

We don’t normalize with the occupation. We do not collaborate in the sense of collaboration as in treachery. But in terms of joint struggle, we welcome it. Just like in South Africa and the apartheid, white [people] and black [people] worked together against apartheid and that's what we do… Zionism is a colonial ideology that is intent on destruction. Destruction of nature and destruction of people… That goal is contrary to every basic human right and environmental justice (Qumsiyeh, 2019).

Efforts to end ongoing conflict, or establish negative peace, cannot eclipse the larger struggle for justice and positive peacebuilding. The struggle against oppression is collaborative and cross-border, but it also must go beyond a “get to know you” agenda and challenge power’s status quo.

At Tent of Nations farm, two important phenomena result from their environmental work: healing and solidarity. Occupation has created conditions of chronic trauma. Daoud Nassar explains how their environmental initiatives have created opportunities for healing.

Sometimes you build a relationship with a tree or a plant. You go to a tree to water every day… My contribution may be small, but it made a difference. This is an important feeling to give… We need to bring ourselves back to our roots again. We belong to the ground and things will grow from it (Nassar, 2019).

In this case, empowerment means being able to move beyond the legacies of violence and trauma and build toward something productive. For children and adults who have always navigated militarized landscapes, being able to witness new, healthy life come from the ground as the consequence of the labor of their own hands is a meaningful and healing experience. It exemplifies the very nature of positive peacebuilding: not only the absence of violence but the presence of possibilities for growth and flourishing.
One of their major strategies, even as a small organization, is to build international awareness and solidarity. Daoud Nassar tells the story of one of the many demolition orders placed on their property by the Israeli military. Daoud explains, “It was the 19th of May 2014, and they destroyed all our fruit trees ten days before the apricot harvest. It was a disaster… It was very hard for us to stand up again.” However, they mobilized to rebuild the terraces and replant the fruit trees. Many groups came to help with the planting, including an American Jewish group. Through the tragedy, they were able to build solidarity across borders, faith traditions, and identities. Daoud concludes that “out of a negative situation something positive was born” (Nassar, 2019). Solidarity-building integrates both dialogue and empowerment - moving beyond conversation to critical collaboration.

**Conclusion**

In the context of Palestine and Israel, environmental inequities are often developed and leveraged as strategies of the occupation. Yet, conversely, many community-based organizations are working toward environmental peacebuilding. Dialogue is given significant attention and resources, yet interviews with grassroots environmental organizations demonstrate the ways that dialogue without structural analysis can fall short of undoing, or even risk exacerbating forms of oppression.

Furthermore, as demonstrated by recent events, even deeply established collaborations through dialogue-based peacebuilding programs are vulnerable to breakdown when crisis hits. A recent New York Times analysis unpacks the barriers to continued conversation between Israeli and Palestinian peace activists post October 7th, 2023 (Dominus, 2023). Heightened fear, trauma, and violence and underlying miscommunication threatened to breakdown communication between activists entirely. The article reports that the urgency of shared work helped relationships survive the turmoil on at least a surface level. Yet even then, the interviews reveal that even activists working together on common projects had fundamentally different understandings of the roots of conflict and violence and the solutions required to address them.

Moving dialogue into the realm of positive environmental peacebuilding requires a willingness to engage in deeper structural analysis. While this structural analysis is often more rigorous and challenging than simply getting to know the other side, it creates more durable programs and can lead to a more clear and shared vision of a peaceful future, without breaking down when crisis hits. As illustrated by organizations actively engaging in positive environmental peacebuilding, these programs can bring unexpected communities together for collaboration, contribute toward healing from generational trauma, and inspire concrete steps toward long-term peace rooted in a foundation of justice and sustainability.

This can include working against the threats of environmental degradation and climate change when those efforts also seek to eliminate existing oppression and injustice. It can lead to healing through cultivating a relationship with the land and building solidarity across borders and identities. Even as structural environmental violence continues to take place in Palestine, community-rooted environmental organizations and advocates continue to engage in the difficult, yet meaningful process of positive environmental peacebuilding.
*Elsa Barron is an environmental peace and security researcher, writer, poet, and activist. She is a graduate of the University of Notre Dame where she studied peace studies and biology. She currently works at the Center for Climate and Security and the Institute for Climate and Peace. The author wishes to thank the University of Notre Dame for funding the research on which this essay is based, faculty at Hebrew University and the University of Notre Dame who reviewed drafts of this work, and all of the organizations and individuals that contributed interviews on this topic. The views expressed in this essay are her own.

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