

Environmental Justice in Occupied Palestine

settler colonialism as an ecological resource conflict

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Palestinians are in a uniquely disadvantaged position to cope with climate-related risks. Climate-induced stress on resources in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip is compounded by an occupation that actively dispossesses Palestinians of their resources and displaces them from their homes. In fact, Israeli-imposed water scarcity in occupied Palestine is far more substantial than climate change predictions on water scarcity for the region.

Climate change vulnerability

is defined as the degree to which structures are susceptible to, and able to cope with, the impacts of climate change. It hinges on a community's access to the resources needed to combat climate change's adverse effects. Thus, climate change vulnerability is not only measured in terms of the direct impact on natural resources, but also through the rights of individuals and communities over their resources. Israel's occupation of Palestine not only hinders the ability to implement climate change adaptation strategies, but is also considered an environmental risk in and of itself.

The occupation exacerbates climate change related risks

as the separation wall, settlement expansion and settler violence, military checkpoints, and the institutionalized control and weakening of Palestinian governance increases food insecurity, water scarcity, and climate change vulnerability.



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Legal Control of Palestinian Resources under the British Mandate

1920 - 1948

British Orientalist perceptions of Arabs as "anti-modern" worked to dismantle the methods Palestinians developed over the course of centuries to adapt to the varied water and climate conditions throughout the country. Palestinian agricultural practices responded to where water was present, rather than forcing its existence. This included dry farming methods, such as growing crops that could succeed without irrigation, such as wheat, barley, and durra (sorghum), and raising water-sparing livestock. Farmers used terracing to preserve water and avoid erosion, and planted their olive trees a wide distance apart to reduce watering needs. **However, Palestinians experienced dramatic changes in their landscape as access to their water and lands were confiscated for construction of Zionist settlements and water-intensive agricultural practices.** For example, in the mid-1920s, Palestinian fruit growers and shepherds in the Bethlehem area lost a share of their local spring water expropriated for use in Jerusalem, and access to the Zarqa River was expropriated by a Zionist and British development project, cutting off the Palestinian communities who relied on this water source to sustain their livelihoods. By the late 1930s, Zionist settlements supported by the British Mandate blocked Palestinian fellahin (farmers) in Hula Valley from reaching their herds' traditional watering places.

Palestinian Legal Action

In 1922, Palestinians of Kabara in Haifa subdistrict hired an attorney to argue that they had clear title to their land and to contest the government's plan to sell it to a company seeking to drain and irrigate it. In 1924, the Zionist settler community was granted the right to build a hydro-electric dam on the Jordan River, leading the Palestine Arab Congress to complain to the League of Nations that the British were hindering Arab efforts to improve town water supplies. Villagers from Artas, Bethlehem took the District Governor of Jerusalem to court in 1925 to prevent the town from appropriating and diverting part of Artas' local spring water to support the British and Zionist expansion of Jerusalem.



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The alteration of Palestine's water landscapes during the Mandate period continues to have implications for climate change adaptivity today.

The switch to water-intensive agricultural practices and the introduction of non-native flora and fauna has damaged the ecology of the land extensively. This "greening of Palestine" persisted through the Nakba in 1948, when towns and villages were razed and planted over with trees native to central Europe, covering evidence of Palestinian life that once existed.

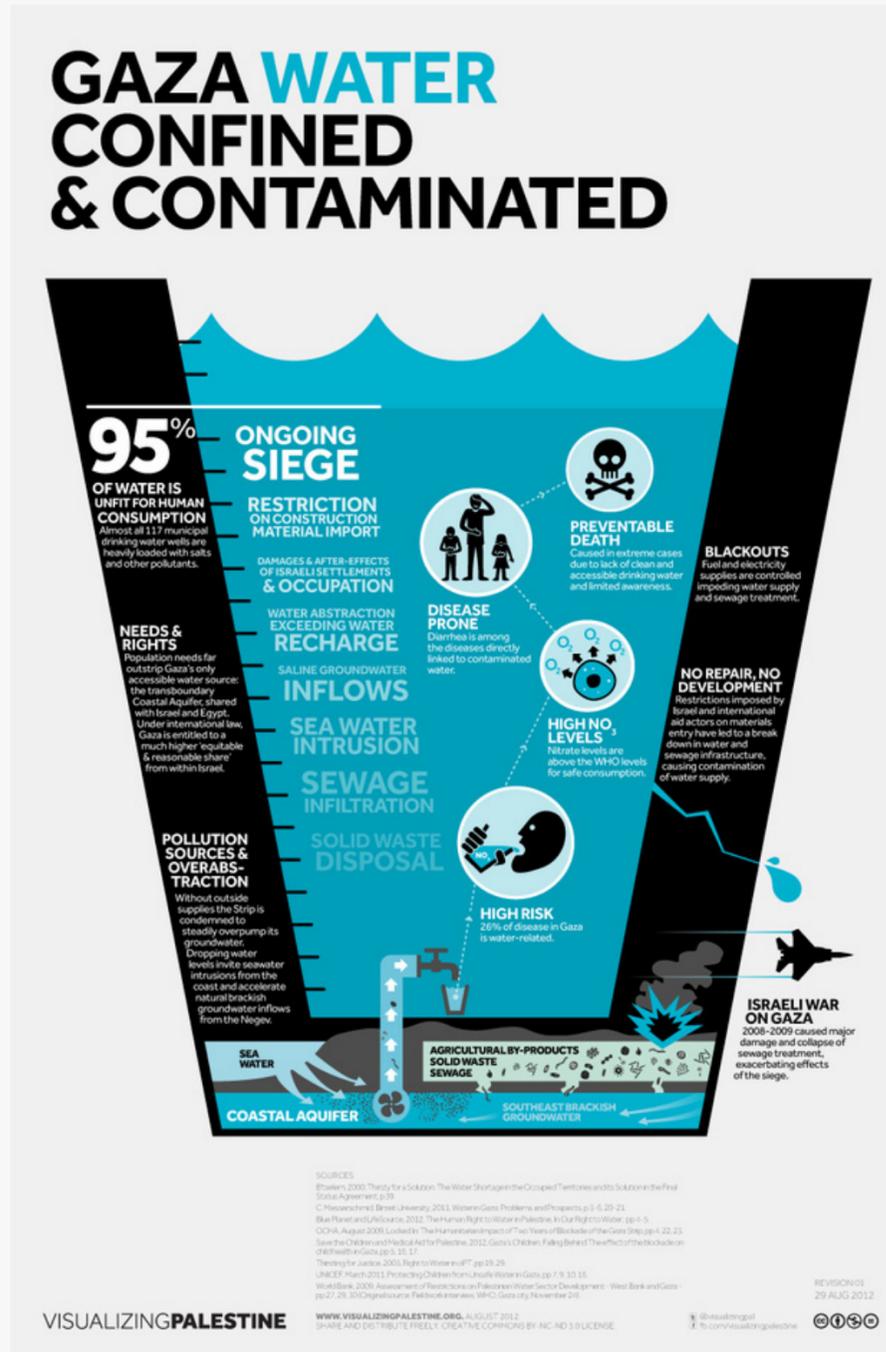
The Nakba & Occupation: Severe Water Inequality

1948 - Present

Unequal water distribution policies, land confiscations, illegal Israeli settlements, and the separation wall are examples of factors of the occupation in the West Bank and Gaza that amount to climate apartheid, fabricating a situation in which Palestinians must survive within a system that deprives them of their own resources and prevents them from accessing the most fundamental necessities to survive in a world that must adapt to climate change.

Water Inequality

In the West Bank, **Palestinians have access to less than 20% of the water resources available, while 80-90% of the water is appropriated for Israel and the illegal settlements.** The World Health Organization recommends 100 liters of water per capita a day, but in the West Bank, **Palestinians survive on between 10 to 75 liters of water per capita a day, whereas Israelis living in illegal settlements, where water is considered a "scarce" resource, enjoy 700 liters of water per capita a day.**



Illegal Settlements

The construction of settlements, military checkpoints, and the separation wall damage the environment substantially. Israeli settlements in the West Bank, in violation of Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, confiscate and disrupt the biodiversity of Palestinian land. There are also more than 20 industrial settlements that emit toxins into Palestinian communities, causing disease, asthma, and cancer in the population, as well as destroy vegetation, crops, and animal life in the surrounding areas. For example, industrial settlements were relocated from Israel onto confiscated land in Tulkarm. A court injunction stipulated that the relocated factories are not allowed to operate when the prevailing headwinds change in the direction of the Israeli side of the Green Line. Thus, these industrial settlements purposefully inflict damage upon Palestinian communities and their environments with impunity.

Popular Resistance as a Tool Against Climate Change

Present Day

Palestinians throughout history have relied on popular resistance as a tool to combat their colonization, displacement, and occupation. This is also true in the climate change context. Palestinians under occupation seek to combat the greenwashing and "NGOization" of Palestine's climate change adaptation approaches, instead returning to traditional methods of agriculture and environmental preservation as a form of resistance to the occupation.

The Profitability of Greenwashing

International organizations and local NGOs frequently view climate change as divorced from the political situation on the ground. This de-historicized view of the settler-colonial power imbalance when it comes to climate change adaptation work, known as "greenwashing," serves to legitimize, rather than oppose, the Israeli occupation. Organizations and donors are often reluctant to challenge Israel's policies that inhibit the efficacy of their work for fear over the continuity of the financed projects. In other words, working with the occupation rather than against it is profitable for many NGOs, even if the occupation prevents their environmental projects from being successful.

A Return to Tradition as a Means of Resistance

Palestinian farmers are denied access to fertile land, water resources, and markets, while Israeli produce, grown with some of the highest concentrations of chemicals and pesticides in the world, inundate West Bank supermarkets. The rejected produce that does not meet quality standards in Israel is dumped into the Palestinian market at low prices. This negatively affects the health of Palestinians and their agricultural economy, and has led to grassroots agroecology movements to revive traditional Palestinian agrarian practices.

The **Palestine Heirloom Seed Library** is challenging the occupation by preserving Palestinian agricultural heritage, including the rituals, methods, and practices used for centuries prior to the Nakba. Heirloom seeds – the native Palestinian varieties of seeds that were cultivated by agrarians over centuries to accommodate the natural ecology of the land – are distributed to hundreds of local farmers, challenging Israeli agribusiness monopolies across Palestine. For example, "**Abu Samra**" is an **heirloom wheat variety** that is rain-fed and does not require water-intensive practices.



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The **Om Sleiman farm** in the village of Bil'in employs agroecological methods of farming that aim to minimize environmental impacts on the land. One of the ten elements of agroecology is the **solidarity economy**, supporting Palestinian food sovereignty by encouraging Palestinians to buy Palestinian produce, which in turn diminishes the power Israel has over Palestine's markets, food production, and therefore, Palestinians themselves.