

Civil society can play key role in peacebuilding



YOSSI MEKELBERG

May 22, 2019 16:13



EcoPeace directors at UN Security Council. (Courtesy UN)

Witnessing a Jordanian, a Palestinian and an Israeli appearing in front of the UN Security Council and speaking in complete agreement is not an everyday occurrence. Yet this happened toward the end of last month, when three representatives of the nongovernmental organization (NGO) EcoPeace Middle East — a unique group that brings together environmentalists from these three countries with the chief objective of promoting cooperation aimed at protecting their shared environment — addressed the Security Council. Beyond the immediate and obvious value of collaborating on an issue that almost instinctively lends itself to multilateral cooperation, EcoPeace is a shining example of the role that civil society can play in promoting peace between Israelis and Palestinians, and more generally for regional cooperation on issues of common interest.

In response to the presentations by the three co-directors of the organization

— Nada Majdalani (Palestine), Yana Abu Taleb (Jordan) and Gideon Bromberg (Israel) — Germany’s Ambassador to the UN, Christoph Heusgen, remarked that “EcoPeace is a rare glimmer of hope showing that cooperation between the two sides is indeed possible. Civil society plays a key role in building trust and confidence.” One can only echo his observation and assert that lack of trust is one of the major obstacles to advancing any dialogue between governments, let alone bringing peace, and can quickly lead to an exchange of threats, accusations, insults and missiles. Civil society, on the other hand, has much to offer in terms of peaceful dialogue that takes into consideration all sides’ concerns.

The history of EcoPeace is strongly related to the Israeli-Palestinian Oslo peace initiative of 1993 and the 1994 peace agreement between Israel and Jordan. That was the heyday of civil society peace activities. In December 1994, EcoPeace was established as a Friends of the Earth umbrella branch for these three political entities. In the 25 years that have since elapsed, it has established offices in Ramallah, Amman and Tel Aviv, which employ a few dozen people and are supported by hundreds of volunteers who work on a range of environmental projects within their geographical, socioeconomic and climate change context.

The organization’s rationale — one that makes it an example for other grassroots groups to follow — is that addressing a complex issue in an environment of ever-changing realities and in an extremely turbulent region requires joint efforts. The rationale states that “the people and wildlife of our region are dependent on many of the same natural resources. Shared surface and sub-surface freshwater basins, shared seas, common flora and fauna species and a shared airshed” inevitably mean that only regional cooperation can serve the collective interests of all three peoples.

“ Addressing a complex issue in an environment of ever-changing realities and in an extremely turbulent region requires joint efforts ”

Yossi Mekelberg

One of the most obvious areas of concern for Jordan, Israel and Palestine is the availability of fresh water. This has always been a major issue, especially in Gaza, where residents have literally no access to this very basic commodity, which in the past has been a source of apocalyptic prophecies. The Jordan River Basin, a major source of fresh water, is a lifeline that runs through all three countries, from the Anti-Lebanon Mountains in the north to the Dead Sea in the south, and its well-being is crucial for the people and their economies. The Dead Sea itself is a unique body of water; a source of valuable minerals and a popular visitor attraction. Then, in the very south, there is the Gulf of Aqaba, with its exceptionally beautiful coral reef, which brings in thousands of tourists every year and is an important source of income. These three features, say EcoPeace, “are all examples of unique shared ecosystems in the region which necessitate regional cooperation if they are to be preserved.”

But, although the appearance of EcoPeace at the UN Security Council was a celebration of regional cooperation and collaboration, there was no escape from the warning it gave to this most important international forum about the predicament of the Gaza Strip. Majdalani reminded the council that 97 percent of groundwater in Gaza is not suitable for human consumption, while the wastewater facilities are critically hampered by a power supply of a mere few hours per day, ushering in an environmental as much as a human disaster. This is obviously an appalling situation for the people of Gaza but, since much of Gaza’s waste flows into the sea and affects the beaches of nearby Israel, it underlines the importance of cooperation to protect the interests of both places.

This bleak picture, however, is in contrast to some great successes in Israel and some parts of the West Bank in harnessing new technologies of desalination, including through the use of solar power, and water recycling to both raise the quality of drinking water and make more available for agriculture. This approach improves the quality of life and drives economic development. Local and national leaders are being lobbied to support these programs and mobilize the necessary funds. As Bromberg observed: “Good water, and not necessarily good fences, make good neighbors.”

There are many other deserving issues, in the Middle East and elsewhere, that civil society can advance through dialogue and cooperation — causes that governments, for an array of reasons, are unable or unwilling to advance.

Whether the concern is health, education, improving infrastructure, empowering women and youth, shared cyberspace, social enterprise, or transport, to follow EcoPeace's example of tackling the critical issues that neither businesses nor the public sector are willing or able to prioritize can bring huge benefits.

In the case of the Israelis and the Palestinians, especially now, when the peace process has seemingly reached a complete standstill and cooperation is mainly restricted to military-security issues, NGOs such as EcoPeace can take the lead in mitigating this volatile situation and building solid environmental, social and economic foundations for peace and coexistence.

- *Yossi Mekelberg is professor of international relations at Regent's University London, where he is head of the International Relations and Social Sciences Program. Twitter: @YMekelberg*

Disclaimer: Views expressed by writers in this section are their own and do not necessarily reflect Arab News' point-of-view