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A State of all its citizens and of both its peoples

- To understand - Analysis and debate -



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Tens of thousands of people participated in this year's Land Day rally in the Palestinian city of Sakhnin in northern Israel (March 30, 2013). Our comrade Gadi Algazi, a member of the Tarabut-Hithabrut movement and of the secretariat of the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality, was invited to deliver a speech there. This is what he said:

"I wish to thank you for the opportunity to participate and to speak here, in this Land Day rally. For me, as a Jewish-Israeli citizen who enjoys privileges in this state, even as he opposes and struggles against them, it is deeply meaningful to be invited to come and speak on Land Day, the day that commemorates the civil struggle of Palestinian citizens of Israel against discrimination and racism, against dispossession and oppression. I want to explain to you why I am here today.

I am here, first, because of the past. Because we have not forgotten. I reached my political maturity during the first Land Day, 1976. I remember receiving news of the martyrs who were killed in Sakhnin, in Arabeh, in Kafr Kanna and in Taybeh. The first political flyer I ever wrote was about the killing of Ahmad Al-Masri in Majd Al-Krum in November 1977. Since then, that list has grown long.

But I am not here only because of the past but also because of the present, because of what is happening now. Land Day is not just a day of remembrance. It is a day of struggle against what is happening now. The State of Israel's war against its residents continues today in the Negev. In the Negev, heavy police forces and bulldozers go out to commit systematic destruction about once or twice a week. We have grown used to the fact that once or twice a week, heavily armed police forces gather in the Shoket junction or the Beit Qama junction in order to go forth on a campaign of demolition. We have grown so used to this that we don't perceive that this is actually a form of continuous warfare.

This country continues to be the site of a war. Modern warfare is conducted not only with tanks, but with bulldozers. You don't only fight it with bombers, but also with zoning plans. Yes, this is a war waged by the state, and real people are its casualties: their health, their hopes, their futures, their human and national dignity. True: Many states around the world neglect their citizens, and Israel also neglects and humiliates its poor. But not many states in the world take part in never-ending wars against their own citizens.

I am here to tell you, alongside many other left-wing activists in this country, that we **refuse to take part in a the state's war against its Palestinian citizens**. We will do all we can to undermine it, in Jaffa, in Acco, and in the Galilee, but mainly in the Negev.

One of the places where this war is being waged is in the village of Al-Araqib in the northern Negev. A special delegation of Al-Araqib Popular Committee arrived just to participate in the rally here in Sakhnin. The residents of Al-Araqib have lost their homes. Many of them have lost their livelihoods. The state of Israel has used tear gas, rubber bullets, paint bullets, and arbitrary arrests against them, and many of them are now facing trial. In the last three years, I have seen the little children of Al-Araqib grow up from demolition to demolition, waking up in the morning to the site of police cars and special patrol units.

Hundreds of volunteers arrived in Al-Araqib in the nights before demolitions and stood alongside the residents. Some of them were arrested, others have had charges brought against them by the state. I don't deny that we, Jewish and Arab activists, have participated in protests in Al-Araqib. I don't deny that we tried to keep up the spirits of the residents. I don't deny that we tried to stand by their side as the forces of destruction arrived in the village. That is our

duty to our humanity, our civic duty as people who fully believe in equal rights. We will continue to stand alongside the people of Al-Araqib in their struggle, even after the 49th demolition of the village.

Al-Araqib is not alone. In 1952, the military governor of the Negev reported that he succeeded in clearing out 70,000 dunams of land for the Zionist movement for settlement purposes – through expulsions, threats, and dispossession. Today, this threat continues. The Prawer Plan is a declaration of war on tens of thousands of the Negev's Arab residents. The Bibi-Lapid government wants to finish what the military governors of the 1950's have not managed to do: to solve, once and for all, the "Bedouin problem in the Negev." There is not "Bedouin Problem" in the Negev. The problem is a racist government and its dispossession projects. We must stop the Prawer Plan! This is indeed the struggle of the Negev's Arab residents, but we cannot, we cannot, leave them to wage it alone.

I am here not only because of the past, and not only because of the present, but also because of and for the future. I am here so that we will have a future in a different sort of state.

What kind of state ? First of all, a state with no military occupation and no settlements. A state that stops waging wars and starts making peace - real peace, a peace based on equality and justice - peace outside its borders and peace within them. A state that stops waging war against its own citizens, that stops sending bulldozers to destroy their homes. A state that settles down and stops seeking to "Judaize" the Galilee and the Negev. A state that doesn't fight the Arab residents of Jaffa, Acco, Lod, Ramle, and the Triangle.

A state in which the Arab past is not being erased; a state whose future belongs to the people who live in it, to all its citizens, men and women, and not to racist demographers, who are busy counting babies and for whom real people's lives do not count. A state without the heirs of people like Arnon Sofer and Yisrael Koenig, Ben Gurion and Netanyahu. A state whose signature is not a tank and a bulldozer.

I am here because I want a state that isn't run by Lieberman, and not the people who fund Lieberman and Bibi. A state that is a shared home and whose people, all its people, Jews and Arabs, are its true masters - not the institutions of the Zionist movement, nor the Jewish Agency and not the Jewish National Fund, neither the magnates and the well-connected or the wealthy donors who live in Australia or the United States. The people who should be masters of this country are the people who live here, Jews and Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians.

A state of all its citizens and of both its peoples, a state that is both a Jewish and an Arab state, a Jewish-Arab state, with full, equal rights for all. Not just political equality but also cultural and national equality, equality that comes with correcting the injustices of the past, giving back land, the return of the refugees, and a more equitable distribution of wealth and opportunities.

A state where both our languages are equal, and all the different accents and cultures enjoy equality. Where people are not classified according to their accent or appearance. A state where no one needs to change their language, to cover up his or her accent, to forget one's culture.

A state that is not a fortress, but is a part of a democratic Middle East, a Middle East that belongs to its peoples, not its rulers. A state where one doesn't live enclosed in European pretensions or Western fantasies - a state here, in the Middle East, whose main culture is Arab.

A state where Jewish and Palestinian children will be truly equal. Where their chances for a future, for education, for life with dignity, are equal. A state where they could both study at a university, in their own language. Where they can go to university in Hebrew, or go to university in Arabic. A state where no young person must give up his or her dreams because of discrimination on the basis of nationality.

A State of all its citizens and of both its peoples

In this future state, there will be no such thing as an unrecognized village. All villages will receive recognition, recognition and adequate resources for development. I am talking about development that will be shaped and decided upon by the residents themselves, not the authorities. Al-Araqib will be rebuilt, and people will come and visit it, as they will the dozens of other Bedouin villages and towns that will all receive recognition. Visitors will come to see the places where people were shot and injured, to show their respect to the people who struggled for their land, who struggled for themselves and, in doing so, struggled for us all, just as we are now paying our respects to those who struggled heroically for the lands of the Galilee in the 1970's.

In this state there will be equal rights, and no one will have special privileges. It will be a free state, and not a state of servants. No one will need to prove their loyalty to the state – the state will constantly have to prove its loyalty to its citizens, to all of them. No one will be required to serve the state: The state will be required to serve its citizens. There will be no mandatory national service [which they now seek to impose on Palestinian citizens], and no mandatory military service. No one in the state will be a servant. People will be free citizens.

This state, this truly democratic state, with full, equal rights, a state of all its citizens and both its peoples, will not be given to us as a gift. This is what Land Day teaches everyone, not just Palestinian Arab citizens, but also Jewish citizens. Rights are not given as a present. Rights are won through struggle.