

Resource on Pending Eviction of Residents from the Masafer Yatta area (“Firing Zone 918”) in the South Hebron Hills



BACKGROUND:

On Tuesday, March 15, Israel’s High Court of Justice held what may be the last hearing on the 22-year-old case that is likely to determine the fate of 12 villages that are home to 1,300 people in the South Hebron Hills, a remote area of the West Bank south of Hebron called Masafer Yatta where agricultural and shepherding communities have lived for generations.

In the early 1980s, the IDF declared these communities’ 35,000 dunams “Firing Zone 918.” This is now known to have been part of an effort to displace Palestinians from their homes and strengthen Israeli settlements in the area. The [Akevot Institute](#) uncovered that, in 1981, then Agricultural Minister and soon-to-be Defense Minister Ariel Sharon said explicitly that he wanted to declare this area a “firing zone” to curb Palestinians’ demographic growth. Across Area C in the West Bank, firing zones are used as a tool to expropriate Palestinian land; 18% of the land in the West Bank has been declared a “firing zone”.

In 1999, the army issued eviction orders for those living there, claiming that the Palestinians who had lived there for decades were not “permanent residents.” The

army loaded residents onto trucks and transferred them out of their villages. This, despite the fact that Israel has many other, vast training areas.

In 2000, *The Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI)*, NIF's flagship grantee, got involved and won the residents an interim court order that allowed them to return to their homes until the Court reaches a final decision. The order is still in force, but a decision from this latest hearing could upend it. At a previous hearing in August 2020, the Court clarified that it would prefer the case end in a "compromise settlement." The court has hinted that a "compromise" would mean that the army would be allowed to require residents to leave for extended periods of time while they complete their drills. But this would amount to forced transfer, and would be illegal under international law, as it would be impossible for the residents to remain living there. The petitioners insist that they should not be evacuated from their homes at all.

The hearing on March 15 did not result in a ruling. That ruling *could* be issued at any time, but is expected in two or three months. If the Supreme Court decides to permit the expulsion of residents, it will be one of the largest expulsions carried out by the State of Israel in recent decades.

LEGAL FACTORS:

- *International Law*: Firing Zone 918 is in opposition to international law which prohibits the expulsion of a population from its land and the use of occupied land for military training.
 - "So long as it cannot be decided that the closure of the area for military training serves an immediate, temporary, and imperative military need of the occupying forces," the declaration of a firing zone contravenes Articles 46 and 52 of the Hague Regulations and Article 53 of the Geneva Convention, treaties to which Israel is party.
- *Israeli Law*:
 - Meir Shamgar, when he was Military Advocate General (he would eventually become the Chief Justice of Israel's Supreme Court), just after the 1967 War, said: "Article 49 of the Geneva Convention...to which Israel is party, expressly prohibits the forcible transfer of civilians in occupied territory, unless required to do so for military reasons. It cannot be said that military reasons clearly compel the evacuation of territories designated to become training zones."

WHAT NIF'S GRANTEES ARE DOING:

ACRI has accompanied the residents of these villages on their legal journey for twenty years.

- ACRI's short [backgrounder](#) on the issue.
- ACRI on social media: [Twitter](#); [Instagram](#)

Breaking the Silence

- Video explainer: [“How Would You Feel if the Military were to Train in Your Backyard?”](#)
- 45-second campaign video to [#SaveMasaferYatta](#)
- Live tweeting of the hearing [in English](#) and [Hebrew](#).
- [History of military exercises in Firing Zone 918](#)

B'Tselem:

- Video explainer: [“Firing Zone 918: An Exercise in War Crimes”](#)
- Report: [Means of Expulsion: Violence Harassment and Lawlessness against Palestinians in the South Hebron Hills](#)
- Report: [Expulsion of Residents from the South Mt. Hebron Area, October-November 1999](#)
- Explainer: [Masafer Yatta communities whose land was declared a “firing zone” \(2013\)](#)

Coalition & Partner Initiatives

- **Protest.** On Tuesday, a coalition of organizations (including NIF grantees *Breaking the Silence*, *Omdim Beyachad*, and *Zazim*) held a [demonstration](#) at the Supreme Court to “demand an end to ethnic cleansing and the forced deportation of 1,300 residents from Masafer Yatta in the South Hebron Hills”.
- **J Street's Instagram Explainer:** [A deep dive into firing zones in the West Bank and how they abet de-facto annexation.](#)
- **Info-sheet** prepared with information from the *Association for Civil Rights in Israel*, *Breaking the Silence*, *Haqel*, *Kerem Navot*, and *Rabbis for Human Rights*: [The 12 Villages of Masafar Yatta \(Firing Zone 918\) in the South Hebron Hills](#)
- **Document exposed by Akevot Institute:** [Ariel Sharon instructed IDF to create training zone to displace Palestinians](#)
- A collection of information, reports and links from the [#SaveMasaferYatta](#) coalition.

Deep Dive: ACRI's arguments to the court

- **There is no “need” for a Firing Zone:**
 - No live-fire drill has been carried out in this Firing Zone for 22 years.
 - The IDF claims that this Firing Zone is needed to train Nahal recruits, but the corresponding base for trainees was only built after the zone was declared.
 - According to international law, the IDF can only legally expropriate land in an occupied area on security grounds if it's needed for the security of the occupied area itself—for “immediate, emergency use.” Training Nahal brigade soldiers in a permanent firing zone does not fall within that definition.
- **Palestinians are “permanent residents” of this area.**
 - While the state claims that this was barren land, only used for seasonal agriculture, aerial photos as early as WWI as well as from the 1960s and 70s demonstrate that at least two of the villages in the area had numerous structures.
 - Palestinians in the area historically lived in caves carved out of the rock, but in claiming that they should not be allowed to build any structure, the state is arguing that these Palestinians lives should be frozen—that their children should be expected to live exactly as their grandparents did.
- **Palestinian residents have had no choice but to build on their land.**
 - The state accepts that the population of Masafer Yatta has grown fivefold, yet it claims that the residents have been flouting the law by building “illegally.” This is absurd considering the fact that, by definition, in military firing zones, building permits are not granted. The residents had no choice but to build “illegally”, even as these structures (solar panels, water cisterns and schools) are constantly demolished.
 - The Israeli settlement of Susya is just 1.5km from the Firing Zone, and three illegal outposts sit partially *inside* of the Firing Zone. This is something that the international community is sure to note if Masafer Yatta's residents are forcibly transferred. Settlers develop their nearby settlements however they see fit, while the Palestinians cannot build a pen for their livestock.