Gidon Bromberg
Israel director of Friends of the Earth Middle East

How did Friends of the Earth Middle East begin?
I had some involvement in environmental issues in Australia where I grew up. I was active in the demonstrations to stop the Franklin Dam in Tasmania and I spent a summer going down to Tasmania... That definitely left a mark, but only coming to Israel [at the age of 24] never imagined that I would be working on environmental issues. I came across an ad from Adam, Terva veDin - Israel's Union for Environmental Defence and they were looking for a lawyer. I had already started my clerkship in Israel and wasn't able to work, but I called in as a volunteer. Then I was offered a scholarship to study human rights law in the United States. I convinced them that environment law was part of human rights and got the scholarship. I was there for the school year of 1993-94, at the height of the Oslo process. I chose my thesis on the environment implications of the peace process, alarmed that environmental issues and sustainable development were not on the political agenda at all.

At the time, had the connection between environment and peace been thought about?
It was the first study of its kind looking at the importance of not only dealing with peace, but that peace be ecologically sustainable as well.

What findings came out of that thesis?
One of the conclusions of the thesis was the need to get the environment community - Israeli, Palestinian, Jordanian, Egyptian - to get to know each other and possibly work together. Before leaving Washington, I met with several foundations, but no-one expressed any interest in organizing the first meeting ever of Israeli, Palestinian, Egyptian and Jordanian environmentalists. I got back home to Israel and wrote my first proposal and sent it off to the people I met at a follow-up. A week later, I got a phone call from one of the people I met - a person who was most sceptical when I met him. He said, "If you can organise it, I can fund it." That's what happened. I got back to Israel in September 1994, by December 1994, this meeting took place in Taba, Egypt. We brought together four Egyptians, four Israelis, four Palestinians and one Jordanian.

How important was the timing, straight after the Oslo Accords?
People talk about a window of opportunity and it's very true from our experience. There was a window of opportunity from 1993 to 1998 where an initiative of this kind had a chance to be launched. It depended on early success, but there was a belief that peace was at the door.

What is the focus of Friends of the Earth Middle East?
We started our work in a typical advocacy approach. Pretty early on in the day, we decided to focus on water issues because all water resources are shared; any water source of any significance crosses at least one international border. That requires a level of dependence and to build on interdependence you need peace-building.

How do you encourage peace through the environment?
We've been collaborative from day one, which sets us apart. Other efforts that take place are collaborations between different organisations, so you'll have an Israeli organisation working with a Palestinian organisation on a specific project, but they'll come at it from a different perspective. What remains unique about our effort is that the common vision is brought forward from the Israeli office to the Israeli government to the Israeli public in the right cultural context. The same vision is brought forward by the Palestinian office to the Palestinian Authority to the Palestinian public in the right cultural context. People are listening.

We need [Friends of the Earth Middle East] projects, not when everything is rosy, but we need it more than ever in the midst of conflict to show that there is an alternative.

With your different way of doing things, how were you received by JNF, Israel's most famous environmental organisation?
The environment community in Israel has had a problem with JNF for a long time. There has been tension. That said, where practicality has come into play we have been able to find common ground. Even when we are not working together, when it comes to rehabilitating the Jordan, we've had meetings with JNF and JNF is supportive of the need to rehabilitate the Jordan. Even though we have some ideological differences, we are able to coordinate activities to get concrete results on the ground.

Can you tell us about the things Friends of the Earth Middle East does?
In 2000, we launched a project which would now be seen as a leader in the field, and that is grass-roots, bottom-up peacemaking. There was a project we launched called Good Water Neighbours where we identified communities that lived along the Jordan River, or shared the Mountain Aquifer, or lived around the Dead Sea, or lived along the Coastal Aquifer. We tried to get school principals, or parents; or the mayor to talk about the need of working together to rehabilitate the system, instead of an environmentalist. We devised Good Water Neighbours to foster community-based advocacy. This truly has been grassroots work in what is more and more described as environmental peace-making. This project was launched in 2001 in the midst of the Intifada at the height of animosity, hatred, violence.

Why did you launch it at that time?
We didn't expect the outbreak of Intifada and we'd submitted the proposal in 1999. In fact, the funder was the European Commission, who said to us that they would not be able to continue funding and we would not be able to do the project. So we flew to Brussels and met with the European Commissioner responsible and said, "You're telling us we can't do it?" We literally hung on the table to convince the commissioner that we were confident we could do it. We need these types of projects, not when everything is rosy, but we need it more than ever in the midst of conflict to show that there is an alternative.

How does conflict, such as the one taking place at the moment, affect your work?
The war in Gaza and southern Israel is not something new. We've been through the whole Intifada, we've been through the Second Lebanon War. During these times, we postpone external regional meetings and continue our own internal meetings, I would say 80 per cent of our work is Israelis working with Israelis, Palestinians working with Palestinians, Jordanians working with Jordanians, and that very much continues.

INTERVIEWED BY NAOMI LEWIN
Internships are available at Friends of the Earth Middle East. For more information on these or the organisation, see www.foeme.org.