**Power in Gaza**

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Friday, Jan 19, 2024

Why doesn’t Gaza have electricity? A colleague who works in clean energy asked me this seemingly innocent question on October 15 when Israel had cut off power sources in Gaza. It opened the door to an important discussion within the environmental movement, in which people are working toward a clean energy, low-carbon future.

The question of Palestine undoubtedly encompasses racial, economic, health, gender, queer, and carceral dimensions. At the nexus of these intersectional issues is the environmental concern. In Gaza, limited access to food, land, water, and electricity are not just infrastructure problems, they are pressing environmental concerns that intersect with larger social justice issues.

The label “intersectional environmentalist” gained popularity during the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, urging people to recognize the interconnectedness of social and environmental issues. For those environmentalists who spoke up in 2020 but remain silent right now, it is time to extend this intersectional lens to the dire situation in Gaza, as many intersectional environmentalists have courageously done.

As the environmental community rightly celebrates the global growth of renewable energy as a means to combat climate change, we cannot ignore what is unfolding in Israel-Palestine, where nearly 30,000 Palestinians have been murdered in three months. The carbon footprint of the U.S.-made bombs being dropped by Israel on Gaza is tremendous, negating the impact of collective efforts to remove carbon from the atmosphere and reduce carbon emissions worldwide. But outside of this recent escalation of violence, the ongoing realities of Palestinians living in Palestinian territories are and have been environmental justice travesties.

The power outages in Gaza that began taking place in early October 2023 have underscored the region’s crippling energy crisis. Essential for day-to-day functioning, fuel is the lifeblood of any society. Gazans relied on Israel for electricity and fuel, making the availability of energy to Palestinians precarious. Gaza has one power plant, which became operational in 2002 with a capacity of 140 megawatts (MW) when it was built. Studies estimate that the actual power needs of Gaza are in fact closer to 400-500 MW, meaning that Gazans were frequently facing power shortages and outages. Under “normal” circumstances, this electricity shortage meant hospitals in Gaza postponed surgeries, teachers taught by candlelight, and waste management could not fully treat sewage water, so it ended up dumped in the Mediterranean Sea, threatening marine life and, subsequently, what remains of the fishing industry in Gaza.

It’s essential to underscore that Gaza’s access to fuel has been tightly controlled by Israel, and Palestinians lack the capacity to produce their own fuel, perpetuating their reliance on external sources for this vital resource.

When a complete blockade occurs, as we witnessed over the past few months, Gazans were left quite literally in the dark, unable to access electricity – a critical need for daily life. Due to the siege and airstrikes on Gaza, lack of electricity meant that many newborn babies who relied on incubators for their survival were killed, and rescue efforts were obstructed as it became harder to search for people trapped under the rubble of their destroyed homes in the dark.

The environmental justice movement’s call for energy democracy recognizes that shifting from corporate, centralized control of energy to a system that is decentralized, democratic, and supports local economies – while committed to the well-being of workers, nature, and future generations – would make perfect sense for Palestinian territories. At least in theory.

Gaza is an occupied territory – despite Israel’s claims that it withdrew in 2005, Gaza’s borders are tightly controlled in a way that makes it reliant on Israel to meet basic needs, including fuel. In Gaza, distributed energy resources – particularly solar panels and energy storage – may seem like a viable solution. Prior to October 7, 13 per cent of Gaza’s electricity sources were renewable energy, including solar, wood, charcoal, and even olive cake, but these alone couldn’t fulfill energy needs. We know off-grid solar systems can provide reliable and sustainable energy, build resilience against conflicts, reduce dependence on fossil fuels and outside parties, and mitigate the environmental impact of energy production. This limitation is not solely a matter of access and affordability; it is the stark reality of living under energy apartheid, where true energy independence remains an elusive aspiration for the people of Gaza. Even if this technology were to become available in Gaza (and other Palestinian territories), there’s an unavoidable obstacle: solar panels can’t withstand bombs.

One might argue that the recent bombings are isolated incidents, but that is not the case. The Israeli army frequently bombs the Palestinian territory. In fact, Gaza’s sole power plant was bombed by Israel in 2006, destroying six of its transformers and its fuel reservoir. After repairs, the plant was more recently capable of producing around 110 MW. Though, because of fuel shortages, it often only produced around 60 MW, far below Gaza’s actual needs. For context, 100 MW can power about 16,400 US homes, insufficient for Gaza’s 2.2 million people. What’s more, between 2008 and 2021, Israel launched military assaults on Gaza, lasting a total of 92 days – roughly three months of bombing in one of the world’s most densely populated areas. So, even if Palestinians managed to transition to off-grid renewable sources, these could not withstand frequent bombing.

Israel’s airstrikes on Gaza have a massive carbon footprint. In October 2023, Israel boasted dropping 6,000 bombs on Gaza in just six days, and the intensity of bombing never subsided. Israel’s military bombardment of the first 60 days resulted in the equivalent of burning at least 150,000 metric tons of coal. While it’s better-understood that Israel has catapulted the region into a major humanitarian crisis, it’s less known that Israel is now catapulting us towards a climate disaster. There is no such thing as a green airstrike. Further, Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) are exempt from environmental laws, exacerbating the global climate crisis with impunity.

The United States, and other countries, cannot be serious about addressing climate change if they continue to fund military activity because not only are those dollars being diverted from climate action, military activity dramatically shortens our already tight timeline to address the climate crisis.

Excerpted: ‘Solar Panels in Gaza Can’t Withstand Bombs’.

Courtesy: Commondreams.org