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Issa Musa Adwan

The diversion of water from the Jordan Basin has resulted in the shrinkage of the Dead Sea - which could fully disappear by 2045!

Interview conducted by **Mohammad Najajrah**

Bethlehem, Palestine Institute for Biodiversity and Sustainability, January 2022

Dr. Issa Musa Adwan Albaradeiya is the General Director of Environmental Resources at the Environmental Quality Authority, in Palestine, since 2010. He holds a PhD in Civil Engineering with a specialization in Environment, a Masters in Genetics, and a Bachelors in Agricultural Engineering. Since 1990, he held several positions, including acting head of the Environmental Quality Authority in the Northern governorates and in the General Department of Administrative and Financial Affairs.

Mohammad Najajrah (MN): What is the state of the environment in Palestine especially in Gaza?

Issa Musa Adwan (IMA): The environmental situation in Palestine is difficult as in other countries, but it is also affected greatly and mainly by the Israeli occupation.

The Gaza Strip area is a closed area that essentially constitutes a large open-air prison with many types of environmental challenges. It was occupied in 1967 and subjected to increasing levels of isolation and siege. Challenges include the pollution and increased salinity of the aquifer which is now unfit for drinking, wastewater discharge into the Mediterranean Sea, and successive wars that led to the destruction of most components of the ecosystem and agricultural and vital lands. The catastrophic situation is compounded by the limited areas in the Gaza Strip, the high population density (>2 million in 365 square kilometers - 2/3rd refugees), and the imposed Israeli siege. Urban expansion in the Strip happens at the expense of agricultural and natural lands. Therefore, the Gaza Strip constitutes an environmental

disaster unparalleled in the world. More than 2 million people try to survive on a mere 370 square kilometers under blockade since 2007. Equipment, machinery, technology, spare parts and materials that help in managing and protecting natural areas, environmental and health facilities such as wastewater recycling stations are not allowed to enter.

MN: And what about the West Bank?

IMA: As for the areas of the West Bank, a big part of it including Jerusalem and its vicinity was illegally annexed by Israel and separated from the West Bank. The rest of the area is divided into areas A, B, and C in what was supposed to be a five year agreement that ends in 1999 but is continuing today. We do not have control over Areas C in which most of the areas and natural reserves are located.

The pressure on areas A and B increased due to inaccessibility of the open and agricultural lands in area C (which is 60 % of the areas) and the presence of refugee camps in those two areas adding to stress on the land. Proper management of natural areas and resources is almost impos-

sible since the Israeli authorities maintain control of those. Israel has stolen Palestinian natural resources such as water, which has repercussions on the health of the population and the environment (e.g. not allowing the natural flow of water from many springs has an impact on the ecosystem). The occupation authorities are also building industrial colonies that destroy the environment in the Palestinian areas.

The Israeli occupation's control of natural resources exacerbates the environmental crisis in the West Bank. The occupation measures also include building a destructive racist infrastructure, such as segregated roads and the Annexation and Expansion Wall. The latter cuts off large areas of Palestinian lands and annexes them, in addition to its negative impact on the areas it passes through and the movement of living land animals. It is done at the expense of some natural reserves and at the expense of areas important for biodiversity and agricultural lands.

MN: What those political “natural” reserves?

IMA: New nature reserves are announced by the Israeli occupation army and its so called “Civil Administration in the West Bank” as a ruse and not on scientific grounds. Usually they are intended just to control natural resources, including groundwater and agricultural lands. This is notable for example in the Jordan Valley area, which constitutes the Palestinian food basket. The reserve and is designed to prevent Palestinians from benefiting from these areas. We are also deprived of benefiting from the Dead Sea, which includes ecotourism and mineral values. The diversion of water from the Jordan Basin has resulted in the shrinkage of the Dead Sea - which could fully disappear by 2045!

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MN: How do you see the current environmental policies?

IMA: As a Palestinian state, we have many institutions that work in the field of environment, but the space available to us to work in is limited as mentioned earlier. We have a lot of capabilities and educational institutions that produce graduates who have environmental interests.

The Environmental Quality Authority also includes geographic information, environmental education, climate change and biodiversity, and trained cadres in the field of environmental monitoring and inspection. Funding from external institutions does not constitute a problem. But as mentioned earlier the political situation in Palestine being under the Israeli occupation and colonization is catastrophic to the environment. For example, to solve the waste problem, we are governed by the approval of the Israeli authorities on the areas of landfills.

Within the strategic plan for solid waste management, three major landfills were proposed for more than 20 years. The Zahret al-Finjan landfill was established in the north and the Minya landfill in the south, but the middle landfill has been held for 20 years pending Israeli approval for its construction because it is located in Area C. The waste problem poses a real danger and has a significant impact on the safety of the environment, human safety and biodiversity. We have national capabilities and strategies prepared based on international standards, but they clash with the reality in which we live by the Israeli occupation. If the situation continues as it is, the deterioration in the environment will increase, ability to deal with climate change will diminish further,

and there will be increasing pressure on natural resources. It will surely lead to the deterioration the health, economic and social situation of the Palestinian people.

MN: What about long term forecasts?

IMA: We, in the Environmental Quality Authority and all the ministries and local institutions, aspire to strengthen our capabilities to build a society living

in harmony with nature and to fulfil the UN sustainable development goals. We are now developing updated strategies and action plans taking into account all scenarios. These include the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan for 2030 and 2050. We consider our serious environmental work as a kind of resistance to colonialism and we look forward to freedom and to peace for ourselves and our environment.