



ACTION MEMO: US Must Act Now against Forced Relocation of Palestinians in Masafer Yatta

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January 12, 2023

Senior Israeli officials have [confirmed](#) that the Israeli army has prepared, and shared with the new Israeli government's Security Cabinet for review and approval, operational plans for evicting the residents of eight Palestinian communities in the Masafer Yatta area of the occupied West Bank. The demolition of these communities and the forced relocation of their approximately 1,000 residents would be the largest mass eviction of Palestinians in decades. Such action is contrary to longstanding US policy and would violate Palestinian human rights and international law. The Biden Administration should immediately reiterate that the United States unequivocally opposes this mass eviction, and make clear that carrying it out would result in specific consequences for Israel's new government.

Background: Masafer Yatta and displacement of Palestinians via "firing zones"

Masafer Yatta is a collection of communities that are home to approximately 1,000 Palestinians in the South Hebron Hills area of the West Bank. Part of the area was designated by Israel as "Firing Zone 918" in the 1980s. Designation of land in occupied territory as a firing zone has been a tactic used to [reserve land for Israeli settlements](#). In 1979, then-Agriculture Minister (later Prime Minister) Ariel Sharon stated, "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." [Land in firing zones has been regularly transferred to settlements](#) (which are [illegal](#) under international law).

After decades of litigation, Israel's High Court, in May 2022, [upheld an expulsion order](#) against the Palestinian communities of Masafer Yatta, finding no legal impediments under Israeli law to evicting them in order to clear the way for "military training." Within months of the Court's decision, Israel's *Haaretz* newspaper [reported](#) that "life in the area has changed beyond recognition," with Masafer Yatta's Palestinian residents being subjected to an intensified coercive Israeli government [campaign](#) of harassment, deprivation and property destruction.

The international community – including the [Biden administration](#), the [European Union](#) and the [United Nations](#) – opposes the eviction of Masafer Yatta's residents. Such opposition was enough to prevent previous Israeli governments from carrying out the threatened mass eviction. Senior Israeli officials [stated](#) that Israel's army presented this latest plan to carry out the evictions only when [Israel's new government](#) – which has pledged to expand settlement in the West Bank where it claims "the Jewish people have an exclusive right" – came into office.

For more information on Masafer Yatta and Israeli firing zones, see the J Street Policy Center issue briefs "[Expulsion by Other Means: Israel's Campaign against Palestinians in Masafer Yatta](#)" and "[Israeli Firing Zones and Displacement of Palestinians in the West Bank](#)."

Masafer Yatta Evictions Contravene US Interests, Shared Values and International Law

The Biden administration has been clear that evictions hurt the US interest in Israeli security, Palestinian rights and the possibility of a negotiated resolution to the underlying conflict. When asked specifically about Masafer Yatta, State Department spokesman Ned Price [articulated US policy that](#), “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.”

US lawmakers have not only backed the Biden administration’s position but urged it to press further, with [20 senators and 63 representatives writing to Secretary Blinken](#) following the May High Court decision, asking him to “immediately engage with the Israeli government to prevent these evictions and further military training exercises” in Masafer Yatta. “As supporters of a strong US-Israel relationship,” the lawmakers wrote, “we believe such evictions undermine our shared democratic values, imperil Israel’s security, and disregard Palestinian human and civil rights.”

In addition to harming shared US and Israeli interests and values, the eviction would be inconsistent with Israel’s obligations under international law, including [Article 49](#) and [Article 147](#) of the Fourth Geneva Convention. With regard to the demolitions attendant to a mass eviction, [Article 53](#) stipulates that an occupying power may only destroy property when it “is rendered absolutely necessary by military operations.” That is why [Israel’s own Chief Military Prosecutor Meir Shamgar declared](#) in 1967 that evicting Palestinians from then-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].”

Taking Action: Recommendations for the Biden Administration

Given the fact that the operational plan for the mass eviction of Masafer Yatta now sits with the Israeli Security Cabinet for review, as well as the troubling stated policies of Israel’s new government regarding settlement expansion and the West Bank’s Palestinian residents, the Biden administration should not only immediately reiterate unequivocal US opposition to the eviction, but make clear that specific consequences would result from it. These include stating that:

- The United States will not block accurate criticism of the eviction that comports with US policy in international fora, including in the United Nations Security Council.
- The United States will support European donor countries’ [claims](#) for compensation from Israel for its demolition of foreign aid-funded structures and equipment in Masafer Yatta.
- Use of US-origin military equipment in connection with the eviction would merit an investigation into whether such use constituted a violation of [US arms export control law](#).