

## Interview

# *Drawing on Common Ground: Lessons from the Arava Institute*

Skyler Inman

***How one institute in the Arava desert, born from the optimism of the Oslo Accords, still seeks to make peace out of some of the scarcest resources in the Middle East.***

Located on Kibbutz Ketura, not far from the border with Jordan, the Arava Institute has been educating Israelis, Palestinians, Jordanians, and international students to become environmental experts and advocates for cross-border collaboration since it was founded in 1996. Despite the fact that it has its roots in a very different political era, the Institute continues with optimism and doggedness to build peace through personal relationships, environmental cooperation, and an understanding that nature does not cleave to political boundaries.

Recently, I spoke with Glocal alumna Shira Kronich, Strategy and Operations Manager of the Track II Environmental Forum for the Arava Institute, about the Institute's pedagogical philosophy, its students, and how changing politics have created a new mission for the Institute in the years to come.

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**Tell me a little bit about how you got involved with the Arava Institute.**

A: [Working at the Arava Institute] was my first job after my undergrad degree in environmental engineering. For the first seven years, I was doing really practical, on-the-ground research about how cross-border approaches to water project development as a component of peace building—focusing on how pragmatic, common-interest issues can bring together Israeli, Palestinian, and Jordanian water experts together to discuss solutions in a more sustainable way.

**What types of people come to the Arava Institute, and from where?**

The academic department is the core and the initial focus of the Arava Institute. What the institute was founded upon

is bringing Israeli, Palestinian, Jordanian and international students to study multiple environmental themes from cross-border perspectives. So they study renewable energy, water, political ecology, climate change, and so on. While the students from the region learn about the environmental interdependence, the internationals highlight key perspectives as “outsiders” to the conflict.

In addition to the environmentally focused classes, which all can be accredited by Bennington College, there's another course that's compulsory and it is the peace building and environmental leadership program. So in addition to studying cross-border issues from a more theoretical or academic perspective, they've created a space that's also meant to facilitate discussion of the cultural, political, community challenges that doesn't ignore the fact that there are participants in the program who have maybe never met an Israeli or a Palestinian before, and they don't know how to broach the subject. And it's always about creating a community—a community of people living on campus, a community of alumni, a community of people who want to become environmental change agents in the region and internationally.

**I'm interested in how it works with such a diverse student body. For those students who have never met an Israeli or a Palestinian before, what is it like for them to encounter one another for the first time in a classroom?**

So, they actually live together. It's a residential program, and you have to live there for one of the two semesters, so they definitely get to know one another during the orientation week, but obviously that's the question that the Arava Institute has kind of been developing an expertise in and

modifying and improving in the last 25 years—which is, how do you support this process of people meeting for the first time so that it is, by and large, an informative, productive kind of experience for Institute students? There's a lot of official outside-the-classroom activities, and there are three facilitators currently leading the program. They teach things like narrative, storytelling, compassionate listening, but actually the industry that we work in has a lot of emphasis on building group dynamics that are conducive to promoting relationships. It's kind of like a theory of change—that relationships build trust, and that the first step towards peace is trust-building. And we do that through the student body, as well as in our cross-border research projects. Trust-building is always underlying the process.

**Most people speak about resources and environmental challenges not as a potential common ground for peace-building, but rather as a cause for conflict. How exactly does the Arava Institute try to change that narrative?**

Well to be honest, environment, and particularly water, do actually lead to cooperation. There's a fair amount of research that shows water scarcity actually promotes cooperation. It's still contested, but there are a lot of examples of programs that even in conflict settings, the water—or rather resource management—was one thing that both parties could, or were forced to, agree on. The Arava Institute itself was an outcome of the Oslo Agreements in that era of optimism, and it was with the assumption that we need to build a body of leaders who are going to be implementing this agreement, who appreciate what water management looks like from the Jordanian side, or, on the Palestinian side, what the challenges are, what the opportunities are... And so that if we can manage to live, all of us, in this region, there has to be a lot more environmental leadership that has training and awareness of the cross-border nature of resources.

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So that really was the guiding principle for our first 20 years—promoting leadership through training and education. And again, maybe the political reality forced it into being a stepping stone towards creating peace and stability, but it started out as this feeling that peace really was in sight, that we were seeing how an agreement really could be reached, but that we were lacking the capacity and skills within the region to know how to implement it. And then very quickly it became apparent that these things would have to be a part of how a solution is reached.

**How has the changing political landscape over the past 25 years affected the operations and mission of the Institute?**

In 2016, the mission was reevaluated, and I think a part of that was that we had been operating for 20 years and seeing the political reality around us getting worse and not better. And the major shift was moving from developing environmental leaders to providing cross-border agreements. So, taking a more active role in the political arena—saying that the environment can actually be an impetus for agreement, and actually a model of how people are coming together, even in this time when so few people believe that there is a partner [for peace] or see around them practical examples of cooperation.



Picture By Arava Institute

The principal methodology we have implemented for building cooperation on the ground is the formation of working groups. The working groups are comprised of Israeli, Palestinian, Jordanian and international experts in their fields who work together to address a pressing, transboundary environmental problem in their area of expertise.

For example, the renewable energy working group, co-led by Israeli and Palestinian energy experts, is currently working on a project that will greatly benefit Israeli and Palestinian farmers. This group is currently developing “green kiln technology” for the Jenin area in the West Bank in order to reduce the amount of air pollution produced by the transboundary charcoal industry. Another example is the climate change working group that plan to build a regional climate change adaptation center where Israeli, Jordanian, Palestinian and international experts can work together on tackling transboundary issues arising from climate change. This center will be able to make policy recommendations and develop technologies to address the most pressing problems arising from the changing climate, and will be able to work with each country’s government and intergovernmental organizations

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Although the Middle East is not one of the main contributors to worsening the effects of climate change, it will be one of the world’s most effected areas, especially in regards to desertification. This crisis, as the Arava Institute believes, may become an engine for bringing parties to the table and to promote regional peace agreements. From this interview it is clear that environmental crisis has a potential to offer an opportunity for change. As can be seen here, the environment can become an important platform for cooperation, even across barriers of conflict.



Picture By Liel Maghen, Jordan