

Israel's 'No Renting to Arabs' Policy

Jewish couple lose court battle to help Bedouin friends

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Nevatim — The Zakai and Tarabin families should be a picture of happy coexistence across the ethnic divide, a model for others to emulate in Israel.

But Natalie and Weisman Zakai say the past three years — since the Jewish couple offered to rent their home to Bedouin friends, Ahmed and Khalas Tarabin — have been a living hell.

"I have always loved Israel," said Mrs Zakai, 43. "But to see the depth of the racism of our neighbours has made me question why we live in this country."

Three of the couple's six dogs have been mysteriously poisoned; Mrs Zakai's car has been sprayed with the words "Arab lover" and the windows smashed; her three children in school are regularly taunted and bullied by other pupils; and a collection of vintage cars in the family's yard has been set on fire in what police say was an arson attack.

To add to these indignities, the Zakais have spent three years and thousands of dollars battling through the courts against the elected officials of their community of Nevatim, in Israel's southern Negev desert, who have said they are determined to keep the Tarabins from moving in.

Last week the Zakais' legal struggle looked like it had run out of steam. The supreme court told the two families the Tarabins should submit to a vetting committee of local officials to assess their suitability - a requirement that has never been made before by the Negev community in the case of a family seeking to rent a home.

"The decision of the committee is a foregone conclusion," Mr Tarabin said.

Chances for Jews and Arabs to live together — outside of a handful of cities — are all but impossible because Israel's rural communities are strictly segregated, said Alaa Mahajneh, a lawyer representing the Zakais.

Israel has nationalised 93 per cent of the country's territory, confining most of its 1.3 million Arab citizens, one-fifth of the population, to 120 or so communities that existed at the time of the state's creation in 1948.

Meanwhile, more than 700 rural communities, including Nevatim, have remained exclusively Jewish by requiring that anyone who wants to buy a home applies to local vetting committees, which have been used to weed out Arab applicants.

But Mr Mahajneh, from the Adalah legal centre for the Arab minority, noted that legal

sanction for such segregation was supposed to have ended a decade ago, when the supreme court backed an Arab couple, the Kaadans, who had been barred by a committee from the community of Katzir in northern Israel.

Although the Kaadans were eventually allowed to move into Katzir, the case has had little wider effect.

In fact, Mr Mahajneh said, the decision in the Zakais' case suggests "we're going backwards". The Kaadans won the right to buy a home in a Jewish community, whereas the Tarabin family were seeking only a short-term rental of the Zakais' home.

The Zakais said they had been told by the officials of Nevatim, a community of 650 Jews a few kilometres from the city of Beersheva, that it would not be a problem to rent out their home.

Mrs Zakai brought the Tarabins' ID cards to the community's offices for routine paperwork. "When I handed in the IDs, the staff looked at the card and said, 'But they're Muslims'." Later, according to Mrs Zakai, the council head, Avraham Orr, rang to say he Arabs would be accepted in Nevatim "over my dead body".

Several weeks later, Mrs Zakai said, two threatening men came to their door and warned them off renting to Arabs. Soon afterwards 36 cars belonging to Mr Zakai, who has a used car business, were set on fire.

Then behind the Zakais' back, Nevatim went to a local magistrate's court to get an order preventing them from renting their home. The couple have been battling the decision ever since.

Mr Mahajneh said the Tarabins had accommodated a series of "extraordinary conditions" imposed by Nevatim on the rental agreement, including certificates of good conduct from the police, a commitment to leave after a year, and limited access to the house's extensive grounds.

But still Nevatim officials were dissatisfied, insisting in addition that the Tarabins submit to questioning by a vetting committee to assess their suitability. Although 40 other homes in Nevatim are rented, Mr Mahajneh said testimonies from past members of the vetting committee showed that this was the first time such a demand had been made.

"It is true that anyone buying a property in Nevatim is supposed to be vetted by the committee, but there is no reference in the community's bylaws to this condition for renters," Mr Mahajneh said.

In 2008, a district court judge in Beersheva overruled Nevatim's new condition, arguing that the vetting requirement would be "unreasonable and not objective". The supreme court judges, however, sided with Nevatim in their concluding statements on March 10.

Mrs Zakai said they had offered to rent their home to the Tarabins after the Bedouin couple's home burnt down in their village in early 2007, killing one of their 10 children. The Tarabins have been living with relatives ever since, unable to afford a new home and keen to move away from the site of the tragedy.

Mr Tarabin, 54, said: "I want Khalas to rest and heal and this place would have been perfect for her. The house has large grounds and we could have kept to ourselves. No one in Nevatim needs to have anything to do with us if they don't want."

A Nevatim resident who spoke anonymously to the Haaretz newspaper last week suggested reasons for the community's opposition: "If tomorrow the entire Tarabin tribe wants to live here and we don't agree, what will people say? The problem will start after the first one comes because then dozens more families will want to move here."

The close friendship forged between the Zakais and Tarabins is rare in Israel. The privileged status of Jews legally and economically, communal segregation and the hostility provoked by a larger national conflict between Israel and the Palestinians ensure that Jewish and Arab citizens usually remain at arm's length.

But Mr Zakai, 53, whose parents emigrated from Iraq and who speaks fluent Arabic, befriended Mr Tarabin in the late 1960s when they were teenagers in Beersheva. Later they served together in the Israeli army as mechanical engineers.

Mrs Zakai said: "If Jews were being denied the right to live somewhere, it would be a scandal, but because our friends are Arabs no one cares."

Avraham Orr, the Nevatim council head, denied that he was opposing the Tarabins' admission because they are Arab. "There are rules," he said. "Every family that wants to buy or rent a property must first go through the committee."

Fearful of the implications of the Kaadan ruling, Jewish communities in the Galilee unveiled a new approach to barring Arab applicants last year. They introduced bylaws amounting to loyalty oaths that require applicants to pledge to support "Zionism, Jewish heritage and settlement of the land".

Jonathan Cook is a writer and journalist based in Nazareth, Israel. His latest books are "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His website is www.jkcook.net.

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