



## A lesson in citizenship

By Dan Rabinowitz

The decision by the Interior Ministry boundaries committee at the beginning of this month to reject Sakhnin's request to add 8,400 dunams to its municipal area and approve just 1,700 dunams in a problematic section is not trivial. It is a reminder of the permanent and dangerous gap here between boasting of democratic rules of the game and dictatorship of the majority.

Sakhnin is a provincial town of 25,000 inhabitants that provides services to a large rural area in the eastern Lower Galilee. The committee's decision to allow for the addition of a limited, hilly area to the east, most of it with no development possibilities, is a case of intentionally ignoring Sakhnin's potential for natural growth to the north and west. This isn't an example of sloppy planning or flawed understanding of proper urban dynamics, but rather an intentional decision. The territorial strangulation the committee has imposed on Sakhnin is part of a zero-sum game that characterizes the state's attitude toward the Palestinian population since its establishment. This is because in the Galilee, like everywhere else, what doesn't go to the Arabs goes to the Jews. Here, the big winner is the Misgav Regional Council. Following the panel's decision, the amount of municipal land per inhabitant (Jewish, of course) in Misgav will come to 36 times the amount of land per (Arab) inhabitant in Sakhnin.

The committee's decision resembles dozens of decisions made in recent decades by similar forums that, when called upon to decide between Jewish and Arab local authorities, consistently chose to perpetuate the territorial strangulation of the Arabs. The logic reflected in the decision views territory as all: If the struggle against the Arabs is over the right to live here, then another dunam and another goat is the only imperative. Either them or us.

But in the Israel of our day, which is a regional economic and military power, for a long time it has not been either them or us, but rather us and them. And both sides are comprised of people who are citizens. And for the Arab citizens, about whom Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said just this week that the equality to which they are entitled is a basic condition for the normalization and prosperity of all of Israel, the problem of land has been, and remains, the gaping wound of their existence here. Most of the Arab families in Israel lost property overnight in 1950, when the law on absentee assets determined that the assets of refugees, including internal refugees - people who left their villages but stayed in Israel - became state property. Other legislation defined open areas between locales as state property, and, in effect, stole most of the land reserves of the Arab locales that had remained after 1948.

Arab citizens constituted about 18 percent of Israel's population in 1949. The number of Arabs has increased by a factor of six since then the same rate at which the Jewish population has grown. The amount of land available to the Arab locales has declined by 50 percent since then. A community that constitutes about 17 percent of the state's population (without East Jerusalem's Arabs) now has in its possession only 3.5 percent of the state's territory, and Arab locales hold only 2.5 percent of the municipal areas.

Since 1948, the State of Israel has established 700 new Jewish locales. The only new Arab locales are Bedouin towns in the Negev with the aim of not granting living space but just the opposite: having the Bedouin who live there relinquish ownership of far larger territories in the Negev. This is also the case regarding unrecognized locales, some of which have been around for a long time: the state wants to strangle them, empty them out and inherit their lands.

Given this backdrop, anyone who wants to cling to the rigid territorial principle and blindly ignore the principles of citizenship and equality will have to live with his conscience. Anyone who sees morality and conscience as luxuries inappropriate for someone who lives in a dangerous neighborhood like the Middle East is invited to think a bit about Sakhnin, politics, anger and protest. In March, 2000, during a Land Day demonstration, an elderly woman died, perhaps from inhaling tear gas that was spread by the police. This event led to the large student demonstrations at the universities, which to a great extent was the opening chord of the October disturbances half a year later.

The land issue, in Sakhnin and elsewhere, is an extremely dangerous barrel of explosives. When real distress joins a clear sense of intentional injustice, anything can happen. Following the events of October 2000, the police learned a few things on the tactical level, and it has been refraining from fanning the flames as it had done previously. Decisions like the one that was taken by the boundaries committee give rise to disturbing doubts about the extent to which the Jewish majority has learned anything about the structural level of citizenship and its meaning, or about the price of denying basic rights to Arab citizens.