

# FIRING ZONE 918

## FIRING ZONES AS TOOLS FOR SETTLEMENT EXPANSION

OCTOBER 2022

On May 4, 2022, the Israeli High Court authorized the expulsion and forcible transfer of over 1,000 Palestinian residents of the Masafer Yatta region of the southern West Bank, an area the Israeli military has declared as "Firing Zone 918." The expulsion could happen at any moment.

Following the High Court decision, one of the 14 villages in the firing zone, Khalat ad-Daba'a, is expecting the demolition of every structure—animal pens, water infrastructure, and homes—as of September 30, 2022.

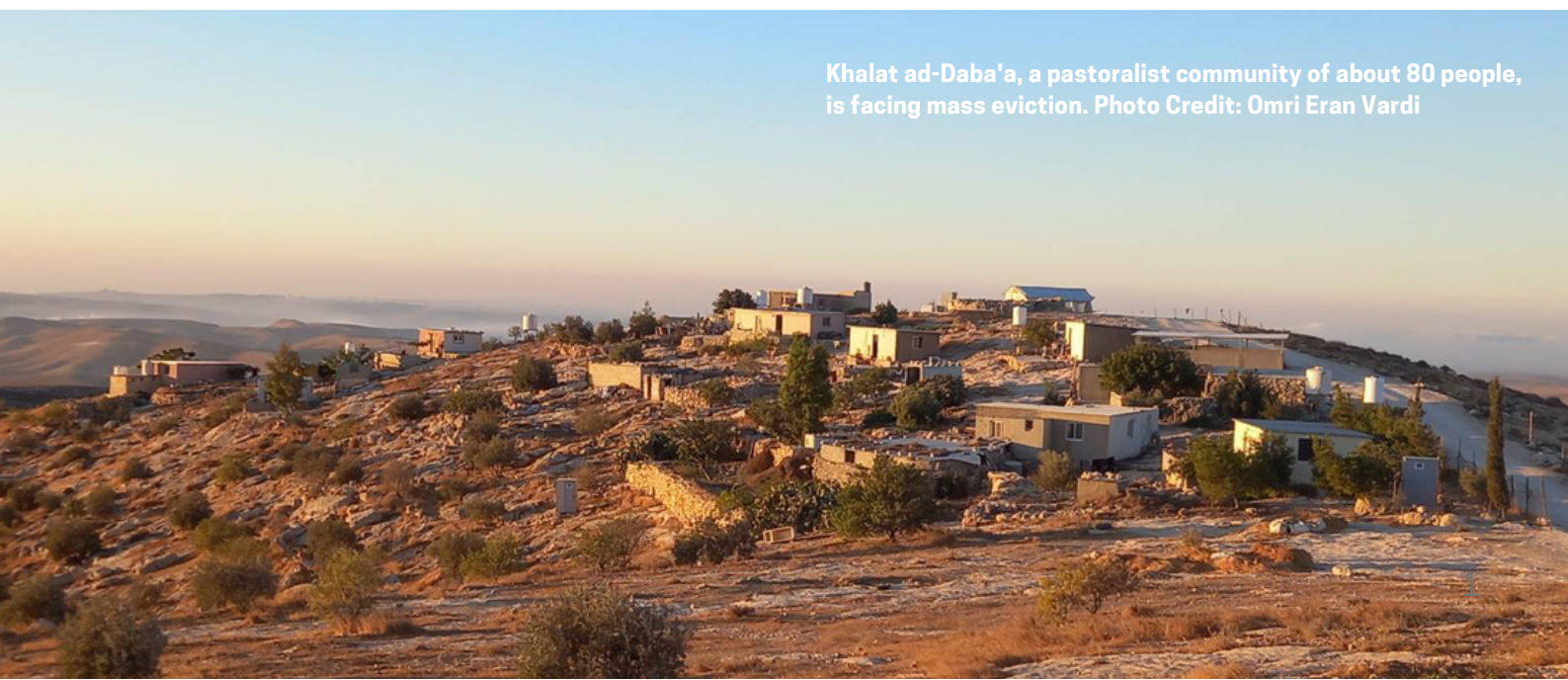
In the decades-long court case, the State of Israel has claimed Firing Zone 918 is necessary for military training. However, this briefing illustrates that since their inception, firing zones, including 918, are tools used by the state to expel Palestinians and enable settlement expansion.

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**The motive behind the court's decision is obvious. It contributes to the ethnic cleansing of the residents and destruction of their rights by expelling them from their home of hundreds of years.**

— Nidal Younes, Head of the Masafer Yatta Village Council

Khalat ad-Daba'a, a pastoralist community of about 80 people, is facing mass eviction. Photo Credit: Omri Eran Vardi



## FIRING ZONES: ORIGINALLY CREATED FOR JEWISH SETTLEMENT

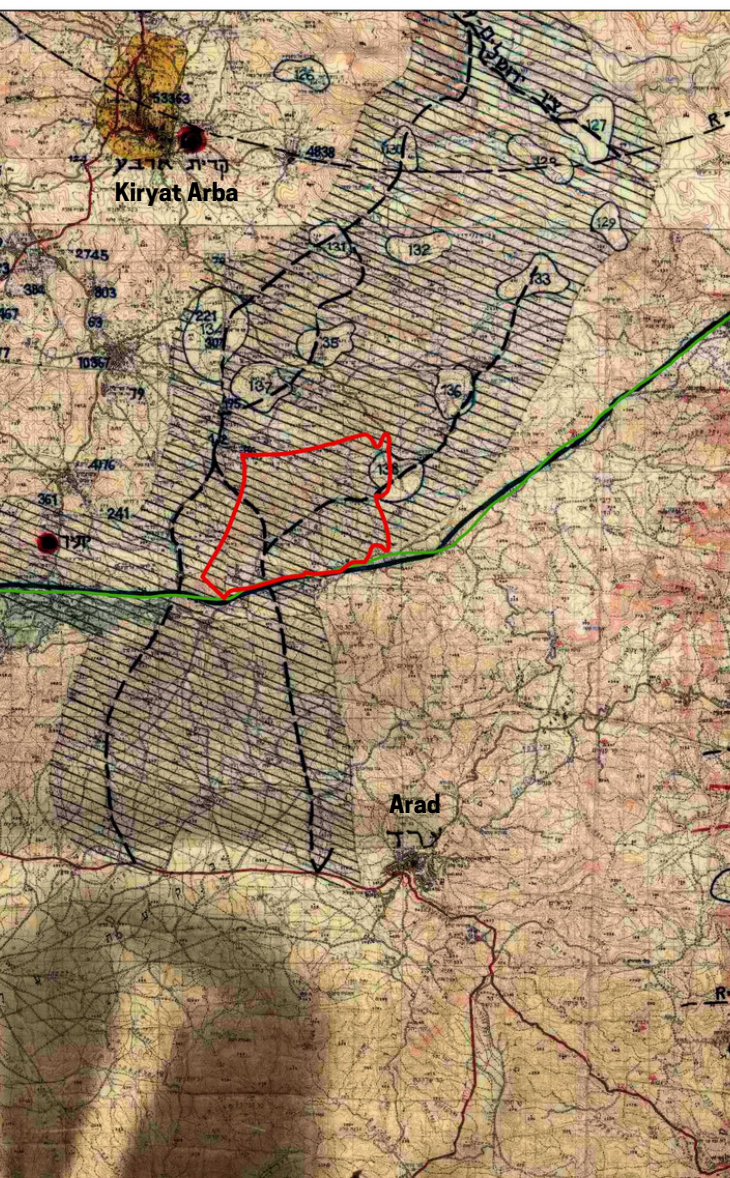
After the 1967 occupation of the West Bank, around 1 million dunams (nearly 18% of the area) were designated as military firing zones. Today, the vast majority are not used by the military; only 20% of Israel's firing zone areas are used for training, and half of that is used less than once every three months.<sup>1</sup>

Official documents from the 1970s reveal the ulterior purpose of the firing zones. Ariel Sharon, who orchestrated the firing zones as acting agriculture minister, explained in a 1979 meeting of the World Zionist Organization's Settlement Division:

“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.”<sup>2</sup>

This holds true for Firing Zone 918. During the 1981 meeting in which Ariel Sharon suggested creating Firing Zone 918, he noted his concern “[about] that phenomenon—the spreading of the Arab villages on the mountainside toward the desert,” and proposed the firing zone “in order to keep these areas, which are so vital, in our hands.”<sup>3</sup>

Ariel Sharon's vision of contiguous Israeli settlement from the Negev to the southern West Bank is reflected in an even earlier government document from 1977. A state-commissioned map (fig. 1) illustrates a planned continuum of settlements in the area that is now Firing Zone 918, linking Arad and Kiryat Arba.



**fig. 1** This official 1977 Israel Mapping Center map shows that even before the firing zone was declared, this area was intended for future Jewish settlements

1. Kerem Navot. (2015). A Locked Garden: Declaration of Closed Areas in the West Bank. Kerem Navot, 64. [https://www.keremnavot.org/\\_files/ugd/a76eb4\\_affeae08cbc9492fb589419b6348373c.pdf](https://www.keremnavot.org/_files/ugd/a76eb4_affeae08cbc9492fb589419b6348373c.pdf)
2. Abraham, Y. (2022). Classified Document Reveals IDF 'Firing Zones' Built to Give Land to Settlers. +972 Magazine. <https://www.972mag.com/firing-zones-sharon-settlements/>
3. Aderet, O. (2020). Document Reveals Ariel Sharon's Plan to expel 1000 Palestinians. Haaretz.



## SETTLEMENT EXPANSION WITHIN FIRING ZONES

Around 10 residential outposts and dozens of agricultural outposts have been established inside firing zones.<sup>4</sup> It is estimated that agricultural outposts have taken over 83,000 dunams of land in firing zones. While outposts like these are technically illegal, they are protected and funded by state entities.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to facilitating settlement expansion through tacit support of illegal outposts, the Israeli state has formally legalized past and future settlement in firing zones. According to Israeli law, settlements can only be built on state land and not on land seized for military purposes (such as firing zones). However, it is legal to declare state lands within a firing zone, opening them up to settlement activity. Since the 1980s, over 40% of land in the West Bank that Israel has declared state land is located within firing zones.

## PLANNING TOOLS LEGITIMIZE SETTLEMENTS IN FIRING ZONES

Israel has further enabled settlement expansion in firing zones through the direct allocation of state lands to settlements and outposts.

Since 1999, the Civil Administration has operated a land status team (the Blue Line Team) tasked with reviewing and demarcating state land designated before 1998. One of the stated purposes of the Blue Line Team (BLT) is to enable expansion of pre-existing settlements and establishment of new ones.<sup>7</sup>



**fig. 2** State lands declared inside firing zones are a legal loophole used to create and expand settlements

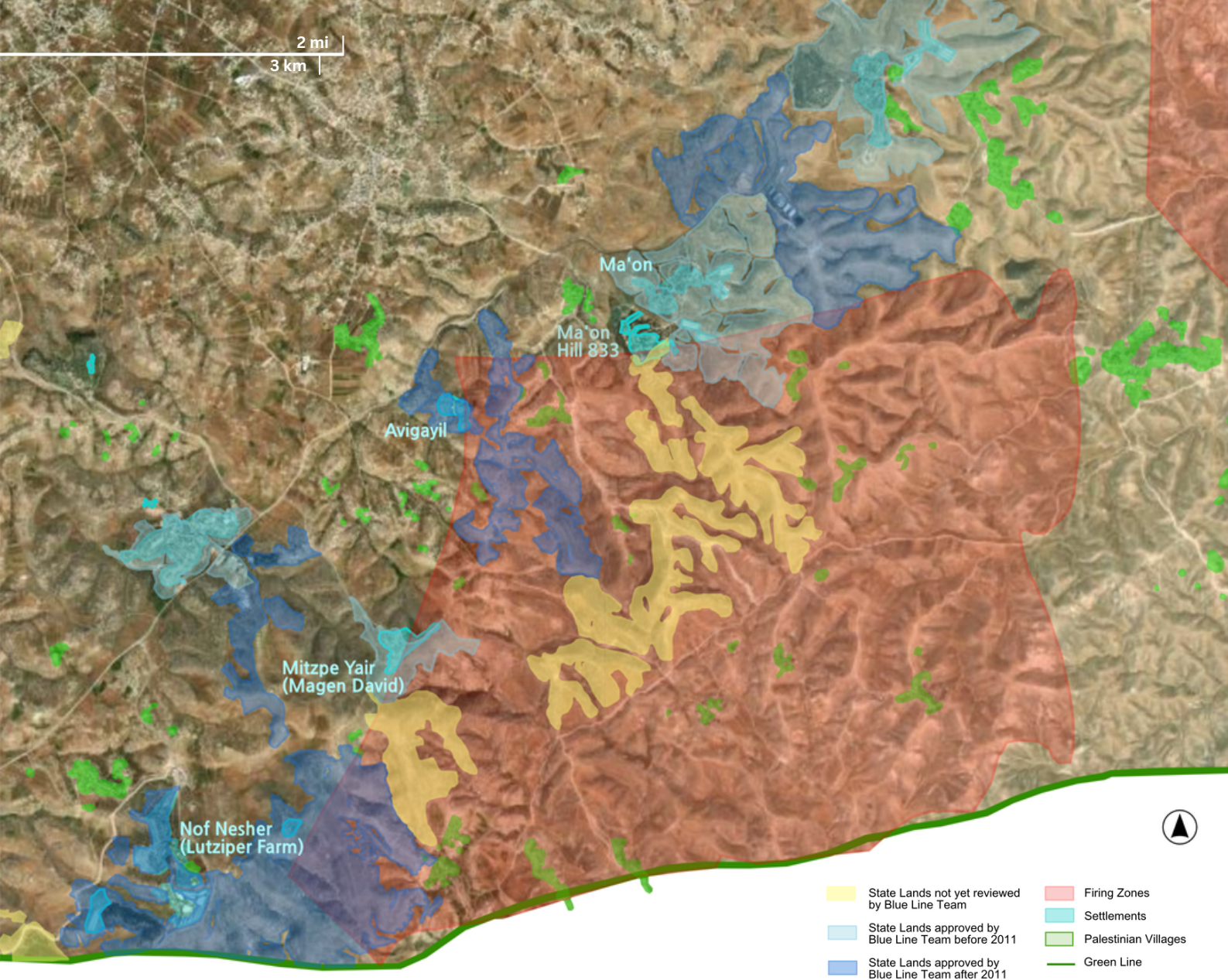
4. Kerem Navot. (2015), 73

5. Kerem Navot. (2022). The Wild West: Grazing, Seizing and Looting by Israeli Settlers in the West Bank. Kerem Navot, 17, 22-26.

6. Kerem Navot. (2015), 79.

7. The Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories. (2016). Team for Demarcating State Lands in Judea and Samaria ("Blue Line" Team) - Work Procedure.





**fig. 3** State land and Blue Line Team boundary designations show past, present, and future ambitions for settlement expansion

Firing Zone 918 is a case in point.

When the BLT first mapped the firing zone, 630 dunams of state land within it were demarcated and labelled as parts of the nearby settlements, even though they are not included in those settlements' official jurisdictions (light blue, fig. 3). Once state land has been re-examined by the BLT, construction in that area is retroactively approved and Israeli agencies can authorize new development plans for settlements.<sup>8</sup>

In 2012, the areas included in BLT designations increased nearly fivefold

(dark blue, fig. 3). The approved areas are adjacent to four unauthorized outposts considered illegal by Israel, significantly increasing the land onto which they can grow.<sup>9</sup>

3,130 dunams of state land within the firing zone have yet to be reviewed by the BLT (yellow, fig. 3). These dunams offer more potential for settlements and outposts to extend towards the Green Line and connect the southern West Bank with the Negev—an expansion only possible if all Palestinians in the area are evicted.

8. Bimkom. (2021). Expert Report on Palestinian Villages in Masafer Yatta 1945-2020 Findings, Interrelationships and Planning Feasibility. Bimkom, 74.  
 9. Ibid.



## AN URGENT HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

More than 1,000 Palestinians are set to be evicted from their homes in Firing Zone 918 in the near future. Most immediately, all 83 residents of Khalat ad-Daba'a may be rendered homeless any day, as the state claims that the village "significantly limits the movement of forces practising in the field and makes effective use of the firing zone difficult."<sup>10</sup>

It is a human rights violation to evict residents to make way for a military training zone. It is even more egregious when the training zone is merely the excuse, and the land will then be inhabited by Israeli settlers. The international community must recognize the state's claim for what it is: an excuse to forcibly evict the Palestinian residents of Masafer Yatta.

## WHAT CAN THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY DO?

### CALL ON ISRAEL TO:

- Prevent the development and establishment of settlements.
- End the demolitions of Palestinian communities in Masafer Yatta.
- Authorize and allow implementation of building plans which the communities have submitted to planning authorities.
- Connect the communities to electricity and water networks, and provide opportunities for other civil and municipal services.



Coming home from school in Khalat ad-Daba'a. Photo Credit: Omri Eran Vardi

10. Israel High Court Decision 5866/22. Retrieved at <https://supremedecisions.court.gov.il/Home/Download?path=HebrewVerdicts/22/660/058/c03&fileName=22058660.C03&type=2>