



Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism

## People to People: Examining Grassroots Peacebuilding Efforts Between Israelis and Palestinians

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### EcoPeace Middle East

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Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson and members of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism, thank you for the opportunity to testify on Grassroots Peacebuilding Efforts Between Israelis and Palestinians. The timing of this hearing is especially important, as several peacebuilding organizations are now resuming their activities in the region alongside the resumption of USAID funding after several years where support for the Palestinian people and Palestinian organizations was cut entirely. Thank you for giving our community this opportunity to reflect on our past experiences, this current round of funding and what can be done in the future to further support our important work.

*I am the Palestinian Co-Director of EcoPeace Middle East organization. A unique environmental peace-building organization of Israelis, Palestinians, and Jordanians. Its mission is to advance sustainable regional development and the conditions for peace by promoting collaboration around shared environmental challenges, especially the need for water. Despite wars, intifadas, and diminished hopes for lasting peace, EcoPeace has persisted for almost 25 years, developing a number of highly successful projects. EcoPeace has received world-wide recognition for its work, has addressed the United Nations Security Council, gave a presentation at the Vatican conference in Rome, and was awarded the Stanford University Law School 2018 Bright Award for exceptional contributions to global sustainability. For more details about EcoPeace, including a complete listing of awards, see <http://ecopeace.org>*

**Overview:** Three decades since the promise of the Madrid Conference and later the Oslo Accords, a final and sustained peace agreement between Israelis and Palestinians has remained elusive. As the peace process remains stalled, an essential ingredient needed to create top down political will is a long-term investment in bottom up community-based education and public engagement programs. Civil society remains the key player for mobilizing Palestinian and Israeli communities. Over recent years they have gained the experience and ability to cope in the most difficult, politically fragile environment. The peacebuilding community survived the Second Intifada, repeated Hamas – Israel wars, as well as the threats of annexation and daily confrontations on ground. In fact it has not just “survived” these events, but adapted and evolved.

The recent events have shown the powerful presence and ability of civil society to thrive and help affect the political dynamic in the Palestinian Territories, starting with the events in East Jerusalem, the recent 11 days Gaza war, the murder of the influencer Nizar Banat and the arrest of political activists in Ramallah. Civil society continues to raise the bar and push to resist the limitations by the Israeli military control, internal political divide and fragile systems. Put simply: civil society remains the most dynamic force capable of disrupting the status quo, empowering ordinary citizens and feeding new ideas into a conflict in desperate need of them. Yet it too seldomly receives the sort of material and political support that this role should demand.

The peacebuilding community is instead facing further pressure and de-legitimization. It stands against the norms of violence, despair and dehumanization, amplifying a message of peace and the voice of the silent majority which continues to wish for a normal life, and the prospect of a thriving and prospering society. Despite the bleak picture that many polls and studies present about the polarized public opinions of anti-peace and anti-cooperation sentiments in both the Palestinian and Israeli society, there is a courageous community of activists and organizations who continue to carry the burden and responsibility of maintaining sanity, promoting values of humanity, mutual respect

**EcoPeace Middle East**

Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism  
People to People: Examining Grassroots Peacebuilding Efforts Between Israelis and Palestinians  
July 21, 2021

and coexistence, right in the middle of a region that is very much driven by politicians, media and powerful groups who continue to promote hatred, dehumanization of the other, and neglecting its very right to exist.

This community has learnt over the years to diversify its tools and mechanisms and to adapt to the challenges and volatile conditions of the region, to reach as many people as possible, to create and work with agents of change, to advance tangible projects on ground that improve people's lives, and to expand people's horizons with different perspectives, showcasing the power of the individuals and groups.

**Climate Crisis and Regional Security:** While the world has to deal with an average of 1 – 2C increase in temperature, Jordan, Palestine and Israel are expected to experience up to 4C increase in temperature and up to 25% decrease in precipitation by the end of the century. Shifting in seasons, fluctuation in raining events, higher probability of extreme weather events such as floods, droughts and fires are all on the radar for a region that is already known to be fragile in its adaptive capacity to such serious impacts and threats.<sup>1</sup>

Climate change's forecasted impacts will hit various sectors. Reduced availability of natural water leads to greater difficulty for local governments to meet domestic water needs and provide satisfactory services. Water scarcity and increased temperatures lead to reduced agricultural production, increased dependence on imported foods and increased food insecurity. The outbreak of climate-related diseases exerts further stress on the already inadequate health services contributing to the overall deterioration of public health.

Under normal circumstances, the above factors could lead to erosion of livelihoods, internal displacement of people and greater instability and will have serious implications for the social and political stability of the region. The low ability for resilience to climate threats due to weak systems and the political conflict often leads to describing climate change as a "threat multiplier."

**Continuing under the status quo**, in the context of the already highly flammable Israeli-Palestinian conflict, could easily translate into uprisings and increased violence that transcend national borders and threaten national security in Israel, Palestine and the broader region. The lack of political will and leadership on both sides address the more difficult files and issues of the conflict, and the need of cooperation, requires a greater push from the bottom-up. The abundance of factors that would continue contributing to inflaming the situation, requires a stronger presence and deployment of the peacebuilding community efforts, which unfortunately continues to be crippled by the lack of support, legitimacy and funding.

**From US national security stand point and international foreign policy interest**, climate change is now recognized as a driving force to underdevelopment and high poverty rates, creating opportunities for extremist to brainwash youth to participate in violent actions that threaten not only national regimes, but as ISIS has proven, whole regions of the Middle East, North Africa and to the broader continents. A clear example from the region, is Jordan with over 50% youth unemployment

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<sup>1</sup> EcoPeace Middle East, 2019, Climate Change, Water Security, and National Security for Jordan, Palestine, and Israel, Amman, Jordan; Tel Aviv, Israel; Ramallah, Palestine: Carry, Inga (Ed.), <https://ecopeaceme.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/climate-change-web.pdf>

in some environmental hotspot areas, which resulted in Jordanian youth being the 3rd largest contributor to ISIS volunteers from the Arab world and one of the top five contributors globally. <sup>2</sup>

**Yet, there are several opportunities** that sit towards tackling the most pressing issues of climate security and the broader stability in the context of the Palestinian – Israeli conflict. Most critically: it is an opportunity to demonstrate the inherent interdependence of Israelis and Palestinians, who share an ecosystem and must cooperate to deliver win/win outcomes for both societies.

- There is continued belief in civil society's role, particularly in the Palestinian Territories, which for many years prior to the establishment of the Palestinian Authority has been responsible for provision of services and direct support of local communities. Following the establishment of the PA, the role of civil society has continued to be strong and rooted among the people.
- The strong adaptive capacity of civil society organizations in the peacebuilding sphere as described above is a great opportunity to continue investing in its growth and strengthening and legitimization.
- There is greater interest from youth to engage in activism and political and social change on ground and through social media influencing. Moreover, there is growing interest among youth about environmental awareness, consumption of organic food and engaging in green economy entrepreneurial initiatives.<sup>3</sup>
- Environmental stress – which affects all peoples regardless of nationality, identity, faith or economic condition – can equally be seen as a multiplier of opportunities. A chance to reconsider existing policies and understand the necessity to work across borders to increase adaptive capacities so that challenges can not only be overcome, but become increasingly sustainable, equitable and prosperity-generating. Environmental and water cross-border cooperation can be described as a low hanging fruit for both parties as a practical mechanism to build trust.
- In a recent poll conducted by EcoPeace ME<sup>4</sup>, 80% of Palestinians and 47.7% of Israelis said the current water conflict could lead to a regional crisis. At the internal level, the majority, 93% in Palestine said a solution to the water crisis could help make their countries more stable. It does seem that the degree of the water problem in each country determines the degree of need for regional cooperation to resolve it. For example, the majority of those polled in Palestine, 73.8% said regional cooperation is extremely important for improving the water and energy sectors, in comparison to 38.7% of respondents in Israel.

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<sup>2</sup> EcoPeace Middle East, 2020, Green Blue Deal for the Middle East, <https://ecopeaceme.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/A-Green-Blue-Deal-for-the-Middle-East-EcoPeace.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> SCP/RAC by Antoine Karam, Palestine Country Profile on Circular Economy, Switchmed Programme, 2020 <https://switchmed.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/2020.11.30-Country-Profile-Palestine.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Draft results of a public opinion poll conducted by EcoPeace Middle East in cooperation with the Jerusalem Media and Communications Centre (JMCC) in Palestine, Jordan and Israel between April 25 and May 31, 2021



**There is a lot that can be done, and below are some suggestions that are derived from the 26 years' experience of EcoPeace ME, working in the environmental peacebuilding sphere, and are replicated, with elaboration, from a recent report to be published by EcoPeace ME in cooperation with the USIP on the concept of a Green Blue Deal for the Middle East:**

- Stakeholder governments should support programs across national education systems to engage students on issues such as water diplomacy, environmental protection and climate diplomacy. Support the development of curriculum and resources toward this end, including conflict mitigation and management skills. Programs that target youth (ages 16-18) in Jordanian, Palestinian and Israeli high schools should be prioritized, and hence contribute to the improvements and efforts that are required from both sides to tackle the issues of hate speech in schools' curricula, by recognizing the others right to exist and the right to have equal opportunities and right to live in a safe and prosperous environment. More robust engagement with universities should also be pursued.
- Stakeholder and donor governments should support youth focused people-to-people leadership programs to engage select groups of emerging young environmental leaders with potential to serve as impact multipliers in regional cross-border activities. Such programs have demonstrated the ability to create networks of empowered young leaders who will forge cross-border connections to advance regional water and environment solutions.
- Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian governments and civil society stakeholders should integrate Green Blue Deal concepts and priorities into national entrepreneurial programs by supporting young entrepreneurs and graduates of academic programs that are relevant to the Green-Blue deal in order to advance its ideals. This can attract students and graduates from environmental science and environmental engineering faculties, young entrepreneurs, and young water professionals. This program aims to advance innovative green enterprises that generate social value and create a cohort of young Israeli, Jordanian and Palestinian entrepreneurs who cooperate to build shared prosperity and sustainable development in the region.
- Creating a safe space and infrastructure for the environmental peacebuilding community in particular and the peacebuilding community in general as a hub for creativity and innovation, either from the socio-political solutions that are required as a driving force for policy change or even towards creating joint projects and prototypes and solutions to immediate market needs to address environmental stress.

**Again, taken from a recent report under preparation by EcoPeace ME in cooperation with USIP,** it is now well established that environmental sustainability and stewardship are values that hold importance to communities across identities and borders and are largely divorced from regional diplomatic issues. For all people, clean water and energy are shared interests which represent a promising entry point for mainstreaming peacebuilding and sustainability issues into education programs. When communities living on either side of a shared water basin come to understand that their future is dependent on the actions of their neighbors, as much as it is dependent on their own behavior, then they can become powerful actors calling on their leaders to cooperate across the border, as a matter of self-interest, if not survival, of their own community. Mainstreaming

#### **EcoPeace Middle East**

Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism  
People to People: Examining Grassroots Peacebuilding Efforts Between Israelis and Palestinians  
July 21, 2021



educational programs that link peacebuilding and sustainability issues, both at the national and regional level, help create the needed public constituencies that support leaders to move towards cooperation and reject unilateralism.

Investment in mainstreaming educational programs that focus on the relationship between environmental responsibility and peace building is particularly needed in areas of protracted conflict like the Middle East, an area recognized as a climate hot spot. Environmental peacebuilding is increasingly recognized as a unique practice that focuses on common threats and opportunities such as those created by the climate crisis, in order to help create the political will needed for governments to act towards climate mitigation and adaptation.

Teaching water and climate diplomacy to high school students encourages interested students to enroll in relevant programs at the university level, which then prepares those that choose a career path as young professionals and entrepreneurs who have the needed skill sets to then implement the programs that advance a water-energy nexus, sustainable water allocation and cross border river and stream management. These are the tools required if we are to meet Green Blue Deal climate mitigation and adaptation goals. For those who do not adopt these issues as a career path, the investment made in water and climate diplomacy in schools and universities nevertheless significantly impacts mindsets and helps create the public constituency needed in favor of cooperative rather than unilateral decisions.

**Fortunately, a new US policy tool provides an opportunity to develop this approach.** In December 2020, the United States Congress passed the Nita M. Lowey Middle East Partnership for Peace Act (MEPPA), which stands to deliver unprecedented financial support for peacebuilding in Israel and the Palestinian Territories. The law provides \$250 million over five years to expand peace and reconciliation programs in the region, as well as to support projects to bolstering the Palestinian economy. Projects such as the above fit closely in the spirit of the act: catalyzing progress on the ground, while generating hope and understanding between peoples, toward the goal of improving the likelihood of a sustainable peace.

In the first months of the Biden Administration, a number of tenets of a “Biden Doctrine” seem to be emerging, environmental leadership and revitalization of international partnerships among them. The Biden Administration has committed the US to leadership on climate issues and to diplomacy and cooperation in tackling national security issues.

**While the Biden Administration has made clear that it views a negotiated two-state solution as the desired outcome to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Washington has also seemed to indicate that a hard push toward negotiations is not a near-term priority.** At the same time, the administration does not want stagnation in Palestinian-Israeli relations and seems keen on initiatives which improve the lives of those affected by the conflict and narrow the political differences between the sides with an eye towards preserving the possibility of reaching a two-state outcome when the circumstances are ripe. MEPPA—particularly if ambitiously implemented with a multilateral approach that engages U.S. allies too—has the potential of preserving conditions but improving them. It can build civic capacity that can improve the political variables that have been deteriorating for decades, and empower civil society leaders to provide new ideas, movements and institutions founded on Israeli/Palestinian partnership.

Partners across the globe – including in the Middle East and Europe – share the administration’s commitments to a more sustainable future. Viewed from Jerusalem, Amman and Ramallah,

#### **EcoPeace Middle East**

Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism  
People to People: Examining Grassroots Peacebuilding Efforts Between Israelis and Palestinians  
July 21, 2021



environmental issues can be considered an opportunity for advancing national interests and pragmatic relationship-building, with potentially transformational results. These projects should be at the core of MEPPA. Thanks to their alignment with the Biden Administration's climate agenda and its pledge to revive U.S.-led multilateralism, they can form the centerpiece of an international strategy to build the conditions that both peace and environmental stability depend upon. With the depth of both the political and environmental crisis in the region, the generous commitment of MEPPA can be used to leverage other contributions from Europe, the Gulf region and the wider world as part of an ambitious U.S.-led international fund strategy that can work at the same scale as the conflict itself.

**The Biden Administration's interests in climate and conflict resolution come at a moment when Jordanian, Palestinian and Israeli ministries have been formulating their own ideas for combatting climate change** but are experiencing limited success with implementation. At the same time, new opportunities exist as the roster of parties interested in and capable of cooperation has expanded as a result of the enthusiasm generated by the Abraham Accords.

Fortunately, many of the pieces needed to bring about a Green Blue Deal are already in place. If connecting these pieces, and bringing about a deal, becomes a US priority, Jordanian, Palestinian and Israeli decision makers seem poised to seriously engage. The prospect — or promise — of potential investments from the US and others will increase the program's attractiveness.

The Green Blue Deal is an opportunity for Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian policy makers to consider what regional policy changes and regional institutional architecture is required to foster region-wide climate resilience and security. Committing to a cross-border water-energy system lies in each of their respective interests; US backing will help them feel the confidence to take this leap. And once in action, such a step will serve as a shining example of what can be achieved, with foresight and collaboration, to achieve climate resilience.

**The United States should not miss this moment. The opportunity exists for robust and transformative diplomacy with the Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian governments** to advance a detailed program with timelines and financing towards the implementation people to people programs and environmental peacebuilding programs as part of the broader Green Blue Deal for the Middle East.

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