

Environmental Injustice in Palestine: A Political Ecology Perspective

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Abstract

This study examines environmental injustice in Palestine through a political ecology perspective amid the escalation of conflict since 2023. The main issue lies in environmental degradation shaped by power relations that govern access to and control over space and natural resources. This study aims to analyze how power structures within the conflict produce ecological inequalities in Gaza and the West Bank. Using a qualitative approach based on literature review, this research draws on international reports, scholarly articles, and policy documents. The findings show that the destruction of environmental infrastructure, restrictions on mobility, and territorial control function as political mechanisms that limit access to water, land, and livelihoods. From a political ecology perspective, these dynamics reflect the intersection of environmental degradation, social marginalization, and resource control, which reinforce distributive, procedural, and social injustices. This study concludes that environmental degradation in Palestine is embedded within political dynamics that structurally deepen inequality and societal vulnerability among Palestinians.

Keywords: *Political Ecology; Environmental Injustice; Power Relations; Resource Control; Palestine*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini membahas ketidakadilan lingkungan di Palestina dalam perspektif ekologi politik di tengah eskalasi konflik sejak 2023. Permasalahan utama terletak pada degradasi lingkungan yang terbentuk melalui relasi kekuasaan yang mengatur akses dan kontrol atas ruang serta sumber daya. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana struktur kekuasaan dalam konflik memproduksi ketimpangan ekologis di Gaza dan Tepi Barat. Metode yang digunakan adalah kualitatif dengan pendekatan studi pustaka melalui analisis laporan internasional, artikel ilmiah, dan dokumen kebijakan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kerusakan infrastruktur lingkungan, pembatasan mobilitas, serta kontrol teritorial menjadi mekanisme politik yang membatasi akses

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masyarakat terhadap air, tanah, dan sumber penghidupan. Dalam perspektif ekologi politik, kondisi ini mencerminkan keterkaitan antara degradasi lingkungan, marginalisasi sosial, dan kontrol sumber daya, yang kemudian memperkuat ketidakadilan distributif, prosedural, dan sosial. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa degradasi lingkungan di Palestina merupakan bagian dari dinamika politik yang secara struktural memperdalam ketimpangan dan kerentanan masyarakat Palestina.

Kata kunci: Ekologi Politik; Ketidakadilan Lingkungan; Relasi Kekuasaan; Kontrol Sumber Daya; Palestina

Introduction

The global ecological crisis has become one of the greatest challenges for contemporary world politics. Climate change, ecosystem degradation, and the exploitation of natural resources demonstrate that this issue is fundamental to global security and sustainability. As attention to the ecological crisis has grown, the concept of environmental justice has emerged to help us understand how environmental impacts and benefits are distributed and how power structures are unequal.

According to Ebu, environmental justice is defined as fair ecological distribution, recognition of vulnerable groups, and their participation in decision-making¹. When power relations over space and resources are unequal, these principles tend to weaken². In such situations, groups that are already socially and economically vulnerable often bear a disproportionate burden of environmental degradation.

Research by Krampe, Kreutz, and Ide shows that conflict is significantly and persistently correlated with the decline of a country's environmental performance, even up to two to three decades after the conflict has ended. The impact is not only direct, through the destruction of energy, water, and industrial facilities, but also indirect, through the weakening of institutional capacity as well as environmental regulation³. In addition, the intensity of conflict is often directly proportional to the scale of ecosystem degradation, including the loss of biodiversity, deforestation, as well as water and soil pollution resulting from the use of weapons and territorial changes.⁴ This indicates that armed conflict cannot be understood solely as a military event or a security crisis, but also as a process that transforms environmental conditions and determines how resources are distributed within society.

Environmental degradation in situations of conflict is closely related to power relations over space and resources. From a political ecology perspective, Robbins argues that environmental change always reflects configurations of interests that determine access, control, and the distribution of benefits⁵. Therefore, ecological damage cannot be separated from the political processes that shape the distribution of benefits and burdens.

If conflict restructures power relations over space and resources, then Palestine is one of the clearest examples of how such processes operate in everyday life. In Palestine, the ecological impacts of conflict are embedded within the structures that shape access to land and water. Damage to water and sanitation infrastructure resulting from military activities, as well as explosive remnants, contributes to the deterioration of groundwater quality in Gaza⁶. In addition to worsening environmental quality, these conditions also increase public health risks, deepen the socio-economic crisis, and create political obstacles in the management of natural resources.

This issue becomes more complex when degradation affects not only the water system, but also the broader ecological structures. A large portion of agricultural land and vegetation cover in Gaza and the West Bank has experienced significant damage, while millions of tons of debris contaminate the living spaces of the population.⁷ Such damage can weaken the ability of communities to sustain their livelihoods and rebuild their lives. This situation demonstrates that environmental degradation in Palestine contributes to the production of unequal access to resources while simultaneously reinforcing existing structures of vulnerability.

These issues have been examined in several previous studies that analyze the impact of the conflict on environmental conditions in Palestine. Abuhomos et al. investigate the relationship between geopolitical dynamics and local energy systems in Palestine. The study shows that various restrictions imposed by the Israeli authorities increase Palestine's dependence on electricity imports from Israel, which reflects geopolitical control over access to energy resources.⁸ Meanwhile, Reddhiyan positions environmental injustice in the Israel-Palestine conflict as an issue of violations of humanitarian law, human rights, and international environmental law. Reddhiyan views ecological damage as being understood as a consequence of non-compliance with protection norms in armed conflict.⁹ On the other hand, Qumsiyeh analyzes the broader environmental impacts of military activities in Palestine by examining various forms of military activity before, during, and after the conflict. The study shows that military policies regulating access to territory and resources, including water, also restrict the living space of Palestinian communities and contribute to environmental degradation.¹⁰

The three studies indicate that environmental degradation in Palestine cannot be separated from the dynamics of conflict, whether in the form of material destruction, violations of legal norms, or power relations over space and resources. Nevertheless, these studies operate within different analytical frameworks, while approaches that connect political-ecological dimensions with the concept of environmental justice remain relatively limited in the existing literature. Thus, the main question of this research is how environmental injustice in Palestine can be understood from a political ecology perspective.

Building on this gap and question, this study seeks to analyze environmental injustice in Palestine through a political ecology perspective and the concept of environmental justice, in order to understand how power structures regulate access to space and resources and produce ecological risks in everyday life. This research is expected to contribute to the development of environmental politics and international relations study by positioning ecological degradation as part of the political processes that shape environmental inequality and vulnerability.

The political ecology perspective in this study refers to the interconnections among the pillars of degradation and marginalization, conservation and control, environmental conflict, environmental subjects and identities, as well as political objects and actors¹¹. These pillars help to examine how environmental change in situations of conflict is connected to the distribution of power and the regulation of access to resources. Meanwhile, according to Kuehn, the concept of environmental justice is understood through the dimensions of distributive, corrective, procedural, and social justice¹². These four dimensions are used to identify how the burdens of ecological damage, mechanisms of recovery, participation in decision-making, as well as the recognition of affected groups operate within the conflict in Palestine. Together, these two approaches make it possible to understand environmental degradation in Palestine as a phenomenon shaped by power relations, and also as an arena through which inequalities in resource distribution and political accountability can be examined more systematically.

Research Method

This study employs a qualitative method with the aim of gaining an in-depth understanding of how environmental injustice is formed within the conflict in Palestine¹³. A qualitative approach is chosen because this study focuses on the dynamics of power relations, the distribution of resources, as well as the political processes that shape environmental degradation in Palestine.

The data sources in this study are secondary in nature and are obtained through library research. The data analyzed are drawn from scientific journal articles, international reports such as those published by the United Nations, the United Nations Environment Programme, and the United Nations Development Programme, international news outlets, publications by environmental organizations, as well as policy documents that discuss the ecological impacts of the conflict in Palestine, particularly those related to access to land, water, and infrastructure. In addition, the work of Paul Robbins is used as a theoretical foundation for examining the relationship between power and environmental change, while literature on the concept of environmental justice helps to explain

the distribution of ecological risks and vulnerabilities within the context of conflict.

The data collection process was carried out by reviewing and selecting various written sources relevant to the research topic. Each source was read and analyzed comprehensively to identify information related to the dynamics of conflict, environmental degradation, as well as the distribution of access to resources in Palestine. The collected data were then classified based on the main themes that emerged in the study, such as access to land and water, infrastructure damage, and power relations in resource management.¹⁴ The next stage involved organizing these findings systematically in the form of a descriptive account to explain the interconnections between conflict, power structures, and environmental injustice, following the steps of qualitative analysis.¹⁵

This study is limited to the period from 2023 to early 2026, with a focus on ecological dynamics in Gaza and the West Bank of Palestine as areas that have experienced significant impacts from the escalation of conflict since 2023. The coverage of 2026 is limited to developments up to the time of data collection. The selection of sources was conducted selectively by prioritizing peer-reviewed scientific publications and official reports from institutions and international organizations in order to maintain the consistency and validity of the research.

Result and Discussion

Environmental Degradation and Resource Marginalization

The escalation of conflict in Palestine since October 2023 has triggered a process of ecological degradation that disproportionately marginalizes Palestinian communities most dependent on natural resources. This is reflected in the damage to water infrastructure, sanitation, and agricultural systems in Gaza and the West Bank, which has eliminated access to the sources of livelihood that have long sustained food security and household economies, particularly for small-scale farmers, fishers, and low-income groups who rely on land and coastal resources¹⁶.

These conditions have been further exacerbated by patterns of violence and the systematic destruction of living spaces. The United Nations Human Rights Council stated that between November 2024 and October 2025, there was an intensification of attacks, the destruction of residential areas, and restrictions on humanitarian assistance that led to the forced displacement of Palestinian communities in Gaza and the West Bank. At least 463 Palestinians, including 157 children, died from starvation in Gaza as a result of restrictions on access to humanitarian aid¹⁷. This dynamic demonstrates that control over civilian life in the conflict operates through the regulation of material conditions that gradually displace Palestinian communities from their own territory.

A similar dynamic is also evident in the West Bank through the increasingly intensive expansion of illegal settlements and the appropriation of Palestinian land. Since late 2025, the Israeli authorities have accelerated policies that facilitate settlement expansion, the legalization of settlement outposts, and the registration of Palestinian land as property of the State of Israel. This process has been accompanied by rising violence by settlers that restricts access for Palestinian farmers and herders, and has led to the forced displacement of several communities from their areas.¹⁸

The pattern of environmental degradation in Palestine demonstrates a close interconnection between social marginalization and the unequal distribution of ecological risks. The dynamics of the conflict systematically reduce civilian access to living space and resources. The ecological impacts in this situation are not distributed evenly, yet are borne primarily by groups that are economically, socially, and politically most dependent on water, land, and food resources. This indicates that the environmental crisis emerging amid the conflict further deepens the long-standing patterns of marginalization that have shaped the lives of Palestinian communities.

Environmental Conservation and Spatial Control

The conditions in Palestine are also related to how space and mobility are controlled within the conflict. In Gaza, control over space operates within a complex configuration of authority. Internally, the Gaza Strip is under the administration of Hamas; however, in practice, it is largely determined by the Israeli authorities through military power and regulations that govern mobility, security, and even the operations of humanitarian actors.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights reported the destruction of approximately 80 percent of civilian infrastructure in Gaza, including homes, hospitals, schools, and water installations, as well as the practice of mass detention of Palestinians, which is often arbitrary and accompanied by torture in detention¹⁹. Thus, control over space also determines the limits of Palestinian communities' participation in accessing basic services and their own living spaces.

The mechanism of control over space in the West Bank is also institutionalized through an increasingly intensive regime of mobility restrictions. The configuration of authority in this area differs, as it is administratively under the Palestinian Authority, yet most aspects of security and mobility remain under Israeli oversight. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2024) recorded at least 793 movement obstacles, ranging from checkpoints to road gates, regulating the mobility of approximately 3.3 million Palestinians. This system directs Palestinian traffic to secondary routes, restricts access to agricultural land as well as education and healthcare services, while many of these restrictions do not apply to Israeli

settlers²⁰. This pattern indicates that control over space in the West Bank operates through regulatory mechanisms and territorial control that monopolize the mobility of the Palestinian population.

Control over space also extends into the humanitarian sphere through restrictions on international organizations operating in Palestine. Since 2023, facilities of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East have been targeted for destruction, humanitarian assistance has frequently been obstructed, and more than 300 UNRWA staff members have been reported killed during the course of the attacks²¹. This condition demonstrates that humanitarian space does not exist outside the logic of conflict control, but instead becomes part of a political arena that determines who is authorized to deliver assistance and how such aid can reach civilian populations.

The regulation of spatial control and mobility demonstrates that environmental governance in the context of conflict operates without a foundation of procedural justice. Authority over land, water, and movement is determined through exclusive mechanisms that do not provide space for participation by the affected communities. When access to essential resources is established through unilateral regulations and armed enforcement, decision-making processes are transformed into forms of domination. Within such a framework of power relations, Palestinian communities are not positioned as subjects with a voice over their own living space, but rather as objects governed by closed structures of authority.

Environmental Conflict and Accountability

Environmental damage in Palestine illustrates how armed conflict directly destroys the ecological infrastructure that sustains civilian life. In Gaza, since the attacks of October 2023, water and sanitation infrastructure has been damaged, including pipeline networks and waste management facilities that supply the primary sources of clean water, thereby leading to increased contamination of the coastal aquifer²². Meanwhile, in the West Bank, a report by the Al Jazeera Media Network indicates that ecological conflict emerges through restrictions on the construction of wells and the appropriation of springs by settlers, transforming access to water into a matter of territorial control²³. Environmental damage in this situation appears to constitute part of the conflict landscape itself, as vital resources are turned into arenas of contestation.

Furthermore, Israel has cut electricity supplies and disabled desalination and water pumping facilities. As a result, the capacity to produce electricity in Gaza has declined, causing the main power plant to cease operations, while the production of drinking water from the principal desalination facilities has decreased by approximately 85 percent, further exacerbating the existing water crisis²⁴. Meanwhile, in the West Bank, control over water is exercised by

compelling Palestinians to purchase water from Israeli companies, even though the water sources originate from their own territory²⁵. These regulations illustrate that control over water functions as a political instrument that structures dependence and limits the autonomy of Palestinian communities.

Despite the vast scale of ecological destruction, mechanisms of recovery and accountability remain largely absent. Approximately 78 percent of buildings in Gaza have been damaged or destroyed, generating around 61 million tons of debris containing hazardous materials²⁶. Meanwhile, recovery in the water and sanitation sector alone is estimated to require more than US\$500 million²⁷. However, restrictions on humanitarian aids and the destruction of infrastructure make environmental rehabilitation efforts difficult to carry out while the attacks are still ongoing. In the West Bank, in areas such as Susiya and Khirbat al-Farisiya, the cutting of water and electricity supplies has even been used to encourage the depopulation of Palestinian areas, while Israeli settlers in nearby areas have greater access to water²⁸. The scale of the destruction indicates the absence of ecological responsibility in the conflict, as damage accumulates without commensurate mechanisms of correction.

The pattern of environmental degradation and resource restrictions in Palestine demonstrates that the ongoing conflict unfolds without corrective mechanisms of recovery. As a result, the ecological losses experienced by communities are not accompanied by clear obligations on the part of those responsible for the damage to repair or restore its impacts, thereby allowing environmental injustice to persist for Palestinian communities.

Environmental Subject & Identities

In a protracted conflict, environmental damage also shapes structures of social vulnerability that determine the position of communities in Palestine in accessing resources and sustaining their livelihoods. This condition is reflected in the increasingly limited access to land, water, and sources of livelihood that previously supported household life in Palestine²⁹. This condition underscores that environmental degradation in Palestine gradually expands forms of ecological poverty, making communities increasingly dependent on resources that are becoming ever more scarce.

The vulnerability experienced is also related to how environmental resources are distributed and controlled in situations of conflict. When access to the environment becomes increasingly restricted, the ability of communities to sustain their livelihoods and maintain their survival is likewise eroded³⁰. Environmental injustice in Palestine is clearly reflected in the relationship between environmental degradation and the social position of communities that continue to be marginalized within the structure of the ongoing conflict.

This situation is also inseparable from the structures of power that determine who has access to, control over, and protection of resources. The internal dualism of authority in Palestine between the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza further deepens political fragmentation, limiting collective efforts by communities to respond to the environmental crisis³¹. This fragmentation creates space for resource extraction practices to occur without coordinated resistance. As a result, many Palestinian communities are trapped in conditions of ecological poverty and dependence on international aid, which does not address the structural roots of the challenges they face.

Palestinian communities increasingly appear as groups that are dependent, vulnerable, and restricted in their mobility by the existing configurations of power. Their identities as farmers, fishers, or traditional land managers are gradually shifting toward identities as recipients of humanitarian aid or as communities affected by the conflict, whose autonomy is increasingly constrained. This process demonstrates that environmental conflict also shapes socio-ecological subjects whose vulnerabilities are structurally produced. Palestinian communities are thus positioned as socio-ecological subjects whose vulnerabilities persist through the unequal distribution of resources and the fragmentation of power that governs access to the environment. Consequently, environmental degradation and social injustice in Palestine develop simultaneously deepening the structural marginalization of communities.

Political Objects & Actors

The struggle for power in Palestine centers on the authority to determine legitimacy over space and its governance. The pillar of political objects and actors positions the environment as an arena for the production of meaning and political legitimacy³². Water, land, and infrastructure are not only controlled physically, but are also constructed through regulations, legal classifications, and security narratives that determine their status as state assets, military zones, or restricted areas. In this process, actors with greater institutional and military capacity have the ability to determine the categories and legal boundaries of Palestinian living spaces. Power operates through administrative mechanisms that establish permits, restrictions, and definitions of ownership.³³ At this point, ecological conflict transforms into a conflict of legitimacy, determining who is recognized as a legal subject and who is reduced to an object of regulation.

The conflict attacks in Palestine since October 2023 demonstrate how the environment has become increasingly integrated into broader geopolitical calculations³⁴. Destroyed infrastructure, restricted aid, and reclassified spaces indicate that resource management becomes an instrument for establishing a new political order amid the conflict. Relations among actors such as Israel, the

Palestinian Authority, and Hamas create a layered configuration of power, in which the capacity to set policies and control space is not distributed equally³⁵. Within this configuration, environmental objects transform into instruments of political negotiation as well as symbols of sovereignty.

The pillar of political objects and actors demonstrates that ecological issues in Palestine cannot be understood as mere byproducts of armed conflict, but rather as integral components of the configuration of power itself. Environmental objects become the medium through which political actors assert dominance, maintain legitimacy, and constrain space for others. This further indicates that environmental injustice is rooted in the structures of political decision-making, which determine not only the distribution of resources but also the allocation of authority and recognition.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that environmental degradation in Palestine, specifically in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, cannot be understood solely as an ecological consequence of armed conflict, but also as the result of power relations that regulate access to space and resources. Through the lens of political ecology and the concept of environmental justice, the destruction of infrastructure and resources illustrates how control over the environment is linked to political dynamics affecting Palestinian communities. The differing authorities between Gaza and the West Bank further shape these dynamics, where the management of territory and resources exists within distinct configurations of power, resulting in patterns of environmental injustice that are not uniform across the two regions.

The findings of this study also indicate that environmental injustice in Palestine is reflected in the uneven distribution of ecological impacts, the limited participation of communities in resource management, and the minimal recovery from environmental damage experienced. From the perspective of political ecology, this condition demonstrates that environmental degradation is not merely a consequence of conflict, but also part of the political dynamics that shape access to, control over, and distribution of resources. Thus, environmental injustice in Palestine shows that ecological degradation operates as part of a broader configuration of power. Conflict not only destroys living spaces but also reshapes access, legitimacy, and authority over resources. As long as these structures of distribution and control remain unchanged, the ecological vulnerability of Palestinian communities will continue to be reproduced. This underscores that environmental issues within conflict are a core concern of the political dynamics themselves.

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