



Israeli Environmentalists Bolstered by Regional Conference at Petra

By Brett Kline

PETRA, Jordan (JTA) – May 30, 2007 – Ilana Meallem and Mazen Zoabi left a recent morning meeting with Jordan's King Abdullah II smiling. The king had just proposed the formation of a regional science fund, and they were certain they would have access to that fund.

The two Israelis, project managers at the Arava Institute, an environmental studies and research center in southern Israel, were among a small group of people in their 20s from Israel, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco and other Arab countries occupying a visible role at a conference of Nobel laureates in Petra.

Most of the media attention had focused on Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and other political leaders attending the conference held here in May and sponsored by Elie Wiesel's Foundation for Humanity and the king's Fund for Development.

But Abdullah, who had opened the gathering with a plea for more regional cooperation outside the realm of politics, saw this group as a good example.

"The king told us that we are the core of a new organization for youth exchange in the Middle East, and that there will be funding to organize regular meetings," Meallem said. "Israeli youths are full members in this organization. We have our full place here, and this is fantastic."

Indeed, some of the Nobel laureates and invited guests seemed to be more interested in the presentations by the young people, who fielded questions and took compliments, than in Israeli-Palestinian politics.

"We are the soldiers of tomorrow fighting for a more healthy environment," Meallem told the conference. "We need you Nobel Prize laureates, and you need us."

The Arava Institute has about 40 students, including three Palestinians from the West Bank and 10 Jordanians. They all live and study at the kibbutz center on Kibbutz Ketura, about 25 miles north of Eilat. The institute is under construction to house up to 100 students in the near future.

The 10-year-old institute has graduated more than 400 students from its yearlong program. It receives extensive funding from the Jewish National Fund and other American Jewish groups. Among the graduates is the son of Jordanian Prime Minister Ma'roof Al-Bakeet.

The Israeli students are part of a master's program at Ben-Gurion University in Sde Boker. Institute members organize an annual fund-raising bike ride from Jerusalem to Eilat. This year's ride along the Dead Sea brought in \$800,000 for the institute.

Until now the Jordanians have not sponsored their own students at the Arava Institute, but at the conference Jordanian Education Minister Khaled Toukan seemed open to the idea.

"Will the funding from Jordan follow?" Zoabi wondered. "I don't know, honestly, but I think it is in everyone's interest that they fund us."



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Ilana Meallem, left, and Mazen Zoabi, right, from the Arava Institute on Kibbutz Ketura with Jordanian Prime Minister Ma'roof Al-Bakeet, at a conference in Petra, Jordan.

Programs at the institute include examining pollution levels in trans-border rivers touching Israel, the West Bank and Jordan, probing air pollution in Jordan and a special two-year project with Morocco to cultivate argan almond trees that until now have grown wild only in southern Morocco.

Meallem, originally from London, and Zoabi, a Technion graduate from an Arab town near Nazareth in the Galilee region, are headed to China for three months. They will bring back technology turning small-scale organic waste into energy for use in Bedouin villages in Israel, and later in Jordan and possibly the West Bank. The technology, known as biogas energy, is not uncommon but apparently has been best developed for small-scale use in China.

"We don't yet have a partner for this with the Palestinian Authority," Zoabi said. He and Meallem spent much of the conference networking.

"Perhaps we could do projects with you and get more Palestinians involved in your institute," Sari Nusseibeh, a leading Arab moderate and the president of Al Quds University outside Jerusalem, told them. "Maybe your generation can go beyond the politics that have dragged us all down."

In the air-conditioned, temporary conference hall not far from the path leading to the spectacular Nabatean ruins that have put Petra on the map, Nusseibeh was busy chatting with Yigal Carmon, the head of the widely read MEMRI: The Middle East Media Research Institute and a counterterrorism adviser in the administration of the late Yitzhak Rabin.

"These environment projects are great for everyone because it is a win-win situation for all sides," Carmon said. "You see here that Jordanian politicians and various prize laureates and funders are very quick to speak with Ilana and the others because it gives them a sense of doing something good for people in a concrete way. I think we have seen enough sessions on conflict resolution; the answer is more real projects."

Wiesel, the conference moderator and winner of the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize, said his foundation was ready to put up or raise \$10 million for the regional science fund that was proposed by Abdullah. The fund would sponsor projects proposed by groups all over the region.

"I think the Arab countries are taking scientific cooperation with Israel very seriously," Wiesel said. "His Majesty the King is a true associate in this endeavor with the young people. He knows and I know that some of them will be the leaders of tomorrow."

Kholouel Al Dorghan, who is in her 20s and works in the Bank for Trade and Finance in Amman, said she was excited by the possibility of working in Israel.

"I met Israelis for the first time in my life here at this conference, and I felt a real buzz in the air here from the young people and the delegates," she said. "I would be happy to do research in the Arava Institute or anywhere in Israel."

Still, several young people who had been invited as individuals from other countries in the region preferred to remain anonymous.

"I would love to work with Israelis," one said, "but my government would not like that at all and would harass me and my family. There must be a way for us to participate as well. I am angry about this, but what can I do?"

FRIENDS of the Arava Institute

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