

York University Faculty Boycotts Israeli Academic Institution

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Students Against Israeli Apartheid at York University (SAIA York) is proud to announce that the Faculty of Environmental Studies (FES), at the third largest university in Canada, has boycotted the Israeli academic institution, the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies (AIES). This move is a major win for the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaign against Israel, as FES has become the first faculty in Canada to honour Palestinian civil society's call for "an academic boycott of complicit Israeli academic institutions".

On October 26, 2017, FES boycotted the institution after the FES Faculty Council passed a motion to not renew a long-standing partnership agreement between FES and AIES. The motion, which was presented by SAIA York, garnered 15 votes in favour, 7 against, and 1 abstention. While AIES has branded itself as an institution that promotes peace and environmental cooperation, the motion condemned AIES as an institution that "has a history in greenwashing injustices and environmental harms" perpetuated by the Israeli government. Greenwashing refers to the practice of creating a false image for oneself as an environmental steward in order to hide an unpleasant legacy.

AIES opened in 1996 as one of the hundreds of people-to-people (P2P) programs that were established around that time. While P2P programs were based on "cooperative activities between Israelis and Palestinians to promote peace", such programs failed to create peace in the last 20 years or so because they did not seek to end Israel's colonialism, occupation, or apartheid. Rather, they built acceptance of Israel's oppression of Palestinians as "normal". P2P programs built such acceptance by encouraging "coexistence" rather than "co-resistance" against Israel's oppression.

Moreover, P2P programs like AIES have portrayed Israel as a state that was on equal grounds with oppressed Palestinians. By encouraging coexistence and environmental cooperation, without recognizing Israel's oppressive role and the need to resist against this oppression, Arava has served to normalize, greenwash, and thus perpetuate Israel's oppression.

AIES has also been tied to several complicit Israeli organizations. First, AIES has received funding from the Jewish National Fund (JNF) and several offices of the apartheid Israeli government. AIES has also officially partnered with the JNF since 2002. As an Israeli quasi-governmental organization, the JNF has played an instrumental role in advancing Israel's colonial project for over a 100 years. This project has not only devastated the indigenous Palestinian people, but also the environment. Secondly, AIES has established a partnership with Ben Gurion University. Like other Israeli universities, Ben Gurion University has been complicit in many human rights violations against Palestinians (Keller 2009). For instance, Ben Gurion University granted scholarships to students who participated in Israel's 2008 military attack on the Gaza strip, which killed over 1,000 Palestinians. Third, AIES has been named sister organization of another greenwashing Israeli organization called Aytzim, which was formerly known as the Green Zionist Alliance. Aytzim is a New York-based Jewish environmental organization, which is a member of the American Zionist Movement. The American Zionist Movement is a federation of Zionist groups affiliated with the World Zionist Organization, which was founded by Theodor Herzl. Herzl is the founder of political Zionism, the colonial ideology that supported the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine and the devastation of the indigenous Palestinian population and the environment. Meanwhile, Aytzim's website reads, "Aytzim's Green Zionist Alliance has been embraced by all streams of the Zionist movement". Aytzim portrays Zionism as environmentally friendly, greenwashing its colonial legacy. AIES has failed to condemn or even highlight the roles played by the JNF, Ben Gurion University, and Aytzim in furthering Israel's colonial agenda. Due to AIES' legacy as a P2P program, silence in the face of injustice, and continued collaboration with other complicit Israeli organizations, AIES has helped to perpetuate Israel's oppression of the Palestinian people.

By boycotting AIES, FES has taken a courageous stance on the right side of

history to pressure Israel and complicit Israeli organizations to end their injustices against the Palestinian people. It is even more inspiring that FES has taken this historic step in consideration of the recent government crackdowns on BDS in Canada and elsewhere. FES has chosen to stay true to the radical, human rights, and anti-colonial roots of environmentalism and to uphold York University's commitment to social justice by implementing academic boycott against Israel. We, in SAIA York, hope that this victory will inspire other York faculties and other academic institutions to implement or endorse the academic boycott against Israel in the struggle for a world free of colonialism, apartheid, occupation, and war, and in the realization of peace, justice, and equality for all.

