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Residents fume as court approves Jewish-only housing

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TEL AVIV, Israel (Ma'an) -- A recent Israeli Supreme Court decision to give the green light to an organization that intends to build a Jewish-only apartment complex in the predominantly Palestinian neighborhood of Ajami in Jaffa has local residents and associations up in arms.

"We are very disappointed from the decision of the [Supreme] Court," said Sami Abu Shahadeh, the Coordinator of Darna, The Popular Committee for Housing Rights in Jaffa.

"The result of this decision is that it is legal and legitimate to build a settlement in the heart of the Ajami neighborhood, which has a vast Arab majority. The settlement is closed only for national, religious Jews, and this means that anyone who is living now in the Ajami neighborhood -- Arab or Jew -- is not allowed to have an apartment in the project which is built nearby his house," he said.

Indeed, with the Supreme Court's ruling, Be'emunah, a settler movement that aims to create ideological and religious Jewish communities in cities with large Palestinian populations, was given the go-ahead to build 20 apartments in the heart of Ajami.

28 Palestinian residents of Jaffa were petitioning against the Israeli Lands Authority, which sold land tenders to Be'emunah.

According to Israeli daily Haaretz, the Supreme Court rejected the appeal on the basis that it was theoretical in nature, inasmuch as "the rights to the land already have been granted to a real estate purchasing company created by Be'emunah."

The court found that while it was important for the ILA to oversee the selling of land in a non-discriminatory way in the future, "the appeal is against a done deal, and the requested support is no longer practical. There is no longer a practical possibility of taking away the

respondents' rights to the plot of land," Haaretz reported.

The Association for Civil Rights in Israel, Rabbis for Human Rights and Bimkom - Planners for Planning Rights had joined the residents of Ajami in this latest appeal.

According to Abu Shahadeh, the reasoning behind the court's decision was problematic.

"Now, the Israeli Land Authority is not allowed to do the same mistake again, which means to give the land of the state to a group which is a racist group. If this was a mistake in [Supreme Court President Dorit] Beinisch's point of view, why is [the ILA] allowed to do it in Jaffa?" he said.

"If it's wrong, she should have stopped this settlement from being built in the Ajami neighborhood. If it's not wrong, she shouldn't have written in her decision that in the future, such things should not happen. So there is a contradiction in her decision from my point of view."

The legal battle over the Ajami neighborhood began in May 2009, when the ILA first awarded the winning bid over the land to Be'emunah. Soon thereafter, Palestinian residents in the neighborhood argued in the Tel Aviv District Administrative Court that providing housing to religious Jews alone constituted discrimination.

In July 2010, the residents of Ajami were in Jerusalem to petition the Israeli High Court against the proposed plans.

"The land is public land and therefore the Israeli Land Administration that must decide what the designation of the land should be. When it marketed this land to the entire public, a private entrepreneur can't come and decide to sell the apartment to public X and not Y. That he will not sell it to Arabs, for example, or to people who aren't religious," Attorney Gil Gan-Mor, from the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, said at the time.

"We don't accept the fact that this private entrepreneur can decide on his own that he will sell to X and not Y. This is discrimination that we do not accept. The Israeli Lands Authority is failing in its responsibility to manage the land and this is unacceptable and leads to discrimination," Gan-Mor said.

Ultimately, for Sami Abu Shahadeh, the recent decision was not only extremely disheartening, but it highlighted the increasing assault of the Israeli state on its Palestinian citizens, especially those living in so-called "mixed" cities like Ramla, Lod and Jaffa.

"Every citizen is asked to be loyal according to [Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor] Lieberman's agenda. And if you don't fit into Lieberman's agenda, you will either be imprisoned - like a big part of the Palestinian leadership now in Israel, they are in the prison, for no good reason - or, you are all the time spoken about as a demographic threat," Abu Shahadeh said.

"The general feeling is a huge amount of frustration [among the Palestinian citizens of Israel]. People are very frustrated. They are becoming very afraid from racist policies and racist attitudes of the Jewish majority towards them. We are talking about [one of] the most basic rights which is housing, and if you are not having your right to build yourself a house or buy yourself a house in the area that you were born in, this is transfer."

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