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Land Day 2011 – More relevant than ever

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Beyond the ongoing shortage of land, the Arab public is marking Land Day this year on the backdrop of an extreme campaign of racism and incitement directed against it. Ali Haider believes that as long as nothing changes, the Land Day demonstrations will continue, and even intensify.

The Arab public all over the State of Israel – from the unrecognized villages in the Negev to the large towns in the Galilee – will mark Land Day today, in memory of the six Arab citizens who were killed by police and army fire during demonstrations against the confiscation of land by the state in 1976. Land Day has always been one of the central and formative days in the formation of the national identity of the Palestinian minority in Israel, but this year it would seem to be more important and relevant than ever; therefore, the Arab Higher Monitoring Committee in Israel decided to declare a general strike this year among the Arab public.

For the past 35 years during which Land Day has been commemorated, the ongoing distress of the Arab public when it comes to housing and land has been at the heart of the struggle. But in spite of the ongoing protest there is no improvement on this issue, and in certain groups – such as the unrecognized Bedouin communities in the Negev – it is evident that the state is only hardening its attitude. All over the country Arab communities are suffering from an acute shortage of land for housing, industry and agriculture – only 3.5 percent of land in Israel is owned by Arabs, with 1.5 percent of it not even within the municipal boundaries of the Arab municipalities. The main cause of all these problems is the fact that the legal frameworks for land ownership in Israel (such as the Jewish National Fund Law and the Jewish Agency Law), inherently discriminate against the Arab citizens.

A reminder to the leaders: There are international norms

In addition to the longstanding shortage of land and the determination of the Arab public to remain on its land, this year we are marking Land Day on the backdrop of an unprecedented campaign of racism, incitement and hatred toward the Arab public, led by senior politicians, clerics and public figures. The results of the incitement campaign can be seen all the more clearly in the past weeks in the Knesset. Every day new laws are approved whose only objective is to harm and exclude the Arab public living in the country. Laws such as the Nakba Law, the Acceptance Committees Law and a number of other racist laws that are already on the agenda, threaten to undermine the sensitive and very delicate fabric of relations in Israeli society, and prove that

protest days such as Land Day are even more relevant in Israel of 2011 than they were in 1970s Israel.

During the Land Day events this year the Palestinian public will protest not only against the built-in discrimination on the part of the establishment that it experiences in Israeli society, but also the racist wave that threatens to harm it and to exclude it from the public discourse. The protest is directed not only against the government and the Jewish majority in order to influence them to change the policy – in spite of the difficulty involved in doing so, but also to the international arena, in order to increase the world's awareness of the deteriorating situation of Israel's Arab population. In addition to the injustice perpetrated on the Arab public in the context of the Israeli government's mechanisms of oppression and discrimination, the leaders of the State of Israel must remember that they are signatories to and obligated by international norms and conventions designed to protect minorities in their countries. As long as these are not implemented and the Arab citizens of the country do not enjoy full civic equality, the tradition of Land Day will continue and will even intensify from year to year.

Attorney Ali Haider is Co-executive Director of Sikkuy: The Association for the Advancement of Civil Equality.