Environmental Justice and Peacebuilding in the Middle East

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Concern over the global environmental crisis may be aligned with contrasting discourses. On the one hand, it is invoked in the sentiment, “we are all in it together.” Whether the scale of reference is the entire planet, region, or nation, this discourse leads to calls for cooperation. Typically, environmental cooperation involves management plans, new policy initiatives and technological innovations. On the other hand, the global environmental crisis is also invoked in an environmental justice discourse, which is about privilege, asymmetric power relations, exploitation, and oppression. The logic of this discourse leads to a strategy of changing power relations so that the environment is managed equitably.

The Arava Institute for Environmental Studies is located in Israel but has a broader Middle Eastern orientation and a regional student body. There, the tension between an environmental management discourse and an environmental justice discourse becomes visible. Created to foster regional environmental cooperation as part of building peace, it has enrolled students from Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Jordan, the United States, Canada, and other countries, and has developed research partnerships crossing national communities of the region. Students come with varying understandings of the discourses through which they perceive the environmental crisis. Some are already clear and articulate about what they think; most find that the experience requires them to talk and listen, and they are challenged to think things through.

From the beginning, Institute staff understood cooperation to mean challenging the narrow perception of environmental issues through the needs, interests, and rights of the respective national communities. Building a regional environmental network was understood as challenging opposing hegemonic discourses of “security” and “steadfast opposition.” Put another way, the Institute understands itself to be fostering neither uncritical cooperation nor unreflexive resistance, but a process of ecological and social transformation.
This essay contrasts the Arava Institute with the “People to People” programs that developed at the same time. It argues that the Institute’s agenda of regional transformation makes it distinctive, and uses the conceptual framework of social capital to explain that distinctiveness. It then returns to the role it plays in constructing a regional environmental narrative that responds to the tension between discourses of environmental management and environmental justice with an agenda of transformation.

In the early and mid-1990s, after the signing of the Oslo Accords, much international funding was available for “people to people” programs that promoted “deepening the peace” through personal encounters. According to Mohammed Abu-Nimer, such programs typically concentrated on bringing Arab and Jewish participants together for a brief period of time, about one to three days, to establish relationships. As Abu-Nimer notes, such programs serve different needs for Arabs and Jews. For Arab participants, they ideally provide an opportunity to interact with Jews, as well as to voice ideas and perceptions of the conflict in a direct, honest, and safe environment without fear and accusation, humiliation, or violence. Jewish participants, in turn, can confront their deep-seated fears and learn about the political perceptions and culture of Arabs.

Since the collapse of the peace process and the second Intifada, scholars and activists have questioned the value of inter-ethnic peacebuilding programs. Some scholars have focused on the positive. Ifat Maoz found that through inter-ethnic encounters, participants became significantly more conciliatory in their perceptions. This was also true of highly skeptical individuals who, prior to participation, had been strongly opposed to reconciliation efforts. As Arik Asherman suggests, although dialogue may not lead to immediate change, it creates hope and a platform for new narratives to emerge that can lead to broader social transformation. Sharri Plonski argues that these types of programs act as a catalyst in the formation of alternative paradigms, thus laying the foundation for social change. According to Ata Qaymari, people-to-people projects are vital when official parties are reluctant to engage, and are central to finding ways to share land and future coexistence. Abu-Nimer adds that graduates of cultural encounters generally retain their newly formed positive outlook, but often do not have the forum or framework to engage in any meaningful activity to promote political or social change.

Other scholars have elaborated the limitations of personal encounters. Humanizing an adversary and learning an opposing point of view do not resolve structural issues on which conflict is based. S. Tamari argues that people-to-people initiatives emerged coercively post–Oslo Accords, when access to research funding became contingent on creating (or fabricating) Israeli–Palestinian partnerships. The result of much of the joint work,
which fosters a false “feel-good” sentiment, trivializes the oppression Palestinians face from Israel. People-to-people programs, Tamari adds, can only be useful if addressed within “a framework that also addresses inequity, injustice and dispossession.” Jeff Halper agrees, noting that dialogue glosses over asymmetries in power; the dialogue is framed and directed by the more powerful (Israeli) side, and this can often serve to reinforce and normalize existing attitudes. Lemish, Mula, and Rubin (cited by Abu-Nimer 2004), suggest that reconciliation initiatives primarily fulfill the desires of the Jewish majority, “who wish to present Israel as a liberal state, ease their consciences, test Arab stereotypes, prove their tolerance and verify Arabic loyalty to the Jewish state.”

Kuttab adds (also cited in Abu-Nimer, 2004) that when dialogue becomes a substitute for action, there are two results. First, it assuages the conscience of members of the oppressing group to the point where they feel they do not have to do anything else. On the other hand, for members of the oppressed group it becomes a safety valve for venting frustrations. In both cases dialogue becomes a means of reinforcing the existing oppression and therefore serves to perpetuate it.

The Arava Institute for Environmental Studies opened in 1996, in the same period that people-to-people programs were being established. It was intended to be a regional center of environmental teaching and research, recruiting a mixed student body. In that sense, it was like people-to-people programs. In some significant ways, however, it was created to be something different.

The Institute experience is much more intense than “people to people” programs. Students stay for a semester (4 months) or a full academic year (8 months). Some stay longer as interns in various capacities. The Institute is residential, located on a kibbutz near the Jordanian and Egyptian borders. Students with different backgrounds share accommodations, take classes together, and are together in their spare time. As Michael Cohen notes, this aspect enables participants to forge relationships based on trust, which is vital to honestly tackle the painful realities of the Arab–Israeli conflict.

A few years after opening, the Institute created the Peacebuilding and Environmental Leadership Seminar (PELS) as a required (but non-credit) part of its program. The Institute website describes the seminar as “a forum for investigating aspects of the social and political context in which environmental problems develop, and for ‘prefiguring’ the kinds of relationships necessary to foster a more just, peaceful, and ecologically secure future.” The seminar includes discussions, workshops, guest lectures, and field trips, and is facilitated by “a Jewish-Arab team experienced with intra-group dialogue,” according to the Arava Institute in 2007. The
similarity of PELS to “people-to-people” programs, and its differences, are readily apparent. PELS takes place over several months, among people who are living together. PELS is part of the process of opening up to each other; it is only a part. Former students report long informal conversations.

The intensity of the program is related to the role it plays in the lives of the students. Motivations vary, but a commitment of a semester or a year is not done lightly. Some come because it is an accredited academic program that could somehow lead to a professional career. Some come because the language of instruction and everyday interaction is English—the “neutral” language of the region. Students who anticipate that better English language skills will be helpful in employment or future studies have the opportunity to develop those skills without leaving the region, with the added advantage that most of the instructors and staff are native English speakers. Some come for intensive study of environmental issues in a supportive academic and social setting. Some come to explore an important issue, wondering whether that exploration will open up a socially beneficial career path. Some come to explore how to make peace.

Students from North America have the opportunity to have a better understanding of the region and its peoples, and to earn university credits, even if their knowledge of regional languages is weak. On average, about a third of the student body also has a particular role. Most North American students are Jewish. Some are the children of Israelis who live in North America. They typically come in the framework of overseas study for credit at their undergraduate institutions. Their presence signifies that study at the Institute is a choice made by students who have other options and who expect academic quality. The North American students are also typically from that segment of society that is convinced of the seriousness of the environmental crisis and is pushing for a response. In these ways, the North American students contribute to the culture of Institute as a serious place where important work is done. Like most Israeli students at the Institute, they also come from the segment of society that advocates an Israeli future based on mutual accommodation with Palestinians, the Israeli Arab minority and surrounding countries. In this way, the North American students present to those from the region North American attitudes, and North American Jewish attitudes, which differ from what is commonly perceived in the region.

The role of the Institute in the lives of the students is in turn related to the practical professionalism of the faculty and staff. The Institute has been self-conscious about having a clear “vision statement,” which reads, “The Arava Institute for Environmental Studies will provide the Middle East a new generation of sophisticated professionals that will meet the region’s
environmental challenges with richer and more innovative, peace-building solutions.” The associated “mission statement” continues:

Our mission is to create a world-class environmental teaching and research Institute at Kibbutz Ketura, which will do the following: deliver teaching at the highest quality and level; play a leading role in research, conservation, environmental protection and sustainable development; prepare future Arab and Jewish leaders to cooperatively solve the region’s environmental challenges; and teach future leaders from all over the world that nature knows no borders.

As its name implies, the Institute is a setting for environmental studies, not environmental science. Environmental policy, environmental law, and environmental ethics are integral to the curriculum, and have been present since the beginning. This was an important innovation for the region.

The research agenda of the Institute and its ties to local environmental advocacy are other distinguishing features. The Institute has a director of research, and seeks out opportunities. Significant projects are partnerships with Palestinian and Jordanian researchers. These include developing policy options for the Dead Sea, transboundary stream restoration, and a study of health effects from exposure to airborne particles. The Institute, in a variety of ways, encourages its students to be activists. One example of this is Sababa, the Center for a Healthy Environment in the Arava, which has been housed at the Institute since 2002. Focusing on the region where the Institute is located, Sababa has addressed regional planning, conservation of open areas, and recycling. Additionally, in December 2006, Arava students and alumni, alongside GISHA, the Centre for the Legal Protection for the Freedom of Movement, petitioned the Israeli High Court to overturn the Israeli Defense Force’s sweeping ban preventing Palestinians from studying in Israel. This struggle is still in process.

This commitment to a serious academic program, research, and advocacy feeds back into the Institute’s relationship to its students. It is interested in cultivating the kinds of professional environmentalists who will do in their careers what is done at the Institute. The Institute is sending alumni out into the world to be change agents. The alumni coordinator assists with professional development, circulates employment opportunities and information about graduate programs and networks students from different years who have similar interests. Since it has had alumni, it has had an alumni coordinator, who helps alumni in various ways. The alumni division maintains an active Yahoo “group.” Networking with alumni was supplemented in 2005 with the first conference of the “Arava Peace and
Environment Network,” which met in Aqaba. At the 2006 APEN meeting, control was passed to an alumni steering committee.

The professional seriousness of the Institute is related to the gravity of the environmental challenge in the region. The Institute provides a space where aspects of regional environmental issues that are marginalized by nationalist discourses can be acknowledged. Diplomacy and hostilities push environmental protection off the public agenda. So too do environmentally irresponsible proposals for economic development. In the region, rising numbers of people and rising expectations for standards of living collide with depleted and degraded natural resources, widely differential access to natural resources, woefully inadequate conceptions of ecological responsibility, and potentially devastating local effects of global climate change. The Institute is a place where this collision can be acknowledged and the response of informed social mobilization can be fostered. The Institute has positioned itself outside of the discourses of “security” and “steadfast opposition,” cultivating, instead, an emergent narrative of regional identity based on a common ecology.

In summary, unlike “people-to-people” programs, the Arava Institute is only partially oriented toward changing attitudes. Rather, it builds knowledge and skills, provides credentials, and builds networks that will be useful to many former students. It provides a space to critique the neglect of environmental responsibility in the region, and an opening for a response.

In contrast to “people-to-people” programs, the Arava Institute has not developed a theoretical explanation of its approach. Much writing on “people-to-people” programs has been based on the “contact hypothesis,” which argues that getting to know members of other groups personally breaks down stereotypes and prejudice. In contrast, the Arava Institute simply presents itself as a strategically pragmatic response to the needs of the region: education, career development, research, and advocacy in the service of ecological responsibility and peace based on mutual respect and accommodation.

Although the strategy of the Arava Institute has elements of the contact hypothesis, the differences between what it has been doing and “people-to-people” programs can be seen using an alternative theoretical approach based on the concept of social capital. Social capital, like economic capital (money and other financial resources) and cultural capital (knowledge, skills, and credentials) is a resource people use to achieve their goals. The contact hypothesis has implications of manipulation. People are seen as having problems (stereotyped beliefs, prejudiced attitudes, discriminatory behavior) that can be alleviated by social science–inspired techniques (bringing groups together to get to know each other). The social capital approach implies a different starting assumption—that individuals and
groups have goals and they seek out means to help them accomplish these goals.

As developed by Bourdieu and Coleman, social capital is understood as an attribute of relationships. As they see it, “to possess social capital, a person must be related to others, and it is those others, not himself, who are the actual source of his or her advantage,” according to Alejandro Portes. Robert Putnam, among others, argues that for the connections between individuals and networks to have value, the connections must be frameworks for reciprocity and trust. Putnam further distinguishes two forms of social capital: bridging (or inclusive) and bonding (or exclusive).

Bonding forms suggest an inward focus, typically implying a homogenous composition of participants nested within particular social networks. Bridging social capital implies connections and social relations among diverse individuals that transcend ethnic, class, gender, sexuality, religion, or other lines. Whereas bridging social capital can generate new and broader identities, bonding reinforces membership in more homogenous groupings, according to Putnam.

The Arava Institute has developed a set of practices based on both bonding and bridging. During their four or eight months at the Institute, many students bond—with each other, with faculty and staff, with the ideals of the institution. With these bonds, they have acquired resources they can use—friends to stay with when traveling; contacts when they are investigating educational and career opportunities; faculty, staff, and peers to go to for references; people they have learned how to talk to and can trust when they need to talk about the Middle East.

This bonding is also a bridging. Arava students are not a homogeneous group. They come from, and go back to, very different places. Many go back having learned things that most people in their groups have not had the opportunity to know. The time at the Institute can be something of a liminal experience, where a person leaves a social status, goes through an intense experience, and is then returned, the same person, but changed. Interviews and informal discussions with alumni indicate that this is fitting for the stage of life and the kinds of people who choose to come to the Institute. They are personally in a process of change, aware of being members of societies in a process of change.

From the perspective of faculty and staff, their role is also both bonding and bridging. Classes are small; teaching is personal. Almost all staff and a few faculty live on the kibbutz and are part of the out-of-class social world of Institute students. Staff and faculty go on recruitment trips, conduct interviews with applicants, expose students through course work to a range of possible career options, steer students toward further study or specific work, write letters of reference, and otherwise through their research and
public policy involvements cultivate personal and institutional connections that can help students achieve their own goals and the transformational goals of the Institute.

The environmentalists who founded the Arava Institute were ahead of public opinion in the region. Access to land, water, and other natural resources has been, of course, central to conflict in the region, but the context of a global environmental crisis, of which the conflicts in the Middle East are one dimension, has introduced something new into regional narratives. The Institute has been working at putting on the regional agenda natural resource needs, depletion, and degradation; differential control over natural resources and differential exposure to environmental risks; the need for economic planning to take place within ecological limits; the need to recognize our interdependence with other species and our responsibility for them.

Narratives about the global and local dimensions of the environmental crisis are still under construction, with contributions from scientists, policy analysts, politicians, and activists of various kinds. The Arava Institute is not the only site in the Middle East, or concerned with the Middle East, where these narratives are being fashioned. It is self-consciously a place where a regional environmental narrative is approached as a process of construction rather than a product, where the discourses of environmental management and environmental justice are both acknowledged, and where regional ecological and social transformation is promoted by strengthening the nascent network of regional environmentalists.

**RECOMMENDED READINGS**


ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND PEACEBUILDING IN THE MIDDLE EAST


Rokach, Yafit and Stuart Schoenfeld. 1999. “Experiences In the Environmental Field Across Cultures and Borders: A Study of Alumni of the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies” (with Y. Rokach). Paper presented at the Environmental Studies Association of Canada. University of Sherbrook (June 9) and in 2000 Association for Israel Studies (June 26), Tel Aviv University.


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