

MIDDLE EAST

Solar Project Pairs Muslims and Jews to Aid West Bank Farmers

By JAMES GLANZ and RAMI NAZZAL MAY 14, 2016

AUJA, West Bank — Samer Atiyat, a Palestinian farmworker, had climbed halfway up a 20-foot date palm and was trimming stalks that held rich clusters of the fruit, still green and unripe. Working near the Dead Sea on land that still evokes its biblical past, Mr. Atiyat, 28, grew animated when asked about a 125-foot bank of solar panels, whose power draws water from deep underground to irrigate the grove.

“The water that’s brought here comes from the panels,” Mr. Atiyat said, using an Arabic slang term for the units, *muri*, that can also be translated as “mirrors.”

Solar panels dot some of the poorest Arab villages in the West Bank and Israel, often donated by European governments. But experts in the field say the \$100,000 project here in Auja is the first substantial one to be financed by a group involving both Jews and Muslims in the United States, and to have both Israeli Jews and Palestinian Muslims on its technical team. In addition to its environmental benefits, the solar project gives an economic push to farmers who struggle with unreliable and expensive electricity.

In a place of nationalist, religious and political animosity, Palestinian farmers embraced the project on one condition. The community, said Ben

Jablonski, who is Jewish and from New York and who led the initiative, insisted only that the collection of donors and engineers be free of any connection to the Israeli settlements scattered across the West Bank on land Palestinians consider their own.

Mr. Jablonski, 33, resigned from the board of the Jewish National Fund, where he had been a rising star, over its modest but politically fraught involvement in West Bank settlements.

Ahmad Injoum, whose family owns the property on which the solar array was built and who negotiated the deal for 45 farm families in the area, is quick to point out that Auja, a town of about 5,000 Palestinians, has settlements to its north, south and west.

“What you heard is 100 percent right,” Mr. Injoum, 54, said of the condition. Known as Abu Bilal, father of Bilal, in Palestinian tradition, he added of donors involved with the settlers, “We don’t want anything to do with them.”

Peter Beinart, a professor at the City University of New York and a leading American Jewish critic of Israel’s occupation, sees Mr. Jablonski’s initiative, called **Build Israel Palestine**, as a sign that younger American Jews are less comfortable with Israeli control of the West Bank than traditional philanthropic groups and their members have been.

“It’s one thing for American Jewish organizations to talk vaguely about economic development for Palestinians,” Mr. Beinart said. “To be willing to take a stand in opposing settlements as part of it, as Ben has done — that makes it unusual.”

Russell F. Robinson, the chief executive of the Jewish National Fund, called Mr. Jablonski an “unbelievable leader” and said, “We wish him and the project only the greatest.” Mr. Robinson acknowledged that his fund had two projects in the Gush Etzion settlements south of Jerusalem, but he sought to

distinguish it from its Israeli sister organization, Keren Kayemet Leyisrael, which supports parks, bike paths, an amphitheater and even a solar farm in West Bank settlements. There are separate boards of directors, he noted.

Mr. Robinson also pointed out that the Arava Institute, an Israeli-based partner on the solar initiative, is a major beneficiary of the Jewish National Fund. (In 2013, the fund was the institute's largest donor, giving \$1.8 million.)

Clive Lipchin, the director of a water-management center at Arava, said the Jewish National Fund financing had led to "tensions" in the 20-year-old institute, whose programs include Israelis, Palestinians and Jordanians. He said the Auja project worked in part because it had been done on private land, the details worked out directly with Abu Bilal rather than with the Palestinian local or national government.

"We didn't have to seek permission from any political entity, and that's partly why we've succeeded," Mr. Lipchin said.

The political complexities, in a place where any cooperation with Israelis is generally denounced by Palestinian leaders as "normalization" of the occupation, were apparent when Auja's mayor, Fakhri Injourn, approached the solar array during a visit this month by the initiative's Israeli and Palestinian partners.

"We are eager to develop Auja, but projects with the Israelis are not welcomed," said the mayor, who described himself as independent politically but leaning toward Fatah, the party that dominates the **Palestine Liberation Organization** and the Palestinian Authority.

In its first phase, which started last month, the new solar array supplies about a third of the electricity needed to run a subterranean pump; the rest comes from the local electricity company. The project also included agricultural training for the farmers growing the prized Medjool dates, and surveys to assess the farmers' needs.

Water is undeniably scarce in the Jordan Valley, and a longstanding complaint among Palestinians and their supporters is that it is unfairly distributed across the West Bank. A 2009 report by Amnesty International, for example, concluded that the area's 450,000 Israeli settlers consumed as much as or more water than the Palestinian population of 2.3 million.

In the valley, the underlying aquifer is relatively shallow, said Deeb Abdelghafour, a senior official at the Palestinian Water Authority, and has been under pressure from drought for as much as a decade. Electricity is also expensive, and service can be unreliable.

One asset the valley has is sunlight, and plenty of it, said Monther Hind, a senior engineer at the Palestinian Wastewater Engineers Group, a private organization that is a partner on the initiative. So engineers came up with the idea of powering the pump with photovoltaic panels.

"They have daylight — use it," Mr. Hind said of the engineers' reasoning.

In a small building next to the solar array, a meter was counting its output, and water was audibly rushing through a pipe connected to the pump, about 250 feet below ground. Ashraf Yahiaa, an engineer with the contracting company that built the array, said it was 3,000 square feet and could produce 25,000 watts when the sun was at its brightest. (A typical light bulb uses 100 watts.)

Mr. Jablonski, who joined the Jewish National Fund's board at 27 and founded a branch to encourage a younger generation of donors, formed Build Israel Palestine in 2014 with Tarek Elgawhary, the chief executive of the nonprofit organization Coexist.

Soon after, their initiative won \$100,000 from Michael R. Bloomberg, the former mayor of New York. It has since raised \$50,000 more from both Jews and Muslims, the founders say.

Mr. Jablonski said he had left the Jewish National Fund after hearing the objections from Auja farmers, despite what he called his enduring respect for much of the group's work.

"It's either you're all in or you're not in," he said of his project with the Palestinians, adding that he was disappointed that the fund would not publicly distance itself from Keren Kayemet Leyisrael's work in settlements.

Alon Tal, a professor of environmental policy at Ben-Gurion University who founded the Arava Institute and was until recently on the Keren Kayemet Leyisrael board, called that work "extremely minimal" but said he still considered it "inappropriate."

In Auja, Abu Bilal brushed off the criticisms by his town's mayor, noting dryly that "he'll be gone in October," when his four-year term ends.

The heads of three of the farm families, during a meeting with Abu Bilal, said they, too, had no objections to Israelis or American Jews being part of the initiative.

But one of the farmers, Ibrahim Injoum, 58, had a request.

"We still need more muri," he said, using the slang term for the solar panels.

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