PODCAST

Environmental Normalization in Palestine with Inès Abdel Razek

By: Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network, Inès Abdel Razek · July, 2022

The transcript below has been lightly edited for brevity and clarity.

Inès Abdel Razek 0:00

These projects are not new. The people-to-people projects have been actively promoted and millions have been poured into them after the Oslo agreements. But it has shown that it has not worked, because we're here today and Israel has only been able to cover up its crimes and to continue its dispossession through active impunity, through partly this greenwashing.

Yara Hawari 0:32

This is Rethinking Palestine, a podcast from Al-Shabaka, the Palestinian Policy Network. We are a virtual think tank that aims to foster public debate on Palestinian human rights and self-determination. We draw upon the vast knowledge and experience of the Palestinian people, whether in Palestine or in exile, to put forward strong and diverse Palestinian policy voices. In this podcast, we will be bringing these voices to you so that you can listen to Palestinians sharing their analysis wherever you are in the world.

At a conference in February of this year, Israeli President Isaac Herzog announced his vision for a regional partnership to create a "renewable Middle East." Herzog spoke of joint environmental threats, especially around water resources, and

claimed that they can only be solved by cooperation. Herzog has already visited Greece, Cyprus, and Turkey, and has stated that he hopes that the cooperation will include Egypt, the Gulf countries, and Palestinians.

This discourse of Israel being a champion of environmentalism in the region is not new. Indeed, the Israeli regime has often used a tactic known as greenwashing to improve its image. Greenwashing in general is an attempt to use certain environmental initiatives to hide behind the fact that it actually causes more damage than it does to help prevent climate change. Now globally, the climate crisis is fueled by inequality and engineered by complicit governments and corporations that put profit before people and planet. Everywhere, the least powerful are the most affected. The Israeli regime uses greenwashing to cover up the disastrous impact it is having on the Palestinian environment and landscape. And Palestinians living under Israeli occupation and apartheid, with no control over their land or natural resources, are highly vulnerable to the climate crisis. Some have even been calling this a form of climate apartheid.

In this context, and in the context of renewed US aid to the 1967 Palestinian occupied territories that is directly funneling money into normalization projects, eco-normalization, or environmental normalization initiatives, are on the rise.

To discuss this with me on this episode is Inès Abdel Razek, Advocacy Director at the Palestine Institute for Public Diplomacy and Al-Shabaka policy member. Inès, thank you so much for joining me on this episode of Rethinking Palestine.

Inès Abdel Razek 3:05

Thank you, Yara. It's good to be home, almost.

Yara Hawari 3:09

I think our listeners are aware of the concept of greenwashing, but perhaps you could explain it a bit more in the Palestinian context and also in the context of

renewed US aid funding and explicit support for people-to-people projects.

Inès Abdel Razek 3:22

Yes, thank you, Yara. And I think you also outlined some of this in your introduction. In our particular context, I think the hypocrisy that lies behind the concept of greenwashing is probably better understood through the prism of green colonialism — and even green settler colonialism. So Zionism as a project has been a settler colonial endeavor, as also recognized by its founders — Herzl, Ben-Gurion, and others — until colonialism was recognized as harmful and not so popular. So Israel actually moved to denying that it was.

What it has meant is this continued practice to replace the native population, the Palestinian population, by an outside settler population — here, the Jewish people. And it was primarily advanced through mechanisms of land dispossession, displacement, and also natural resources appropriation and exploitation. So we're talking mainly land, water, but also minerals — by controlling the Dead Sea — or stones, controlling quarries in the West Bank.

So greenwashing, as you said, is not new, and neither is this green colonialism. It has been taking the form of the Jewish National Fund planting non-indigenous, non-endemic trees on top of Palestinian villages they demolished in 1948 and 1967, but also creating environmental reserves on land annexed and taken from Palestinians in the West Bank, etc.

And I think what's important, to get to the international donors' intervention and USAID, is that Israel has built its diplomacy and prosperity by exploiting such colonial domination and making an advantage of basically this dispossession of Palestinians, particularly through developing agro-technologies, green technologies, water-efficient technologies that they're exporting around the world. And these have fundamentally been structured and developed around the dispossession of Palestinians.

And so in the context of international donor interventions and USAID, they're actively, I think, normalizing this dispossession. They're normalizing and entrenching these domination structures and playing into promoting Israel as this beacon of a fight against the climate crisis, against the environmental crisis. And so it basically denies these dire asymmetries of power that exist here, and the denial of rights of Palestinians, and the denial of agency and decision-making power of Palestinians.

So it's presenting these projects promoting cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians — whether it's the Palestinian Authority or NGOs or the business sector — as one of cooperation and peacebuilding. So instead, again, of recognizing that asymmetry of power, it's presenting the situation and normalizing and trying to present the situation as one of a dispute among two parties with equal rights — one of a post-conflict situation where trust and dialogue could solve the injustice, instead of, again, looking at the reality.

Yara Hawari

So Inès, what might some of these environmental normalization projects look like? Can you give us some concrete examples?

Inès Abdel Razek

Yes. So I can give an example in the context of this renewed USAID intervention in Palestine. They are very much trying to promote the implementation of the Abraham Accords — the normalization agreements between Israel, the UAE, Sudan, Morocco, and more indirectly Saudi Arabia. So one of these projects, for example, is called Prosperity Green and Prosperity Blue. It's very much private sector–oriented, which also poses the problem of making resources like water and energy commodities — and especially water, which is a right — making it a commodity to be traded.

But more importantly, the problem with this project is exactly that Palestinians are completely absent from this project. And it's basically here to promote UAE investments and Israeli investments and interests and completely erase Palestinians from the picture. So this project is about producing renewable energies in Jordan, exporting it to Israel so that they desalinate water that then they would export again to Jordan. So this kind of exchange, where again we see that the Palestinians will either receive — or be sold — some water by the Israelis, the very water that Israel steals from them, or they will be completely erased from the equation.

And what's interesting is how, again, the US is presenting it. So Kerry said, "The Middle East is at the front line of the climate crisis, and only by working together can countries in the region rise to the challenge." And he also said that "this is a welcome example of how cooperation can accelerate the energy transition and build greater resilience." So we very much see the exploitation of the climate change needs and the climate crisis into normalizing this type of projects, where effectively Palestinians continue to be dispossessed of their renewable resources by Israel as a colonial power.

And unfortunately, they're very, I think, popular — because who doesn't love, again, cooperation, peace, and renewable energies? All of these things look very nice on paper and politically. So that's how they're really receiving such support.

And I think an interesting other example is one that has failed — the so-called Red Sea–Dead Sea Canal, which was supposed to have water from the Red Sea desalinated and then the brine transferred into the Dead Sea. And again, this project has failed. The Palestinians were very critical of it, mainly NGOs, because the PA had signed the MOU for this project to happen — they were a bit forced into it. But what this project has shown is that eventually it would have normalized the annexation — it would have normalized Israel controlling the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea is in the occupied West Bank, yet this project received support from the

World Bank, from the US, and from all the international donor community, despite its tremendous problematic approach.

Yara Hawari

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I think it would be a good idea just to pause for a minute and define what normalization is, because some of our listeners might not be so aware. Normalization is the act of treating the Israeli regime as a normal entity, as opposed to an apartheid regime. And anti-normalization as a concept and a political practice has been agreed upon by consensus by the majority of Palestinian civil society.

And as you talked about — why these projects are so harmful — one of the main issues is the symmetry of power that is presented through these projects. But I was hoping you could expand a bit further as to why these initiatives and projects have such negative impacts on Palestinians.

Inès Abdel Razek

Yeah. I think the primary political impact, as mentioned, is that it erases — but it normalizes — the dispossession at play by Israel of Palestinian resources and the denial of Palestinian rights to their resources. So when you're looking at promoting, for example, dialogue on water issues between Israelis and Palestinians, or on renewable energy — having Israelis present, for example, them providing trucks of water to the Palestinians, or agreeing, cooperating on building some solar panels for Palestinians — what that means is it normalizes this colonial and patronizing approach, but it erases completely what's happening on the ground.

What's happening in reality is that there is constant land confiscation and expropriation of Palestinians from their land, expulsion of rural communities to build settlements. There is active water dispossession. Palestinians are only allowed to use 15% of the groundwater in the West Bank. We have to look at the fact that the renewable sources of water present in Palestine are mainly there underneath the West Bank — so inside Palestine. Yet Israel controls more than 85% of that and then sells back the water at very high prices to Palestinians.

It also erases the fact that, again, Palestinians are given zero access to the renewable sources of water of the Jordan River or the Dead Sea. It erases the fact that, again, rural communities in the Jordan Valley are denied the ability to dig any wells or denied being connected to water.

So I think, again, this is the hypocrisy of this kind of dialogue or trust-building project — that it allows Israel to present itself as a good-faith actor, as someone who's ready to make a gesture, when in reality all of what this international diplomacy and normalization agreements and Abraham Accords do is entrenching and facilitating them continuing that dispossession.

And the environmental impacts are also extremely serious, and they have been over decades. The agriculture sector in Palestine has shrunk. Farmers have stopped doing agriculture because it was so costly, because of the lack of water, because of the lack of access to land. So Palestinians have been denied food sovereignty and food security. We're looking also at the denial of infrastructure — especially, the PA for years has been asking to build infrastructure like solid waste management, wastewater management, renewable energy — that has constantly been denied by Israel because it's located in areas that they want to keep under their control and they are annexing.

So this has obviously had tremendous environmental impacts. Why? Because then Palestinians resort to other sources of energy, like fuel. This is particularly dire in

Gaza under siege, where Israel has bombed the only power plant. And Gaza relies on fuel that is extremely polluting and harmful for people's health.

But yet, again, the World Bank and USAID will be promoting projects of building solar panels in Gaza or treating some of the wastewater along the beach and then say that this is "wonderful cooperation." So these are just some of the concrete impacts that we see — that, again, maintain Palestinians under the full control of Israel and their interest and will. And it also has, I think, long-term impacts for people's health and for the climate.

Yara Hawari

And as I know, you are interested in the case of water, and you've worked in the water policy field. We've already discussed water quite a bit during this podcast, but I was hoping you could tell us a bit more about what you've observed about recent water normalization projects.

Inès Abdel Razek

Yeah. I think it's again interesting, what's happening with the Abraham Accords, that is putting at the forefront, again, this approach of peacebuilding, dialogue, and people-to-people approaches. I think the discourse there and the political approach is really promoting water and environment as sectors that could be put first — in terms of, before looking at political issues or what are considered more difficult issues — that water and environment are kind of taken as sectors where it would be easier to build, again, that trust and dialogue.

And I have seen that at play over the years. So for example, in 2009, you have the World Bank that released a report on water saying that the main obstacle to development for the water sector for Palestinians is the Israeli occupation. It's the obstacles that are documented in a hundred-page report. That report was actively lobbied against by the Israelis, and the World Bank since then has completely

erased this analysis — this analysis of reality — and has depoliticized completely its approach and rather moved towards, again, promoting this kind of normalizing of the situation instead of looking at the root causes.

And so we're here today where this "blue peace" or "green-blue peace" is promoted again, when we know that effectively, again, it's erasing the root causes. And it has tremendous support from the international community — receiving international awards, being invited to the UN Security Council to present, again, this sort of peacebuilding approach.

And it has been years that these initiatives have been existing — of water diplomacy, of using this informal, what we call Track Two diplomacy, to bring Israelis and Palestinians together to discuss some of these sectoral issues. In reality, all of these initiatives — like the Geneva Initiative — have been evaluated as not efficient. So, for example, the Swiss government has removed their funding to the Geneva Initiative.

And I think what it has done is, again, continue to promote these empty mantras and this political discourse that is completely disconnected from reality, instead of looking at the root causes. And so it's almost like — I think people can see behind, I think some people can see behind that propaganda. I think it's disinformation, to bring about terms like "peace" or "cooperation" when in fact it's completely imposed projects, imposed investments on the majority of Palestinians.

Yara Hawari

These projects tell Palestinians to forget the macro destructive regime, and instead tell them to focus on these small micro issues that will then be turned into this propaganda opportunity, in which a narrative is peddled where Palestinians and Israelis simply need to get along for an end to the so-called conflict — not that the Israeli apartheid regime needs to be dismantled.

And I think some of our listeners might be a bit confused as to why Palestinians would participate in these kinds of projects. Of course, these are normalization projects, so there must be Palestinian participants. And I think the confusion is fair, especially as there is a very clear consensus on normalization within Palestinian civil society. And of course, everything you mentioned as to how these projects are actually very harmful. So what are the benefits for Palestinians who do participate? And what do you think the reasons are behind their participation?

Inès Abdel Razek

I think we need to distinguish between how the Palestinian Authority has been participating, how the business sector has been participating, and how civil society has been participating.

We have to look at, first — the Palestinian Authority has signed the Oslo agreements, which in themselves were putting the PA in a place of domination. Especially when we look at the water sector, the Oslo agreements only gave 80% of the control of the renewable sources of water to the Israelis, where Palestinians would be given a certain bulk of water. That was supposed to be temporary, but the same exact amount is still the one given today to Palestinians, 30 years later.

So that's one. And it has also created these mechanisms, again, for Israeli and Palestinian bilateral discussions. So instead of looking at the dire asymmetry of powers and recognizing that there should be an end to the occupation and apartheid, it just created those mechanisms — called the Joint Water Committee — where you would have the Israeli government and the PA discussing the projects for Palestinians. And the vast majority of the projects — again, infrastructure projects presented by the PA — were denied.

So you have the PA that has been trapped into its own domination. And in order for — let's say, Palestinians in the very little islands that the PA controls, or at least where it controls civil matters like water and education — they have had to

surrender, basically, to what Israel authorizes them to. So it means that for the PA, it's better to have one pipeline for water and two trucks of water instead of zero. So that's how it has been playing out — that eventually, in order to receive and to have access to the minimal amount of water, even if it's not your right to water, even if it's too little, even if you still get dispossessed from water elsewhere, you still have to accept some of these breadcrumbs in order to function at a minimum level and to give services to some of the population.

And the business sector — well, some of the business sector and companies have eventually benefited from the occupation. A lot of people know that there have been Palestinian cement companies that have built the wall. So I think in the case of the business sector, there are private interests at play. Because again, when you transform water or land or energy into commodities that become just privatized — and you privatize these, let's say, the efforts that should be public, into protecting public goods, into again people having access to water and to land as a right — some companies also are benefiting from these types of projects.

So in the case of the new Green Prosperity and Blue Prosperity between Jordan, UAE, and Israel, some Palestinian companies might have stakes in — whether it's the solar energy panels or some of the desalinated water within Israel.

And so I think that's important to keep in mind — that, again, private businesses don't have the general interest at play, in general. And when it comes to Palestinian civil society, I think at the individual level — I think you said it right — when you're an individual and you live under extreme oppression, repression, stress, and dispossession, you can feel the need for some empathy and for some sort of normal. And that's why I think a lot of Palestinian individuals might think that by sitting together with an Israeli, by discussing around the table, they're given some agency, they're listened to. And this is obviously promoted and actively prompted also by international Western liberal approaches.

So people feel seen, people feel listened to. But the fact of the matter is that even if you create some form of empathy in a room, as you said, it doesn't change the fact that the Palestinian goes back home under unequal rights, still under apartheid, still denied their fair access to water, still denied their access to land. And the Israeli goes back to being the dominant, whose prosperity is built on Palestinian dispossession.

And so I think it's normal, humanly, for some Palestinians to think that these types of projects could change things. But over the years, again, these projects are not new. The people-to-people projects have been actively promoted and millions have been poured into them after the Oslo agreements. But it has shown that it has not worked, because we're here today and Israel has only been able to cover up its crimes and to continue its dispossession through active impunity, through partly this greenwashing.

Yara Hawari

Inès, thank you so much for that. I think we'll leave it there for today, but I hope you'll join us again on Rethinking Palestine.

Inès Abdel Razek

Thank you, Yara. My pleasure.

Yara Hawari

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