



# The Israeli Palestinian War: Ecological Implications

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## INTRODUCTION

In June 2025, Greta Thunberg, a famous climate change activist, joined the Freedom Flotilla voyage to deliver aid to the people of Palestine (Guardian 2025). She called for an immediate ceasefire and freedom for all Palestinians. Since October 7th, Israel has been bombarding Gaza non-stop killing more than 50,000 people including around 16,500 children as collective punishment for the attack Hamas carried out on Israel killing around 1200 people. While the West Bank, an area under Israeli military occupation and run by the Palestinian Authority, (different from Hamas), Palestinians there suffered the same fate as Gaza, albeit on a smaller scale. At least 646 Palestinians in the West Bank have been killed since October 7th along with at least 5,400 injured as of August 2024 (Al Jazeera, 2024).

Greta Thunberg's support of the Palestinian people's right to self-determination caused outrage on social media. Some accused her of being anti-semitic for calling for a ceasefire and justice for all civilians affected. Israel removed all references to Greta Thunberg in school curriculums (Jordan, 2024). While Greta's position shocked many Israelis, it is important to understand how it is consistent with climate change demands. Besides the humanitarian angle, Free Palestine, at its core, is a climate change cause.

## Understanding Israel's Targeting of Palestinian Environment

Olive trees are quintessential to Palestinian agriculture. They have been a major source of income for Palestinians for hundreds of years. Olive trees take decades to grow. Often Palestinians follow the tradition of planting them for generations to live off. Since 1967, Israel uprooted 800,000 olive trees (Hedroug, 2023) to build settlements (out of a total of around 10 million trees) (Tahhan, 2021). The systematic destruction of trees is done to build settlements for Jewish Israelis declared illegal by the United Nations. Due to the illicit nature of these settlements, they use up significantly more space than Palestinian villages. They are built within highly fenced walls and are connected through a mangle of highways that isolate them from Palestinians. These settlements allow only Jewish Israelis to live in them. It is estimated that water consumed in these settlements is six times more than the entire Palestinian population in the West Bank (Butmeh, 2019). To put that into context, the West Bank area has close to 300 such settlements demonstrating an astronomical use of water compared to the rest of the population (United Nations Organization, 2023).

Besides destroying trees, Israel confines Palestinian farmers from sustaining their agriculture. Through the Joint Water Committee (JWC), established under Oslo II, Israel has practical control over water supply and infrastructure for Palestinians. Using its Veto power, Israel denies Palestinians from getting permits for water wells. Israel's apartheid policy manifests in its unequal distribution of water resources which significantly impairs Palestinian farmers. Between 1995 and 2008, Israel approved all well permits for Jewish Israelis and denied 51% of Palestinian permit applications (Koek, 2013). With permits being almost impossible to obtain, Israel destroys existing wells in the West Bank that Palestinians rely on for their water supply. In 2021, 48 water and sanitation structures have been demolished in the West Bank by Israel. In 2020, Israeli Security Forces targeted water tanks at Palestinian homes destroying 24 of them (UNHRC, 2021). While water structures don't pose any material risk to Israel, destroying Palestinian agriculture is key for Israel to pave the way for settlement expansion plans.

The systematic destruction of agriculture doesn't stop at the state level. Palestinians in the West Bank experience ongoing violence from settlers who are protected and backed by the IDF. Israeli spokespersons have consistently backed up violence against Palestinians by settlers. A recent instance of this was Itamar Ben Gvir, Israel's Minister of National Security, distributing 10,000 assault rifles to settlers (Middle East Monitor, 2023). Besides killing and looting Palestinians, settlers often target Palestinian water wells to Disrupt Palestinian villages' agriculture.

### **Ecological Warfare in the Current War and Climate Implications**

Since October 7, Israel has used various means to target Palestinians including deploying White Phosphorus bombs, according to a Human Rights Watch report (Human Rights Watch, 2023). White Phosphorus usage is prohibited by international law as it can cause severe burns especially if used in densely populated areas such as the Gaza Strip. White Phosphorus has long-term effects on agriculture and the climate where it is used. According to a report by the US Center for Disease Control (CDC, 2003), White Phosphorus can contaminate water making it unfit for consumption in any form. This is not the first time Israel used it against Palestinians. In the 2008 onslaught, Israel used White Phosphorus bombs according to the Human Rights Watch report. Impact on agriculture was observed in Gaza after 2008 when trees were discolored and barren (Middle East Monitor, 2014). In addition, several organizations have also pointed out the huge carbon footprints released by Israeli weapons deployment in Palestine. For example, as pointed out by scientists based in the US and UK, based on a very small sample size of the first 60 days of warfare alone, the carbon footprint of the missiles deployed is about 280,000 tonnes or the total of the 20 most vulnerable countries in the world in terms of their carbon footprint. As the Guardian pointed out, this is an underestimate and could mean a real number of at least five to eight times more (Slawson, 2024).

### **Considering Climate Change and Conflict**

There is a huge ecological implication from Israeli actions in Palestine. While much dismantling of the ecological infrastructure has been taking place for a long time, the scale has been exacerbated by the current war. The systematic targeting of agriculture, in Gaza, the West Bank, and Southern Lebanon will have long-term implications on the native habitat.

Accordingly, climate activists like Greta Thurnberg take a stance that is pro-Palestine is hardly surprising given the above-mentioned implications of the war. Given the rest of the world's slow but steady increase in interest regarding climate change and its damaging implications, it is imperative that nations also recognize the immense environmental destruction involved as a target of and as a byproduct of the war and work to deal with this too. Finally, while the rebuilding of Palestine after the war subsides will involve rehabilitating people, maintaining peace, and redeveloping infrastructure, much care would also have to be given to understanding how to revive the ecological structure of Palestine as well.

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