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Environmental apartheid in the shadow of annexation

In an area like the West Bank where political boundaries are hazy, the issue of profits and tax payment should be examined in the context of environmental and social justice.

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AUGUST 10, 2020 23:03



THE BEDOUIN encampment of Khan al-Ahmar near Ma'aleh Adumim.

(photo credit: HADAS PARUSH/FLASH90)

Though written nearly four decades ago, the lyrics of the song “Seeing Far, Seeing Transparent” by songwriter Yaakov Rotblit (who is known mainly for

penning an anthem of the Israeli peace movement – “A Song for Peace” – in 1969) remain relevant to current discourse on development projects and political tensions occurring in the West Bank in the summer of 2020.

According to common interpretations, the song was inspired by the biblical figure of Moses, who was exiled from the “Promised Land.” Two lines in particular parallel current issues with Israeli policy in the occupied territories: 1) “A man like a tree planted on water” – perhaps in reference to the Book of Psalms (“and was like a tree planted on streams”) – likens man to a tree as he roots and clings to a tenuous land. 2) Then, later in the song: “So my way was lost, my life was a riddle, thirst was gone in the desert, to a word of truth that has the power to give a face for tomorrow.’

This summer, the “truth” and “power” that Rotblit wrote of in the early 1980s will determine the political viability of a sustainable “tomorrow” in our region. At the moment, it is uncertain whether the question “To annex or not to annex” reverberating throughout Israel in recent months will be decided. Additionally, in light of an accumulating number of large, Israeli government-sanctioned development projects in the West Bank, it is also uncertain what percentage of the territory might be claimed in a de facto annexation.

The Association for Environmental Justice in Israel, civil rights organizations working against the occupation, and nature conservation organizations working in Judea and Samaria (the biblical name for the region of the [West Bank](#)), have been in a race against the clock in recent months to preserve the possibility of a “two-state solution,” which annexation inherently threatens. Therefore, efforts are aimed at halting the development plans that are currently in the decision-making pipeline of various government authorities, which, if approved, would further legitimize annexation in the eyes of the Israeli government.

The odds of success are small.

The following is a partial list of these proposed projects:

- The construction of a waste treatment and energy production facility near the Good Samaritan site, in the large municipality of [Ma'aleh Adumim](#). A preliminary tender was published at the end of 2019 and now an international tender could be published any day. Once built, about 1,500 tons of garbage will be transported to the site from Jerusalem each day, thus leading Israel to violate its signing of the Basel Convention, an international treaty that prohibits trans-boundary waste transfer between countries (or political entities) that do not possess similar infrastructure and governance capabilities.
- The development of 3,500 housing units by Israel in Area E1 (between east Jerusalem and Ma'aleh Adumim). If carried out, these developments will permanently negate the possibility of east Jerusalem becoming the capital of the Palestinian state. Objections to the plan can be submitted to the Supreme Planning Council of the Civil Administration arm of the Ministry of Defense.
- The expansion of the Nahal Raba quarry, located in an area between the “Green Line” and a Separation Wall that Israel constructed east of the line over a decade ago, close to Nahal Raba (the Raba Stream). The stream is one of the tributaries of the Yarkon River, an area rich in flora and fauna and attractive to many hikers seeking natural terrain in the center of the country. Expanding quarry operations would jeopardize the ecological integrity of this watershed. It would also pose a health risk and reduce the quality of life of communities living near the quarry - mainly the municipality of Rosh Ha'ayin, where many residents object to the expansion.

Implementation of the Nahal Raba quarry plan is a subversion of international law. In particular, it undermines a past Israeli High Court decision that prohibited construction of new quarries in the West Bank by Israel, on the grounds that such

a unilateral transformation of land beyond the Green-Line would be an act of environmental apartheid. While technically no new quarries will be built under the Nahal Raba plan, the proposed expansion of the existing one will yield the same unjust result.

According to a report by Human Rights Watch, the Nahal Raba quarry was established on lands of the Palestinian village of Al-Zawiyah in the early 1980s. About 20 years later, in 2004, Israel built a separation wall east of the quarry, effectively claiming all land between the wall and the Green Line as Israeli territory. As such, any quarry that is built (or expanded) west of the wall is considered by the government to be on state land, and is not required to provide tax payments to the Palestinian Authority. The quarry stands between residents of Al-Zawiyah and the lands expropriated from them by the separation wall, depriving them of the opportunity to profit from that land. Though Palestinians can technically work at the quarry itself, they must obtain legal permissions from the Israeli military.

Nahal Raba is the subject of an additional program that concerns the creation of a new industrial zone, called Sha'ar Hashomron (Gate of Samaria) or the Nahal Raba industrial zone, and covering approximately 2,700 dunams. If the zone is developed, surrounding areas would incur significant environmental impact, including damage to the main ecological corridor of the central region of Israel. The planning of the project is being managed by the Civil Administration, the branch of the Ministry of Defense that maintains civil oversight and control in Area C of the West Bank, and which has not made all project information available to the public. Thus lack of transparency is another issue with the development plans for Sha'ar Hashomron.

IN AN area like the West Bank where political boundaries are hazy, the issue of profits and tax payment should be examined in the context of environmental and social justice. But in the case of the Gate of Samaria industrial zone, these values have been ignored.

Development of the “Nahal Raba [industrial zone] [was delayed] for many years due to conflicts [between neighboring Jewish settlements over tax allocations by the industrial zone], and in the last 10 years there has been almost a complete stalemate. About two years ago, the Samaria Regional Council, [a coalition of local authorities from the settlements, attempted] to resolve the issue, and after [much] hard work... [it] reached a historic breakthrough [after about six months], signing a tripartite agreement between the Samaria Regional Council, and the Oranit and Elkana local councils. The agreement significantly increased the Samaria Regional Council’s [share of] profits [from the project] to about 42%... and [ensured payment] on a regular basis” (Translation of a Hebrew publication on the Shomron (Samaria) Regional Council website shomron.org.il last month). However, this agreement utterly failed to consider nearby Palestinian municipalities and their right to a share of the profits.

The authors of this article hope that early celebration over this recent, one-sided agreement between the settlements does not distract from the Samaria Gate plan’s persisting issues. The broader political implications of such a major development, along with the other proposed projects in the West Bank outlined above, is what should be at the center of public discourse during this period of annexation talks. Because the West Bank is subject to political, legal and international controversy, and despite the apparent truth that unilateral annexation is the will of most Israelis, a public discourse should be held in which the above plans can be discussed as part of a just and bilateral solution for the areas in question. Execution of these plans without fair discussion and involvement of all impacted parties will only increase the alienation and hostility between the Israeli and

Palestinian populations. It will also cultivate a bitter awareness of the contrast between where these plans might lead us politically, socially and environmentally, and what leaders could have ensured instead if they had only been more farsighted and transparent, and acted on the behalf of both peoples, their future generations, and a fair and sustainable environment.

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