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PROTEST 5 (2025) 265–281

PROTEST
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Challenging the Ecocide of Colonization: Case study of Palestine

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Received 4 June 2025 | Accepted 20 July 2025 |

Published online 24 April 2026

Abstract

Destruction of the environment (ecocide) always accompanies colonization and significant literature (usually retrospective) exists to describe such damage. What receives much less attention is how the indigenous people respond to such damage. Here we describe ways in which Palestinians have responded to the ecocide that afflicted our region over the past few decades. We highlight some case studies and explain why such forms of resistance are crucial components of the totality of popular resistance. We also conclude that decolonization requires this resistance both in challenging systems of environmental injustice but also to build sustainability options on the ground (a resilient eco-friendly economy).

Key words

environmental resistance – decolonization – education – environmental injustice

Introduction

Ecocide, defined as “the extensive destruction, damage to or loss of ecosystems of a given territory” (Higgins et al. 2013), has increasingly been applied to contexts of military occupation and settler colonialism (Artz 2023). Settler colonialism may entail the replacement of an indigenous population with a new settler society (Wolfe 2006) or involve exploitation of local resources while keeping indigenous people as indentured labor such as happened in apartheid South Africa. The link between colonization and ecocide was studied in many countries. This link in the case of Palestine is increasingly recognized (Tal 2002; Weizman, 2012; Qumsiyeh and Abusarhan 2020, 2021; Qumsiyeh et al., 2014). The Gaza Strip represents an acute example of environmental devastation under blockade and military assault. Israeli activities destroyed sewage treatment plants, agricultural land, and green infrastructure (Yin et al 2025; Qumsiyeh 2024; Yavuz and Unal 2025) The introduction of invasive species, depletion of natural resources, habitat destruction, pollution, ensuing deterioration of food sovereignty can be understood as an example of “slow violence,” further entrenching the settler-colonial occupation of Palestine. The settler-colonial occupation, along with the creeping annexation of land, agro-military settlements, and hydro-hegemony, strip Palestinians of their traditional forms of livelihood (Pedersen 2018). If colonization damages the environment then by definition any decolonization process must de facto include work for environmental justice (Lanjouw 2021; Salem 2019).

The process of overcoming Zionism and arriving at sustainability must begin with mental decolonization (Khalifah and Qumsiyeh 2024; Qumsiyeh and Amro 2019). Palestinians responded then both individually and institutionally beyond the issue of armed resistance (Qumsiyeh 2012, 2015, 2017a,b). This paper focuses on the little-addressed initiatives to resist environmental injustice and reclaim ecological agency under occupation. Through examples, we illustrate how Palestinians are actively challenging ecocide while building pathways toward a resilient, sustainable future rooted in local knowledge and environmental sovereignty.

Ways to Challenge Environmental Injustice

Palestinians have organized against their displacement and ecocide by depending on traditional ways and developing new forms of environmental resistance. The first way to challenge Environmental Injustice is to research and document it and simply reject its hegemony (Badil 2013; Barakat 2018).

Knowledge is power Monitoring Israeli Colonizing activities in the Palestinian West Bank and Gaza (dubbed POICA <http://poica.org/about-the-project/>) is a joint project between the Applied Research Institute in Jerusalem (ARIJ) and the Land Research Center (LRC). Both institutes have a long history of gathering data and documents and producing local maps and reports about settlements causing injustice to the local people.

Yet there exists another way to respond and challenge environmental injustice, *sumud* (trying to sustain presence and resilient community). We can join with the indomitable spirit of *sumud*, Ramzy Baroud (2025) writes: *sumud* “represents a profound and deeply ingrained cultural phenomenon rooted in [Palestinian] defiance, historical consciousness, unwavering faith, spirituality, the strength of family bonds, and the cohesion of community.” In a context where conventional forms of protest and political activism are heavily suppressed or criminalized, Palestinians have turned to alternative, often quieter but just as important forms of resistance. Ecological preservation and environmental activism emerge not just as acts of sustainability but as manifestations of *sumud*—steadfastness in the face of erasure. This reframing of resistance as something that extends beyond public protest and politics of appeal, works to emphasize the importance of building autonomy through preserving traditional practices. Most important is a return to agriculture or return to the land (Abdelnour et al. 2012; Zurayk 2012). Palestinians also resisted colonization attempts to erase their local food production by forming seed banks such as at UAWC thus enhancing food sovereignty (Meneley 2021; Fullilove 2022) and other farming activities (Abdelnour et al. 2012; Golzar Anderson and Phan 2022). If Palestinians were allowed to continue living on their land using traditional methods of sustenance like stone terracing, they would have been able to be food sufficient (Abu Hammad 2004). Some Palestinians started permaculture farms as a form of resistance (Anabtawi 2016). Maintaining traditional rain fed agriculture is considered a form of resistance and for food sovereignty in the face of Israeli onslaught (Teddell et al. 2019, 2020; Kohlbry 2022). Other inspiring initiatives are also available for *sumud* (Al-Butmeh et al. 2019; Qumsiyeh 2021; Qumsiyeh and Abusarhan 2020). Even in conservation efforts, Palestinians were able to conserve habitats and restore land despite political challenges (Qumsiyeh and Albaradeiya, 2022; Qumsiyeh et al. 2023, 2024a). Seed banking is another interesting form of resistance (Meneley 2021; Teddell 2020). Others include roof top gardens in refugee camps (Pedersen 2018), enhancing bio-cultural connectivity (Qumsiyeh et al. 2024b).

Resistance has also taken cultural and economic forms such as the Alternative Tourism Group (ATG), which challenges the Israeli tourism

industry's appropriation of land and narrative by promoting ethical, community-based tourism that centers the realities of living under occupation (Higgins-Desbiolles et al. 2013). Palestinians do engage in environmental and agricultural work for example via cooperatives (Abdulmajeed 2018; Krieger 2018) and women empowerment (Peteet 1992; Hasso 2001, 2005; Kuttub 2018; Al-Khateeb et al. 2017). Challenging injustice is done by a number of NGOs for example Land and Water Institute, the Palestinian Hydrology Group, the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committees, the Applied Research Institute/Jerusalem, and the Agricultural Engineers Association. Some things can also be learned from other experiences (Ebbesson 2002). Campaigns are important for example on water (EWASH 2012, 2016; Ashqar 2012; CESVI 2019) or via agriculture (Perrier 2021)

Individuals also resist in Palestine. This is usually young people that take initiatives to protect their environment and educate others. Najla Abdellatif founded "Zero Waste Palestine" which creates awareness on environmental issues and inspires households to adopt waste-free and sustainable practices in the Arab world (<https://www.instagram.com/zerowastepalestine/>). Abdellatif's digital content attracted tens of millions of views across various platforms. She has also delivered workshops and initiated and managed many projects benefiting thousands. Mohammad Shuaibi likewise developed a passion of photography and adopted the protected area next to his village using social media to raise awareness (see <https://www.facebook.com/mohammadshuaibi>). Some individuals end-up creating groups of activists working on environmental sustainability. For example, Deeik (2025) explains:

Farmers like Iman Turkman, a farmer from Al-Nasariyah in the central Jordan Valley, shares inspiring stories of transformation. Known as the 'Daughter of the Mountain,' Turkman left her teaching job to establish an agroecological farm that sustains her family by cultivating 40 crops across 12 dunums (about 1.2 hectares). She founded a cooperative and transitioned from conventional monoculture farming to agroecological farming, free from pesticides and chemical fertilizers that had once burdened her with debt and dependency on corporations. She explained, 'Now I have self-sufficiency and, most importantly, freedom. I grow what I want, and no one forces me to use any pesticides. I've regained the confidence I had long lost in my journey.'

Dr. Omar Tesdell (<https://www.omartesdell.org/>) came to teach at Birzeit University but also set up a youth group that collects data for sustainability of local communities (see <https://barari.org/en>)

There are over 30 non-governmental organizations that were set-up beginning in the 1980s which accelerated during the 1987–1991. There were few NGOs dealing with environment or sustainability issues as a form of Sumud in the Occupied Palestinian Territories until the late 1980s and the 1990s when they proliferated during the 1987–1991 uprising. Those that were established had good agendas but the creation of the Palestinian Authority and its autocratic rule caused the situation of volunteerism and the spirit of giving to diminish (Qumsiyeh 2012). A Palestinian Environmental NGO network was formed (PENGON.org). Resilience took the form also of some initiatives of young people for sustainability and self-reliance such as the Nabat farm in the Galilee (<https://www.instagram.com/nabatecofarm>), Om Sleiman farm in Bilin (<https://www.instagram.com/omsleimanfarm/>), Bayan eco-farm (<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100082133630986>), Tent of Nations (Fadil 2013), Rawajeh Al Saen for Bedouin sustainability (<https://www.facebook.com/rojehh/>), Sakiya (<https://sakiya.org/>), “Green Knowledge Community, Beats for Gaza,” by Majed Abusalama (Esteves and Abusalama 2020) and Dalia Association (<https://www.dalia.ps/>). There were groups that help empower entrepreneurs such as BuildPalestine (<https://buildpalestine.com/about-us/>). The Arab Group for the Protection of Nature was founded in Jordan by Palestinians with strong connections to the land and has succeeded in planting over 3 million trees in Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine. Their latest project intends to rehabilitate the Gaza Strip (<https://apnature.org/en/gaza>).

Protest actions are far too many to list regarding environmental justice. We can cite a few examples. In January 2022 a friend wrote the Sierra Club asking them to reconsider a planned trip to our country which normalizes “Israel” and makes it look as a green destination. This is what people dub greenwashing occupation, colonization, and apartheid (Falah 2003; Hughes et al. 2023). Their response: “we recognize the gravity of the situation and we agree that the occupation of Palestine is unjust and inhumane. However, it is our position not to restrict trips due to the politics of the countries we educate participants about a country’s social and environmental conflicts.” We immediately wrote to them to explain that this tour does not show the other side and is guided and controlled not to show any environmental injustice issues. The response was short “I greatly appreciate your engagement on this issue. While the focus of the trip this spring is to give participants an environmental and cultural experience that reflects the diversity of the region, I hear your concerns. I have shared your perspectives with longtime members of the Sierra Club Board of Directors as well as senior staff across multiple departments, and we will take your feedback under consideration for the future.” A month later, the trip was

cancelled but then was quickly reinstated (though with limited participation) after pressure from the Zionist lobby.

There is a global environmental justice atlas <https://ejatlas.org/> and we in Palestine can add to it. Global working groups like <https://ceobs.org/> should be approached for support. Some local and even Israeli organizations provide legal support such as <https://gisha.org/> (mostly focused on Gaza) and <https://www.saintyves.org/> (focused on West Bank). There is a very useful toolkit for managing conflicts like ours and issues like natural resources (UNIFTFPA 2012). Palestinians should maximally utilize UN procedures for environmental justice issues. The UN Human Rights Council sets up special rapporteurs on human rights (see the insightful new book by three previous holders of the position: Dugard et al. 2023). The current Rapporteur is Francesca Albanese and items can be submitted also via link <https://spsubmission.ohchr.org/>. What is needed are special rapporteurs for environmental rights/justice.

The most effective community resistance works bottom-up to resist environmental injustice. The Maan Development Center was started in 1989 by a group of activists “united by the passion to contribute to the strengthening and steadfastness of the Palestinian society via developing and protecting its human and natural resources and its local institutions, in a way that supports the national liberation process, upholding Palestinians’ rights and ending the Israeli occupation” (<https://www.maan-ctr.org/>). They publish educational materials and execute projects like a permaculture farm that make a huge difference for local resistance to the colonial project destruction of lives and livelihoods. The Land Research Center and the Applied research institution both also engage in research and protection related to environmental issues in relation to colonization. The Palestine Institute of Biodiversity and Sustainability (PIBS at palestinature.org) was established in 2014 with the mission to research, educate about, and conserve our natural world, culture, and heritage and use knowledge to promote responsible human interactions with our environment. PIBS depended mostly on volunteers and local donations but now has started to get other interests and support and is growing rapidly. Even in the situation of occupation and with minimal resources, we were able to do significant research (160 publications), education/community awareness, conservation, and community service (ecosystem services) that indeed helped challenge environmental injustice (Hassouna 2024; Qumsiyeh 2017, 2023, 2021; Qumsiyeh and AbuSarhan 2020, 2021; Qumsiyeh et al. 2017, 2023, 2024a,b). To date, only a limited number of contributions have examined environmentalism as a powerful discursive tool for constructing the future. The case of the gardens highlights three interrelated aspects of the production

of ecological counter-futures: futures as knowledge, futures as (bio)diversity, and futures as survival (Hassouna 2024).

Discussion

Expanding on Martinez-Alier's (2002) concept of environmentalism of the poor, Jennifer Pedersen (2018) notes that an *environmentalism of the occupied* can be observed in the West Bank, where environmentalism can be understood as a struggle to sustain current and future livelihoods, but also aimed at securing self-determination/sovereignty over land and resources. In a climate-changed future, with agriculture increasingly under threat across the globe, the strategies and especially the perseverance of Palestinians in their agro-resistance serves as an example for all of us.

Palestinians resisted encroachment and dispossession at every stage and in every sphere of their lives. Even when they were being shot for trying to return to their homes and lands 1948–1950, tens of thousands managed to do so which added to the so-called demographic challenge. As land confiscation after 1948 and after 1967 continued, farmers continued to resist evictions. Planting trees, returning to the land, and reconnecting with a rich agricultural heritage became manifestations of *sumud* (resilience, persistence). In the West Bank and Gaza, actions of resistance by planting and harvesting are very common. Farmers in Gaza and the West Bank risk being shot on sight as they planted near the wall. Farmers lose crops to settler and soldier attacks regularly. Yet they continue.

The Palestinian environment is suffering from loss of natural resources, neglect environmental pollution, low water quality, depletion of water sources, and other human impacts leading to habitat loss and decline in biodiversity. The Israeli occupation and colonization activities pose major threats to the Palestinian environment. Addressing these and global challenges like climate change requires a grassroots effort and not a top-down approach (Bullard 1994; Martinez-Alier 2002). Yet, this environmental Nakba is possible to reverse with diligent resistance work and thinking outside the box (Qumsiyeh 2004, 2012, 2021; Qumsiyeh and AbuSarhan 2020, 2021; Qumsiyeh et al. 2017, 2024a). The challenge to fighting environmental injustice is mainly hegemony and power imbalance with colonizers getting away with dictating their agendas (see Qumsiyeh and Albaradeiya 2022). We must also challenge the corrupting neoliberal agendas focused on short-term “aid” and perpetuate occupation (Dana 2015; Shehada 2015).

We noted internal disagreement about the direction of economic development and visions for a sustainable future. The PLO proceeded to establish ministries and systems of governance analogous to most states in a state building mode beginning 1994 following the signing of the Oslo Accords. The accords were supposed to be temporary resolving issues like refugees, Jerusalem, statehood, water, and fate of Israeli settlements in five years. Clearly, there was no intention by the Israeli governments to resolve the issues based on international law and UN resolutions (like the Fourth Geneva accords, UNGA 181, 194 or UNSC resolutions 242 and 338).

The situation worsened for Palestinians and for the environment. One vision, proposed by the Palestinian Authority and international development actors, involves building up industry, increasing international investment in modernizing the Palestinian economy, and, generally, approaching the idea of a “green economy” from an angle of technological advancements and job creation. The other vision, articulated primarily by Palestinian farmers and many young people aspiring to be producers rather than consumers who still make up the majority of workers in the occupied territories, is one of going back to one’s roots: to small scale farming, with an eye towards biodiversity and ancestral farming practices, with cooperation and self-sufficiency as the overarching ideals. The first is a vision of accommodation; the second is one of restoring what was lost or destroyed by occupation, colonization, and capitalism (Braverman 2021, 2023; Meneley 2021). We should be looking for environmental justice that go beyond equitable distribution of harms and goods but focus instead on sustainability. We can find such a framework articulated by those who are seeking to change our very relationship with the environment, to return to interdependence, to return to indigenous solutions.

The international community can help local communities in achieving environmental justice (Pellow 2007). In the case of Palestine, the environmental justice push is intricately linked to decolonization and many global actors seem reluctant to do action that helps popular resistance and thus focus only on humanitarian aid. Calls for justice, reparations, and decolonization efforts underscore the need for comprehensive policies that uphold environmental rights and promote sustainable development in post-colonial contexts. This reluctance to act by international groups is disappointing especially since the ecocide is considered an international crime by legal scholars and the Stop Ecocide Foundation reflects the urgency to codify environmental justice within international frameworks (Higgins et al. 2013).

The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court includes environmental destruction as a potential war crime if it causes “widespread, long-term and severe damage” (Rome Statute, Art. 8(2)(b)(iv)). Multiple

UN reports have found Israel's actions meet this threshold in areas like Gaza. Palestine, as a State Party to the ICC, has the legal capacity to bring environmental cases before international courts. Educating globally about ecocide in the context of Palestine is thus important. Unfortunately this issue receives much less attention and protest action than issues like killing civilians or destruction of the infrastructure built by people (e.g. in the recent onslaught on Gaza). While the International Criminal Court and International Court of Justice have looked and made some findings regarding war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in the Gaza Strip 2023–2025, hardly any mention was given to the utter destruction of plant cover, agricultural fields, and wild habitats (see Dardona 2025; Qumsiyeh 2024).

The conflict in Palestine affects all facets of life in our land including the environment and environmental conservation. In this sense, it becomes clear that there is an organic connection between peace and environmental issues. The idea of conflict resolution including those related to environmental issues is to seek to reconcile competing interests but to do it in a way that leads to sustainability (Temper et al. 2018). Conflict over land and natural resources are difficult but can be tackled in a methodological way usually if the two parties are somewhat balanced (it is more difficult in very uneven conflicts such as colonialism). In terms of managing natural resources and the environment, the idea is to arrive at sustainable development and state building through the process of ending the conflict and post conflict management (UNIFTFPA 2012).

Integrating the environment in peace building efforts and in joint struggle is different and opposite to normalization efforts. This is not a conflict between two parties but a colonial anti-colonial struggle. Trying to equate the oppressor with the oppressed (e.g. in areas like perpetuating the conflict or violence) does a disservice to understanding and dealing with reality. The cost of occupation even without counting natural resources is in the billions (ARIJ 2015; Arafah et al. 2015). The disparity between settlers and natives in land control, economy, and access is also compounded by disparity in use of other natural resources especially water. Cooperation with long-term occupiers/colonizers in waste management should not lead to normalization and strengthening of the status quo of occupation by treating the waste from settlers in "joint facilities" (see e.g. Barak 2012; Reynolds 2017). A good example of this is <http://environmentalpeacebuilding.org/> as a positive approach instead of the negative one of normalization. Normalization activities (also in environment) involve cooperation between the occupiers and occupied with assumptions of normalcy of the situation. For example the Arava Institute is dubbed as a peacebuilding institute (Alleson & Schoenfeld 2007). However, real peacebuilding requires facing hard realities and for the occupiers who

wish to work with the oppressed to challenge the system and genuinely join in the struggle of the oppressed including on environmental justice issues in an area that is the cradle of civilization and key to peace and justice in other parts of the world (Qumsiyeh 2018).

While discussions around environmental justice are relatively new in the mainstream consciousness, Palestinians have been resisting land theft and ecological destruction at the hands of the Israelis for decades. Land reclamation and mass mobilization related to agriculture and agroecology are often practiced in response to the creation and expansion of settlements in the West Bank (Araj 2021; Kohlbry 2022; Qumsiyeh et al. 2024b). Claiming land use over neglected lands or repurposing crops and trees that are no longer productive with more fruitful ones are some of the ways in which Palestinians have been vouching for the necessity of keeping their land and asserting its use. Today, with the burgeoning fears of climate change impacts, and with the exacerbated impacts of the occupation, Palestinians have been furthering environmental justice actions to address the intersection between the two connected issues.

Another way to respond to environmental injustice associated with colonization is education and awareness raising. Education, especially relating to natural and cultural heritage can be considered a form of resistance (Dei and Kempf 2006; Nathani Wane 2009). Minoia and Taher (2024) showed in a comparative study in Ecuador and Palestine, that there is indeed space for resistance that allows indigenous people to confront neo-liberal and colonial attempts and to reconnect them to their heritage). This process must begin by ensuring indigenous people and indigenous knowledge enters into the curriculum (Lees et al. 2021).

Palestinians have also exercised other measures of resistance by targeting the Israeli industry sectors that have imposed direct harm on the environment (Qumsiyeh 2017b). The Israeli tourism industry, which has blocked and deterred Palestinians from access, managing, and safeguarding land while further contributing to waste accumulation and resource deprivation, have been resisted by Palestinians who have created alternative forms of tourism. Seen as a way to divert the Israeli agenda to use tourism initiatives as a political tool for obscuring the occupation, and to further control Palestinian land, the Alternative Tourism Group of Palestine (<https://atg.ps/>) exposes the reality of life under occupation (Higgins-Desbiolles, Whyte, and Tedmanson 2013). Efforts like these not only provide more sustainable ways of introducing tourists to Palestinian heritage and culture, but to also provide alternative forms of touristic endeavors that do not further deteriorate local waters, waste, and land under Israeli operators.

The literature on environmental justice in Palestine rarely addressed local community action and we tried to cover some of this here. Yet, much more research is needed. While there are many examples of resistance that Palestinians have exercised to increase biodiversity and practice agro activism through olive and community farming, there are still challenges due to the restrictions imposed by the Israeli border control on the movement and regulation of crops, plants, and seeds. To exemplify, since the 1970s, Israeli forces have confiscated za'atar plants at checkpoints under the pretense of preserving the natural habitat and health of wild za'atar. Palestinians have also been prevented from picking wild thyme as it has been culturally practiced, due to an Israeli classification of wild thyme as a 'protected plant' (Abdelnour et al. 2012). We noted above that ecological decolonization can take many forms. Planting seeds at risk of extinction and reconnecting with our cultural heritage is one such activity, where the act of planting, harvesting, and foraging soil, seeds, and plants through sustained historical practices and local knowledge help to retain Palestinian connection to the land and regenerate the land (Mendeley 2021). Urban gardening in efforts for restoration has shown promise in the capabilities to connect Palestinians to their land (Qumsiyeh et al. 2022). Seed sharing and archiving through seed libraries is one way in which Palestinians have been working towards maintaining plant diversity and expanding farmers' agricultural output and attachment to their heritage. The settler colonial occupation not only vies for the theft of land but also the erasure of Palestinian knowledge and traditions; sustaining seed diversity and Palestinian knowledge in nurturing and growing them is part of an environmental justice movement that ensures cultural longevity and existence (Mendeley, 2018). We believe that activism for environmental justice is central to peace (Awad 2019) and to sustainability (Salem 2019). The examples cited above show indeed that indigenous people agency can be a critical component of ecological decolonization. Much more needs to be done to end the ongoing environmental 'Nakba'/ catastrophe (Qumsiyeh and Abusarhan 2020). This requires concerted efforts of individuals, organizations, local authorities and the international community.

Acknowledgements

Our seed banking and agroecological intervention projects that prompted this work were partially funded by the United Methodist Committee on Relief of Global Ministries and an anonymous donor.

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