

Bustan Qaraaqa  
Permaculture Farm and  
Guesthouse  
Wadi Hanna Saad  
Beit Sahour  
Bethlehem  
West Bank  
Palestine



May 29<sup>th</sup> 2011

Dear friends,

As we have just passed our 3<sup>rd</sup> anniversary, and summer is coming to Palestine in an unusual (and extremely welcome) flurry of late spring showers, it seems an appropriate moment to update you on what has been going on at Bustan Qaraaqa over the last few months.

As the revolutionary spirit of the Arab Spring has been blowing winds of change through the Middle East, we have been having perhaps our most productive and successful season yet. While we will leave detailed political analysis of the fever gripping the Arab world to accomplished commentators, it is perhaps relevant to point out the environmental factors that are playing in to events as they unfold, as we feel that this clearly illustrates the urgency of taking action to protect the environment and increase access to life giving resources for vulnerable communities, as we have been doing.



*Left: Protesters in Tahrir Square, Cairo (from the Associated Press); Right: Students protesting in Tunis, Tunisia*

Rapid population growth rates, widespread poverty, declining rainfall and soaring food prices have undoubtedly played major roles in sparking political turmoil across the Middle East. For example, neither Egypt nor Tunisia are able to produce enough food to feed their burgeoning populations (mainly due to water shortages and degradation of farm lands as a result of heavy irrigation which salinizes the soil). Thus they rely a great deal on food imports (Egypt imports 40% of its wheat), and price hikes in the global food market impact profoundly upon the population, in particular the numerous and rapidly growing number of people living below the poverty line.

Due to the severe drought in Russia last summer, as well as speculation on food commodities on the global market, wheat prices soared in 2010 so that by August the Egyptian government (the largest importer of Russian wheat) was paying \$270 for a ton of wheat that had cost \$238 just a month before. In combination with a disastrous year for food production at home, leading to hikes in the price of vegetables (50%), meat and poultry (29%) and scarcity of rice, this led to a serious food crisis in Egypt (click [here](#) to read a detailed report). Other Middle Eastern countries are subject to the same complex of factors.

Of course, while most Middle Eastern countries are food poor, they are conversely energy rich. For example, Egypt is the 14<sup>th</sup> largest producer of natural gas in the world, whereas 95 % of Libyan export earnings are from the hydrocarbon industry (click [here](#) for detailed analysis). Even Syria, which is considered to be relatively hydrocarbon poor, derived 42 % of its export profits from oil in 2008 (click [here](#) for economic profile). However, under the post-colonial regimes that have been operating in these countries for the past half-century, little of this wealth has trickled down to the impoverished majorities.

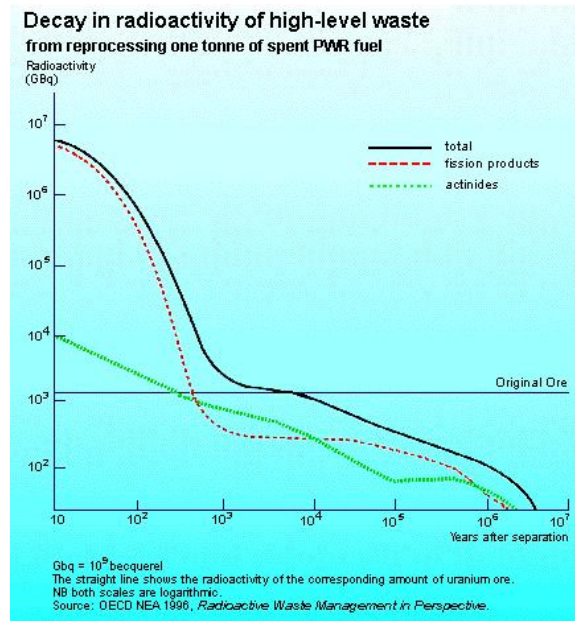
In Egypt, the supply of natural gas at knock-down prices to Israel formed a major part of the Camp David peace deal of 1979, and in 2005 the deal was extended to include a further 1.5 billion cubic metres per year supplied by Egypt's East Mediterranean Gas Company in the face of widespread public opposition. Former Egyptian Energy Minister Sameh Fahmi and five other senior energy officials are currently facing charges of 'harming Egyptian national interests' and 'squandering national wealth' for their part in brokering the deal, which apparently sold gas to Israel at way below market rates, incurring losses to the Egyptian economy of over \$714 million dollars, [according to the state prosecutor](#).

In addition, [armed groups have attacked the Egypt-Israel gas pipeline twice this year](#), effectively shutting down the supply and causing Israel, which recently made a [significant find of natural gas off its Mediterranean shore](#), to move to become 'energy independent' (currently 40% of Israel's gas is imported from Egypt).

It is an old and sad story. While the poor and vulnerable majorities struggle to make ends meet, corrupt governments make deals with corrupt businessmen to shore up their own wealth and power, while the wealth of their countries fuels the consumer machine of industrialised nations and simultaneously poisons the planet and drives climate change, causing further problems for the poor and vulnerable as crops fail and rains decline.

As the pieces on the chess-board move, Libya, Syria and Yemen are still in turmoil as their leaders cling to power in the face of popular uprisings, while the dust is settling in Tunisia and Egypt. Resource production and consumption continue to drive the region's politics, and the usual suspects continue to jockey for profit and power. While it is to be hoped that this year's popular uprisings will lead to a more equitable sharing of resources and improved conditions for the region's poor, the fundamental environmental problems that have precipitated this turmoil (declining rain, failing crops, degradation of land, surging population) will remain, and will have to be dealt with; while in 30 to 50 years the [hydrocarbon production of the Middle East will very probably have significantly declined](#), and the party will be over in any case.

At this point it is impossible to resist making a glancing reference to [recent events in Japan](#), which from where we were sitting clearly demonstrate the abject foolhardiness of significantly relying on nuclear power to fill the gap that will be left by fossil fuels. Given the amount of time that radioactive wastes from nuclear power plants will have to be contained for ([according to the World Nuclear Association themselves](#) you are looking at 10,000 years before high level waste approaches the radioactivity levels of the original ore, which is already dangerous to human health), it is criminally dangerous to fill up the planet with little bubbles of radioactive joy to enliven the existence of people as distant from us as we are from the first agriculturalists, and the hunter gatherer societies that spawned them 10,000 years ago in the Fertile Crescent.



Meanwhile, back in Palestine, the nasty business of occupation and colonisation ground on through the incongruous beauty of the spring season. As a panoply of wild flowers thronged the countryside and an array of migrating birds flocked overhead making their way north for the summer, gaggles of Israeli settlers were also to be seen seizing hill-tops, planting trees on land that doesn't belong to them, uprooting Palestinian trees and destroying crops, throwing stones at farmers, burning cars, releasing sewage and industrial chemicals onto Palestinian farmland and into towns..... and doing whatever settlers do (for a report of incidents in March 2011 alone, click [here](#)). In the meantime, the Occupation Authorities were busy walling in the residents of [Al Wallaja](#), [Beit Ummar](#) and a number of other Palestinian villages, [expropriating land](#), [demolishing houses](#), [smashing water cisterns](#), arresting and shooting people, [derailing development projects](#).....and bombing Gaza. Occupation as usual in fact.



*Left: Bustan Qaraaqa team walking in the countryside near Teqoa on a camping outing; Right: Israeli bulldozers demolish Palestinian home near Bethlehem (thanks to MaanImages for the use of this picture)*

In the midst of this, Bustan Qaraaqa staff and volunteers have been putting in a monster of a tree-planting season – sadly now drawing to a close as the heat intensifies. As soon as we had recovered from the excesses of the New Year celebrations, we were to be found on the land twice a week, planting trees from the Bustan Qaraaqa nursery, the Palestinian Ministry of Agriculture and the YMCA Olive Tree Campaign with various Palestinian farmers. This year we managed to work in 7 different villages in the Bethlehem area (Nahhalin, Um Salamoneh, Teqoa, Al Wallaja, Beit Sahour, Artas and Al Khadr), putting in 12 days of tree planting and ransacking our tree nursery to a sorry and depleted state – although now we have plenty of space for new stock :)



*Left: The team at work in Artas village; Right: loading trees at the YMCA. Thanks to Kais for these pictures!*

Thankfully we were only in one direct confrontation with Israeli occupation forces during all of this activity, when we went to support Beit Jala residents in reclaiming land adjacent to Elazar settlement that the settlers had planted with olive trees, despite the fact that it is registered in the names of Beit Jala residents and no official confiscation orders had been issued. This was one of the starkest demonstrations of the power dynamics at play in the West Bank, as the settler-planted trees had irrigation lines running to them out of the settlement and Israeli authorities made no attempt to interfere with the trees or the infrastructure, whilst when Beit Jala residents attempted to access their lands (where they have no access to water and on which the settlers were also building some sort of cement structure), we were all (including the mayor of Bethlehem who was also present) pelted with tear gas and sound grenades by the Israeli military and forced to flee the scene, while the son of the owner of the land was arrested.



*Left: soldiers confront land-owners by Elazar Settlement; Right: Get-away by donkey as the gas comes down. Thanks to Anaïs for these pictures!*

Nevertheless, it was a highly successful season, so many many thanks to all the volunteers who participated in tree planting events with us this year – especially to Jad, Kelleigh, Nathan, Anais, Liam and Kais who were big repeat offenders. Most of all though, we have to thank the inimitable Awad Abu Sway for coordinating our events so fantastically and finding us so many farmers to work with; and of course, thanks to all of our hosts, who worked so hard alongside us and fed us such brilliant food (it's not all tears and oppression :).



*Feasting after a hard day's work near Nahhalin*

Throughout the season, we also managed to keep up fairly regular visits to everyone's favourite cave-dweller: Abed, up in Al Wallaja. This season we fixed the porch roof, allowing rainwater harvesting; renovated the compost toilet using sheets of ironed-together plastic bags; planted a bunch of trees; did a bunch of weeding and wrapped up with a definite highlight of the season: the [Great Donkey Odyssey of 2011](#), bringing a string of donkeys 26 km from Abu Dis to Al Wallaja (a gift for Abed from Mohammed Zahalka to help him haul water and wood). As the wall goes up around Al Wallaja, and [plans to expand Gilo settlement are being debated by the Jerusalem Committee](#), we are increasingly worried about Abed's future on his land. We will keep up our visits, and keep everyone informed as events progress (so watch the website for news if you want to stay in the loop).



*Left: Abed's improved compost toilet; Right: Climbing out of the Wadi Nar en route to Al Wallaja with a gift of donkeys.....(Thanks to Anais for these pictures!)*

In addition to our activities in Bethlehem area this season, we were delighted to partner with [ActionAid Australia](#) in implementing a tree planting pilot project in the tiny village of Halawi in the South Hebron Hills. We planted approximately 100 trees with the residents of this village, who live a long way from any centralised infrastructure and survive almost exclusively from the land. We backed up our tree planting activities with a series of workshops on rainwater harvesting, soil management, building sustainable ecosystems and propagation of trees.

It was very instructive and exciting for us to work in a different eco-zone (Eastern Slopes as opposed to the Mountain Ridge), so that we could deploy our array of desert species; and also to work with a pastoralist community whose lifestyle differs significantly from the fellahin of the Bethlehem area. We are currently in the process of wrapping up this project and producing a report, and it is possible that the project will be extended/ scaled up next year if our partners at ActionAid are happy with our work. Again we have to thank our volunteers, project beneficiaries and most especially our funders at ActionAid Australia for their support in implementing this exciting work.



*Some nice snaps from Halawi village, South Hebron Hills. Thanks to Max for these pictures!*

While trees were being α-planted, the Bustan Qaraaqa Fish People were also forging ahead in pioneering a new form of food production for Palestine: Aquaponics! Aquaponics is an amalgamation of hydroponics (growing plants in a soil-less system fed by nutrient solution) and aquaculture (growing fish in man-made pools). In Aquaponic systems, water cycles constantly between the fish tank (where it is fertilised by the fish) and plant grow-beds (where it is cleaned by the plants). Having successfully built a demonstration system at Bustan Qaraaqa (the first of its kind in the West Bank), Phil and Lorena were awarded project funding from [Operation Blessing International](#) to build another system at the [Al Basma Centre](#) (an organisation providing support to young adults with mental disabilities), to implement a series of workshops with Palestinian participants, and to produce a practitioners manual on aquaponics. This project is still in full swing and is going very well (as usual we couldn't have done it without all the volunteer assistance – so thank you!).



*Left: Lorena demonstrates Bustan Qaraaqa Aquaponics System to a visiting group; Top Right: The Al Basma Aquaponics set-up; Bottom Right: Aquaponics workshop at the Al Basma Centre. Thanks to Phil and Lorena for these shots!*

As all of this community work was going on, of course we were also working on the Bustan Qaraaqa site: educating volunteers and visiting groups and individuals about the potential of permaculture to solve environmental and political problems. We managed to squeeze in a couple of tree planting workshops with children from East Jerusalem schools in cooperation with [Juzoor](#), as well as hosting a student group from Al Quds University. Excitingly, work on the new eco-building is also well underway. Foundations have been laid, a framework of scavenged steel welded in place, initial work on the bottle-walls started and a prototype for making a rainwater harvesting roof out of recycled plastic bottles designed (thanks to Anais, Nasser, Lauren, Loay, Martin, the fearless welder Max – and everyone else who helped - for all of their hard work on this).



*Left: Digging out the greenhouse area; Middle: Checking out the scaffold; Right: Suicide welding!*

Work on this project will be ongoing throughout the summer and when it is finished we hope that it will not only serve as an excellent demonstration of how to build using free, recycled materials; but also of how to integrate functions in a building so that water is recycled from showers, to laundry, to plant beds; ovens serve not only to cook but also to heat water for showers; the building is largely passively heated by the sun; and vents can be opened to cool it passively with the wind. Of course, since it will be a greenhouse as well as a bathroom, laundry and kitchen, it will also allow us to cultivate some fun tropical plants that we could not otherwise grow. We will be continuously blogging about this project as it develops, so if you want to stay informed, check in every now and again on our facebook page (yes, we have a profile now!) and see the vision become reality.....



*Left: A current picture of Bustan Qaraaqa; Right: Black black sunflowers in my garden!*

As we lurch on into the summer, we are as ever, bracing for water shortage. Despite the late spring rainfall, total precipitation this winter stood at less than 80% of the inter-annual average across the West Bank, with worse shortages being experienced in more arid areas (e.g. the South Hebron Hills) where only 50% of the inter-annual average fell. Nevertheless, we are looking forward to a busy summer as we toil on the new building, continue our support to Abed Rabbo, work with farmers in Artas community to develop sustainable soil management strategies, and host workshops and summer camps at Bustan Qaraaqa. Come and join us if you can!

That's all from us for now – but finally we have to thank LUSH Cosmetics and the British Shalom Salaam Trust for renewing their support for the Bustan Qaraaqa project, and the Ryklow Trust for their generous grant. Somewhat novelly, we are not staring imminent bankruptcy in the face – although if anyone still wants to give us gifts of money and Things we can definitely find wonderful ways of using them! And thanks again to all of our fabulous volunteers - but most especially of all to Anais who has been with us for the whole season since January and has been a tower of strength and enthusiasm!

Wishing you all the very best wheresoever you may be,

Merry may we meet,

With love from

Alice, Lorena, Lyra, Phil and Tom  
x

the Bustan Qaraaqa team



*Anais: Volunteer of the Season!*

## Support Bustan Qaraaqa:

As a small and recently founded organisation, we rely heavily on grassroots fundraising for much of our income. Small donations can go a long way in our low budget project. Things we are currently saving up for include:

- A new water tank to improve the farm's water security (£250)
- A water refill for our cistern (£80)
- Transport to Abed's farm every week (with water!) (£20 per week) egfmputers and cameras since most of ours have been stolen at this point! :)

Our PayPal account ([info@bustanqaraaqa.org](mailto:info@bustanqaraaqa.org)) is now functional, so if you would like to support us financially, you can now do it online; or send a cheque to The Old School, Lydfords Lane, Gillingham, Dorset, SP8 4NJ.

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Have you considered becoming a regular contributor to Bustan Qaraaqa? Our monthly running costs amount to approximately £2200, broken up as follows:

Expense	Cost (NIS)	Cost (£)
Site rent	3000	565
Utility bills	450	85
Water	600	115
Transport	1600	300
Staff stipends (5 people)	3000	565
Materials	3000	565
<b>Total</b>	<b>11650</b>	<b>2195</b>

We can raise £500-£750 in the guesthouse, so if 100-200 people gave us £5-10 per month, all the project expenses would be covered and we would not have to worry about writing grant applications, instead being able to turn our full attention to the real work of creating grassroots environmental change in Palestine.

If you would like to contribute in this way, please ask your bank to set up a direct debit to our UK account:

Bank name: Lloyds TSB  
Account name: Bustan Qaraaqa  
Account number: 00052001  
Sort code: 30-93-45

For international transfers:  
SWIFT code: LOYDGB2L  
IBAN: GB30LOYD30934500052001

All contributions, however small, are gratefully received.