

Ina Friedman

ON DECEMBER 18, HALL B of Israel's sartorially stuffy Supreme Court is packed with a collection of young people in jeans, chinos, sweatshirts, T-shirts and other casual garb. They've dropped in to the court in Jerusalem, on their way to an outing in the north, even though a good proportion of the group cannot follow the proceedings (for lack of a working knowledge of Hebrew). Nevertheless, the issue at hand — a petition challenging the army's blanket ban on allowing Palestinian students into Israel to study at institutes of higher education, on the grounds that they pose a security risk — is very close to their hearts. For they are students and faculty of the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies (AIES), a program that brings together people from Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Jordan, North America and Europe not just for academic courses but to grapple with core issues and consequences — beyond the ecological — of the Middle East conflict and, ultimately, to serve as a bridge to regional cooperation.

Last month AIES appended its name to a petition originally submitted by Sawsan Salame, 29, from the West Bank village of Anata, who was accepted to do a doctorate in chemistry at the Hebrew University but was prevented from entering Israel to pursue it, and Gisha ("Access"), an Israeli NGO that represents Palestinians who face restrictions on their freedom of movement. Education Minister Yuli Tamir, the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities and the heads of all of Israel's major universities (with the exception of Bar-Ilan) have asked Defense Minister Amir Peretz to quash the indiscriminate ban — instituted in 2003 but implemented inconsistently until 2005 — and enable Palestinian students to enroll at Israeli institutions of higher learning, subject to individual security checks. But the AIES went a step further and joined the appeal to the court, not least because the blanket embargo affects its very *raison d'être*.

"The Institute's mission in bringing young Jews and Arabs to live and study together is to create both personal and professional ties that will carry over and foster regional cooperation when they return to their respective communities," explains Rabbi Michael Cohen, AIES director of special projects. "Until the autumn of 2005, our student body was divided equally



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# Green Peace

among Jewish Israelis, Arab Israelis, Palestinians and Jordanians, and students from outside the Middle East," he continues. "So preventing us from enrolling Palestinian students severely compromises what we're about."

This semester, Cohen adds, AIES has 27 students, which will rise to 35 in the spring semester. "But we could easily have 40 were it not for the ban on enrolling Palestinians."

At the close of the hearing, the appellants are in an upbeat mood. For while the state argued that no Palestinian, as a foreign national, has an inalienable right to study in Israel and that the commander of the West Bank is authorized to establish security regulations, the court gave the state 60 days to establish criteria for permitting Palestinian students to enter Israel. "That's tantamount to declaring that the blanket ban cannot stand," says Sari Bashi, director of Gisha, who argued the brief before the three-justice panel headed by Chief Justice Dorit Beinisch. "We noted that Palestinians are allowed in for various other reasons, including to work, to marry, to receive medical treatment and even to take part in seminars and professional training," she relates. "And we hold that requests to study in Israel should similarly be judged on their individ-

**A unique Israeli program in environmental studies paves a modest path toward regional conflict resolution**

ual merits, for branding someone as a security risk just because he or she is a Palestinian is racist." While the court's next hearing will not be held before the Institute begins its spring semester on February 14, in the interim its staff, along with attorneys from Gisha, are set to meet with government officials in an effort to have the ban lifted through other channels. Their testimony before the Knesset Education Committee on December 26, for example, led its members to call upon Defense Minister Peretz to change the considerations applied to Palestinian students and request his response within a month.

ESTABLISHED 10 YEARS AGO BY Dr. Alon Tal (*see "Making His Mark," February 20, 2006*), AIES is located on Kibbutz Ketura, 31 miles north of Eilat. It currently operates on an annual budget of \$1 million (half devoted to the academic program and half to research) supplied by grants from the Department of Conflict Management and Mitigation from



**DESERT ISLE OF PEACE: (Far left) At AIES, Palestinians, Israelis and Jordanians learn to cooperate over the environment and argue about politics; (left) Director Rabbi Michael Cohen, AIES director of special projects; (below left) Friendships formed at AIES cope with the conflict**



U.S. federal agency USAID, the European Union and various private foundations and individuals. Although an independent entity boasting its own dorms, the Institute avails itself of the kibbutz's classrooms and communal dining room, and students who so wish are "adopted" by kibbutz families. "Our location enables our students to appreciate what it means to live in a cooperative society and how to go about sustaining cooperation even in the face of challenges," says Cohen. "Living in the desert, far from movie theaters, cafés and other distractions, also helps them bond as a kind of family," he adds. "Last year, for example, the sister of one of our students was married in Amman, and the entire group attended her wedding."

Academically, the Institute offers three main tracks: a one-year program in environmental studies primarily for undergraduates (who may receive credit for AIES courses at their universities in Israel and abroad); a two-year MA program run in collaboration with Ben-Gurion University's Jacob Blaustein Institutes for Desert Research (at Sde Boker); and a "Green MBA," likewise in collaboration with BGU (at its Eilat campus). It also conducts a joint program with nearby Kibbutz Lotan, which includes courses in Hebrew and Judaic studies, and a summer session that covers highlights of the undergraduate syllabus. The language of

instruction is English. "One of our dreams," says Cohen, "is to institute summer courses before the start of the academic year, to raise the English proficiency of the students from the Middle East, as well as courses in Arabic and Hebrew."

Environmental studies, however, is only part of the deal. "When you look at this region in terms of geopolitics, you see divisions and borders," says Cohen. "But when you look at it from the perspective of the environment, those lines disappear, and you're invited to work with the 'other' to preserve and protect it. The environment works as the glue that holds our students together." Yet because the Middle East conflict is inevitably "the elephant in the room," as Cohen baldly puts it, AIES also requires its students to take part in its Peace Building and Environmental Leadership Seminar (PELS), which deals "head-on with the issues of the conflict." Staff and students alike testify that the seminar can be trying, even painful. "Yet because PELS doesn't last only for a weekend or a week, as do most of the seminars run by organizations that bring Jews and Arabs together," he continues, "again and again we've seen how students armed with preconceived notions about the 'other' learn to hear each other's narratives."

The process is not a simple one. Samer Eid, 26, a graduate of Bir Zeit University near Ramallah, who is studying in the Institute's MA program — and is the only Palestinian enrolled this semester, by virtue of holding an Israeli East Jerusalem I.D. card — says that he now feels comfortable living among Israelis. But it has taken time to reach this state. "It's good that we can all freely express our feelings about the conflict, but in the beginning I was upset by what the [Israeli students] had to say," he reports. "Now, after two months of living and talking together, and getting to know each other as individuals, and I feel more at ease — though I can never stop thinking about what's going on [in the territories]."

Hadas Karmon, 23, a BA student at BGU who hails from Moshav Gan Shomron, near Hadera in central Israel, is particularly can-

did about the difficulties she's faced in acquiring the listening skills instilled by the PELS encounters. "People arrive here with heavy emotional baggage that they can't leave at the door — be it loved ones who were driven out of their home in Hebron, or were killed in a terror attack — and that can make interaction very difficult," she says. You get over this, she says, first by starting to talk and then by learning to listen, "rather than instinctively riposting every argument with 'Yes, but...'" Karmon admits that it's been hard for her to master this lesson, "because I always have something to say," she explains with a laugh. "But I've learned that it's not necessary to respond to everything, that you can take the time to mull over a different perspective," she continues. "And I'm beginning to appreciate that only by undergoing this process can we begin to cope with the conflict."

There are other challenges, especially for Arab students, who may pay a heavy price for choosing to study in Israel. Louay Mneizel, 26, of Amman, enrolled in the Institute on the recommendation of a friend who had earlier studied there — and, incidentally, has continued on to an MA at BGU's Blaustein Institutes. Mneizel himself has a BA in law and sees himself as "becoming a bridge between law and environment in my country." But fellow Jordanian Manar a-Rifa'i, 34, of Irbid, who is likewise a lawyer studying in the one-year program, expects to be disbarred for enrolling at AIES.

"The Jordanian Bar Association, which is controlled by radical Islamic groups, cancels the membership of anyone who studies in Israel," a-Rifa'i explains. "But I don't care; I'm prepared to change my career," he continues, "but I won't accept being blackmailed over where I can go and what I can do."

On another plane of potential conflict, AIES deftly avoided a clash with its hosts at Kibbutz Ketura over the volatile issue of fish farming in floating cages in the Gulf of Aqaba. Ketura is a partner in this mariculture venture. A number of leading green organizations (including the Israel Union for Environmental Defense, established by IAES founder Tal) lobbied vigorously for closing it down because, they argued, it severely damages the gulf's coral reefs. After considering the conflicting findings of scientific studies, the government ultimately ordered the fish cages removed by 2008. But while the controversy raged, AIES prudently sided with the conclusion of an international team of experts that the

effect of fish farming on the corals was small, compared with the two other factors: pollution by phosphate dust, released while loading cargo ships, and the flow of sewage into the gulf. Yet it also endorsed the study's recommendation that the fish farmers adopt a "risk-management" approach to further decrease harm to the reefs.

Cohen refrains from speculating on how prickly relations between the kibbutzniks and the environmentalists might have grown had AIES judged otherwise. "There was a valid disagreement within the green movement over this issue," he says, "and we used it to teach our students that it isn't always easy to decide on the right course to adopt in environmental affairs."

Mindful of these complexities and pitfalls, I ask how AIES measures the value and effectiveness of its decade of endeavors. "We now have 400 alumni, and 70 percent of them are working in the field of the environment, whether in government, education, or NGOs," Cohen replies with satisfaction. Some graduates, he adds, have also gone on to establish environmental NGOs, like the Jordan Society for Sustainable Development, the Rural Center for Sustainable Development (Palestine) and Atid Yarok ("Green Future") in Israel, which ran Jerusalem's first successful plastics-recycling program. "We've also created the Arava Peace and Environmental Network (APEN) to help our alumni stay in touch and provide them with seed money for cross-border projects, which often involve our current students as researchers." Among the studies supported by the Institute are cross-border research projects on the Dead Sea and on the biodiversity of the Arava Valley.

The personal ties among alumni are also an enduring asset, says Maya Negev, 29, who is now an MA student in environmental literacy at the Blaustein Institutes. "Almost every Friday night, all the AIES graduates now studying at the Sde Boker campus — Jewish Israelis, Arab Israelis and Jordanians — have pot luck together," she relates. The cross-cultural experience that began at the Arava Institute "is a very rare opportunity for Middle Easterners," she adds, "and leaves an indelible mark." While rooming with two Jordanians on Ketura, for example, Negev picked up some spoken Arabic and was inspired to take an intensive course at Ulpan Akiva, near Netanya. Now she describes herself as "partly fluent" in the language. "Last Friday I sat talking with four Arab students at Sde Boker for two

hours, and I was able to understand almost everything they said," she reports. "It was wonderful!"

Inevitably, though, there are some flies in this soothing ointment. Samer Eid speaks of the unpleasant experience of negotiating army checkpoints when returning to Israel after a visit to his family in Ramallah. "If I'm questioned, I tell [the soldiers] that I am doing this to improve my life and that of my people by getting to know Israel better," he says, "but getting through them isn't easy these days." The Jordanians risk being blacklisted by their professional organizations and, Cohen observes, Arab women — whether from Israel or neighboring countries — must grapple with resistance from their families, "because here they see, some for the first time, that they can play a role in society that far exceeds the conventional one their culture expects of them."

The greatest challenge currently facing AIES, however — indeed, the threat to its very ethos — is the army's ban on allowing Palestinian students from the territories to join its programs. "I'm really frustrated by how rigid my country is about allowing these students in," says Negev. "At the court hearing, as I listened to the attorney representing the state, I felt that if he could meet some of the Institute's Palestinian graduates," she adds winsomely, "he would see how positive their feelings are about peace and coexistence — nothing like the stereotypes he probably harbors."

That's not a likely scenario. And in any case, it is the government, not its attorney, that sets policy. But there was a second ray of light for AIES in the court's December 18th decision: In response to the state's claim that Israel's security services could not possibly handle the burden of running security checks on the thousands of Palestinian students who would apply to Israeli universities were the ban to be lifted, the justices ordered it to ascertain and report back the number who have actually submitted applications. "Our information strongly suggests that we're talking not about thousands of Palestinian students but, all in all, a few dozen," says Gisha's Sari Bashi." As the Arava Institute is asking for entry permits only for five, Justice Beinisch made it clear that it could submit requests to the army before the 60-day period ends, and hope for the best or wait patiently until the court's final ruling on the case — which could take quite a while. ●