

October 14, 2007

We're in the Building Age, not the Stone Age

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Four incidents of stone-throwing in ten months do not constitute "a return to the Stone Age," as *Maariv* announced. On the contrary, a stable civic fabric is being woven in the Wadi Ara region

A week ago, a main headline appeared in this newspaper – "A return to the Stone Age" in Wadi Ara (Oct. 7). This headline raises fear that a campaign against the residents of the area is simmering. The connection between the facts and the headlines, which were splashed across pages 2 and 3, was particularly feeble: Do two clusters of stone-throwing incidents by teenagers who came from the West Bank (they were apprehended, it was reported) ten months apart, and two incidents of stone throwing within Kafr Kara constitute a "return to the Stone Age," justifying a dance to the sounds of the war drums of October 2000?

Well, one can still hope that the night editor went crazy. Headlines like these serve to delegitimize Arab citizens living in proximity to the Green Line, adding pressure on the government to gerrymander them outside of the state's borders and strip them of their citizenship. So, for the information of those seeking to drive a wedge between Jews and Arabs, and to negate the Israeli citizenship of Wadi Ara residents, here are a few facts:

First, during the past three years, a forum of mayors has operated in the Wadi Ara region, with three Jewish localities and eight Arab localities participating. The chairman of the forum is the mayor of Umm al-Fahm, who accepted the leadership role in order to create a bridge between the Jewish and Arab localities in the region. His deputy is the head of the Menashe regional council.

Second, the forum established a joint and egalitarian directorate for developing a regional industrial zone in the eastern part of Wadi Ara. An agreement to form a joint directorate for a second industrial zone in the Wadi's western part is about to be signed. The main effort was focused on reaching agreements on an equal allocation of future tax revenues.

Third, the communities in Wadi Ara have yet to be included in any municipal organization for environmental protection. This has a decisive impact on various aspects of environmental quality, from trash removal to sewage treatment, which require cooperation and coordination between municipalities. The forum is now bringing the Wadi Ara communities into the Hadera Municipal Association for the Environment. This process is comprehensive and slow.

Four, entrepreneurs and local residents, Jews and Arabs, have joined together – encouraged by the mayors' forum – to establish a non-profit company promoting tourism in the area. During the past year, over 1,500 people, from Israel and overseas, visited the area. They participated in nature tours and visited art galleries, guided by their Jewish and Arab hosts. Recently, in the framework of the Ramadan Nights project, some of them also stayed the night at bed & breakfast on Mount Alexander in Umm al-Fahm.

The future of Wadi Ara, like that of the entire State of Israel, depends on weaving a sustainable civic fabric between Jews and Arabs, with their common citizenship in the State of Israel constituting the basis for work. It is no longer a "sensitive fabric of relations," threatening to unravel at any moment. The sign posted in Wadi Ara reads: "Caution, building here." Maariv's headline last week will not destroy the stable structure being constructed here, with much hard work. Just don't hinder the work.

The writer is a member of Kibbutz Ma'anit, located in the Wadi Ara region, and is the co-executive director of Sikkuy – The Association for the Advancement of Civic Equality.