

JNF in crisis

By Avi Bar-Eli | May.14, 2007 | 12:00 AM (Haaretz English Edition)

The JNF has actually been in an extended identity crisis since the moment of the establishment of "a national home for the Jewish people in the Land of Israel," which pulled the rug out from under the JNF's purpose - the redemption of land.

The Supreme Court's ruling in Kadan versus the JNF (in 2000), forbidding discrimination against Arab ownership of apartments in Jewish towns, was a turning point for the state's land management policy and essentially put an end to the state's tacit agreement not to lease JNF lands to Arabs. The JNF received the second indication of the policy changes with the recommendations of the Gadish Committee on land reform, which called for the transfer of urban lands to their leaseholders. The JNF refused to internalize this new direction in the Israeli public discourse and came to a silent arrangement whereby the ILA exchanged state land for JNF lands that were leased to Arabs.

This arrangement would have continued had it not been for the third blow to the JNF's existence - the planned reforms in the ILA, which would result in the cessation of the flow of monies from the ILA's marketing of JNF lands. The JNF cannot countenance this, and is therefore asking to separate from the ILA and reassume control over its own lands. This could prove quite difficult, as over the years the JNF's status and political power have eroded. Even so, some view this as an opportunity for the JNF to reinvent itself. Prof. Rachel Alterman of the Technion, for example, believes the JNF could exchange its valuable urban lands for rural areas and become a manager and guardian of Israel's green spaces. (Avi Bar-Eli)