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Bezeq withholding services from Arab towns `for safety reasons'

By [Jack Khoury](#)

Dr. Majed Badarna, an ophthalmologist of Sachnin, called Bezeq's IPVPN service on Sunday to report that his modem broke down and asked for a technician to fix it. He was told this could take some time, as Bezeq defines Sachnin as a "security zone," which means a special security permit must be issued before a technician is dispatched to the town.

However, Galilee sub-district police spokesman superintendent Kobi David said "there is no security problem involving Bezeq employees in Arab communities in the Galilee. This is why the police do not accompany Bezeq teams when they go into Arab communities."

Some 22,000 people live in Sachnin, which has several relay stations and a Bezeq communications equipment store. Chief Superintendent Ilan Harush, Misgav station commander for the past year, cannot recall a single case of violence against a Jew in Sachnin. He says Bezeq technicians have not been attacked in the town. "There is no danger of any harm to Bezeq employees," he says.

The last time a Bezeq employee was attacked in the Galilee was a few months ago, in the village Kaukab, when a child threw a stone at a Bezeq vehicle, causing very slight damage.

Another senior Galilee police officer said that "since the events of October 2000 there have hardly been any attacks on Jews in an Arab community caused by racial tension."

Police sources said that violent demonstrations in recent years were held against cellular companies, in protest of their antennae in the communities, but not for nationalist reasons. Badarna, whose computer is owned and insured by the Meuhedet Health Maintenance Organization he works for, asked to speak to the manager, who confirmed that not sending a technician was company policy.

"I was in shock," he said. "What does a security zone mean? When has anyone heard lately of a Bezeq worker hurt or attacked, even verbally, in Sachnin? Even if there had been a violent incident, it should be dealt with specifically as any other, even in Tel Aviv. Why punish Sachnin collectively?"

At Haaretz's request, a Bezeq technician visited Badarna's home yesterday, accompanied by a security guard, and fixed his modem.

Other Israelis, such as Bedouins in the Negev and Jews in the West Bank, also have difficulty getting their phones fixed. Bezeq says technicians are often attacked in security zones, but refused to provide figures.

Bezeq's practice of withholding services from Arab towns and villages in the Galilee is not new. After the October 2000 riots, several public companies suspended their services to Arab communities. Bezeq technicians frequently enter communities defined as "security zones" accompanied by security guards. Bezeq officials yesterday refused to say how they determine a security zone. It was learned that the criteria are based on the community's character, whether there are illegal aliens living there, and if it has a record of attacking company employees.

The last violent incident took place in June 2003, when Amit Mentin, a Bezeq technician in Baqa al-Garbiyah, was shot dead. However the shooter was a 15-year-old Palestinian from the village Dir al-Basha in Jenin. After that incident, residents from the triangle region complained of increasing difficulties in receiving Bezeq services.

Residents of a neighborhood in the Arab village Dir al-Assad near Karmiel waited months with no telephone connection for Bezeq to repair a technical malfunction. Bezeq denied it was withholding services due to security considerations and argued that the residents were responsible for the breakdown, which was caused by vandalism. However, Bezeq continued charging the residents for the fixed subscriber payment, although the lines were disconnected and Bezeq refused to fix them.

"Even if what they said were true, why did they have to punish a whole community collectively?" asks attorney Ala Haidar, the legal adviser of the Anti-Racism Center. "When they need to charge money from Arab citizens, then they have equal rights. But when they asks for service, he is a security risk."

Following the intervention of a number of Arab Knesset members the lines were finally fixed in June this year.

"The company sees supreme importance in providing high quality and full service to its clients wherever they are including the Arab sector," Bezeq commented yesterday. "We are sorry if anything else was implied by the service representative at the IPVPN center. Following attacks of Bezeq workers in the Arab sector, they now operate there according to the directives of Bezeq's security division."