

Jewish town in Galilee demands 'loyalty oath'

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New bylaw designed to bar Arab couple

Misgav. A community in northern Israel has changed its bylaws to demand that new residents pledge support for "Zionism, Jewish heritage and settlement of the land" in a thinly veiled attempt to block Arab applicants from gaining admission.

Critics are calling the bylaw, adopted by Manof, home to 170 Jewish families in Galilee, a local "loyalty oath" similar to a national scheme recently proposed by the far-Right party of the government minister Avigdor Lieberman.

Other Jewish communities in the central Galilee — falling under the umbrella of a regional council known as Misgav — are preparing similar bylaws in response to a court petition filed by an Arab couple hoping to build a home in Misgav.

"It looks very much like this is being co-ordinated by the Misgav council in an attempt to pre-empt the court ruling," said Ronin Ben Ari, resident of another Misgav community, Mikhmanim, and an opponent of the bylaw change.

Manof's move comes in the wake of efforts by Ahmed and Fatina Zbeidat, who live in the neighbouring Arab town of Sakhnin, to win admission to the Misgav community of Rakafet.

Traditionally some 700 rural communities in Israel, including 30 in Misgav, have weeded out Arab applicants by issuing automatic rejections through special vetting committees. Arab citizens make up one-fifth of the country's population.

According to a legal rights group, rural communities, which are home to only five per cent of the population but have control over four-fifths of the countryside, are seen by the state as a bulwark against Arabs gaining access to what are called "national lands".

However, the vetting system has been under threat since a court ruling in 2000 that required the committees to consider Arab applicants and justify their decisions.

In line with the ruling, the Zbeidats demanded the right to take a suitability test when their application was turned down in 2006. Examiners found Fatina too "individualistic" for life in a small community while her husband lacked "knowledge of sophisticated interpersonal relations".

The Zbeidats then petitioned the courts against the use of vetting committees, saying they enforced "blatant discrimination" against Arab applicants.

Earlier this year, in an indication that the court was preparing to back them, it demanded that the attorney-general explain why the vetting committees should continue.

“There is little doubt that many residents of Misgav are panicking about the court case,” said Mr Ben Ari, who heads a small dissident group called Alternative Voice in the Galilee.

He added that Ron Shani, who was elected Misgav’s mayor late last year, made opposition to the Zbeidats’ bid to live in Rakafet a major platform in his campaign.

Mr Shani defended the bylaw change last week to the Israeli media. “The council’s position is that it is appropriate to strengthen the character of the community — a community in which Zionist values and Jewish heritage stand at the heart of its way of life. We don’t see this as racism in any way.”

Mr Ben Ari said: “There is a widely held feeling in Misgav that changing the bylaws is a legitimate way for the Jewish minority in the Galilee to defend itself against an Arab and Islamic danger.

“The residents here are not right-wing types like Lieberman. They see themselves as liberals and in fact are made very uncomfortable by the Lieberman comparison.”

A bill proposed by Mr Lieberman’s Yisrael Beiteinu party that conditioned citizenship on declaring loyalty to a Jewish state was rejected by a ministerial committee last week. Mr Lieberman campaigned in February’s general election on a platform of “No loyalty, no citizenship”.

Such views are widely held, according to polls. One in 2006 found that 68 per cent of Israeli Jews would refuse to live next to an Arab and 46 per cent would not allow an Arab to visit their home.

The bylaw, accepted by an overwhelming majority in Manof, stipulates that applicants must share “the values of the Zionist movement, Jewish heritage, settlement of the Land of Israel ... and observance of Jewish holidays”.

It also proposes that local children be encouraged to join the Zionist youth movement and the Israeli army.

A similarly worded proposal will come before another Misgav community, Yuvalim, later this month.

One resident opposed to the change, Arik Kirschenbaum, told the liberal Haaretz newspaper last week: “It suddenly seems as if we adopted bylaws from the settlements.”

Residents of Manof have been quoted in the Israeli media decrying accusations of racism.

“It’s unpleasant and even offensive to wake up one morning and find that you’ve turned into Lieberman,” said Alon Mayer, pointing out that Yisrael Beiteinu won only 2.5 per cent of Manof’s vote in the February general election.

Several residents were reported to fear that living alongside Arabs might lead to ethnic tensions and sectarian violence.

Suhad Bishara, a lawyer with the Adalah legal rights group who is representing the Zbeidats, said: "There is nothing unique or special about the way of life in these communities to justify this kind of restriction on admission.

"Rather, the purpose of the selection system is to make sure 80 per cent of the territory inside Israel is not accessible to Arabs, that the control of public resources stays exclusively in Jewish hands."

The Zbeidats' application was submitted after they were unable to find a building plot in Sakhnin. The town's young couples face increasing difficulties building homes after much of Sakhnin's land was turned over to Misgav's jurisdiction.

Sakhnin officials point out that its 25,000 inhabitants have only one-twentieth of the land available to the 20,000 residents of Misgav's 30 communities. An appeal by Sakhnin that it be awarded some of Misgav's land was rejected by a boundary commission in 2005.

Misgav promotes itself, in the words of its website, as a model of "ethnic pluralism" because it includes 5,000 Bedouin.

However, critics note that Misgav's Bedouin live in a handful of separate communities deprived of the land available to the Jewish communities.

The Bedouin inhabitants are generally denied basic services such as water and electricity, as well as schools and medical clinics. In one, Arab al Naim, the inhabitants are forced to live in tin shacks because permanent structures are demolished by the state.

Last week, three members of the Israeli parliament introduced a bill stipulating that vetting committees should assess candidates' "suitability to the community's way of life and social fabric". The legislators said the bill would help in "maintaining the Zionist vision".

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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