RIVER OF LIFE

The Jordan River has suffered an ecological collapse. This is a briefing for Muslim educators and community leaders on what went wrong, why it matters, and how you can help bring life back to the valley.

ECOPEACE / FRIENDS OF THE EARTH MIDDLE EAST (FoEME)
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’We made from water every living thing’

Quran 21:30
For thousands of years the Jordan River brought life to one of the cultural heartlands of the Islamic world.

Today, the river has been all but destroyed. 96% of its flow has been diverted. What little water remains is polluted with saline and untreated sewage. The valley’s wetlands have dried up, its springs are failing, and half its biodiversity has been lost.

This is a man-made disaster – one that shows an utter disregard for the natural world, for our own spiritual tradition, and for our responsibility as custodians of God’s earth.

It’s not too late. EcoPeace / Friends of the Earth Middle East (FoEME) asks you to join us in calling for a return of water to this river, and a return of life to the Jordan Valley.
Imagine the Jordan River. In the mind’s eye we see a great river – a river that brings life to **al ard al muqadasa** - the Holy Land - described in the Quran as the “land that We had blessed for the worlds” [*Quran, 21:71*].

We know that this river is important in the stories of the Prophets Yusha Ibn Nun (Joshua) and Yahya Ibn Zakariya (John the Baptist) and Isa (Jesus) – peace be upon them all – and that many of the closest Companions of the Prophet Mohammed (SAAS) are also buried in the valley, to the east of the Jordan.

This is a river, then, that flows through the heart of the Islamic world. It is a river of life.

Until about 50 years ago, the river looked much as it did in the time of the Companions of the Prophet (SAAS). From its source in the foothills of Jabal Al-Sheikh the Jordan rushed south into Lake Tiberius, and then meandered more slowly along the length of the Jordan Valley until it disappeared into the intensely saline lake of the Dead Sea – the lowest point on the surface of the earth. All along the way, the Jordan River brought life to the valley. It created wetland habitats in which wild plants and animals flourished. It greened a corridor through the desert, connecting the eco-systems of Eastern Africa and Western Asia and forming a flyway used by some 500 million migratory birds each year. And it allowed the flourishing of human life and the emergence of urban civilization.

Some of the first people ever to leave Africa walked across this plain and drank from its springs. And it was here, too, that the world’s first farmers began to plant and harvest grain in the alluvial mud north of the Dead Sea. Agriculture was the breakthrough that allowed villages to develop into the world’s first real towns, Jericho among them. Jericho’s walls were built some 10,000 years ago, and it can claim to be the oldest continuously inhabited city anywhere in the world.
A BLESSED LAND

The Jordan Valley has been central to Muslim history and culture since the time of Islam’s expansion under Caliph Umar.

It was here that the Muslim armies, including many who had known the Prophet (SAAS), fought one of the decisive battles against the Byzantine forces at Fahl (Pella) in 635 CE. Some of the closest Companions of the Prophet (SAAS) are buried on the Jordanian side of the river. They include Zayd ibn Al-Harithah, the adopted son of the Prophet (SAAS); Ja’far ibn Abi Talib, the cousin of the Prophet (SAAS); Abu ‘Ubaydah ibn al-Jarrah, one of the first to accept Islam and later supreme commander of the Arab armies under Caliph Umar; Bilal bin Rabah, who served as mu’athin to the Prophet (SAAS); Dirar bin Al-Azwar, an early Companion and renowned warrior; and Sharhabil Bin Hassneh, among the most trusted of the Prophet’s (SAAS) Companions and, according to some, one of the scribes of the Holy Quran.

By any measure, then – ecological, cultural, spiritual - this river must be counted as part of the heritage of humankind, and as a place of exceptional importance to Muslims.
Neither the natural beauty nor the spiritual significance of the Jordan has been enough to save the river from being degraded.

In just over 50 years, the countries that share this watershed have dammed and diverted more than 96% of the river’s historic flow. What little water remains is polluted with saline, sewage, and agricultural run-off. In places, the river is little more than a stagnant canal of effluent.

As the river has dried up, the Jordan Valley has suffered an ecological collapse. Half the valley’s biodiversity has been lost. The Dead Sea, sustained only by inflowing water from the Jordan, is sinking by more than a meter every year.

This is not just a tragedy for wildlife. Springs that irrigated farmland for thousands of years have started to falter and fail. Wells used for generations have run dry. Refused access to the river and denied a fair share of the water pumped from beneath the land, Palestinian communities have seen fields turn to dust, livelihoods lost, and families forced to migrate.

The neglect of this river shows a disregard for our own cultural heritage and for our moral responsibility as custodians of God’s creation. It also exacts a heavy price from the nations that share the valley, crippling the growth of an economy that could be supported by tourism and exacerbating the political conflicts that divide the region. This is an ecological collapse whose severity and cost – economic, ecological, human – we are only now beginning to count.

"The neglect of this river exacts a heavy price from the nations that share the valley, crippling the growth of an economy that could be supported by tourism and exacerbating the political conflicts that divide the region."
• The Lower Jordan River begins at Lake Tiberius and flows south for about 120km before reaching its end at the Dead Sea.

• The Lower Jordan Valley is divided between Jordanians, Israelis, and Palestinians. Palestinians have no access to the Jordan and do not receive water directly from the river.

• Until about 1950, some 1.3 billion cubic meters of water flowed through the valley every year.

• 96% of that flow has been diverted.

• Untreated or poorly treated sewage has been dumped or allowed to leak into the river for over 50 years from Israeli, Jordanian, and Palestinian communities.

• The diversion and pollution of this water has caused an ecological collapse - more than 50% of the valley’s biodiversity has been lost.

• The dying of the Jordan is also causing the Dead Sea to disappear – it is now sinking at the rate of approximately one meter per year.

• FoEME estimates that Israel diverts about half of the river’s average annual flow, while Syria and Jordan take the rest.
The degradation of this valley also reveals a profound failure of respect for the natural and non-human world. It exemplifies an attitude in which nature, including its water and all its forms of life, is seen as nothing more than a collection of resources to be mined for human use. This directly contravenes our Muslim duty, clearly expressed in the sunna of the Prophet Mohammed (SAAS) to show respect to all living creatures. As recorded in the hadith, the Prophet (SAAS) said “There is reward in [caring for] every living being” [Sahih Muslim, Ch. 7].

The abuse of nature is surely not what was intended when God appointed man as His Vice-Regent (Khalifah) on earth. As Dr. Abdullah Omar Nasseef, Secretary General of the Muslim World League, wrote in the Islamic Declaration on Nature in Assisi in 1986 -

For the Muslim, mankind’s role on earth is that of a Khalifah – Vice-Regent or trustee of Allah. We are Allah’s stewards and agents on Earth. We are not masters of this Earth; it does not belong to us to do what we wish.

A FAILURE OF WISDOM

Why has this happened? How have we allowed this to happen to a place of such exceptional beauty and value?

At the root of the problem is conflict. The basin that drains into the Jordan River is divided between Lebanese, Syrians, Jordanians, Israelis, and Palestinians. Instead of seeing the valley as a single, trans-boundary watershed, these nations have raced to capture the greatest possible share of the Jordan’s water. FoEME estimates that Israel diverts about half of the river’s average annual flow, while Syria and Jordan take about a quarter each. Palestinians, denied access to the river, take almost nothing.

Given the intensity of conflict in the region, this zero-sum struggle for the valley’s water might seem inevitable. But it is, in the long term, an approach that will undermine the interests of all concerned. This is a single watershed: the flow of its streams does not correspond to the borders drawn on our maps, and its rain and rivers cannot be sustainably managed through a process of competition.
It belongs to Allah and He has entrusted us with its safekeeping.

This duty to care for the earth that God entrusted to us was modeled by the Prophet (SAAS), especially in regard to the use of water.

Abdullah Ibn `Amr reported that Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) “passed by Sa’d [Ibn Abi Waqqas] while he was performing ablution and said to him: Why the excessive use of water? [Sa’d] asked: Even in ablution there is excessive use of water? [The Prophet] replied: Yes, even if you were at a flowing river.” (Narrated by Ibn Majah, Ch.2)

The respect for water, and for all of nature, shown by the Prophet (SAAS) has been lost, along with our sense of wonder at the creation and of responsibility for the world that God made. All of this has contributed to the demise of the Jordan River. The revival of the Jordan, then, requires not just a shift in policy, but a renewed spiritual effort to honor the creation that God has entrusted to us.
The starting point of any new approach must be to see this river and its tributaries as a single, interconnected ecosystem. If we want the Jordan to survive – if we want to use this water to sustain farms and families and economies – we have no choice but to manage it sustainably through cooperation.

“If we want the Jordan to survive, we have no choice but to manage it sustainably through cooperation.”

FoEEME has a different vision for the Jordan Valley - a vision in which a clean, living river runs from Lake Tiberius to the Dead Sea; in which the valley’s plants, birds and animals are afforded the water they need to flourish; in which the springs flow as they have for millennia; and in which water extracted for human use is divided equitably between the nations that share this valley and amongst the people who live here.

This is a vision that reflects our moral and spiritual obligations as Muslims, that shows respect for Al-Ard Al-Muqadasa, and that is in harmony with Islam’s attitude of care towards God’s earth.

Given the scarcity of water in parts of this region and the state of relations between the countries that share the valley, realizing this vision will not be easy. But difficulty cannot be an excuse for inaction. To do nothing is to leave a landscape irreparably damaged by our own neglect.
In the last 3 years we have seen the first signs of progress in the struggle to revive the river.

Responding to years of advocacy, national governments and municipalities are now working to prevent the dumping or leaking of untreated sewage into the river. New treatment plants are in development in Jordanian, Israeli, and Palestinian communities throughout the Jordan Valley. If this commitment is maintained, half a century of using the Jordan as a sewage canal can now be brought to an end.

2013 also saw the first release of clean water into the Jordan River in 49 years. The Israeli Water Authority has agreed to allocate 30mcm (million cubic meters) of fresh water every year from Lake Tiberius to help revive the river. This sets an important precedent for future allocations, but it falls far short of FoEME’s recommendation that Israel release 220mcm of water, and Jordan a further 90mcm, as part of an international effort to rehabilitate the Jordan.

FoEME is also developing the first cross-border master plan for the management of the Jordan River Valley – a plan that takes account of the valley’s fragile ecology as well as recognizing the legitimate human need to draw on its water resources.

The plan puts scientifically sound and economically realistic policy recommendations behind our vision for the Jordan. Key recommendations include the return of 400-600 mcm (million cubic meters) of fresh water to the river; an end to the dumping of raw or poorly-treated sewage, saline, and other effluents into the stream; and the establishment of functioning international mechanisms for the joint management of the valley’s water. With the support of national governments, this master plan can become the blueprint for the revival of the river.
FoEME believes that a living Jordan River can bring economic prosperity as well as ecological health to this valley, and that the management of the valley’s water provides a practical opportunity for regional cooperation and for the advancement of justice and peace.

We believe the Jordan can be revived without weakening the valley’s agricultural economy or causing a shortage of water for human use. In the countries that share the valley, FoEME has identified over a billion cubic meters of water that could be saved (see the fact box on page 7) and used to restore basic water rights to the Palestinians, to revive the Lower Jordan River, and to save the Dead Sea.

In the past decade FoEME has opened eco-parks – ideal places to stay and learn - on both sides of the Jordan. We are now working towards the creation of a trans-boundary ecological peace park centered on one of the river’s historic crossing points, on the border between Israel and Jordan. This reserve will welcome visitors from both sides of the valley, providing a much-needed point of access to a river which, for much of its length, remains a closed military zone.
IDEAS FOR ACTION

Reviving the Jordan River is a challenge that requires real political commitment from leaders on all sides of the valley.

And that’s where you come in.

We need to push this issue up the political agenda – to raise our voices and let Jordanian, Israeli, and Palestinian decision-makers know that we care about this river and that we expect them to act.

The revival of the Jordan is a not simply a question of politics – it is also a moral and spiritual challenge for Muslims. If we want to the river to survive, we cannot remain silent.

HOW TO JOIN THE CAMPAIGN

- **Get together.** Establish a circle of friends, classmates, or co-workers from your community. You might be a group of three or three hundred. It doesn’t matter. Together, you can make a difference.

- **Get inspired.** When you’ve got a group, you need to tell them what happened to the river, why it matters, and what they can do about it. FoEME can provide films, presentations, and fact sheets to help you tell this story. For faith groups we have published sourcebooks that include scriptural quotations, essays, and sample sermons that you can use to engage your religious congregation.

- **Identify your target.** You need to let decision-makers know that you care about the river and want them to act. It is crucial to address this message to the right person. If you’re in one of the countries that border the river, this might be a mayor or minister. If you’re part of a religious congregation, it might be the most senior representative of your community. If you’re outside the Middle East, you might need to address your elected representatives, or the national ambassadors from the countries that share the river. You are in the best position to make this call. Discuss it with your group, and come up with the names and addresses of the political, religious, or civil society leaders you are going to approach.
Get the message across. When you know what you want to say and who you want to say it to, you need to decide how to get the message across.

IDEAS FOR ACTION

WRITE
Old-fashioned paper mail is more effective than email, and personal, hand-written letters tend to have more impact that mass-printed campaign blurb. Pictures, poems and postcards can all help your letter to stand out. On our website you’ll find sample letters, fact sheets, and stories to help you make the case.

MEET
Why not invite your representative or leader to a meeting, so s/he can learn more about the issue and start to work with you on the campaign?

GET NOTICED
Organize a creative, peaceful, attention-grabbing stunt to bring the Jordan River to the attention of political leaders. Remember to invite the local media, and to get your message as clear as possible. FoEME has used this strategy to great effect in the Middle East – you are welcome to contact us for ideas and advice.

LEARN, CREATE, EXHIBIT
If you are a schoolteacher or faith leader, you may want to design an educational project about the river. This could produce paintings, poems, songs, films, or photos that you can exhibit to raise awareness about the state of the Jordan. Think about which religious or political leaders – as well as which media outlets - you could invite to such an event. A module of this kind is not only raises environmental consciousness; it can also offer young people an education in global citizenship, grassroots activism, and participation in the democratic process.

USE YOUR IMAGINATION
These are not the only ways to raise awareness about the state of the Jordan River. Use your imagination. Make some noise. And keep it positive - you’ll be more effective if you address
political leaders as partners, and ask them to join you in this effort, rather than treating them as an obstacle.

OTHER WAYS TO HELP

- **Spread the word.** Use your social networks to call for the revival of the Jordan River. Let people know what the problem is, why you care, and what you’re doing to help. On our website you’ll find videos, photos, and even sample posts to help get the word out – but your own voice is the most powerful. Please tell us what you’re doing via Twitter and Facebook - it helps us build momentum behind the campaign.

- **Invite FoEME to speak to your community.** Get in touch if you would like someone from FoEME to speak to your community about the Jordan River.

- **Come to the river.** If you want to get more deeply involved, organize a journey to see the Jordan River for yourself. FoEME runs eco-parks – ideas places to stay and to learn - on both sides of the valley. A journey like this will equip you with first-hand knowledge that you can use to advocate for the river in your home community. We can also put you in touch with tour operators and local partners (including environmental and faith groups) that’ll help make your trip safe and successful.

- **Donate.** We need your financial support to continue this effort. You can donate directly at www.SaveTheJordan.com or, better still, use your local campaign to raise funds.

‘Verily, this world is sweet and appealing, and Allah placed you as vicegerents therein; He will see what you will do.’

_Prophet Mohammed (SAAS), Musnad Ahmad Bin Hanbal (Ch. 3)_

“It is Allah who created the heavens and the earth and sent down rain from the sky and produced thereby some fruits as provision for you and subjected for you the ships to sail through the sea by His command and subjected for you the rivers.”

_Quran, 14:32_
FoEME recommends the release of 400-600 million cubic meters (mcm) of fresh water into the river every year.

In addition, the Jordan needs to flood at least once each year in order to keep the river’s ecosystem healthy (100m$^3$/sec for 24 hours).

FoEME recommends that Israel release 220mcm of water into the river each year, Syria 100mcm, and Jordan 90mcm. FoEME also recognizes that Palestine, as a riparian to the river, has a right to a fair share of the Jordan’s water.

FoEME’s analysis has identified over a billion cubic meters of water that could be saved by these countries (primarily through reduction of leaks, improvements to irrigation efficiency, water harvesting and grey-water recycling, and demand management) and used to revive the river and to restore Palestinian water rights.

The revival of the river requires that Jordanian, Israeli, and Palestinian decision-makers implement national policy strategies to manage their own demand for water, and to cooperate in the implementation of a comprehensive trans-boundary master plan for the river.

This master plan should determine levels of water flow, set water quality standards, identify ways to eliminate pollution, define ecological corridors, support environmental rehabilitation programs, and advance plans for the development of eco-tourism in the Jordan Valley.

Implementation of a master plan requires the establishment of a functioning trans-boundary commission to manage the valley’s water resources, resolve disputes, and strengthen the mechanisms of cooperation.
A NOTE ON QURANIC TRANSLATION
All English-language translations are taken from the Sahih International edition of the Holy Quran, with the exception of the quotation (21:30) on the cover of this document, which comes from the version by Yusuf Ali.

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The views expressed are those of EcoPeace / FoEME and do not necessarily represent the views of our expert team, contributors, project advisors or reviewers.

THIS PUBLICATION WAS WRITTEN AND PRODUCED BY

Author
Daniel Adamson, Exterior Consultant

FoEME Project Team
Mary Alexander, FoEME International Advisory Committee
Anwar Abu Hamour, Jordanian Government Relations Officer
Abdel Kareem Shreiteh, Palestinian Jordan River Rehabilitation Project Coordinator
Elizabeth Koch-Ya’ari, Israeli Jordan River Rehabilitation Project Coordinator
Yana Abu Talab, Jordanian Assistant Director for Projects and International Affairs
Rabbi Michael Schwartz, Resource Development Director

Photography
Photography: ©Jonathan Kalan / FoEME, ©Francesco Zizzola, ©Jos van Wunnik, ©Jesse Blutulis / FoEME, © Eddie Gerald / Pixmedia, ©Daniel Adamson / FoEME, ©Ofer Stein.

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Graphic Design
Rand al Jammal
EcoPeace/ Friends of the Earth Middle East (FoEME) is a unique organization at the forefront of the environmental peacemaking movement. As a tri-lateral organization that brings together Jordanian, Palestinian, and Israeli environmentalists, our primary objective is the promotion of cooperative efforts to protect our shared environmental heritage. In so doing, we seek to advance both sustainable regional development and the creation of necessary conditions for lasting peace in our region. FoEME has offices in Amman, Bethlehem, and Tel-Aviv.

For more information on FoEME or to download any of our publications please visit: www.foeme.org

Amman Office
PO Box 840252 - Amman, Jordan, 11181
Tel: +962 6 5866602/3
Fax: +962 6 5866604
Email: info@foeme.org

Bethlehem Office
PO Box 421 – Bethlehem, Palestine
Tel: +972 2 2747948
Fax: +972 2 2745968
Email: info@foeme.org

Tel Aviv Office
90 Begin Road – Tel Aviv, 67183
Israel
Tel: +972 3 5605383
Fax: +972 3 5604693
Email: info@foeme.org
You are welcome to contact FoEME about this campaign -

Email: info@foeme.org
Web: www.SaveTheJordan.com
Facebook: Save the Jordan
Twitter: @FoEMidEast
Hashtag: #SaveTheJordan

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Email: info@foeme.org
Web: www.SaveTheJordan.com
Facebook: Save the Jordan
Twitter: @FoEMidEast
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