

**ENVIRONMENT ABOVE ALL? PALESTINIAN PERSPECTIVES ON POWER  
& COLLABORATION IN ENVIRONMENTAL PEACEBUILDING**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### Environment Above All? Palestinian Perspectives on Power and Collaboration in Environmental Peacebuilding

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This research explores the lived experiences of Palestinians involved in environmental peacebuilding efforts, focusing on how they navigate the contradictions inherent in these initiatives. It examines how the broader context of occupation and settler colonialism profoundly influences their encounters with peacebuilding efforts. Palestinians often grapple with conflicting emotions, as they must balance ideals of cooperation and dialogue with the ongoing realities of oppression and dispossession. The study situates these experiences within the concept of slow environmental violence, which refers to the gradual, often unnoticed environmental harms that accumulate over time. This framework helps illuminate how Palestinians experience increasing alienation from their land and environment. Through this lens, the research aims to understand how these contradictions shape their participation in environmental peacebuilding, offering insights into the dilemmas and challenges they face. The findings of this research are based on in-depth interviews conducted between April and June 2024.

**KEYWORDS:** Environmental peacebuilding, environmental justice, settler colonialism, occupation, slow violence, greenwashing, Palestine-Israel.

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I dedicate this thesis to every member of nogojiwanong2palestine. This work would not have been possible without their unwavering support and their fierce determination to amplify voices calling for justice. Their tireless efforts and willingness to shout, “In our thousands in our millions, we are all Palestinians” into the ears of every Canadian have been a constant source of strength and inspiration throughout this journey.

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## List of abbreviations

- **BDS:** Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions
- **EP:** Environmental Peacebuilding
- **JNF:** Jewish National Fund
- **KKL:** Keren Kayemet L'Yisrael (Jewish National Fund)
- **PA:** Palestinian Authorities
- **PACBI:** Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel
- **PNGO:** Palestinian NGO (non-governmental) Network
- **UNDP:** United Nations Development Program

## Glossary

- **Anti-Normalization Discourse:** A perspective that critiques efforts to normalize relations between conflicting parties without addressing underlying injustices and power imbalances, particularly in the context of Israeli-Palestinian relations.
- **Climate Change:** Long-term shifts in temperatures and weather patterns, mainly due to human activities such as burning fossil fuels, which can lead to severe environmental, social, and economic impacts.
- **Collective Identity:** A shared sense of belonging among individuals who perceive themselves as part of a larger community, often used in EP to foster cooperation and reconciliation among conflicting parties.
- **Colonial Legacies:** The long-lasting impacts of colonialism, including the exploitation and marginalization of Indigenous peoples and the imposition of foreign governance and economic systems.

- **Conflict-Affected Contexts:** Regions or situations where there is ongoing or recent violent conflict, making them vulnerable to additional challenges such as environmental degradation and climate change impacts.
- **Distributive Inequity:** Unequal distribution of resources and opportunities, often affecting marginalized communities disproportionately and contributing to social and environmental injustices.
- **Eco-Normalization:** The use of environmental cooperation projects to create a facade of normalization between Israelis and Palestinians, potentially obscuring ongoing injustices and reinforcing the status quo.
- **Environmental Degradation:** The deterioration of the environment through depletion of resources, destruction of ecosystems, and pollution, often exacerbating social and political tensions in conflict-affected areas.
- **Environmental Justice:** A framework that emphasizes the fair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens, focusing on addressing structural inequalities and empowering marginalized communities.
- **Environmental Peacebuilding (EP):** A field of research and practice focusing on integrating environmental considerations into peacebuilding processes to promote peace, stability, and sustainable development, particularly in conflict or post-conflict contexts.
- **Greenwashing:** The practice of making misleading claims about the environmental benefits of a product, policy, or organization to present an environmentally responsible public image.
- **Human Security:** A concept that encompasses the protection of individuals from threats such as poverty, disease, and environmental hazards, extending beyond traditional notions of national security.

- **Intersectional Analysis:** An approach that examines how various social identities (e.g., race, gender, class) intersect with individuals' experiences, particularly in relation to environmental and social justice issues.
- **Neoliberal Perspectives:** Approaches that prioritize market-driven solutions, often criticized for overlooking social equity and structural inequalities in addressing environmental and peacebuilding challenges.
- **Shared Affectedness:** A concept highlighting the common environmental challenges faced by conflicting parties, which can serve as a basis for dialogue and cooperation in peacebuilding efforts.
- **Sustainable Development:** Development that meets present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, emphasizing environmental, social, and economic sustainability.
- **Greenwashing:** The practice of making misleading claims about the environmental benefits of a project, organization, or policy to present a responsible public image while masking harmful practices.
- **Settler Colonialism:** A form of colonialism where settlers establish permanent residence on indigenous land, often leading to the displacement and marginalization of native populations.
- **Slow Violence:** The gradual and often invisible harm inflicted on marginalized communities through environmental degradation and resource exploitation, highlighting the long-term impacts of structural inequalities.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1 Overview of Research Topic**

In the Palestinian-Israeli context, Environmental Peacebuilding (EP) and socio-environmental cooperation are regarded as helpful strategies for fostering regional cooperation and contributing to a foundation for peaceful coexistence (Arielli, 2022; Ide & Tubi, 2020; Schoenfeld et al., 2014). This has recently gained further attention, as, since the beginning of the 2023 Gaza war, two EP programs have been nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize (Jaffe-Hoffman, 2024; Jerusalem Post, 2024). The ongoing war on Gaza has resulted in severe environmental damage, in addition to the significant human toll and the dire humanitarian crisis. This destruction, described by some activists as “ecocide” (Ahmed et al., 2024; Bagheri, 2024), has become an urgent issue for many EP programs in Palestine-Israel. These projects aim to respond to the humanitarian crisis by addressing basic needs related to water, sanitation, and hygiene, among others. One project, for example, includes bringing solar-generated desalination systems to Gaza to alleviate the water shortage (ALLMEP, 2024).

Since the outbreak of hostilities in the fall of 2023, many EP and peacebuilding projects have emphasized the urgent need for increased investment in civil society and peacebuilding efforts and grassroots movements (Lyndon, 2024). These projects are informed by the view that, in the absence of a political resolution, there must be a stronger focus on providing adequate funding for grassroots peacebuilding efforts and civil society work (Burt, 2024).

Advocates of these projects argue that focusing on the environment—a relatively less contentious issue compared to the question of Palestinian self-determination—can provide invaluable opportunities for dialogue and concrete solutions to shared environmental challenges

(Ide & Tubi, 2020). These initiatives offer a platform for Palestinians and Israelis to collaborate on common goals, fostering mutual understanding and trust. By addressing shared environmental concerns, such projects have the potential to transcend political and social divisions, promoting a sense of shared responsibility and interdependence (Chouliaraki Milner, 2023; Lipchin & Friend, 2023).

At the same time, these projects operate in an acutely political context, where the Israeli state employs environmental strategies both to exert power and expand its dominance over Palestinian land and livelihoods (Braverman, 2009). This is evident in the control of water resources, demolition of Palestinian agricultural lands, and restriction of access to natural resources. Many scholars argue that these actions are not merely incidental but part of a broader strategy to maintain control and suppress Palestinian autonomy (Amira, 2021; Hughes et al., 2022).

Furthermore, scholars argue that Israel projects an image of environmental stewardship and progressiveness in order to mask the reality of land confiscations, displacement of Palestinian communities, and the broader agenda of territorial expansion. This dual use of the environment has made environmental cooperation projects a subject of anti-normalization discourse, which rejects any form of cooperation with Israel and Israeli organizations in the lack of a clear political resolution (Amira, 2021; Shqair, 2023).

This perspective is echoed in the work of Braverman (2023) who highlights how the dispossession of Palestinians by the Israeli state manifests in the ecological sphere. She describes this process as the *"invisibilizing power of nature as a structure"* (p.15). This concept refers to the way natural conservation and sustainability efforts can obscure the ongoing territorial and political agendas of the Israeli state, making the impact of settler colonialism less visible but no less harmful. By framing environmental issues as purely ecological concerns, the underlying

political and territorial motivations are concealed. This pattern mirrors broader issues within the global peace rhetoric and peacebuilding efforts in Palestine-Israel; both formal and informal.

The Oslo Accords liberal peace paradigm has portrayed Palestinians as one side in a 'conflict,' rather than an occupied people, which has shifted the focus away from issues of colonization and dispossession (Amoruso et al. 2019). Since Oslo, Palestinians have increasingly been framed as victims of a humanitarian crisis rather than individuals engaged in a political struggle. This transformation is largely driven by the non-governmental (NGO) sector and the international donor community, which often focus on providing relief and support rather than addressing the underlying political issues that contribute to the plight of Palestinians. This has contributed to a depoliticization of the Palestinian cause, where the emphasis is placed on immediate humanitarian needs rather than long-term political solutions (Landy, 2013)

Part of the environmental critiques articulated by scholars is that of slow environmental violence. Environmental slow violence, a term coined by Rob Nixon (2011), refers to the gradual, often invisible environmental degradation that disproportionately affects marginalized communities over extended periods. This form of violence is insidious because its effects unfold slowly and cumulatively, making them less noticeable and, consequently, often overlooked by mainstream narratives and immediate crisis responses (Amira, 2021).

Amira (2021) further explores how the Israeli state systematically disrupts and reshapes the Palestinian environment to create a new reality that marginalizes and excludes them. In Palestine, this manifests through contested historical narratives, restricted movement, strained social bonds, and controlled cultural practices. Recognizing these sites of violence is essential to fully understanding the occupation's impact and is key to developing strategies to resist and dismantle its structures (p.513). This raises the critical question of whether EP initiatives are perceived as sites of authentic connection and meaningful engagement in addressing environmental degradation or as places entrenched in hegemonic peacebuilding rhetoric, and

reinforcing power dynamics that result in the ongoing subjugation of Palestinians. The duality of these perceptions reflects the broader tensions and complexities of EP efforts within the context of the occupation.

While critical to understanding the development of environmental degradation and settler ecological narratives in Palestine-Israel, these concepts are rarely addressed in EP literature. Thus, this study seeks to explore the complex interplay of political, social, and ecological factors that shape the experiences of Palestinians engaged in these projects. Through this approach, the research contributes to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of environmental peacebuilding in the Palestinian-Israeli context and centers the experiences and perspectives of Palestinians within such projects.

Understanding how Palestinians involved in EP programs perceive and reflect on their experiences is essential to uncovering the complexities of participating in initiatives that may simultaneously function as peacebuilding and normalization efforts. In EP work, Palestinian participation is informed by their experiences with slow environmental violence—which has profound effects on their relationship to the land, and access to resources, and livelihoods. Furthermore, participation in these projects often places Palestinians in a precarious position, as they must navigate a growing anti-normalization movement, which opposes any form of cooperation or engagement that might be perceived as legitimizing the Israeli occupation.

## **1.2 Situating myself in the Research; Positionality Statement**

As a Jordanian of Palestinian descent, my connection to Palestine is deeply personal and rooted in my identity as the daughter of two Palestinian refugees. For me, Palestine represents a landscape of memory and longing, a place to hold on to, mourn, and fight for. Growing up in Jordan, I was constantly surrounded by stories of displacement and loss, as my parents recounted their memories of the hills and orchards of Palestine. Unlike other children who explored the landscapes of Jordan on road trips, my childhood trips with my father involved driving along the

Jordanian Israeli border, from Tiberias Lake to the Yarmouk River, and down to the Red Sea. At each stop, my father would point out Palestine, expressing his longing with the words, "My beloved Palestine, how do I live away from your rolling hills and mountains?"

As a peacebuilding practitioner, I often grapple with the paradox of being both a peacebuilder and a Palestinian. This tension arises because the language of peace has been co-opted by the liberal peace paradigm (Richmond, 2010) which suppresses Palestinian liberatory imagination and diverts attention from Israel's deepening control and dispossession and erasure. Within this framework, Palestinians are portrayed as an equal side in a "conflict" rather than an occupied and colonized people, often blamed for failed negotiations and the violence they endure through narrative manipulation (Ihmoud, 2019). To be considered peaceful, Palestinians are expected to compromise, accept Israel as the status quo, and refrain from resistance, as resistance is seen as risking instability and offending the oppressor.

In my view, the best example of this is the "Middle East Peace Process" (MEPP), initiated by the Oslo Accords, which transformed an anti-colonial movement for liberation into a state-building project that pacified and controlled Palestinians rather than advancing their freedom and sovereignty. The concept of "peace" became a tool for entrenching Israeli settler colonial violence and power. This reliance on hegemonic vocabularies has impoverished the political imagination of the peacebuilding field (Roy, 2002).

My interest in the themes of place, land, and political ecology was sparked upon my arrival in Canada, where I enrolled in the Sustainability Studies program at Trent University. During my first year, I examined environmentalism and sustainability within Canadian settler colonial history and its current implications. As a Palestinian in Canada, observing how Turtle Island grapples with its settler colonial past, it is impossible not to draw parallels between the architecture of settler colonialism in North America and the Israeli occupation's attempts to erase Palestinian history.

Understanding environmental slow violence and the weaponization of ecological sustainability narratives within the Canadian context reveals the environment as a site of domination and power. Mitchell in "Landscape and Power" (1994) argues that landscapes are often "instruments of cultural power," presenting themselves as innocent and benign while serving to naturalize ideologies "dripping with power" (Braverman, 2009, p. 9). This viewpoint reveals how supposedly neutral environmental narratives can conceal deeper power dynamics and maintain control. Observing these tactics in Canada prompted me to consider how similar issues might manifest in the context of Palestine-Israel. In my pursuit to integrate peacebuilding and conflict resolution with issues of sustainability, I started thinking about environmental peacebuilding. Disenchanted with hegemonic peacebuilding paradigms, I sought through this research to examine the problems with current peacebuilding rhetoric addressing the Palestinian question and explore what decolonial perspectives might require.

As I delved deeper into environmental peacebuilding projects, my initial intention was to evaluate what attracts people to these initiatives, assess their effectiveness, and explore how the solutions they offer can be improved. However, this focus quickly shifted as I became more interested in peeling back the layers to explore the deeper implications of these projects. This exploration led me to question the narratives and strategies these projects employ and to examine how EP issues intersect with power dynamics, historical narratives, and spatial control. Throughout my assessment of EP work in Palestine-Israel, I began to contemplate how the reality of a context predicated on systemic expropriation of resources, reconfiguration of land, and the expulsion of the Palestinian population impacts these efforts from the perspective of Palestinians' lived experiences.

Interviewing Palestinians and listening to them grapple with their experiences under Israel's prolonged military occupation has been profoundly enlightening, especially in the midst of a war characterized as collective punishment (Amnesty International, 2023). These

conversations demanded dialectic reflections on my own identity. As a Palestinian who has never been to Palestine, my perception of the land is often romanticized, shaped by nostalgia for a land that no longer exists, and an idolization of the Palestinian struggle, which in my mind manifests only in resistance of all things Israeli. Engaging with Palestinians who navigate the realities of the occupation on a daily basis has challenged my understanding, highlighting the stark contrasts between the romanticized vision and the harsh realities on the ground. This process has deepened my appreciation for the resilience of those living under Israeli regime and has urged me to look for stories of “Murabata” i.e., steadfastness and resistance for justice and liberation in an unlikely place, namely, in the context of an Israeli-led EP project (Ihmoud, 2019).

This research represents a modest effort to delve into how Palestinians navigate and interpret their lived experiences within the context of EP, particularly as these are shaped by the realities of environmental slow violence, settler colonialism and growing anti-normalization sentiments. It specifically focuses on the challenges Palestinians face when participating in EP programs that are often Israeli-founded or Israeli-led. By examining these dynamics, the study seeks to uncover the nuanced ways in which Palestinians reconcile their involvement in such initiatives with the broader socio-political context of occupation, offering insights into how they manage the dilemmas and contradictions that arise in these settings.

### **1.3 Thesis narrative**

This document has six chapters comprising the narrative of this thesis. The information gathered and the analysis performed in this study are presented through a narrative that follows the same logic and structure as the research question. In Chapter 1, the central topic of this research along with the key research question is described, which seeks to understand the perspectives and lived experiences of Palestinians involved in environmental peacebuilding (EP)

projects. This inquiry is set against the backdrop of slow ecological violence, the broader discourse on anti-normalization, and a statement on my positionality as a researcher.

Chapter 2 describes the research design informing this project, addressing the specific methodologies and methods utilized, and the factors considered in choosing such methods. These methodologies were selected to create a space that allows the reader to ‘hear’ the voices of the participants. The reflections and insights of the participants represent the fundamental point of departure for this inquiry. Chapter 3 provides a review of the literature on EP, highlighting potential benefits and key challenges. Chapter 4 offers an overview of how EP manifests in the Palestinian-Israeli context, with a brief description of the history of the emergence of people-to-people (P2P) peacebuilding in the post-Oslo era and highlights some key critiques of EP work.

Chapter 5 presents a thematic analysis of the participants’ reflections on the program within a broader context of slow environmental violence and anti-normalization rhetoric. It presents a thematic analysis of the participants’ reflections on their experiences in EP contexts and insights in their own words and aligns their perspectives and stories into thematic categories of shared meaning. Extensive quotations are provided in this chapter so that the voices of the participants can guide the reflections, separate from, and aligned with, the researcher’s own interpretation and organization of these ideas. Chapter 5 further situates the results of the thematic analysis and critically examines these thematic findings in relation to the literature relevant to EP efforts and key critiques. Finally, Chapter 6 offers a summary of the discussion presented along with conclusions and final reflections on the implications of this study for future research and practice.

## **Chapter 2: Research Design & Methodology**

### **2.1 Research Focus**

The primary purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of Palestinians within the context of EP, particularly against the complex effects of environmental slow violence and growing anti-normalization sentiments. The study aims to provide insights into how Palestinians in EP settings navigate the deep complexities inherent in these initiatives, which are perceived both as spaces for fostering cooperation and dialogue, and simultaneously as being fraught with contradictions that may perpetuate existing power imbalances.

### **2.2 Research Objective & Question**

EP organizations in Palestine-Israel are seen by many as playing a crucial role in creating pathways for environmental cooperation. By addressing shared ecological challenges, these organizations aim to foster trust and facilitate dialogue between communities (Ide & Tubi, 2020; Schoenfeld et al., 2014). At the same time, these projects frequently face criticism for prioritizing environmental sustainability over addressing the broader political context in Palestine-Israel and perpetuating stark power dynamics inherent in the Palestinian-Israeli context. Critics argue that this focus diverts attention from the urgent need for tangible solutions to structural inequalities. Furthermore, the funding sources of these projects, which sometimes includes donations from pro-Israeli organizations and the Israeli government, draws additional scrutiny. Critics contend that such funding may compromise the projects' independence and neutrality, raising concerns about their true intentions and effectiveness in promoting peace and justice. (Dajani, 2022; Ide & Tubi, 2020, p. 9).

Drawing insights from development studies, political ecology and environmental justice studies and in-depth interviews, this research project will attempt to explore the following questions: *How do Palestinians engaged in EP programs experience, understand, and reflect on their experiences against the backdrop of a weaponized environment marked by slow violence, settler colonialism and a growing anti-normalization discourse?* Palestinians' reflections on their lived experiences can shed light on how personal and political narratives are constructed and mobilized, revealing the deeper intersections between environmentalism, politics, and identity. This exploration is set against the backdrop of prolonged military occupation and a system of oppression that weaponizes the environment to reinforce Israeli domination and further dispossess Palestinians.

### **2.3 Methodology**

A qualitative research method has been utilized in this project. Qualitative research methods offer a pathway for exploring the perceptions and meanings of a given topic, utilizing specific methods to engage with how individuals perceive and experience the world (Howitt, 2019). This approach is particularly suited to this study's exploratory nature, which seeks to understand participants' lived experiences rather than confirming pre-existing hypotheses (Guest et al., 2013).

To fulfill the objectives of this project, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with Palestinians who are currently or previously have been involved in EP programs. This methodological approach allowed for rich, detailed, and flexible data collection that provided insights into the personal and collective narratives of the participants. The interviews aimed to capture Palestinians' reflections on their experiences in EP programs and understand how they navigate their participation in projects that are often the subject of criticism and anti-normalization sentiments.

As outlined in appendix II, actions were taken to minimize any potential repercussions arising from previous participants' involvement in the research project. This includes obtaining informed consent (verbally), ensuring confidentiality, and maintaining the anonymity of the participants and organizations to protect their identities and safeguard them from any negative consequences. The research was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Review Board at Trent University. All necessary forms were completed before the interviews began. Approval was contingent upon implementing measures to ensure participants would not experience harm or negative effects from their involvement in the study.

### ***2.3.1 Grounded Theory***

Grounded theory is a flexible research methodology designed to generate theories that explain a social phenomenon (Howitt, 2019). Since its inception through the early works of Strauss and colleagues (Glaser, Strauss, & Beer, 1968), it has evolved into numerous variations (Glaser & Strauss, 2009). This flexibility allows for various methods of information collection, including narratives, semi-structured interviews, and other more creative forms of research, such as participatory action research (Howitt, 2019). The research process in grounded theory is driven by the data that emerges during interviews, rather than attempting to prove or explain a preconceived argument formulated by the researcher (Howitt, 2019).

Grounded theorists develop themes, often referred to as 'thematic codes' or constructs, from the collected information as an ongoing part of the knowledge-gathering process. This begins with the very first interview or document submission. The interviews are recorded, transcribed, and then coded in multiple ways, such as word by word, line by line, or incident by incident (Howitt, 2019). From these initial thematic codes, theoretical categories are developed to describe the prominent issues arising from the data, providing a robust framework for understanding the social phenomenon under investigation. This approach seeks to achieve a more

contextualized understanding of lived experiences, using these experiences as a foundation for interpretation and reflection. It enables researchers to develop their understanding from the narratives provided by participants and present this knowledge within its proper context. By integrating researcher experience with participant stories, this method grounds interpretation in a more holistic framework. This reflective process can be seen as a dialogue between the researcher and the participant, shaping the researcher's interpretation while generating meaning rooted in the narrator's perspective (Howitt, 2019). Such an approach involves continuous dialogue and iterative reflections throughout the research process. This includes activities like journaling and writing, allowing for a deeper understanding of individuals in their social and physical environments. This method, therefore, facilitates a dynamic and contextualized exploration of lived experiences, fostering a richer interpretation of the data collected (Subedi, 2021). The findings of this research are based on nine in-depth interviews conducted between April and June 2024. Eight of these interviews were with Palestinians from East Jerusalem and the West Bank, and one was with a Palestinian with an Israeli citizenship. The sample comprised four females and five males who have participated in the same EP program.

It is important to note the context in which the research took place. The interviews were conducted during the intense bombardment on Gaza and a fully-fledged war, marked by heightened regional divisiveness and escalating tensions. The timing of the research added a particular kind of challenge and urgency. Periods of intensified violence often affect people's willingness to engage in peacebuilding activities, including EP efforts, which could have had an important impact on participants' perspectives and reflections on their experiences. Moreover, this surge in violence, as an extreme expression of the ongoing occupation and oppression that Palestinians live under, highlights some of the most significant challenges and anti-normalization criticisms directed at collaborative and peacebuilding initiatives. This, for example, had an impact on recruitment and therefore justifies the small sample size. That said, evidence shows that small sample sizes often allow for a more detailed exploration of each participant's experiences by

providing in-depth data that may not be possible with bigger samples (Subedi, 2021). Thus, by incorporating these criteria, I sought to facilitate in-depth conversations, capturing a wide range of perspectives and experiences to enrich the depth of the findings. The interviews were conducted primarily in Arabic. Participants often switched between Arabic and English and were encouraged to speak in whichever language they felt most comfortable with, ensuring a more natural and authentic exchange of information.

### **2.3.2 Sample**

The research sample consisted of Palestinians from the West Bank and East Jerusalem, often referred to as the "post-Oslo" generation (Bartal, 2023), Palestinians born since 1990 navigate a complex landscape where the Palestinian Authority exercises limited administrative control, characterized by rampant corruption and cronyism, while Israeli authorities maintain overarching power, impacting various aspects of daily life (Almasri, 2021; Jiménez, 2023). Their encounters with the occupation are particularly pronounced, leading them to develop complex and hybrid tactics of resistance and resilience.

According to Salamanca (2016), Palestinians in the West Bank face a "closure regime" that manifests in both physical and administrative forms. The physical infrastructure includes checkpoints, roadblocks, and the separation wall, which severely restrict Palestinian movement. Additionally, there is a "soft" infrastructure comprising policies that transform mobility into a "privilege" granted on a case-by-case basis influenced by racial, class, and gender considerations. The closure regime has also limited Palestinians' access to water and agricultural crops. The separation (or apartheid) wall is intermittently made up of fencing or imposing concrete barriers, with about 85 percent of it falling within the West Bank, slicing through Palestinian communities, agricultural fields, and some of the West Bank's most fertile farmland (B'Tselem, 2017). At the same time, the annexation of East Jerusalem after 1967 has created a complex reality for

Palestinians living there. While they have been granted the status of “residents,” which enables them to work and receive social benefits offered by the state of Israel, they lack political rights at a state level, meaning they cannot join political parties or vote in the Knesset. In addition, Israel has implemented a program of "de-Arabization" in Jerusalem (Tawil-Souri, 2012), focusing on policies designed to reduce the Palestinian population. These efforts include revoking ID cards, expanding municipal boundaries to increase Jewish-Israeli residency, imposing severe restrictions on Palestinian building and infrastructure, making it nearly impossible for Palestinians to obtain commercial permits, demolishing homes, and denying family reunification.

Similar to their peers in the West Bank, young East Jerusalemites are disillusioned with Palestinian political representation and are painfully aware that the Palestinian Authority (PA) has completely abandoned them. Fragmented from the rest of the West Bank by checkpoints and the separation wall, this reality has made them more pragmatic, with some evolving into a distinct subgroup comparable to Palestinian citizens of Israel (Bartal, 2023). Their mere presence in the city is an act of steadfastness and a way of protecting the identity of the city. Being in Jerusalem gives them access to employment, healthcare, and education opportunities unavailable in the West Bank. According to Bartal (2023), Palestinian youth in East Jerusalem make tactical choices, enabling them to navigate and operate more freely in defense of Al-Aqsa and Arab Jerusalem. This strategy allows them to assert their rights and presence despite the lack of Palestinian leadership to protect their interests. They have become acutely aware of their need to fend for themselves, using their integration into Israeli systems to secure better opportunities and access some social benefits.

The fact that the majority of research participants are from the West Bank and East Jerusalem highlights the unique fragmentation imposed by the state of Israel, which has divided Palestinian populations everywhere and has created “bordered identities” (Tawil-Souri, 2012, p. 173). This fragmentation exposes Palestinians to different forms of oppression based on how

much of a threat they pose to the Israeli state and its legitimacy (Guignard & Seurat, 2019). According to B'Tselem (2021) the Israeli regime uses laws, practices, and state violence as mechanisms to establish and reinforce the dominance of Jewish Israelis over Palestinians. A critical strategy in this power dynamic is the differential spatial arrangements. Without the strategic use of space as a means of control, the different descriptors of Palestinians—such as those from East Jerusalem, the West Bank, or Gaza—would not carry the same significance. This spatial control affects access to resources, movement, and political rights, highlighting the role of geography in sustaining power dynamics and influencing everyday life for Palestinians who are represented in this research.

### ***2.3.3 Organizing Data and Thematic Analysis***

Following Howitt (2019), data analysis in grounded theory involves three steps: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding involves identifying themes or categories from the participants' perspectives to group the data collected. Axial coding rearranges the data in new ways after open coding, making connections between categories. Selective coding identifies the core issue of the research data and recodes the data according to that core issue. This methodology for analyzing in-depth semi-structured interviews was adopted in this study as it promotes deep engagement with the participants' experiences. Furthermore, the convenience sampling approach relied on selecting participants based on their accessibility and willingness to engage in the research project (Howitt, 2019).

The interview process began with a semi-structured interview, utilizing interview protocol and sample questions (Appendix I). These questions served to steer the conversation toward key topics relevant to the research questions. Conducted via Zoom, the interviews were set as casual meetings focusing on participants' broader reflections on their experiences in EP activities. The discussions typically started with participants vividly describing their experience in EP project,

although at times I initiated the conversation with specific questions from the interview guide. These semi-structured interviews formed the primary unit of analysis for the project. Participants were contacted and invited to voluntarily take part in confidential interviews, with the option to decline recording due to the sensitive context and timing. For participants who declined to be recorded (4 participants) extensive notes were taken instead. This approach ensured that their perspectives and insights were still captured and considered in the research while ensuring they felt safe. Where consent was granted, interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by me on an ongoing basis. In cases where recording was not possible, I took extensive notes to ensure the richness of the data was preserved. This approach allowed for the continuous development of a thematic coding guide, which evolved and expanded as more interviews were conducted. As significant themes began to emerge across participants, I engaged in a detailed line-by-line analysis, closely examining the emerging stories and patterns. These themes were iteratively refined and expanded, starting from the initial three interviews, and continuing through the critical analysis of all subsequent interviews.

Throughout this process, I recorded personal reflections before, during, and after each interview, as well as any other communications with participants that might inform the research. These reflections provided valuable context for each interview, capturing any factors, emotional expressions, and any other elements that might have influenced the interaction. This reflective practice not only deepened my understanding of the data but also allowed me to remain attuned to the nuances of each participant's experience (Howitt, 2019).

## **2.4 Limitations**

This research project encountered several challenges that have limited its scope, which should be acknowledged and accounted for. Firstly, the study is based on a small sample with a limited timeframe, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. The insights gathered are

specific to the participants' experiences and are largely anecdotal, limiting the ability to draw broader conclusions. While these limitations constrain the extent to which the findings can be applied to other areas of research in Palestine-Israel, the intention is to highlight critical issues that require further research and investigation.

Secondly, this research was conducted during a period of heightened violence, mistrust, and instability due to the ongoing war in Gaza, which began in October 2023. This challenging period significantly affected the dynamics of the interviews and the willingness of individuals to participate in this study. The pervasive atmosphere of fear and uncertainty likely influenced participants' responses and reflections on their experiences and the prospects of peace. This context may have influenced their responses, as participants might have been more guarded or hesitant to share their true thoughts and feelings. The war's impact on their daily lives could have also shaped their perspectives in ways that might not be representative of more stable times.

Furthermore, the context of war imposed significant restrictions on accessing certain individuals and settings. For example, reaching alumni from the Gaza Strip was impossible. Many potential participants were hesitant or unable to take part due to the ongoing war. This reluctance often stemmed from fear of discussing their current or former association with Israeli-led initiatives, which could lead to social stigmatization or personal safety risks. Additionally, the emotional toll of living through a devastating war left many individuals struggling to cope, reducing their capacity or willingness to engage in interviews.

By exploring the nuanced experiences of Palestinians involved in EP programs, this research provides valuable insights into the complexities and challenges they face, particularly in navigating their participation in EP programs. Utilizing a grounded theory approach and in-depth semi-structured interviews, the study captures rich data, despite limitations imposed by the ongoing war on Gaza and a small sample size.

## **Chapter 3: Mapping the Landscape of Environmental Peacebuilding**

### **3.1 Introduction**

The repercussions of climate change are now unfolding at an unprecedented pace and scale, placing immense strain on the capacities of societies and governments to manage and adapt to it. In addition, environmental changes are progressively disturbing ecological systems that are foundational to the livelihoods of billions of people around the globe (Brown & Nicolucci-Altman, 2022). This issue is particularly pronounced in conflict-affected and fragile contexts, where environmental degradation and the threat of state violence mutually reinforce one another (UNDP, 2023). Recent scholarship has shown how climate change and environmental degradation are hindering peacebuilding efforts globally, exacerbating inequality, threatening livelihoods, and being linked to higher rates of violence and crime (Ide et al., 2023; Brown & Nicolucci-Altman, 2022; Salloum Lindegaard & Jarawura, 2024). Climate change has also been shown to negatively impact social cohesion, further worsening mistrust and rivalry in communities struggling with dwindling resources (Brown & Nicolucci-Altman, 2022; Salloum Lindegaard & Jarawura, 2024).

The scale and cascading impact of climate change has led to the emergence of environmental peacebuilding as a field of research and practice (Brown & Nicolucci-Altman, 2022; Ide, 2020; Dresse et al., 2018). Environmental peacebuilding refers to a wide range of efforts that address environmental challenges within conflict or post-conflict contexts, with the overarching goal of promoting peace, stability, and sustainable development (Ide & Tubi, 2020). Broadly, this emerging field focuses on integrating environmental considerations into peacebuilding processes. The aim is to mitigate environmental stressors and manage natural resources equitably, fostering cooperation among conflicting parties. Scholars argue that this approach helps build resilience and prevents the outbreak or recurrence of conflicts, particularly those related to environmental issues or exacerbated by climate change. (Brown & Nicolucci-

Altman, 2022, p. 8). The field's broad mandate, incorporating considerations of the environment and ecology, is suggested to help prevent and transform current conflicts, as well as post-conflict recovery. Such an objective covers conflict both within and between states.

### **3.2 Brief Overview of EP**

Literature on EP has highlighted the connection between the environment and human security (Brown & Nicolucci-Altman, 2022, Sharifi et al., 2022). Some scholars in this subfield have argued that historical and ongoing environmental degradation—coupled with inadequate resource management—has consistently heightened the risk of conflict and violence in environments marked by socioeconomic inequalities, as well as those marked by tensions across ethnic or ideological lines (Brown & Nicolucci-Altman, 2022; Salloum Lindegaard & Jarawura, 2024). Moreover, the environment is increasingly perceived as a security concern, often described as a "threat multiplier". This is because it has the potential to exacerbate conflicts, especially in regions facing resource constraints or witnessing large-scale displacement, putting further pressure on already limited resources and challenging socioeconomic situations. This dynamic can produce feedback loops, as armed conflict can in turn have detrimental effects on the environment, causing damage to infrastructure, polluting the environment, and leaving behind hazardous waste.

Environmental peacebuilding recognizes environmental management and sustainable development as essential components of peace and human security and sees shared environmental challenges and interests as potential drivers of trust and cooperation, rather than instigators of conflict (Brown & Nicolucci-Altman 2022). EP scholars highlight how environmental, and climate issues offer unique opportunities to foster cooperation and reconciliation among conflicting parties by leveraging shared environmental concerns as common ground for dialogue and collaboration. This approach aims to reduce tensions and build trust

between adversaries (Carius, 2007; Ide & Tubi, 2020; Schoenfeld et al., 2014). Environmental projects, such as ecosystem restoration and sustainable development initiatives, contribute to improving livelihoods, enhancing resilience, and fostering community cohesion in conflict-affected areas. Ide and Tubi (2020) argue that environmental peacebuilding offers low political risk opportunities, making it a valuable entry point for fostering trust and coexistence.

These activities harness collective interests and offer positive-sum cooperation opportunities, building "everyday peace" by keeping communication lines open during episodes of violence and providing positive examples to counter negative narratives. Additionally, environmental projects can offer critical training and capacity-building opportunities for future leaders and decision-makers on different sides of the conflict, further promoting long-term peace and stability.

### ***3.2.1 Mechanisms and Trajectories of Environmental Peacebuilding***

Environmental cooperation plays a pivotal role in fostering peacebuilding, particularly in conflict-ridden areas such as Palestine-Israel. Ide and Tubi (2020) highlight several mechanisms through which environmental cooperation can contribute to peacebuilding. Firstly, by improving environmental conditions, EP efforts can enhance the environmental security of marginalized communities, providing better access to essential natural resources and increasing their resilience. This approach aims to mitigate conflicts arising from competition over scarce resources, improve livelihoods, and prevent radicalization (Barnett & Adger, as cited in Ide & Tubi, 2020). EP also fosters trust, mutual understanding, and a collective identity by highlighting shared interests and creating win-win situations (Dresse et al., 2018). These efforts help nurture a sense of shared challenges and a perception of "shared affectedness," reshaping relationships by prioritizing socio-ecological systems over political borders (Barquet, 2015; Dresses, 2018). Additionally, EP activities can lead to the establishment of institutions dedicated to environmental cooperation

and broader peacebuilding efforts, particularly through joint educational activities and tangible collaborations addressing shared environmental concerns (Ide & Tubi, 2020).

### **3.3 Critiques of Environmental Peacebuilding**

Despite broad scholarly recognition of EP's potential benefits, the field has also been the subject of many critiques. These critiques focus on its origins, methods of engagement, and ways of addressing power imbalances and structural inequities. Ide & Tubi (2020), for example, affirm that the impact of EP activities, especially when focused on people-to-people dialogue and cooperation, on formal peace processes—that is, negotiations and agreements aimed at ending violent conflicts—has been significant yet modest. This suggests that while environmental initiatives may have localized or indirect positive effects on peace and stability, they may not always translate into significant advancements in formal peace negotiations or the resolution of underlying issues.

Furthermore, some scholars and practitioners argue that the field has yet to identify a reliable, evidence-based link between environmental interventions and their impact on peace and violence. Instead, the field predominantly relies on isolated case studies for its findings (Brown & Nicolucci-Altman, 2022; Dresse et al. 2018). This reliance on individual cases highlights the need for a comprehensive framework and a substantial evidence base to support the effectiveness of EP. Currently, there is no broad consensus or detailed analysis of the specific conditions under which environmental cooperation can effectively serve as a peacebuilding tool. Brown and Nicolucci-Altman (2022) emphasize that without a robust framework and empirical evidence, it remains challenging to generalize the outcomes of EP efforts across different contexts. Consequently, there is a critical need for systematic research and analysis to establish a clearer understanding of how environmental interventions can contribute to sustained peace and mitigate violence.

Another critical challenge, that is also relevant to the themes of this thesis, is the enduring influence of neoliberal perspectives on peace and sustainability (Brown and Nicolucci-Altman 2022; Dresse et al., 2018c; Peace Direct, 2021). EP interventions tend to be concentrated within professionalized non-profit organizations located in the global North. Consequently, the field lacks geographic and sectoral diversity and tends to view marginalized and underrepresented groups—those most affected by environmental degradation in the aftermath of conflict—as passive recipients of aid rather than recognizing them as knowledgeable agents of change in their own right (Ben-Shmuel & Halle, 2023a).

Additionally, the assumption underlying many EP interventions—that adversarial groups will naturally opt for mutually beneficial cooperation over zero-sum conflict, driven by cost-benefit analysis and rational decision-making—reflects a liberal peace perspective. This viewpoint posits that individuals will choose peace because it serves their interests. However, such an assumption fails to address the root causes of conflict and can obscure imbalanced power dynamics through superficial interventions (Dresse et al., 2018a). Moreover, the field’s tendency to focus on technical and scientific cooperation rather than the political aspects of conflict and issues of structural inequality can result in the production of ‘depoliticized’ and technical solutions that undermine the impact of environmental racism and violence and can further entrench structural inequalities (Ben-Shmuel, 2024; Davis, 2023).

This depoliticization often overlooks the deeper socio-political contexts that drive environmental conflicts, leading to interventions that may be technically sound but fail to address the systemic issues at the heart of environmental degradation and violence. Depoliticization is part of what Ide (2020) describes as the ‘dark side’ of EP. He argues that when environmental peacebuilding is always seen as “low politics,” this can contribute to concealing serious cleavages related to the impact of asymmetrical power relations and how structural inequalities inform the disproportionate impact of environmental degradation on people.

In conclusion, while the field of EP has made significant strides in promoting cooperation and addressing environmental challenges in conflict-affected regions, it has often overlooked the broader socio-political structures and power imbalances that shape environmental interventions (Sharifi et al., 2021; Ben-Shmuel & Halle, 2023a). When structural inequalities are not accounted for, EP initiatives may lead to adverse social and political consequences or provoke local resistance from marginalized or impacted communities if they fail to acknowledge or actively address socioeconomic and political disparities. This is particularly true when there are disproportionately affected communities, unequal power dynamics, or powerful actors are more likely to engage in using environmentally friendly rhetoric and strategies to mask or divert attention from underlying political and social injustices or exploitation, such as land appropriation and dispossession of Indigenous and marginalized populations. (Ben-Shmuel & Halle, 2023).

### **3.4 The Need for a Paradigm Shift**

Critical EP scholarship has called for the need to confront the field's colonial history (Brown & Nicolucci-Altman, 2022). These calls are part of a broader conversation in EP around the need to better engage with questions of structural inequality and power asymmetries (Ben-Shmuel & Halle, 2023a). Doing so demands moving beyond a patronizing 'savior' framework (Brown & Nicolucci-Altman, 2022) toward the exploration of new inclusive paradigms. Justice in EP encompasses principles of fairness, equity, accountability, and participation. Environmental injustices, such as unequal access to resources, disproportionate environmental burdens on marginalized communities, and exclusion from decision-making processes, contribute to conflict and undermine peacebuilding efforts. Therefore, scholars have argued that addressing these injustices is essential for building trust, fostering reconciliation, and promoting social cohesion (Salim, 2019).

The environmental justice scholarship and practice critically engages with these complex issues of structural inequalities, social justice, and the disproportionate impact of political or environmental action and harm on marginalized communities, which are missing perspectives from mainstream EP perspectives. Davis et al. (2023a) argue that the field is frequently criticized for its insufficient involvement with—and occasionally intentional masking of—the power dynamics and issues related to structural inequalities and racism. According to Schlosberg and Collins (2014), environmental justice is a “major movement and organizing discourse in the environmental politics arena” (p.359). In their examination of environmental justice, Schlosberg, and Collins (2014) understand it as a framework that amplifies and prioritizes the lived experiences of the most impacted and vulnerable communities and amplifies local knowledge. They understand the environment as the place where people practice work, interact and resist. Within this framework, environmental degradation harms nature and has a significant impact on everyday life. Engaging with environmental issues therefore necessitates adopting Indigenous and Marginalized perspectives around the relationality between humans and nature, integrating various forms of justice, including distributive, procedural and restorative, as well as dismantling environmental injustice and violence.

In his exploration of the urgent need for justice in sustainable development, Salem highlights the importance of engaging with legacies of environmental harm and contemporary violence. According to Hughes et al. (2022) environmental justice should be understood as part of a “redistributive struggle” for the equitable sharing of environmental burdens and benefits and requires a reckoning with how structural racism within capitalist nation-states is also a driver of environmental injustice. Ben-Shmuel and Halle (2023) argue that integrating environmental justice-responsive perspectives is crucial to ensuring that EP interventions effectively address issues of distributive inequity, lack of recognition, disenfranchisement, and the exclusion of basic needs and capabilities of systematically marginalized communities. By adopting these perspectives, EP interventions are more likely to achieve sustainable and equitable outcomes.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

This section aimed to provide a brief overview of the benefits and limitations of EP, emphasizing the colonial history of the field as a critical challenge and the failure to address power asymmetry and structural inequalities. It also sought to highlight ongoing discussions within the field about the need for a paradigm shift rooted in critical engagement with environmental justice perspectives. Furthermore, this section underscored the importance of adopting an expansive definition of the environment, as informed by environmental justice. This definition moves beyond technical, solution-based interventions to engage critically with root causes, environmental violence, and racism.

The next section will delve into the Palestinian-Israeli context, examining how the complex interplay between EP efforts, historical harms, and contemporary slow violence unfolds. The environment is strategically used as a tool to further the settler logic of dispossession and elimination (Braverman, 2009), serving as both a weapon and a shield. On one hand, it advances the appropriation of Palestinian land, and on the other, it obscures these actions under the guise of environmental protection and sustainable development (Hughes et al., 2022). Consequently, EP interventions in this context are inevitably shaped by these complex realities, as well as by the local resistance that arises in response to these underlying injustices.

## **Chapter 4: Environmental Peacebuilding & Cross-border Cooperation in Palestine/Israel**

### **4.1 Introduction**

Environmental cooperation efforts in Palestine-Israel are frequently highlighted as an important example of environmental peacebuilding (Alleson & Schoenfeld, 2007; Arielli, 2022; Djernaes et al., 2015; Zohar et al., 2010). Since the escalation of violence in Gaza in October 2023, these efforts have garnered increased attention as potential pathways to de-escalate violence, foster trust, and improve the humanitarian situation (Barron, 2024). According to human rights and environmental organizations, the environmental destruction in Gaza will have lasting effects on Gaza's ecosystems and biodiversity. The deliberate targeting of water infrastructure, the contamination of natural resources, and the devastation of agricultural lands in Gaza is, according to many scholars, a manifestation of decades of violent settler colonialism designed to drive the Palestinians from their land and make the places they inhabit unlivable (Boulos & Sorek, 2024).

In recent months, several peacebuilding organizations and entities, including some EP programs, have emphasized the urgent need for increased investment in dialogue and peacebuilding activities. These organizations have voiced criticism toward the international community for its lack of investment in civil society and grassroots efforts—efforts that are crucial for fostering justice, solidarity, and laying the groundwork for enduring peace. They argue that without substantial support for these grassroots initiatives, the foundation for a lasting diplomatic solution remains weak (Lyndon, 2024; Burt, 2024).

At the same time, some peacebuilding efforts have been targeted by growing anti-normalization sentiments (Nechin, 2024). Critics argue that these forms of cooperation normalize the Israeli occupation and depoliticize environmental issues (Middle East Monitor, 2024). By framing environmental issues as technical problems, critics claim that EP and environmental

cooperation efforts fail to recognize and account for the deeper roots embedded in the larger context of settler colonialism and military occupation (Dajani, 2022; Shqair, 2023).

EP, as part of the broader field of peacebuilding and dialogue in Palestine-Israel, has on one hand, been deemed important. Some scholars and environmentalists argue that the critical need to address shared environmental challenges provides a unique opportunity to pave the way for coexistence and the development of a collective identity (Barron,2024; Ide & Tubi, 2020). On the other hand, critics argue that EP programs risk being co-opted to serve political agendas that normalize the occupation and obscure the power asymmetries inherent in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Selby, 2002). These projects can be seen as depoliticizing environmental issues (Ide, 2020) by framing them as technical challenges rather than recognizing their roots in the broader context of settler colonialism and military occupation. More generally, recent events have shown that even long-standing dialogue-based peacebuilding programs can quickly unravel during times of crisis. A *New York Times* analysis examined the challenges facing Israeli and Palestinian peace activists in the aftermath of the events of October 7th, 2023 (Dominus, 2023). The analysis highlights how heightened fear, trauma, and violence, coupled with underlying miscommunications, can severely strain communication between activists. While the urgency of their shared work allowed some relationships to endure, the landscape has significantly changed (Barron,2024).

#### **4.2 A Brief History of Environmental Cooperation in Palestine-Israel**

As mentioned in Chapter 3 EP encompasses a wide range of practices and activities that prioritize environmental sustainability and climate change in peacebuilding efforts. It emphasizes the role of environmental cooperation in ending conflict and violence, while also addressing the impact of violence and intractable conflicts on the environment, often above the consideration of human impact. (Dresse et al., 2018a; Ide & Tubi, 2020). In the Palestinian-Israeli context,

environmental cross-border cooperation is an important example of grassroots, people-to-people projects, particularly those that have emerged in the wake of the Oslo Accords (Barron,2024). These projects are seen to leverage shared environmental challenges as a foundation for fostering dialog, building trust and promoting peace in Palestine-Israel. By addressing mutual environmental concerns, these initiatives seek to transcend political divides and contribute to a more sustainable and peaceful future for the region (Carius, 2007; Ide & Tubi, 2020).

Environmental scientists have long emphasized the urgent need for a collective response to environmental degradation and climate change in the lower Jordan Basin/Eastern Mediterranean region, which includes Israel, Palestine, and Jordan (Brooks et al., 2020). Experts project that the region will experience a temperature rise of approximately 1.4-4°C and a decrease in precipitation by 25% regionally and 40% locally; these changes will result in extreme weather conditions and natural disasters with severe consequences, especially in this water-scarce region (Carry & Giordano, 2019). Furthermore, the southern and eastern Mediterranean is expected to warm at a higher rate than the global average over the twenty-first century—between 2.2 and 5.1°C—which will lead to highly disruptive, if not catastrophic, changes to the region’s climate, including increased desertification (Agha, 2019) and dangerous levels of water scarcity. This region is already one of the most water-scarce areas on the planet, where basic drinking water needs are often unmet, and water sources are overdrawn threatening the sustainability of future water resources (Brooks et al., 2020).

As noted in Chapter 3, scholars and advocates of environmental cooperation argue that climate crisis and environmental degradation have significant national and regional security implications and can act as a risk multiplier. This means that while environmental degradation alone is not the direct cause of insecurity, a state or region’s inability to adapt to climate-related changes, coupled with poor public institutions, corruption, and existing social conflicts, can

exacerbate the impacts of environmental degradation, and intensify social tensions (Carry & Giordano, 2019, p. 18).

In this context, environmental degradation, particularly water scarcity, is perceived as a national security concern that necessitates joint efforts between Jordanians, Palestinians, and Israelis. Such cooperation is seen by many as important to address immediate environmental concerns but also foster regional stability and peace, demonstrating the need for a collective approach to environmental challenges in this politically sensitive and ecologically vulnerable region. For example, one EP organization promotes environmental cooperation, particularly in water management, as a tactical strategy that poses minimal political cost or harm to Israel due to its ample water production capacity. However, this cooperation offers significant political benefits for Israel, enhancing its reputation as a key player and innovator in the region (EcoPeace Middle East, 2022). At the same time, such cooperation aligns with the interests of the Palestinian government, which is eager to demonstrate its ability to improve the lives of Palestinians through economic development and better living conditions (EcoPeace Middle East, 2022a). Beyond its integral role in national security, the environment is seen by many stakeholders as a low-hanging fruit for conflict resolution. Among the final status issues related to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, water equity is widely regarded as the "most solvable" and least controversial. Thus, environmental cooperation offers a pragmatic pathway toward building trust and fostering long-term peace (Grzybowski & Hunnie, 2021).

#### ***4.2.1 History of EP People-to-People Efforts***

According to Herzog & Hai (2005), the term "people-to-people" became a 'code' for all efforts aimed at fostering cooperation and dialogue between Palestinians and Israelis in the post-Oslo era (i.e., post-1993) that were neither business-oriented nor humanitarian in nature (p.12). These initiatives were designed to bridge divides by focusing on shared interests and fostering

direct interactions between individuals and cooperation. It could be argued that the types of EP program that this research examines fall under the umbrella of people-to-people initiatives. These programs emerged in the wake of the Oslo Accords and aim to address pressing ecological challenges while simultaneously building trust and fostering collaboration between Israelis and Palestinians. Unlike many post-Oslo peacebuilding efforts that have faltered or collapsed, some EP programs have been lauded in the literature for their resilience and ability to persevere in the face of Oslo's failures (Schoenfeld et al., 2014). These projects are celebrated not only for their capacity to endure but also for their adaptability, navigating the complex political landscape of the region while addressing urgent environmental issues.

These initiatives are described by some as "much more" than traditional people-to-people efforts due to the deeply personal encounters they facilitate and the collaborative nature of their work (Schoenfeld et al., 2014). Participants in these projects are not only exposed to each other's narratives but also engage in practical, on-the-ground cooperation, which helps to transcend mere dialogue and build tangible connections (Schoenfeld et al., 2014). Environmental peacebuilding programs emphasize that ecological challenges transcend political and cultural boundaries, necessitating collaborative efforts for effective solutions. By engaging stakeholders from both communities in joint environmental projects, these initiatives aim to create a platform for continuous interaction and mutual understanding. Activities might include collaborative water management projects, shared agricultural practices, and joint environmental education programs.

EP programs in Palestine-Israel align closely with the contact hypothesis which argues that the increased exposure and dialogue between conflicting groups can reduce intergroup prejudice (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006, as cited in Barron, 2024). According to this hypothesis, structured interactions and cooperative activities foster understanding and empathy, helping to break down stereotypes and build trust. In the context of EP, joint efforts to address shared

ecological challenges provide space for dialogue and at the same time work on tangible solutions to achieve mutually beneficial solutions (Barron, 2024; Ide & Tubi, 2020; Schoenfeld et al., 2014).

#### ***4.2.2 Objectives of EP programs in Palestine-Israel***

According to Ide & Tubi (2021, p.6), EP activities in the Palestinian-Israeli context have focused on two key objectives: addressing environmental degradation issues to improve the environmental situation in the region and foster trust and understanding between Palestinians and Israelis. EP programs work to build community consensus and implement small-scale environmental projects that provide tangible solutions to solve equity and resource allocation issues. This also includes projects that offer training and livelihood opportunities for Palestinians, who face economic hardships and lack of opportunity within the context of a prolonged occupation. An example of this type of cooperation is one well-known organization with a flagship project centered on water. The project brings together Jordanians, Israelis, and Palestinians to work on advancing sustainable cross-border water and sanitation projects. It works with local communities, civil society, and government officials (Coşkun, 2016). Organizations that engage in projects like these believe that working with communities across borders that share mutual dependence on the same water resources can be a catalyst for fostering cooperation and dialogue around sustainable water management issues (Djernaes et al., 2015).

By concentrating on shared environmental vulnerabilities, EP efforts seek to foster a sense of ‘collective regional identity’ and create a joint “scale of meaning” (Ide & Tubi, 2020, p.8). Put differently, the strategic focus on environmental cooperation is perceived as an effective way to circumvent deeply entrenched political disputes that often hinder progress. EP projects often argue that challenges, such as water scarcity, pollution, and climate change, impact all communities regardless of political boundaries. This shared impact necessitates collective action and provides a platform for dialogue and collaboration that might otherwise be impossible (Arielli,

2022; Schoenfeld et al., 2014). Such a perspective, however, does not account for the disproportionate effects of environmental degradation on marginalized communities, and in this context on Palestinians whose environment is weaponized against them, as I argue in later chapters.

Furthermore, advocates of EP efforts emphasize their significant contributions to improving the livelihoods of Palestinians by offering capacity-building and training opportunities (Ide & Tubi, 2020). These initiatives aim to enhance living conditions and provide better economic prospects for a population constrained by prolonged military occupation, limited job opportunities, and ongoing infringements on their movement and access to services. Additionally, research on EP claims its potential to inspire activism and social change through collective mobilization and bottom-up advocacy.

According to Arielli (2022, p. 8), these projects achieve this by "harnessing technical solutions that encourage changes in policy, creating a social network of activists on both sides who will support a political peace process once it is launched, and supporting the efforts of other actors who want to promote peace-related processes". Research highlighting the benefits of EP programs in Palestine-Israel focuses on their ability to address environmental degradation and foster mutual trust and understanding (Ide & Tubi, 2020; Djernaes et al., 2015; Schoenfeld et al., 2014). For many environmentalists, these projects offer a glimmer of hope in an otherwise entrenched conflict, providing platforms for cooperation and dialogue amidst the absence of a clear and long-term political resolution.

#### ***4.2.3 Critiques of EP in Palestine-Israel***

While many scholars highlight the opportunities offered by EP, these initiatives are also the subject of growing criticism and an intensifying anti-normalization movement led by environmental activists and scholars, primarily based in the region (Dajani, 2022; Selby, 2002;

Shqair, 2023). These critics emphasize the limitations and power asymmetry issues in these projects. Palestinians who criticize EP interventions and cooperation efforts more broadly highlight their failure to address Israel's complicity in environmental degradation amid a prolonged military occupation and ongoing expansion of illegal settlements (Dajani, 2022; Ide & Tubi, 2020; Pundak, 2012). Dajani (2022) argues that projects that call for joint environmental cooperation as a domain that is above politics and use slogans such as "nature knows no borders" are harmful to the struggle against the occupation. By overlooking the oppressive reality of the Israeli state, these projects in effect contribute to perpetuating and normalizing oppression and further entrenching Israel's colonization and progressive denial of Palestinian rights.

Furthermore, Alatout (2006) identifies a fundamental limitation that informs critiques of environmental cooperation; the starkly contrasting realities experienced by Palestinians and Israelis that shape their respective environmental narratives. Palestinians see environmental issues as part of a broader conversation about land rights and Palestinian sovereignty. For Palestinians, a critical root cause to the environmental challenges they face is the occupation and Israeli oppressive policies. These policies severely limit their access to land and natural resources, impeding their ability to establish and maintain sustainable management systems. The occupation not only restricts their physical presence on the land but also disrupts traditional ecological practices, agricultural livelihoods, and the development of local infrastructure. Israeli control over key resources, such as water and agricultural land, exacerbates these challenges, leaving Palestinians with limited autonomy to implement environmental solutions (Gutkowski, 2018).

On the other hand, Israeli environmentalism adopts narratives that prioritizes improving quality of life and tend to overlook Israel's territorial domination over the land and therefore depoliticizes, or rather de-territorializes, environmental discourse (Alatout, 2006). It disconnects environmental challenges from the political realities of occupation and dispossession, presenting

them as neutral concerns that can be solved through cooperation and innovation. This selective narrative allows Israeli environmental efforts to project an image of progressiveness while sidestepping the deep-seated issues of land appropriation and control that lie at the heart of Palestinian environmental struggles. Consequently, this depoliticization obscures the structural violence embedded in Israel's policies, diminishing the urgency of addressing the broader socio-political context that underpins environmental degradation in the region (Braverman, 2023).

While the literature on EP and environmental cooperation offers valuable insights into the potential benefits and challenges of such initiatives, it often fails to fully capture the complex role that the environment plays within the Palestinian-Israeli context. These existing perspectives tend to overlook the significant power asymmetry embedded within environmental discourses, which often reflect and reinforce the broader political realities of occupation and domination. Furthermore, some scholars have called out a notable lack of structural analysis of the complex role that the environment plays in Palestine-Israel. As will be argued later, the environment is not merely a neutral or passive backdrop; rather, it is actively deployed as a tool to further Israeli domination and facilitate Palestinian dispossession (Barron, 2024, Braverman, 2009).

That said, these EP programs, while contributing to solving environmental degradation issues facing marginalized communities and fostering dialogue, may struggle to address structural inequities that shape the experience of Palestinians and inadvertently perpetuate it, including their access to, management of, and relationship with the environment. The challenge lies in confronting how environmental policies and practices are intertwined with broader systems of control and power. Some critiques of EP are closely intertwined with, or even conflated with, broader criticisms of state-level environmental cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians. This overlap suggests that the challenges and controversies surrounding EP efforts cannot be fully understood in isolation from the larger political and environmental dynamics at

play. Critics argue that these state-level collaborations, while framed as cooperative efforts, are characterized by significant power imbalances that disproportionately favor Israel and exacerbate the marginalization of Palestinians. As a result, EP programs are sometimes viewed with skepticism, as they may be seen as intertwined with oppressive state practices, potentially reinforcing the very injustices they aim to address.

While this research acknowledges these concerns, it does not adequately delve into whether and how Israeli-led EP programs might be perceived as part of broader criticisms of environmental cooperation and what will be described in the later section as environmental slow violence. The extent to which these programs are viewed as extensions of such critiques is beyond the scope of this study. However, the discussion raises important questions about the intersection of environmental initiatives and political power dynamics, suggesting that this is an area worthy of further investigation.

### **4.3 Masking Slow Violence in Green Development**

One key concept to understanding how the environment is weaponized in Palestine-Israel, and Palestinians' experience of that weaponization, is slow environmental violence (Nixon, 2011). Slow violence captures how Israeli policies incrementally shift spatial features that make a place livable without necessarily displacing or moving people outright. In Palestine-Israel, this includes the destruction of Palestinian agricultural lands, restricted access to natural resources, and the adverse environmental impacts of the occupation. Amira (2021) highlights the experiences of the small villages of Salfit in the West Bank, which are subjected to the deliberate release of wild boars into their communities, the decimation of their seasonal agriculture, and restrictions on their modes of production and mobility. These actions, which constitute state-backed settler violence (B'Tselem, 2022), fundamentally alter definitions of security and stability for Palestinians, effectively weaponizing their landscapes against them.

Amira (2021) further describes the critical importance of nature as a productive and political development space employed by the Israeli state to reinforce domination over the land and further disenfranchise Palestinian identity and presence. Slow violence is not confined to immediate time and space, often remaining invisible or not as apparent as direct violence. Slow violence also highlights the unseen, cumulative aspects of environmental and social harm embedded in development projects funded and implemented by Israel. Salamanca (2016) describes how Israeli infrastructure plans, specifically roads, but also water, as well as discriminatory access policies, are designed to prioritize the security of Israeli settlements at the expense of Palestinian livelihoods. These projects often operate under the guise of humanitarian efforts, attracting foreign funding, but serve to obscure the violence and erasure inflicted upon Palestinians.

Research that addresses the long-term and structural impacts of the insidious and often imperceptible forms of environmental harm that accumulate gradually over time, causing lasting damage is invaluable in understanding how Palestinians endure increasing alienation from their land, environment, and territories (Amira, 2021; Braverman, 2009; Hughes et al., 2022; Salamanca, 2016). In the Palestinian-Israeli context, these slow-moving disasters—such as land degradation, water scarcity, and restricted access to natural resources—are not incidental but are deeply entwined with the occupation.

#### ***4.3.1 Green Cover: The Dual Role of the Jewish National Fund in Concealing Palestinian Presence & Producing Settler Ecological Narratives***

In her exploration of nature administration and conservation in Israel, Braverman (2023) examines how Israeli ecological thought and practices are deeply embedded in colonial narratives. She argues that even when climate change mitigation and green development are perceived as urgent and critical, they are constantly at odds with critical Palestinian demands for self-

determination and decolonization. Braverman further explores the complexity and subtlety of "settler ecologies," which she argues are not monolithic but rather diverse, evolving, and sometimes contradictory.

These ecologies do not always display overt violence or deliberate intent to harm. Instead, they are intricately woven into colonial structures and scientific frameworks, making their true nature less apparent and more challenging to discern. Being embedded within accepted scientific and administrative practices allows Israel to obscure its exploitative actions, creating a veneer of legitimacy and benevolence. As a result, the management of natural resources and environmental policies can become powerful tools for furthering colonial objectives. Israel's ability to mask its true intentions through seemingly neutral or even positive ecological practices makes nature administration an effective means of maintaining control and perpetuating dominance. In Braverman's words, "Precisely because of this obfuscation, nature administration has become a potent weapon in the hands of the settler state" (2023, p.6).

Within critiques of environmental cooperation in Palestine-Israel, the historical and contemporary activities of the Jewish National Fund (JNF) are frequently examined (Braverman, 2009; Hughes et al., 2022; Shqair, 2023). The Keren Kayemet L'Yisrael- Jewish National Fund (KKL-JNF) was established in 1901 and was instrumental to how the Zionist project has formalized and expanded its control through acquiring Palestinian land, replacing resilient native trees such as olive and carob with vulnerable and fast-growing pine forests to create a new landscape fit for the narrative of 'a land without a people to a people without a land' (Braverman, 2014, p. 48). Using the innocent act of tree planting, gifting, and donating, KKL-JNF has used its legal status as a non-governmental entity to strengthen Zionist domination and act as a "land-laundering" apparatus on behalf of the Israeli state (p.49).

KKL-JNF has also been involved in projects aimed at greening the Arava Valley (Wadi Araba) and increasing the Jewish population there. This has necessitated the destruction of

Bedouin communities under the guise of land rehabilitation. For example, the Bedouin village of Al-Araqib has faced multiple instances of destruction, eviction, and displacement since 2010 and has been destroyed over 200 times. These actions are linked to JNF's efforts to "green" the desert (The New Arab, 2023). Controversies around the role of KKL-JNF persist. In October 2023, Israeli media revealed that KKL-JNF invested four million shekels (\$1 million) to support young Israeli settlers residing in illegal outposts in the occupied West Bank, strategically placed to minimize Palestinian grazing grounds (Shezaf, 2023).

KKL-JNF exemplifies how seemingly benign environmental initiatives can serve political and territorial goals. By planting millions of non-native trees and creating parks and forests, KKL-JNF has transformed the landscape while facilitating the erasure of Palestinian presence and history. These actions, presented as ecological restoration efforts, have systematically displaced and dispossessed Palestinians, reflecting the complex interplay of nature and power in Palestine-Israel (Braverman, 2013; Hughes et al., 2022). Understanding the role of organizations like KKL-JNF is essential because it serves as a prominent example of how and why environmental cooperation is criticized and why the environment is so contested. KKL-JNF has been repeatedly condemned for promoting environmental projects that, while seemingly aimed at conservation and sustainability, mask its involvement in the displacement of Palestinians and the expropriation of their lands. In fact, there have been instances where EP organizations have come under scrutiny for their ties to KKL-JNF and similar entities (Horowitz, 2010; Shqair, 2023). These connections raise concerns about the legitimacy and integrity of EP efforts, particularly when they fail to address the underlying environmental violence and broader colonial agendas driven by such organizations. By ignoring or downplaying the historical and ongoing displacement of Palestinians and the manipulation of land resources, EP initiatives risk perpetuating the very injustices they claim to resolve.

It is also worth noting that much of the funding that these EP programs receive comes from the American JNF, which technically is a separate entity from its Israeli counterpart, KKL. While JNF U.S. maintains institutional ties with KKL, its operational relationship has significantly reduced. By the mid-2010s, only one percent of JNF U.S. grants were directed to KKL, a dramatic decrease from 60 percent in 2008. However, this shift in funding priorities does not indicate that JNF U.S. has no involvement in the expansion of illegal settlements in the West Bank. Although JNF U.S. has scaled back direct support for KKL, it has not renounced KKL's actions, choosing instead to distance itself from some of KKL's controversies (Gottesman, 2021; Forward & Nathan-Kazis, 2017). In 2021, the executive committee of the Israeli JNF–KKL took steps to advance a policy focused on purchasing privately-owned Palestinian land in Area C of the West Bank to facilitate the expansion of Jewish settlements. This move has drawn significant criticism from many Jewish organizations abroad. In fact, Canada Revenue agency recently decided to revoke the JNF of Canada's charitable status over the organization's use of donations to support infrastructure projects for the Israeli Defense Forces (Barrows-Friedman, 2024).

#### ***4.3.2 Environmental Slow Violence: A Critical Lens for Understanding Palestinian Lived Experiences***

I argue in this research that environmental slow violence can be a useful analytic for understanding Palestinians' lived experiences. Throughout this work, I will return to the concept to explore how my participants' interactions with the land, resources, and environment are shaped by the ongoing occupation and context of settler colonialism, how these factors influence how they have engaged—often with deep ambivalence—in EP programs. Doing so, I will come to argue, can help us understand the role that EP programs play in contemporary Palestine-Israel.

Slow violence helps shed light on the ambivalence of its Palestinian subjects, in efforts to build peace and promote sustainability in the region. This research project builds on the work of

others who have found slow violence a fruitful critical lens to approach Palestine-Israel. Amira (2021), for example, argues that scholarship on Palestine-Israel tends to separate ecological considerations—such as how environmental projects are designed, implemented, and by whom—from the broader dynamics of environmental slow violence. He further argues that without the structural and historical grounding that slow violence as a concept offers, scholars often overlook the deeply political nature of environmental issues in the Palestine-Israel context. Moreover, this oversight enables certain ecological strategies that reinforce Israeli domination, facilitating the ongoing dispossession of Palestinians.

This research project takes up Amira's challenge, looking at how EP programs that work within a broader structural field of slow violence, must navigate its demands, and shape the experience of Palestinians and Israelis who are forced to contend with its historical weight. Doing so offers an important need to account for the structural forces that shape EP programs in Israel/Palestine (Barron, 2024). It is important to note here that while this research centers on the experiences of Palestinians within an Israeli-led EP context and may appear to focus primarily on the Palestinian-Israeli dialectic, environmental issues in the region are influenced by a broader range of factors beyond group identity politics. These issues are shaped not only by the Palestinian-Israeli binary but also by a complex interplay of geographic, socioeconomic, ethnic, religious, and political affiliations. Understanding the full scope of environmental challenges in Palestine-Israel requires acknowledging these diverse influences and how they intersect (Braverman, 2009). For example, in her exploration of divergent perspectives on environmental justice in Al Auja village, McKee (2021) highlights how varying life experiences, especially in terms of rural versus urban residence, career paths, and gender, led to differing perspectives among Palestinians on what constitutes environmental benefits and harms. As she explains in her own words: "While some emphasize the lack of Palestinian sovereignty over natural resources, others focus on the obstruction of agricultural livelihoods in villages and the unfair pricing of water" (p.44).

By examining the social and economic dynamics in al-Auja and tracing the historical trajectories of the different communities residing there, McKee (2021) highlights the importance of adopting an intersectional lens when addressing environmental harm and justice issues. This, in return, offers a more nuanced understanding of how diverse factors intersect to shape individual and collective experiences of environmental harm and justice (Braverman, 2021).

#### **4.4 Environmental Peacebuilding Within Growing Anti-Normalization Sentiments**

In February 2024, dozens of Jordanians protested outside the Jordan Valley Authority in Amman, calling for an end to environmental cooperation with any Israelis entities. They specifically demanded that the authority not renew the lease for a nearby eco-park managed by a collaborative environmental and EP organization that brings together Palestinian, Israeli, and Jordanian environmentalists to work on joint projects at both grassroots and governmental levels. The protesters argued that the park is being used as a normalization site disguised as an environmental conservation project by hosting joint environmental programs and workshops that bring together Israelis, Jordanians, and Palestinians. This example illustrates how broader criticisms of environmental cooperation with Israel and state-affiliated entities can sometimes extend to EP efforts.

These EP programs, typically initiated and coordinated by non-profit organizations as illustrated in section (4.2), often employ language such as *“nature cannot wait “*, *“nature knows no borders”*, and *“When climate change affects everyone,”* which emphasizes the urgency of environmental issues, shared responsibility and collective impact. Critics argue that such programs elevate environmental concerns above the political context, and in doing so inadvertently normalize and legitimize the Israeli occupation. This occurs under the pretext of promoting sustainable development and fostering cross-border environmental cooperation,

without properly acknowledging or addressing the long-standing environmental violence and land dispossession perpetuated by the Israeli state (Dajani, 2022).

While deemed important by the majority of Palestinians, growing anti-normalization sentiments mean that Palestinians can sometimes be the target of social censure and being called ‘normalizer’ or collaborators, a label that carries significant social and political consequences on Palestinians (Andoni,2003). The term 'normalizer' is especially potent in Palestinian society, where the resistance to occupation is not only a political stance but also a deeply ingrained part of the collective identity. Those accused of normalization may be seen as undermining the broader Palestinian struggle for self-determination.

#### ***4.4.1 Background on the Term Normalization***

The term "normalization" broadly refers to various forms of professional, economic, social, and cultural cooperation between Palestinians, the broader Arab world on one side, and Israelis on the other side, beyond formal peace processes (Andoni, 2003). Originally, the term was used to describe the normalization of relations between Israel and Arab countries after the 1973 Six-Day War. In 1979, Egypt became the first Arab country to recognize Israel by signing a peace treaty and establishing political cooperation. Jordan followed in 1994, post-Oslo Accords, with a peace treaty aiming to normalize relations and establish economic and environmental cooperation agreements, resulting in Israel returning territory near the Rift Valley to Jordan (Roy, 2002).

Many scholars argue that the Oslo Accords not only failed to improve the daily lives of Palestinians but also exacerbated conditions in the occupied territories. Following Oslo, illegal Israeli settlements expanded significantly, security measures became more oppressive, and military occupation intensified, particularly in the West Bank (Roy, 2002; Todorova, 2014; Shlaim, 2021). Rather than serving as a step toward peace and sovereignty, Oslo is viewed by

critics as a mechanism that effectively normalized Israeli control over Palestinian territories, entrenching the occupation further.

Disillusionment with the Accords gave rise to a powerful narrative among many Palestinians and activists, who saw Oslo as a tool for legitimizing ongoing occupation and suppressing the Palestinian struggle for self-determination. As a result, resistance to Oslo grew, prompting calls to reject any form of cooperation with Israeli entities, not just in formal political or economic contexts but also in grassroots, cultural, and environmental peacebuilding initiatives. This opposition extended to people-to-people programs, which critics argue could inadvertently legitimize Israel's policies of occupation and by promoting a false sense of normalcy. Boycotts and the rejection of cooperative initiatives became acts of protest, emphasizing that collaboration with Israel in any form risks undermining the Palestinian cause and obscuring the power imbalances at play.

#### ***4.4.2 Perspectives on Anti-Normalization and the BDS Movement***

For many Palestinians, normalization implies a willingness to engage in dialogue, cooperation, or any form of interaction that sidesteps the critical issues of occupation, land expropriation, and the denial of Palestinian self-determination. It is viewed as a form of complicity that undermines the struggle for justice and freedom, potentially validating the status quo without addressing the structural injustices imposed by the Israeli state. As a result, many Palestinians resist normalization efforts as they believe it dilutes their resistance to occupation, allowing Israel to maintain its oppressive policies under the guise of peacebuilding and collaboration.

Conversely, for some Israelis, normalization has a different connotation. It is seen as a pathway toward regional and international legitimacy, wherein Israel is accepted as a Jewish state in the Middle East without the need to confront or resolve the underlying issues of Palestinian

rights, sovereignty, or justice. From this perspective, normalization offers a way to solidify Israel's standing in the region and globally, sidestepping the historical and ongoing grievances of Palestinians. This stark contrast in the understanding of normalization reflects the deep divide between the two sides, with Palestinians seeing it as a threat to their struggle for justice and Israelis viewing it as a step toward long-term acceptance without addressing the fundamental injustices embedded in the occupation (Salem, 2005). The primary movement in Palestine with a prominent anti-normalization stance is the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanction Campaign, otherwise known as the BDS movement. Developed in 2005 as a coalition of Palestinian intellectuals, academics, unions and non-governmental organizations, the movement sought to end the occupation through boycott and divestment initiatives similar to those used against apartheid South Africa in the 1980s (Barghouti, 2011).

A critical component of the BDS movement is the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI). Palestinian and international academics, intellectuals, and entertainers have joined this movement to call for a “comprehensive economic, cultural, and academic boycott of Israel” (PACBI, 2008). PACBI discourages joint activities between Palestinians and Israelis, but also makes a distinction between ‘co-existence’ and ‘co-resistance.’ According to the PACBI, normalization applies to any cooperation that creates a false impression of normalcy, symmetry, or equality within the fundamentally unequal and abnormal context of colonial oppression (PACBI, 2012), and that tokenizes Palestinians as fig leaves to obscure Israeli human rights violations and system of apartheid imposed on Palestinians (B’Tselem, 2021). However, PACBI acknowledges the need for “co-resistance” between Israelis and Palestinians: “Israelis who support our comprehensive rights under international law and struggle with Palestinians against the wall, checkpoints, and other forms of apartheid are our partners. Relationships with them do not constitute normalization” (PACBI, 2012).

The Palestinian NGO Network (PNGO) supports the BDS campaign by calling for the cessation of joint programs between Palestinian and Israeli organizations, except for solidarity actions. According to the PNGO code of conduct, no endeavor should undermine Palestinian rights to statehood and the return of refugees to their original homes (The Palestinian NGOs Code of Conduct, 2008).

Palestinians themselves hold a wide range of perspectives on normalization. This spectrum of viewpoints reflects the diverse political, social, and subjective experiences among Palestinians (Todorova's, 2014). For instance, Salem (2007) argues that many Palestinians reject the normalization of relations in the current context of ongoing military occupation and systemic violence. This implies that some Palestinians might be open to dialogue and cooperation, particularly at the grassroots level, if these interactions occur within a framework that addresses the core issues of Palestinian dispossession and align with their aspirations for self-determination and the end of the occupation (Salem, 2007, p. 1).

Israeli scholars engaged in peace and solidarity work with Palestinians have, at times, pushed back on some of the anti-normalization rhetoric. For example, Jeff Halper (2012) argues that Palestinians' calls for boycott and criticism of normalization efforts can sometimes hinder opportunities for solidarity and co-resistance between Palestinians and Israelis. According to Halper, this trend risks oversimplifying the complexities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and may hinder the potential for building alliances between those committed to justice and peace. By dismissing the possibility of co-resistance, these criticisms may inadvertently weaken the collective struggle against the occupation and reduce the opportunities for Israelis and Palestinians to work together in meaningful and transformative ways

Corroborating Halper's perspective, Todorova's (2014) points out that some positions on the BDS movement tend to conflate 'Israel' with 'Israeli', blurring the distinction between critiquing state policies and challenging individuals or identities. According to Todorova, this

delegitimization does not differentiate between the state's policies and the diverse identities and cultural expressions within Israel, thereby contributing to a polarized environment that complicates the pursuit of mutual understanding and co-resistance. This conflation can complicate the discourse around BDS and normalization, making it more challenging to navigate the nuances of resistance and solidarity. She further states that: "Israel and Israeli are not symbiotic. Israeli is a national and cultural identity, which although the product of the establishment of the settler colonial state of Israel, does not necessitate its continuation as a settler colony to exist as a form of identification" (p.206). Todorova also highlights how individual Israelis, who are not the main focus of BDS campaigns, can at times become unintentional targets, potentially undermining Israeli efforts and solidarity work with Palestinians and leading to negative repercussions for those seeking to support Palestinian rights.

The discourse around anti-normalization in Palestine-Israel presents a significant challenge for peacebuilding efforts. While both calls for BDS and critiques of normalization highlight prominent issues of justice and resistance against oppressive policies, they can also inadvertently hinder opportunities for dialogue and co-resistance. EP efforts have faced some scrutiny from anti-normalization and BDS advocates. The central concern is that such programs could legitimize the occupation by creating a superficial appearance of cooperation and harmony, without genuinely addressing the deep-rooted power imbalances and systemic injustices that define the conflict. Critics argue that these initiatives risk normalizing the status quo, allowing the facade of joint environmental efforts to overshadow the critical political and social issues at the heart of the Palestinian struggle (Dajani, 2022; Ide and Tubi, 2020; Shqair, 2023).

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

In sum, there are various critical ecological discourses informing the understanding and analysis of environmental cooperation and EP efforts in Palestine-Israel. Some literature focuses

on the potential of EP and the positive impact of collaborative environmental initiatives in fostering dialogue and cooperation between Palestinians and Israelis, especially in the absence of a clear formal political resolution and deepening divides (Alleson & Schoenfeld, 2007; Arielli, 2022; Schoenfeld et al., 2014). Conversely, other perspectives approach these programs through a broader lens that critically examines the practices of the Israeli state within the context of structural inequality, and environmental slow violence. These viewpoints emphasize the importance of understanding how such initiatives, while seemingly focused on environmental cooperation and dialogue, may also be perceived as complicit in perpetuating the very power imbalances and injustices they purport to address or fail to adequately be engaged with issues of structural inequality (Dajani, 2022; Barron, 2024; Braverman, 2023). In addition, growing anti-normalizations sentiments places Palestinians who wish to engage in EP are placed in particularly precarious situation. On one hand, they may perceive environmental cooperation and dialog as important and wish to make use of the opportunities offered given their limited opportunities; on the other, they risk being perceived as compromising their political principles, contributing to the depoliticization of their struggle.

## Chapter 5: Thematic Analysis

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a thematic analysis of participants' reflections on their experiences in EP contexts and insights in their own words and aims to present their perspectives and stories into thematic categories of shared meaning. The topics it discusses are organized around the emergent themes and issues that were introduced by the participants during my interviews with them. Participants' reflections revealed a complex web of perspectives that highlight the paradoxical experiences of Palestinians within EP contexts. Importantly, I explore how these reflections go beyond simple binaries of good and bad, or whether these programs should be outright celebrated or condemned. Instead, their accounts reflect the nuanced and often conflicting realities that participants navigate, balancing the tangible benefits of these initiatives against the deeper ethical and political dilemmas they evoke. In navigating these complex dynamics, the experiences my interviewees explained to me transcend the simplistic dichotomy of their being either passive victims of circumstance or laudable symbols of resistance. Instead, my interlocutors' comments engage in and shape a more nuanced account of agency, where participation in EP programs becomes both an act of survival and a strategic form of empowerment.

While EP initiatives between Palestinians and Israelis occur in various settings, including meetings in Jordan, Palestine, and Israel, the program in which my interlocutors participated was specifically based in Israel. This focus on an Israeli-based program brings up complex dynamics and experiences that are shaped by being in this particular context that may not be relevant in others. For the Palestinians I spoke to, the land the program took place on—a Kibbutz in the Negev desert—is not merely a geographical location but part of historic Palestine, occupied in 1948, leading to the creation of the state of Israel and the displacement of millions of Palestinians

(Shlaim, 2016). As such, participating in an EP program in Israel carries a significant emotional and political weight for Palestinian participants, as it involves engaging with territories that, in their view, symbolize the ongoing reality of dispossession and communal fragmentation. These feelings and the complex reflections on their participation in such a space will be the primary analytical lens reflected in this thematic analysis.

## **5.2 Thematic Analysis**

Through our discussions and reflections on their experiences, participants focused on three key aspects that they highlighted as critical to understanding their experiences: 1) the perceived limitations and challenges of EP programs, shaped by their life under occupation and encounters with environmental violence; 2) reflections on how they navigate the tensions of participating in an Israeli-led peacebuilding project within a context of growing anti-normalization sentiments and the potential accusations of being collaborators; 3) and broader reflections on their overall interactions with other participants in the program, including Israelis, other Palestinians, and international students. Collectively, these discussions provided a nuanced understanding of the complexities that characterize their involvement in such initiatives.

### ***5.2.1 Critiques of EP at the Backdrop of Palestinian Lived Experiences with Environmental Slow Violence***

Participants highlighted several limitations and concerns they had about the specific EP programs they took part in during their participation in the program. Their insights were deeply informed by their personal experiences with the slow, often imperceptible, environmental degradation that characterizes life under occupation, and the contradictions they encountered throughout their participation. These concerns include:

### **a) Failure to Engage with Structural Inequality**

In reflecting on the root causes of environmental degradation and climate change, the majority of participants emphasized the impact of Israel's ongoing military occupation, including the expansion of settlements, and the expropriation of Palestinian land. At least half of the participants expressed frustration with the nature of the environmental solutions and environmental cooperation projects either undertaken by the organization or introduced to them over the course of their participation. In their reflections, participants perceived these projects to providing tangible solutions, however, they felt that these solutions were predominantly temporary and "makeshift." Many of them expressed that while yielding positive outcomes to small, marginalized communities, these solutions still take place within a context of deep-seated structural inequalities.

One participant, SL21, described environmental projects carried out by the organization as "*tarqee*," "ترقيع" which literally translates to "tinkering." This term aptly encompasses the desultory and piecemeal manner in which the implementation of these projects is perceived by some of the participants. She shared further that, "I worked [on a project] to help build plastic houses so that Palestinians can sell their produce to the nearby settlements. Although the project was initially successful, winter brought sewage and wastewater from the two [Israeli] settlements on the mountains above down into village, destroying the plastic houses. These projects create makeshift solutions; they merely tinker with the problems; *tarqee*' "

SL21's frustrations with the project's ultimate demise due to settlement practices is not an isolated issue. Since most Israeli settlements are established on ridges and hilltops, their untreated wastewater commonly flows downhill into nearby Palestinian communities, which are typically located further down the slopes. As research has demonstrated, this creates significant environmental hazards for these downhill Palestinian villages. Exacerbating the issue is the lack of wastewater treatment plants in the settlements, resulting in the direct dumping of untreated

sewage into Palestinian villages (Hareuveni, 2009). Referring to my earlier discussion, these waste-water politics can be seen as an indicative manifestation of environmental slow violence. The flow of untreated wastewater, along with its damaging effects on land, water, and health, serves as a stark reminder of how environmental issues are deeply intertwined with political and structural violence in Palestine-Israel. Moreover, SL21's account speaks to the impossibility of such EP efforts. In this case, ensuring the sustainability of the plastic houses the participant built would necessitate the development of waste-water treatment in a nearby settlement, something that Palestinian participants may balk at. This dynamic both highlights the intertwined nature of Israeli and Palestinian struggles for sustainability and alludes to the potential Palestinian frustration that projects they have worked on are caught between either confronting the destruction of their work, or further entrenching the material embodiments of the occupation, i.e. settlements.

Another participant, MN14, echoed SL21's perspective, sharing his experience working on a project to treat black and gray water to irrigate palm trees in a village in the West Bank. Despite the project's good intentions, the nearby settlements were taking fresh water, and the lands were under threat of confiscation. MN14 questioned the value of solving immediate problems without addressing the underlying issues, exclaiming, "What is the point if you solve one small problem but do not tear it up by the roots!" The perception that these projects only offer temporary solutions that do not address issues on a macro level points to some participants' skepticism about the true impact of environmental peacebuilding efforts when set against the deeply entrenched and pervasive challenges they face.

In their encounters with different environmental projects, participants shared frustration with what they perceived as the lack of context and acknowledgment of historical injustices. For many, these environmental initiatives are intertwined with the political realities of land dispossession, settler colonialism, and ongoing marginalization. Without addressing these layers

of injustice, such projects—however well-intentioned—can inadvertently reinforce the very power dynamics and erasures they claim to rectify. For example, TN23 recalled going on a fieldtrip to one project located on a dispossessed Bedouin community. She shared her experience:

“[These] Israelis have created an impressive project, but this was built on stolen land, on the ruins of demolished Bedouin communities. And yet, they dare tell us how generous they are for allowing Bedouins to access the land for grazing. At the time, there was another participant in the program, a Bedouin, who refused to join a field trip because the land belonged to one of her relatives before it was taken.”

This example reflects the deep-rooted grievances that these programs cannot erase or heal. The tension between "progress" and historical injustice is a painful reminder of the power dynamics that continue to shape the landscape, and the lives of Palestinian communities displaced by such development efforts. This dynamic suggests a manifestation of what I've explored in this work as slow environmental violence, where harm accumulates gradually through the loss of land, resources, and autonomy, leaving long-lasting impacts on the communities involved. The challenge for EP programs lies in navigating these complexities and acknowledging that true environmental justice must confront these deeper systemic injustices.

## **b) Framing the Environment as Neutral & Degradation as A Collective**

### **Responsibility**

In addition to voicing concerns about the effectiveness of the environmental solutions carried out by the organization, some participants also felt that the approach taken to address environmental issues falls short by focusing narrowly on the impact of environmental degradation. Furthermore, they noted the organization's use of neutral language to describe its work, which, according to some of participants, ignores the complex realities and historical

injustices that are integral to understanding and resolving environmental challenges in Palestine-Israel.

Some participants raised concerns about the organization's language around collective responsibility and shared affectedness, particularly slogans like “the environment knows no borders” and messaging suggesting that climate change impacts everyone equally. They felt that such language positions the environment as a more urgent issue than addressing the impact of the occupation and environmental violence, obscuring the unequal experiences of Palestinians and Israelis. SL21 expressed her frustration with this framing, stating: “It felt like they’re saying that the environment is something we all need to prioritize together, but how can we do that when the land itself is being taken from us? This [language] ignores the reality of what’s happening on the ground—it puts the environment above our own struggle.”

This sentiment reflects a broader critique of how EP initiatives might utilize neutral universalizing and depoliticized language that can contribute to downplaying the stark disparities in power and lived experiences between Palestinians and Israelis, potentially sidelining the deeper, more pressing issues of systemic injustice and inequality that define the Palestinian-Israeli context (Dajani,2022). This was a painful and strongly expressed sentiment, echoed by others. JN52 noted that, while he believed that Palestinian-Israeli cooperation on environmental issues is important, he found the language used by the organization, which emphasizes shared responsibility and mutual experience, was unproductive. He elaborated, “I understand that the environment cannot wait, but there is a more powerful side, and they [Israelis] benefit more. Even if you try to establish environmental equity, the needs are drastically different. For an Israeli, access to water means pursuing more innovative green projects, and meeting an additional need. For a Palestinian, it’s about quenching the thirst of deprived children.”

LB74 also provided an example of how water scarcity was talked about in the project, highlighting that framing environmental degradation as a shared problem and a collective responsibility can obscure power imbalances and the role of state practices in exacerbating water issues. “They try to portray water as a collective problem while ignoring the fact that they [Israel] stole water. They tell you about these joint projects where Israel is helping, but actually, it is not helping! It is like you took a loaf of bread from us and now you are giving it back as crumbs.”

JN52 and LB74's reflections suggest deeper environmental frustrations that Palestinians face, particularly regarding water disparity in the region. These disparities are a critical manifestation of environmental slow violence in Palestine-Israel. B'Tselem (2017) reports that while both Palestinians and Israelis rely on the same aquifer, 80% of the water in the West Bank is allocated for Israeli use, leaving only 20% for Palestinians. This inequity is worsened by Israeli policies that compel the Palestinian Authority to purchase water from Israel, further entrenching these severe inequalities. Israelis, including settlers, consume an average of 247 liters of water per day, while some Palestinian communities receive as little as 26 liters daily—comparable to conditions in disaster zones. That said, references to water inequity highlights instances where Palestinian frustration with the broader system of Israeli oppression is projected onto smaller programs, even when those initiatives may not be directly complicit in these dynamics. For many Palestinians, these programs—regardless of their intentions—exist within a larger framework of systemic inequality, making it difficult to separate them from the power structures that perpetuate their marginalization.

At the same time, a few participants argued that the language of collective responsibility and shared affectedness is crucial for tackling the environmental challenges. They emphasized the importance of environmental cooperation, asserting that working together remains critical to addressing these issues effectively. According to EY72, “If I can help protect some villages from

environmental harm and diseases, I do not care if people say I am involved in normalization." EY72, who identified as an environmental activist, highlighted the importance of understanding the Israeli context as a crucial step in effectively addressing environmental degradation. He argued that gaining insight into the forces driving environmental challenges is essential for developing effective solutions.

He explained, "The biggest enemy to green spaces is grey spaces. I cannot attack the beast without understanding it." By "grey spaces," EY72 referred to Israel's security infrastructure, such as the Separation Wall, and the environmental degradation it has caused. This, it can be argued is a manifestation of environmental slow violence that shapes Palestinians' experiences in EP contexts. He refers to the need to understand the environmental challenges, even those caused by aspects of the security apparatus, in order to best tackle them. For him, like earlier participants who expressed dissonance at the lack of recognition between the political and environmental, this was an important issue. Yet, he chose to work alongside an Israeli organization, because he felt they were truly helping protect certain areas from harm and disease.

This sentiment was echoed by other participants as well. For example, JN52 explained: "You have a reality you have to live within. The real question is, what do you want? Do you want to stay ignorant and do nothing with your life, or do you want to make the best of it? Programs like these aren't perfect, but they offer a gateway to something better." Like EY72, he chose to engage in these imperfect programs to address issues that could make a difference on some marginalized and affected communities. One participant, DR17, even went on to describe their participation in the program and efforts to provide tangible solutions to marginalized communities as a form of "*nidal*," or Palestinian resistance: "While [these programs] may not bring about peace, I see them as a form of *nidal*—resistance. When I engage in projects that impact marginalized communities, it means the world to me, regardless of the political backdrop. I have had the chance to connect with very remote and neglected communities. For me, this is a form of

resistance against the occupation and environmental violence—no less significant than any other form of struggle.”

For DR17, resistance is not solely defined by direct confrontation with the occupying forces. Instead, it also includes empowering marginalized communities and working towards environmental justice—all of which contribute to a larger strategy of enduring resistance. This broader conception of resistance allows them to redefine what it means to struggle for liberation, incorporating actions that might not be overtly political but are no less meaningful in terms of their impact on Palestinian life and sovereignty. While this perspective was not widely shared among participants, it reflects a nuanced understanding of resistance—one that recognizes the value of everyday acts of resilience, including working alongside Israelis in making short-term gains in this long-term conflict.

### **c) Concerns Over Partnership & Funding from State-Affiliated Entities**

In reflecting on the limitations and critiques of EP efforts, the majority of former participants, to varying degrees, expressed concerns about funding and partnerships with organizations that are affiliated with the state or that reflect Zionist agendas, such as KKL- JNF. As argued in chapter 4, organizations like the KKL-JNF are seen as instrumental in serving Israel's agenda of dispossession and elimination (Braverman, 2009). This concern led to a sense of uneasiness and sometimes suspicion about the true intentions and long-term objectives of the project. MN14 shared his sentiment about this dynamic, “No matter how much good work they do or how many noble values they uphold, in the bigger picture, I can see where the money comes from. It's like Coca-Cola funding medication for diabetes.” Drawing a parallel to "Coca-Cola funding medication for diabetes" highlights the contradiction MN14 perceives; it seems hypocritical and self-serving for a company responsible for contributing to health problems like diabetes through its sugary products to also fund treatment for the very same condition. By

using this analogy, MN14 suggests that, despite doing some valuable work, these organizations may be complicit in perpetuating the very issues they claim to address. This creates a moral dilemma, where the source of funds compromises the integrity of the work being done.

Others felt that, while the project's core intentions might be focused on creating positive change, the need to secure funding often leads to compromises. They argued that although these programs may receive funding from sources that serve Israeli agendas, that does not necessarily compromise the independence of these organizations. They believed that the organization is still able to operate with integrity and pursue its stated mission.

One participant, DR17, reflected on the diverse affiliations and environmental narratives within the organization, stating, "The organization is not a monolith; it consists of individuals working and engaging in different ways. For some, justice and the Palestinian struggle is integral to their work, while others might align with Zionist perspectives. However, these differing views do not define the organization as a whole." DR17 further highlighted that the organization has had internal discussions concerning its funding sources and connections with entities like the JNF. At the same time, DR17 argued it was difficult to completely disassociate from entities such as the JNF if you're engaged in environmental work. He further elaborated on the difficulties of divesting from the JNF, acknowledging its status as one of the largest green development NGOs. "Getting out of a relationship with the JNF is very hard," they explained further, "This doesn't justify the ongoing relationship, and I still think it's problematic. But these things take time, and I believe the organization is aware of the challenges and the need to address them."

DR17's experience reflects the broader tension many participants feel when working within environmental programs that may be tied to entities perceived as complicit in the occupation. DR17's belief that the organization is working to address these issues signals a hope for gradual change, even within difficult political and financial constraints.

Beyond the type of funding the organization receives or affiliation with seemingly questionable entities, some participants felt that the organization's location within Israel, the fact that Palestinians travel to Israel to participate, and the predominance of Israeli leadership, despite the inclusion of some Palestinian voices, indicate that they still reflect Israeli-only interests. LB 74 expressed her frustration over this issue by saying: “Most of these [EP] programs are Israeli led. The colonizers have designed this program and invited you! And you [as a Palestinian] are there trying to prove yourself to them, in systems that belong to them. I am there trying to meet their objectives and accept their agenda in the hopes that they listen to my voice.” Involvement in the program for the majority of participants placed them in a position where they had to conform to an agenda set by Israelis. The feeling of needing to prove themselves in a system designed by and for Israelis contributes to the sense of frustration that LB74 expressed.

### ***5.2.2 Navigating Anti-Normalization Discourse***

The concept of normalization and its perception among Palestinians, particularly in the context of environmental peacebuilding programs, is fraught with tensions. A few former participants highlighted how for participants in environmental peacebuilding programs, acceptance and criticism from their community, family, and friends regarding their involvement in such projects often hinges on where they are from and their experiences with the occupation. According to MN14, families living in Jerusalem might not object to involvement in these projects, given that these are the only opportunities available. Participants from the West Bank face more pressure due to their direct experiences with the occupation and with settlers (Hareuveni, 2021). Those from villages who frequently encounter Israeli soldiers face even greater scrutiny and judgment when participating in such programs. The situation varies significantly depending on whether one is from a city like Ramallah, where there is more internal freedom of movement, or a village in the West Bank experiencing more severe impacts of the occupation.

### **a) The Inevitability of Normalization**

Some former participants highlighted that it is important to consider the circumstances that lead Palestinians to participate in such a program. The lack of opportunities, especially in fields related to environmental studies, and the limited employment prospects under occupation, are significant factors driving their participation. This program provides access to resources, education, and sometimes, a mere respite from the harsh realities of life under occupation. As JN52 describes, “People have varied reasons to join, and they are all legitimate: to learn; to have fun; to get out of the house. Maybe the fear of being accused of normalizing is bigger now, but also the need is bigger. You have to understand where people are coming from in such dire circumstances.” Living under occupation, facing systemic barriers, and feeling abandoned by their leadership, Palestinians often find themselves participating in initiatives that many of them find flawed or counterproductive to their struggle. In the absence of broader structural change, these imperfect programs become vital lifelines. This is a sentiment shared by the majority of participants.

According to MN14, “I do not blame any student for participating to try and build a future for themselves and learn something. I would not call him a normalizer. It is better than working in building a settlement and making minimum wage. I also do not blame those. They are forced to do this. This is just normal.” Here, MN14 addresses the complexity of navigating the fraught landscape of Palestinian-Israeli relations, particularly the social censure faced by those who choose to engage in dialogue or educational programs with Israelis. MN14 expresses empathy, acknowledging that for many Palestinians, participating in this EP program is a pragmatic decision—a way to gain skills, education, or a better future in a context where opportunities are severely limited. Rather than viewing these participants as “normalizers”, MN14 draws a distinction between survival choices and ideological compromise. He highlights that participation

in these initiatives is often a better alternative than working under exploitative conditions, such as building settlements for low wages—an economic necessity for many Palestinians.

The systemic barriers Palestinians face—such as restricted access to quality education, limited job prospects, and economic instability—leave them with few options for improving their socio-economic conditions without participating in initiatives that might conflict with their personal and political values. For many of them, these reasons outweigh the threat of being criticized for participating in an Israeli-led project or being called a collaborator. Furthermore, many participants expressed that, while they celebrate the success and progress of the anti-normalization movement and the pressure it places on Israel, Palestinians' lived reality restricts their ability to contribute to the movement. MN14 shared, "I see the anti-normalization discourse in Jordan and the Gulf, and it [soothes] my heart. However, we [Palestinians] live under one system, and if you try to step outside of it, our 'cousins' [i.e., the Israelis] will put their foot down. They don't need an accusation to imprison you; many people are held in administrative detention without charges against them."

MN14 highlights the fact that Palestinians live under a single, oppressive system where stepping outside its boundaries—such as openly resisting or defying Israeli state control—can lead to severe consequences. The reference to Israelis as "cousins" is an ironic remark, often used by Palestinians, which reflects the tense yet intimate relationship and alludes to the fact that the fates of Palestinians and Israelis are inextricably linked. By invoking this term, Palestinians point to the tension of living under the same system, where the possibilities for their future are constrained by the political and military dominance of Israelis, despite the supposed "familial" connection (Tamari, 2005). This perspective highlights the complex realities faced by Palestinians, who must navigate a system that offers them little choice but to comply with certain norms for survival. While the anti-normalization movement gains momentum globally, Palestinians living under

occupation face significant constraints that limit their ability to participate in similar forms of resistance.

## **b) Critiques of Anti-Normalization Rhetoric**

Some participants argued that what they have perceived as the BDS movement's rigid stance on engagement with Israelis can limit opportunities for dialogue and mutual understanding. By drawing strict lines, the movement may inadvertently isolate Palestinians from international networks and resources that could support their cause. Additionally, the majority of participants expressed concern that the anti-normalization strategies do not always account for the complex realities on the ground. In contexts where Palestinians have limited opportunities, anti-normalization could disproportionately impact those who rely on these resources for their livelihood.

DN28 emphasized the need to distinguish between the Israeli government and civil society organizations that, in his view, are genuinely working to foster peace and coexistence. “These programs create a foundation, seeds for peace, so that people in ten or twenty years are ready. If we cancel these programs, we will stay in the cycle of struggle. These [civil society] efforts are needed; people need to be readied for peace.” DN28 shared his support for some aspects of the boycott—such as boycotting settlements and the IDF— but he criticized academic and cultural boycotts promoted by the BDS movement and felt that it should be treated on a case-by-case basis. “I am not against boycotting. I boycott settlements and politicians, but I do not boycott academia and individuals. That should be done on a case-by-case basis”. DN28 advocates for a nuanced approach that supports civil society initiatives aimed at building a foundation for peace, while also recognizing the need to resist oppressive practices.

A small group of participants also highlighted that accusations of normalization often come from individuals and parties who are privileged “keyboard activists” or those affiliated with

the Palestinian Authority (PA) who seek to control how and under what conditions Palestinians collaborate with Israelis. According to MN14, "The people who criticize and make accusations usually work for the PA, which opposes any normalization that doesn't occur under their control. They want to dictate when and how we talk to Israelis." This perspective suggests that many vocal critics of normalization may be perceived as motivated by a desire to maintain their own political power and influence. By controlling the narrative around normalization, these individuals and groups can advance their own agendas, often at the expense of independent efforts at dialogue and cooperation. This view also reflects a broader disillusionment among Palestinians with the PA's leadership, often critiqued for its widespread corruption and attempts to use the Palestinian struggle to serve narrow political interests, rather than advance the broader cause of justice and liberation.

### **c) Balancing Compromise and Empowerment**

Many participants emphasized that, despite their concerns about certain aspects of the program as well as doubts about the effectiveness of the broader peacebuilding field in responding to Palestinian calls for justice and liberation, their involvement has not altered their political and ethical stance. They pointed out that whether their participation is labeled as 'normalization' it has not changed their commitment to Palestinian rights or the broader Palestinian struggle. Instead, many of them expressed that their engagement in the program has enhanced their ability to address critical issues they are passionate about, provided them with valuable exposure, and allowed them to build some pathways for solidarity and joint struggle. This experience has empowered them to navigate complex dynamics without losing sight of their core values and objectives. According to EY81,

"I am a Palestinian, I will never forget the Nakba and I will never forget the checkpoint. I will never change the idea that a settler is trying to steal my land. But now I am in a

moment where I have to ask, what's next? I understand that you have your own trauma, but I am not the reason for your trauma. However, you are the main reason for my trauma, but neither of us will forget, so let's at least come and find concrete solutions to problems that will affect us collectively.”

Despite these deep-seated grievances, the quote advocates for a practical approach to addressing shared issues, suggesting that both parties should focus on finding concrete solutions that can benefit them collectively, without ignoring or dismissing the deep pain and historical context each carries.

Some participants also expressed how the program has been instrumental in equipping Palestinians with essential skills and knowledge. In addition, some argued that participation in the program has inspired many of them to become more active in their communities, engage with anti-occupation efforts, and foster a greater sense of political awareness and activism. Perspectives on the source of this impact varied, however: while some felt that these outcomes were a direct result of the project, others believed that these developments occurred despite the program and as a response to some of its questionable dynamics, reflecting a complex and sometimes ambivalent relationship with the initiative. MN14 offers this reflection,

“At the end of the day it is all greenwashing; it is impossible to avoid it. However, it has provided many Palestinians with capacity-building and training opportunities; many of them are now empowering their communities against the occupation. So many of them work with Palestinian organizations, anti-occupation groups, who have become continually active. The experience has politicized many Palestinians.”

The term "greenwashing" here is a critique of broader environmental cooperation and sustainability efforts by Israel. This critique highlights Israel's strategic use of environmentally-friendly rhetoric and policies to mask or divert attention from underlying political and social issues, such as land appropriation and the dispossession of Palestinians (Hughes et al., 2022).

MN14's reflections highlight the tension between benefiting from systems that may be perceived as perpetuating injustice, while using those same opportunities to challenge and resist the very structures of oppression. SL21's recounting of a fieldstrip echoes similar sentiments,

" I am from a small village on the outskirts of Jerusalem whose people were displaced in 1948, and in 2007, Israel declared it a nature reserve. I am very connected to this part of my identity, but I never talked about it during my time in the program. They took us to Qalunya, which is close to my village, to a cultural center. I realized that it was previously the home of a Palestinian family that was transformed into an Israeli cultural center. I felt suffocated, and I spoke up for the first time! Later on, I started doing tours of my hometown, for Israelis and tourists, to show people that this is not just a hiking spot but also a place where my people lived." While the experience was deeply triggering for SL21, it also served as a powerful catalyst for reconnection with a significant part of her Palestinian identity and heritage.

### ***5.2.3 Reflections on Interactions & Dialogue During Participation***

In addition to being engrossed in environmental learning and training, a small, yet important aspect of the program is a series of dialogue sessions dedicated to discussing divisive peace and justice issues. According to most participants' accounts, these sessions provided a crucial space for sharing experiences and narratives in a facilitated manner, bringing politics to the forefront of environmental cooperation.

MN14 vividly described the atmosphere of these dialogue sessions, "Emotions run high, with people crying, shouting, agreeing, and disagreeing. The sessions provide a space for frustration and animosity to surface, allowing for a raw and honest exchange of feelings." This description captures the overall atmosphere of the dialogue sessions, as recounted by many participants. They emphasized that these sessions were primarily focused on sharing lived

experiences and personal stories, creating a space for deep, often emotional exchanges. Outside the technical and environmental training, these participants listened to and shared perspectives that were frequently challenging and, often, uncomfortable to hear. According to many accounts, these spaces acted as a catalyst for humanizing one another. However, as I demonstrate in the next section, this process was not without its complications.

### **a) Gaining Insights Into Israeli Perspectives**

While reflecting on their discussions, nearly all participants emphasized the significance of these conversations in giving them exposure to and understanding of Israeli perspectives. For example, some participants were surprised to discover that there are Israelis who are against the occupation and who reject the practices of the Israeli state. On several occasions, interviewees remarked that certain Israeli participants were "more Palestinian than me." This phrase, while striking, reflects a deeper recognition of solidarity between Palestinians and critical Israeli voices who challenge the occupation and advocate for Palestinian liberation. To many participants' surprise, some Israeli participants were not only allies but also deeply engaged in the struggle for justice, at times even more outspoken than some of the Palestinian participants. This dynamic is partly influenced by the privilege of being Israeli, inside of Israel, which affords them a greater sense of safety and freedom to express their opinions without facing the same level of risk or repercussions as their Palestinian counterparts.

According to JN28, "It was eye-opening to meet Israelis who are against the occupation, against the IDF, who criticize their government and talk about liberation." The opportunity to recognize the diversity of positions on the other side indicated that they saw some meaningful opportunities for solidarity with Israelis who value Palestinian liberation.

Furthermore, participants noted that their experience of such sessions made them realize that Israelis are also embedded in a violent system, albeit from a different vantage point. While

some Israeli participants had a keen awareness of the conflict's politics, others had little awareness of the violence Palestinians experience under Israeli occupation. One participant expressed empathy for Israelis who, through these encounters, were beginning to grapple with the harsh realities of the occupation for the first time. This empathy, however, came with the recognition that the journey towards understanding Israelis undergo is one that does not center them as the primary victims. Rather, it requires them to acknowledge Israeli violence against Palestinians that Israel's media, state, and socio-cultural dynamics have sought to hide from them.

One such means to expose Israeli participants to these realities was through field trips that focused on material and most controversial manifestations of the occupation, including the Separation Wall. According to TN23's account, "The experience has made many people [Israelis] exposed to the reality of the occupation; during some field trips they see the separation wall, they see manifestations of occupation, the Israelis are shocked by what they see ... They also go through a personal conflict. I have come to respect that the experience was difficult." TN23's empathy for Israeli participants experiencing the reality of the occupation's material manifestations arguably signals a moment when the organization's goal of fostering mutual empathy is realized. Moreover, some participants emphasized that the dialogue sessions, jointly led by Palestinian and Israeli facilitators, served as spaces where these power dynamics shifted, even if only temporarily and symbolically. According to LB74, "During discussions, the Palestinian voice is the loudest, and Israelis are mostly listeners. I recall an Israeli girl who started crying in front of me. This is a tough process, but also particularly important." This reversal of the usual power dynamic, in which Palestinians are often marginalized or silenced was an important experience to many participants.

Some participants proudly shared how their stories and lived experiences had an impact on shifting the perspectives of some Israeli participants, and helped make some Israelis "*more leftist*" and aware of the context of colonization that they are all embedded within. JN52 shared

how their conversations with Israeli friends had evolved over time, “I have Israeli friends now; I go out with them and have difficult conversations,” While disagreements and even intense arguments were common, JN52 stressed the importance of staying engaged and grounded in reality. For him, stepping away from engagement was not an option, as avoidance would only perpetuate ignorance and distance. “We cannot sit on the sidelines and say we do not want to talk to anyone,” he asserted, highlighting the necessity of engaging in these difficult conversations as part of a larger effort to confront and challenge oppressive systems.

At the same time, the majority of participants highlighted some imbalances in how Israelis versus Palestinians can express and reflect on their experiences. SL21 shared a story of when one Israeli participant talked about his experiences in the IDF and shared a story where he killed a kid during the Gaza Great March of Return, or the 2018-2019 border protests. She reflected on this saying: “If a Palestinian participant had openly admitted to killing an Israeli soldier, they would likely be excluded from the program and face legal consequences. Yet, when an ex-Israeli soldier expresses regret over killing a Palestinian, they are still granted a platform for dialogue.” This perception of imbalance, though it may not fully reflect how the organization handles such intense and sensitive conversations, was reflected in many of the discussions with participants. This contributed to a sense of unequal expectations: Palestinians are asked to recognize and empathize with the humanity of Israeli participants, even those who have caused them harm, yet they do not feel the same level of recognition and empathy is reciprocated. The space for dialogue, which claims to be equal, becomes yet another reflection of the broader power dynamics that dominate their lived experiences, reinforcing the very inequalities the program claims to address.

Some participants also felt that that these dialogue spaces can unfairly place the responsibility to educate and raise awareness about the realities of the occupation on Palestinians. According to TN23, “It is not my responsibility as a Palestinian to educate Israelis! You [the organization] have to take responsibility for the compromises that Palestinians have to make to

participate in such a program! You are the privileged ones; you are the one who need the exposure, not me!” Such a sentiment reflects a deep frustration with the unequal dynamics in such spaces, where Palestinians feel like they are expected to bear the emotional and intellectual labor of explaining their lived experiences under occupation and at the same time censor themselves. For many, this expectation not only reinforces the existing privilege of Israelis but also diminishes the space for Palestinians to fully engage without being tasked with the role of educators in an already unequal relationship. While not a widely expressed sentiment among participants, this perspective highlights the divergent and varied ways in which Palestinians interpreted their experiences in the program.

In sum, some participants saw the dialogue spaces as opportunities to engage in meaningful exchange and challenge the status quo. Others, however, viewed these spaces as sites where an undue burden was placed on Palestinians. In both cases, the potential for meaningful engagement is overshadowed by the structural inequalities embedded in the very framework of these discussions. These imbalances, rooted in the broader political and social realities of occupation and power, make it difficult for Palestinians to fully engage in these spaces without feeling as though they are being asked to do more emotional labor.

## **b) Meeting Different ‘Kinds’ of Palestinians**

While the primary objective of the program is to create spaces for dialogue, exchange, and cooperation between Palestinians and Israelis, many participants shared that meeting and interacting with other Palestinians was an important aspect of the program. SL21 highlighted that the most valuable part of her participation was not the encounters with Israelis, but rather the opportunities the program provided for dispersed Palestinians to connect with each other. “Programs like this are an opportunity to meet Palestinians from everywhere, we are disconnected from Palestinians in the West Bank, in Gaza, those inside Israel, and even from Jordan!” This

experience, in some ways reflects an important dimension of the experience of slow violence. The inability to connect and unite as a people is a form of erosion—of culture, identity, and community—that mirrors the environmental degradation and socio-political disempowerment caused by the occupation.

### **c) “The Bubble”**

In describing their experiences in the program, many participants referred to it as a *"bubble,"* a term they used to convey both positive and negative aspects of the space the program offers. Palestinians could, for the first time, study and learn without the constant distractions and pressures of living under occupation. It allowed them to imagine, even if temporarily, what it might be like to live in peace with Israelis, providing a microcosm of coexistence and mutual understanding. On the other hand, some participants highlighted the "bubble" as a means of isolation and depoliticization. They felt that the dynamics of the program obscured the power imbalances and the ongoing political and social injustices that define their everyday life. This isolation created a false sense of normalcy, detaching them from the broader context of their struggle and the systemic issues that perpetuate their oppression.

The term "bubble" encapsulated both perspectives for most participants. They appreciated the refuge the program provided and the opportunities for personal and academic growth. They also highlighted instances where they felt their participation fostered an unlikely community of Palestinians and Israelis living together, despite the complex power imbalances that underlie their interactions. This duality of experience reflects the complex and often conflicting emotions that participants navigated as they engaged with the program, recognizing both its value and its shortcomings. For example, EY81 highlighted how this "bubble" environment offered alternative spaces where Palestinians can temporarily forget the harsh reality of the occupation. He shared: "This program was an opportunity to understand myself better. We [Palestinians] face daily

struggles and navigate challenges like checkpoints, daily encounters with IDF soldiers, and violent settlers. Here, everything is available to you—you only need to engage and express yourself! You have time to think about yourself."

In this "bubble" environment, many participants felt they encountered a rare opportunity for self-reflection and personal growth—an experience markedly different from the constant threats and constraints they typically endure under occupation. This allowed them the space to explore their own identities, values, and aspirations in ways that are not always possible under the oppressive conditions of checkpoints, surveillance, and violence. However, while participants were able to enjoy a brief reprieve, they were acutely conscious of the fact that they were inside Israel. The setting itself carried symbolic weight, as it represented the very systems of power that have historically and continually marginalized them.

This setting, as the majority of participants felt, undermines the claimed safety of the dialogue space, as it evokes strong historical and political associations with Palestinian displacement and ongoing subjugation under military occupation. According to TN32, "What are you doing here? Bringing me to a [colonized land], and trying to portray it as an ideal place built on sustainability and cooperation?" The attempt to frame this setting as a model of progress and collaboration was perceived as ignoring or sanitizing the deeper political and historical wounds associated with it. For these participants, engaging in a dialogue in such a space felt like a tacit endorsement of the ongoing occupation.

Questions about the sustainability and long-term effects of such bubble environments were also raised by some participants. According to DN28, "After finishing the program, Palestinians often experience what I call the '*going back home syndrome*.' They return to their harsh reality after having imagined peace and coexistence. It's like stepping from a beautiful experience back into hopelessness." While the program may foster moments of hope and

cooperation, it often fails to provide participants with the tools or continued support necessary to navigate the stark contrast between the peacebuilding space and the return to their daily struggles.

#### ***5.2.4 Hope & Alternative Pathways***

It was difficult for participants to be hopeful or think about the future. The ongoing war in Gaza has left many Palestinians feeling disillusioned, unable to foresee any future where EP initiatives effectively tackle their struggles. The trauma and destruction caused by the conflict, along with the escalating violence in the West Bank, have eroded any sense of optimism or hope for the future, making it difficult for participants to engage in conversations about long-term solutions or reforms to current EP efforts.

In addition, participants were divided in their reflections on future engagement. Some participants felt that, given the context of environmental slow violence and the limitations imposed by the political and social realities, the organization is doing what it can within its constraints. While they acknowledged the limitations, they felt that incremental progress, however small, was still valuable in the face of such overwhelming obstacles. Other participants expressed a sense of resignation, feeling that real change is difficult within the structure of these organizations, which offer practical solutions to specific environmental issues but, in their opinion, tend to sideline or obscure the deeper political and structural issues.

#### **a) Alternatives For Environmental Engagement Without Cooperation**

A few participants hinted at some ideas that they thought were key to shifting the current rhetoric of peacebuilding in Palestine and centering Palestinian voices. LB74 drew a clear distinction between two types of support that Palestinians often receive: conditional empathy and unconditional solidarity. Conditional empathy, in LB74's view, is a superficial form of sympathy that is often rooted in pity or a sense of moral duty. This type of empathy does not

challenge the status quo or confront the systems of oppression that perpetuate Palestinian suffering. It is performative in nature, offering temporary relief but ultimately preserving the existing power dynamics. LB74 challenged these perceived performative acts of help, where Israelis may come to Palestinian or Bedouin communities to plant trees or offer temporary assistance as a way to alleviate their own guilt or to feel better about themselves. While well-intentioned, she argued that such acts fail to disrupt the foundations of Israeli privilege and colonial structures. LB74 called for unconditional solidarity, which involves actively joining the Palestinian struggle for justice and liberation. LB74 is also expressing her broader concerns about the organization's engagement here. She views its efforts as similarly constrained by a superficial approach—focused on temporary, feel-good interventions rather than dealing with deeper colonial structures.

TN23 further posed a relevant question: “What do you expect from the world as a Palestinian, do you expect conditional empathy? Do you want someone to treat you like they are protectors of you? A lot of Israelis come to help Palestinians, to feel [better] about themselves, to hide their guilt. But as long as their foundations are not shaken. I do not want that kind of empathy. What Palestinians need is unconditional support.” TN23's call to action is clear: Palestinians do not need paternalistic empathy. Instead, they need genuine solidarity from those willing to engage in the shared struggle for liberation.

In addition, a few Palestinians expressed a powerful desire for alternative pathways to engage with environmental issues and reconnect with the land—pathways that do not involve working within the frameworks of EP. For these individuals, environmental activism and land stewardship are deeply tied to the broader struggle for self-determination. These Palestinians seek to protect and restore the land in ways that align with their aspirations for sovereignty and resistance against the occupation. To them, protecting the environment does not necessitate cooperation but is instead deeply connected to the pursuit of environmental justice and the

broader fight for political and social liberation. They shared stories of actively seeking out or becoming involved in Palestinian-led initiatives, which they felt aligned more closely with their values and aspirations for true environmental justice. For instance, some participants mentioned their engagement with grassroots movements such as the Union of Agricultural Work Committees, which focuses on empowering Palestinian farmers by reclaiming land, promoting seed banking, and strengthening food sovereignty (About Us – Union of Agricultural Work Committees, 2024). Others spoke of working with organizations like the Palestine Institute for Biodiversity and Sustainability (PIBS), which seeks to revive Palestinians' connection to the land through projects focused on sustainable architecture, water reclamation, and aquaponics (Pellow, 2023). For these participants, as long as the occupation persists, any form of cooperation risks reinforcing the very systems of domination and control that perpetuate Palestinian suffering. This perspective directly challenges the notion that environmental cooperation is either imperative or somehow above politics. It rejects the idea that cooperation on environmental challenges can exist in isolation from the broader political conflict, emphasizing that true cooperation must be predicated on justice and equality, rather than on maintaining the power structures that benefit one side at the expense of the other.

### **5.3 Discussion**

The thematic analysis, as I lay out in the previous section, highlights key aspects that align with the existing literature on EP, while also introducing fresh perspectives grounded in the lived experiences of participants. Many of the critiques that participants raised reflect broader criticisms of EP and environmental cooperation in the Palestine-Israel context. These critiques center on several recurring issues, including the failure of EP initiatives to deeply engage with complex root causes related to environmental violence, their tendency to deliver

short-term impacts rather than long-term solutions, and the inherent power imbalances between Israelis and Palestinians.

Participants were also critical of the universalizing and often depoliticized language employed in the organization, which frames environmental issues as shared, neutral concerns while overlooking the deeply political nature of environmental degradation in the region. This reflects existing critiques in the literature, such as those by Ide (2020), Hughes et al. (2022), and Shqair (2023). By avoiding engagement with these core issues, participants felt that the EP program risks reinforcing the very systems of oppression they purport to challenge. The thematic analysis reveals a demand for EP efforts to move beyond surface-level cooperation and embrace a more critical, politically engaged approach that directly addresses the power imbalances and colonial structures shaping the environmental landscape.

Participants' reflections on their lived experiences demonstrated the critical importance of understanding how environmental slow violence, coupled with the awareness of the environment as a political weapon wielded by the Israeli state, profoundly shaped their involvement in EP initiatives. For many, the environment is not just a backdrop for ecological concerns but a highly politicized and contested space, directly tied to issues of dispossession, land control, and the broader occupation (Braverman, 2009; Svarstad & Benjaminsen, 2020). Simultaneously, participants appreciated the dialog spaces offered by the organization, which many Palestinians utilized to amplify their perspectives, challenge dominant narratives, and foster a sense of solidarity. This engagement was a way to navigate and subvert the power dynamics that often left them marginalized. Participants also remained acutely aware of the complexities and contradictions inherent in engaging with such programs under occupation. They understood that even within these dialogues, the larger structures of power and control were still at play, making the task of reclaiming agency a continuous and complicated process.

In addition, the majority of participants acknowledged the importance of anti-normalization efforts in pressuring the Israeli state and highlighting its human rights violations but felt that they should not be labeled as “collaborators” for engaging in people-to-people and civil society peacebuilding efforts. As Palestinians navigate a complex reality, they should not be socially censured or targeted for engaging with Israeli civil society, or peacebuilding efforts.

Balancing these conflicting realities—between the tangible opportunities and the risks of complicity in systems of domination—left participants in a state of constant negotiation, unsure whether their involvement aligned with their broader goals of justice and liberation.

#### **a) Navigating Ethical Ambivalence: Balancing Opportunity and Skepticism**

Palestinians engaged with EP programs must balance the potential advantages of participating—such as access to resources, education, and a global social network—against the ethical ambivalence these initiatives often evoke in them. They are acutely aware of the contradictions inherent in working within systems that may, on one hand, offer access to opportunities and a social network but, on the other, maintain or fail to challenge structures of the power that inflicts oppression and violence on them. Additionally, they must navigate anti-normalization sentiments, which carry the risk of social censure and being labeled as “normalizers.” Rather than outright rejecting these initiatives, many participants saw their involvement as a way to navigate and potentially challenge the very dynamics they found troubling. Their willingness to engage reflects the tactical choices Palestinians make within the context of ongoing occupation. These choices are shaped by the intricate and challenging realities they face daily, where political, social, and environmental pressures intersect. Through their participation, Palestinians assert their presence and advance their struggle for sovereignty, even within frameworks that may be politically and ethically fraught with contradictions.

## **b) Palestinian Lived Experience Between Agency and Political Fatigue**

Participants' reflections reveal a broader sense of political fatigue, or as described by Aggestam & Strömbom (2013), peace fatigue, which can be described as a pervasive sense of exhaustion stemming from decades of unrelenting conflict, occupation, and systemic injustice. This fatigue also arises from internal disillusionment with Palestinian leadership, which is frequently seen as fragmented and ineffective. This has led many Palestinians to search for opportunities even within frameworks that might trigger their skepticism or ethical ambivalence, or to explore new ways of asserting their agency. They are weary of being perpetual subjects of victimization or mere symbols of resistance; instead, they attempt to reclaim agency in the face of a reality that often imposes limited choices, pushing them to navigate complex spaces. Whether through their engagement in environmental projects or their interactions with Israeli participants, some participants find ways to challenge the dominant power structures, amplify their voices, carve out spaces for agency and build pathways for solidarity.

## **5.4 Conclusion**

The findings I highlight here are focused on three central issues. First, I examine participants' perspectives on the critiques of EP programs, informed by their personal experiences and interactions within these initiatives. Second, I explore how participants understand and contest the anti-normalization discourse, particularly within the context of their participation in an EP project. Lastly, I offer a broader discussion on the lived experiences of Palestinians within these projects, considering how their identities and agency are navigated and expressed in a setting that is often fraught with contradictions and tensions.

My discussion of these findings emphasizes the ethical ambivalences and tactical choices that Palestinians must constantly wrestle with over the course of their engagement in the project.

They find themselves navigating a complex and ethically challenging landscape. While the program provided valuable opportunities for personal and professional growth—offering skill development opportunities, exposure to various perspectives, and a sense of community—many were acutely aware of the deeper dynamics that, to them, reflect profound power imbalances. Participation in the program meant grappling with power dynamics that could perpetuate existing inequalities or mirror the very experiences of dispossession and marginalization they sought to resist.

For some of them, the experience was akin to slow violence—being inside Israel, having to explain their lived experiences under occupation to Israelis, and witnessing environmental projects that, while beneficial, fail to address the profound violence and dispossession their people endure. For these Participants, it was painful to see projects that might improve the environment in certain ways but do not confront the systemic injustices that continue to oppress and displace their communities.

On the other hand, some participants viewed their involvement as crucial to their ongoing struggle for justice. They saw it as a powerful means to reclaim their agency, assert their identities, and ensure that their voices were finally heard in spaces where they had long been marginalized.

## **Chapter 6: Implications for Future Implementation & Conclusion**

### **6.1 Introduction**

As discussed in the thematic analysis, it was challenging as both a scholar and a Palestinian-Jordanian to gauge how the Palestinians I engaged with in this work envision more effective engagement with peace and justice issues, or how they envision better implementation EP efforts in Israel/Palestine. The complexities of the political and social landscape, combined with the participants' diverse experiences, made it difficult to pinpoint a unified vision for how these efforts should be reformed or advanced. Specifically, considering their diverse experiences, the greatest challenge was to offer a concrete and cohesive account of how their identity, ethics, and experiences shape their unique and disproportionate encounters with slow violence within a broader context of settler colonialism. This difficulty stemmed from two main factors. First, the current context of the war on Gaza, which has left many Palestinians disillusioned and unable to envision any positive prospects for peace, let alone one in which EP initiatives meaningfully address their struggles.

Second, many participants expressed a sense of resignation, leading them to feel that there is little that they can do to change the fundamental nature of these organizations. They saw these organizations as imperfect but acknowledged that they fulfilled their self-defined mandate for advancing EP initiatives given the political, social, and economic context they operate within—i.e. within an Israeli context. At the same time, other participants expressed a sense of political fatigue. They were frustrated by the broader peacebuilding rhetoric that they perceived as emphasizing practical solutions to environmental and peace-related challenges, while in doing so shifting the focus of EP toward technical, discourses that structurally reshaped their relationship to the political status of being Palestinian. This approach, carried out by EP

programs, in their view, sidelined deeper political and structural issues that shape Palestinians experiences under a single system of settle colonialism.

## **6.2 Implications For Future Practice & Research**

It was evident from conversations with some participants that they sought better acknowledgment and engagement with their complex experiences as Palestinians. Taking their comments in sum, I contextualized those experiences within the framework of slow environmental violence and the diverse impacts of a longstanding occupation. This framework, I argue, offers a lens to understand my participants' collective demand not to be subjected to what they described as superficial optimism, or the "fluff" that they saw as defining the organizations' representation of themselves. This includes their use of language that highlights shared responsibility and affectedness, which many felt dilutes the stark power imbalances and the specific harms inflicted on Palestinians in the context of occupation and settler colonialism. While many participants felt that the organization has the capacity to provide valuable opportunities for driving engagement and solidarity, this institutional rhetoric, while promoting ideals of cooperation and unity, tended to minimize or overlook their lived realities of political, environmental, and social dispossession. I interpret this as participants' attempts to call for better recognition of their lived experiences. McKee (2020) argues that recognition is a component of justice and explores how inclusive environmental justice requires recognizing and holding space for the knowledge and lived experiences of economically and socially disenfranchised groups. My research suggests that EP organizations may be well served by heeding McKee's call for more incisive efforts at recognition the diversity of Palestinians' lived experiences and the contextualized knowledge they have gained through these experiences.

Regarding future research, an important factor contextualizing this study is that interviews took place during a devastating war, a period that has profoundly shattered many

people's senses of hope for peace and coexistence. The intense violence and destruction likely shaped participants' perspectives, influencing their reflections on peacebuilding and environmental cooperation. In some ways, this context might have provided a potent clarity about what works and what doesn't within these initiatives, sharpening participants' focus on the failures of existing approaches. On the other hand, it might have made it difficult to envision any meaningful path forward in such a tumultuous and violent time. While this context is essential to understanding the participants' responses, it also suggests that further research should be conducted during less violent periods. Having said that, even in times of relative calm, the underlying conditions of occupation, dispossession, and environmental violence remain ever-present for Palestinians. The perpetual state of instability and fragmentation is integral to their lived reality, and peacebuilding initiatives must contend with these harsh, ongoing encounters.

While this project alludes to certain organizational practices and challenges, it falls short of fully exploring how the organization, and the broader EP field, confront and reckon with the complex social and political dimensions that define Palestine-Israel, particularly within the context of occupation and settler colonialism. Moreover, the research does not thoroughly analyze how the organization, and EP efforts more generally, respond to the growing calls for environmental justice that I highlight in Chapter 3. What is needed is a deeper exploration of the organization's efforts to navigate the contradictions and ambivalences on one side, and how it is adapting to evolving demands for more just and equitable approaches to environmental peacebuilding on the other.

Furthermore, by adopting the framework of environmental slow violence, this research has sought to incorporate a political ecology lens into the discourse on peacebuilding, recognizing the inherently political nature of environmental issues in contexts like Palestine-Israel. Political ecology, with its focus on power dynamics, resource control, and the socio-political dimensions of

environmental degradation, offers a critical framework for understanding the complexities of EP efforts. While this study has taken initial steps in bridging these two fields, much more is needed, particularly in contexts where the environment is deeply contested. This would involve examining how the context of settler colonialism shapes and influences EP efforts, as well as identifying EP organizations that are forging pathways for inclusive environmental justice and solidarity.

In addition, employing a political ecology framework can inspire alternative social and political imaginations for a future that is anti-colonialist, anti-imperialist, and transformative. This perspective goes beyond the typical peacebuilding rhetoric of coexistence and cooperation, pushing for deeper, more systemic changes that seek to dismantle the colonial legacies that continue to shape the lived experiences of all peoples in Palestine-Israel and respond to calls for environmental justice.

Beyond focusing on prospects and limitations of EP in Palestine-Israel, future studies should delve deeper into the lived experiences of Palestinians in these complex contexts, exploring how they practice power and reclaim agency. De Certeau (1980, as cited in Ahearne, 2010) emphasizes the importance of examining the subtle, everyday tactics that marginalized and oppressed groups employ to navigate and cope with circumstances they have little power to change.

He refers to these practices as the *"tactics of the weak,"* which are often overlooked but carry significant emancipatory potential. DE Certeau's concept suggests that, even in contexts where change on a macro-level seems difficult, the oppressed can still assert agency through small acts of defiance, creativity, and resourcefulness. This "micro-resistance" allows them to reclaim agency, assert their rights, subtly challenge dominant power structures and carve out spaces for solidarity. Understanding the nuanced ways Palestinians, especially those who identify as environmental activists and peacebuilders, navigate their realities under occupation and within a

context of slow environmental violence can enrich our understanding of how resistance and solidarity operate in Palestine-Israel.

### **6.3 Conclusion**

All participants I engaged with reported similar, if varied and complex, experiences of ambivalence regarding their participation in the EP program. The program had changed, even transformed some of them, although the positive aspects of these experiences were always colored by a corollary sense that participation entailed certain compromises to their personal or political identities. This shared ambivalence by the participants I spoke to was perhaps best captured in the account of SL21, who while visiting an Israeli cultural center was able to view in the distance her family's now depopulated village. The experience, according to her, was both emotionally and personally difficult, but motivated her to speak more forcefully within the program about her experience of dispossession as a Palestinian. It is this experience, of struggle and overcoming within structurally unequal circumstances and experiences, which I argued profoundly shapes participant's ambivalent attitudes towards the program. In sum, for many that I spoke to, their accounting of the program's virtues was often motivated or shaped in large part by their struggles to overcome the inherent structural limitations of the program itself, and the broader context of environmental slow violence and settler colonialism.

Perhaps most importantly, this sense of overcoming—of having made tactical choices to make the best of their engagement with the EP program—instilled in all of the participants a sense of pride. However, as I allude to in this work, given the ambiguity of such a reality, this sense of pride may be quite distinct to the forms of empowerment that such EP programs aim to instill or cultivate in their participants. From this recognition, my work alludes to a further important reality: that the institutional structure and broader universalistic dynamics of EP organizations in Palestine-Israel can sometimes function in a self-defeating manner.

For several participants that I spoke to, despite their many positive experiences in the program, these spaces eventually mirrored the broader context, where the unequal dynamics of control and oppression persisted. What the organization framed as a safe space for dialogue was often perceived by many participants as reproducing the very power imbalances and injustices they sought to challenge. As discussed in Chapter 5, differential expectations about participants' past experiences were encapsulated in the ability of Israeli participants to speak openly, if regretfully, of their military experiences. If the programming and structure of such EP institutions are designed to offer a space in which participants are asked to face one another's humanity, including their challenging pasts, the experiences of research participants suggest that they do so unevenly, or at least that is their perception. To put it directly, if Palestinians are expected to offer an Israeli, even one who has killed a Palestinian, recognition and solidarity in such an environment, my participants felt that this should run with equal expectations and recognition in the reverse. They felt that their experiences did not reflect the expectation of equality

An important minority of participants also reported that their further engagement in environmental projects would not be predicated on cross-identity solidarity but would rather work to assert Palestinian-led and autonomous initiatives, perhaps to the exclusion of Israeli participation or integration. In this sense, Palestinian involvement in EP may in some cases undermine their belief that such initiatives can be successful.

Going back to the title of this project, I find myself grappling with ambivalence when reflecting on the approach of this organization. On one hand, the language they use, which highlights the urgency of environmental issues, can sometimes feel as though it elevates environmental concerns above the pressing political realities in Palestine-Israel. This prioritization can seem to overlook or sidestep the complex, deeply-rooted political challenges that are integral to understanding and addressing the situation. However, I also find that many

criticisms of EP, which often focus on this perceived prioritization, are lacking in depth. These critiques tend to be superficial, failing to provide a nuanced account of the complex context in which these organizations operate. Furthermore, these criticisms often paint Palestinians involved in this work with a broad brush, treating them as a monolithic group and reducing their participation to token representations. This approach overlooks the diverse motivations, experiences, and perspectives that Palestinians bring to the table, and fails to provide a nuanced understanding of their engagement in EP efforts.

## Chapter 7: Bibliography & Appendices

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## 7.2 Appendices:

### *Appendix I: Interview Protocol*



#### Interview Protocol

Research Topic: Prospects and limitations of Environmental Peacebuilding (EP) in Palestine-Israel according to Palestinian perspectives.

REB File # 29000 – Approval date: 21 March 2024

Research Objective:

- Understand the perspectives of Palestinians engaged in environmental peacebuilding projects regarding the complexities and challenges of environmental peacebuilding.

#### **WHAT PARTICIPATION MEANS:**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

- Be interviewed for 30-45 mins via zoom about your experience with EP programs and your perspectives on the prospects and limitations of EP in the Palestinian/ Israeli context.
- The interview will be audio-recorded.
- A copy of the final project will be shared with you once the project is concluded and the thesis is defended.

#### **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL:**

Your participation is voluntary. If a question makes you uncomfortable, you can skip that question. You may stop participating at any time. If you choose to stop participating, you may also choose not to have your data included in the study. Also, you can withdraw from the project before its completion at any point after this conversation.

#### **CONFIDENTIALITY:**

For confidentiality and security reasons, primary data shall be secured within an online folder under Microsoft OneDrive. Specifically, a document management and storage system of SharePoint within OneDrive to share with my supervisory committee members only.

For security and confidentiality purposes, all voice recording data collected from this interview shall be stored directly into Microsoft OneDrive's online cloud server. The data shall be stored for purposes of completing this MA thesis as described above, and such storage shall not be for more than five (5) years upon completion of the MA thesis. However, the interview data can be destroyed upon request from the interview participant at any time.

## **QUESTIONS**

### **Opening Questions:**

- What led you to get involved in the X EP project? What were your expectations?
  - What was the most beneficial outcome from taking part in the program?
  - What did you find most challenging about taking part in the program?
- Have you faced any pushbacks/criticisms from your community/ family/friends for participating in the program? What were the grounds for that?
  - How did you deal with it? / What was your perspective on this?

### **Main Questions:**

- **Definition & Understanding:**
  - Often EP programs like the one you're involved with get accusations that they are normalizing and projects:
    - Is this a conversation that has come up over the course of your involvement with the project? If yes, what terms are used (i.e. do they use the word greenwashing, normalization, eco normalization)? In what context do these conversations happen? How have others in your group, Palestinians, or otherwise, bring up or talk about normalization?
    - How would you define normalization in your own words?
    - Are there other words/ terms that you, or others around you, would use to describe actions that are deemed a form of normalization?
  - **Examples of Normalization**
    - What specific practices or actions, if any, would you classify as normalization in the environmental project you are involved/ familiar with?
    - Do you have any examples from your experiences in EP?
    - Has your involvement in environmental peacebuilding projects changed your views on normalization? If so, in what ways? What made your perspective shift?
- **Impact of the broader context of Normalization on Palestinians' participation in EP**
  - Do you think that normalization poses ethical dilemmas in EP work? Why or why not?
  - If yes, how do you reconcile the need for environmental cooperation with the potential for these practices to be a function of normalization?

### **Closing Questions**

- Are you still involved in any environmental peacebuilding/ cooperation work? If yes, how? If not, why not?
- How do you think the unfolding war in Gaza will have an impact on EP programs?
- Is there anything else you'd like to add or emphasize that we haven't covered?

## **Conclusion**

- Kindly indicate if you would like data from the interview data (voice or text) to remain confidential or be disclosed.
- The participant will be thanked for the interview time and is invited once again to contact me *with any questions or concerns*.

## ***Appendix II: Informed Consent Form Template***

### **Informed Consent Agreement**

You are invited to participate in a research study. Before you agree to participate, please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have to be sure that you understand what your participation will involve.

**RESEARCH TOPIC:** Prospects and limitations of Environmental Peacebuilding (EP) in Palestine-Israel according to Palestinian perspectives.

**INVESTIGATORS:** This research study is being conducted by Aseel Zahran, an MA student from the Sustainability Department at Trent University.

This study is not funded by any parties.

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:** Understand the perspectives of Palestinians engaged in environmental peacebuilding projects regarding the complexities, challenges and prospects of environmental peacebuilding.

**WHAT PARTICIPATION MEANS:** If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

- Be interviewed for 30-45 mins via zoom about your experience with environmental peacebuilding projects and your perspectives on the prospects and limitations of environmental peacebuilding in the Palestinian-Israeli context.
- The interview will be audio-recorded.
- A copy of the final project will be shared with you once the project is concluded and the thesis is defended.

### **Potential Benefits:**

Although there are no direct commercial benefits, the research project will amplify critical Palestinian voices on the challenges and prospects of environmental peacebuilding. The research is also expected to contribute to the literature on the challenges, limitations and

prospects of environmental peacebuilding in the Palestinian/Israeli context. In addition, there is no intention by the researcher of this project or Trent University to engage in any commercialization of the research data and findings, currently or in the future.

### **What are the Potential Risks to you as a Participant:**

While there will always be a minimal risk that the data may indirectly trace back to the participants, reasonable mitigating measures shall be taken to ensure that names and other identifying information will not be used in the transcripts and final report. Nevertheless, I would like to highlight three possible minimal risks arising from the interview, and the appropriate mitigating steps taken by the researcher, for your consideration:

- i. Potential *reputational risk* to research participants as data collected will entail them discussing their participation in a project inside Israel as anti-normalization sentiment grows among Palestinians and in the region. Participants in EP programs may worry about being linked to any project that bring together Palestinians and Israelis.

Any reputation risks to the participants shall be mitigated by ensuring all identification or references to participants are done through alpha-numeric codes only. Any contextual references to who they are or what year that have participated in the program or other identifiable items shall be omitted – to mitigate the chance of the participant being identified by the public readers of the findings in papers, articles, books, and/or dissertation/monograph.

- ii. Potential privacy risk where research participants may inadvertently make references, explicitly or implicitly, to organizations or people involved in such projects

Any privacy risk by way of specific references made or commented by participant shall be de-sensitized and made generic. Any names of people or organizations will be omitted and/ or pseudonyms will be used.

- iii. Given the current context of an ongoing war in Gaza, discussing your participation in a peacebuilding project with Israelis may be distressing or might bring up unpleasant memories.

In the case that participants find any questions uncomfortable to answer, participants will be guided to skip any questions, take a pause, or discontinue the interview all together at any point.

### **Confidentiality:**

For confidentiality and security reasons, primary data shall be secured within an online folder under Microsoft OneDrive. Specifically, a document management and storage system of SharePoint within OneDrive to share with my supervisory committee members only.

For security and confidentiality purposes, all voice recording data collected from this interview shall be stored directly into Microsoft OneDrive's online cloud server. The data shall be stored for purposes of completing this MA thesis as described above, and such storage shall not be for more than five (5) years upon completion of the MA thesis. However, the interview data can be destroyed upon request from the interview participant at any time.

Premised on the above disclosure, the participant has been duly informed and freely give consent to participate in this research project by signing on next page. An original copy of this consent form shall be provided to the participant for his/her records.

### **Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal:**

Your participation is voluntary and anonymous. Audio recording is also optional. Furthermore, a question makes you uncomfortable, you can skip that question. You may stop participating at any time. If you choose to stop participating, you may also choose not to have your data included in the study. Also, you can withdraw from the project before its completion at any point after this conversation.

### **Questions about the Study:**

If you have any questions or concerns about the research now, please ask. If you have questions later about the research, you may contact the primary investigator at:

[aseelzahran@trentu.ca](mailto:aseelzahran@trentu.ca)

This study has been reviewed by the Trent University Research Ethics Board; the study number is [# 2900]. If you have questions or concerns that you do not wish to share with the researchers, please contact:

Anna Kisiala

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### **CONFIRMATION OF AGREEMENT:**

- I have read, or have had read to me, the information in this agreement.
- I have asked any questions I have about the study.
- By signing, I agree to participate in the study.
- I am aware I can change my mind and withdraw consent to participate at any time.
- I have been given a copy of this agreement; and
- I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this consent agreement.

Optional

- I am aware that the researcher will use [my name or a pseudonym] when discussing my contributions in their report.

I agree to be [audio, video, or both] recorded for the purposes of this study. I understand how these recordings will be used, stored and destroyed.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant (please print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant or Parent/Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Dependant (print) if applicable