

# Links of Oppression: Eco-apartheid and Environmental Injustice in Palestine

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In a world in much need of environmental consciousness and action, we must turn our attention to regions consistently overlooked by mainstream Western discourse. The Middle East, particularly the South-west Asia and North Africa (SWANA) region, is often erased from Climate Change and Environmental Justice conversations. Intersectional Environmentalism has brought regions like this to the front line of the conversation by highlighting the profound ways in which the exploitation and destruction of the planet are directly linked with the exploitation of vulnerable communities. As a writer for the Eukaryon magazine, I honor the responsibility to use the natural sciences to understand political and social issues. Therefore, in light of recent events, this article reflects on the oppression taking place in Palestine in the form of genocide, ethnic cleansing, and colonialism through the lens of Environmental Studies. According to UNICEF, “As of October 2023 - conditions for Palestinians have further worsened in Gaza when millions of civilians were deprived of food, water, fuel and a safe exit route which are both considered both a war crime and human rights violation” (Environmentalist, 2023, p. 7).

To understand the Environmental injustices taking place in Palestine, it is necessary to acknowledge the Israel-Palestine context. The colonization of Palestine dates back to 1917 when the European colonial powers determined the fate of the former Ottoman Empire (United Nations). Great Britain decided to administrate Palestine as part of a transitory plan until the nation would achieve a complete status of Independence (United Nations). However, without the consent of the Palestinian People, the British Government had given commitments to the Zionist Organization regarding the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine (United Nations), which they claimed to have a “historical connection” to give the presence of their ancestors two thousand years before the Jewish Diaspora” (United Nations). This was followed by “The Nakba” (meaning “catastrophe”) in 1948, the displacement of Palestinian People through ethnic cleansing including the destruction of villages and massacres (Intersectional Environmentalist, 2023, p. 22).

Palestine’s landscape bears the marks and consequences of the violence and oppression that it has endured since then, the first of them being the erasure of Indigenous People’s culture and traditions due to colonization. Besides the loss of traditional knowledge and connections to land and Nature, much of the native landscape and natural resources have been destroyed in the process of settler colonialism and eco-apartheid. Eco-apartheid is defined as the ecological separation of humans from Nature (Intersectional Environmentalist, 2023, 4). As cited in the Intersectional Environmentalist report on Environmental Justice in Palestine, a 2015 article in The Ecologist reports that since 1967 some 800,000 olive trees have been uprooted, out of which there is no estimation for how many the Israeli military has intentionally torn down with bulldozers (Juthour, 2014). Additionally, crops such as carobs, hawthorns, oaks, olives, figs, and almonds have been uprooted and replaced by European species. Besides threatening people’s livelihoods, the destruction of native vegetation contributes to the loss of biodiversity, soil erosion, destruction of essential root systems, an increase in wildlife fires, and drought (IMEU, 2022). Furthermore, bypass roads are built to restrict the movements of Palestinians and economic activities in a colonized land. The construction of these roads requires the confiscation and destruction of approximately 109,000 dunums (a dunum is 1/10 hectare) of Palestinian land, which otherwise would have been used by farmers (Intersectional Environmentalist, 2023, p. 22).

Much like the United States, Israel locates toxic facilities and disposes of waste pollutants in residential areas predominantly inhabited by marginalized communities – the Palestinians. Similarly, in the American context, policies and practices have historically “and to this day, favored the health, well-being, and consumer choices of white communities over

those of non-white, low-income communities” (Ihejirika, 2023). There are at least seven Israeli industrial zones in the West Bank (Intersectional Environmentalist, 2023, p. 9) located on hilltops, which results in the contamination of water bodies and settlements by industrial wastewater. ((Intersectional Environmentalist, 2023, 9). Israel’s main industries generate waste containing toxic elements such as aluminum, chromium, lead, zinc, and nickel, which often accumulate in the environment and are known to be detrimental to humans (Intersectional Environmentalist, 2023, p. 9).

The inexistence of Palestine’s sovereignty and lack of self-determination has further allowed Israel to gate-keep natural essential resources such as water. Besides the contamination of water bodies by the settlements industries, Israel uses military orders to destroy Palestinian-built treatment centers, wells, or any other sort of facilities. Besides, a permit is necessary for Palestinians to build a rain-catching system (Environmentalist, 2023, p. 22). Jewish settlers in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip receive a continuous water supply, mainly from wells in Palestine, whereas Palestinians struggle to have access to clean, safe water. Besides, the poor disposal of wastewater is threatening the sustainability of the West Bank’s aquifer (Environmentalist, 2023, p. 22).

Examining environmental injustices in Palestine highlights the urgent need for an inclusive and intersectional approach to environmental discourse. The intricate layers of oppression faced by the Palestinian people come into sharp focus when viewed through the lens of environmental studies. Rooted in a history of ongoing colonization, ethnic cleansing, and a denial of sovereignty, these layers reveal themselves across Palestine’s scarred terrain—a narrative of erasure involving natural resources, Indigenous culture, and traditions. Deliberate acts of eco-apartheid and settler colonialism have destroyed native vegetation, crops, and olive trees, contributing to ecological isolation and a loss of biodiversity. Drawing parallels with tendencies observed in the United States, Israel’s placement of toxic facilities near Palestinian residential areas adds to a disconcerting pattern of environmental racism that disproportionately impacts marginalized communities.

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