

Environmental Hazards in Palestine since the Apartheid Wall



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Introduction

Since the beginning of the Israeli occupation in the Palestinian Territories about 40 years ago, Palestine has suffered from various environmental problems. These problems mainly resulted from the Israeli neglect, land confiscation and the exploitation of the natural resources within the districts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. These issues include water shortage, waste management, deforestation, industrial pollution, agriculture as well as nuclear radiation.

It has been pointed out that Israel has violated several international laws regarding the environment. Among these violations are intentional water pollution and illegal dumping of wastes on Palestinian territories.

One of the major problems concerning the environment in Palestine has been the constant annexation of Palestinian areas and the expansion of Israeli settlements there, which is a violation of both the Oslo Peace Accords and Geneva Convention. This has also stood in the way of different attempts of solving the environmental problems in Palestine over the years.

The Israeli control of Palestinian water resources has also been a serious problem. Many of the Palestinian populations in the West Bank and Gaza suffer from water shortage, while there are sufficient water resources for them all. However, Israel has besieged over them.

All these problems have increased dramatically since Israel's latest project: the apartheid wall (a.k.a Israeli West-Bank Barrier).

The Apartheid Wall

When the Berlin Wall was built in 1961, acting as a physical barrier between East and West Germany, it received mass condemnation and resent. Yet the world still seems to be ignorant about the barrier which is built around the West Bank, which when completed is going to have a length of 750 km and a height equivalent to 8 m. That's five times as long and more than twice as high as the Berlin Wall. It also has a "multi layer fence system" with a width of more than 50 m. The Apartheid Wall has been a major mean of annexation of Palestinian lands and water supply and is a violation of several international laws. Even the International court of Justice has declared the Wall as "illegal"

Of course, the building of the Apartheid Wall barrier has and will have severe consequences in the environmental and numerous other aspects.



A sniper tower in the Apartheid Wall.

It is important to point out that Israel's separation wall is not only consists of concrete and fencing materials. It also includes electrified fencing, two-meter-deep trenches, roads for patrol vehicles, electronic ground/fence sensors, thermal imaging and video cameras, unmanned sniper towers, and razor wire.

Israel has pointed out that the Apartheid Wall is a temporary solution to prevent the Palestinian suicide attacks from reaching their destination outside the West Bank, and Israel has stressed that this is the only reason. Yet the location of the Wall and its route suggests something else. When the barrier was first to be built, it was to be set on the green line separating the West Bank and Israel, which is less than 200km in length. However, the route the Wall is currently taking, is in a wriggly pattern, penetrating deep into Palestinian territories as much as 20 km in some places, (as shown in the figure to the right) making it not only 750 km long but also separating and confiscating Palestinian areas. As well as isolating water resources to the Israeli side of the barrier, previously located within the West Bank borders.



The path of the Wall in the West Bank, penetrating the border and annexing lands.

When completed, the Apartheid Wall will have annexed 47% of the West bank area for building settlements and other reasons.

The Environmental Impact

With the construction of the Apartheid Wall, all the environmental problems in Palestine have and will increase significantly in some aspects such as resources, wildlife and agriculture. Here are some of the different elements, these aspects include:

Water

Water is the main reason for the wriggly route the Wall is currently taking. The climate in Palestine is semi arid. This means that water is precious and very important.

For Israel, water resources are extremely important. After occupying the West Bank in 1967, the Israeli military issued orders that prohibited all water drilling and development in the West Bank unless a permit was approved from the Israeli military. Till today not a single permit has been issued. So, most of the wells that are used by Palestinians were



The Apartheid Wall surrounding Qalqilya, separating it from its agricultural lands and water wells.

drilled prior to the occupation in 1967. So, Palestinians have been forced to sustain themselves with that water. While there is still a water shortage in the West Bank and difficulty for agriculture, a couple of meters below there are perfectly fine and pure water ready for usage.

According to the Palestinian Hydrology group, the number of water wells affected by the first phase of the wall is 50. Most of them in the Qalqiliya and Tulkarm districts. 14 of these wells are located in the Wall's 30 -100 m "Buffer Zone", while the remaining 36 have completely been isolated from the West Bank. This has become a major problem due to the fact that 88% of Palestinian households live in housing units connected to wells.

Waste Management

When it comes to waste management and drainage systems regarding the Palestine, it can only be said that it is poorly done. Especially in the small villages, where there is hardly any drainage system at all. During the years of occupation Israel has also neglected the management or disposal of solid wastes within the West Bank, and in 2008 12% of Palestinian households did not even have "solid waste collection service". Consequently, many lands are now considered unfit for agricultural and domestic use. Israel has also prevented municipalities within the West Bank from transporting the solid wastes outside the city. So for many Palestinian villages and cities, there has been no choice except dumping the wastes in urban areas. In 2008 there were 119 dumping sites in the West Bank. In some places, air pollution has become a problem due to burning garbage.

A report done in 2006 found that the disposal of solid waste in the West Bank has resulted in the abnormally high presence of toxic substances in the groundwater, including chloride, arsenic, cadmium and mercury.

Israeli settlers annually discharge 224 000 tons of waste into the West Bank, polluting springs, streams and farms. According to PENGON (The Palestinian Environmental NGOs Network) untreated and contaminated water is directly being pumped into Palestinian Agricultural areas and Valleys. Studies in 2008 have shown that 73% of southern West Bank families live in areas contaminated with waste water.

Israel has also several times been charged and accused of dumping toxic materials within the West Bank (in the Palestinian side of the wall). In an exclusive interview with PRESS TV, Deputy Director of the Palestinian environmental authority, Jamil Mtoor, confirmed that Israel cuts disposal costs by dumping it on Palestinian territories. According to Mtoor; "Israeli companies have been dumping solid and hazardous wastes in different West Bank villages." "They have been using the Palestinian land in a village called Shoukba near Ramallah to dump x-ray films, releasing carcinogens into the environment, and this has left



Israeli waste disposal companies send dozens of loaded trucks to Palestinian villages every day.

many people with asthma-related illnesses," he explained.

It was also reported by witnesses that Israeli companies had buried the carcasses of thousand of chickens infected with the avian flu virus in the district of Nablus.

Regarding the Apartheid Wall, drainage damage occurred in some areas. Especially in Qalqiliya, where the Wall acted as a “dam”, trapping the rain water on the inside of the Wall, preventing it from flowing westwards. There it mixed with pollutants and overflowed houses fields and greenhouses in Qalqiliya. Around 700 dunums of agricultural lands were completely destroyed, as well as factories, shops and a bridge. Israeli authorities also refused to open the hatches in the wall to allow the water from flowing down the valleys. The Palestinian authorities estimated the damages to be 1.4 million US dollars.



Lands in Qalqiliya flooding due to the wall trapping the water preventing it from flowing out.

Nuclear activity

Israel’s nuclear activity began in the 1950’s though it has not been officially declared by the state of Israel. The inhabitants of a number of small Palestinian villages have found areas in the soil, sealed with cement. According to several studies, the radioactivity level in these areas turned out to be very high.

"The waste from Dimona is buried west of Dahriyya and the radiation from this buried waste reaches the people and causes cancer," said Dr. Mahmoud Sa'ada, a Palestinian general practitioner and head of the Middle East division at International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, referring to a small West Bank Palestinian village just north of Hebron and just over 12 miles from the Dimona nuclear reactor. According to Dr. Sa’ada, the nuclear radiation has reached places as far as Tulkarm (a Palestinian city in the northern West Bank located at over 160 km from the Dimona reactor).



Dimona Nuclear Plant

It has been revealed that radiation from Dimona also causes an increase in cancer among Palestinians in the West Bank. Around 415 cancer cases and hundreds of abnormal births were reported between the years 1995-2007.

Many kinds of insects do not live in the vicinity, only the toughest of plants live there.

Impact on Plants and Animals

As the wall is being under construction it has a devastating effect on the wildlife living in those areas. The Apartheid Wall is an enormous structure that takes up a lot of space, harming the environment and bringing the ecosystems (communities of living things) there out of balance.

Trees play a major role in preserving the environment and the ecosystems; they improve air quality and water quality as well as stabilizing the soil. Even in the beginning of the construction in 2002 and 2003, a number of 102,320 trees were uprooted.

The construction activity of the wall and its presence will have a harming effect on the natural animals and plants living there as well. Many of their natural habitats will get destroyed and due to the habitat loss, it becomes easier for Pathogens, harmful microorganisms and exotic weeds to invade the area. This will increase the disease rates for the animals and plants remaining.

Also, animals respond to noise pollution caused by the construction. Their stress level increases and this brings their body out of balance. Their communication with each other is also affected by the noise as well as their reproduction.

In short, populations will significantly decrease, due to constant disturbance of their ecological relations. Some species may disappear completely.



The uprooting of olive trees in Jayyous, an agricultural village in the north of the West Bank.

Future

For Palestine, the future seems bleak in the shadows of the Apartheid wall. A future, where constriction and confiscation will become matters the Palestine will have to live with daily. Regarding the environment and natural resources, the wall will continue to harm the environment. Both with its ongoing construction, as well as mere presence.

The environment in the West Bank will hit a wall and it will take it a long time to recover.

Proposals

When it comes to what we should do to prevent further environmental degradation within the Palestinian Territories, it is important to note that it will not be too effective if the Israeli authorities

were negotiated. Israel has made it pretty clear that it intends to continue the construction of the Apartheid Wall despite many sides, like the UN and USA, calling for its halt as it has an illegitimate presence on Palestinian Territories.

On the political level, authorities against the Apartheid Wall should take action. The case of Israel's separation barrier must be taken to the right legal establishments. They should declare their condemnation of it and take legal action against it internationally in the presence of all nations.

On the level of a single individual, the most important thing, when fighting the environmental damage and terror caused by the wall, is spreading awareness. Getting it out into the open. Most people in the world are completely ignorant to the fact that the Apartheid Wall is being built the way it is. If only they received information and facts about the Wall and the devastation it is causing the Palestinian lands, it would receive mass condemnation. Spreading awareness is done by any mean possible; writing a book, presenting information through seminars, making a website, telling as many people as possible and many other ways. A campaign of mass rejection is what truly is going to set stop on the Apartheid Wall.

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