

Israel's Arab Citizens Fight for a Roof over Their Heads

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Image: A relative surveys the ruins of Tareq Khatib's home / Photos: Jonathan Cook

Official 'Judaisation' policy blamed for severe housing crisis as anger mounts over family made homeless twice in two months

The start of the Muslim holy fasting month of Ramadan has been bitter for Tareq Khatib.

The Israeli authorities razed his home for the second time in two months last week. Now under house arrest, he is confined to a friend's home and separated from his wife and children.

His lawyer has warned that he should expect a bill from the state for hundreds of thousands of dollars to cover the costs of the demolitions and security operations.

Fingering prayer beads, the 48-year-old father of five looked disconsolate, his hopelessness compounded by fatigue from the afternoon heat and a long day without food or water.

"Where are my family and I supposed to live?" he asked. "It seems the government thinks the only place for us is out on the street, without a roof over our heads. It's like they are waging a war against their own citizens."

In the darkness before dawn on June 15, hundreds of Israeli [police entered the Galilee town](#) of Kafr Kana, close to Nazareth, to destroy Khatib's almost-completed house.

It was carried out like a military operation, he told Middle East Eye. Police, some on horseback, sealed off the roads to the area while others fired stun grenades and rubber bullets as dozens of neighbours and relatives tried to stop the demolition. Four people were arrested, including Khatib himself.

Treated like an enemy

Khatib's long and unsuccessful battle to build his family a home legally has come to symbolise a much larger struggle by Israel's Palestinian minority against decades of land confiscations, severe planning restrictions and an ever-escalating housing crisis.

Israel's 1.5 million Palestinians, a fifth of the population, have citizenship but their leaders say they are treated more like an enemy population.

The formation in May of an ultra-nationalist coalition under Benjamin Netanyahu has further raised fears that the destruction of Khatib's home will herald a wave of house demolitions in the Galilee.

Interior ministry officials are evasive about figures for unauthorised building in Israel, but experts say the number of such homes is believed to have reached around 30,000 in Israel's Palestinian communities.

"That means one in 10 Arab homes in Israel is treated as illegal by the government and faces the threat of demolition," said Hana Swaid, who was until recently an Arab member of the Israeli parliament.

He heads the Arab Centre for Alternative Planning, an organisation promoting fairer land and housing allocations for the Palestinian minority.

According to Swaid, the housing problems faced by Khatib and thousands of other Palestinian families in Israel derive from an official Zionist policy of "Judaisation".

"The goal since the state's creation has been to Judaise territory. That doesn't mean just building communities for Jews but tightly restricting where Arab citizens can live. They are trapped with no options for the future for themselves or their children."

The result has been rampant overcrowding in Arab communities, with a chronic lack of open spaces, proper roads, and industrial and commercial centres offering employment opportunities.

100,000 homes needed

Khatib's troubles gained public attention in April when he, his wife and three of his children were evicted. The house he had built two years earlier in his family's olive grove, on the edge of Kafr Kana, was destroyed.

Some 26 other homes in the town are threatened with immediate demolition. Despite repeated appeals from the local municipality, planning officials have refused to expand the town's residential area for more than 15 years.

Arfan Khatib, a local councillor, [told the Haaretz daily](#) that parts of Kafr Kana – the place where Jesus reputedly performed his first miracle, turning water into wine – now looked more like "refugee camps".

Tareq Khatib said: "I have been trying for years to get a permit to build on my land without success. We couldn't keep living in a small rented apartment for ever, so I decided it was time to build."

A [recent study](#), according to Haaretz, showed that approval of at least 100,000 additional homes was needed over the next decade to avert a deepening housing crisis among the Palestinian minority.

Based on the housing ministry's current estimates, barely a fifth of the necessary building permits will be issued to Palestinian citizens. In recent years approval rates have actually fallen.

The demolition of Khatib's house in April, along with five homes in three buildings in the village of Dahmash in central Israel, triggered a general strike by the country's Palestinian minority and a [protest by thousands](#) in central Tel Aviv under the banner "Fighting for our homes".

Ayman Odeh, leader of the Joint List, the main Arab party in the Israeli parliament, told the demonstrators: "A family which loses its home, built on its own private land, is shattered."

Simultaneous efforts to hold an [emergency debate](#) in parliament on the minority's housing problems were blocked by opposition from the Jewish parties.

The attorney general, Yehuda Weinstein, meanwhile, [has warned](#) that a failure to enforce demolitions would be "irreconcilable" with the rule of law.

House built in six days

Angered by the demolition in Kafr Kana, local residents rallied to Khatib's side and rebuilt his house this month in just six days.

Their efforts now lie in ruins. A large mound of rubble and twisted steel wires marks the spot where his second house briefly stood.

A torn green canvas and crumpled metal frame close by are all that is left of a large tent the family had been living in while they finished the house. Friends were able to salvage only mattresses, blankets and chairs before the bulldozers set to work.



"They chose their moment carefully," Khatib said. "That day we were due to get the house connected to water and move in. Now nothing's left."

Will he try to build his house a third time? He shrugged, the mammoth task one he is apparently not yet willing to contemplate. "The system is rigged against us," he said.

The interior ministry, which oversees building permits, was unavailable for comment. Government officials, however, regularly claim that Palestinian citizens like Khatib are refusing to abide by planning rules and prefer to build illegally.

Jeff Halper, director of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD), said thousands of Palestinian families in Israel were trapped in what he termed the same “matrix of control” that operates in the occupied territories of East Jerusalem and the West Bank, where demolitions also regularly take place.

“People are surprised that Israel demolishes three times more homes inside Israel, against its Palestinian citizens, than it does in the occupied territories,” he told MEE. “The number of demolitions in Israel undermines the idea that the policy is simply a problem of the occupation.”

ICAHD, he said, had launched a new campaign called “[Judaising Palestine](#)” to emphasise that Israel’s goal was confinement and displacement of all Palestinians wherever they were living in historic Palestine.

Despite a slow-down in Jewish immigration in recent years, Judaisation is still being actively pursued.

In late 2013 the Jewish National Fund, an international Zionist charity with semi-governmental status, [announced](#) it would invest \$1 billion over the next decade to encourage 250,000 Jews from the US and Europe to move to the Galilee and Negev.

Jewish-only communities

The land and housing problems faced by Israel’s Palestinian citizens, note experts, have a long history that started in the immediate wake of the 1948 war that established Israel as a Jewish state.

Israel confiscated most of its new Palestinian minority’s lands, as well as that of the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians freshly made refugees. It then nationalised 93 per cent of its total territory on behalf of worldwide Jewry.

Israel built hundreds of rural, land-hungry communities for Jews, including farming collectives like the kibbutz, that exclude Palestinian citizens through admission committees, said Swaid.

The Palestinian minority has been mostly confined to some 130 separate communities occupying just 2.5 per cent of Israel’s land.

“While over 1,000 new Jewish communities have been established [since Israel’s creation], not a single Arab settlement has been authorized,” [notes the website of Adalah](#), a legal centre for Israel’s Palestinian minority.

The Or Commission, an Israeli judicial-led inquiry, concluded in 2003 that systematic discrimination in land and housing had been a major cause of unrest in the Galilee three years earlier. Israeli police shot dead 13 unarmed Palestinian citizens and wounded hundreds more during demonstrations in Israel at the start of the second intifada.

The commission [observed](#) that waves of massive land expropriations had been viewed by

the Palestinian minority as a “dispossession enterprise”. Despite a sevenfold increase in the Palestinian minority’s numbers since the state’s founding, it added, zoning for residential areas had barely increased.

Destroyed 80 times

The picture in Israel’s south, in the semi-desert Negev, is particularly extreme, Maysanna Morany, a lawyer with Adalah, told MEE.

There, several dozen Bedouin villages have been unrecognised by the state and 10,000 homes are automatically under threat of demolition.

The small village of al-Araqib, near Beersheva, has become a test case for the government, with the authorities destroying the entire village [more than 80 times](#) over the past five years.

Last month the Israeli Supreme Court also [approved](#) the demolition of another Bedouin village, Umm al-Hiran, to make way for an exclusive Jewish town on its land.

But there are severe problems too in the 120 or so recognised Arab communities in the Galilee and Triangle areas in the north and centre of the country, where 20,000 homes are ruled illegal.

In most cases it is because they are built in communities either lacking a state-approved master plan or with a long out-dated master plan that fails to take account of the Palestinian minority’s growth, said Morany.

Umm al-Fahm, the second largest Palestinian town in Israel after Nazareth, with a population of 50,000, has no master plan, making all its homes illegal.

A change in approach has been blocked because planning committees, dominated by Jewish officials, have refused to abandon the state’s Judaisation policy, said Swaid.

Recent research based on interior ministry data [showed](#) that no Palestinian citizen held a professional position on any of Israel’s planning committees, which oversee and approve community master plans. Further, none of the 74 staff of the interior ministry’s Planning Authority was Arab.

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