

# Jordan: Rivulet in the Garden of the Lord

A unique environmental group wants to save the Jordan River

by Bernd Hauser

Lot settled in the Jordan valley, or so the Old Testament says, because it was “well watered everywhere like the garden of the Lord.” Today the lower Jordan River is an open sewer. Environmentalists are hoping to change that with a unique cooperative project. While political conflict in the Middle East claims new victims almost daily, Friends of the Earth Middle East unites Israelis, Palestinians and Jordanians with a common goal: To have the Jordan valley declared a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage site. We joined them on an exploratory journey down the sacred river.

Each breath of wind hits your face like the breeze from a blow dryer. Amid bleak limestone hills, Murat and his friends strip to their jeans and leap into a basin fed by clear water rushing from a concrete canal. The Al-Ouja spring, not far from Jericho, is an important resource for Palestinian agriculture. Since the 1967 war and the Israeli army’s subsequent occupation of the West Bank, Palestinians have been unable to use a single drop of Jordan river water: The river became the Jordanian border, and the army declared its banks a closed military zone.

The 17-year-old Murat comes to the spring every week, but he has never learned to swim. The basin is too small for that. He has never been to a swimming pool, and the Mediterranean is an unattainable dream, although Tel Aviv and its beachfront *dolce vita* are only an hour away by car. Palestinians in the West Bank can leave their homeland only via the nearby Allenby Bridge to Jordan. Murat’s parents are not well off. They are day laborers, currently employed in the vineyards of an Israeli settlement.

With water added, the desert blooms into a Garden of Eden. Palestinian agriculture serves mostly to provide staple vegetables to the population, but Israelis are able to raise fruit that brings hard currency in Europe – strawberries, apricots, mangoes, even bananas, generally confined to the tropics. A banana plantation requires, in the arid Jordan valley, a thousand liters of water per square meter per year.

“Insane,” says Nader Al-Khateeb. The 44 year old hydrologist is the Palestinian director of Friends of the Earth Middle East (FOEME). With agriculture consuming such immense quantities of water, the Jordanians and Israelis manage to extract every drop from the upper reaches of the Jordan. Farther south, the river is fed almost exclusively with untreated sewage. It arrives at the Dead Sea a sluggish stream of filth. Accordingly, the level of the Dead Sea sinks every year by a meter. One-third of its original area is already above water.

The regional water problem is the most urgent task facing FOEME, founded ten years ago in the mild political climate of the Oslo accords: Jordanian, Palestinian and Israeli environmentalists joined forces then for the first time. “Environmental protection knows no borders,” says Khateeb. “We can’t wait for a solution to the Middle East conflict. Even the most fanatical politicians have to agree that the environment can’t be protected without mutual cooperation.” FOEME has offices in

Amman, Bethlehem, and Tel Aviv, each led by local directors who work closely with each other on an equal footing, making it unique among NGOs in the Middle East.

The environmentalists of FOEME speak in the rhetoric and jargon of the decision-makers. They commission economic studies to show that protecting the watershed would pay for itself. Their newest idea to exert pressure on the three governments: They want to have the Jordan valley declared a World Cultural Heritage site. Three dozen of their members are on a three-day exploratory tour in Palestine, Israel and Jordan. They investigate the water supply situation and take stock of ruins, natural attractions, and pilgrimage sites, aiming to reflect the valley's full potential in their application to UNESCO.

A hundred meters from the Al-Ouja spring stands a small house with a fence around it. "That's a well operated by the Israeli water authority," explains Khateeb. "Water from this well is pumped to Israeli settlements. That causes the water table to sink and the Al-Ouja spring to lose parts of its embankments." Each day the settlers, in their walled hilltop compounds in the West Bank protected by armed guards and the Israeli military, consume 300 liters of water per person. "The Palestinian population has access to only 50 to 70 liters a day," says Khateeb, and you can feel something of the anger that is seething inside him.

When Israeli soldiers occupied Bethlehem in 2002, imposing a curfew and routinely shooting holes in rooftop water tanks, Khateeb was trapped in his house with his wife and six children. Palestinian communities, relying on wells and springs that may run dry, are often faced with days or weeks of empty pipes. People use the storage tanks to assure they can meet their needs.

Khateeb started a fundraising initiative by e-mail, while colleagues in the Tel Aviv office helped organize the collection of contributions. FOEME was able to repair or replace 300 water tanks, in part with money donated by Israeli citizens. Humanitarian help, environmental activism, efforts on behalf of peace: "In this region, you can't separate them. When peace is finally here, protecting the environment will also be easier," says Khateeb.

The heat at the Al-Ouja spring becomes increasingly unbearable. Munqeth Mehyar joins the adolescents in the basin and tries to swim freestyle against the incoming stream of water. "I like to swim against the current," says Mehyar, 47. As co-founder and Jordanian director of FOEME, he is mistrusted by many of his compatriots, especially since the second intifada began to rage and claim its victims almost daily on both the Arab and Israeli sides. Since then it can be dangerous for a Jordanian to work with Israelis. "It takes courage to keep going," he says.

A bull-necked man with pale skin and a wreath of reddish hair, he left his office in Amman one evening and got into the passenger seat of a colleague's car. A shot rang out, and the passenger and driver side windows were reduced to shards of glass. A bullet from a large-caliber Magnum had missed their heads by only a few centimeters and lodged in the wall of a house. The attackers drove away at high speed. That was three years ago, but even now, when Mehyar tells the story, he becomes enraged. "People wanted to kill me who obviously didn't even know who I was." He assumes that he became a terrorist target because his red hair makes him look like a foreigner and because he often has Israeli visitors. But he never

considered giving up his work after the attack. "I would have regarded myself as a coward."

Mehyar is important to FOEME because, as a Jordanian, he can mediate between Israeli and Palestinian bureaucrats and functionaries. "In that regard, our organization can serve as a model for new environmental and peace initiatives." In his own country, Mehyar lobbies environmental protection organizations to promote cooperation across the Jordan. FOEME spurred bird groups on both sides of the river to ground a common organization, Birds Life International.

Millions of birds use the Jordan valley as a flight corridor and resting place between Africa and Europe. Cooperation between Jordanian and Israeli ornithologists can make banding and other scientific studies more meaningful. "At the beginning, people in the environmental ministry in Jordan publicly denied any contact with Israeli colleagues. But our example encouraged them."

The group trip continues, out of the West Bank and into Israel, and then on to Jordan. Khateeb must say a temporary goodbye. As a Palestinian, he is not permitted to cross the Sheikh Hussein Bridge. He must use the Allenby Bridge, near Jericho, to cross from Israel to Jordan. He will meet the group in the morning, two days later. Waiting at the border will cost him many hours. The border crossing is staffed only during the day, and the checks are thorough. Entire families sometimes wait several days in 40-degree heat before they are allowed over the river.

The Friends of the Earth Middle East bus arrives, without its Palestinian director, in the Israeli town of Bet Shean. After a long day in the heat, the guests enjoy jumping in the pool located next to the hostel.

Gidon Bromberg, 40, founder of FOEME, is not a nature-freak in sandals and a hand-knit sweater. The next morning his dress shoes shine as if he were headed to an international conference and not into the dust of the desert. His law thesis in Washington, D.C. was entitled "Environmental Effects of the Peace Process." Its quintessence: Environmental protection can only succeed if the entire Middle East works together.

The eloquent attorney had found his vocation. He floated the idea of a common organization to Jordanian, Egyptian, Israeli, and Palestinian environmental groups – and was successful. "Nineteen ninety-four was a good window of opportunity for the idea. All indications were pointing towards peace."

Today Bromberg often works seven days a week. If you ask him about his hobbies, he takes a moment to think, then responds, "Reading. Political books. About the Middle East." He is primarily responsible for FOEME's growth to three offices with 27 employees and an annual budget of a million Euros, drawn mainly from the EU, as well as European states and the U.S. Government.

The Egyptians withdrew in 1998 for reasons of domestic political pressure. That the Jordanians, Palestinians and Israelis continue to work together, despite almost daily violence, can be traced to the personal trust that has been built up in the past ten years. That mutual trust is not harmed by the current conflict among the nationalities, because those involved share a political conviction.

“There is no doubt for any of us that there must be an independent Palestine alongside Israel,” says Bromberg. “The great majority of Israeli settlements in the occupied territories must be abandoned. Most Israelis recognize this solution as the only one possible. It’s only a question of how many more lives have to be lost.”

Thus FOEME is more than just an environmental organization. “We are also looking for justice and chances to promote peace.” For the water issue, that means that “Israeli agriculture must give up water to the Palestinians.” Agriculture, Bromberg says, is not a long-term solution for the regional economy. Were it not for the almost daily violence, much more money could be made in other areas, especially in tourism.

The environmentalists’ bus descends to the riverside, to a spot where a kibbutz manages a site for Christian pilgrims to enter the Jordan securely down a broad stairway. No one claims that this is the actual place where John the Baptist baptized Jesus. But here, below the Sea of Galilee from which Israel takes a third of its drinking water, the river is clean and a dip is refreshing. The site is devoid of visitors. Since the second intifada began four years ago, Israel draws only 50,000 tourists a year in place of the earlier half million.

Three kilometers farther south, the clean Jordan ends abruptly. An earthen dam blocks the river. Below the dam, a concrete culvert shunts brown, foaming liquid into the empty riverbed: sewage from the neighboring Israeli communities. The entire length of the lower Jordan is fed only from insufficiently treated and even untreated waste water. “Money goes into the military and security. The environment is not a priority,” explains an accompanying hydrologist from the Israeli Ministry of the Environment.

On the way back from the dam, the bus gets stuck. Water from a leaking irrigation pipeline has turned the dirt road into a morass. Jews and Arabs together throw themselves into budging the bus. They can’t do it. A four-by-four from the nearby kibbutz must help out.

Then it’s a steep downhill drive to the ruins of the crusader fortress of Belvoir. Three hundred meters above sea level, the fortress commands a bleak height. The view goes 550 meters down into the green plain of the Jordan valley. Archaeologist Gidon Avni of the Israel Antiquities Authority relates how in the Byzantine and early Islamic periods, Christians, Muslims, and Jews lived together peacefully as neighbors. In Bet Shean, for example, a single school of mosaic artists was active in synagogues, churches, and Muslim palaces. Then, in the eleventh century, the crusaders arrived. Their massacres of Muslims, Jews, and even orthodox Christians put an end to centuries of peaceful coexistence.

Formalities at the border last three hours before the environmentalists can enter the country whose name the river bears. “New evidence,” an official Jordanian tourist pamphlet declares, “shows that John the Baptist was active on the eastern bank of the Jordan – more precisely, near the village of Al-Kafrayn.” A brand-new path leads to carefully constructed wooden piers. But the river itself, grown to a stream five meters in width, is uninviting. The water is dark and opaque.

“We must let the world know what has happened to the Jordan. The world knows nothing of the brown and black sewage emptying into this river sacred to millions of people around the world,” says Gidon Bromberg. He sounds as if he were already in rehearsals for the international conference at which FOEME will present its World Cultural Heritage concept for the Jordan Valley to the media, diplomats, and the three governments.

The campaign for recognition of the Jordan valley as a World Cultural Heritage site is intended to speed progress toward their actual goal. “We want both Jordan and Israel to take less water from the headwaters so that, instead of just ten percent, at least 30% of the original quantity arrives at the Dead Sea.” A policy that would pay off economically: Waterfront tourism on the Dead Sea, threatened by the water’s retreat, promises much greater returns than agriculture. Bromberg, with his law training, recalls a court case familiar to all of us. “It’s like the child disputed before Solomon. The one willing to compromise wins, instead of destroying everything.”