



# Israeli Firing Zones and Displacement of Palestinians in the West Bank

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Issue Brief #1 | July 2022

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## What are firing zones? How did they come to take up a large portion of the West Bank?

- Firing zones are closed areas in the occupied West Bank that Israel has designated for military training by the Israel Defense Forces. Israel has designated a substantial portion of the West Bank – [roughly 18 percent](#) – as firing zones. Despite claims of military need, only 20 percent of land classified as a firing zone is [actively used for military training](#).
- According to new archival evidence from a “top secret” meeting, the firing zones were designated to [reserve land for Israeli settlements](#). The zones were the brainchild of Ariel Sharon who, while Agriculture Minister in 1979, told a joint meeting of the Israeli government and the World Zionist Organization, **“As the person who initiated the military fire zones in 1967, they were all intended for one purpose: to provide an opportunity for Jewish settlement in the area.”** As intended, [land has been transferred to settlements](#) (which are [illegal](#) under international law) from the firing zones.

## What is Masafer Yatta and why is it important?

- Masafer Yatta is a collection of villages in the South Hebron Hills area of the West Bank, part of which was designated by Israel as “Firing Zone 918” in the 1980s. Over 1,000 Palestinian residents of Masafer Yatta are at risk of forced displacement – in what would be [the largest mass eviction of Palestinian families by Israel in decades](#).
- Israel’s High Court in May 2022 [upheld the longstanding expulsion order](#) against the Palestinian communities, finding no legal impediments to evicting them in order to clear the way for military training. The Court determined there were no permanent residents in the firing zone prior to its designation; however, the anthropologist on whose book the determination was based [disputes](#) this conclusion. [Aerial footage submitted to the Court](#) documents Palestinian residency in Masafer Yatta decades earlier.
- Since the court’s ruling, the Israeli military has [commenced live-fire training exercises](#) within shooting range of residential areas and [demolished Palestinians’ homes](#).

## How does living in a firing zone impact the life of its residents?

- Firing zone residents are [“among the most vulnerable in the West Bank.”](#) They typically have limited access to services, including education and health care.
- Israel maintains a [restrictive and discriminatory planning regime](#) that does not allow Palestinians in the firing zones to obtain building permits. Israeli authorities regularly issue

demolition orders against homes, animal shelters, cisterns, and infrastructure built without permits. Residents live with an ever-present fear of demolitions.

- These communities are [subject to violent attacks from settlers](#) living in nearby outposts.

### What does international law say about firing zones?

- Forced evictions are inconsistent with international humanitarian law, including [Article 49](#) and [Article 147](#) of the Fourth Geneva Convention. They [violate human rights](#), including the rights to adequate housing, water, sanitation, health, education, and privacy.
- As for demolitions, [Article 53](#) stipulates that an occupying power may only destroy property when it “is rendered absolutely necessary by military operations.” In 1967, [Chief Military Prosecutor Meir Shamgar declared](#) that evicting Palestinians from newly occupied territory to create firing zones was illegal under international law: **“It is not possible to claim that military reasons unquestionably necessitate the evacuation of areas designated as training zones, and as such, forcible transfer of the population from these areas would be a breach of the terms of the [Geneva Convention].”**

### What are the Biden Administration and US lawmakers saying?

- Led by Sen. Jeff Merkley and Rep. Melanie Stansbury, [20 senators and 63 representatives wrote to Secretary Antony Blinken](#) in May to ask him to “immediately engage with the Israeli government to prevent these evictions and further military training exercises” in Masafer Yatta.
- [Secretary Blinken has raised](#) “evictions of Palestinians from their homes where they lived for decades and generations” with Israeli officials as actions that “could spark tension, conflict and war and also ultimately undermine even further the difficult prospects for two states.” Asked by a reporter about the Israeli High Court’s decision on Masafer Yatta, State Department spokesman Ned Price [responded](#), “It is critical for all sides to refrain from steps that exacerbate tensions and that undercut efforts to advance a negotiated two-state solution. This certainly includes evictions.”

### How can President Biden counter firing zones being used for deepening occupation and de facto annexation?

- The President should state that demolitions of Palestinian homes and forced relocations of Palestinians are inconsistent with US interests and international law. He should also make clear that it is against [US arms export control law](#) for Israel to use US-origin military equipment in connection with demolitions, evictions and settlement expansion.
- Following the request in the bicameral Merkley-Stansbury letter, President Biden should “encourage the Israeli government to [approve master plans for the Masafer Yatta villages](#) so that they may build and maintain homes, schools, infrastructure, and sustain their agricultural and pastoral lands.”

