



A population of criminals

By Jafar Farah

I admit: I'm a spy. Over a year ago, my mobile phone rang one evening and on the other end was a person who introduced himself as the editor of a current-events program on the Voice of Iran in Hebrew. He asked to interview me about the political situation in Israel. I was very surprised. I asked where he had obtained my phone number, and he said he received it from a friend who works in the Israeli media, and anyway, it turned up via Google.

The Iranian liked my commentary for a period of a few months, and then he stopped calling. I assumed that with the rise of the new regime, the Hebrew broadcast had been stopped. When Sheikh Raad Saleh and his colleagues from the Islamic Movement were arrested, my heart skipped a beat. I was afraid that they would get to me too, because if the Mossad had got onto Sheikh Saleh's conversations with the Saudis, it certainly intercepts conversations of Israeli citizens with Iranians. But thus far I have not been arrested.

About two weeks ago I received a phone call from a person who introduced himself as a correspondent for Sudan Radio, who asked for an interview about the situation in Israel. At the outset I asked for his details and those of the news desk where he worked. I asked him where he had obtained my phone number, and received an answer similar to what I had been given by the Iranian. And again I decided to be interviewed and analyze the implications of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's illness from the perspective of an Arab citizen of the country. This time too Mossad and Shin Bet security service investigators did not show up, even though it ostensibly involved an enemy state.

So that you will understand how deeply I am entangled, I will set forth a series of confessions: I have participated in a number of encounters abroad with social movements from the Middle East, of which needless to say Israel is a part, and during the course of these I met with representatives from Libya and Algeria. They shook the hand of an Israeli citizen, only because I am an Arab. The cameras did not click, and when I returned to Israel I was not arrested.

In regional meetings that were held in Cyprus, Spain and even Morocco, I met with some people whom I assume are employees or "agents" of "enemy" states - Arab countries that do not have relations with Israel. This did not deter them from inquiring what it's like to be an Arab citizen of Israel. I told them. In Morocco, for example, I acceded to the organizers' request, and talked from the stage to an audience of hundreds. I related things that everyone knows and were even written in the Or commission report and the State Controller's Report.

This week, when I saw Jerias Jerias, former head of the Fassuta local council, being led in handcuffs and accused of espionage, or for the sake of accuracy "contact with an agent of a foreign state," I assumed they would also come after me. After all, I met and spoke with citizens of "enemy states," I addressed them publicly, and I even send written messages on my mobile phone to friends and relatives in Algeria, Lebanon and Syria.

Jerias Jerias is not alone. Sheikh Raad Saleh and his colleagues will sit in prison on a similar charge. Arab Knesset members who visit Lebanon and Syria are criminals to the same extent, and Druze clerics who - with permission or clandestinely - visit Jabal Druze are also criminals. The Arab Israeli public is fed up, and it is demanding recognition of its uniqueness as a national group that has regional continuity. The Arab-Israeli public is part of the Arab world, and it is untenable that after every journey to the Haj in Saudi Arabia, we will find ourselves under investigation and arrest because we worshiped next to an Iranian pilgrim. We are natives of the region, and we have in it ties of religion, language, culture, family and friendship. The Jewish ghetto in the Middle East is a Jewish choice; the Arabs are not part of it. The time has come for the government and security institutions to internalize this fact, even if this internalization entails changing a law that for us is draconic.

The writer is director of Mossawa, The Advocacy Center for Arab Citizens of Israel.