

# 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



“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

### 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.

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.

In 1999, the Israeli military evicted most of the residents from the area and destroyed or confiscated most

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.

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



Al Fakhit clinic, operated by Union of Health Work Committee, and CARE International - funded by ECHO. The clinic provides primary health care services and operates once weekly.

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 there are no paved roads serving the

community. The local health clinic also has a demolition order issued against it.

Since the late 1970's, the Israeli authorities declared thousands of dunams in and around Masafer Yatta, including within the firing zone, as "state land". This land was subsequently leased to the World Zionist Organization, which allocated them for the development of Israeli settlements, illegal under international law. Consequently, Palestinian communities in Masafer Yatta became gradually surrounded by a belt of Israeli settlements from the north, east and southeast. One settlement outpost, established in the middle of the firing zone (Old Ma'on Farm), was removed by the Israeli authorities in 2004.

The establishment of Israeli settlements in the area has resulted in increased restrictions on the freedom of movement of the communities, reduced the space available to them for grazing their livestock and also severely undermined their physical security. Over the years, the communities have regularly faced intimidation and violence

*“Last August, during Ramadan, the army raided our house. They forced us to go outside and sit in the sun for a long time, including my father who is 85 years old. He was fasting and it was very hot. They poured yoghurt and ghee that we have produced on the floor. We had invested a lot of work in that”*

24 year old Zainab

from Israeli settlers and there has been little or no law enforcement by the Israeli authorities to prevent this. The communities have also been subjected to regular search and arrest operations and by Israeli military training exercises conducted in the area.

Humanitarian organizations and donors are currently providing assistance to these communities in an effort to meet their basic needs. However, these efforts are impeded by the issuance of 'demolition' or 'stop work' orders against many of the items provided,

by confiscation of organisations' vehicles and equipment, and by restrictions on the physical access of humanitarian workers to the area.

"These communities are already very vulnerable" said Mr. Rawley. "Displacing them from their homes and land would be absolutely devastating, particularly for the

children. We urge the Israeli authorities to halt the demolitions of homes and infrastructure belonging to these communities, to facilitate access for humanitarian organizations trying to assist them and ultimately to allow them to remain on their land, to live in safety and dignity", he added.

### Israeli-declared "Firing Zones"

Approximately 18% of the West Bank has been designated as "Firing Zones". At least 5,000 Palestinians, mostly herders, live in 38 communities in these areas. Although many of the communities have lived in the areas in question for decades, Palestinian access to the areas is formally prohibited and their Palestinian residents face repeated demolitions and displacement. At least ten Israeli settlement outposts, illegal under Israeli law, are partially or completely located in "Firing Zones". According to available information, few of these settlement outposts have been removed or their structures issued with 'demolition' orders.

Under **international humanitarian law**, Israel is obliged to protect the Palestinian civilian population and to administer the occupied territory for their benefit. The forcible transfer of civilians from or within occupied territory is absolutely prohibited, regardless of the motive and whether the affected residents are permanent or seasonal dwellers. An occupying power may temporarily evacuate people from their homes only in the context of active hostilities, if people's safety or imperative military reasons so demand. Those affected must be provided with adequate shelter and other assistance for the duration of evacuation. The destruction of private property is strictly prohibited. Forced evictions are also *prima facie* contrary to international human rights law which recognizes the rights of everyone to an adequate standard of living, including to adequate housing.



