

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Babel: Translating the Middle East  
**“Yana Abu Taleb: Environmental Peacebuilding in  
Jordan”**

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FEATURING

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Jon Alterman: Yana Abu Taleb is the Jordanian director of EcoPeace Middle East, a regional organization that brings together Jordanian, Palestinian, and Israeli environmentalists to promote sustainable development and advance peace efforts in the Middle East.

Yana, welcome to Babel.

Yana Abu Taleb: Thank you very much for having me.

Jon Alterman: So, what's the connection between the environment and peacemaking?

Yana Abu Taleb: Well, we're considered an environmental peacebuilding organization, but the way we function as an organization is we build trust through focusing on legitimate issues to protect our shared environment between the three countries. That trust is the first necessary step to building peace.

Jon Alterman: So, is there something different about peacebuilding in the Arab-Israeli context around environment issues, or do you think this is something that is generalizable to other conflicts?

Yana Abu Taleb: Well, it can be and it can work in other conflict areas, and this is part of the programming that we do. For many years, we've succeeded in putting together a methodology for environmental peacebuilding that we showcase and we share with other conflict areas in the world. For us, peacebuilding and peacemaking are two separate issues, basically.

Jon Alterman: Help me understand that.

Yana Abu Taleb: When you involve both the policy and the people on the ground, you build peace among people. You have people be part of that long-term peace, basically. Peacemaking is when you see political agreements signed, and that's an important base, definitely. But us, as a civil society group, working with people on the ground, working as a grassroots organization, we're building long-term peace. We're building that trust that is necessary for peace to be sustainable. Because the way we do it is that people understand that they're cooperating on legitimate issues to achieve water security, to achieve energy security, to achieve climate security, basically. We showcase how linked they are together, and we highlight the need for cooperation, showcasing the mutual gain and self-interests of these issues to each of our countries, and how we are able to build better communities, and then it becomes sustainable.

Jon Alterman: How many people are involved in EcoPeace activities in Israel, Palestine, and Jordan?

Yana Abu Taleb: Well, it depends on the programs. So, we have our advocacy lobbying, and they involve high-level issues and coordination and cooperation between the three countries, and it all goes back to our Green Blue Deal for the Middle East that we presented back in 2020. It talks about achieving water security, energy security, and food security, and making that linkage between them all.

And why are we saying they're high level? Because it aims at policy change. And there we work on building that political will with decision-makers and politicians, but we also have a very wide range of stakeholders in Jordan and Israel and Palestine to educate so that they can help put that pressure. Because if people on the ground are not convinced, then the projects that are implemented are not sustainable.

For example, our climate diplomacy. Every year, we work with a new cohort. And we are talking about one hundred and fifty young professionals from each country that we work with at the national level to train throughout the year to build their capacity, for them to understand their water realities, what climate security is, and prepare them for the regional interactions with their peers in the other offices. So that is one of our components, basically.

Jon Alterman: One of the challenges of a lot of civil society efforts is that the support from outside can overwhelm the amount of support from inside a society, and you have these groups that end up very focused on soliciting revenue from outside but don't really develop their own sources of domestic support. As an organization, how do you avoid that problem? How do you ensure that it doesn't just seem like a bunch of foreigners telling Jordanians or Palestinians what to do and to think?

Yana Abu Taleb: So, first of all as an organization, we do not take direct financial resources from our governments. So, all our funding comes from abroad. This has been since the start of the organization. We do not want to be seen as working for our countries or the governments of our countries. We're independent, but we bring in, like I said, that mutual gain, and we employ citizens of our three countries.

I have a full Jordanian staff that understands the Jordanian law, that understands the Jordanian issues, and are the ones that talk to people and the governments as well.

It's not easy, to tell you the truth. But we have become very knowledgeable and experienced and trusted in our relationship with different donors

around the world, and we even now are able to secure core funding for the organization and not only program funding. But that took us a long time.

Jon Alterman: How do you build trust among Jordanians? I've spent enough time in Jordan to know there are a lot of Jordanians who are opposed to any notion of normalization with Israel. How large is that group of people who object to what you're doing, and how large is the group of people who at least quietly support what you're doing?

Yana Abu Taleb: So, before the war, our life was never easy as an organization, as an Amman office, because we were always condemned for being "normalizers." But our power is through our programs, through our methodology. We invest in dialogue, in explaining to people from our different target groups, why we're involved in climate security issues, water security, and energy security. And we bring information based on research that people don't know.

When you talk to someone about regional cooperation or cooperation with Israel on water issues, you find out that an average Jordanian does not really know the severity of our water situation in Jordan. So, when you start passing on that information, it's proved in research that the best options would be cooperation with Israel for purchasing additional quantities of water for so many reasons.

Then you come again to the self-interests and the mutual gain for all. Our programs build healthy interdependencies. So, we're not only talking that Jordan continue to purchase one-way water and gas from Israel but for the first time, Jordan has something to provide to Israel as well, and that's the renewable energy. That healthy interdependency gets people to understand. So that's our power.

After the war, things are really complicated. And the majority of people do not believe in peace on the Jordanian side. It's a tough situation, and we're now trying to focus on what matters. So, what we're doing is focusing on how in the three offices, we're able to work on creating a trilateral alliance to allow humanitarian aid to both the West Bank and Gaza, focusing on the WASH sector: water, sanitation, and hygiene.

The needs are tremendous at this time. And again, we're working with decision-makers, even in Jordan. So, I coordinate with the relevant ministries here and then pass on the information to our other offices so that we can move things. And this is something that we have a proven track record of for many years. And, hopefully, that would lead to more important issues that we need to focus on, especially the day after the war, the rebuilding and reconstruction that is needed, of course, and all the other issues, like the water. It cannot stop at conflict issues. People need water to survive, and

with the climate crisis, in addition to the humanitarian crisis that we see now, it's going to make things even worse. And that's why we're able to work with the relevant decision-makers to continue to continue to move these important issues forward.

Jon Alterman: Most Arab-Israel peacemaking has evolved to be between Israelis and Palestinians. This is not a bilateral group; this is a trilateral group. How does Jordanian involvement change the dynamic of how Arabs and Israelis engage on environmental issues?

Yana Abu Taleb: Jordan's role is important, because 75 percent of Jordan's population is of Palestinian origin and therefore, Jordan's role in maintaining the balance in Palestine is really important.

For example, Jordanians talking to Palestinian decision-makers to sign trilateral agreements, in relation to the Jordan River or the Water-Energy Nexus, plays a major role to convince the Palestinians but also plays a major role in convincing the Israelis, as well.

Jon Alterman: How has the current violence affected government-to-government cooperation on water between Jordan and Israel?

Yana Abu Taleb: The agreements that existed as part of the peace agreement, the water agreement, continue. Coordination is there and Jordan has received its full share of water according to the agreement. And then the shorter-term agreements that were signed two years ago to purchase 50 million cubic meters of water are also moving forward. The worry is the future. So, what we're trying to move forward as a group is to have discussions with the Jordanian and the Israeli governments to renew the water agreement based on the 50 million cubic meters that was for three years.

It's not an easy situation because of the political tensions that we are seeing but I must say, the Jordanian government and the Israeli government understand the importance of the water issues.

Jon Alterman: And there were certainly some plans to expand agreements that the foreign minister announced in November that Jordan was not going to pursue.

Yana Abu Taleb: You mean the Water-Energy Nexus?

Negotiations on that level have all stopped. But my discussions, at least with the Jordanian government, that this is something that is of strategic importance for Jordan, and we're having the same discussions in our Israeli office, that it's of strategic importance for the Israelis as well. And then at the right time, we will help move it forward to a full agreement and then help

implement the agreement because nothing is as easy as it sounds in our region.

Jon Alterman: So, what are your plans going forward? You talked about the Green Blue Deal. You're dealing with the ongoing violence in Gaza. What is your expectation for the next year, the next three years, the next five years? What's the role of EcoPeace as peace builders in a conflict where there is going to only be more need to build peace?

Yana Abu Taleb: So long-term, our work is to continue to focus on the climate crisis, and we have all the different components of our Green Blue Deal, like the Water-Energy Nexus, the rehabilitation of the Jordan River Valley, and all that. Negotiating a water agreement between the Israelis and Palestinians and then the continuation of our educational programs on climate resilience and the climate crisis.

At this time, we're focusing on the humanitarian aid and creating that corridor where all of our three countries would work together on allowing the humanitarian aid to enter through Jordan and the West Bank to Gaza, and really focusing on the WASH sector, like I said. At this time, linking the health issues that have arisen from the war, both on the Israeli side and Palestinian side to the climate crisis, is an important focus.

So, we're really working at the national levels with decision-makers and many of our supporters that we've been working with for a long time, but also internationally, getting the U.S. administration involved to help us push this forward is important, also the EU.

Jon Alterman: You've talked about how the environment in Jordan has become less open to the kind of work that you've been doing in the midst of the war. You talk to your Palestinian and Israeli colleagues. What do you hear is happening to the communities that were open to this kind of cooperation in Israel and Palestine? And how are they dealing with the current violence and its effects on their operation?

Yana Abu Taleb: So, we're in it together. Thank God we have each other as a group and since the war started, we have been speaking every day. We have been working together with our teams, definitely focusing on the well-being of our staff and the security of our staff at this time.

Jon Alterman: Is that a problem in all three locations?

Yana Abu Taleb: It's the same. Unfortunately, there's polarization, and we hear that peace is not possible from everyone. Even people that used to really support our work, they say to me that, "No, no, no, this can't go on. It's not possible anymore, not after what happened." Of course, things will change, but it's

going to require time. Because as the war continues, as the pain continues, you cannot really have good dialogue with people. But we're facing the same situation in all three countries. We're attacked, but then we're accused of being dreamers, and we see that people are polarized and do not believe in peace anymore.

Jon Alterman: As somebody who's been doing this for decades, what do you see in this cooperation that other people who haven't been doing this work don't see from your work with Israelis and Palestinians on environment issues?

Yana Abu Taleb: I see that it creates mutual benefit for all, on all levels. Because when each country is looking to really fight climate change on its own, first of all, it's not possible, because our environment knows no borders, and it's much more expensive and would take a much longer time. It's not possible, really moving forward on achieving climate resilience without regional cooperation. As an organization, we bring in that regional vision that we all will benefit from and that will help us move forward.

Jon Alterman: Yana Abu Taleb, Jordanian director of EcoPeace Middle East, thanks for joining us on Babel.

Yana Abu Taleb: Thank you very much, Dr. Alterman.

(END.)