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The Middle East: From an Inflammable Region to A Resilient Land of Opportunities

A Case Study of EcoPeace Middle East's Unique Approach to Conflict and Environmental Action

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Abstract

The Middle East is an inflammable region on multiple levels. The ongoing war between Israel and Hamas, with its overwhelming loss of human lives, has further disrupted the already fragile prospect of peace in the region. It is also 'inflammable' from an environmental perspective, insofar as it is considered the most climate vulnerable region on Earth, with an expected 4°C increase in average temperature over the next decades. Yet, through the example of EcoPeace Middle East, an environmental and peacebuilding regional organization working in Jordan, Israel, and Palestine, this article sheds light on a theory of change that seeks to transform the Middle East into a climate-resilient and peaceful region.

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Ongoing Conflict and the Triple Planetary Crisis: the Middle East at a Crossroads

The world is facing a triple planetary crisis: climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss. These three interlinked issues threaten human livelihoods.¹ It is estimated that over the next fifty years, one to three billion people will live in extreme climate conditions, which will significantly impact health, food security, and migration trajectories.² Pollution creates significant health hazards for vulnerable communities while the unprecedented rate of biodiversity loss has been described as a biological annihilation or sixth mass extinction.³

The Middle East is one of the most climate vulnerable regions on Earth. While the rest of the world is seeking to avoid a 1.5°C increase in temperature, the Middle East is forecast to see a 4°C increase.⁴ Large parts of the region will simply become unlivable during the long summer months. This climate vulnerability is further exacerbated by underlying dependencies on food imports and reliance on fossil fuels. The Middle East is also the world's most water-scarce region, which stresses ecosystems, economies, and population health.

In recent years, growing attention has been paid to the nexus between climate and political stability, giving rise to the concept of climate security, that is, “the impacts of climate change on peace and security, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected settings.”⁵ In its Sixth Assessment Report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change concludes “that risks to peace will increase with warming, with the largest impacts expected in weather-sensitive communities with low resilience to climate extremes and high prevalence of underlying risk factors.”⁶ The acknowledgment of a nexus between climate adaptation and peacebuilding was further highlighted when the COP27 Presidency launched the Climate Responses for Sustaining Peace Initiative, to “ensure that integrated climate responses contribute to sustainable peace and development in line with national ownership and context specificity.”⁷

Beyond the risks to the region's stability posed by the triple planetary crisis, the Middle East is already experiencing high levels of conflict and violence. Before the start of the Israel-Hamas war, the region had the world's highest number of battle-related deaths (26,270 in 2021), primarily due to the escalation of the conflict in Yemen.⁸ Since October 7, 2023, the region has been plunged further into the horrors of high intensity conflict, and 36,000 have been killed in the first seven months of the war.

Despite this convergence of crises, EcoPeace Middle East, nominee for the 2024 Nobel Peace Prize, has developed a theory of change that seeks to simultaneously address climate change and conflict resolution in Jordan, Israel, and Palestine. This article focuses on this unique paradigm in the region and gives insights into the prospects of reversing the narrative attached to the Middle East: from a climate vulnerable and conflict-prone region to a resilient and peaceful land of opportunities.

EcoPeace Middle East: Born at a Time of Hope and Resilient in Conflict

EcoPeace Middle East was born out of a paradox: because climate change is fundamentally threatening all aspects of human livelihood, it can act as the ultimate trigger for a peace process in seemingly intractable situations. For three decades, the non-profit organization has advocated, and acted on the ground, to demonstrate that climate action, and more broadly environmental stewardship, can serve as a pathway toward peace instead of a trigger for conflict.

At a December 7, 1994 meeting of environmental non-governmental organizations in Taba, Egypt, EcoPeace Middle East was founded to foster sustainable development across the region. In

the first stages of its existence, EcoPeace Middle East sought to protect the environment, which was endangered because of a lack of cross border cooperation related to the underlying Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its ramifications in neighboring Jordan. Until 2001, EcoPeace acted from a rational, single-minded focus on the environment, considering the political situation in the region to be a detrimental backdrop that had to be dealt with separately. But soon, when it became obvious that the Oslo Accords had failed to attain their objectives, EcoPeace Middle East started to develop what has become its landmark vision: building peace through environmental action.⁹ The organization committed itself to an integrated approach that bridges political and interpersonal gaps between Jordanians, Israelis, and Palestinians by addressing shared challenges.

Prior to the emergence of this new paradigm, peacebuilding had been approached as a lose-lose game in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The traditional approach to peace was a story of who would lose territory, identity, or means toward sustainable development. EcoPeace transformed that narrative. Instead of focusing on what could be lost, it focuses on what can be gained, such as a healthy Jordan River Valley, to provide economic and social benefits to all three countries, improved access to high quality water resources, and a vast range of educational opportunities across Jordan, Israel, and Palestine.

At a time when the current crisis seems to have ended all prospects of stability and peace, EcoPeace Middle East is demonstrating a high level of organizational resilience. Throughout its thirty years of existence, it has overcome many acute eruptions of violence. Its flagship project, the Good Water Neighbors (GWN) initiative, was born at a time when no one believed peace was possible, at the start of the Second Intifada in 2001. The Good Water Neighbors project, which involves communities on either side of the border, brought the environmental issues of saving the Dead Sea and rehabilitating the River Jordan to the regional decision-making table, making it a model for educational and community programs in other regions of conflict. EcoPeace Middle East's organizational resilience also springs from its focus on two issues that cannot be sidelined: human prosperity and the environmental crisis. Despite the humanitarian tragedy currently unfolding, and perhaps because of the level of destruction, these two concerns will remain at the forefront of today and tomorrow's policy agenda.

EcoPeace Middle East's Theory of Change

A theory of change is a method that explains how a given intervention, or set of interventions, are expected to lead to a specific development change, drawing on a causal analysis based on available evidence.¹⁰ It is grounded in the local context. It helps to identify solutions that address the underlying causes that hinder progress toward a goal and can help develop and manage partnerships with a variety of stakeholders.

EcoPeace Middle East is uniquely positioned, with its three offices and multi-stakeholder approach, to develop an effective theory of change to advance its vision in Jordan, Israel, and Palestine. Over the last three decades, it has articulated a three-step theory of change.

Increasing Knowledge, Developing Awareness of Climate Change and Environmental Degradation

Jordanians, Israelis, and Palestinians are experiencing conflict on all levels, each with their own narrative, from the most intimate circles to the global political stage. These competing visions and 'narrative landscapes' have become dominated by a few simplified representations of the conflict, which have deepened the polarization of societies.¹¹ EcoPeace Middle East has long understood

that seeking to complexify narratives, while it is an indispensable step in building long-lasting coexistence, can be premature and trigger rejection from local communities and authorities. Thus, it has identified regional climate security and environmental protection as a point of entry for change. EcoPeace first raises awareness of the impacts of these crises at the national level, for instance, how Jordanians are impacted by water scarcity. Then, this national understanding of an acute environmental crisis is broadened through a regional lens, which leads interlocutors into realizing that regional cooperation is necessary to effectively address the environmental crisis.

Positioning

Once a satisfying level of public awareness is reached on climate change and environmental degradation, EcoPeace Middle East works on positioning. Positioning is understood as the realization by an individual or a collective that they must take action regarding the aforementioned issues. In other words, it is the step where the knowledge that there is a crisis becomes an imperative to take personal or collective action. One positions oneself as a doer rather than a disempowered victim.

Behavioral Change

After positioning comes the necessity to seek behavioral change. This ‘how to’ question arises, i.e., how to take action against what has been identified as a tangible existential threat. At this stage, EcoPeace Middle East utilizes its multi-stakeholder approach to create the enabling environment that will allow individuals, communities, and officials to take effective action against climate change and environmental degradation. At this point, when locals are empowered, they can turn to regional cooperation, understanding that their action alone will not be sufficient to build sustainability.

This theory of change has been adapted to match EcoPeace Middle East’s expanded scope of action. Since its founding, the organization gradually moved from community action to a basin-wide approach and later started operating at the national level. In the past decade, EcoPeace built credibility at the regional and international levels by engaging in high-level political forums, for instance the United Nations Security Council where the leadership briefed the Council on urgent steps needed to secure climate resilience and advance peace in the Middle East.¹²

Within this framework of change, EcoPeace Middle East combines two types of approaches, top-down and bottom-up, to bridge the gap between communities, decision-makers, and the urgent actions required to tackle both the environmental crisis and the conflict.

Top-Down Approach

In intractable conflicts, reasons for disagreements and confrontations are endless. Trying to diagnose and resolve each is a daunting task whose potential successful outcomes are doubtful. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of those situations where the number of disputes and psychological barriers is such that traditional approaches to peacebuilding, which typically try to address each dispute separately, has led to repeated failures over the decades.

This is where climate change becomes an opportunity. Never was humanity threatened by such a multidimensional phenomenon. Climate change is a challenge shared by Jordan, Israel, and Palestine, regardless of their political disputes. It is thus the only potential uniting factor to push governments to cooperate. Already, when water resources were at risk during drought periods throughout the 1950s, Jordanian and Israeli officials met at the border in spite of their two countries

being at war.¹³ EcoPeace Middle East has leveraged the urgency of the climate crisis to advocate for regional cooperation and integration.

A case study of this top-down approach is EcoPeace's flagship strategy: the Green Blue Deal for the Middle East. Inspired by the Green New Deal in the US, the European Green Deal, and the individual nationwide commitments made by Jordan, Israel, and Palestine in their respective climate action plans, EcoPeace Middle East has used its experience in transboundary cooperation to elaborate a vision of regional climate security and integration. The Green Blue Deal for the Middle East is a practical, feasible, and effective policy approach to an urgent challenge, and one that can address conflict drivers, advance a two state solution based on 1967 borders, and promote trust-building and cooperation in a conflict-mired region.¹⁴

A flagship component of the proposed Green Blue Deal is the Water-Energy Nexus: the vision that a healthy interdependency with regards to water and renewable energy between Israel, Jordan, and Palestine would help advance lasting peace between the three countries.¹⁵ Informed by European history, where agreements over steel and coal were the backbone of the creation of a more peaceful Europe and led to the formation of the European Union, EcoPeace envisions a partnership in which Palestine and Israel would supply desalinated water to Jordan and in turn, Jordan would sell solar-generated electricity to the two countries. With these new arrangements Israel would make significant progress to meet its commitments for renewable energy under the Paris Agreement and Jordan would be able to meet its basic water needs.¹⁶

After years of advocacy for this transboundary water-energy economy, Jordan and Israel signed a declaration of intent to materialize this exchange of resources. A 600-megawatt (MW) solar farm is to be built by 2026 in Jordan, financed by the UAE's private sector, and will produce energy that will be sent to Israel in exchange for 200 million m³ of water annually from a new coastal desalination facility near Nahariya, Israel.¹⁷ While the current Israel-Hamas war has resulted in uncertainty regarding immediate future prospects for the Green Blue Deal, EcoPeace maintains that achieving regional economic integration by leveraging economically sound comparative advantages on water and energy, will be a key step in building regional resilience.¹⁸ In parallel to advancing the Jordan-Israel deal on water and energy, EcoPeace is working to build upon the existing Palestinian-Jordanian energy bilateral agreements (whereby Jordan supplies electricity from a power station in the Jordan valley to a Palestinian power grid) by advancing dialogue on expanding the existing transmission line to a higher capacity to receive renewable energy. In addition, it has proposed Palestinian-Israeli renewable energy cooperation, whereby a 200 MW solar facility would be built by the Palestinian private sector in Area C of the West Bank to be used there and/or to be transferred through Israel to power wastewater and desalination facilities in Gaza. The climate crisis and its impacts on water and national security are well recognized by all sides. This security interdependence will remain a powerful force to repair and rebuild relations as the climate crisis becomes more and more exacerbated.

Bottom-Up Approach

Political leaders can be reluctant to take bold initiatives, such as the ones proposed in the Green Blue Deal, when they are afraid of popular discontent. For instance, the Palestinian 'anti-normalization' movement opposes any cooperation with Israel and affects political buy-in, from decision-makers and the private sector, to engage in regional cooperation. Hence it is important to work with communities to create acceptance at the grassroots level. Since its creation, EcoPeace Middle East has invested considerably into education to this end.

As mentioned earlier, even when conflict reached a climax in the early 2000s, EcoPeace Middle East committed itself to cross-border education. It developed a community-based awareness program called Good Water Neighbors. In 2001, when it was launched, convincing the eleven original participating communities that they would benefit from the program proved difficult. Today, there are more communities seeking to join the project than the available funds can enable to participate. Jenin and Yatta in the Hebron Governorate, joined the program with concrete cross-border projects they seek to implement with the support of their neighboring community. In fact, EcoPeace believes that instead of ‘good fences’ creating good neighborly relations, security barriers dividing communities not only contribute to ecological demise but are often the source of attitudes that blame the other side for all of the problems and behaviors that contribute to environmental degradation. EcoPeace’s bottom-up education and public awareness programs have therefore focused on the shared interest in good water for all, as the entry point for mainstreaming peace and sustainability issues into education programs.

The Good Water Neighbors project has encouraged young people for nearly two decades to support concrete environmental solutions and become agents of change for regional cooperation. It includes two main components: school programs and young professional programs. The school programs target youth (ages 16 to 18) in Jordanian, Palestinian, and Israeli high schools. EcoPeace helps to develop lesson plans that either expand existing official school curricula or introduce new curriculum, and provide national and regional teacher training, site tours, summit days, and support for student-led projects. Young professional programs include two tracks: Climate Diplomacy for Young Professionals, which allows young leaders from Palestine, Israel, and Jordan to build their knowledge and skills related to climate change and regional cooperation, and the Green Social Entrepreneurship track where young entrepreneurs from the three countries are provided with technical and financial support to set up their own business for their innovative projects with a strong sustainable component.

Through this focus on education, EcoPeace Middle East has trained current and future community leaders in its innovative approach to peacebuilding. This granular work, adapted to local needs and contexts, is key to achieving lasting peace.

Beyond Top-Down and Bottom-Up Approaches: Creating a Space for Psychological Relief and Imagination

Throughout its existence, EcoPeace Middle East leveraged millions of dollars in physical infrastructure investments, in education programs, and in advocacy efforts that have led to promising transboundary cooperation on key environmental and social issues. But perhaps one of its most innovative remedies to conflict in the region has been its focus on helping individuals and communities address the traumas they have experienced. The Jordan EcoPark, an area of biodiversity conservation and green tourism managed by EcoPeace in the Jordan Valley, has been the catalyst of this emphasis on creating a peacebuilding ‘mindset’ or readiness.¹⁹ When Israelis, Jordanians, and Palestinians gather at the EcoPark to participate in the organization’s regional programming, fences and barriers, both physical and mental, eventually fall. For a few hours, or a few days, visitors understand that they belong to the same territory: the Jordan River Basin, with its incredible religious significance for half of the world’s population and its unique biodiversity. In other words, the EcoPark represents everything that lasting peace between the three populations could look like. It is a place for exchanging knowledge and letting go of what appears to be intractable in this conflict. This psychological space for a creative approach to peacebuilding is essential, especially in this time of crises.

Finally, the leadership of the EcoPeace organization has engaged in a unique experiment, aimed at building internal resilience. Since October 7, 2023, all staff members have been undergoing mindfulness training under the supervision of a neutral third party to process the impacts of the war on their colleagues and themselves. This illustrates once more that creating dialogue opportunities where psychological barriers previously seemed insurmountable, is key to peacebuilding in the region.

Conclusion

The Middle East is, more than ever, described by observers around the world as an inflammable region, almost doomed to chaos and bloodshed. In this context of destruction and loss of human lives, discussions of climate change and environmental stewardship have been sidelined, despite the fact that every year, more socioeconomic losses are caused by the exacerbation of the triple planetary crisis. War has also created urgent humanitarian needs. This ocean of needs, from two particularly complex challenges, may appear overwhelming. However, this article has shown, through the example of EcoPeace Middle East's work, that by addressing both crises together, there is a way forward to a 'day after' with a climate-resilient and peaceful region. This is not wishful thinking; it is happening in the backstage of the war. Determined organizations and communities are ready to own their future; this is why climate and environmental action can be the means to reinvent another Middle East, one that does not evoke chaos or bloodshed, but that strives toward locally adapted and sustainable solutions for a common future.

Notes

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