

Challenges for Sustainable Development in Palestine

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Introduction

Positioned at the crossroads of three continents, geographic Palestine is a tiny piece of land rich with biodiversity, fertile agricultural fields, and varied ecological systems. The preservation of this unique environmental interplay is a responsibility which lies equally upon the people of Palestine, as well as its occupiers. In recent years, however, attention has focused far more on conflicting political claims to the land than to its preservation and sustainable development. Throughout history, as well as in the current Middle East peace process, narrow political agendas have proven to be the leading contributor to the destruction of the Palestinian environment. Although in the current peace process there may be mention of environmental protection, measures are developed almost exclusively along security lines.

Soon after its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in June 1967, Israel seized absolute control over the West Bank and Gaza Strip's land and natural resources. From that time until today, Palestinians are permitted to use only a small fraction of the total amount of their water resources. Vast areas of the West Bank and Gaza Strip have been confiscated or closed off to Palestinians. Israeli colonies continue to be built on illegally confiscated Palestinian (mainly agricultural) land. A devastated Palestinian economy is still controlled largely by Israel. Also, a dangerously dilapidated infrastructure has been

nearly completely ignored. Collectively, these measures have adversely affected the Palestinian environment, leading to, among other disasters: desertification of the eastern slopes, degradation of agricultural and range lands, unregulated dumping of solid waste and raw sewage, in addition to severely depleted underground water aquifers.

The Palestinian people, by and large, support the current peace negotiations with Israel and sincerely hope to revert the current inequitable and unjust allocation of land and water resources. They, of course, prefer to develop their communities within a framework of sustainability, political stability, and sovereignty. However, the actual outcome of the current peace process has not yet ensured Palestinian sovereignty over their land and water resources. To the contrary, Israel has manipulated the standing agreements, specifically the Oslo Accords, to legitimize its control over the natural resources of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, carving Palestine into disconnected cantons where sustainable development and environmental protection are impossible in the foreseeable future. The Palestinian struggle after the Oslo II Interim Agreement has become, to a large degree, rooted in the fear of losing a most basic human right, that is, the right to live in a clean, safe and sustainable environment.

The Oslo II Interim Agreement was accepted by the Palestinian Authority as an interim step towards the establishment of a Palestinian state. It is interim in nature and should therefore be applied as such by the concerned parties. That is, “neither sides shall initiate or take any step that will change the status of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip pending the outcome of the permanent status negotiations.”¹ Yet, in reality, Israel is currently orchestrating the Oslo II Interim Agreement into a permanent arrangement by creating *de facto* realities on the ground that will undoubtedly affect the outcome of the final status negotiations. These realities include:

- The building of a comprehensive network of by-pass roads for the exclusive use of Israeli settlers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip;
- The expansion of Israeli colonies in the Palestinian territories;

¹ Chapter two, Article 31, item 7 of **the Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (Oslo II)**, Washington, D.C., September 28, 1995.

- The physical and demographical re-structuring of East Jerusalem;
- The confiscation of Palestinian land and demolition of Palestinian houses; and
- The partial Israeli implementation and noncompliance with over 27 items in the Oslo II Interim Agreement², especially the refusal to re-deploy the Israeli military from the Palestinian territories according to the agreed upon timetable³ (Chapter two, Article 10, item 1-3).

Moreover, in its process of modification of actual settings, Israel failed to comply with the Oslo II Interim Agreement⁴ regarding the impacts of these realities on the Palestinian environment and the extensive damage they are imposing on the Palestinian agricultural land, forests, wild life, and human habitats. The Israeli-orchestrated new realities and violations to the standing peace agreements are chronic challenges to Palestinians, making their living environment unbearable and their economic development and national planning virtually impossible.

The Geopolitical Integrity of the Palestinian Territories

Under the pretext of its security and by means of over 1,500 military orders, Israel has seized control over the West Bank and Gaza Strip's natural resources and rendered large tracts of Palestinian land available only for its own use. Presently, over 70% of the West Bank and 22% of the Gaza Strip lands are inaccessible to Palestinians. These lands are used for the construction of Israeli colonies or have been declared by Israel as 'state' land, nature reserves, military bases or closed military areas. These tracts of land declared 'closed military area' alone encompasses approximately 100,000 hectares of the

² Palestine Report, *The PA on Israel's Standing Violations*, Jerusalem Media and Communication Center, Volume 2, No, 6, 19 July 1996, Jerusalem.

³ *Al-Quds Newspaper*, *The Israeli Government Decides to Indefinitely Postpone the Re-deployment of its Army from the West Bank*, Monday, 2 September 1996, No. 9705, pg. 1, Jerusalem.

⁴ Annex I, article 12 B of **the Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (Oslo II)**, Washington, D.C., September 28, 1995.

West Bank (20% of the West Bank's area) and are mainly located in its eastern region⁵. As a result, the eastern parts of the West Bank are currently empty of any substantial Palestinian communities. Most have been made unreachable to Palestinians (Figure 1).

Soon after the Madrid Conference in 1991, marking the start of the current peace process in the Middle East, Palestinian negotiators requested that closed military areas in the West Bank be opened and all restrictions imposed by Israel on Palestinian use of them be lifted immediately. This request stems from the need of additional land to absorb the growing Palestinian population and, at the same time, decrease pressure on limited environmental resources.

The closed military areas in the West Bank provide the only refuge remaining for Palestinians to sustainably grow and develop in their land and to diffuse the current high population densities which reach approximately 870 inhabitants per square kilometers in the West Bank and 3,400 people per square kilometers in the Gaza Strip. The Israeli response to this vital request came through the Oslo II Interim Agreement, signed by the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority in September 1995. All closed areas, and, moreover, most Palestinian owned lands vacant of houses (including agricultural lands, range and natural grazing areas) were placed under the sole control of Israel by categorizing them as Area C.

Areas A, B, C

According to the Oslo II Interim Agreement, the West Bank has been divided into three main areas (Figure 2):

⁵ Area and geographical information used throughout this paper, unless indicated otherwise, has been obtained from map and aerial photo analysis carried out at the Geographic Information System Unit (GIS) of the Applied Research Institute of Jerusalem (ARIJ), Palestine.

- **Areas A**, in which the Palestinian Authority has full control except on matters to be discussed in the final status negotiations, such as water and territory. This area is presently limited to main parts of the eight major cities of the West Bank, namely Jenin, Nablus, Tulkarm, Qalqilia, Ramallah, Bethlehem, Jericho, and Hebron⁶. It covers a total area of 160.2 km², comprising approximately 3% of the total West Bank land which was occupied by Israel in 1967.
- **Areas B**, in which the Palestinian Authority has partial control, limited to land and providing civil services such as education and health, while all security issues are under the sole control of Israel. These areas comprise 400 Palestinian villages and hamlets. They cover a total area of 1,334.2 km² and constitute almost 23% of the West Bank lands which were occupied by Israel in 1967.
- **Areas C**, in which the Palestinian Authority provides civil services, however, Israel retains full control over land, security, people and natural resources. Areas C cover a total area of 4,327.9 km², comprising the remaining 74% of the West Bank land which was occupied by Israel in 1967. All currently existing Israeli colonies in the West Bank lie within these areas.

In addition, a small area of the city of Hebron, which houses the major Israeli settlement of Qariyat Arba', is identified as Area H2. This area remains under the Israeli control where Israel will retain all powers and responsibilities for internal security and public order.

In practice, the Oslo II land classification scheme of the Palestinian territories translates into the physical fragmentation of Palestinian communities. This jagged distribution of areas A, B, and C (Figure 2) has partitioned the West Bank into isolated cantons of Areas A and B which are physically separated from each other by Areas C. A situation similar to islands dispersed in a sea.

Because Areas C are totally under Israeli control, the Oslo II Interim Agreement grants Israel the authority to block access to all Palestinian communities and prevent free movement between them by simply closing off Areas C to Palestinians. This authority has been used by Israel on several occasions since March 1996, of which the latest was in

⁶ Thus far, Israel has unilaterally delayed its re-deployment from Hebron city, despite its previous commitments and the continuous Palestinian demand for this withdrawal.

September 1996, where Palestinians were confined within their small and isolated communities. This action has proved to be an effective tool for the Israeli government to collectively punish Palestinians and prevent Palestinian movement in and between the West Bank and Gaza Strip whenever Israel feels that its 'security' necessitates it.

Furthermore, several Palestinian built-up areas were assigned as Areas A or B, yet portions of their community lie in Area C. Thus, many neighborhoods in a town or village are physically separated from the core part of their communities. In the case of an Israeli closure, children of these neighborhoods are not allowed to reach their schools, sick people are denied access to hospitals, and visiting relatives or friends are impossible⁷. One clear example is in the Bethlehem District (Figure 3). Several neighborhoods in the towns of Beit Sahour and Beit Jala are excluded from Area A and classified as Area C. The Mayor of Beit Sahour, who happens to live in one of these excluded neighborhoods, is denied access to the municipality and therefore to adequately serve his community during the harsh times of Israeli closure. Also, Talita Kumi Secondary School, one of the most prominent and largest schools serving the Bethlehem area, is located in Area C. On several occasions since the signing of Oslo II, Talita Kumi's over one thousand students were not allowed to reach their school.

⁷ *Al-Hiyat Newspaper, 245 Villages are Deprived from Health Services*, Friday, 15 March, 1996, pg. 4, Ramallah, Palestine.

Further restricting movement and trade, Israel has thus far refused to apply certain items of Oslo II Interim Agreement which call for the creation of a permanent travel route between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. During the past 12 months, Israel has not granted West Bankers travel permits to Gaza. As of the writing of this paper, Israel has not fulfilled its commitment to provide two safe and free passageways⁸ for Palestinians between the Gaza Strip and West Bank.

The lack of geographical continuity in the lands under Palestinian control has created a major physical impediment towards accomplishing sustainable national development in Palestine. Such fragmentation of the Palestinian communities makes it impossible to construct an effective and resourcefully efficient national infrastructure, such as building a national electric grid and water supply network, or formulating an integrated national policy for the agricultural and water sectors. If such a situation is to continue beyond the intended interim period, maintaining the stability and the environmentally sustainable and progressive economy required for an independent Palestinian entity (state) will be doomed. This would not only be a direct blow to Palestinian self-determination, but also sharply contradict international resolutions, namely United Nations Resolution 242 and 338 which are the essence of the peace process begun in Madrid in 1991.

By-Pass Roads

Regardless of the time schedules stated in the Oslo II Interim Agreement, Israel made its re-deployment schedule from certain areas in the West Bank contingent upon building lateral roads to secure a 'safe passage' for Israeli settlers in the West Bank. These lateral roads, mentioned briefly in the Oslo II Interim Agreement, have grown into a whole infrastructure of by-pass roads which crisscross the West Bank and Gaza Strip, creating a separate road infrastructure from the existing Palestinian road network and converting the area into an asphalt jungle (Figures 4a and 4b). These post-Oslo II by-pass roads have been designed to serve only Israelis traveling in the West Bank. Some of these by-pass

⁸ Annex I, Article 10 of the **Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and Gaza Strip (Oslo II)**, Washington, September, 1995.

roads are accessible only to Jews, such as the by-pass road passing west of Bethlehem city, connecting Jerusalem with Gush Etzion settlement⁹.

To fully serve their 'security' purpose, the use of the by-pass roads and their surrounding vicinity by Palestinians is subject to many restrictions. Exits to by-pass roads in several locations throughout the West Bank have military checkpoints which filter traffic and prevent Palestinian owned vehicles from using the roads. By-pass roads also enjoy a safety buffer of 50 to 100 meters on each side, where no Palestinian activity can take place, such as building houses and opening factories. Moreover, existing Palestinian houses located in areas close to newly planned by-pass roads are being demolished.

By-pass roads encircle every major Palestinian city and community in the West Bank (Figures 4a and 4b), and therefore create boundaries which limit the expansion and development of the Palestinian communities which they encircle, and further disconnect Palestinian communities from each. Land currently available to Palestinians does and will not accommodate natural population growth, the absorption of Palestinian returnees, nor the development of a strong economic infrastructure.

A cross examination of the overall geographic extension of both the existing and planned by-pass roads in the West Bank with the various previously prepared plans for the separation lines between Israel and the West Bank uncovers the true nature and actual purpose behind the construction of these roads (Figure 5). These are as follows:

- Enabling Israel to divide the West Bank into small isolated cantons where geographic unity and integrity is impossible. Therefore, the creation of a Palestinian state on Palestinian land becomes physically unattainable. This objective has been clearly affirmed by the new Israeli Likud government in its political platform which states

⁹ *Al-Nahar Newspaper, Sharon Proposes Expansion of Settlements in Response to the Latest Confrontations with the Palestinians*, Monday, 30 September 1996, pg. 4, Ramallah, Palestine.

that “The government of Israel will oppose the establishment of a Palestinian state or any foreign sovereignty west of the Jordan River.”¹⁰

Figure 5: Two Previous Israeli Proposals for Palestine/Israel Border Re-demarcation¹¹.

- Creating *de facto* new physical borders for the West Bank and isolating uninhabited but Palestinian owned border areas to facilitate their annexation to Israel proper¹². Thus Israel is using by-pass roads to unilaterally re-draw the geopolitical map of the region, and further deprive Palestinians of areas of their homeland¹³.
- Providing the means to reserve large stretches of Palestinian land for the expansion of Israeli colonies. The main clusters of Israeli colonies in the West Bank continue to be surrounded by by-pass roads in a manner which allows the encircling of Palestinian lands where houses have not yet been built. This objective is consistent with the current Israeli Likud government’s political platform which calls for the consolidation and development of Israeli colonies in the West Bank¹⁴.

It is worth mentioning that the by-pass roads so far built in the West Bank exceed 276 kilometers in length while the planned roads are estimated at 452 kilometers. With the safety buffer zone they enjoy, the construction of these by-pass roads requires the confiscation and destruction of approximately 109,200 hectares of Palestinian land, mostly of which is agricultural. Many farm lands were totally destroyed by the construction of by-pass roads, depriving owners of their main source of income. Other farm lands were split into several pieces, rendering it impossible to cross from one side of the land to another¹⁵.

¹⁰ The Political Platform of the Israeli Likud Government is available on the Internet at the Israeli Information Service homepage (<http://www.israel-mfa.gov.il>).

¹¹ David Newman, **Boundary and Territory Briefing**, International Boundary Research Unit, Vol. 1, No. 7, United Kingdom, 1995.

¹² Fadel Atawneh, *Border Adjustments West of Hebron*, The Jerusalem Times, 21 June 1996, page 3, Jerusalem.

¹³ The political platform of the Israeli Likud Government is available on the Internet at the Israeli Information Service homepage (<http://www.israel-mfa.gov.il>).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Al-Quds Newspaper, *By-pass Roads and Military Orders are Two Sources of Worry for the Palestinian Farmer*, Saturday 21 September 1996, Jerusalem.

In this regard, the Palestinian Ministry of Agriculture has expressed its deepest concerns for the loss of large areas of precious agricultural land in a country where agriculture is the largest production sector of the Palestinian economy, generating 22-30% of the gross domestic product (GDP), and providing employment to over 15% of the population¹⁶. Under these circumstances, the Palestinian Ministry of Agriculture is facing great obstacles in formulating a sustainable and effective national policy for the development of the agricultural sector in Palestine which will guarantee adequate utilization of the scarce land and water resources.

What's Next

The major challenges for development in Palestine after the Oslo II Interim Agreement are not a direct result of the content of the agreement, rather they are a result of Israeli non-compliance with and partial implementation of the agreement itself. A renewed commitment by Israel to the full and immediate implementation of the agreement is absolutely necessary to restore Palestine's geographical integrity. By halting the confiscation of land and the expansion of Israeli colonies, by ceasing further construction of by-pass roads, by eliminating the restrictions on their use by Palestinians, Israel would not only begin to fulfill its obligation to a just and comprehensive settlement, but also demonstrate its foresight and wisdom by safeguarding the sustainable future of Palestine's natural resources. After all, the environment knows no geopolitical boundaries and degradation in Palestine will not necessarily stop at that border checkpoint to Israel.

Although Palestinians will continue for quite sometime in the future to engage in difficult political negotiations, they can not be expected to endure, among other things, inadequate drinking water, the loss of agricultural lands, and the denial of freedom of

¹⁶ Isaac, Jad & Leonardo Hosh, *Palestinian Land and Water Resources Management - Status and Potentials for Development*, presented and published in the proceedings of a workshop on "Agriculture Institutional and Policy Study for Palestine", Palestinian Ministry of Agriculture and the Palestinian Economic Council for Development and Reconstruction (PECDAR), Bethlehem, 6-7 July 1996.

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movement --particularly to the holy city of Jerusalem. It is precisely these deteriorating and neglected conditions which collectively have created the current volatile atmosphere in the Palestinian territories --an atmosphere which could erupt with any event, such as last September's opening of the "Jerusalem Heritage Tunnel".