

Interview with Abeer Butmeh, Woman, Palestinian, Journalist and Environmental Activist: “No Climate Justice Without Gender Justice”

Ibrahim Rifi. Journalist and political expert

Abeer Butmeh is a brave Palestinian woman from the city of Nablus, an environmental engineer who specialised in water and graduated from Berzeit University, an environmental activist, and current coordinator of the Palestinian Environmental NGOs Network, comprising 14 organisations working for the environment in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. It has been a member of the international organisation Friends of the Earth since 2008 and is undertaking different political advocacy and protest campaigns with the aim of influencing environmental policies and Palestinian public opinion. Abeer Butmeh has been working in this field since 2006 and has participated in many local and international environmental surveys and projects.

Ibrahim Rifi: What are the main projects you are currently working on at the Palestinian Environmental NGOs Network?

Abeer Butmeh: We're currently working on four main campaigns: the fight against all types of pollution, advocacy of rights concerning land, water and natural resources, energy transition, and, finally, the protection of biodiversity. Taking an all-embracing approach, we document and monitor Israeli aggressions against the Palestinian environment and report these violations through different media. In contrast,

the implementation of the infrastructure development projects, such as wells or agricultural projects, is based on more specific actions of the network's partner organisations.

I.R.: What are the main environmental emergencies in Palestine?

A.B.: Palestine is very visibly suffering from climate change. In recent years, we have had major droughts due to lower precipitation. Every year it rains less and, in many cases, the rains are sudden. Within a short time, large quantities

of water fall with great violence, which causes enormous floods that affect the quality of the soil, which does not properly absorb the water it needs for the nutrients or to feed the underground wells. Another very palpable reality is the mismatch in temperature between day and night, summer and winter. Summer is increasingly longer and warmer, and winter is increasingly colder and shorter. During the day, the hours of sun are very warm and, at night, the temperature drops very sharply. All this has a very negative impact on agriculture.

I.R.: How is climate change affecting agriculture?

A.B.: As an example, a survey conducted in 2020 by the Centre for Statistical Studies along with the Ministry of Agriculture of the Palestinian National Authority concluded that, since 2010, there has been a notable deterioration in wheat crops due to the effects of climate change. Wheat is a key food in the diet of the Palestinian population and, because of the drop in the amount of water available and the increase in temperatures, many harvests have been lost since then. There are also annual losses in crops of fruit largely consumed in Palestine, such as figs or pomegranates, which no longer ripen as a result of climate change.

I.R.: How does climate change affect the West Bank and how is it linked to its political situation?

A.B.: Climate change in Palestine is not only a natural phenomenon but is intrinsically related to the political situation of the territory. The Israeli army has violently taken hold of many agricultural lands and natural resources in the West Bank. Currently, Israel controls 85% of the Palestinian water resources, and I wonder how we can fight against the lack of water if we have limited access to this resource.

Since the 1993 Oslo Accords, 64% of Palestinian territory has belonged to zone C, mainly comprising agricultural lands. Zone C is controlled by the Israeli authorities, and a large part of these lands is close to the settlements, around which Israel has created a kind of “buffer zone”, and in an area of approximately two or three kilometres we are not allowed to cultivate these lands, or even to get close to them. The Israeli occupation limits us to a very small part of our territory in which we can farm, and to an increasingly smaller quantity of water from the aquifers.

Right now, a strategy of greater occupation of the Palestinian territory is underway, especially above the area of the Jordan Valley, which falls under the Jericho Governorate, whose area is considered the “basket of the Palestinian diet” as it has a larger number of farm lands. In this strategic area, Israel is seeking to build more settlements, dry up the underground aquifers, and redirect them to supply Israeli farms. This is what happened with the village of Al Auja, whose residents have had to migrate because of the drought produced by climate change and because Israel has taken hold of the underground aquifer that used to supply them.

I.R.: How do the aggressions by the State of Israel affect climate change in Palestine?

A.B.: The Israeli occupation is the main cause of deterioration of the Palestinian environment, such as the spills generated by the big Israeli power stations and industrial estates in Palestinian territory. Much of the waste generated by these industries ends up unprocessed in public sewerage networks, which later pollute agricultural lands.

There are two big Israeli industrial complexes in Palestine, Mishurim and Ariel, and they both emit large quantities of chemical gases into the atmosphere, polluting the air

close to the urban and agricultural areas. All these gases reach the lungs of the residents and, according to some studies, Tulkarem is one of the areas that has a higher percentage of people with cancer and respiratory illnesses in Palestine, as they are close to these industrial complexes.

I.R.: What is the specific situation of the Gaza Strip?

A.B.: In the Gaza Strip the situation is much worse than in the West Bank. Gaza has been under sea and land blockade for 16 years. 77% of the water in the Strip is not drinkable because of Israeli restrictions on the entry of fuel, which means there is not enough fuel to start up the water treatment and purification plants. Therefore, much of the wastewater ends in the sea, which also seriously affects maritime life.

A survey conducted by the Palestinian Environmental NGOs Network in 2015 on the Israeli bombings on the Gaza Strip in 2014 shows that the use of chemical weapons prohibited at international level by Israel on the Gaza Strip affected the health of Palestinians, the water, the agricultural lands, and also sea life. Large territories of agricultural land are no longer fertile because of the use of chemical weapons.

Moreover, Israel controls many of the aquifers on which the inhabitants of the Strip depend, which are in themselves not enough for the two million people living in this area. The Gaza Strip is experiencing a real environmental catastrophe, and all the Israeli practices are aimed at destroying the environment, which has a direct impact on people, as the environment is our life.

I.R.: One of your mottos is “No climate justice without gender justice”. How is the Palestinian women’s fight related to the environmental struggle?

A.B.: Historically, we Palestinian women have been closely linked to the land, and currently many Palestinian countrypeople are women, around 42%. We women suffer and resist all types of Israeli aggressions and are at the forefront of the defence of the land. Through our work, we support the participation and leadership of women in environmental organisations; we endeavour to ensure that women are active subjects in the debate and public opinion, as well as decision-making.

We need to be represented in this struggle, and seek a balance in senior positions. We say that there cannot be climate justice without social and gender justice because we cannot talk of climate justice if women are not involved in resolving this problem.

I.R.: How involved are Palestinian youths in environmental organisations?

A.B.: Luckily, the Palestinian population is relatively young and their involvement in activism of all kinds is good. In general, the Palestinian people have a strong relationship with their land, but the aim of the Israeli occupation is for Palestinians, particularly young people, to leave the land and work in other jobs in the secondary or tertiary sector in Israel.

I think that Palestinian youths are aware of this strategy, as well as the issue it raises. Our work, among others, tries to carry out training and awareness-raising actions in which youths are present through all the network’s partner organisations, as well as the projects and campaigns on which we work.

However, Palestinian youths are much more active on the internet, as in this medium they organise and support campaigns via social media such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram to promote environmental awareness. Youths are at the forefront of volunteering and local actions, and undoubtedly they are the future of

the environmental fight in Palestine and the rest of the world. The problem is that the Palestinian government does not consider the environment a priority in comparison to other sectors. Palestinian farmers need assistance and compensations for the destruction and effects of climate change, but the budget allocated to environmental affairs and agriculture is inadequate. The budget envelope of the Ministry of Agriculture for the environment does not even reach 1% of the total budget of the Palestinian government.

There is awareness, not only in the field of environmental organisations but also at a general level, but the existing difficulties do not allow us to appropriately deal with the problem, and Israeli aggressions only make things worse.

I.R.: What do you think will happen? What would you say to the Spanish and European public?

A.B.: I don't want to be pessimistic, but the current situation is very negative if we compare it with the past. Israeli aggressions are

increasingly tougher, and there is ever greater control of Palestinian natural resources. The Israeli threat is growing, and this is the greatest difficulty when protecting the Palestinian environment.

There are two proposals for energy cooperation projects between Israel and Europe: the EuroAsia Interconnector, and the EastMed Pipeline. If the EU's aim is to increase the level of dependency on renewable energy sources, I think that this project is counterproductive as it involves dirty and polluting energy.

With the advance of this project, EU countries are contributing to the violation of human rights and international law, which has ruled that Israeli settlements in occupied territories are illegal. Given that this project indirectly legitimises these settlements, we call for an immediate stop. And we also ask the EU to pressure Israel to remove the blockage in Gaza and respect human rights and international law, as well the right to land and water and the dignity of the Palestinian people.