

Solar Project Pairs Muslims And Jews

By JAMES GLANZ
and RAMI NAZZAL

AUJA, West Bank — Working near the Dead Sea, Samer Atiyat, a Palestinian farmworker, had climbed halfway up a six-meter date palm and was trimming stalks that held rich clusters of the fruit, still unripe.

"The water that's brought here comes from the panels," said Mr. Atiyat, 28, referring to a 38-meter bank of solar panels, whose power draws water from deep underground.

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

Ahmad Injoum, 54, whose family owns the property on which the solar array was built and who negotiated the deal for 45 farm families in the area, pointed out that Auja, a town of about 5,000 Palestinians, has settlements to its north, south



URIEL SINAI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Ahmad Injoum, whose family owns the property on which a solar array was built to pump water to Auja's farmers.

and west.

In the West Bank, cooperation with Israelis is usually denounced by Palestinian leaders as "normalization" of the occupation. The political complexities were apparent when Auja's mayor, Fakhri Injoum, approached the solar array during a recent visit by the initiative's Israeli and Palestinian partners.

"We are eager to develop Auja, but projects with the Israelis are not welcomed," said the mayor.

Farmers embraced the project on one condition: that the donors and engineers have no connection to the Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

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

Water is scarce in the Jordan Valley, and a longstanding com-

plaint among Palestinians is that it is unfairly distributed. A 2009 report by Amnesty International, for example, concluded that the area's 450,000 Israeli settlers consumed as much as or more water than the Palestinian population of 2.3 million.

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

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

Ashraf Yahiaa, an engineer with the contracting company that built the array, said it was 280 square meters and could produce 25,000 watts when the sun was at its brightest. (A typical light bulb uses 100 watts.)

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

The heads of three of the farm families, during a meeting with Mr. Injoum, said they, too, had no objections to Israelis or American Jews being part of the initiative. But one of the farmers, Ibrahim Injoum, 58, had a request. "We still need more muri," he said, using the slang term for the solar panels.

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