

Israel's Takeover of Area B de-Facto Annexation in the “Contractual Reserve”

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Israel is exploiting environmental pretexts to seize control of land in the West Bank's Area B, as illustrated by its revocation of Palestinian planning powers in the “Contractual Reserve” located East of Bethlehem and Hebron. This move cynically uses environmental considerations to outlaw Palestinian construction and issue demolition orders, while simultaneously encouraging new Israeli settler outposts in the same area. Together with state-backed settler violence, this revocation forms part of a broader campaign to dismantle Palestinian authority in Area B, confine Palestinian development to shrinking enclaves, and facilitate de facto territorial annexation.

The Action and Its False Justification

In July 2024, the Israeli military commander revoked the Palestinian Authority's (PA) planning and building powers within the "Contractual Reserve" in Area B. This was accompanied by a military order declaring all Palestinian construction there since 1998 illegal, followed by demolition orders.

Israel justified this as a response to alleged PA violations of the 1998 Wye River Memorandum, which required the PA to designate 3% of Area B as nature reserves. This justification is made in bad faith and is factually baseless for three reasons:

The Reserve Itself Lacks Environmental Justification: Israel unilaterally delineated the reserve's boundaries without conducting an environmental assessment, thus undermining the PA's prerogative.

Palestinian planning documents and environmental assessments, including the 2012 Palestinian National Plan for the Conservation of Natural Resources and Historic Sites, updated in 2023 by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), conclude that most of the reserve lacks significant biodiversity, landscape, or agricultural values that would warrant strict protection. Indeed, only a limited portion was deemed environmentally worthy for protection. The PA has instead met its 3% commitment by designating many new protected areas in Areas A (about 13,000 dunams) and B (some 5,500 dunams) that are part of a credible, ecologically informed open-space network. By so doing, it has fulfilled its obligations under the Wye Agreement.



View of Palestinian construction adjacent to Za'atra

Photo credit: Peace Now

The PA's Management is Legitimate and Necessary: Permitting limited construction within the reserve is a rational and necessary response to severe development pressures. Areas A and B are already densely built, and in Area C — approximately 60% of the West Bank — Israel largely prohibits Palestinian development. The Palestinian population, however, has grown 150% since 1997. Communities have expanded onto adjacent lands under their ownership to house natural population growth. This contiguous development follows accepted planning principles, efficiently expanding existing infrastructure while minimizing environmental harm, and does not breach the Wye Memorandum's core goal of preserving genuinely valuable open spaces.

Blatant Discrimination in Enforcement: Israel's claim of enforcing planning and building regulations in pursuit of environmental protection is firmly contradicted by its systematic policy of non-enforcement as well as active support for Israeli settlers' unauthorized construction. Across Area C, 24 settlements and 12 Israeli settler outposts have been established within protected areas, with most outposts located deep inside their boundaries. In 2024 alone, five new settler outposts were established inside the Contractual Reserve, seizing control over approximately 15,345 dunams of land and directly threatening to forcibly displace the Palestinian pastoral communities who have used the land for centuries. While Palestinian construction faces aggressive enforcement, settler construction is systematically tolerated and even encouraged.

Map of Contractual Reserve, 2025



ירושלים
Jerusalem

בית לחם
Beit Lehem

אל-עבידייה
al-Obieda

זעתרה
Za'atra

ערב א-רשאידה
Arab a-Rasheida

חברון
Havron

בני נעים
Beni Neim

זוידין
Zwidin



- Area A
- Area B
- Contractual Reserve
- Palestinian construction
- Israeli settler outpost
- the Green Line



