Slow Violence: Water governance as Settler-Colonial Control in Palestine

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Vienna, 30 May 2025

Fanni Szöllősi

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1. Introduction

Despite the disproportionately experienced harms of climate change, environmental governance is often framed as a neutral or technical field. Yet in settler-colonial contexts, such governance functions as a mechanism of control, territorial restructuring, and Indigenous erasure. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Palestine, where Israel's environmental policies, and particularly in the domain of water, serve not only to manage resources but to produce unlivable conditions that sustain settler expansion and displace the native population.

My project examines Israeli water governance in Palestine as an integrated and strategic element of settler-colonial control, focusing on how infrastructural, legal, and ecological exclusions restrict Palestinian access to water. While scholars have documented environmental degradation, spatial fragmentation, and infrastructural disparity in the West Bank and Gaza, fewer have connected these patterns to the logic of elimination that underpins settler colonialism (Wolfe 2006). This project builds on postcolonial, political ecology, and environmental justice literatures to argue that environmental policy in Palestine is not a failure of governance but an instrument of domination. I argue that water governance functions as a core apparatus of what can be understood as climate apartheid: a racialized regime of environmental control that differentially structures access to life-sustaining resources (Alston 2019). In this system, Israeli settlements enjoy full access to piped water, irrigation, and renewable infrastructure, while Palestinian communities face rationing, infrastructural destruction, and bureaucratic barriers. These exclusions beyond their reflection of

environmental racism, they are integral to the state's long-term project of territorial consolidation and population displacement.

Therefore, my central research question is the following:

How do Israeli water governance practices produce environmental exclusion and contribute to a system of settler-colonial climate apartheid in Palestine?

Although limiting access to clean water infrastructure might appear marginal amid more visible forms of state violence, it plays a crucial role in the everyday reproduction of unlivability. Following Nixon's (2011) concept of slow violence, I examine how the delayed provision of water services, permit refusals, and destruction of cisterns work cumulatively to undermine Palestinian resilience and autonomy. These processes extend beyond the West Bank: in Gaza, even before the start of the ongoing genocide, the repeated bombing of the Strip's only power plant (2006, 2014, 2021) has created long-term energy precarity, compounding the effects of drought, agricultural loss, and health crises.

While Sophia Stamatopoulou-Robbins' Waste Siege (2019) provides a foundational analysis of how waste infrastructure is politicized in the West Bank, my research expands the scope to water governance to demonstrate the totalizing nature of this environmental system. I draw inspiration from her claim that infrastructure is not just technical, but deeply political, shaping access to life itself. If landfills are sites of sovereignty, so too are the water pipelines that never reach Palestinian homes.

In situating Palestine within a broader framework of Indigenous environmental struggles, from North America to Australia, I highlight the common tactics of settler-colonial greenwashing, displacement through ecological rationales, and the erasure of native land relations (Coulthard 2014; Whyte 2018). Yet Palestine's case also demands attention to the unique dynamics of occupation, statelessness, and infrastructural siege. By centering water

governance, this project aims to challenge both mainstream environmental justice narratives and state-centered approaches to climate resilience, insisting on the need to include occupied and stateless peoples as critical subjects in climate politics.

To explore these dynamics, the paper proceeds in four parts. First, I review existing literature on green colonialism, climate apartheid, and hydropolitics, identifying a key gap in how water governance is analyzed in relation to settler temporality and infrastructural violence (Rodgers and O'Niell 2012). Second, I outline the relevant theoretical frameworks (postcolonial theory, political ecology, and settler-colonial studies) through which environmental governance in Palestine can be understood as a structure of racialized control. Third, I conduct a policy and document-based case study analysis of Israeli water governance in the West Bank, Gaza, and the Naqab, drawing on reports from Palestinian institutions, international organizations, and field-based monitoring groups. This analysis highlights how infrastructural denial and bureaucratic obstruction function not only as spatial but as temporal strategies of elimination. Finally, I conclude by reflecting on the implications of climate apartheid in Palestine for broader discussions of climate justice and the decolonization of environmental governance.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Green Colonialism in Palestine

In the context of settler colonialism, environmental policy and ecological narratives can become tools of domination. In Palestine, the Zionist project has long employed ecological claims, such as land reclamation, afforestation, and environmental management, to justify territorial expansion and the erasure of Palestinian presence (Kadman 2015; Dajani 2020; Stamatopoulou-Robbins 2019). This process is often referred to as green colonialism, in which environmentalism becomes entangled with settler state-building and national myth-making (Ferdinand 2019). Sophia Stamatopoulou-Robbins's *Waste Siege* (2019) offers a foundational analysis of how environmental infrastructures, such as waste disposal, sewage treatment, and sanitation, are weaponized in the occupied West Bank. She demonstrates how Palestinians are subjected to a form of infrastructural siege, where the accumulation of waste, rather than the delivery of basic services, defines environmental governance. This siege operates not only through absence (lack of infrastructure) but also through presence: the imposition of waste, toxic exposure, and bureaucratic measures, all of which construct a precarious livability that systematically degrades Palestinian life (Stamatopoulou-Robbins 2019).

Furthermore, Kadman (2015) explores how Israeli national parks and forestation projects (particularly those administered by the Jewish National Fund) have been instrumental in erasing the ruins of Palestinian villages. These spaces are repurposed as leisure and heritage sites, which turns the history of dispossession they rest upon invisible. The planting of non-native pine forests, for instance, has both an ecological function and a political one, in terms of how they obscure Palestinian land claims and inscribe a new settler ecology on the landscape (Kadman 2015). These projects are celebrated internationally as models of sustainability, but they mask a deeply racialized environmental logic. Recent works by scholars such as Dajani (2020, 2023) have emphasized how environmental knowledge is also colonized. Palestinian traditional

ecological practices, such as rainwater harvesting and seasonal planting patterns, have been delegitimized or made obsolete by Israeli-imposed infrastructures and resource regulations (Dajani 2023). This epistemic violence is a key dimension of green colonialism, one that erases Palestinian land as well as Palestinian ways of knowing and relating to it. Epistemic violence refers here to the systematic invalidation and replacement of Palestinian environmental knowledge, framing Indigenous relationships to land and water as illegible within settler-state paradigms (Coulthard 2014; Whyte 2018).

It is visible from existing literature how green colonialism in Palestine operates through environmental policies that appear restorative or progressive but in fact facilitate settler futurity and Palestinian elimination (Dajani 2020). Afforestation, waste infrastructure, and the transformation of space into nature reserves are all part of this project. These practices help sanitize the settler state's image while obscuring the slow and cumulative violence of environmental erasure, an angle which is yet to be analyzed in green colonial literature with regards to water management in Palestine.

2.2. Climate Apartheid

The concept of climate apartheid captures the deepening inequalities in exposure to and capacity to adapt to the impacts of climate change. In Palestine, climate apartheid is structurally embedded in the Israeli regime of control over land, water, and infrastructure. As Naomi Klein (2011) and later the UN (Alston 2019) have warned, climate apartheid results in a world where the wealthy can insulate themselves from environmental breakdown, while the (often racialized) poor bear its brunt. In the occupied Palestinian territories, this manifests both through uneven exposure to climate hazards and through a system of engineered environmental uncertainty that reproduces racialized hierarchies under claims of ecological management. Much like the disproportionate exposure to industrial waste in Black and Indigenous communities in the US (Bullard 2000; Pulido 2016), the Israeli environmental governance

system spatially and racially allocates vulnerability in ways that reinforce patterns of global environmental racism.

Hickel (2020) and Ferdinand (2019) have emphasized that climate injustice is deeply intertwined with the legacies and continuities of colonialism. The framing of Palestinians as irrational, non-modern, or environmentally backward is utilized as a justification for Israeli interventions, which parallels civilizing discourses found in other colonial contexts (Said 1978). Such narratives function to naturalize racialized governance and obscure the coercive conditions under which Palestinians are made dependent on Israeli environmental infrastructures.

Moreover, the depoliticization of climate discourse in the region, as seen both in Israeli state narratives and in international environmental forums, contributes to the erasure of occupation as an environmental determinant (Chakrabarty 2012). As Chakrabarty (2012) notes, the Anthropocene risks flattening histories of inequality into a universal human culpability. In the case of Palestine, such framings are politically dangerous, as they dislocate responsibility for environmental suffering from the structures of military occupation and settler expansion.

2.3. Hydropolitics in Palestine

Water in Palestine is a deeply contested political terrain. The hydropolitics of the Israeli occupation operates through legal, institutional, and infrastructural mechanisms that reinforce asymmetrical power relations under the guise of cooperation and development. Selby (2013) argues that the Israeli-Palestinian Joint Water Committee (JWC), rather than functioning as a neutral forum for transboundary cooperation (as it was intended to be), institutionalizes an extreme imbalance of power in which Israel retains veto power over Palestinian water projects while continuing to expand its own water infrastructure for settlements. This dynamic has resulted in systematic delays, denials, and restrictions on Palestinian water access. The World Bank's (2009) report corroborates this analysis, documenting how Israeli-imposed planning

regimes prevent Palestinians from drilling wells, rehabilitating cisterns, or maintaining distribution networks.

Drawing from political ecology, scholars (Dajani 2016; Zeitoun and Allan 2008) further conceptualize water governance as a form of hydro-hegemony, where control over water is maintained simultaneously through physical infrastructure and through the discursive framing of scarcity, security, and sustainability. The securitization of water policy in Palestine, where even rainwater collection is monitored or criminalized, demonstrates how environmental governance is interwoven with colonial rule (Dajani 2016). This hydro-hegemony is spatially observable in the differential infrastructure that defines Palestinian and settler experiences of water. While Israeli settlements have consistent and often surplus water supplies, many Palestinian communities face chronic shortages and are forced to rely on expensive water tankers or unsafe sources (Selby 2013).

2.4. Palestine and Environmental Governance: What is Missing?

While the existing literature on water governance and environmental policy in Palestine has generated important insights regarding institutional asymmetries, hydro-hegemony, and infrastructural control, there remain significant gaps in how environmental governance is situated within the broader settler-colonial project. Many policy analyses, including those by international actors such as the World Bank (2009), continue to approach water issues through technocratic and developmentalist frameworks, often obscuring the colonial dimensions of environmental violence. Even critical works like those of Selby (2013) and Zeitoun and Allan (2008), while illuminating in terms of dynamics of power and cooperation, stop short of engaging with the eliminatory logic that defines settler-colonial control over nature in Palestine.

What is often missing from the literature is a systemic analysis that connects different environmental policies under a unified framework of green settler colonialism. Rather than examining these practices in isolation, it is crucial to recognize how they operate together to

restructure Palestinian space and erase Indigenous presence. Examining the case of water governance under Israeli occupation of Palestinians, adds to this systemic analysis.

Furthermore, the temporalities of environmental violence remain underexplored. Much of the literature tends to emphasize the spatial logics of occupation (borders, checkpoints, land grabs) but pays less attention to how time is also manipulated as a tool of domination. The co-existence of slow violence (Nixon 2011) with more immediate forms of violence, such as home demolitions and military assaults, requires a conceptual shift toward multi-temporal analysis. Understanding how different registers of time (legal, ecological, generational) intersect in shaping environmental dispossession. This perspective allows for a more nuanced diagnosis of settler-colonial governance.

My project addresses these gaps by offering a relational, temporal, and systemic analysis of Israeli environmental governance in Palestine. In doing so, it foregrounds settler colonialism not as context but as structure, and aims to unsettle the normative assumptions embedded in dominant frameworks of environmental management and sustainability.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Settler Colonialism and the Environmental Restructuring of Indigenous Life

My project draws on a growing body of settler-colonial and Indigenous theory to reconceptualize environmental governance in Palestine as a system of elimination. Unlike other forms of colonialism focused primarily on resource extraction or labor exploitation while maintaining a distinction between colonizer and colonized homelands, settler colonialism is characterized by the settlers' intention to establish a new, permanent home on the land (Wolfe 2006). This core aim necessitates the elimination of the native population as a political and often physical presence to secure settler sovereignty over all aspects of their new domain, including land and water resources (Wolfe 2006). Wolfe's (2006) assertion that "settler colonialism is a structure, not an event" has been foundational in shaping the way scholars understand the enduring and spatial nature of colonial power (p. 388). Rather than concluding with conquest, settler colonialism reproduces itself through the continual elimination of the native (Wolfe 2006). It aims to restructure the land, infrastructure, and life itself, a process in which environmental governance plays a central role. From water regimes to afforestation projects, such policies are not merely administrative or ecological, they are also deeply political, often functioning as tools to consolidate settler control over space, resources, and future possibilities (Veracini 2010; Pappé 2011). Veracini (2010) shows that settler regimes establish a binary between the native and the settler that must be maintained through the continual disposability of Indigenous life.

Stamatopoulou-Robbins (2019) reveals how even waste is not simply discarded material but an active governance tool, shaping Palestinian daily life through infrastructural neglect, bureaucratic obstruction, and environmental exclusion. Building on this analysis, my research extends her insights beyond waste management to examine how Israeli environmental policies

function collectively as a system of climate apartheid. If landfills are political sites, then so too are the water pipes that never reach Palestinian homes, the electricity grids that flicker on and off in Gaza, and the solar farms that settlers enjoy while Palestinians remain energy-deprived. Environmental governance in Palestine is not just about managing nature; it is about controlling access to life itself. You cannot move through the day without encountering the political. It is in your waste, your water, your lightbulbs, and the infrastructure that dictates whether you have the right to a livable future.

Audra Simpson (2014) complicates dominant narratives of settler-colonial governance by foregrounding Indigenous refusal, which is different from forms of resistance that seek recognition within the settler state, and instead puts forward a political stance that denies the legitimacy of settler rule altogether. According to Simpson (2014), refusal operates as a disruption to the assumption that the settler state is the rightful arbiter of political authority. This means that the logics underpinning settler governance (its bureaucracies, policies, and legal claims) are themselves mechanisms designed to secure settler futurity through the erasure of Indigenous presence and authority. In the context of environmental governance, Simpson's (2014) insight urges us to question not just the outcomes of environmental policy, but its underlying premises: Who defines what needs to be governed? Whose epistemologies of nature are being institutionalized? And who benefits from the appearance of neutrality or sustainability?

This orientation is also used in global Indigenous scholarship. Glen Coulthard (2014) and Kyle Powys Whyte (2018) demonstrate that the language of sustainability and development has long functioned in a way that it preserves the land for the settler while displacing Indigenous peoples under the guise of protection or modernization. Such work challenges us to read Israeli environmental governance not as failed policy or neglect, but as a strategic structuring of space,

rights, and survival. Coulthard (2014) and Whyte (2018) argue that settler environmental governance not only reorders territory but also makes Indigenous relationships to land and water unintelligible. In Palestine, this is both a material and ontological erasure. Palestinians are displaced not only from land and infrastructure, but also from the cosmologies through which they understand and live on that land.

3.2. Political Ecology and the Governance of Nature

Another theoretical framework my project benefits from is political ecology, which moves beyond purely ecological or political analyses to examine the complex interrelations between society and the environment. Political ecology pays a particular attention to power dynamics and inequalities (Bridge et al. 2015; Hornborn 2015). Having emerged as a critique of apolitical approaches to environmental issues, it is highly relevant for research on how political economy, social relations, and power structures shape environmental change, resource access, and (environmental) conflicts (Bridge et al, 2015; Le Billon 2015). In the context of my research, political ecology provides the tools to analyze how power relations influence the management and distribution of water resources, leading to environmental marginalization and injustice for Palestinians (Le Billon 2015; Leff 2015). The focus on material, infrastructural, and bureaucratic exclusions in water access can be understood through a political ecology lens as manifestations of power operating at multiple scales. Political ecology reveals how dominant environmental discourses serve specific political agendas, while also attending to the everyday resistance of marginalized groups who challenge environmental dispossession (Watts 2015).

3.3. Environmental Racism and Environmental Justice

My project also incorporates the critical perspectives of environmental racism and environmental justice to explicitly address the racialized dimensions of environmental injustice

in Palestine. In particular, I use environmental racism to highlight the disproportionate exposure of marginalized and racialized communities to environmental burdens and the unequal distribution of environmental benefits (Pulido 2016; Verges 2017).

While environmental racism exposes the structural roots of injustice, the framework of environmental justice offers a normative and political orientation toward addressing these inequalities. It calls for the equitable distribution of environmental goods and harms, the inclusion of marginalized voices in environmental decision-making, and the recognition of environmental struggles as inseparable from broader struggles for racial, social, and territorial justice (Pellow 2018; Schlosberg 2007). In the context of Palestine, environmental justice demands an end to unequal resource distribution, the restoration of Palestinian sovereignty over land and water, and the affirmation of Indigenous environmental knowledge.

Building on this, the concept of climate apartheid describes an emerging system of discrimination, segregation, and violence based on race and other axes of oppression, produced by the material effects of climate change and the responses to it (Perkiss 2024). This framework recognizes that climate change impacts and vulnerabilities are unevenly distributed along racial lines, with racialized populations often experiencing the most severe consequences while contributing the least to the problem (Perkiss 2024; Daoudy 2020). Climate apartheid is rooted in historical and ongoing racial domination, colonialism, and neo-colonialism, where Eurocentric hegemony and racial capitalism contribute to the vulnerability and disposability of certain populations (Perkiss 2024).

3.4. Slow Violence and the Temporality of Environmental Harm

Finally, my project draws on Rob Nixon's (2011) concept of slow violence, which refers to harm that is gradual, dispersed across time and space, and often invisible, yet has devastating

and cumulative consequences. Unlike spectacular violence that commands immediate attention, slow violence unfolds incrementally, making it harder to represent and resist (Nixon 2011). It disproportionately affects marginalized populations who lack the political power or visibility to make such suffering legible within dominant policy frameworks.

In the context of settler colonialism, slow violence is particularly useful for understanding how dispossession operates not only through overt force, but through the gradual restructuring of access to life-sustaining resources. Nixon (2011) argues that this form of violence is rendered "out of sight" to those in positions of power or privilege (p. 6). Slow violence can be understood as a settler-colonial strategy of elimination, aligning with Wolfe's (2006) thesis that settler colonialism is inherently eliminatory. As Bonds and Inwood (2016) argue, under systems of racialized governance, resource denial is a deliberate form of structural violence. Within this framing, beyond the denial to a vital resource, water apartheid is a long-term political tool designed to reconfigure sovereignty and survivability.

Moreover, the temporality of slow violence compels us to think in terms of durational harm, highlighting how settler-colonial environmental policies are embedded in everyday governance. This approach complements the frameworks of political ecology and environmental racism by emphasizing how time and invisibility function as parts of domination. It enables a critical analysis that moves beyond isolated events and instead reveals how environmental governance operates as a sustained process of marginalization and dispossession. This project, therefore, participates in the broader imperative to 'unsettle the settler': to expose how settler geographies, infrastructure, and ecological narratives are produced not as neutral policy, but as instruments of domination and erasure (Snelgrove, Dhamoon, and Corntassel 2014).

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Approach

For my research, I employ a qualitative and inquiry-driven approach to examine how Israeli environmental policies impact access to resources in Palestine and their role in shaping territorial governance. Policy structures and their long-term material consequences prove to be a solid focus as I aim to assess whether they function as mechanisms of slow violence. In doing so, I can explore how they gradually reshape Palestinian landscapes to exclude Indigenous communities from sustainable land use, economic autonomy, and climate resilience. The research draws from secondary data analysis, focusing on the material and bureaucratic infrastructures that regulate Palestinian access to water and, by extension, to sovereignty, mobility, and survival (Selby 2013; Alatout 2008; Daoudy 2020).

4.2. Policy Analysis of Water Governance as Case Study

The objective of the policy analysis is to analyze how Israeli environmental policies formally regulate access to natural resources in Palestine. In order to identify patterns in environmental exclusion, I look at specific water governance projects as case studies. While using this method, I aim to explore the way in which these policies are structured, and what mechanisms are in place to regulate resource access for Palestinians versus Israeli settlers.

Drawing from interpretive policy analysis (Yanow 2000), the research investigates both the official discourse and the material outcomes of water regulation. The analysis focuses on how these governance frameworks reinforce long-term territorial dependency and demographic management through what has been described as hydro-hegemony (Selby 2013). I use the following secondary sources of data:

1. *Palestinian Water Authority (PWA) – Water Sector Strategic Plan 2016–2018*

   A policy document outlining governance structures, institutional reforms, and strategic goals for water management in the occupied Palestinian territories.

2. *World Bank (2009) – "Assessment of Restrictions on Palestinian Water Sector Development"*

   A comprehensive institutional analysis documenting Israeli-imposed constraints on Palestinian water infrastructure, access, and development.

3. *Amnesty International (2017) – "Thirsting for Justice: Palestinian Access to Water Restricted by Israel"*

   A human rights report providing evidence of discriminatory access, systemic under-supply, and infrastructure inequality faced by Palestinians.

4. *WASH (Emergency Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) Reports*

   Regular field-based monitoring data on water availability, contamination, infrastructure conditions, and humanitarian needs in the West Bank and Gaza.

5. *UN ESCWA (2017) – "Israeli Practices Towards the Palestinian People and the Question of Apartheid"*

   A UN report addressing systemic patterns of dispossession, including environmental resource control as part of broader apartheid practices.

This method allows for a direct investigation into legal and institutional frameworks that regulate resources. Policy analysis is particularly useful for identifying how governance frameworks shape territorial control and governance that reconfigure land ownership patterns. This method ensures that the research remains focused on legal and administrative structures rather than solely on environmental conditions, allowing for a critical assessment of governance as a mechanism of spatial and demographic control.

4.3. Addressing Slow Violence as a Core Analytical Tool

Building on the theoretical framework, I use the concept of slow violence as a central analytical lens to assess the long-term effects of Israeli environmental governance. Rather than limiting the analysis to immediate effects, this approach foregrounds durational, structural harms, especially how environmental policies shape access to water and other natural resources over time. Slow violence is operationalized in this study by tracing the cumulative effects of infrastructural neglect, resource denial, and bureaucratic control on Palestinian communities. These phenomena are interpreted as manifestations of an intentional settler-colonial strategy to gradually undermine Palestinian sovereignty and self-sufficiency. This framework also informs the selection and interpretation of sources. Policy documents, NGO reports, and infrastructure maps are read for the temporal patterns of dispossession they reveal, rather than for isolated data points. The analytical goal is to make visible the attritional processes that often escape conventional forms of evaluation, while centering the lived experiences of those most affected by long-term environmental injustice.

4.4. Limitations and Reflexivity

This research is based entirely on secondary data due to the limitations of conducting fieldwork under conditions of military occupation and siege. While this allowed for a broad comparative and systemic analysis, it also meant the absence of direct oral testimony or co-produced knowledge with Palestinian communities. As a non-Palestinian student, I recognize the ethical weight of writing about an ongoing colonial condition from outside its immediate geography. My goal throughout has been to critically interpret governance documents and structural patterns without speaking over or for those directly impacted. Additionally, the data used predates the genocide in Gaza (before late 2023 escalations) so detailed real-time documentation of 2023–2024 environmental destruction is outside the current empirical scope.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1. Infrastructural Fragmentation and Permit Denial in Area C

Israeli water governance in the occupied West Bank constitutes of infrastructural exclusion that systematically fragments Palestinian access to land, water, and development. This is particularly apparent in Area C, which comprises over 60% of the West Bank and contains the majority of its natural resources, aquifers, and arable land. Although the Palestinian population living in Area C is estimated to be between 180,000 and 300,000 people, less than 1% of this territory is zoned for Palestinian construction or agriculture, while 68% is allocated to settlements, military zones, or nature reserves (World Bank 2013, 6; B'Tselem 2013).

Careful comparison of the difference between allocated vs actually extracted water reveal that access to water infrastructure is systematically obstructed. Palestinian communities must obtain permits from the Israeli Civil Administration and approvals from the Joint Water Committee (JWC) to drill wells, build cisterns, or lay pipes (PWA 2016; Selby 2013). These permits are rarely granted. Between 1995 and 2011, although Palestinians were allocated 138.5 million cubic meters (MCM) annually under the Oslo II Accords, they were only able to extract 87 MCM, primarily due to restrictions on maintenance, upgrades, or new drilling (World Bank 2013, viii). Meanwhile, over 50% of Palestinian wells have dried up, and the number of functioning agricultural irrigation systems continues to decline (B'Tselem 2013). These constraints have caused a 30% drop in per capita water access, while Palestinian reliance on Mekorot, Israel's national water company, has doubled (World Bank 2013, viii).

Rather than being due to scarcity or failed cooperation, this infrastructural fragmentation is a feature of hydrological domination, where water becomes a strategic asset for territorial control. As Selby (2013) argues, the JWC was never intended to function as a space of mutual water governance; rather, it operates as a veto mechanism used by Israel to block Palestinian water development. The JWC institutionalizes asymmetry by requiring Palestinian projects to

receive Israeli approval, while Israel continues to expand its own infrastructure unilaterally, often in violation of the Accords (Daoudy 2020).

Through the lens of political ecology, this regime reveals how environmental governance is never separate from questions of power, sovereignty, and control. As Bridge et al. (2015) emphasize, the material flows of resources such as water must be understood in relation to the institutional arrangements that (re)produce inequality. In the West Bank, the selective denial of water infrastructure (cisterns, tanks, wells, and pipes) becomes a technique of exclusion. It territorializes power in a way that Palestinians are governed through dry taps, infrastructural decay, and legal uncertainty. This goes beyond concerns of unequal access to reveal a form of environmental racism. As Pulido (2016) points out, racialized populations are often subjected to ecological degradation through policies masked as rational or technical. In Palestine, environmental racism is present in militarized bureaucracy: the denial of permits, the criminalization of cisterns, and the routine destruction of donor-funded infrastructure (UN ESCWA 2017). In 2011 alone, Israeli authorities demolished over 173 water-related structures in Area C, many funded by the European Union and humanitarian NGOs (B'Tselem 2013). These acts, taken all together, represent a long-term strategy of denying Palestinians the material conditions for permanence.

The material dimension of this system recalls what Perkiss (2024) and Stamatopoulou-Robbins (2019) identify as part of climate apartheid, which is a racialized and spatialized regime of infrastructural differentiation. Settlers enjoy access to state-subsidized irrigation and solar-powered pumping systems, while Palestinians rely on water tankers and exposed containers (B'Tselem 2023). The widespread use of rooftop water tanks is where infrastructural denial is most visible, as households are forced to store irregular and expensive water deliveries (see Figure 1). In the Jordan Valley and south Hebron hills, for instance, Israeli settlers use up to six times more water per capita than nearby Palestinian communities, even when they are

adjacent or overlapping in terrain (B'Tselem 2013). As visualized in Figure 2, water tanker prices surpassing 30 NIS per cubic meter in areas like Jericho, Tubas, and Hebron further illustrate how infrastructural exclusion is spatially concentrated in Palestinian zones, reinforcing climate apartheid through systemic deprivation (WASH Dashboard 2024).

Figure 1. Rooftop water tanks on residential buildings in Nablus, illustrating household reliance on water storage due to irregular municipal supply. Photo by Salma a-Deb'i, B'Tselem, 19 April 2023. Source: B'Tselem – Parched.

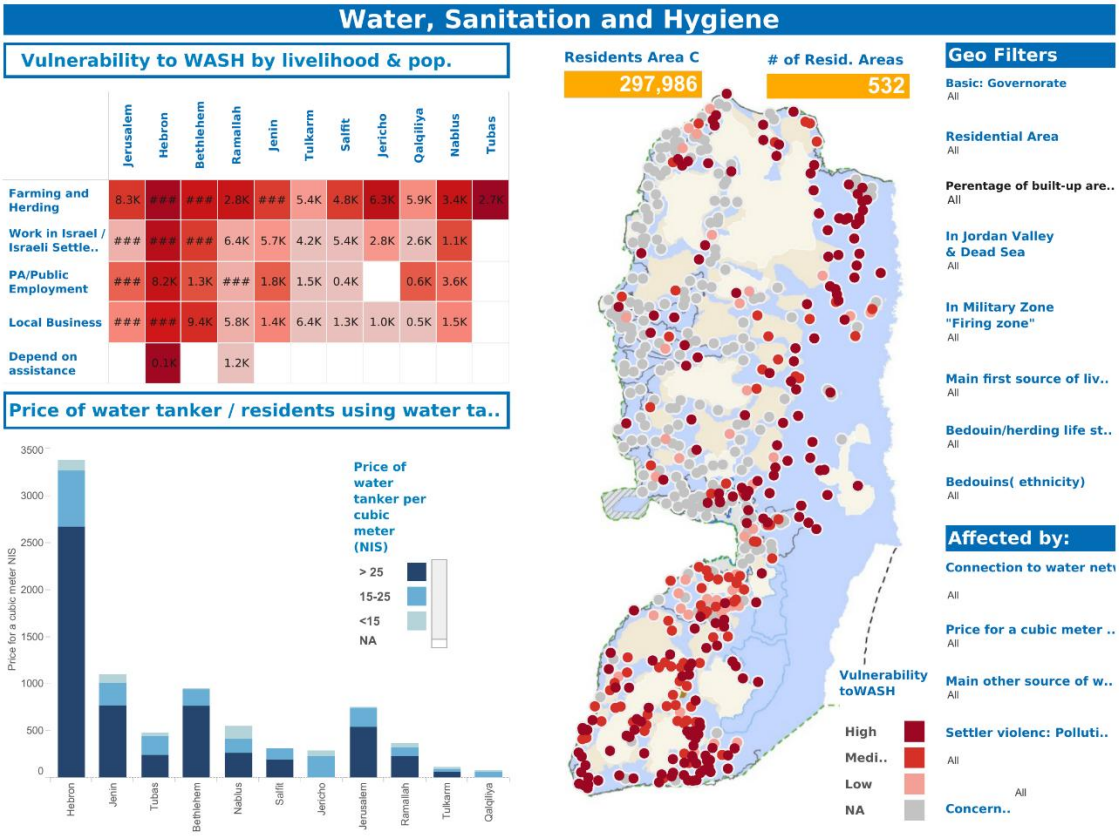

Figure 2 Map of water tanker prices and WASH vulnerability across the occupied Palestinian territories. Source: UN OCHA, WASH Dashboard: DashAccessland, 2024. Accessed April 29, 2025.

These water restrictions are also inseparable from energy apartheid. Water infrastructure, particularly pumping and storage, depends on electricity. In many Palestinian villages, power outages are frequent or planned infrastructure is denied entirely and, in such cases, the absence of electricity makes even limited water allocations unusable. This interdependency of deprivation reinforces the broader system of ecological control, where Palestinians face simultaneous denial of energy, sanitation, and water under the disguise of security and development.

At the systemic level, these practices align with Wolfe's (2006) conception of settler colonialism. Israeli environmental governance of Palestinians is one of the core operating mechanisms of settler-colonial control. As such, water denial becomes a tool of elimination through dependency, since communities cannot sustain themselves, cultivate food, raise

children, or plan infrastructure. This logic is naturalized and normalized through donor frameworks that treat these problems as development challenges and ignore the colonial architecture of exclusion (UN ESCWA 2017). Even humanitarian actors are often forced to navigate Israeli permit systems, inadvertently legitimizing the very frameworks that prevent Palestinian autonomy. Therefore, Israeli water governance should not be seen as mismanagement or policy imbalance. It must be understood as a weaponized infrastructure of colonization. It is a slow-moving apparatus that displaces through silence and delay.

5.2. Land, Water and the Spatial Politics of Agricultural Elimination

Agriculture and spatial planning in Area C are interdependent mechanisms of settler-colonial governance, in which the erosion of Palestinian agricultural capacity is actively produced through planning, land denial, and infrastructural exclusion. These overlapping controls systematically strip Palestinian communities of their ability to cultivate, inhabit, and remain on their land.

The decline of agriculture in the West Bank has been steep: from contributing over 14% of GDP in the mid-1990s to just over 5% by 2011 (World Bank 2013, 7). Yet this decline cannot be explained by market trends or climatic pressures alone. According to the World Bank, there are over 326,000 dunums of irrigable land in Area C that Palestinians cannot access due to infrastructural exclusion, while an additional 187,000 dunums are under settler control (World Bank 2013, viii). The denial of irrigation infrastructure through an impossible permit system makes agriculture materially unsustainable. However, the erosion of agriculture is inseparable from the spatial planning regime that governs Area C. As B'Tselem (2013) and OCHA (2009) have shown, less than 1% of Area C is zoned for Palestinian development, and only a handful of Palestinian master plans have been approved since the 1990s. This has left the vast majority of villages in a condition of suspended legal status, where even maintaining existing structures is considered illegal. Buildings and cisterns are routinely demolished for lack of permits, while

new Palestinian construction is effectively frozen. Between 2000 and 2007, fewer than 6% of Palestinian permit applications were approved (B'Tselem 2013).

Israeli planning in Area C operates under what Yiftachel (2009) terms "gray space" or a suspended zone between the "whiteness of legality" and the "blackness of eviction" where Palestinians are governed by permanent exception (p. 246-247). Israeli plans routinely expand settlements, designate "nature reserves" and "military zones" to prohibit Palestinian access, and legalize construction for settlers (B'Tselem 2013; OCHA 2009). Meanwhile, Palestinian plans are systematically blocked, ensuring that villages cannot grow, access services, or build infrastructure (ESCWA 2017). The result is a territorial regime of slow erasure, in which spatial legality is weaponized to eliminate Palestinian agriculture by engineering the conditions of collapse. Farmers face land fragmentation, blocked roads, confiscated equipment, and legal prohibitions on cultivation. Without zoning approval, they cannot build warehouses, irrigate their fields, or connect to water grids. This planning system functions as a permanent freeze on Palestinian life, described as a slow making of lands uninhabitable, which is effectively governed within the "gray space" of non-recognition (Bridge et al. 2015; Yiftachel 2009).

Moreover, this violence is deeply temporal. The concept of slow violence helps us understand how denial of land access and agricultural viability does not destroy in a single moment, but it degrades life possibilities across decades (Nixon 2011). Farmers give up after years of blocked access, just as families leave after generations of permit refusals. Cultural knowledge of land-based livelihoods is lost and agricultural collapse becomes the medium through which elimination is routinized. Smith (2012) argues that environmental governance determines the capacity of households and communities to reproduce life, so when irrigation fails and cultivation ends, so too does the possibility of remaining.

This spatial-agricultural governance model is not unique to Palestine. It parallels settler-colonial strategies across the globe. In Canada, as Coulthard (2014) demonstrates, Indigenous

nations are pushed out of subsistence economies through land dispossession masked as development. In Australia, "green zones" and conservation policies are used to restrict Aboriginal mobility (Whyte 2018). In Palestine, what appears in policy as land use regulation or environmental zoning is, in practice, a settler-colonial territorial strategy. Spatial planning and agricultural denial are co-constitutive mechanisms of settler domination, enforcing long-term displacement through strategic neglect.

5.3. Environmental Control and Unlivability in the Naqab

In the Naqab (Negev), Israeli environmental governance takes a distinct yet structurally similar form to that in the West Bank. Here, Palestinian Bedouins, who are nominal citizens of Israel, live in a legal and infrastructural condition of permanent non-recognition. Over 35 Bedouin villages are classified as "unrecognized" by the Israeli state, so they are ineligible for basic services such as water, electricity, waste disposal, sanitation, schools, and health care (HRW 2008). Despite residing on ancestral lands predating the formation of the Israeli state, these communities are excluded from national planning frameworks and systematically targeted for displacement through bureaucratic erasure (Yiftachel and Kedar 2000).

This is, one again, not a case of underdevelopment but of state-engineered unlivability. Denial of water infrastructure is particularly acute. Residents must rely on expensive water trucking or makeshift storage tanks exposed to contamination and evaporation. The cost of water for Bedouin communities can be up to ten times higher than in nearby Jewish towns (Bimkom 2012). These towns, often newly established or expanded in the Naqab as part of state development plans, receive full infrastructural support, including piped water, paved roads, and subsidized renewable energy (HRW 2008). ESCWA (2017) reporting also shows that environmental access is strategically allocated to maintain demographic and territorial separation. This infrastructural differentiation further demonstrates forms of climate apartheid, where environmental resilience is racialized. Ferdinand's (2022) critique of green colonialism

shows how settler states often pursue ecological modernity for themselves while subjecting Indigenous populations to degradation and environmental neglect. In the Naqab, this manifests in the weaponization of environmental policy via afforestation, nature reserves, and "green" rewilding projects that are deployed to displace Bedouin communities under the pretense of environmental protection (Yiftachel 2009). These ecological rationales are used to legitimize demolitions, restrict movement, and confiscate land, just like the settler-colonial logics of erasure at work in Area C.

Furthermore, this environmental violence is also reproductive. Without access to water, sanitation, electricity, or stable shelter, Bedouin families face impossible conditions for raising children and maintaining kinship networks. As Smith (2012) and TallBear (2019) argue, settler governance often targets Indigenous reproduction through infrastructural deprivation, framing it as a population management issue rather than a structural denial of life. As with other settler-colonial contexts, green colonialism is one of the mediums of violence. Therefore, the Naqab reveals how environmental governance becomes the language through which the state conducts and legitimizes elimination.

5.4. Time as a Tool of Elimination

While spatial exclusion is overt in the Naqab, the temporal politics of Bedouin dispossession is equally harmful. Unrecognized Bedouin villages are not only unmapped, they are disconnected from time itself. As Fanon (1963) writes, the colonial state seeks to expel the native not only from space but from temporality (p. 36). This condition manifests in what might be called suspended temporality: Bedouin communities are locked in a legal vacuum where they are prohibited from developing infrastructure, yet continuously punished for its absence. This state-induced static state means that houses cannot be expanded, water systems cannot be formalized, and lives cannot move forward (Fanon 1963). Projects like the Blueprint Negev, promoted by the Jewish National Fund, seek to "develop" the Naqab through Jewish settlement,

renewable energy expansion, and tourism, all while de-development is imposed on Bedouin villages through forced relocation (HRW 2008). Environmental governance here functions as a dual system of sustainability for some, and systematic erasure for others.

The World Bank (2009) and Amnesty International (2017) reports confirm how infrastructural permissions in the Naqab are either indefinitely delayed or categorically denied. Bedouin residents often wait years for a planning decision that never arrives, while demolition orders may be enacted without notice. This unpredictable and one-sided manipulation of bureaucratic time constructs perpetual precarity, in which the only certainty is loss. Time itself becomes a medium of control, as future planning, investment, and reproduction are put into question. The case of Umm El-Hiran exemplifies this weaponization of time. After being forcibly relocated there by the Israeli military in 1956, the village's residents spent decades petitioning for basic services, including a direct water connection (Zaher 2013). Instead, they were offered access to a state-managed water tank placed eight kilometers from the village (Zaher 2013). Their legal appeals were dismissed on the grounds that providing equal infrastructure might "encourage the phenomenon of unrecognized villages" (Zaher 2013). This rationale reveals the state's temporal logic in which services are denied to pressure communities into abandonment over time.

Generationally, this dispossession produces what Povinelli (2011) would describe as the governance of the otherwise: the suppression of Bedouin temporalities and life-worlds that do not conform to the settler-colonial schedule (p.13). These lives are "tied to suspended futures" (Povinelli 2011, 21-22). Children are raised in unrecognized villages come of age in a legal time warp and excluded from future-oriented policies, education, and development programs. Infrastructure delays become formative experiences, normalizing deprivation and foreclosing alternative futures. Infrastructural denial is a form of reproductive governance, where families

are forced into conditions that erode kinship, care, and cultural continuity over time (Tallbear 2019; Smith 2012).

The case of Gaza further demonstrates how settler-colonial environmental violence operates across infrastructural systems and temporal registers. Even before the start of the genocide in Gaza, the repeated targeting of the Strip's sole power plant (2006, 2014, and 2021) has produced chronic energy insecurity, while also exacerbated by Israeli fuel restrictions and dependence on external supply (B'Tselem 2020). Electricity availability often drops below four hours per day, undermining access to water pumping, sanitation, refrigeration, and critical healthcare (B'Tselem 2020). This dynamic reflects slow violence through a gradual, normalized destruction reinforced by episodic military strikes, but also reveals a broader temporal logic of control.

Therefore, temporality is not secondary to spatial displacement but central to the way environmental governance enacts settler-colonial elimination. Time is occupied alongside land, and erasure occurs not only through the bulldozed villages, but through the slow and calculated foreclosure of the future.

5.5. Systemic Look at Environmental Governance as a Settler-Colonial Regime

To synthetize, Israeli environmental governance performs a dual function. First, it enables the consolidation and expansion of Jewish-Israeli spatial presence; second, it induces precarity, stagnation, and eventual displacement of Palestinians. Environmental policy becomes the medium through which the settler state governs time, space, and survival. Whether in the West Bank's Area C, the Bedouin villages of the Naqab, or the Gaza Strip, Israeli environmental governance constitutes a systemic regime of climate apartheid. Settler infrastructures reflect abundance: chlorinated water, solar arrays, reforested lands, and high-efficiency irrigation. By contrast, Palestinians are relegated to zones of degradation and scarcity, with demolished cisterns, non-permitted pipes, polluted agricultural land, and disconnected power grids. Climate

resilience becomes a racialized privilege, embedded not only in access to resources, but in the legal and infrastructural systems that structure the everyday. This duality is a clear design of governance. Across these territories, control is implemented both through direct military force, and through the selective distribution of infrastructure, permits, and planning. It is a slow and often invisible system, operating through paperwork, maps, checkpoints, and zoning plans. As Stamatopoulou-Robbins (2019) shows in *Waste Siege*, infrastructure in Palestine is used to administer abandonment. This is slow violence in its most acute form, a violent deterioration of viability, layered over decades of siege and blockade (Nixon 2011). It reveals how climate apartheid operates not just through unequal access to water or land, but through the deliberate creation of conditions where no life can be sustained without permission. Infrastructure becomes a border and the absence of infrastructure becomes a weapon (Stamatopoulou-Robbins 2019).

What emerges from these cases is a coherent system of settler environmental governance. In this system:

- Permits are denials
- Conservation is territorial expansion
- Sustainability is racial selection
- Environmental planning is spatial foreclosure

This is what Weizman (2012) calls "architecture as occupation," extended into the environmental sphere (p. 5). Infrastructure, zoning, and ecological law become spatial technologies of apartheid, used not to coexist, but to replace. The settler state reorders land and nature to render Palestinian presence unviable legally, hydrologically, and energetically. Following the UN ESCWA's (2017) findings, which demonstrate that Israel's legal and infrastructural policies collectively fulfill the criteria of apartheid, through this analysis we can

also observe how water governance is a central vector through which racial domination is operationalized and temporality is manipulated to control Palestinian life.

The distinctiveness of the Palestinian case lies in its combination of colonial enclosure, ecological manipulation, and international greenwashing. Israeli environmentalism is frequently celebrated for its innovation in desalination, afforestation, and sustainable farming, yet these very technologies are deployed to facilitate dispossession and to naturalize settler occupation as sustainable development (Ferdinand 2022; UN ESCWA 2017). Furthermore, this process is also visible within international development and humanitarian frameworks. Donor-funded infrastructure projects in the West Bank are frequently destroyed by the Israeli Civil Administration, while aid agencies are forced to operate within the zoning systems that work to erase Palestinian life (B'Tselem 2013; OCHA 2009; UN ESCWA 2017). These well-intentioned interventions inadvertently reproduce the spatial hierarchies of settler colonialism by adhering to its legal and territorial boundaries.

Israeli environmental governance in Palestine must not be understood through the language of failure, scarcity, or mismanagement. Instead, it demands a postcolonial and political ecological framework that reveals its true function: the slow, spatial, and temporal elimination of the native through environmental design. Water, land, energy, infrastructure, and ecology are racialized, politicized, and weaponized. This is a regime that governs not only bodies and borders, but the very conditions of survival and futurity. To deny infrastructure is to deny presence and to allocate water is to allocate life.

6. Policy Implications and Conclusion

This project has traced how water governance in Palestine operates not as a neutral technocratic apparatus, but as a settler-colonial structure of control, exclusion, and elimination. What appears in policy documents as sustainability, regulation, or development must be understood instead as the slow, spatial work of dispossession. These findings affirm what scholars of settler colonialism, such as Wolfe (2006) have argued: that elimination is not always genocidal in its most spectacular form, but often unfolds through everyday systems and environmental regimes. However, the current moment, particularly with the genocide unfolding in Gaza, demands that we revisit Wolfe's thesis. Israeli settler colonialism has become actively genocidal. The calculated destruction of Gaza's water and sewage systems, the bombing of food infrastructure, and the sealing off of humanitarian aid cannot be separated from the longer settler project of ecological domination and infrastructural attrition. What has for decades been a system of slow violence has accelerated into mass death. The logic of elimination has become explicit.

To discuss environmental governance in Palestine without naming this genocide would be an act of scholarly complicity. It would render invisible not only the violence itself, but the very systems of knowledge, planning, and policy that enable it. As discussed, the Israeli environmental governance is not operating outside of the settler-colonial project, rather, it is constitutive of it. It is through water management, territorial reengineering, and ecological control that the settler state asserts its sovereignty while undermining Palestinian claims to life, space, and futurity. While settler-colonial environmental violence is a global phenomenon, visible in places such as North America and Australia, Palestine demands a different kind of attention. Its struggle cannot be reduced to analogy. Palestinian liberation is ongoing as a living,

collective demand that resists being historicized, contained, or treated as an inevitable outcome of conquest.

In light of this, policy recommendations cannot remain within the existing governance sector. To call for increased cooperation, infrastructure repair, or donor coordination without addressing the colonial structure that underpins the water sector is to re-legitimize the very systems of domination this research exposes. Settler states cannot be reformed into decolonial futures; they must be unsettled. Here, the work of Snelgrove, Dhamoon, and Corntassel (2014) becomes vital. Their call to "unsettle the settler" offers a framework for policy and scholarly engagement that refuses liberal gestures of inclusion and instead confronts the foundational violence of settler colonial rule. In the case of Palestine, this means moving beyond frameworks of water diplomacy, humanitarianism, or "development under occupation", towards a structural refusal of Israeli environmental legitimacy. The question is not how Israel can better govern Palestinian water needs, but why it is governing them at all.

The policy implication, then, is not about optimizing water distribution under occupation but about dismantling the conditions of occupation itself. Environmental justice in Palestine cannot be achieved without ending the siege on Gaza, dismantling the military and infrastructural apparatus of apartheid, and restoring full Palestinian sovereignty over land and resources. International organizations, donors, and environmental agencies must recognize that technical solutions offered under conditions of colonial domination serve to stabilize the status quo, not to transform it. They must shift their frameworks away from "risk mitigation" and toward solidarity with decolonial movements. Environmental organizations, governments, and climate alliances must stop treating Israeli environmental innovation as apolitical. Climate awards, partnerships, and "green" tech diplomacy that include Israel while excluding Palestine reinforce the erasure of Indigenous ecological knowledge and normalize settler-colonial control.

Furthermore, this project insists that the politics of sustainability, climate resilience, and environmental development cannot be abstracted from settler violence. As Whyte (2018) reminds us, settler environmentalism often functions as a vehicle for erasure, preserving land for the settler while displacing the Indigenous. Environmental governance in Palestine is not simply about land management but it restructuring nature itself to sustain settler futurity while eliminating Indigenous presence. Palestine's case exposes the profound limitations of state-centered climate governance frameworks, which often erase the lived realities and agency of occupied and stateless peoples. To build truly decolonial climate justice, environmental politics must recognize these populations not as peripheral victims but as critical agents whose infrastructural and ecological struggles are central to global climate futures. In Palestine, afforestation projects, nature reserves, and resource control serve precisely this purpose: they green the landscape by cleansing it of Palestinians. Thus, future policy frameworks must adopt a decolonial environmental justice approach. This means:

- Recognizing Israeli governance of Palestinian water as illegitimate under international law.
- Supporting Palestinian-led ecological and infrastructural development without intermediary settler institutions.
- Reframing "resilience" not as adaptation to colonially imposed conditions, but as a political demand for the restoration of autonomy, mobility, and land access.
- Holding international actors accountable when so-called climate adaptation strategies are used to depoliticize colonial violence.
- Center occupied and stateless communities in global climate justice agendas, recognizing their unique experiences of infrastructural siege, environmental violence, and political exclusion.

Lastly, and most importantly, this research affirms that Palestinian liberation is a necessary condition of environmental governance rather than an external concern. There is no just water future under occupation. There is no sustainability without sovereignty. The project of decolonizing environmental governance in Palestine begins by naming the violence, refusing the settler state's ecological claims, and standing unapologetically in solidarity with Palestinian demands for land, return, and life.

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