

Conference Series | 4th Edition - 2024
Ideas for a Sustainable Mediterranean



MedDialogues +2030

CLOTHING A BETTER TOMORROW

Omar Itani

MOBILISING THE YOUTH FOR
ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

Manar Elkebir

CHAMPIONING MARINE CONSERVATION
IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

Zafer Kızılkaya

NURTURING PEACE AND
SUSTAINABILITY ACROSS BORDERS

EcoPeace Middle East

CREATING SOCIOECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT THROUGH
CULTURE AND HERITAGE

Leila Ben Gacem

MEDITERRANEAN CHANGEMAKERS

Pioneering a Sustainable Future

The **European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed)**, founded in 1989, is a think and do tank specialised in Euro-Mediterranean relations. It provides policy-oriented and evidence-based research underpinned by a genuine Euromed multidimensional and inclusive approach.

The aim of the IEMed, in accordance with the principles of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), is to stimulate reflection and action that contribute to mutual understanding, exchange and cooperation between the different Mediterranean countries, societies and cultures, and to promote the progressive construction of a space of peace and stability, shared prosperity and dialogue between cultures and civilisations in the Mediterranean.

The IEMed is a consortium comprising the Catalan Government, the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation, and the Barcelona City Council. It also incorporates civil society through its Board of Trustees and its Advisory Council.



The Club of Rome was created to address the multiple crises facing humanity and the planet. Drawing on the unique, collective know-how of its 100 members – notable scientists, economists, business leaders and former politicians – it seeks to define comprehensive solutions to the complex, interconnected challenges of our world.

As a network of thought leaders from a rich diversity of expertise, its members are committed to facilitating the difficult conversations and the bold actions required to confront the planetary emergency facing humanity and our common home. Its goal is to actively advocate for paradigm and systems shifts which will enable society to emerge from our current crises, by promoting a new way of being human, within a more resilient biosphere.

The efforts of its members are supported by the International Secretariat in Winterthur (Switzerland), a satellite office in Brussels (Belgium), and National Associations in more than 30 countries.



“la Caixa” Foundation is the main private foundation in Spain, the second in Europe and one of the most important in the world in terms of budget volume. “la Caixa” Foundation has as its mission to contribute to the advance of people and society, with particular emphasis on the most vulnerable groups, whether through its own programmes, strategic alliances or collaboration with third parties, by means of efficient and, if appropriate, innovative actions, whose results can be evaluated and are transferable to other entities. With a preferred area of action within Spain and Portugal, and with a global and coherent view of the international situation. All of this, guided by objectives of sustainable social transformation and creation of opportunities.

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INTRODUCTION

IDEAS FOR A SUSTAINABLE MEDITERRANEAN

The Med Dialogues +2030 is an annual conference series organised and promoted by the **European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed)**, the Barcelona Office of the **Club of Rome**, with the collaboration of **“la Caixa” Foundation**, which fosters debate on the sustainable development issues in the Mediterranean region. By giving voice to renowned experts and actors from both shores of the Mediterranean Sea and a variety of backgrounds, the Med Dialogues +2030 seek to raise greater awareness and understanding about the critical sustainability challenges faced by Mediterranean countries. Launched in 2021 as the region was entering the “Decade of Action”, the Med Dialogues +2030 adopt each year a different approach to the implementation and achievement of the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**, putting forward analyses and recommendations to contribute to building a more resilient, sustainable, prosperous, inclusive, and safer Mediterranean region by 2030.

2024 EDITION

MEDITERRANEAN CHANGEMAKERS: PIONEERING A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

In recent editions, Med Dialogues +2030 has extensively explored the Mediterranean region’s sustainability challenges, focusing on the current and future realities of climate change and human security. These discussions have outlined various avenues for action, emphasizing the need for sustainable transformation. As these challenges continue to intensify, it is imperative to accelerate this transformative process towards a more sustainable Mediterranean region.

In the face of the often-discouraging regional panorama, it appears more necessary than ever to promote and share positive narratives that can instil the belief in the possibility of change and progress in the Medi-

terranean. Many remarkable efforts and pioneering initiatives are taking place in our region and putting them in the spotlight invites us to look at the Mediterranean region from another perspective, highlighting the existence of solutions for a sustainable future.

The 2024 edition of the Med Dialogues +2030 invited individuals and organisations from the Euro-Mediterranean region, that are actively working to improve future prospects, to share their journey as changemakers and their groundbreaking initiatives making a tangible difference on the ground. From tackling environmental challenges to fostering social and economic resilience, these pioneers are advancing sustainable development in the region with innovative, scalable initiatives. **Omar Itani (Lebanon)** is redefining fashion’s impact through FabricAID, a fast-growing social enterprise that reduces textile waste while ensuring clothing accessibility for disadvantaged communities. **Manar Elkebir (Tunisia)** empowers youth to combat plastic pollution and climate change, harnessing education and activism to drive sustainable change. **Zafer Kızılkaya (Türkiye)** is a leading force in marine conservation, establishing community-led marine protected areas to successfully restore fragile marine ecosystems in the Eastern Mediterranean. **EcoPeace Middle East (Israel/Palestine/Jordan)** unites environmentalists across borders, proving that shared environmental challenges can be a catalyst for peace and cooperation. Meanwhile, **Leila Ben Gacem (Tunisia)** transforms neglected cultural heritage into a driver of socio-economic development, empowering local communities and revitalising historic sites. Spanning fields as diverse as circular economy, climate action, marine conservation, regional diplomacy, and cultural sustainability, these changemakers exemplify the power of local initiatives in shaping a more just, resilient, and sustainable Mediterranean.

Mediterranean people are changing our region for good, and it is time to recognise, champion and amplify their efforts.

A pile of different colored clothes in a box with a recycling sign. (Kosikova Natalia; Shutterstock)

CLOTHING A BETTER TOMORROW

OMAR ITANI

The Lebanese social entrepreneur Omar Itani was the guest of the first dialogue session of the 2024 edition of the Med Dialogues +2030, on 17 September 2024, at Palau Macaya. Omar Itani is the co-founder of FabricAID, a social enterprise aimed at providing affordable and appropriate clothing to disadvantaged communities by gathering, grading, cleaning, and redistributing used clothes. FabricAID is regarded as one of the fastest-growing social enterprises globally. Omar Itani has won numerous competitions and awards, including the Global Social Venture Competition (GSVC), and the United Nations' Young Champions of the Earth award.

He answered questions from Daniel Torres, Director of the Red Española de Ciudades Inter-culturales, and from the large audience in attendance.

Textile production and waste are estimated to be responsible for 10% of global carbon emissions, more than the aviation and shipping industries combined. As such, urgent action is needed worldwide to significantly reduce the clothing industry's impact on the environment. Additionally, \$500 billion in value is lost every year due to underutilised clothing and insufficient recycling efforts, with the growth of the so-called fast fashion industry also exacting a significant human cost.

The MENA region is no exception to the rest of the world. Significant waste of clothes is generated in the countries of the region, which together with international dumping of low-quality clothes, exacerbates the near absence of adequate disposal solutions. Inequalities remain high and many disadvantaged populations, including a high number of refugees, cannot afford standard-quality items.

Against this backdrop, a young Lebanese social entrepreneur has provided an innovative answer to these pressing issues while showing a strong determination to change habits, combat poverty and nurture a circular, environmentally and socially conscious textile industry in the region. In January 2018, Omar Itani co-founded FabricAID, a company that focuses on gathering, grading, cleaning, and redistributing used clothes to disadvantaged communities across Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt and which has now grown into one of the fastest-growing social enterprises globally.

FABRIC AID – THE INITIATIVE THAT REIMAGINES THE APPAREL INDUSTRY

In the 6 years since its inception, FabricAID has grown exponentially and has had an enormous social and en-





A CHALLENGING CONTEXT

The textile sector constitutes the third-largest industry worldwide in terms of water degradation and land use, impacting animals, local communities, and ecosystems. This is primarily due to the microplastics, and microfibers released from washing synthetics. Moreover, its ability to reduce pollution is limited, as only 1% of clothing is recycled, and the rise of fast fashion is accelerating consumption. This challenging context underscores the need to find new solutions and create initiatives to reduce its environmental impact.

Environmental impact in the countries it operates in. The enterprise currently collects more than 700,000 clothing items per year, owns more than 550 collection centres and has built partnerships with around 200 charities in both Lebanon and Jordan. It has also created more than 120 jobs in those two countries and is now expanding into Egypt where it has partnered with the Egyptian Clothing Bank.

At present, approximately 90% of donated clothes in Lebanon and 70% in Jordan end up in FabricAID's containers. They are consequently sorted, graded and those determined to be deserving of a second life go on to be cleaned and sold in one of the 24 stores the company operates in Lebanon and Jordan. Moreover, these stores are not located just anywhere, and this is where FabricAID's remarkable social impact lies. The company has made it its mission to help the most disadvantaged segments of the population in the MENA region and empower them to clothe themselves at an affordable price while offering a dignified shopping experience. The vast majority of FabricAid stores are located within the poorest neighbourhoods, slums, and refugee camps, selling clothing items for less than a dollar on average and benefitting more than 200,000 people annually.

EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES THROUGH DIGNITY AND AFFORDABILITY

For Omar Itani, poverty in Middle Eastern countries is much more aggressive and entrenched than in Europe: *"It's a huge problem. Currently, more than 77 million people cannot afford clothing. We cannot eradicate poverty, but with what we are doing at FabricAID, we can eradicate a symptom of poverty. At least affordable clothing for a poor person will no longer be an issue."*

While FabricAID provides affordable clothing to marginalised communities, Itani believes the organisation's greatest impact goes beyond just providing material goods. He recounted a moment in one of the stores where a father expressed gratitude for being able to shop without worrying about the cost. *"It's the dignity that comes with being able to choose what you want without financial fear,"* Itani reflects. This sense of empowerment—giving people autonomy and choice—remains at the heart of FabricAID's mission.

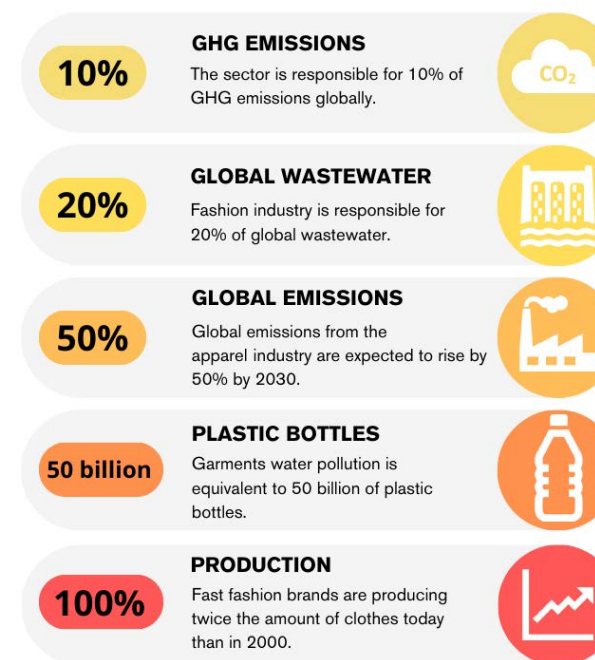
FabricAID places particular emphasis on cleanliness, appearance, equipment and advice from qualified salespeople in their stores. *"The most important aspect is to give people a dignified shopping experience. People have the chance to choose whatever they want at prices they can actually afford without feeling like somebody is doing charity for them,"* Omar tells us.

"The most important aspect is to give people a dignified shopping experience. People have the chance to choose whatever they want at prices they can actually afford without feeling like somebody is doing charity for them."

In addition to serving traditionally underprivileged areas, FabricAID also operates stores in more affluent neighbourhoods, geared towards selling clothing to a middle-class clientele. The goal here is primarily environmental, aiming to give a second life to vintage-style

clothing items in order to prevent them from being disposed of into nature or otherwise improperly destroyed. By highlighting this aspect, FabricAID seeks to address the heavy stigma surrounding the purchase of second-hand clothes in the MENA region by emphasizing their environmental impact.

THE NUMBERS BEHIND THE FASHION INDUSTRY ARE STAGGERING



Source: earth.org

INNOVATING THE FASHION INDUSTRY

Omar shared insights into FabricAID's efforts to minimize waste in the fashion industry. When asked how the company handles clothes that cannot be sold, Omar revealed FabricAID's innovative solutions. *"We upcycle the items into merchandise like tote bags and laptop cases. We have more than 60 products made from second-hand materials,"* he explains. He also detailed how unwanted clothes are shredded and repurposed as stuffing for various products, while other fabrics are transformed into materials resembling gypsum board, which are used in construction. In

total, the company estimates it has reduced carbon emissions by 650 tons by doing so.

"The overproduction and consumption of textiles are such a massive problem, and they require attention, capital, talent, and creative, imaginative approaches to solve them in different ways, in different geographies, adapting to the actual needs of every market."

Omar highlighted similar innovations happening globally. From a Parisian company turning fabrics into bricks to a Moroccan enterprise creating carpets, and a Japanese startup converting shredded fabrics back into fibre, the fashion industry is slowly addressing its environmental impact. Omar stressed the importance of making these solutions more widespread, particularly as ultra-fast fashion brands like Shein exacerbate the problem.

FABRICAID'S INCEPTION

The initial idea behind FabricAID was conceived by Omar when he was just 21 years old and one day began wondering where the clothes his family donated to his building's concierge ended up. When asked, the concierge replied that he didn't really benefit from them due to size discrepancies and, therefore, either looked for other potential beneficiaries or simply threw them away. Surprised, Omar realised that the charitable gesture his family had made toward the concierge was not achieving its intended objective. That is when he saw an opportunity and decided to act, driven by a strong sense of purpose: *"I come from a part of the world that has so many different problems. And people tend to complain about those problems and blame them on politicians or on other people, rather than actually taking action. And since a very young age, I was raised to believe that if you have a problem, you fix it. And it doesn't matter who is responsible for it, as long as you can fix something."*



"In the MENA region there are barely any organisations focused on clothing collection and redistribution. The vast majority of clothes that are collected by churches, mosques, and NGOs in the region are distributed in very ineffective ways."

Omar consequently organised a social media campaign to collect unused clothes from his friends and extended family and began storing them in his room, slowly taking over the family apartment. He would then go to disadvantaged areas, going door-to-door, noting each family's needs and matching them with the items he had received. Until one day, after a year, his mother, seeing the clothes encroaching on her personal space, gave him an ultimatum to find a place to store them.

For Omar, this was the turning point: *"I wanted to take the clothes and deliver them to an NGO that can basically do what I've been doing for a year. That is when I discovered that in the MENA region there are barely any organisations focused on clothing collection and redistribution. The vast majority of clothes that are collected by churches, mosques, and NGOs in the region are distributed in very ineffective ways."* And so FabricAid was born.

What started off as a personal initiative with the help of friends gradually grew into a full-fledged donor-backed company, with FabricAid now considered one of the fastest-growing social enterprises in the world. For Omar, it is a calling that has come to fruition, and he is now convinced that the success of his experience can and should be replicated. *"I felt that this experience and the success of social enterprises should be democratised and should be globalised."*

THE PATH TO SUCCESS

From its inception, FabricAID benefited from the generosity of seasoned professionals. For instance, the company's first organisational chart, financial model, fundraising strategy, and pitch deck were developed pro bono by a senior executive from a well-established start-up. This came about simply because Omar had the courage to ask. His approach, he learned, involved two key steps: reaching out to people and showing genuine gratitude. Over time, he observed that around 60% of the people he contacted responded positively, a success rate he credited as a driving force behind FabricAID's rapid growth.

Gratitude became a cornerstone of Omar's business philosophy. Not only did he express thanks to those

who helped him, but he also made it a point to publicly acknowledge their contributions. This approach served three purposes: it showed his genuine appreciation, motivated others to lend a helping hand, and increased the likelihood that previous contributors would collaborate with him again. *"Do you know this guy? He appreciates a favour. So, if I support him too, my effort and my time will be appreciated,"* Omar shared, describing how this positive feedback loop fuelled the company's expansion.



Social entrepreneurship combines business innovation with social impact, addressing challenges like poverty, unemployment, and sustainability. Unlike traditional businesses, it prioritises social and environmental goals.

In the Mediterranean region, it tackles economic disparities, environmental issues, and migration through both local and regional initiatives, as well as cross-border cooperation.

Social enterprises create jobs, promote inclusion, and drive sustainability; they foster regional resilience, making social entrepreneurship a key force for positive change in the Mediterranean's economic and social landscape.

"I felt that this experience and the success of social enterprises should be democratised and should be globalised."

The support Omar received, though rarely financial, proved invaluable. It often came in the form of introductions, advice, articles, or even nominations for awards. These intangible resources helped FabricAID gain access to the necessary capital and infrastructure it needed to grow.

As a university dropout, Omar was acutely aware of his educational shortcomings, yet he found ways to compensate for them. He recognised that he was not a strong reader, so instead of relying on traditional academic methods, he sought to learn through direct interactions. He sat down with successful businesspeople, bankers, and entrepreneurs, drawing lessons from their experiences. *"Where this education comes from, it doesn't matter. It can come from university, it can come from life, it can come from those one-on-one meetings, or it can come from reading books,"*

Omar said. This approach enabled him to bridge the gap between himself and more academically inclined entrepreneurs.

NAVIGATING THROUGH LEBANON'S STRUGGLES

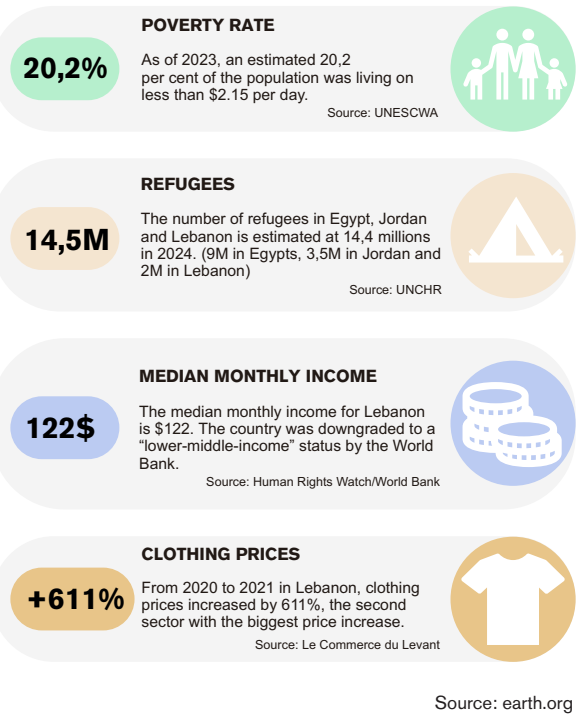
In recent years, Lebanon's socio-political landscape has been filled with economic hardship, political upheaval, and the aftermath of devastating events like the explosion at Beirut's port. Amid these challenges, local enterprises like FabricAID have persevered, driven by a commitment to social impact and sustainability. Omar Itani, reflected on the company's journey and the trials it faced, particularly in the challenging context of the Middle East.

Lebanon has faced a drastic reduction in international charity funding and government subsidies, forcing many volunteer-led initiatives to fold. Despite this, FabricAID continued to grow, relying on a business model

rooted in sustainable economics rather than external grants. “Our growth was very organic,” Itani noted, explaining that the company’s success was grounded in the economic viability of its mission rather than dependency on donations.

Fundraising posed significant challenges. The political instability, economic crisis, and currency devaluation in Lebanon made attracting capital difficult, as many investors shied away from the risks associated with the region. While FabricAID managed to raise nearly a million dollars, Itani stressed that this would have been far easier in a more stable market. Introducing a new mindset toward achieving social impact also proved challenging. Unlike European models of sustainable clothing, which FabricAID had initially tried to replicate, the unique cultural and economic context of Lebanon required a different approach. This involved significant trial and error, from determining the most cost-effective methods to collect and sort goods to creating a retail experience that could resonate with local consumers.

SOCIAL CHALLENGES IN THE MENA REGION



OVERCOMING THE BEIRUT BLAST: A TURNING POINT

Itani also shared his personal reflections on the Beirut explosion of 2020, an event that devastated the city and severely impacted the FabricAID team. Many, including Itani, were injured in the blast, and one team member even lost a finger. “It was extremely traumatic,” he said, recalling the catastrophe that killed 200 people and left 20,000 injured. The explosion destroyed much of the city, including some of FabricAID’s stores and Omar Itani’s own house.

Despite the destruction, Itani was struck by the resilience of Beirut’s citizens. The day after the blast, he saw thousands of volunteers clearing rubble with their hands, unwilling to give up on their city. “That was an incredibly empowering experience,” he said, emphasizing that it was not just about rebuilding structures, but about rebuilding hope and community. In response, FabricAID launched the “Fabric Relief” initiative, through which they helped renovate 50 homes, distributed 10,000 food parcels, and assisted in cleaning damaged streets. This moment underscored the spirit of solidarity that has been central to FabricAID’s work.

A VISION FOR EXPANSION AND FUTURE GROWTH

Looking ahead, Itani hopes to expand FabricAID’s presence beyond Lebanon and Jordan, targeting countries like Egypt, Pakistan, Iraq, and Syria—regions plagued by extreme poverty and inequality.

The goal, Itani explained, is not just to serve hundreds of thousands but millions of beneficiaries across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

He also plans to scale up FabricAID’s upcycling initiatives, turning unusable clothes into new merchandise. Partnering with international companies like Deloitte and PwC, FabricAID has already started producing corporate merchandise from second-hand clothing, and Itani hopes to see this part of the business grow, creating more employment opportunities in the process.

However, Itani is candid about his personal limitations as a leader. He described himself as an entrepreneur

driven by optimism and vision, but lacking the detailed planning required for managing the day-to-day operations of a rapidly scaling business. “I’m starting to discover that I’m not a great CEO,” he admitted. In the future, Itani envisions stepping back from the operational side of FabricAID and focusing on expanding partnerships and laying out long-term strategies, something that truly drives him.

Beyond FabricAID, Itani has broader ambitions. He plans to create an impact fund and studio to support more social enterprises in the region. “We need more social enterprises,” Itani stressed, highlighting the importance of community-driven solutions in a region where governments often fail to address critical societal issues. From infrastructure to healthcare, he sees immense potential for innovation and hopes to inspire more entrepreneurs to turn social problems into opportunities for economic impact.

Itani hopes to expand FabricAID’s presence beyond Lebanon and Jordan, targeting countries like Egypt, Pakistan, Iraq, and Syria—regions plagued by extreme poverty and inequality

Itani’s reflections are a testament to the resilience of both the Lebanese people and the spirit of social entrepreneurship. Despite facing enormous challenges, FabricAID has grown into a beacon of hope, empowering individuals and communities while paving the way for a more sustainable future.



“ TO GO FURTHER... ACTIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE AND CIRCULAR TEXTILES

Even though we are facing a challenging problem, we can develop strategies and initiatives to reduce its impact:

- Expanding trade in second-hand clothes, online clothing reuse, recycling apps.
- Improving the traceability of the deliveries, from the extraction of raw materials to the after sale.
- Developing innovations to increase the useful life of clothing and technologies enabling water-free dyeing.

Source: World Economic Forum

As he concluded his address, Omar emphasized the urgent need to tackle global challenges posed by the textile industry. “It’s such a massive problem, and it requires attention, capital, talent, and creative, imaginative approaches to solve it in different ways, in different geographies, adapting to the actual needs of every market,” he said. His parting message was clear: change begins in our own closets.

MOBILISING THE YOUTH FOR ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

MANAR ELKEBIR

Manar Elkebir, a Tunisian storyteller, National Geographic Young Explorer, and founder of EcoWave, a youth-led environmental organisation in Tunisia, was the guest of the second dialogue session of the Med Dialogues +2030, on 23 October 2024, at Palau Macaya. During the event, Manar Elkebir shared her experience as a passionate environmental advocate, discussing her journey to environmental leadership. Her work has earned her recognition as one of the leading young environmental voices in the region.

She answered questions from Daniel Torres, Director of the Spanish Network of Intercultural Cities.



Group of eco volunteers picking up plastic trash on the beach. (Davide Angelini, Shutterstock)

Plastic pollution in the Mediterranean Sea has become a critical environmental issue, posing significant threats to marine life, ecosystems, and coastal communities. Every year, millions of tons of plastic waste end up in the Mediterranean, making it one of the most polluted seas in the world. This pollution not only harms wildlife but also impacts human health.

The root of this problem lies not only in the sheer volume of plastic waste produced but also in deeply ingrained societal habits. Single-use plastics, poor waste management practices, and a lack of awareness about the consequences of plastic pollution have all contributed to the current crisis. To address this, it is essential to shift societal mentalities towards more sustainable behaviours, emphasizing the reduction, reuse, and recycling of plastics. Youth involvement is crucial in driving this change. Young people are not only the most affected by long-term environmental change and degradation but also possess the energy, creativity, and ability to influence their peers and communities.

Deeply committed to the fight against plastic pollution and climate change, Manar Elkebir, a storyteller, National Geographic Young Explorer, founded EcoWave, a youth-led environmental organisation in Tunisia. Manar's mission is to galvanize young people in her community to tackle global environmental issues and develop existing solutions to make sustainable change. Growing up in Gabès, along the Mediterranean coast, she has led successful campaigns to educate her local community about plastic pollution. She





has received recognition for her work as Global Leader of Solutions to Plastic Pollution from Algalita Research and Education, Ocean Hero 2019, and Conrad Innovator. Manar has leveraged this recognition to try to influence governmental leaders and business executives to make sustainable decisions across Tunisia and beyond.

FROM ECOLOGICAL AWAKENING TO ACTIVISM

Manar's personal journey of transformation began in 2019, inspired by her own firsthand experience of

“ PLASTIC POLLUTION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

Mediterranean species and ecosystems are threatened by microplastics and macroplastics. The Mediterranean Sea constitutes the sixth-largest accumulation zone of marine litter and contains 7% of all global microplastics, with a significant portion of them accumulating on the seafloor, turning the sea into a dangerous plastic trap. Spain and Turkey, followed by Italy and Egypt, are the main microplastic polluters. This is primarily due to the high number of tourists, which increases marine litter by 40% each summer.

Sources: IUCN, WWF

environmental degradation in Tunisia. Witnessing plastic pollution in her hometown of Gabès fuelled in her a sense of urgency to do something about the climate crises.

Consequently, she decided to join an environmental club at her school called “Sea Rangers”, where she began working on various environmental campaigns. The most successful of these was called “Say no to Plastic”, a grassroots endeavour that aimed to encourage local citizens to ditch plastic bags in favour of traditional bags made from palm tree leaves. At her club she also learned about the inefficient and toxic life-cycle of plastic products, from their production to their disposal in landfills where they are eventually incinerated, a brute process that ends up releasing copious amounts of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

With her passion for ecological justice ignited, she began delving into broader environmental issues and ended up traveling to the US-based Ocean Institute in Los Angeles. During that trip, she was able to deepen her understanding by meeting experts in climate change and marine conservation, with Captain Charles J. Moore being among them. He is the discoverer of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, a floating island of plastic in the Pacific Ocean three times the size of France and viewable from NASA satellites in space.

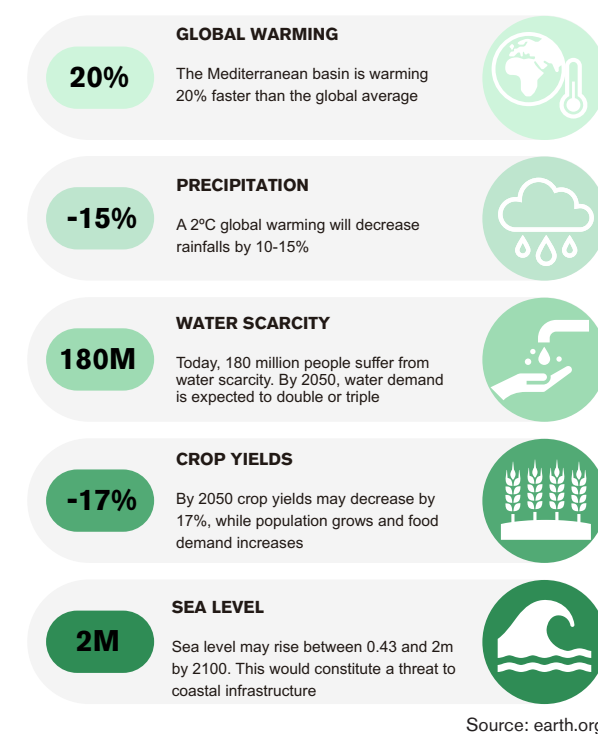
As she returned to Tunisia after that eye-opening experience, Manar realized that there was very little relative awareness about these important issues in her country. “*We need more awareness,*” she explained. “*In our school curriculum, we don't have enough lessons to teach us about sustainability, about what is happening around the world. So, it's really something that encouraged me to start my own initiative to mobilise and educate our young people.*”

“In our school curriculum, we don't have enough lessons to teach us about sustainability.”

Realising at that stage that she wanted to be an agent of change and given the difficulties of going at it alone, she decided to gather a team of like-minded students

in her “bubble” who, equipped with little more than their passion for the environment, began spreading awareness about the ecological challenges facing Tunisia. They then started collaborating with local decision-makers and circulating petitions to ban single-use plastics in her area. After graduating from high school, Manar saw the need to maintain and scale the positive impact her movement was having on her community and came up with the idea of duplicating it across other parts of the country, thereby creating the youth-led organisation EcoWave.

CLIMATE CHANGE RISKS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN



ECOWAVE – AN EXPANDING NETWORK OF CHANGE

EcoWave is the first environmental organisation of its kind in Tunisia. What began as a high school girl's concern about climate change and environmental degradation in her hometown has now grown into a youth-led ecological organisation that has mobilised countless young people across Tunisia and beyond. To date, EcoWave has expanded to 9 other cities in

the country by duplicating the model Manar pioneered at her own school, and further growth is still in the works. Using a model focused on empowering young leaders, the organisation trains students at an annual camp, equipping them with the tools and resources they need to start EcoWave chapters in their own communities. “*My philosophy was to build a network, like duplicate the same EcoWave in my high school in different schools around Tunisia, and that's what we've been doing so far*”, she revealed.

In addition to its national reach, EcoWave has also embraced global collaborations. The organisation co-hosts camps with international partners like Greenpeace, Roots and other organisations from the Global South to gather hundreds of participants in pursuit of climate justice and awareness, with last year's camp in Tanzania attracting over 450 participants from over 100 countries. These camps aim to provide capacity building resources and prepare the young attendees for advocacy on the world stage, including key events like the United Nations' COP conferences.

At the heart of EcoWave's mission, however, lies education. From energy transition workshops in collaboration with international agencies, such as the International Renewable Energy Agency, to innovative “activism” campaigns that integrate art with activism to promote educational messages through art installations, the organisation is committed to making environmental issues accessible and engaging to the youth. According to Manar, it is important to “*be open to different thematics so that the young people can be trained in a very holistic approach to find solutions*”.

CHALLENGES & TRIUMPHS OF A YOUNG CHANGEMAKER

As with all worthwhile endeavours, challenges were a par for the course for Manar and the EcoWave team. The most acute one was the one faced by many when trying to lift a project off the ground: funding. “*All we had was passion,*” Manar admitted. Starting from scratch, the team relied on volunteers and partnerships to sustain their efforts.

Manar also found that recruiting people committed to being part of the EcoWave team for more than a year



THE CHANGEMAKER: THE YOUNG CLIMATE ACTIVIST

Youth climate activism gained global recognition with the rise of Greta Thunberg and the Fridays for Future movement, which launched school strikes to protest against climate inaction in 2018. Inspired by this momentum, a new generation of engaged youth worldwide is demanding stronger and fairer climate action.

Driven by a deep sense of urgency and concern for their future, these young activists call for greater accountability from governments and denounce policymakers' failures. They highlight global inaction on climate issues and advocate for environmental justice while demanding a seat at the decision-making table.

In the Mediterranean, the movement is heterogeneous and fragmented. Networks like the Mediterranean Youth Climate Network (MYCN) seek to unite initiatives, despite the challenges facing civil society, particularly in the southern and eastern parts of the region. In this context, projects like EcoWave play a crucial role in amplifying young voices and providing concrete means for action.



was a major obstacle, at least initially. Instead of being discouraged by the problem however, she decided to turn that adversity into a virtue for the organisation. Manar now considers this aspect to be a net positive feature of EcoWave: *"We're always changing, we're always recruiting, which, if we see it in another perspective, has brought benefits for the team. We always have fresh ideas; we're always trying to learn and change our approach"*. This attitude reflects the broader pragmatic philosophy Manar adopted over the course of her journey: *"We see the challenges as an opportunity for us to grow and learn from them"*.

*"Any decision that you take today,
we (the youth) will be living their
consequences."*

Being a young team, visibility was also a challenging prospect facing EcoWave members due to the prominence of older decision-makers at the high-profile conferences and events they attend. To counteract any feelings of inadequacy or intimidation, Manar now makes sure all new members are trained to be confident and take their seat at the decision-making table with conviction. She encourages them to boldly address attendees and call them out on the decisions they reach: *"any decision that you take today, we (the youth) will be living their consequences"*.

Educating local communities about the urgency and importance of the climate crisis over their immediate economic concerns was another difficulty Manar had to face. In Tunisia, a country where many people struggle to meet basic needs, advocating for climate action was seen as an abstract secondary issue. Rather than react with disapproval and condescension however, Manar opted to approach such contention with sensitivity, linking climate impacts, such as agricultural disruption and water scarcity, to economic wellbeing and social stability. This compassionate style of communication has enabled her to reach people who would otherwise have been hesitant to learn about the climate crisis. Manar believes that the recipe is to *"always be open for conversation and give facts"* to be able to convince peers through dialogue.



A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Looking ahead, Manar envisions EcoWave becoming an even greater force for environmental advocacy and education by creating a global network of youth-led climate activists. *"I would like to see us going internationally, expanding even more, getting more young people in our movement. Hopefully, on the international level, we see more young people, more change-makers"*, she said. A key component of this vision is fostering a movement that is informed, innovative and inclusive. Regardless of one's background, Manar sees EcoWave becoming a platform for cultivating future entrepreneurs, artists, scientists and policymakers equipped with a deep understanding of sustainability and the driving forces behind the climate crisis. *"Even if you're working in different sectors, you're always going to find a way to join the movement. The space is really open for everyone"*, she quipped.

*"We push to make youth be able
to have a seat at the table of
decision-makers."*

She also hopes to strengthen partnerships with international organisations to provide both technical and financial support in order to coalesce their impact on

international decision-making processes, such as the UN's annual COP conferences. *"What I'm trying to do is to amplify our voices in high-level conferences where world leaders are present"*, she explained. Manar believes young leaders can and will drive impactful change at both local and global levels and is proud of the results EcoWave has achieved so far in this regard. *"It's something we are proud of, that we push to make youth be able to have a seat at the table of decision-makers"*, she proclaimed.

Ultimately, Manar's vision for EcoWave extends far beyond her tenure as its leader. Her long-term goal is to consolidate and expand a self-sustaining network of local EcoWave chapters capable of operating independently while remaining connected through shared values and goals. With her eyes set on the future, Manar also emphasizes the interconnectedness of the challenges across the Mediterranean Basin. *"What's happening in Tunisia, it eventually affects the whole Mediterranean—if there is a very bad waste management somewhere in Africa, it's eventually going to come to Europe as well"*, she stressed. With a mission grounded in hope in the face of despair, resilience in the face of vulnerability and the unyielding belief that young people hold the key to a sustainable world, EcoWave seems set to inspire a new generation to see what is possible when youthful passion converges with meaningful action.

CHAMPIONING MARINE CONSERVATION IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

Z A F E R K I Z I L K A Y A

Zafer Kızılkaya, a Turkish marine conservationist, participated in the third dialogue session of the Med Dialogues +2030 on 6 November 2024, at Palau Macaya. Zafer Kızılkaya has dedicated his career to marine conservation, founding the Mediterranean Conservation Society in 2012. His work has led to the creation and expansion of effective marine protected areas (MPAs) along Türkiye's Turquoise Coast, where ecosystems have seen a remarkable return to balance.

Zafer Kızılkaya engaged in a 90-minute conversation with Cori Calero, a journalist specialising in environmental issues, at TV3 – Televisió de Catalunya.

Zafer Kızılkaya's story is one of passion and tenacity. A story of recovery. But above all, it is a story of hope for the Mediterranean Sea at a time when it is facing a severe ecological crisis.

Although it occupies only 1% of the Earth's surface, this unique sea is home to more than 11% of marine species. Of these, 28% are endemic to Mare Nostrum and cannot be found anywhere else. Yet, this rich biodiversity is on the brink of collapse. As climate change drives its tropicalisation, the overexploitation of marine resources and pollution caused by human activities severely threaten its future. According to the WWF, 58% of fish stocks are overfished. The total fish population is now just one-third of what it was 50 years ago, while marine mammal populations have declined by 41%. Shark populations are in critical danger, as are monk seals, of which only 400 individuals remain. In addition, 34% of the Posidonia oceanica seagrass has been lost in the last half century.

The diagnosis is clear: the Mediterranean Sea has never been in such poor health. Faced with this reality,

it is imperative to implement robust protection measures to halt this degradation and reverse the trend. This is precisely what Zafer Kızılkaya has been working towards over the past three decades. His success has been so significant that he was honoured with the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize in 2023 for his efforts to protect the Mediterranean.

FROM MARINE PHOTOGRAPHER TO CONSERVATIONIST

Zafer Kızılkaya was not born on the shores of the Mediterranean, but the sea has fascinated him since his childhood, spent amidst the Anatolian plains of his native Türkiye. Visits to the Mediterranean instilled in him a passion that led him to promise himself he would one day become a marine conservationist. Despite studying engineering, he never lost sight of this ambition. As soon as he graduated, he set off for Indonesia, where he became a researcher and an underwater photographer for National Geographic. He spent over

Aerial view of Boncuuk Cove in Gökova Protected Area, Türkiye. (Photo by Zafer Kızılkaya ; Shutterstock)

14 LIFE
BELOW WATER





7 years there. “*This is the heart of marine biodiversity. It’s the real paradise. If you have a kind of love affair with the ocean, this is the only place you can be,*” he recalls.

It was also a love story—one he likes to describe as such—that ultimately brought him back to the Mediterranean for good. In 2006, during a visit to his family in Türkiye, Zafer received an urgent call: an orphaned monk seal, just a few weeks old, had been found. Realising it was a female and recognising the enormous responsibility she had for the species’ future, Zafer immediately decided to care for her. For several months, he nurtured the young seal, named Foça, until it was time to release her. He chose Gökova Bay, declared a Special Environmental Protected Area (SEPA) in 1988.

However, when Zafer first dove into its waters, he was stunned. Something was terribly wrong: no fish, no algae, nothing. “*It was like a nuclear war had happened underwater—nothing was left, no life,*” he remembers. The shock was immense for someone used to the vibrant underwater life of West Papua. To highlight the state of the rocky reefs in the Mediterranean,

Zafer enlisted the Spanish CSIC and his friend Enric Sala. The findings were grim: in 2008, Gökova Bay had only 4 grams of fish per square meter—a measure used to assess the health of marine zones—the lowest level in the Mediterranean. “*It couldn’t be worse than that. And the same year, the fisheries in the bay collapsed. Small-scale fishermen lost more than 60% of their income,*” Zafer recalls.

When Zafer first dove into Gökova Bay, a Special Environmental Protected Area, he was stunned. Something was terribly wrong: no fish, no algae, nothing. “*It was like a nuclear war had happened underwater—nothing was left, no life.*”

Deeply moved, Zafer Kizilkaya felt compelled to act. He dedicated himself to restoring life to this sea, once a sanctuary of biodiversity. The solution was straightforward: make Gökova a fully and highly protected marine area.



THE 30X30 INITIATIVE

In 2022 in Montreal, 190 countries present at the UN Biodiversity Conference (COP 15) adopted the Global Biodiversity Framework, which includes the “30x30” initiative launched in 2020 by the High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People. This initiative aims to designate 30% of the world’s lands and oceans as protected areas by 2030. This requires a significant increase in protected areas compared to current levels: 17% of land and 8% of oceans are protected areas (with varying levels of protection).

With the 30x30 initiative, the goal is to halt biodiversity loss, improve ecosystem services, help ecosystems better adapt to climate change, and enhance their role in carbon sequestration and storage. The EU aims to achieve the 30% protected area target by 2030, with 10% of them being strictly protected. However, it is still far from this goal, with only 3.37% of its land under strict protection (2023). As for the Mediterranean Sea, 8.33% of it is under official designation as a protected area (2020). Some voices criticize the 30% target as arbitrary, call for a more ambitious goal, or prefer to focus on the quality of protected areas instead.

Sources: IUCN, UNEP, MedPAN

Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) make a significant difference in restoring marine ecosystems and ensuring their sustainability. These are areas where human activities are restricted to safeguard biodiversity and maintain the health of marine ecosystems and the services they provide. Their effectiveness has been scientifically proven to such an extent that there is now a global con-

Zafer Kizilkaya: Championing Marine Conservation in the Eastern Mediterranean

sensus on the need to establish MPAs across 30% of the world’s marine zones by 2030 (compared to 8.3% at the end of 2024).

However, MPAs vary in protection levels, from high protection, where fishing is prohibited, to lower levels where fishing and recreational activities are regulated and limited. Many MPAs exist only on paper due to a lack of ambition, resources, scientific planning, management, and enforcement of activity restrictions. Unsurprisingly, their results often fall short of their objectives. This is a significant issue in the Mediterranean that Zafer Kizilkaya points out, and the Marine Conservation Institute describes as an “epidemic of paper parks.” Up to date only 0.04% of the Mediterranean Basin’s surface enjoys a genuinely high level of protection (76 MPAs out of 1,000).

MAKING GÖKOVA MPA A REALITY

For Zafer, reversing this trend of marine degradation was crucial. Armed with determination and the ambition to turn Gökova into a fully and genuinely protected marine area, he first focused on convincing the local fishing community to support his project to declare no-fishing zones in the Bay. The task was daunting: how to persuade 200 fishers, one by one, that respecting the fishing ban declared by the government in 6 zones of the MPA would be in their best interest?

Zafer realised he could count on unexpected allies: the fisherwomen from Gökova, who made up nearly half of the fishing workforce in the bay. “*Because women listen to you. Men never. When I gathered them and kept men out, when I explained why the ecosystem had collapsed, how we could restore it, and what needed to be done, they understood me and decided to support us.*”

How to persuade 200 fishers, one by one, to respect the fishing ban? Zafer realised he could count on unexpected allies: the fisherwomen, who made up nearly half of the fishing workforce in the bay. “*Because women listen to you. Men never.*”

Encouraged by some fishers' support, Zafer tackled the challenging issue of enforcement: who would ensure the fishing ban was respected, especially when many fishermen continued to operate in prohibited zones? The coast guard, at the time overwhelmed with rescuing refugees attempting to cross to Greek shores, was not an option.

So Zafer took the initiative to establish his own ranger force. While not authorised as a law enforcement force, the rangers focused on reporting illegal activities to the coast guard. And it worked! This success was due in part to Zafer's decision to recruit rangers from among the fishermen who knew the area well, particularly women. He actively sought to create gender balance within the ranger programme: *"I noticed that having women rangers has more advantages than having men. When women rangers confront illegal fishers, they are shocked and panic—it's unbelievable!"* The coast guard's support was also critical, especially after violent incidents targeted the park's rangers. Finally, Zafer's team harnessed the latest digital technologies to track, report and provide real-time statistics on incidents in the no-fishing zone, making the whole system more transparent and efficient. Three years after the rangers were introduced, the fishing bans were finally being respected overall.

"I noticed that having women rangers has more advantages than having men. When women rangers confront illegal fishers, they are shocked and panic—it's unbelievable!"

But gaining the support and collaboration of the local fishing community while enforcing no-fishing zones were only the first steps in the ecological restoration of the marine protected area. Another important obstacle stood in the way of Zafer and his team: ghost nets.

Marine ecosystems worldwide are heavily impacted by abandoned, lost or discarded fishing gear, colloquially known as "ghost nets." These abandoned lines, nets, and other materials usually made of long-lasting

plastics are a monumental threat to underwater habitats, trapping marine life, injuring mammals, breaking and suffocating reefs. Gökova Bay was no exception, with its seabed covered by millions of kilometres of these "silent killers".

In 2012, Zafer's newly founded NGO, the Mediterranean Conservation Society (MCS), initiated one of the Mediterranean's largest marine cleanup operations, a year-long endeavour that targeted ghost nets and other debris within Gökova Bay's protected area.

Together with the Gökova Yachting Club, the MCS removed over 15 tons of discarded fishing nets and an additional five tons of miscellaneous waste. The meticulous process involved surveying the seabed, pinpointing the location and size of debris, and coordinating its removal using specialised equipment.

In a twist of irony, the operation employed local fishers, including one previously caught engaging in illegal fishing, to assist in lifting the nets. These examples highlight once more the strength of Zafer's model and the Mediterranean Conservation Society: making the local community the central players in the management and implementation of the MPA.

MARINE PROTECTED AREAS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA



Source: MedPan (2020)

THE ECOLOGICAL REVIVAL OF GÖKOVA BAY

The results of these actions were nothing short of transformative. Within three years after the cleanup, reefs began to flourish. Coral and sponge communities, essential building blocks of marine ecosystems, recovered dramatically in areas once suffocated by ghost nets. The resurgence of these habitats paved the way for the return of marine species to the bay, including the endangered monk seal and the sandbar shark. The strict enforcement of no-fishing zones by the MPA's rangers enabled the establishment of sanctuaries for species reproduction, growth, and settlement. The effects in terms of biomass are spectacular: fish biomass increased from 4 grams per square meter in 2010 to over 100 grams per square meter in recent years.

The return of sharks to the MPA is particularly appreciated by Zafer. Indeed, the presence of sharks is commonly seen as a sign of a healthy marine ecosystem that has reached balance and abundance. Every morning, Zafer follows the same ritual: turning on the underwater observation webcams, which, powered by artificial intelligence, can detect and count the sharks that come to feed in the waters of Gökova, as well as the monk seals living in artificial caves specially created by Zafer and his teams. *"When I wake up, when I see more sharks there, when I see the monk seals there, when I see that stupid grouper looking at the camera every morning, that makes me so happy. This is my reward. And I think that this can be replicated easily elsewhere,"* he says with joy.

The rebirth of marine life due to the action of the MCS had a major positive impact, not only for the marine ecosystem of the bay, but also for the local fishing community. Although the fisheries regulation policies implemented by the MCS were initially viewed with disbelief and opposition by local fishermen, the results they brought could not go unnoticed. Year after year, fish became more abundant in the nets of the traditional fishermen of the bay and the economic consequences were soon felt. According to data collected by the Akyaka Fishery Cooperative, fishers have seen a 400% increase in income.

Another positive consequence of this return to abundance in the bay is that the conservation efforts under-

taken by Zafer and the MCS indirectly empowered fisherwomen. This allowed them to reduce the frequency of fishing trips while maintaining or increasing their income. Consequently, women could dedicate more time to other responsibilities or opportunities, enhancing their overall quality of life.

"When I wake up, when I see more sharks there, when I see the monk seals there, when I see that stupid grouper looking at the camera every morning, that makes me so happy. This is my reward."

The results in Gökova Bay speak for themselves and are a testament to the power of comprehensive conservation strategies and the resilience of nature when given the chance to recover. There is no doubt that Marine Protected Areas, when granted a high level of protection scrupulously enforced, are highly beneficial environmentally, economically and socially.

THE BATTLE FOR MARINE PROTECTED AREAS

So why has not this model of high protection become a common practice in the Mediterranean and globally? For Zafer, there is no mystery; the explanation boils down to two words: industrial lobbying. Promoters of industrial fishing oppose the creation of MPAs worldwide, arguing that they reduce catches and increase costs—claims that have been debunked by both scientific research and examples like Zafer's. As a result, they have launched an influence campaign to prevent the establishment of MPAs or to weaken restrictions. Against these well-organised lobbies, which have the ear of governments all the way up to the European Union, environmental and ocean protection movements struggle to compete.

Zafer recognises this imbalance but refuses to admit defeat. In his view, conservationists must adopt the same tactics as the industrial fishing lobby, maintaining a persistent physical presence in decision-making



OVERFISHING IN THE MEDITERRANEAN: A PRESSING CONCERN

Since the 1970s, technological advancements have intensified fishing efforts in the Mediterranean, allowing fleets to reach greater depths and distances. As a result, key species like European hake, red mullet, and anglerfish are being exploited at unsustainable levels—up to ten times the recommended limits.

While overfishing has declined by 31% since 2012, it remains a significant issue, with 58% of fish stocks still overexploited and total fish populations shrinking by more than a third over the past 50 years. The region's fishing industry, valued at €4.6 billion, sustains 180,000 people and operates around 80,000 vessels, yet fishing pressure remains twice the level considered sustainable. Each year, 1.5 million tonnes of fish are harvested, further straining marine ecosystems.

Additionally, harmful subsidies continue to fuel overfishing, with nearly 60% of global fishing subsidies contributing to marine resource depletion. Tackling this challenge requires collective efforts from Mediterranean nations and local fishers to ensure the long-term health of the sea and those who depend on it.

Sources: WWF, FAO, Plan Bleu

circles. He himself travels to Ankara several times a month to make his presence known to the government. *“No one is going to defend our wish just to protect the oceans for the next generations. We need stubborn people, really dedicated people, to chase the government,”* he says.

In this battle, he counts on a powerful ally: the tourism sector and its significant lobbying influence. With growing awareness of the need to preserve the Mediterranean to sustain their business model, major multinational tourism companies now support the Mediterranean Conservation Society's efforts to establish new MPAs in Türkiye. *“The government cannot ignore the tourism industry,”* Zafer observes.

Promoters of industrial fishing oppose the creation of MPAs worldwide, arguing that they reduce catches and increase costs —claims that have been debunked by both scientific research and examples like Zafer's.

Finally, as was the case in Gökova, convincing local fishing communities remains a challenge, as they often view no-fishing zones with scepticism. Dialogue can be difficult, even impossible at times, but Gökova's example spectacularly proves that fishing revenues increase dramatically on the margins of an MPA. This is why Zafer sees it as crucial to organise study visits where fishermen can engage with their counterparts in Gökova, learning firsthand about the benefits of conservation.

Armed with these lessons, Zafer and the MCS have been working to replicate his initiatives on other shores of the Turkish coastline. Thus, in 2019 the MCS brought its model of marine ranger system, tracking methods and rehabilitation activities to other Marine Protected Areas in the country: Datça – Bozburun Peninsula, Fethiye – Göcek, and Kaş – Kekova. Still deeply attached to his adopted country, Indonesia, he also plans to replicate his model there.



A CHANGING MEDITERRANEAN

One of the most pressing concerns Zafer has regarding the future of conservation and protection of endangered species in the Mediterranean is global warming. *“The bad news is all the climate models are showing the Mediterranean is warming up four times faster than the average of the world. So, accept it or not, it's going to be much warmer,”* he explains. Ever since he began monitoring water temperature in Gökova Bay in 2015 using temperature loggers at every 5 meters of depth, he noticed that the thermocline, the line where warm water abruptly changes to cold water, has been gradually shifting lower and lower: *“every year, cold water level in the Eastern Mediterranean goes almost five meters deeper and deeper”.*

“The Mediterranean is turning into a tropical sea. It is just a matter of time”

According to Zafer, the biggest impact of this oceanic warming on the Mediterranean is already being felt in the form of invasive species. *“The warming up of water temperatures is bringing a lot of invas-*

ive species, as the Suez Canal is just a big highway from the Red Sea, and today there are more than 1,000 species of tropical species that came from the Red Sea,” he says. *“The Mediterranean is turning into a tropical sea. It's just a matter of time”.* These changes can already be seen in a type of underwater seascape that exists only in the Mediterranean called coralligenous habitats, which are comprised of coralline algae frameworks and are home to numerous sponges, corals and other native invertebrates. Zafer reports how in recent years he has witnessed many such areas beginning to die off due to invasive species from the Red Sea such as yellow sponges and spiny oysters.

Additionally, he recounts an anecdote of a local fisherman who after a day's catch, noticed that out of 273 fish in his net, only one was a local Mediterranean species, a Red Scorpionfish. The other 272 were all invasive species from the Red Sea, such as Pufferfish, Soldierfish, Lionfish and others. *“Almost 90% of the catch of fishers are just invasive species, which are worthless. No one eats them, no one uses them. Some of them are toxic. Many small-scale fishers in the eastern part of Türkiye, they stop fishing because they can't catch anything, just invasive species,”* he shares.

“THE MEDITERRANEAN, A HOTSPOT FOR INVASIVE SPECIES

What are invasive species?

Invasive species are non-native organisms, such as animals, plants, or microorganisms, that are introduced into a new environment. These species often thrive due to the absence of natural predators, diseases, or competition, which allows them to proliferate and dominate a new ecosystem.

Why are invasive species harmful?

Invasive species can outcompete native species for resources, alter ecosystems, and cause significant ecological and economic damage. They are considered a major factor in global biodiversity loss and can negatively impact industries like fishing and tourism.

How many invasive species are there in the Mediterranean, and how were they introduced?

In the Mediterranean and Black Seas, over 1,000 non-indigenous species have been identified, with more than half establishing stable populations. These species are often introduced through human activity, primarily via shipping routes like the Suez Canal and the Strait of Gibraltar, where they travel on ship hulls or within ballast water. Climate change, particularly rising sea temperatures, has accelerated this process, leading to the "tropicalisation" of the sea.

How can we fight invasive species?

Commercial fishing can help manage invasive species when they can be used for food or other products, as seen with blue crabs in Tunisia. Fisheries-restricted areas, when strictly implemented, have proven to be more resilient to invasive species. Restoring saline barriers in the Suez Canal and implementing monitoring programmes at ports can also help prevent further spread and protect native ecosystems.



BATTLING INVASIVE SPECIES THROUGH CUISINE

The proliferation of invasive species throughout the Eastern Mediterranean is a genie that cannot be put back in the bottle. *“There is no way you can extradite any marine invasive species. They have a one-way ticket. Once they end up here, they are here forever. We have to learn to live with them”*, explains Zafer. In his view, the only way to deal with the issue is to be pragmatic and innovative to find a work around. To this end, he began paying local fishers for filling out a sheet after every excursion detailing the total amount of fish caught and the ratio of native to invasive species in their catch. After collecting this data for a year, Zafer had a truly ingenious idea that has become even more popular in Türkiye than the MPA’s he helped established.

“There is no way you can extradite any marine invasive species. They have a one-way ticket. Once they end up here, they are here forever. We have to learn to live with them.”

In conjunction with renowned Michelin chefs in across Türkiye, Zafer began a programme to incor-

porate some of the invasive species into their restaurants’ menus by creating new recipes, particularly Lionfish. Furthermore, the Mediterranean Conservation Society began organising an annual chef competition in Istanbul to determine the best “invasive recipes”. The idea is to foster public awareness about the issue and stimulate organic demand for these otherwise unwanted species. Local fishers would be then incentivised to catch them and thereby help alleviate the impact they were having on the marine ecosystem.

The project was a resounding success, with more than 20 tons of invasive species bought by the Mediterranean Conservation Society to local fishermen in the last four years. The NGO sells these catches to more than 39 partner restaurants across Türkiye that feature them on their menus. *“We are more fish-mongers nowadays than conservationists”* Zafer jokes, before explaining that the price of lionfish is now increasing every year. Consequently, the programme has opened a new source of revenue for local fishers who were previously struggling financially due to the depletion of native fish stocks and the proliferation of invasives. Ultimately, Zafer wanted to create a win-win model that would work for all stakeholders involved, warning that the problem of invasive species in the Mediterranean will negatively affect all countries in the region unless such solutions are implemented. *“Every year, the biomass of invasive species is increasing by 2%. According to our analysis, by 2030, 30% of the whole fish species in the Eastern Mediterranean will*

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be invasives. It is a matter of time until they come to Spain. And once you cut their stomach, there are so many juvenile fish, lobsters, shrimp, etc. Their impact is huge”, he cautions. But the good news is that, according to the Mediterranean Conservation Society, there is 15% less invasive species in fully protected marine areas than in non-protected ones. Once more, MPAs prove to be more resilient against new threats to the Mediterranean endogenic ecosystem. *“So, to keep the Mediterranean as Mediterranean, we need more protected areas”* Zafer concludes.

A CALL TO ACTION

Zafer’s approach provides a blueprint for addressing marine pollution, enhancing species’ recovery and fostering marine conservation on a global scale. His model of combining community engagement, effective protected area enforcement and advanced surveying techniques has proven that even severely degraded ecosystems can be revived. However, such success requires stubbornness, sustained funding, governmental cooperation, and public support to maintain momentum and expand impact. The result is worth it.

Zafer Kızılkaya’s relentless efforts in the Eastern Mediterranean serve as a powerful reminder of humanity’s responsibility to safeguard the oceans. His work challenges other regions to address similar issues with the same determination and ingenuity, offering a path to sustainable coexistence with our planet’s oceans.



Diving picture of Mediterranean monk seal, Gökova Bay, Türkiye (by Zafer Kızılkaya)

NURTURING PEACE AND SUSTAINABILITY ACROSS BORDERS

ECOPEACE MIDDLE EAST

Gidon Bromberg and Nada Majdalani, the directors of EcoPeace Middle East participated in the Med Dialogues +2030 on 20 November 2024, at Palau Macaya. EcoPeace Middle East is a unique environmental peacebuilding NGO, which brings together Jordanians, Palestinians and Israelis, to advance sustainable regional development and the creation of necessary conditions for lasting peace in the region. Gidon Bromberg, cofounder and Israel Director of the organisation, and Nada Majdalani, its Palestine Director, explained their three decades of remarkable work for the environment and peace amid one of the most conflicted contexts in the world.

During the 90-minute dialogue, Gidon and Nada answered the questions from Sònia Sánchez, an environmental journalist at Diari Ara.

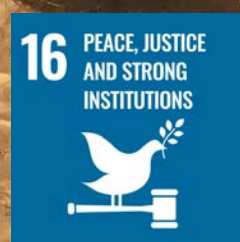
Scarred by long-standing, deadly geopolitical conflicts, the Middle East is also one of the most arid regions in the world, where the control of natural resources— increasingly affected by climate change— has become an additional source of conflict. Amid a backdrop of mistrust between neighbours, activists have taken the bold step of bringing together Palestinians, Israelis and Jordanians around the shared goal of protecting their common environmental heritage.

Founded in 1994, EcoPeace Middle East brings together Jordanian, Palestinian and Israeli environmentalists to advance both sustainable regional development and the creation of the necessary conditions for lasting peace in the region. The NGO takes a bottom-up approach to educate local constituents, as well as a top-down approach to advance vital policies. In three decades, the organisation has managed to break down borders and barriers, working to change mindsets and ways of thinking. In recognition

of their work, EcoPeace Middle East has been nominated for the 2024 Nobel Peace Prize.

A UNIQUE MODEL OF ENVIRONMENTAL COOPERATION BETWEEN JORDANIANS, PALESTINIANS AND ISRAELIS

The story of EcoPeace Middle East begins in 1994, a time when all hopes for peace in the Middle East seemed possible. Gideon Bromberg even describes an atmosphere of euphoria that is hard to imagine today, with the signing of the Oslo Accords (1993) and the peace treaty between Israel and Jordan (1994), following the Madrid Conference (1991). For him and his fellow environmentalists, the goal at the time was not only to achieve peace between peoples—something they mistakenly believed was granted—but also to foster harmony between humans





Conferència

A càrrec de:
Gidon Bromberg, cofundador i director israelià d'EcoPeace Middle East – ISRAEL & Nada.
Nada Majdalani, directora palestina d'EcoPeace Middle East – PALESTINA.

Moderat per:
Sònia Sánchez López, periodista m... oriental a Diari ARA.

THE CHANGEMAKERS: ENVIRONMENTAL PEACEBUILDERS

Environmental peacebuilding has emerged as a crucial field in regions where environmental challenges intersect with conflict. By addressing resource scarcity and promoting sustainable development, these efforts seek to reduce tensions and foster cooperation between conflicting parties.

Environmental peacebuilders understand that environmental issues—such as competition over water, land, and natural resources—can escalate existing conflicts or even spark new ones.

In the Middle East, the idea of environmental cooperation as a peacebuilding tool gained traction during the 1991 Madrid Conference, where countries like Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria recognised the need for shared solutions to water and

environmental challenges. Despite political tensions, there have been ongoing efforts to maintain cooperation on these issues, with countries like Israel and Jordan continuing their work on shared environmental and water concerns.

However, environmental peacebuilding has faced significant setbacks, particularly with the ongoing conflicts in Gaza and the wider region. Despite these challenges, a small network of civil society organisations like EcoPeace Middle East, Israel/Palestine: Creative Regional Initiatives (IPCRI), and the Arava Institute, continues to advocate for environmental cooperation, believing that even in times of conflict, shared environmental goals can pave the way for peace.

and nature. Indeed, progress in the Middle East Peace Process was encouraging potentially devastating development projects in the Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea (such as industrial sites and motorways), threatening fragile ecosystems. “Our conflict was over the land. But if we destroy the land, what are we fighting for?” became EcoPeace’s guiding principle.

However, as we know, the euphoria did not last long. Extremists on all sides soon derailed the process. This marked the first reinvention of EcoPeace, which transformed into an environmental peace-building organisation, convinced that the shared environmental concerns of Palestinians, Israelis and Jordanians could serve as a powerful catalyst for cooperation and a means of building trust between communities. “We were the first to write about working together on the environment as a way to create peace,” recalls Gidon Bromberg, long before the academic term environmental peacebuilding was even coined.

“Our conflict was over the land.
But if we destroy the land, what are
we fighting for?”

EcoPeace is not only a unique organisation in terms of its mission but also in its democratic and egalitarian structure, bringing together its Israeli, Jordanian, and Palestinian members in an effort to overcome both physical and mental borders. While the NGO has offices in each of the three countries, it operates as a single entity governed by a unified Board and three directors who take decisions by consensus. Its team of around sixty staff members maintains daily contact and works closely with counterparts across the three countries—an exceptional occurrence in the region.

WATER AT THE HEART OF COOPERATION

It is no surprise that water has been at the heart of EcoPeace Middle East’s actions since its inception. While the region is one of the most arid in the world, it has an extremely high population density, putting immense pressure on natural resources. “The region was never

meant to have so many people. Undoubtedly, there isn’t sufficient natural water to meet all the needs, certainly not in the lifestyles that we run,” says Gidon Bromberg.

Fair water distribution is undoubtedly one of the most contentious issues for peace between Israelis, Palestinians and Jordanians. The EcoPeace co-founder explains that the 1993 Oslo Accords deliberately left the water issue unresolved—alongside the questions of Jerusalem, borders, settlements, and refugees—due to the lack of a satisfactory solution. Since then, no political progress has been made on the fair distribution of the region’s scarce water resources—this, even though the climate crisis has become a harsh reality, further exacerbating water insecurity. EcoPeace has already observed a two-degree rise in temperature in the region compared to the 1950s, and all indications suggest that the worst is yet to come, with increasingly frequent droughts expected. Nothing could be more likely to inflame already simmering conflicts.

In this context, how can the people of the region be convinced to manage water resources sustainably and equitably? For EcoPeace, the answer lies in educating

WATER STRESS IN THE MENA REGION

MOST WATER-STRESSED REGION IN THE WORLD

14 of the 17 most water-stressed countries globally are from the MENA region.



WORLD’S LOWEST AVERAGE

The region has the lowest average of annual water availability per person: 480 cubic meters in 2023, less than 10% the global average.



CLIMATE VULNERABILITY

70% of MENA’s agricultural production is rain-fed, the region is extremely vulnerable to changes in temperature.



HIGHER DEMAND

By 2050, the total population in half of the MENA countries will have increased by more than 50% relative to their 2015 levels



Source: UNICEF, World Bank, Carnegie Endowment



FACING WATER SCARCITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The water crisis in the Middle East highlights stark contrasts between neighbouring countries, with Israel, Palestine, and Jordan facing unique but interconnected challenges. Israel has become a global leader in water management, utilising advanced technologies like desalination and wastewater reuse to meet its needs. Today, at least 70% of Israel's drinking water comes from desalination, and half of its agriculture is irrigated with treated wastewater. However, despite these innovations, Israel still faces challenges due to limited natural water sources and high demand from agriculture, industry, and households.

In contrast, Palestinian communities in the West Bank and Gaza are severely impacted by water shortages. In the West Bank, Palestinians face restrictions on accessing the Mountain Aquifer, which significantly limits their ability to meet growing demand. The situation in Gaza is even more dire, with the Coastal Aquifer overexploited and contaminated, leaving 96% of groundwater undrinkable. Additionally, water infrastructure is inadequate, and

Palestinians face water theft and destruction of infrastructure, exacerbating the crisis.

Jordan struggles with limited water resources, compounded by rapid population growth and the strain of hosting over 650,000 Syrian refugees. Despite efforts to conserve water and recycle wastewater, the country remains one of the most water-scarce in the world, with less than 100 cubic meters of water per person annually. Moreover, climate change exacerbates the situation with reduced rainfall and increased evaporation.

In addition to these challenges, the Jordan River, a shared water resource, has seen its flow drop dramatically over the past 50 years, and the Dead Sea has lost over a third of its surface area due to the depletion of its water sources. The decline of these water bodies highlights the critical need for regional cooperation and sustainable water management practices to address the ongoing crisis and ensure water security for all.

Sources: EcoPeace Middle East, The Water Project

younger generations—an endeavour the organisation has been committed to for three decades. Educational programmes are at the heart of EcoPeace's work and also yield the most immediate impact. The organisation focuses on raising awareness among young people about sustainable and cooperative water management, equipping them with the knowledge and resources to take action. This is particularly evident in the Good Water Neighbours programme, which provides young Jordanians, Palestinians, and Israelis with the tools to safeguard water security across borders.

OVERCOMING HOSTILITY AND POLITICAL HURDLES

At another level, EcoPeace Middle East seeks to influence policy through advocacy efforts, which are playing an increasingly prominent role within the organisation. EcoPeace has consistently advocated for water to no longer be held hostage by political decision-makers, especially given that technological advances in desalination, wastewater treatment, and water efficiency have positioned Israel as a global leader in water production. Today, according to EcoPeace, it is undeniable that Palestine and Jordan can secure a fair share of water resources without Israel losing out.

EcoPeace has consistently advocated for water to no longer be held hostage by political decision-makers in the region.

One key initiative aims to save the Dead Sea, whose water levels are dropping by more than a metre per year due to the diversion of freshwater, mineral extraction, and the effects of climate change. The programme seeks to have the basin recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage site to ensure its protection and to establish a rehabilitation plan led by the riparian states. However, Nada and Gidon acknowledge that advocacy is a much longer and often frustrating process, particularly in a context where political will is frequently lacking, as highlighted by Nada Majdalani: "We have

several consultation meetings and validated data. We have developed concept projects together with technical people from all three sides within the governments. And eventually, when things come to implementation, every single government comes with an excuse that this is not the right time, they have priorities and political hurdles. So, we are in a ping-pong position where we must go back and forth, and things never get done. And unfortunately, the climate crisis is not waiting for anyone."

As frustrating as advocacy efforts may be for EcoPeace members, they remain essential. This was starkly illustrated in the organisation's most recent advocacy campaign, launched in response to the humanitarian tragedy in Gaza following the massacres of 7 October 2023. According to EcoPeace figures, more than 95% of Gaza's water and sanitation infrastructure was destroyed by Israel. Worse still, on 8 October, the Israeli Ministry of Defence decided, as a form of collective punishment, to shut off the three water pipelines supplying the Palestinian enclave. EcoPeace reacted immediately, mobilising its Ramallah office to assess the humanitarian situation while its Tel Aviv office intensely lobbied Israeli authorities for the reopening of the pipelines. With support from Israeli health professionals and international partners, EcoPeace successfully convinced the Israeli government not only to gradually reopen the pipelines but also to supply fuel to power water pumps and small desalination plants (delivered by EcoPeace itself). The key argument—that a public health crisis in Gaza would inevitably affect Israel as well—proved decisive in EcoPeace's efforts. Gidon Bromberg considers it a major success for EcoPeace, especially given the prevailing context of hostility, as he recalls: "there's so much antagonism towards cooperation, towards believing that there is another side that we can work with. And I think the type of efforts that we lead is that we try to highlight that stopping water supply is not going to contribute to anything better."

"There's so much antagonism towards cooperation, towards believing that there is another side that we can work with."

ECOPEACE AMIDST THE DARKEST HOUR OF THE PALESTINIAN-ISRAELI CONFLICT

The massacres on 7 October 2023, and the disproportionate backlash that followed marked a turning point not only in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, but for the region as a whole. In this context, the extremely violent escalation of the conflict put to the test the peace building efforts of EcoPeace Middle East. For an NGO built upon the belief in cooperation between Palestinians, Israelis, and Jordanians, it took a lot of communication and mutual understanding to maintain its activities while war claimed the lives of their peoples: *"It was really difficult for us to move beyond the hard feelings, because each side has its own narratives, its own stories, its own terminologies... We have been talking daily at the leadership level, to discuss how can we heal together"*, Nada recalls.

"I don't think any leaders in our countries have the responsibility that we see in 60 employees in our offices in Palestine, Israel and Jordan".

Despite the difficulties, their determination was unwavering. They stood together and set out to address the situation in the most practical way possible, acknowledging the limitations of an NGO of 60 staff members facing the complex context of the horrific humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip. The EcoPeace team continued its labour driven by their humanitarian spirit and sense of responsibility. In the words of Nada: *"This is what wakes us up in the morning"*



and motivates us to go to the office and do something. Maybe it is a drop in the ocean of what needs to be done, but at least it fulfils us as

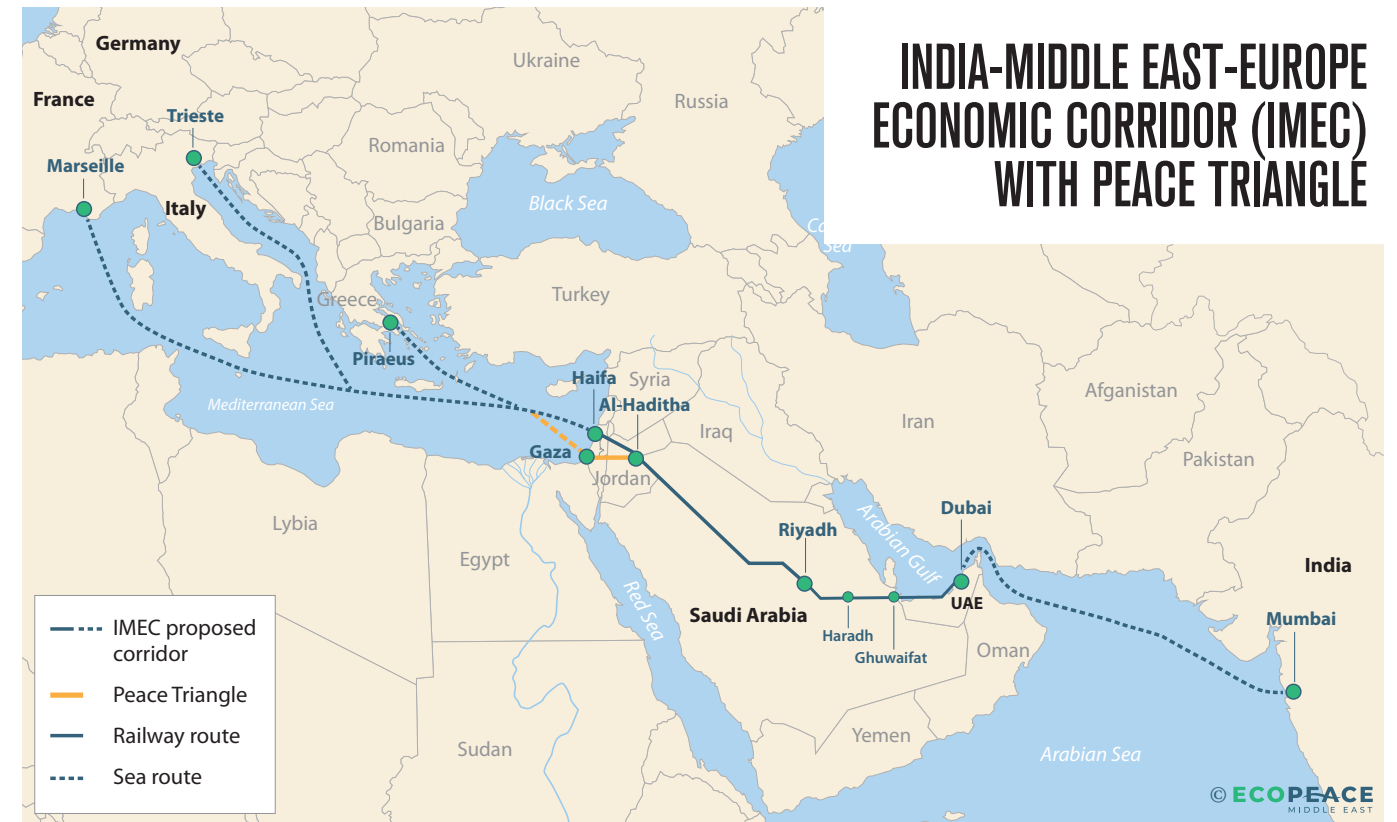
human beings. This is responsibility. I don't think any leaders in our countries have the responsibility that we see in 60 employees in our offices in Palestine, Israel and Jordan".

"We need a Palestinian state living in peace with Israel and in regional integration if we are to ever move forward."

From EcoPeace's perspective, there is an urgent need to recognise the suffering that both sides are enduring as a result of this long-lasting conflict. In this sense, the organisation's purposes are holistic, and their objectives indissociable. Recognising the legitimate Palestinian aspirations goes hand in hand with the Israeli concerns on their security and both walk side by side with the Jordanian concerns about their economic future. As Gidon expresses in his own words: *"We need a Palestinian state living in peace with Israel and in regional integration if we are to ever move forward."* In EcoPeace's field of work, environmental and climate issues can serve as a catalyst for progress on broader political, economic and security issues.

THE PEACE TRIANGLE – A PLAN FOR THE DAY AFTER

When asked about their views on how the day after would unfold, their answer reflected a comprehensive approach aligned with EcoPeace's aspirations for regional integration. Their proposal, which they have named the Peace Triangle, is based on fostering a lasting peace through economic interdependence and integration between Israel, Palestine and Jordan by means of 3 catalytic projects in the areas of water security, sustainable transport, and energy security.



The Peace Triangle is intrinsically linked to the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) a trade route envisioned to stimulate economic growth by improving connectivity and fostering economic ties between Asia, the Arabian Gulf, and Europe. This corridor is intended to complement current maritime and land transport networks, providing a direct link from India to Europe via the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Israel.

"We need to jump onto a broader coalition with an economic engine, but make sure that that economic engine includes, at its heart, peace building"

EcoPeace's original idea is to add Palestine to the economic corridor, ensuring that the initiative extends beyond the economic field to advance the

two-states solution and enables regional peace-building: *"We need to jump onto a broader coalition with an economic engine, but make sure that that economic engine includes, at its heart, peacebuilding"* Gidon expresses.

THE CATALYTIC PROJECTS OF THE PEACE TRIANGLE

The first major project under consideration is a regional water-energy exchange, leveraging Jordan's renewable energy capacity and Israel and Palestine's desalination potential. Initial steps were even taken before the Gaza War, including a MoU signed between Israel and Jordan. However, Palestine was left out of the equation. Yet EcoPeace believes that a large desalination plant in Gaza could be game changer, supplying water to Gaza, the West Bank, and Jordan via Israel's water carrier, in exchange for renewable electricity from Jordan. Gidon notes that investment from IMEC players like the UAE and

“ THE INDIA-MIDDLE EAST-EUROPE ECONOMIC CORRIDOR (IMEC)

What is the IMEC?

The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) is a major geoeconomic initiative announced at the 2023 G20 Summit in New Delhi. It aims to enhance global infrastructure connectivity, linking India to Europe via the Middle East through two main corridors: an eastern segment connecting India to the Gulf and a northern segment linking the Gulf to Europe through Jordan and Israel. The project aligns with broader global strategies for trade, energy, and digital connectivity.

Who is involved?

The IMEC is backed by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, India, the European Union (EU), France, Germany, Italy, and the United States. All these countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) during the G20 Summit.

What is its purpose?

The IMEC aims to strengthen supply chain resilience, enhance trade, and balance geopolitical influences, particularly countering China's presence in the Middle East. For India, the corridor reinforces its role as an industrial hub and deepens ties with Gulf countries. Additionally, the initiative has implications

for Arab-Israeli relations, energy security, and digital trade.

What is the current status?

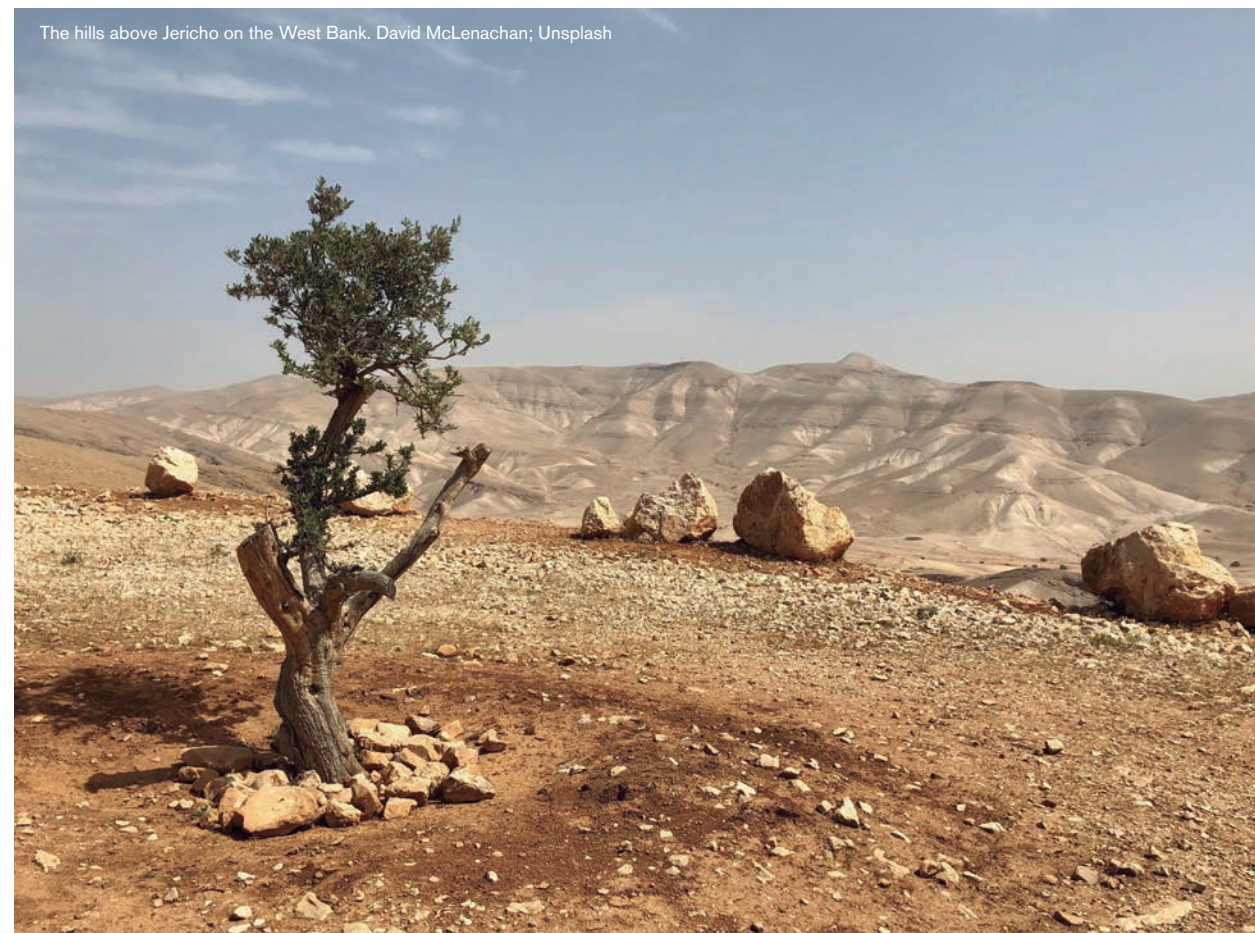
The project's implementation has been delayed due to escalating conflicts in the Middle East, particularly the war in Gaza. Given the political and economic challenges, participating countries currently lack strong incentives to advance the corridor.

IMEC and the Middle East Peace Process

IMEC is largely disconnected from the Middle East peace process. The initiative excludes broader Eastern Mediterranean cooperation and lacks a framework for conflict resolution. Analysts warn that without a just peace plan, IMEC could lead to higher costs, security risks, and reputational damage for its partners. The EU, in particular, risks undermining its strategic interests if the corridor is pursued without addressing regional instability. For many like EcoPeace Middle East, the IMEC could be used by the stakeholders as a diplomatic tool to promote sustainable peace in the region.

Source: Euromesco Policy Brief 136

The hills above Jericho on the West Bank. David McLenachan; Unsplash



Saudi Arabia could make Gaza's desalination plant a shared strategic asset, enhancing regional stability and security beyond Israeli-Palestinian cooperation.

The second catalytic project deals with a major renewable energy initiative that has the potential to transform the energy landscape of both the Middle East and Europe while advancing regional peace and security. Previous studies indicate that the southern regions of Saudi Arabia, southern Jordan and the Sinai Peninsula have the capacity to generate enough renewable energy to supply up to 30% of Eastern Europe's electricity needs, spanning from Greece to Germany.

Critical energy linkages through Haifa, Israel and Egypt are already being explored. However, for EcoPeace Middle East, a truly comprehensive and sustainable approach must also include Palestine. The envisioned project, involving billions of dollars in renewable energy infrastructure, would extend from the Saudi-Jordanian border, not only passing through Haifa but also integrating Gaza into the network.

Beyond energy production, such an initiative carries significant geopolitical implications. By tying Saudi interests to the success of a two-state solution, it reinforces the need for concrete steps toward its implementation—ensuring that Palestinian statehood is not merely a diplomatic aspiration but a practical reality essential for regional security and stability.

As the third pillar of the Peace Triangle, the Electrified Rail Network is a vital infrastructure project aimed at fostering economic integration and regional stability. Currently, a Sea Route links India to Gulf ports in Oman and the UAE, with freight transported by rail through Saudi Arabia to Jordan. While the existing plan envisions extending this railway connection to Haifa, transforming it into a key Gulf trade hub, EcoPeace argues that true regional integration must also include Palestine.

To achieve this, EcoPeace proposes a dual-railway system: one linking Jordan to Haifa and another extending to Gaza, positioning it as a major trade hub alongside Haifa rather than in competition with it. This approach

shifts the focus from repeated cycles of reconstruction to long-term economic development, making Gaza a crucial player in regional commerce and reinforcing the foundations for sustainable peace.

“Europe was able to move beyond the horrors of World War II. We are also in a stage of horrors in this current war. We need the trigger to move beyond that. We need to learn from Europe’s experience”.

The Peace Triangle proposal challenges the perception that the Middle East conflict is an intractable struggle spanning thousands of years. In reality, it has lasted just over a century – far shorter than the centuries of conflict that once plagued Europe –. As Gidon recalls, the European experience, particularly in the aftermath of World War II, offers valuable lessons on reconciliation and economic cooperation as a pathway to lasting peace. By applying these lessons, the peace triangle could serve as a catalyst for a new era of regional stability and prosperity. In Gidon’s words: *“Europe was able to move beyond the horrors of World War II. We are also in a stage of horrors in this current war. We need the trigger to move beyond that. We need to learn from Europe’s experience”.*

MOBILISING SUPPORT FOR THE PEACE TRIANGLE

EcoPeace believes in the chances of this day after plan materialising. At the very least, they continue to advocate for it among various political actors despite the prevailing pessimism. Some signs make them believe that their proposal is not so utopian but rather rooted in a broader realistic context. First, the current Israeli government remains committed to the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), indicating an economic interest that could be leveraged to foster broader regional cooperation. The Palestinian Authority, in collaboration with the World Bank, is actively working on a recovery and development plan for the post-war period.



People in Gaza City queue for drinking water amid severe shortages. Emad El Beyd/Unsplash

On EcoPeace’s side, key proposals were presented to the new European Commission in February 2025 – receiving positive feedback from senior officials, including those in the offices of Kaja Kallas and the new Directorate-General for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf (DG MENA) – despite the uncertainties surrounding the war and its aftermath. Following the Trump-Modi meeting in the White House, that relaunched IMEC, EcoPeace discussions in March 2025 in Ottawa, Washington DC, Rome and London have been met with constructive responses.

Finally, EcoPeace reached out to Emirati companies and investors in clean energy, who received the NGO’s plan with great interest. The same sentiment is echoed by Saudi investors, who see this as a way to realise their vision for the region’s future. *“We are not asking them to do a favour to include Gaza. We are saying that the IMEC will never succeed if Gaza is not included as an integral part, together with Jordan and Israel”*, stresses Gidon Bromberg.

Motivated by the pursuit of a better future for their people, Gidon, Nada, and their colleagues will continue their advocacy efforts for as long as the situation demands. All they ask for is the support of the international community: *“We must take our future into our own hands—no one will do it for us. But we need support. No one can do this alone. We must build alliances and ensure that we are not just hearing words.”*

However, while economic interests may drive engagement, peace, security, and dignity must remain at the core of any future agreements for Peace. Sustainable development cannot be

treated purely as a business transaction; rather, it must be built on the foundation of lasting stability and the fundamental rights of all people in the region. For Nada Majdalani, *“this is a strong mess-*



age that we promote as an organisation because we also bring up the voices of our communities and our people. We have hundreds, maybe thousands of alumni. We hear their voices, and we amplify them.”

“We must take our future into our own hands—no one will do it for us. But we need support. No one can do this alone. We must build alliances and ensure that we are not just hearing words.”

KEEPING FAITH AGAINST ALL ODDS

The determination of EcoPeace Middle East to strive for a sustainable and peaceful future remains unwavering, despite the increasingly polarised environment in which it operates. Nada and Gidon admit that the organisation and its members are vilified simply for working together—Jordanians, Palestinians, and Israelis side by side. They are often labelled as normalisers, traitors, and collaborators with the enemy. In the era of social media and extreme polarisation, their efforts to build connections between people have become even more challenging. But they refuse to be deterred. *“We are not doing anything wrong. It is our work on the ground and how we improve things for our people and our communities that speak for us,”* says Nada Majdalani. She adds, *“If crazy people like us stop dreaming, I think the world would be a darker place. We have to keep going, keep dreaming, and keep trying.”*

More than anything, it is the enthusiasm of the younger generations that fuels EcoPeace’s motivation to keep moving forward and building bridges between communities. Since October 7 and the outbreak of war in Gaza, the NGO’s educational programmes have seen overwhelming demand. Every course EcoPeace offers is fully booked, giving Gidon and his colleagues a renewed moral boost: *“It was amazing to see that so many people want a better future and understand that this better future will only come by working together.”* This is the essence of EcoPeace’s message: the younger generations will be the ones to make a difference—both for peace and for the climate crisis—if they can forge alliances across divides.

CREATING SOCIOECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT THROUGH CULTURE AND HERITAGE

LEILA BEN GACEM

Leila Ben Gacem, an award-winning Tunisian social entrepreneur, participated in the last session of the Med Dialogues +2030 on 4 December 2024, at Palau Macaya in Barcelona. Leila shared her story of engaging community members in the renovation of historic sites in Tunisia, especially the Medina of Tunis, and then helping to integrate these spaces into the economy by transforming informal artisanal initiatives into sustainable businesses.

The session was moderated by Montse Frisach Carmona, journalist and visual arts critic.

Entrance of house and ornamental blue door in the medina of Sidi Bou Said, Tunisia. (Narda Gongora, Shutterstock)

The historic heart of Tunis, its centuries-old Medina, stands as both a cultural treasure and a community at risk. Once home to master artisans and prominent families, the Medina (listed as a World Heritage site) has suffered from neglect, urban migration, and structural degradation, leaving many of its historic buildings abandoned or in decay. But where some see decline, Leila Ben Gacem sees an opportunity for revitalisation through social entrepreneurship.

A former biomedical engineer turned cultural advocate, Leila Ben Gacem has dedicated herself to preserving Tunisia's heritage while fostering economic and social growth. Through her social enterprise, Blue Fish, she has pioneered projects that not only restore historic structures and preserve cultural heritage but also create sustainable economic opportunities for local artisans and microbusinesses. Her approach blends cultural conservation with modern entrepreneurial strategies, proving that heritage and progress are not mutually exclusive.

Her passion for social entrepreneurship began with a simple realisation: the artisans of Tunisia possessed extraordinary skills but lacked the knowledge and tools to sustain their crafts in a modern economy. Many, particularly women, were selling their handmade goods at a loss, unaware of proper pricing, marketing, and export strategies. Through Blue Fish, Leila introduced business training, cooperative models, and market access, helping artisans build sustainable livelihoods while preserving traditional craftsmanship.

The story of Blue Fish began at Leila's home, where she helped artisans improve the exportability of their





products. She then specialised in exporting palm leaf baskets and olive wood items, as well as in carpet making. Over time, the company grew and shifted its focus to strategy, collaborating with a wide range of stakeholders. As Leila explained, “We are working with municipalities to help them integrate the cultural dynamic that young people want to create in their cities.” Additionally, they “assist artisans in forming cooperatives to improve their purchasing power, enabling them to buy raw materials at lower rates and share resources more effectively.”

Apart from exporting and working with artisans, the company also places significant emphasis on architecture. Its journey began with the restoration of a single house, reinvesting the profits to restore another, always working with and employing people from the local community.

One of her most notable initiatives was the transformation of a 17th-century house in the Medina into a boutique hotel, Dar Ben Gacem. More than just a hospitality project, it became a model for community-centred economic development. The success of this project catalysed further efforts to reclaim abandoned buildings, leading to the formation of an economic interest group, M'Dinti, which unites microbusinesses in the Medina to advocate for improved infrastructure, safety, and urban planning.

Through strategic partnerships and impact investments, she envisions a future where the Medina is not merely a relic of the past but a vibrant economic and cultural hub.

THE MEDINA OF TUNIS: A LEGACY UNDER STRAIN

Like many cities steeped in history, the rapid decline of traditional businesses and artisan workshops is an unsettling trend in the Medina of Tunis. Historic districts, once teeming with vibrant local cultures, are increasingly becoming little more than tourist playgrounds.

The artisans, whose skills have been passed down through generations, are finding it harder to survive. Mass-produced goods, cheaper and more accessible, flood the market, pushing their time-honoured crafts into the background. Each year, the number of artisans dwindles as they struggle to compete with the influx of imported goods that dominate the market.

Added to this is the phenomenon of urban decay in the Medina. The survey conducted by Leila and her team in 2019 revealed over 126 buildings had collapsed within the Medina. Many ruined houses are occupied by squatters, which exacerbates the sense

of insecurity and abandonment in certain areas of the Medina, despite their undeniable heritage value. However, the restoration of the Medina is not a priority for the authorities, who are facing numerous challenges.

According to Leila, the issue of multi-ownership adds another layer of complexity to potential restoration efforts. Some buildings are owned by multiple individuals, and it is often difficult to trace their ownership, making it almost impossible to sell the properties for restoration purposes in the Medina. For example, Leila had to fight to purchase the building she restored as a boutique hotel from its 34 different owners.

The survey conducted by Leila and her team in 2019 revealed over 126 buildings had collapsed within the Medina. Many ruined houses are occupied by squatters, which exacerbates the sense of insecurity and abandonment in certain areas.

Meanwhile, some investors are drawn to the Medina with the seemingly noble mission of restoring its historic buildings. But the pressure to make a profit often leads to changes that compromise their authenticity. Leila Ben Gacem, who has lived and worked in the Medina for years, offers a telling example: “A 17th-century home with 7 rooms, for instance, might be expanded to accommodate more guests, prioritising profits over preserving history,” she says.

This philosophy is not limited to buildings—it extends to the people who work there. Many tourist establishments prefer to hire employees with formal hospitality training, leaving the locals, with their deep-rooted connections to the area, overlooked.

The real challenge, however, lies in finding a way to breathe new life into these spaces without erasing the communities that have sustained them for centuries. How do you balance development with preservation? How do you ensure that the local culture thrives amidst the pressures of modernisation and mass tourism?

“ THE REHABILITATION OF MEDINAS: A PATHWAY TO THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF MEDITERRANEAN CITIES

Medinas are vibrant hubs of social, economic, and environmental sustainability. Their narrow streets and communal spaces foster close-knit communities, strengthening social bonds, mutual support, and collective responsibility, thus enhancing the overall quality of life.

Architecturally, the design of medinas inherently supports climate resilience.

Features such as narrow alleys and dense building arrangements provide natural cooling and shading, reducing the reliance on artificial cooling systems. The compact design of medinas promotes walking and reduces reliance on motorized transport, leading to lower carbon emissions.

As cultural landmarks, medinas safeguard heritage, traditional crafts, and local customs. They also serve as economic engines, providing spaces for artisans, traders, and small businesses, generating employment opportunities, sustaining livelihoods, and enriching urban life.

Sources: EIB, World Habitat

FOSTERING A COLLABORATIVE ECONOMY

For Leila, the answer is simple: the Medina's future lies in its people and in their ability to work together. Her approach, grounded in the collaborative economy, flips the script. Instead of seeing her boutique hotel, Dar Ben Gacem, as a foreign entity separate from the community, she views it as part of the Medina's organic ecosystem—an integral piece of a larger puzzle, where the hotel and its guests benefit from the collaboration with local artisans, small businesses, and the community as a whole.

It is a model built on shared value, where everyone contributes and everyone gains. “*So, this is the power of inclusive business, it becomes everybody's*”, she claims. And importantly, this approach proves that it is possible to be economically profitable without compromising authenticity or social cohesion.

Leila recalls the early days of her journey, when Dar Ben Gacem opened its doors as a boutique hotel in the Medina. Back then, guests stayed for just a night or two, and the surrounding streets lacked the energy that would make the area a true destination. But Leila had a vision. She did not want to just run a hotel; she wanted to be part of something much bigger, something that involved the people of the Medina and preserved its unique character.

She sees her hotel as a tool for socioeconomic change, embracing the local culture at its core. It became a gathering place for the community, a space where visitors could not only stay but also experience the Medina as the locals did. She works hand-in-hand with artisans, small business owners, and community members, weaving them into the fabric of tourism rather than sidelining them.

The hotel sourced its furniture, textiles, and décor from local artisans, integrating guests into the cultural fabric of the Medina. She has also created maps that guide visitors directly to the workshops of artisans, ensuring their skills remain a visible and valued part of the Medina's charm. In her view, it is not just about buying or selling products—it is about engaging with the very traditions that make the Medina special. This shift does not just help artisans

maintain their livelihoods, it safeguards the cultural identity of the entire area.

Leila's initiatives go beyond supporting artisans. In the face of rising commercialisation, she has also helped local restaurants hold their ground. Many small, family-run eateries risk being overshadowed by larger, more corporate ventures. To counter this, Leila introduced street food tours, offering a chance for both locals and tourists to discover authentic, homegrown culinary traditions.

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE RESIDENTS

Far from focusing solely on strengthening and developing the economic fabric of the Medina, Leila Ben Gacem's initiatives around her boutique hotel create opportunities for the most disadvantaged residents of the historic centre, particularly for young people and women, who are integral to her strategy for the area's socio-economic revitalisation.

One key initiative developed by Leila involves working with youth community members who have dropped out of school. Rather than being left without opportunities, they are trained as local tour guides, offering visitors an authentic and enriching experience. While these team members may not have formal hospitality education, they bring warmth, authenticity, and a deep connection to their community.

By sharing their stories and local insights, they provide guests with a meaningful experience while gaining confidence and purpose in return.

The same philosophy applies to the people involved at Dar Ben Gacem. Hiring individuals who have not completed formal education may mean they lack the polish

of a traditional concierge or receptionist. A local woman making beds may not follow conventional hotel standards, but she brings a unique, homely touch. These elements – embracing imperfection, valuing authenticity, and prioritising community engagement – are what make Leila's approach to hospitality truly distinctive.

Embracing imperfection, valuing authenticity, and prioritising community engagement are what make Leila's approach to hospitality truly distinctive.

By embracing the principles of the collaborative economy, Dar Ben Gacem has fostered a thriving network of local partnerships and a sense of community. Through mutual support, these collaborations have revitalised the Medina of Tunis, making it a more attractive destination. Guests are now staying longer at Dar Ben Gacem — three or four nights—immersing themselves in the true spirit of the place. But that's not all. The appeal of the establishment created by Leila Ben Gacem lies also in its social impact, which does not go unnoticed by travellers who deliberately choose their destinations based on ethical considerations. They are drawn not only by the authentic experience but also by the idea of contributing to the revitalisation of the Medina and the socio-economic and cultural empowerment of its inhabitants.

EMPOWERING THE COMMUNITY

Two powerful stories highlighted by Leila Ben Gacem stress the profound impact of opportunity and empowerment within the local community that her initiatives have generated.

“I always believed that to have a better life, I had to leave the Medina. Now I know we can make it better ourselves, right here.”

One such story is that of Muhammad Ali, a young man born and raised in the Medina. After leaving school, he

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM – A MODEL IN DEVELOPMENT

The UN World Tourism Organisation defines Sustainable Tourism as “Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities”.

For tourism to be sustainable it must:

- Preserve essential ecological processes and safeguard natural heritage and biodiversity.
- Respect and preserve the socio-cultural integrity of host communities by protecting both tangible and intangible cultural heritage (traditional values).
- Promote long-term economic sustainability, ensuring that tourism generates equitable socio-economic benefits.

These principles are particularly relevant to the Mediterranean region, where mass summer tourism exerts significant pressure on coastal ecosystems, water resources, and cultural sites. The seasonal influx of tourists often leads to environmental degradation, overconsumption of natural resources, and socio-economic disparities, with local communities facing the dual challenge of economic dependency on tourism and its adverse impacts on their quality of life. Implementing sustainable tourism strategies in the Mediterranean requires policies that mitigate overcrowding, promote responsible visitor behaviour, and encourage diversification beyond peak seasons to ensure a more balanced and resilient tourism sector.

Sources: World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)



spent years without direction until he joined the hotel. Initially shy and reserved, he gradually gained confidence and worked his way up to become a manager. His journey led him to a realisation he once thought impossible: *“I always believed that to have a better life, I had to leave the Medina. Now I know we can make it better ourselves, right here.”*

Another inspiring example is the hotel's cook, a widowed mother of three who lives nearby. At first, she hesitated to work, fearing judgment from her community. She would rush home after her shifts, reluctant to be seen. But over time, as she gained confidence, her perspective shifted. Now, she proudly works late into the evening, knowing she is providing for her family with dignity. The impact extends beyond her—her son is now training to become a chef, with the hotel sponsoring his education.

But Leila Ben Gacem's vision extends far beyond the walls of her hotel. She understands that true revital-

isation of the Medina requires a collective effort, one that engages the entire community in reclaiming their cultural heritage. This belief drives a series of initiatives she has spearheaded.

One such effort is the Journal de la Medina, a participatory journal created by and for the community. It sheds light on the often-overlooked parts of the old town, bringing together people who share a common goal: raising awareness of the Medina's unique cultural heritage and advocating for its preservation. The journal has managed to foster a sense of ownership among the Medina community over their history and identity.

Building on this momentum, Leila also helped launch MedinaPedia, an initiative of Carthaginam a youth-led NGO. MedinaPedia was a series of workshops that have mobilised volunteers every Sunday for two years to research, discuss and document the Medina's rich history, architecture and social fabric. Leila plays the

role of logistical coordinator for the group that catalogues all the historic buildings of the Medina (mosques, madrasas, courtyards, palaces, shrines), both existing and lost, resulting in the publication of over 300 articles on the Wikipedia platform, translated into 7 languages by a network of international volunteers.

These stories and initiatives, which highlight both the heritage and its inhabitants, reflect a broader transformation that Leila Ben Gacem and her team are working towards: a growing sense of pride, ownership, self-sufficiency, and renewed hope within the Medina community. *“I think the best way to tell a positive story of the community is for the community to come together and build it, to write their own story—their own positive story. This helps boost self-esteem because you are part of the community, you have a voice, you are heard, you have contributed to the story, and you've contributed to the positive ideas that are emerging. This is an important part of self-esteem,”* Leila sums up.

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REDEFINING PUBLIC SPACES AND SHIFTING MINDSETS

This drive to challenge mindsets is reflected in other initiatives by Leila, aimed at making the Medina a more inclusive place. For generations, the Medina of Tunis has been shaped by traditional gender roles, particularly in the use of public space. Historically, women's social lives revolved around the courtyards of their homes, while men dominated the streets, using them as hubs for learning, political discussions, and economic opportunities. For women, these spaces functioned solely as passageways—routes from one place to another rather than arenas for networking, education, or community engagement, Leila tells us.

Recognising this imbalance, Leila's initiative aims to reclaim and transform abandoned and collapsed buildings into safe, inclusive green spaces for women and girls, by supporting youth-led initiatives in the community. These reimagined areas are designed to be welcoming to all, encouraging women to occupy and engage with public spaces.

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Leading by example, community members—including Leila herself—frequently visit these spaces to demonstrate that women belong there too. Activities such as gardening, film screenings, and communal gatherings help normalise female participation in public life. A particularly symbolic moment occurred when a group of young men and women watched a live football match between England and Spain—an unprecedented scene in the Medina, where public sports viewership had long been a male-dominated activity. This led Leila to claim that her initiative is not just about creating physical spaces; it is also about shifting mindsets.

NAVIGATING COMPETITION AND BUREAUCRACY

Leila's initiatives to revitalise the Medina, however, are far from a smooth journey. Like many small tourism businesses, Leila's boutique hotel faces significant challenges in operating within a competitive and often uneven landscape. One of the primary hurdles is the growing presence of platforms such as Airbnb, which create fierce competition while operating under different regulatory conditions. Unlike traditional hospitality businesses, many short-term rentals do not pay taxes or contribute to social security, yet they offer accommodation at similar price points, making it difficult for small hotels to compete fairly.

Beyond the challenges posed by market competition, bureaucratic delays present yet another significant



Playing chess at Dar Ben Gacem
(Courtesy of Leila Ben Gacem)



FOCUS ON THE ECONOMIC INTEREST GROUP M'DINTI

Led by Leila Ben Gacem, the Economic Interest Group, M'dinti, was established in the medina of Tunis to bring together micro-entrepreneurs, artisans, restaurateurs, guesthouse owners, and booksellers. The initiative, launched in collaboration with the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and supported by EU funding in 2017, aims to revitalise the economic and social fabric of the historic district.

With over 500 artisan workshops facing challenges such as rising raw material costs, declining tourism, and market competition, M'dinti seeks to support local craftspeople and businesses through economic renewal and branding efforts. This includes leveraging digital communication tools to promote the medina's rich heritage and attract visitors and investors while maintaining its authenticity.

Guided tours are organised to showcase artisans, historical landmarks, mosques, and mausoleums, enhancing both tourism and community engagement. M'dinti offers also the opportunity to participate in workshops with local artisans. The initiative also emphasises inclusive development, ensuring that the medina's residents directly benefit from its economic transformation, with a particular focus on youth inclusion to involve them in the medina's collaborative economy.

<https://mdinti.org/>

Source: Lapresse.tn

hurdle. The process of securing the necessary permits and approvals for historic building preservation or community gardens is often cumbersome and drawn out. Many historic buildings in the Medina face multi-ownership disputes, making restoration efforts legally complex. The lack of government attention to urban heritage compounds these difficulties, necessitating grassroots solutions driven by local stakeholders. But for Leila, these obstacles only reinforce the need for continued efforts.

Her model, which is firmly anchored in the collective strength of the local community, offers a path forward that enables swifter progress and garners much-needed support. By working closely with the community through the economic interest group M'Dinti, Leila is able to tap into the power of unity, which becomes particularly crucial when advocating for improvements and driving the urban development agenda forward. As she explains, *"We are united as a legal entity, and we try to act as an economic lobby because each of us is a small business [...] if we come together and speak to the authorities, we are stronger."*

"We are united as a legal entity, and we try to act as an economic lobby because each one of us is a small business [...] if we come together and speak to the authorities, we are stronger".

Thanks to the power of the collective, she now hopes to bring about change regarding her new cause: reforming legislation to limit multiple ownerships, enabling the preservation of more buildings in the centre of Tunis and other medinas across the country. The task is daunting, given the religious culture surrounding inheritance, which is considered sacred. Inheritance is not taxed by the state, which discourages heirs from selling, while the state faces difficulties in expropriating property owners, some of whom it has lost track of.

To counter these obstacles and restore the Medina, Leila would like to mobilise public-private partnerships. However, she acknowledges that the process of establishing these partnerships is extremely lengthy and faces resistance from the public sector. *"Now in Tunisia, there is*

a lot of talk about anticorruption, and public administrations are afraid to partner with the private sector. There is a bit of resistance to partnering with the private sector for fear of corruption cases," she admits.

A NEW ERA FOR TUNISIA'S HERITAGE

Leila Ben Gacem is on a mission to change the way Tunisia values its heritage. Her cause is shared by many actors around the Mediterranean. It is only natural that she finds support from the CoPaM association (Co-Develop Heritage in the Mediterranean), born out of the 2019 Summit of the Two Shores in Marseille, and aimed at accelerating development projects in Mediterranean territories based on UNESCO World Heritage. She can rely on a network of skills and expertise in her endeavours to create a sustainable restoration model that can be replicated across the region.

Leila is never short of new ideas. Faced with the lack of qualified professionals in heritage restoration, her next plans consist of creating vocational schools within the Medina to train on site the next generation of heritage restorers: *"In Tunisia, despite the important number of buildings that need to be restored, we do not have a vocational training for restoration. The School of Architecture do not have a speciality in Heritage Architecture. So, inshallah, next year, we*

hope to start at restoration sites with master artisans. We will teach on site and then we hope to create new jobs in the restoration specialty," she explains.

But for Leila, this is about more than architecture. It is about reimagining urban resilience—where the past and future coexist, where history fuels opportunity rather than fading into irrelevance. She sees heritage not as a burden but as an asset.

Yet, for all the partnerships and policy conversations, the heart of Leila's work is still on the ground, in the Medina's narrow alleyways and sunlit courtyards. She knows real change starts at the grassroots level—with the artisans, small businesses, and local residents who shape the fabric of the city. She cannot imagine being anywhere else but where she is today. She did try politics—becoming mayor was one of her many dreams—but she confesses that social entrepreneurship is where she feels she can be of the most use: *"Once upon a time, I wanted to be mayor. I love city management. I believe city management is a form of social enterprise because you have to be profitable to help people. And that is what social enterprise is. I was elected city councillor, and I realised how difficult it is to push your ideas forward. You have to work with people who do not agree with you,"* she acknowledges. *"When I was elected, I wanted to do 200 things, but I only managed 3. And I'm happy with my 3, because it was so difficult to achieve even that. But now, with that experience, I feel freer to push for what I believe are positive urban transformations."*

For Leila, this is about more than architecture. It is about reimagining urban resilience—where the past and future coexist, where history fuels opportunity rather than fading into irrelevance.

Through her work, Leila is telling a different story about Tunisia's past and future. It is a story of preservation, yes—but more than that, it is a story of renewal, resilience, and the belief that history and progress can move forward, hand in hand.



Cooking workshop at Dar Ben Gacem (Courtesy of Leila Ben Gacem)

