

Israeli Shepherd Settlements – Ecological Colonialism in the Jordan Valley

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Manal Shqair provides an account of the brutalization of the Jordan Valley by Israeli settler-shepherds who, along with the violent Hilltop Youth and the Israeli military, are ranged against pastoral Palestinian communities.

In this paper, I examine how Israeli shepherd settlement outposts accompanied by other impositions act to decimate Palestinians' land-based pastoralism in the Jordan Valley, and represent a deliberate mechanism of the Zionist state to disrupt indigenous eco-social practices. Focusing on the communities of Khirbet Al-Hadidya, Khirbet Makhoul and Al-Farisya, I find that the Israeli destruction of Palestinians' eco-social relations falls with the framework of colonial ecological violence (CEV) described by Jules M. Bacon. CEV works slowly and strategically to advance the settler-colonial project, perpetually undermining the agricultural livelihood and social resilience of the indigenous population.

Introduction

Immediately after the six-day war in 1967, members of Israel's government gathered daily to discuss the destiny of the 1½ million Palestinians living in the newly occupied territories (Pappe 2016, 212-214). They contemplated the possibility of ethnic cleansing, similar to the ethnic cleansing of approximately ¾ million Palestinians in the war of 1948 (many of whom were displaced to the territories subsequently occupied in 1967). Concerned about the reaction of the international community, as well as its image as 'the only democracy in the Middle East', Israel held back. Instead, the erasure of Palestinian existence from their land would be carried out incrementally. Within three months – between June and August, 1967 – a set of decisions were made that successive Israeli governments have adhered to: To impose Jewish supremacy in a methodical manner on as much of the occupied territories as possible while ghettoizing the Palestinian people within ever-smaller enclaves.

The Jordan Valley is one of the areas in which the decisions taken in 1967 are translated into a vicious and dehumanizing reality. According to the Oslo Accords signed between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1993, 87% of the Jordan Valley was designated as 'Area C', which Israel was supposed to return to Palestinian control five years after signing the accords (Haddad 2020). Yet, with the sheer hegemony of the colonizer, Israel still retains control over the great majority of the Jordan Valley. This constitutes 30% of the area of the West Bank and makes up half of its fertile agricultural land. In addition to the fertility of the land, Israel's strategic interest stems from the location; the Jordan Valley runs 10 km along the border with Jordan at the eastern gate of Palestine providing access to the rest of the Arab World.

Ilan Pappé contends that the partitioning of the West Bank into Areas A, B and C according to the Oslo Accords was never in contradiction with the decisions reached post-war in 1967 (2016, pp. 212-214). Such decisions, as I mentioned above, were based on the motivation to erase Palestinian existence from as much land as possible. Thus, 11,000 illegal Jewish settlers live in the Jordan Valley compared to 65,000 Palestinians, yet 77.5% of the land is in the grip of Israel (*Al Bawaba* 2018).

In this paper, I look into Israel's ongoing territorial expansion in the Jordan Valley within the framework of ecological colonialism. The elimination of Palestinian existence from areas targeted for Jewish settlement expansion is carried out by different means and here I look in particular at shepherd settlement outposts.¹ With a focus on the communities of Khirbet Al-Hadidya, Khirbet Makhoul and Al-Farisya in the Northern Jordan Valley, I examine the ecological and social harms caused by these outposts and their role in squeezing the Palestinian population out from their land. This study is based on activist research by the author, which is done alongside women and men living in the Jordan Valley of the occupied West Bank and enduring an Israeli onslaught on their land-based semi-nomadic pastoral living.

Theoretical Framework

Research on Israeli shepherd settlement outposts and their role in curtailing the landscape for Palestinians in the Jordan Valley is scarce.² Part of the reason is that Israeli shepherd outposts are a recent phenomenon; according to local residents, Israel started the construction of shepherd settlements 4-5 years ago. Given the scarcity of previous studies, the people I interviewed for this study, who are co-producers of the knowledge presented here, will be the main source of information about these outposts. Shepherd settlement outposts refer to small settlements built on a few hectares of land, usually hilly areas and inhabited by one or a few shepherd families. The danger of these settlements, the residents explain, lies in the ability of Israeli shepherds to block off Palestinian access to large swathes of grazing areas, usually by force, preventing their cattle from grazing.

Palestinian shepherds assert that Israeli shepherds are usually escorted by the Israeli army and fanatical settlers who affiliate with the 'Hilltop Youth'. The Hilltop Youth is a group of hundreds of settlers who aim to take over Palestinian lands by establishing settler outposts especially on hilltops (Al-Qadi 2021). Since its creation at the end of the 1990s and until 2020, the group succeeded in building 170 settler outposts across the West Bank. The Hilltop Youth direct lynch mobs and other violence against Palestinians. For instance, in 2015, they burned down the home of the Dwabsheh family in the village of Duma, Nablus and killed three family members, the parents and their 1-year-old child (ibid). The actions of the Hilltop Youth are underpinned by Amana, a settler organization, which is an arm of Gush Emunim, a Jewish messianic movement that believes in divine inheritance of Palestinian land (MacGillivray 2016, 2).

The shepherd outposts, the Hilltop Youth, Amana, and Gush Emunim constitute an ideology and set of policies enforced by the Jewish colonial authorities, including the Israeli army, to prohibit Palestinian access to land. Together they represent what J.M. Bacon (2019) calls forces of cultivation [in respect of settlers] and discipline [in respect of the native population]. Bacon contends that the forces of cultivation [programs, policies, and discourses promoting settler expansions] and discipline [organizations that generate and implement the ban on native access to land] create an eco-social structure that serves the interests of the settler society while disrupting

¹ An outpost is an Israeli settlement that has not been officially authorized by the Israeli authorities, although they receive services from the state, including construction and defence [www.palestina-komitee.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/3-Cultivating-Dispossession-Israel-Settlements-in-the-Jordan-Valley-Maan-Development-Center-2013A-1.pdf]

² There are some Israeli sources that address shepherd outposts in the West Bank, including the Jordan Valley. Yet, as part of my efforts to decolonize the production of knowledge and to allow for the framing of our reality through an indigenous lens, I avoided the reliance on Israel-based sources, including rights groups and newspapers.

the eco-social relations of the native population. Eco-social relations are defined as the economies, kin relations, social practices, gender roles and responsibilities, and the collective identity enabled and maintained through the material base of the ecological surroundings of the communities in question (Bacon 2019; Mauer 2021, 615).

Human actors (e.g., settler-shepherds and settler-youth) and non-human facilities (e.g., herds of cattle and the weaponry of settlers) are intertwined in the forces of cultivation and discipline, which together enable the shepherd outposts to practice colonial ecological violence (CEV) in the agrarian space. Through the framework of CEV, Bacon (2020) delineates how settler colonialism damages the relationship between indigenous people and the ecology of their traditional land. The theory focuses on how the eliminatory logic of settler colonialism has particular ecological aspects; it contends that there are numerous mechanisms through which the native population's eco-social relations are disrupted to enable the appropriation of the land with total exclusion of native people. Although Bacon focuses mainly on settler colonialism in the American context, I find their analysis of CEV relevant to the Palestinian context. Apart from the particulars of each settler colonial context existing across the world, at the core of the structural workings of settler colonialism is the obliteration of the native population, along with their culture, lifestyle, and relationship with and perception of land, animals and crops in favor of the settler society (Amira 2021, 4).

CEV as a term includes various forms of violence. Of the violence generated and sustained by Israeli shepherd outposts, I will explore two kinds of CEV: Slow violence and spectacular violence. Slow violence, Rob Nixon explains, refers to an 'invisible' form of violence that takes place by increment and accretion, where it may not be seen as violence at all (2011, pp. 2-3). Unlike spectacular violence, slow violence is not an event limited by a beginning and an end. Moreover, slow violence is less attractive to media attention. To be able to fathom how the disruption of Palestinian eco-social relations, as a form of [slow] CEV is perpetuated, my starting point of analysis will focus on more eye-catching and instantaneous forms of Israeli brutality against Palestinian shepherds, which characterize spectacular violence.

Scope and Methodology

For this study, I employed a combination of interviews, site observation, my personal experience, and insights from secondary data on eco-social disruption by CEV within the context of Palestine (Amira 2021; Bacon 2019 & 2020; Mauer 2021; Whyte 2018). The interviews were conducted by conversational exploration and in particular the technique of collecting data through storytelling (Kovach 2010, 40). I employed this method in interviews I conducted in three agricultural communities, where I and the participants exchanged personal stories to gather knowledge. By harnessing open-ended, semi-structured interview questions, conversations were stimulated to allow for the participants, along with myself, to be co-producers of the study.

Khirbet Al-Hadidya, Khirbet Makhoul and Al-Farsiya are three agricultural communities in the northern Jordan Valley:

- Khirbet Al-Hadidya has become a small ghetto as a result of Israeli colonial appropriation of its land. It is surrounded by the settlement (moshav) of Ro'i in the west, the heavily militarized settlement of Humaidat in the east, the military bases of Samra and Mazuqa in the north, and closed military areas in the south (*Stop the Wall* 2021).

- Khirbet Makhoul, which is 3 km from Khirbet Al-Hadidya, is bordered by the settlements of Masskeyyot in the north, Ro'i in the south, and Humaidat in the southeast.³ The communities of both Khirbet Al-Hadidya and Khirbet Makhoul are plagued by three Israeli shepherd outposts built on their pastoral land about 4-5 years ago.
- Al-Farisya, which is 16 and 13 km away from Al-Hadidya and Makhoul, respectively, is surrounded by the settlements of Giv'at Sal'it and Mehola to the north, Shadmot Mehola and Rotem to the east, and Maskeyyot to the south.³ To further curtail access to pastures available to Al-Farisya, Israel classifies the land located to the north, south and west of the community as military training and firing zones. For 4 years, two shepherd settlements – to the east and the west of Al-Farisya – have been pushing them even farther back from their grazing land.

Aside from my interest in exploring the role of Israeli shepherd outposts in damaging Palestinian eco-social integrity, which other communities in the Jordan Valley and elsewhere encounter, I chose the three communities in this study because I have a personal connection with the people I interviewed as part of my work for *Stop the Wall*⁴, which has been to reinforce *sumud* [steadfastness] in their struggles over the course of two years. The personal relationship with the participants was necessary to be able to employ the conversational research method, which is relational and reflective (Kovach 2010, 42). The relational dynamic between myself and the protagonists of the study helped to evoke the telling of stories, including my own stories.

All of the participants have material of their everyday encounters with CEV. As I was born and grew up in the village of Al-Zawiya in the district of Salfit to a family that partly depends on animal husbandry and farming for their livelihood, I could easily identify with the stories the participants shared with me. I could relate to their experiences of violence such as I have encountered directly and corporeally in Al-Zawiya. Al-Zawiya's landscape is vanishing as Israel controls the entrances and exits of the village which is confined, not only by Jewish settlements, but the erection of the Apartheid Wall. Agricultural land in Al-Zawiya has been subjected to deliberate environmental damage, mainly by unleashing wild boars to destroy crops and trees, including that of my family (Amira 2021, 10). To the west of my village, the green hills are distorted by a quarry (Muaddi 2020) operated by the German building materials firm HeidelbergCement, one of several multinational companies profiting through Israeli settlement expansion and CEV.

Analysis and Discussion

Human and non-human spectacular violence

Inside the tent that is the home of RB, with her husband and five children on a warm day in January, RB and myself sat together recalling the childhood that the two of us have in common. With a sense of nostalgia over the past, we recalled how each one of us (RB in Al-Hadidya and myself in Al-Zawiya) used to spend most of our time outdoors helping our parents to graze the cattle of sheep, and cultivate and harvest the land. RB spoke bitterly of the dramatic changes in Khirbet Al-Hadidya, as well as the neighboring communities, and now in

³ Interview with grassroots activist RK, Jan 15, 2022

⁴ stopthewall.org

Khirbet Makhoul, where she moved when married, especially since the arrival of Israeli shepherd settlements over the last couple of years. She explained to me that, once they arrived in the area, “Settlers took over the hilly area opposite to our community of Khirbet Makhoul, which we call Al-Arqoub. There, we used to freely graze our cattle. Israeli shepherd outposts have drastically shrunk our pastoral areas. We don’t know where to graze our 350 sheep. My brother-in-law, who owns 400 heads of sheep, also faces the same problem.”⁵

The takeover of pastoral spaces – uprooting the indigenous Palestinian communities – occurs as a result of [spectacular acts] of CEV against Palestinian shepherds. RB asserted that any Palestinian shepherd who dares venture to the precinct of an Israeli shepherd settlement to graze their cattle is usually beaten by Israeli shepherds under the protection of the Israeli army. Settlers also disturb Palestinian flocks of sheep by driving quad bikes through them.

OM, a mother of five children from the community of Al-Farisya, explained that whenever she or her husband go to graze their herd of sheep in areas close to shepherd outposts, Israeli shepherds force them out of the pasture by unleashing their cows and dogs to attack the Palestinian livestock.⁶ AA from the community of Khirbet Makhoul, who has been working as a shepherd for 37 years, described how Israeli shepherds along with their herds storm his agricultural land and destroy his crops of fodder and wheat. “I usually plant these crops to feed my livestock during the dry summer season. The crops disappear when the herds belonging to Israeli shepherds graze them, as if grazing in the extensive pastures they took from us do not suffice their flocks!”⁷

For Palestinians in Al-Farisya in particular, OM narrated incidents of Israeli invasion of their pasture and agricultural land to conduct military training. Israeli soldiers in large numbers, usually hundreds of armed soldiers and military tanks, completely paralyze the activity and movement of the community and their herds during military exercises. “Military training, which usually lasts for days and takes place several times throughout the year, disrupts our access to the few hectares of land that have not yet fallen prey to Israeli settlement expansion. This is compounded with the loss of large grazing areas to Israeli shepherd outposts,” she added.

The violence of Israeli shepherds, including the weaponization of cows and dogs, to crush the Palestinian pastoral lifestyle including their eco-social norms is part of a current and past Israeli policy. AS, a community leader in his seventies from Khirbet Al-Hadidya, claimed that as soon as Israel occupied the Jordan Valley in 1967, it started enforcing laws and practices to curtail the pastures available to Palestinians.⁸ The omnipresent Israeli brutalization of the landscape manifested in the detention and imposition of fines on shepherds who grazed their cattle in areas deemed prohibited to Palestinians. AS recalled that in the past, Israeli soldiers in helicopters used to shoot and kill their sheep and furthermore: “If our herds were not killed, they would be confiscated.” AA added that the “demolition of our homes and animal shacks was the other policy introduced by Israel to expel us.” The demolition of animal shacks, especially if it takes place in winter, results in the loss of a large number of sheep due to the cold weather, he noted.

⁵ Interview with RB, Jan 17, 2022

⁶ Interview with OM, Feb 6, 2022

⁷ Interview with AA, Feb 6, 2022

⁸ Interview with AS, Jan 17, 2022.

Both AS and AA affirmed that all these policies and practices to remove them from their land failed. Yet, they argued that shepherd settlements have been an effective weapon to undermine their pastoral activities. AA explained that the effectiveness of this weapon lies in the use of animals [herds of sheep and cows, and dogs] against their own herds. "When 500 cows are unleashed against my sheep, I have no other option but to leave before they kill them and me," said AA. In other ways, these new weaponized shepherd settlements, AA contended, have quietly and gradually been successful in debilitating their lives, economies and attachment to the land.

In the colonial ecological war Israel is waging on pastoral Palestinian communities in the Jordan Valley, Palestinian shepherds are portrayed as a threat to the environment. This can be best seen in how Palestinian shepherds' access to areas now classified as nature reserves is prohibited. "Once we go to nature reserves to graze our cattle, an Israeli officer affiliated with the Israel Nature and Parks Authority usually comes to kick us out of the area, escorted by Israeli soldiers," said 25-year-old SB, a shepherd from Khirbet Al-Hadidya.⁹ In wry humor, SB laughed and added, "these pillagers want to teach us how to protect the environment by preventing us from grazing our herds while Israeli shepherds can freely do so. Are there pastoral activities more environmentally friendly than ours?"

CEV is never environmentally friendly. The control of most grazing areas by the shepherd settlement outposts forces Palestinian shepherds in the three communities to overgraze in the limited pastureland they retain access to. Overgrazing results in the desertification of these areas, which has devastating effects on the local biodiversity. Turning the Palestinian landscape into a wasteland realizes the Zionist myth that Palestine is a barren land awaiting the arrival of Jews to make the desert bloom. Desertification also brings into being the colonial claim that the native is incapable of tending and making proper use of the land.

Immobility: A threat to Palestinian eco-social continuity

Palestinians' eco-social relations in the three communities are not predicated on stability and sedimentation. In addition to roaming the plains and hills of the Jordan Valley in search of pastures, seasonal mobility, mainly in the winters and summers, is necessary for the continuity of the social norms of the communities in relation to the environment. The Israeli decimation and domination of Palestinian ecologies through shepherd settlement outposts, along with other practices, policies and obstacles discussed above, have resulted in the curtailment of the mobility of Palestinians in Khirbet Makhoul and Khirbet Al-Hadidya, in particular.

Seasonal immobility, and its repercussions, is an example of slow violence that poses a threat, not only to social norms and the pastoral lifestyle, but to the health of the herds of sheep and to their local economies. AS illustrated this with the point that being fixed in one place throughout the year, a situation that has been the case for several seasons now, makes his flock of sheep more susceptible to different kinds of diseases. "Just less than two months ago I lost 40 heads of sheep", he reported. "Most of them were newborn and sickened by foot-and-mouth disease." AA faces the same problem; within ten days he lost 42 newly born sheep due to disease. Similarly the other participants in the study attributed the increase of diseases plaguing the livestock to the lack of hygienic conditions in the animal shacks due to being static in one place most of the year. AS remonstrated: "Before Israel started imposing restrictions on our movement, we used to get rid of the bacteria and germs in

⁹ Interview with SB, Jan 17, 2022.

the animal shacks and our homes by spending our time in winter and summer in two different places. Vacating the two areas for a while as we seasonally move between them allowed animal shacks to dry, which is necessary to kill bacteria and microbes. Now, the situation is different. Animal shacks remain wet and dirty all year round, where the livestock have become more exposed to fatally sickening bacteria.”

AA stated that, even to clean the animal shacks, he needs an Israeli permit to allow trucks and bulldozers to load the animal waste and transfer it to a different area away from their community. “It takes months to get such a permission; and sometimes even if I have it, the Israeli army raids my community and forces the bulldozer and truck drivers to leave the place before the waste is loaded and transported away.”

Being unable to roam freely and to feed their livestock through grazing, Palestinians in the communities in question have had to depend on processed fodder at exorbitant prices. RB and her husband from Al-Farisya are indebted by 16,000 ILS (approximately 5000 USD) to retailers of fodder. Most of their income goes to securing fodder for their cattle. Furthermore, as Israel has monopolized Palestinian water sources and denies these communities access, water has to be transported to them in tanks, placing another financial burden on their livelihoods. RB enumerated that the herd of sheep she and her husband own needs a tank of water every three days in the summer. Each tank costs them 190 ILS (roughly 60 USD).

The reliance on fodder to feed the flocks of sheep does not only pose a financial problem, but also a threat to the animals’ health. RB pointed out that the health of sheep dramatically improves when they are fed with grass during spring, when they gain weight accordingly. This makes them more able to resist any diseases that may inflict them. “In the past, before Israel invaded our land, our families’ herds were never inflicted by the diseases that are currently killing many of the livestock.” RB added that overeating of processed fodder results in the death of some sheep due to bowel rupture.

Eco-social disruption: A structure of violence, not an event

Israeli shepherd settlements and the associated forces of cultivation [in respect of settlers] and discipline [in respect of the native population] (Bacon 2019) that I drew on above wreak havoc on the communities’ eco-social norms. The manifestation of various forms of CEV has long-term implications on different aspects of their lives. Animal husbandry is the communities’ means for subsistence on the material level including their own food security. RB asserted that their pastoralism gives them the privilege of healthy and nutritious food, the produce of their land, rather than the preserved and chemically polluted food in the stores, or in her words, “food that only God knows how it’s processed”. Without the sustenance of their natural diet, their attachment to the land and their resolve are weakened, and it is easier for Israel to push members of the community into servitude, as cheap wage laborers for Israeli employers. The Palestinian economy is highly dependent on Israel. According to Walid Habbas, as of 2019, roughly 133,000 Palestinians from the West Bank worked in Israel and Israeli settlements across the West Bank, including the Jordan Valley (2020, 1-2). Their transformation from owners of the modes of production to cheap wage-laborers and consumers is a structuring of eco-social relations that is based on exploitation and dehumanization.

Palestinian-farmed food sources are an obstacle to the advance of Israeli settler colonialism. On the other hand, the eradication of their own food sources leads to the forcible relocation of land-based Palestinian communities. All the participants in this study emphasized that their pastoral lifestyle is the main motive for them to stay. If Israeli shepherd settlements continue to decimate their pastureland until they are totally stripped of viable land, the participants considered that their life there will be meaningless and purposeless. RB said that the number

of families in Makhoul keeps decreasing: “Families are forced to relocate in different areas, usually in Areas A and B after the loss of their land or insufficiency of animal husbandry as a source of income.”

Cutting the connection between Palestinians and their ecology, being forced into overcrowded enclaves, destabilizes their physiological maintenance. For Palestinians in these communities, their linkage with the land is imbued with social, emotional and spiritual value. RB observes that living in open grazing areas is necessary for her and her children’s happiness and sustenance. “I can’t imagine myself living in-doors. I keep comparing how my children enjoy more comfort and better physiological health compared to my nephews and nieces who live in-doors.”

Researchers in the field of epigenetics assert that the lives and wellbeing of humans are shaped by their interactions with the surrounding world. This reinforces a reciprocal relationship between humans and the natural world (Marsden 2017). When this sense of reciprocity or interconnectedness with the land is lost due to the damage of the eco-social structure of communities, the unity and social cohesion between community members themselves erodes. AS summed it up as follows: “The land base of our pastoral lifestyle reinforces unity between the extended family members and preserves social cohesion at the community level. When we become landless, fragmented family and community members, we tend to be more brutal towards each other and people around us as everyone will be only looking for individual survival, usually at the expense of the collective.”

The observations made by AS are the result of years of witnessing the dramatic changes that have taken place in the community of Khirbet Al-Hadidya. His perception of the reality and prediction of the future if Palestinians become totally landless are of creeping social disintegration. Drawing on the importance of adhering to indigenous principles for a more sustainable world, Dawn Marsden (2017) observes that social disintegration makes community members disconnected from things that are painful and harmful. She explains that this includes community members becoming detached from their own feelings and the feelings of people around them. Kyle Whyte points to the environmental injustices caused by settler colonial violence against indigenous people and the affect on their relationship with the environment in undermining their social resilience (2018, 125). He contends that as social integration and cohesion are essential to the continuity of indigenous communities as self-determining collectives, environmental violence renders indigenous people vulnerable and less able to resist settler colonial elimination.

Conclusion

There is a growing, yet, hardly noticed role of Israeli shepherd settlements in erasing the sites where Palestinians forge their eco-social relations in the Jordan Valley. By undermining the function of Palestinians’ ecologies in suturing and maintaining their social traditions, Israeli shepherd outposts and other brutal practices generate a process of colonial ecological violence (CEV). Ongoing and recurring CEV debilitates the collective resilience of Palestinians while consolidating Israel’s settler colonial project. With the testimony of the participants of this study, we can see the imperative to defend these communities and many others in colonized Palestine facing the brunt of the vicious interplay between various human and non-human forces to eliminate Palestinian existence.

I here take the opportunity to conclude the paper by calling on social movements and climate justice groups

across the world to support Palestinian-led efforts to thwart Israeli forces of cultivation and discipline. The *Defund Racism Campaign* (defundracism.org), a Palestinian-led movement aiming to end the exploitation of US charitable laws that fund Israeli settler organizations registered in the USA, is one such initiative to stop Israel's CEV. Climate justice movements and other environmental/ecological movements internationally are obliged to answer Palestinian calls to dismantle the Jewish National Fund (JNF). The JNF is a long-standing trailblazer in enacting and sustaining the obstruction of the social linkage Palestinians have with their environment while wearing the garb of environmentalism.

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