



Just Another Environmental Hearing

You're checking your calendar: is it April Fool's Day already? Alas, no. [But there is some genuine good news out of the Middle East — at least for those who care about the Middle East's natural environment.](#)

Terminating a several-year saga that has pitted claims of energy independence against environmental risk, the Jerusalem District Committee for Planning and Building voted to reject the Shfela basin oil shale pilot drilling project on Tuesday evening.

The project under debate was that of Jerusalem-based Israel Energy Initiatives, which has for years been aiming to prove the viability of approximately 40 billion barrels of oil found in the shale rock layer of the Shfela basin in south-central Israel. Although the company completed the exploratory phase of its project in 2011 – required due to the newness of the technology being tested – environmental opposition and regulatory changes delayed moving on to a pilot stage.

Okay, so a project was stopped. Good, but no big deal, right? Wrong. First, the project was slated for the Judean hills, sometimes known as the “Tuscany of Israel.” Second, the ideological context of the battle is particularly important.

The project was to be located where David fought Goliath, and that had real poignance here. Israel Energy Initiatives is an Israeli Goliath, with several retired generals on the boards. It is also a subsidiary of the U.S. based Genie Energy, whose strategic advisory board includes Dick Cheney and Rupert Murdoch. Using the subtlety usually associated with those two gentlemen, IEI exerted immense economic and political pressure to advance the project by any means. As a result of direct pressure on Benjamin Netanyahu, the Prime Minister sent his personal attorney to talk in favor of the project before the committee. (This once again demonstrated the growing international conservative movement. See? There is a [vast right-wing conspiracy!](#)).

And they lost, at the hands of a (relatively) rag-tag group of Davids led by advocates from [Adam Teva V'Din — Israel Union for Environmental Defense](#) (full disclosure: I'm on IUED's US supporting board). This was one of those places where

facts actually mattered. One of IUED's attorneys reports that although IEI made large claims about how much oil the project would produce and how it would not adversely impact the environment, when opponents started raising questions, IEI simply had no answers. First, they claimed that the project would generate 320,000 barrels of oil daily, then no, it was only 100,000, no only 50,000, and data was awful in any event. The technology that they claimed would do this –and which would heat up the land to more than 300 degrees centigrade — has never been tried commercially anywhere else in the world, and the company could not say when the land would cool off. Would the oil leak into the groundwater? Oh, we'll get back to you on that. Trust us!

The committee didn't, to its great intellectual and moral credit. But David's work is never done: despite its insistence that it will try to "learn" from this episode, [IEI has another subsidiary pursuing plans to drill and frack in another environmentally sensitive area](#): the Golan Heights overlooking the Sea of Galilee, or Lake Kinneret. The lake is one of the nation's (and the region's) principal water sources. [IUED has filed a petition in Israel's High Court to stop it](#).

It's not clear why Israelis would take seriously such massive drilling, especially since the country is a pioneer in renewables. As the former executive director of IUED asked, "if Germany, with its gray weather, can be a world leader in solar energy, why has Israel squandered this opportunity so badly?" It won't if David has anything to say about it. The original David wasn't much of a high-tech guy — five smooth stones are pretty basic — but modern Israel certainly is.