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Security and Environment – The impact of environmental security issues on the prospects for long term peace in Israel and Palestine.

Robin Twite – August 2004

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The long and seemingly intractable conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is fuelled by disputes over land, opposing historical narratives, religious dogmatism, to name but a few. At the heart of the conflict is the struggle over land, which can be seen as an environmental conflict. On each side are those who believe that only by controlling as much land as possible can they be secure. This attitude was neatly summed up in a car sticker which appeared in the late nineties when the Israeli government was about to hand over Hebron, aside from the enclave occupied by settlers in the center of the city, to Palestinian control. It read, in Hebrew of course, "Hebron is Tel Aviv" – and was meant to imply that if Israel gave up voluntarily its control of any part of the "Holy Land" it would not be long before the Palestinians would claim that they had a right to the heart of Israel. From the Palestinian side similar voices could be heard from the leadership of "Hamas" and from orthodox Moslem clerics, denying the right of Israel to prevent the return of refugees who fled in 1948 and rejecting the recognition of Israel which had been accorded to the country by Arafat and the PLO in the peace accords.

In this conflict over land extremists on both sides have made use of the environmental argument to persuade the wider public that they must avoid compromise and that their security, their very existence, is threatened by making concessions. Mutual suspicion is at the heart of these arguments and conflicting claims are purposely fuelled by statements in the media which serve to promote fear and hostility. Nor is land the only environmental factor used in such arguments according to which "they", the other party, the enemy, "aim only to destroy us, to take our land, to limit and corrupt our supply of fresh water, to deliberately poison the very air we breathe".

There is no doubt that in Israel and in Palestine perceived threats to environmental security are exploited and exaggerated for political reasons. Exaggeration of the dangers which each side poses to the others long term environmental well being is deliberately practiced in order to secure short term political gain. Just as in the world wide context the threats of terrorist action is used to obtain public approval for actions which would not normally be accepted without demure since they diminish individual freedom. Making a bogey man to frighten people can be a significant and powerful tool for political manipulation. This is not to say that there are not genuine threats to environmental security in the region but that these can be, and sometimes are, deliberately over emphasized by groups who care not so much about the environment as about seeing their cause succeed - Israeli extremists anxious to maintain control over the West Bank and Gaza, to see the settlements grow and remain in place, and Palestinian extremists who wish to see the end of a Jewish State and its integration into the Moslem world.

Among the more evident long term threats to environmental security in Israel and Palestine are:

- a. Disputes over the control of water
- b. Questions about how to dispose of hazardous waste
- c. The impact of the security fence between Israel and Palestine.
- d. The long term effect of global warming.

- a. The issue of water

The fear of being deprived of water is an atavistic one. Israel has always feared that if it did not have absolute control over its water sources neighboring states might cut the supply. Israeli policies are designed to protect the status quo. The violence of the Israeli reaction in 2002 when the Lebanese government sought to divert part of the flow of water from their country into the Jordan to the Litani basin showed how strong the drive to maintain control over water can be. Fears of water contamination by terrorists are also taken very seriously. Much work is being done for the water authorities in Israel on how to minimize the effect of an attempt to introduce toxins into the water system. This work includes pioneering research designed to ensure that systems which have been attacked can be detoxified within a short period of time. On the Palestinian side fears that Israel will use its control over water supply to control Palestinians in the event of an emergency are always in evidence. When the idea was put forward that Israel should supply desalinated water to the Palestinians from its planned new desalination plants, the issue of control was at once raised by Palestinians who feared that "Israel would have control of the tap".

However in spite of this somewhat forbidding situation, professionals in the field from both Israel and Palestine have recognized that they need to cooperate. While Israel has maintained control, the Israeli Water Commission has sought to ensure that water supply to the Palestinians is maintained. Of course the Palestinians feel they do not have an adequate share of the available water, particularly from the mountain aquifer, but the Joint Water Committee established after Oslo still functions and handles day to day disputes in a reasonable manner. When the second intifada broke out in 2002 both the Israeli Water Commissioner and the Head of the Palestinian Water Authority signed a joint declaration asking all concerned in the violence to try to avoid damage to water installations. Plans outlined by the Israeli Water Commissioner at a recent conference in Stockholm include the supply of desalinated water to the Palestinian Authority and encouragement to the Authority to treat waste water from Palestinian towns to a level where it can be used to replace fresh water to meet almost all agricultural needs.

b. The threat of hazardous waste

All hazardous materials entering both Israel and the Palestinian Authority areas are monitored by Israel when they come into country and certificates issued. However the ultimate fate of the hazardous material going to Palestinian recipients has not been monitored. Arrangements envisaged under the Oslo agreements for the treatment of such hazardous waste material have not been carried out. Fortunately the amount of hazardous material used by Palestinian factories and hospitals is relatively small but failure to treat it does pose an environmental threat both to water quality and to public health. Palestinians also regularly claim that Israel has secretly buried some of its hazardous waste in the West Bank and there have been occasional incidents in course of which hazardous waste was transferred to West Bank locations, but there is no proof that this is government policy and it is more likely to be the work of contractors anxious to avoid the costs of having the waste destroyed at the Ramat Hovav facility in Israel.

In Israel about seventy five percent of hazardous waste is dealt with at the country's main facility in Ramat Hovav but for security reasons there is no clear account of what happens to wastes from Israel's atomic facility.

c. The Security Fence

The fence (four per cent of which is an actual wall and the rest a three meter high chain link barrier protected by ditches), is undoubtedly environmentally detrimental. There seems little doubt that it will adversely effect the flow of surface water, it takes up a great deal of land and it is visually repulsive. In addition large numbers of Palestinian farmers are cut off from their land by the wall which is certainly a negative development. Arguments for its construction derive, of course, from the Israeli belief that will help to prevent suicide bombers from crossing into Israel, and it has to be remembered that about 1000 Israelis have been killed by suicide bombers or other violence in the last four years. Israel stresses the human security need for the wall, its opponents feel equally strongly that the human security of the Palestinians is harmed when they cannot reach their fields and move freely on land which is theirs.

The arguments put forward by Israel would be more convincing if the wall had not been built almost entirely on land which was part of the West Bank before 1967 so that it appears to be designed as a “land grab”. However it appears to be true that since the wall was built the number of suicide bombers entering Israel has diminished very sharply> The Israeli authorities also point out that water supply has been maintained to Palestinian villages affected by the fence and that only 4 per cent of the wells supplying the West Bank will be cut off from the West Bank by the fence and this number will be further reduced if parts of it are relocated.

In short arguments are to be found both, for and against the wall, but it remains a clear case of security considerations being put first and the environment second.

d. Global warming

Of course like most aware societies Israel and the Palestinian Authority are concerned about global warming. The precise impact of such a change is not yet apparent. There is at least one major research project (the Glowa Project) seeking to bring together scientists from Israel, Jordan and Palestine, to study potential impacts of global warming in the Jordan basin but the science is not yet clear. Horrific scenarios which result in the flooding of the coastal plain of Israel, reduction in rainfall etc. are occasionally put forward in the press. But at present the main impact of global warming is to make the atmosphere relating to environment and water issues slightly more tense – it introduces another unpredictable element into an already volatile situation.

Conclusion –

What measures can be taken to reduce the adverse potential of conflicts over the environment and fears about environmental security:

- a. So far as water is concerned it seems that the remit of the Joint Water Committee should be widened and that provision for data sharing should continue to be developed. The positive step taken under the terms of the multilateral talks on water in establishing a shared data base for water in the region is a step in the right direction. At a less technical level, small initiatives designed to promote understanding between Israelis and Palestinians on water issues, such as that currently directed by Friends of the Earth Middle East, have a positive value.

- b. Hazardous waste disposal

The implementation of Oslo agreements could be of great value. Perhaps what is needed is a joint monitoring committee to oversee hazardous waste disposal under the auspices of the two Governments and with participation from a neutral third party such as UNEP. In the long term it would be worth considering the construction of a separate hazardous waste facility for the Palestinian areas

though this would be a very expensive way of solving the problem and would really only be feasible if the facility were shared with Jordan.

c. Security fence

The adverse impact of the fence will be reduced if its route is altered so as to run largely along the 1967 border, to take account of the needs of the Palestinians affected by it (currently it appears that the Israeli government is thinking along these lines), and if the cross border checkpoints are manned by trained personnel who know Arabic and can deal with those going to and from across the fence in a decent and civilized manner. But these minor improvements will still not be such that they make the fence acceptable to Palestinians. To define a border in the long run may be necessary but the construction of the fence without any consultation with Palestinians and without sufficient thought on its precise location was clearly a mistake.

d. Global warming

Joint Israeli/Palestinian research efforts to work on the long term impact of global warming should be encouraged and if and when results are available both Israel and Palestine should share their findings and coordinate their response. In a paradoxical way the threat of change which comes from outside, from global developments, and which can be very detrimental, may serve to bring to bring Israelis and Palestinians together to face it.

Over all both sides should try to create structures which permit of sharing of resource and knowledge related to the environment and enable them to face threats to environmental security together. A revival of the joint coordinating committee for environment, parallel to the Joint Water Committee, on which both the Israeli and the Palestinian Ministries of Environment are represented, would seem evidently desirable (the original committee ceased to function in 1998). Both sides should try to make sure that their publics are fed facts not alarmist speculations designed to fuel conflict and serve direct political ends.

In geographical terms the land between the Jordan river and the Mediterranean is insignificant, but it has an importance over and above its size. It is in some ways one of the clearest examples available of the way in which environmental necessity will either compel the parties in conflict to share their environment effectively, or lead to a situation where both suffer deprivation and have a doubtful future.

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Paper 15, presented Friday 10 September, 2004 (Panel 4)