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## 1. Background

**The South Hebron Hills**, also known as Musafir Yatta, is a geographically isolated area of the West Bank severely affected by the Israeli occupation. The Hills are adjacent to the 1949 Armistice Green Line; the location and rural landscape makes it of **strategic importance for the Israeli administration** - as land with which to build and expand illegal Israeli settlements and outposts.

The area is home to 19 hamlets and is situated in Area C, meaning it is under full Israeli control, like 60 per cent of the West Bank. Many of these hamlets have been threatened with eviction since the Israeli administration designated part of the land as **'Firing Zone 918' for military training**. Largely cave dwelling shepherds, the residents are not Bedouin communities despite claims by the Israeli administration. According to anthropological and archeological research, these communities have been living in the area since the 1830s.

The inhabitants rely on livestock, mostly sheep and goats, as their primary source of income. **Annexation of land combined with settler intimidation** has severely restricted the ability of shepherds to graze their herds. With a reduced income, the levels of poverty among these communities have grown to the extent that all of the villages within the Firing Zone are dependent upon humanitarian organizations for food aid.



## 2. In limbo

**Palestinians** affected by the military firing zone **are unable to plan or develop their communities**. Building permits are almost universally rejected and houses and structures are consistently issued with demolition or 'stop work' orders by the Israeli Civil Administration. In the absence of building permits, families live in sub-standard housing, unable to expand or even maintain their existing homes, many of which are simple stone houses or concrete walled structures with tin roofs. Some families live in caves and those whose homes have been demolished live in tents or temporary housing units.

**The restrictions on development also apply to the construction of public service buildings like schools and health clinics** There is only one basic primary school in the area that has classrooms in



the villages of Jinba and Al Fakhit, both classrooms have been issued with demolition orders. Children from surrounding villages walk up to four kilometres to reach these classrooms and up to seven kilometres to reach the nearest high school. In the village of Al Mufaraqarah, the local mosque served as a school during the day but was demolished in 2011, as well as its replacement in 2012.



Since the late 1970s, the **Israeli administration has declared thousands of dunams in and around Masafer Yatta as 'state land'**. This land has been subsequently leased to the World Zionist Organization for the **development of Israeli settlements**. Palestinian communities in Masafer Yatta have become gradually surrounded by a belt of Israeli settlements from the north, east and southeast.

### 3. Firing zone 918

**The Israeli military established "Firing Zone 918" in the 1980s** in Masafer Yatta, designating it as a closed area for military training purposes encompassing 12 of the 19 hamlets. Israeli authorities have the power to close any area and evacuate those who enter it without permission. As this rule does not apply to permanent residents, Israel authorities claimed that the inhabitants of Masafer Yatta were living there seasonally, which applies only to a small number of villages. On the 5th of October 1999, the communities in the Firing Zone area received an **evacuation order that eventually displaced 700 Palestinians**.

**Israeli authorities destroyed tents, confiscated cisterns, sealed cave dwellings and dispersed livestock.** Some of the evacuees took refuge in tents in the village of al-Tuwani, while others moved to the nearby city of Yatta.

In January 2000, four expelled families represented by the ACRI [Association for Civil Rights in Israel] petitioned the High Court. The families requested an order permitting them to return to their homes and ordering the state to return the property that had been confiscated during the expulsion or, alternatively, to compensate them for the losses they had sustained.



The following month, eighty-two other residents petitioned the High Court. On the 29th of March 2000, the High Court granted the petitioners' application to return despite the much of what they left behind, having been destroyed. Families who did not participate in the petition were then targeted by additional eviction order issued by the Israeli Civil Administration, which forced them to prove their permanent residency in the area. ACRI filed an application with the High Court in July 2001, requesting to add 112 additional resi-

dents as petitioners. Ten months later, the court approved the application.

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, the state of Israel is obligated to protect the Palestinian civilian population** and uphold their rights. The forcible transfer of civilians from or within occupied territory is 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.

## 4. Major threats

### **Military Law:**

While settlers enjoy a civil administration that advocates for their well-being, Palestinians are simultaneously subjected to military law, which consistently discriminates against them as historical residents of the land. As a result, two separate legal systems are applied by the same authority in the same area, depending on the persons' origin.

### **Illegal Settlements:**

The Closed military Area designated by the Israeli military is surrounded by four illegal settlements: Karmel and Ma'on at the North; Susya and Mezadot Yehuda at the West. Settlements remain illegal under International law as they violate Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which prohibits the transfer of the occupying power's civilian population into occupied territory. Furthermore, the total or partial evacuation of a given area should be implemented to assure the security of the population of the occupied territory or to imperative military reasons.



### **Settler violence:**

Over 90% of monitored complaints regarding settler violence filed by Palestinians with the Israeli police in recent years have been closed without indictment. Under international humanitarian law, Israel is obligated to prevent attacks against civilians or their property and ensure that all incidents of settler violence are investigated through an impartial authority.



However, Israel's de facto policy promotes the settling of its citizens in the West Bank and violent acts are typically treated with impunity. This violence includes physical attacks, harassment, takeover of and damage to private properties, road closures to prevent access to lands and properties as well as assaults on livestock and agricultural land, among others.

### **Roads closures:**

In December 2005, Israeli authorities built a wall along road 317, cutting any connection between the village of A-Tuwani, the firing zone and the vital city of Yatta.

### **Lack of water and electricity infrastructure:**

Over 70% of communities located in area C are not connected to water networks and rely on costly water from Yatta which often demands 10%-15% of their entire incomes. There are no paved roads leading to the villages and the harsh topography of the area forces residents to walk between closed areas. The villages are not linked to a power grid, telephone lines, a running-water system or a sewage system. Initiatives to link the village of Al Mufaqarah by electrical pylons from Al Tuwani were set up but demolished by the army in 2011.

## **5. Villages affected**

**Al Tuwani:** The village has a population of 350, a primary school and a small health clinic. It is a hub for many other villages that don't have access to these basic facilities.

The inspiration behind Al Mufaqarah village's R-Exist campaign is Al Tuwani. After many years of struggle, Al Tuwani residents managed to obtain a Master Plan from the Israeli administration that meant they were able to build brick houses, a school and a small clinic without fear of demolition. With these resources, the village is able to support nearby communities.

**Al Tuba:** Road enclosures, settler violence and lack of infrastructure are the main difficulties facing Al Tuba residents. A main road that would connect Al Tuba to the hub village of Al Twani runs through Ma'on settlement and Havat Ma'on outpost forcing villagers to walk the long way around. Harassment and violent attacks against Palestinians are common. Since 2006, Israeli soldiers have escorted children walking via

the main road to school in Al Tuwani because of settler intimidation.

On June 18 2012, the Israeli District Coordination Offices delivered five 'stop work' orders to Al Tuba. These orders affected two of the three families living in the village.

They had until the 9th of July to appeal before notice of demolition. Under threat were three tents and a tin toilet, a sheep compound and a pavilion belonging to the first family; a house; one tent used as storage and one with a concrete floor belonging to the second family. Two 'stop work' orders have been issued on ten solar panels and a wind turbine constructed in 2010 by Comet-Me, a joint Israeli-Palestinian NGO that supports the economic and social empowerment of local communities through material support and environmental sustainability.

**Al Mufaqqarah:** Secluded on a hillside, Al Mufaqqarah is accessible only through a single dirt road. 15 families live in a variety of cave dwellings, tents and a few stone houses, farming and grazing sheep as their ancestors have been doing for decades. The community depends on crops such as grain and olives and on the production of milk and cheese as its livelihood.



Several structures were demolished in Al Mufaqqarah on the 24 November 2011, following demolition orders that were issued three years before. Israeli soldiers destroyed the village mosque, two houses, a cattle shed and the generator building. They arrested two women who tried to save some of their belongings from the ruins of their home. The village mosque was rebuilt and demolished again in November 2012 by Israeli authorities.

**Susya:** Is located in the southernmost part of the West Bank, about 15 kilometers south of Hebron. The residents of Susya have experienced multiple evictions. In 1986, Israeli authorities expelled the residents, who then were living in caves, after nearby archaeological ruins were declared a national archaeological park. They resettled on their land nearby that was located between the archaeological site and the Israeli settlement of Susiya until 2001.

The Israeli military then returned and destroyed their homes and wells and evicted the residents for the second time. With the help of individuals and Israeli and international organizations, they appealed to the Israeli High Court which granted them an injunction order allowing them to return temporarily to their land. In 2007, the injunction order expired.



Recently the residents of Susya re-appealed to the High Court to claim the rights to their land. In 2012, over 42 'stop work' orders were issued by the Israeli administration, if these demolitions were to be executed, this would effectively demolish the whole village.

19 'stop work' orders are still in the courts. 36 requests by Susya resi-

dents for building permits have been submitted and campaigns, petitions and demonstrations initiated after the stop work orders in 2012 has increased Israeli and international organization solidarity of residents determined to remain on their land.



## 6. Non-violent actions and resistance

**The systematic oppression of the Palestinians living in the South Hebron Hills** is an attempt by the Israeli administration to ethnically cleanse Palestinians from Area C and force them into the urban and crowded cities of Area A.



As the **popular resistance in Area C** increases, so does the repression and arbitrary detentions of activists and locals. By creating a climate of insecurity and fear, the Israeli military and authorities aim to prevent campaigns and movements such as those organized by the **Palestinian Popular Struggle** from continuing and expanding.

## 7. How to support communities

*Find out more and how you can support communities in the South Hebron Hills:*

- **Popular Struggle Coordination Committee (PSCC)** <http://popularstruggle.org>

**R-exist campaign:** The PSCC launched Al Mufaqarah R-Exist campaign on 19 May 2012 to support the community in its legitimate struggle to remain on its land. Its aim is to provide a permanent housing solution with the construction of 15 brick houses, one for each family, and legal support with long term monitoring of the situation. This campaign aims to spread to other villages in Area C across the West Bank. <http://almufaqarah.wordpress.com>

- **Comet-Me:** <http://comet-me.org/>

A joint Palestinian-Israeli organization that provides green energy and clean water services to off-grid communities using environmentally and socially sustainable methods.

- **Voices Beyond Walls:** <http://www.voicesbeyondwalls.org>

A pilot project covering the whole of the West Bank that seeks to encourage resilience of young Palestinians living under occupation. Palestinian media experts provide training to young people to enable them to express themselves and document what they see. The project also informs participants on issues of human rights, law and activism. Particular attention is given to vulnerable populations living close to settlements providing them with psychological support.

- **Susya:** <http://susyablog.wordpress.com/>  
information about the village.

- **Ta'yush:** <http://www.taayush.org/>

A grassroots movement of Palestinians and Israelis working to break down the walls of racism and segregation through direct action.