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## OCHA Case Study Life in a “Firing Zone”

### THE MASSAFER YATTA COMMUNITIES

At least 1,300 people currently live in the Masafer Yatta area of south Hebron Hills. Palestinian communities have been living in this area for decades, many since before the Israeli occupation began in 1967. However, in the 1980s the Israeli authorities designated most of this area, including 14 communities, as a closed military zone for training, a so-called “Firing Zone 918”. Subsequently, these communities have been subject to a range of policies and practices that have undermined their physical security, lowered their standard of living, and increased their poverty levels and dependence on humanitarian aid. The communities are at continuous risk of forcible transfer out of the area.

#### PERSONAL STORY

I was born in Khirbet Saroura and have lived there for more than 30 years; I got married and my wife delivered 10 children there. I left in 1996 with other families when the road to our village was closed by the nearby Ma'on settlement but I continued to access my land in the area for several years. However, we continued to experience violent attacks by settlers from Ma'on settlement; in 2003 for example the settlers attacked us while we were harvesting our wheat - they set our crops alight and killed my donkey. Since that time I haven't accessed Khirbet Saroura but the land is cultivated by my relatives who still live nearby.

I had 120 heads of animals which I sold after I left Khirbet Saroura; I had no house to live in so I built a small house in Irafaiyeh but this was later demolished by the Israeli authorities because I didn't have a permit for building it. My childrens houses in Irafaiyeh also have demolition orders against them. The barn I built in Irafaiyeh to house the five cows that are my new source of income also has a demolition order. I lost everything when I fled Khirbet Saroura.

Mohammed, 54 years old.

In 1999, the Israeli military evicted of their homes and property, on the grounds that this area was a “Firing Zone”. A few months later, the Israeli High Court of Justice, in a response to a petition from the residents, issued an interim injunction order allowing some of the people to temporarily return, pending a final court decision. In 2012, in the context of the ongoing legal case, the Israeli authorities confirmed they intend to “remove” nine of the remaining communities from the area and allow only limited access for cultivation and grazing. The Israeli authorities have continued to argue that the residents of Masafer Yatta are living in the area illegally and that they are seasonal dwellers, not permanent residents, a status which under current Israeli military orders would allow them to stay. Many of the families however have documentation proving their ownership of the land.

"Our life is so  
difficult, we are under  
pressure from the  
settlers, IDF and civil  
administration to  
give up and leave our  
villages..."

Khalid, 44 years old,  
a community leader

Families in two other communities in the area – Al Kharouba and Khirbet Saroura – have already been forced to leave their homes as a result of settlement activity, including settler violence.

Like many other Palestinian communities located in Area C, which is under full Israeli military and administrative control, Palestinians living in Masafer Yatta are particularly vulnerable and food insecure. They rely on livestock, mostly sheep and goats, as their primary source of income. Some families are unable to support their livestock since access to grazing areas is restricted due to the threat of settler violence or by the Israeli military, and thus have reduced income with which to meet their own needs, increasing their levels of poverty. All of the communities located in the Firing Zone are dependent upon food assistance from humanitarian organizations.

Palestinians in these areas are unable to plan and develop their communities. Currently, most of the homes and infrastructure in Masafer Yatta has been issued with a 'demolition' or 'stop work' order by the Israeli Civil Administration. At least 80 residential structures and animal shelters have received such orders, on the grounds that they were built without the necessary building permits from the Israeli authorities. Building permits cannot be obtained by these communities because the land has been designated as a “Firing Zone”.

Because they are not able to build 'legally', the families in this area are living in sub-standard housing, unable to expand or even maintain their existing homes which are simple old stone houses, concrete walled structures with tin roofs or more temporary structures. Many families also live in caves. None of the families are connected to the water network and thus rely on tankered water, provided at up to eight times the normal cost. They are not connected to the electricity network either. At least 30 water cisterns, and six solar panels and wind turbine systems owned by the communities have been issued with 'demolition' orders.

“These communities are in a Catch-22 situation” said the UN's Humanitarian Coordinator, Mr. James W. Rawley who has visited the area; “they need to provide homes for their families and shelter for their livestock but they are not allowed to build on their own land”.

The restrictions on development apply also to the construction of public service buildings like schools and health clinics. There is only one basic primary school in the area which has a classrooms located in Jinba and Al Fakhit – both classrooms have been issued with demolition orders. Children must walk up to four kilometres to reach these classrooms and up to seven kilometres to reach the nearest high school. A local mosque has been demolished twice since 2011 and



