ECSP Pathways to Peace: Stories of Environment, Health, and Conflict

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Edited Transcript — Gidon Bromberg

Gidon Bromberg:
Thank you, Aaron. A hard act to follow.

So, my name is Gidon Bromberg and, as Geoff had announced, I am the Israeli Director of Friends of the Earth Middle East. We truly are a unique organization, and we are the only regional organization that involves Israelis and Palestinians and Jordanians in any field -- environment, water or anything else -- in a single organization. And the stories that I'm going to share with you really build on Aaron's stories, and I'm going to steal his Jordan River next time --

[laughter]

-- but talk more to how we've developed programs that, through water help build understanding. I wouldn't jump so quickly to say "that build peace," but certainly build understanding between people that are in the midst of conflict.

We work on water because of the interdependent nature of the resource -- all of the major sources of water in the Middle East are shared by more than one country and that interdependence necessitates a level of cooperation. And that's what we try to foster, both an understanding of it and a practice of it, and we do that in two ways. First, we work out of three offices. We work out of Amman, where our Jordanian director and Jordanian staff sit, and work out of Bethlehem where our Palestinian director and Palestinian staff sit, and out of Israel where I sit together with our Israeli staff. We're at about 50 staff in the organization, so we're quite large.

We work in two ways. We work top-down by preparing reports but quite uniquely -- reports

on shared water -- reports on the River Jordan, reports on the Dead Sea, reports on shared groundwater, the mountain aquifer. But quite uniquely, those reports are written by Palestinians and Jordanian and Israeli experts together so that we have a common understanding of why the river or the water resource is important, what's happened, what's gone wrong, and what's the vision that we can share to correct it? And we're talking about serious problems with the Jordan River south of the Sea of Galilee basically being a sewerage canal, where all of its water, 98 percent of its fresh water today is diverted by Israel, by Jordan, and by Syria. And in exchange, it has been turned into a sewerage canal where Israel, Jordan, and Palestine emit their sewerage into the river instead. The Dead Sea, which has received a fair amount of attention, is dropping dramatically. It's lost a third of its surface area in the space of some 50 years. Instead of 80 kilometers long, it's now only 50. It drops by over a meter in depth every year because of human activities predominantly, the Jordan River is no longer flowing, there is extraction of minerals in the south where the mountain aquifer is increasingly polluted because of the lack of sanitation facilities for communities, Israeli and Palestinian, that are on top of the aquifer, and, of course, the issues of sharing, with the mountain aquifer being the example of Israel taking some 80 percent of the water and Palestine receiving 20 percent of the water.

So, in those frameworks, we deal with the shared water resources and come out with a vision that is a shared vision, but then the Jordan office advocates that vision to the Jordanian government, the Israeli office to the Israeli government, the Palestinian office to the Palestinian Authority. And it's proven to be very effective because it's the same vision, but it's articulated by Palestinians to Palestinians, Jordanians to Jordanians, Israelis to Israelis.

That's been complemented by top-down activities, activities that are at the grassroots, at the community level that involve communities along the Jordan River, around the Dead Sea, on top of the mountain aquifer, where the shared water is so visual to the communities. They can see the river that runs through or runs past, the sewerage that runs through, or the springs that represent the groundwater. And there we've built activities that bring the neighboring communities together.

We work with young people. We work with schools and create water trustees where we bring young people to learn how to build rainwater harvesting facilities or how to create wetlands to reuse gray water. And then they go and actually build such systems in their own schools; important for water, because that's means of increasing water supply, but equally and just as important for peace building because it's an empowering moment. In the midst of

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conflict, people feel helpless. "There's nothing I can do. This is way beyond me. I certainly can't improve my reality." That is the outcome of intense conflict, so by empowering young people to go out and improve their water reality with their own hands, they learn together and then they build the facilities within their own communities.

That's a powerful lesson, not only in conflict, but in life in general, that you can make a difference, and that's done through water. And not only does it empower the youth, but it helps create peacemakers, people that never intended to be leaders on cooperation in their community but found themselves having to defend themselves, teachers and school principals that have joined our program. And today, in the 25 communities that we work in, in Palestine, in Jordan, in Israel, we are working in almost all of the schools in these communities. And we're talking about thousands of schoolchildren, school principals that, at a "parents and teachers" night, will have to defend themselves because one of the parents will stand up and condemn them for working with the other side, for being a collaborator because they've allowed this joint project, this cross-border project to invade their school. And suddenly the school principal has to stand up and say, "I'm a collaborator? I'm enabling your kids to come to school without having to bring a bottle of water," because water scarcity in many of the communities is so severe that you cannot guarantee that every time you turn the tap, there'll be water flowing out. "I'm the collaborator? I'm improving the educational ability of your kids. I'm facilitating girls to come to school," because when there's no water in the school, the bathrooms are closed. There's nothing to flush toilets with and, therefore, girls are not sent to school because the parents will not allow the girls to go out into the fields while they will allow the boys. So there are social implications of not having water and peace implications of the school principle standing up and defending his actions. And this is a true story. The only parent that left the room was the parent that got up and condemned the teacher because the teacher was able to convince the rest of the parents there that he was doing the right thing.

And we work with adults and we've created Neighbors Path tours that look at the water reality in every community by stopping in stations. We've had, in the last two years, over 10,000 Israeli, Palestinian, and Jordanian adults partake in the Neighbors Path trails, and they are generally in their own community. They see some of the beauty that they might not have known because underneath every stone in our part of the world is incredible history, but they also see the back door. They see what's happening to the sewerage and they are asked to think about where is their water coming from, and they always stop at the border and talk about the water reality on the other side and how that might be different.

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And another story that comes out of that is we've also tried to bring tour guides, and in this case a group of Israeli and Palestinian tour guides doing a Jordanian Neighbor's Path tour. At the end of the tour, we're having a discussion -- Jordanians, Palestinians, and Israelis -- the tour guide that had been brining Israeli tourists to Jordan for 15 years, since the signing of the peace treaty, came and said, "Well, for the first time, I've realized that for 15 years I've been bringing Israelis to Jordan to look at stones, to go to Petra, and to go to Jarash, and to talk about the past." At the Neighbor's Path tour, he was coming to a community, a Jordanian community, and meeting residents from the community and talking to residents, and meeting the mayor -- for the very first time he said "Well, now I can talk about the present, and I can talk about the future, because the water issues compel us to talk about our future." So, again, water being an opening for a transformational moment -- that "the way I was doing things in the past can so much be improved for the betterment of our common future."

And then, for the mayors, we've seen incredible leadership from mayors, the mayors of the Jordan River, jumping, as an annual event, into a clean area of the Jordan river, in their bathing suits -- Palestinian, Jordanian, Israeli -- because they're the ones that are missing out, it's their lost economic opportunities by the waters of the Jordan being diverted, and the Jordan being turned into a sewage canal. Millions of people would want to tour the Jordan River, be baptized if they're from the Christian faith, in the river. But the river is a border that has a fence and is heavily restricted, and even in a few locations where you can have access, you wouldn't want to enter -- you wouldn't want to jump in the water because you'd quite likely come out with a rash, if you would have a cut on your skin.

So, we see mayors cooperating together, again, having to defend their actions, because there are so many spoilers out there in the midst of conflict. Unlike in California, in the Middle East, you're condemned for working with the other side, and that condemnation risks your life. So, you always have to prepare and strategize your programming to empower.

So, we're moving forward on a peace park between Israel and Jordan at the confluence of the Yarmouk and the Jordan Rivers. And the mayor on the Jordanian side that has to defend himself, defends himself by job creation. Forty percent of his community in Muaz-bin Jabal is unemployed. They're dependent an agriculture, which pays terribly, and therefore there's massive unemployment. And he has seen through the cooperation, at the community level and then with his Israeli mayors, that there is a new opportunity by creating the first peace park that enables Israelis to come to Jordan without a visa or showing a passport, and

Jordanians to come to Israel. In this enclosed bubble, an economic study that we undertook showed that some half a million tourists would want to come and see the park and that would be a tremendous aspect of job creation. And that was the underlying element that enabled him to stand up against the trend.

For us, it's also the model -- the first step, the economic engine -- that would help justify bringing fresh water to the river, to bring environmental health back to the river, and also to enable sharing further downstream with Palestinians who currently can't access the river because it's so polluted and they can't access it politically anyway -- but also as a concrete model of peace, the very first; and we're optimistic that this will be the first peace park, the first peace park not only between Arabs and Israelis, but the first peace park in the Middle East because there aren't any peace parks throughout the Middle East.

So, there's traction and the bottom-up links with the top-down. We have an advisory committee that's made up of Israeli, Palestinian, and Jordanian government officials that are today sitting and meeting and discussing the rehabilitation of the River Jordan. And the U.S. Senate has passed a resolution in 2007 calling on the governments to work together to rehabilitate the Jordan, to use water as a mechanism for peace building, confidence building, that speaks to so much more than just the environment. It speaks to livelihood, speaks to economic and social betterment that in the Middle East we so desperately need. But our work is showing that water is an appropriate -- if somewhat unique -- engine that helps spurn that forward. So I'll stop with that.

[applause]

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