

THE UNBEARABLE LIFE

THE HEALTH IMPACTS OF THE ISRAELI
MEASURES TO FORCIBLY EVICT THE
RESIDENTS OF MASAFER YATTA



MSF

About Médecins Sans Frontières:

An international, independent medical humanitarian organisation, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) translates to Doctors without Borders. We provide medical assistance to people affected by conflict, epidemics, disasters, or exclusion from healthcare. Our teams are made up of tens of thousands of health professionals, logistic and administrative staff - bound together by our charter. Our actions are guided by medical ethics and the principles of impartiality, independence and neutrality. We are a non-profit, self-governed, member-based organisation.

MSF was founded in 1971 in Paris by a group of journalists and doctors. Today, we are a worldwide movement of nearly 63,000 people.

MSF in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT):

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has been working in the Occupied Palestinian Territory since 1989. The international humanitarian medical organization provides medical and psychosocial assistance to facilitate access to healthcare services for Palestinians living under ongoing occupation and blockade. In the West bank, MSF runs mental health projects, serving people in Nablus, Hebron, Tubas, and Qalqilya. MSF also provides essential medical services to women and children in the area of Hebron known as "H2".

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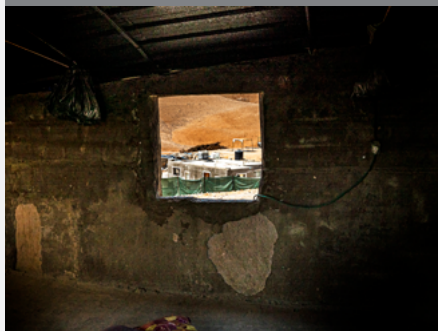
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*Mahmoud, resident of Al Markez, Masafar Yatta. His house was demolished in May 2022.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Israeli authorities have put extraordinary pressure on the residents of Masafer Yatta to leave the area, in what may amount to a forcible transfer, prohibited under International Humanitarian Law (IHL). As well as demolishing people's homes, the authorities have installed checkpoints, confiscated residents' vehicles, enforced curfews, and put in place other movement restrictions. These measures have intensified since May 2022, following a ruling by the Israeli Supreme Court which removed all legal barriers to the forced displacement of Palestinians from Masafer Yatta to make way for a military zone. As a result, residents' freedom of movement, mental health, and ability to access basic services, including medical care were severely impacted.

Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors without Borders (MSF) is providing medical and mental health services via mobile clinics to the residents of Masafer Yatta since 2021, and mental health care in Hebron district since 1996. MSF's team witnessed first-hand the impact of the increasingly coercive and oppressive environment on the physical and mental health of the people in Masafer Yatta.

Due to movement restrictions, MSF patients from neighbouring villages are denied access to the village where MSF provides its medical services if their identity card shows they are not from the village they are trying to access. To keep the mobile clinic services available to the patients, MSF had to adapt the mobile clinics' schedule and location repeatedly. However, these repeated changes and irregularity of services inevitably led to additional uncertainty regarding access to medical care. In addition, many residents reported to MSF's team that the uncertain access to medical care in Masafer Yatta has forced medically vulnerable people, such as pregnant women in their last trimester, elderly and seriously ill patients, to leave their homes and family, and move to Yatta city.

Residents with reduced access to medical care, are also forced to change their health-seeking behaviours, adapt their diet due to financial hardship, and have reduced access to potable water; all factors that are known to negatively impact physical health.

In addition, political violence—particularly evictions, demolitions, and home raids—is causing unnecessary suffering and constant fear, harming people's mental health, and their ability to live a dignified life. Between 2021 and 2022, MSF observed a sharp increase in Masafer Yatta residents seeking mental health support who have experienced home incursions and demolitions of homes, or other properties. Following these incidents, more than half of the patients in 2022 reported psychosomatic symptoms; one quarter showed post-traumatic symptoms; and two-thirds described having depressive symptoms.

The accumulation of oppressive measures and political violence is gradually making life in Masafer Yatta unbearable, creating a coercive environment which puts people at risk of displacement in what may amount to a forcible transfer.

Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders (MSF) denounces the Israeli policies and calls on Israeli authorities to bring an immediate halt to the eviction plan and to stop implementing restrictive measures that impede the ability of Palestinians in Masafer Yatta to access basic services, including medical care. MSF also calls on the international community to take all necessary measures to protect the population of Masafer Yatta and ensure that their human rights are upheld.



Masafer Yatta, West Bank. ©Juan Carlos Tomasi/MSF



Masafer Yatta, West Bank. ©Alfredo Caliz

THE SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY OF THE REPORT

MSF is providing medical services through mobile clinics to the residents of Masafer Yatta, in the southern Hebron Hills in the West Bank, since 2021, and mental health care in Hebron District since 1996. Thanks to this proximity, we have been able to witness the impact of the Israeli coercive measures, which have intensified in 2022, on every aspect of the daily life of the residents of Masafer Yatta.

This report illustrates how the ongoing occupation, and specifically the measures that seem to be aimed to push the residents of Masafer Yatta to leave their homes and land, have impacted the residents' freedom of movement, physical and mental health, and ability to access basic services.

Qualitative and quantitative data collected between May 2021 and December 2022 were used to inform this report, including:

- Individual interviews and focus group discussions with residents of Masafer Yatta villages (Umm Qussa, Umm Al-Khair, Al-Majaz, Mirkez, Jinba, Sha'b Al-Butum, Isfey Al-Fauqua; including but not limited to MSF patients)
- Interviews with MSF medical and non-medical staff in Hebron
- Interview with the Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS)
- MSF's anonymized records of medical data and mental health data
- MSF assessment/reports on the barriers to accessing medical care in Masafer Yatta, West Bank
- MSF response to incidents reports

CONTEXT

LIVING UNDER OCCUPATION



Jamla, a resident of Khirbet Al-Fakhit gathering, Masafer Yatta. Her house was demolished 3 times in 2022.
©Juan Carlos Tomasi/MSF

Living under occupation has never been easy for Palestinians, but even appalling situations can get worse. In 2022, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) witnessed first-hand the impact of an increasingly hostile environment on the safety and well-being of Palestinians residing in the occupied West Bank. According to the United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), **2022 was the deadliest year for Palestinians in the West Bank since the UN started systematically recording fatalities.**¹

Israeli forces killed 152 Palestinians—including 35 children—in the West Bank in 2022 alone. In the same period, 21 Israelis—including one child—were killed by Palestinians, according to the same source. The upsurge in violence has included the excessive use of force by Israeli soldiers and increased attacks on Palestinians by Israeli settler communities.² In 2022, OCHA recorded 9,873 Palestinians injured by Israeli forces and 621 settler attacks in the West Bank alone. The coercive environment has also been marked by an increase in home demolitions; 697 Palestinians were displaced due to demolitions in the

¹ [Data on casualties | United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs - occupied Palestinian territory \(ochaopt.org\)](https://www.ochaopt.org/)

² West Bank Protection Consortium. *Israel's Use of Live Ammunition in the West Bank: A Visual Guide*. November 2022. [WBPC Visual Guide. Use of live ammunition. Nov 2022.pdf - Google Drive](#); OHCHR. (2022, December 15). *Israel: UN experts condemn record year of Israeli violence in the occupied West Bank* [Press release]. [Israel: UN experts condemn record year of Israeli violence in the occupied West Bank | OHCHR](#)

West Bank in 2022³, and 1,584 demolition orders were given in Hebron district alone,⁴ with Masafer Yatta, an area of the southern West Bank, being the most affected as over 1,000 of its residents are at immediate risk of forced eviction, which may amount to forcible transfer.



**“If I lose my
land, I lose my
life.”**

Youssef*,

resident of Al Majaz, Masafer
Yatta

Mahmoud, resident of Al Markez, Masafer Yatta. His house was demolished in May 2022. ©Juan Carlos Tomasi/MSF

The rise of violence is increasing the need for medical care, however, receiving and providing medical services is becoming more challenging and dangerous. In October 2022 alone, the World Health Organization (WHO) recorded 43 attacks against health-care providers in the West Bank, 29 obstructions to the delivery of health services (including the obstruction of 28 ambulances), 12 health workers arrested or detained, and 18 cases of physical violence against health workers, ambulances, and health facilities⁵. These acts of violence and obstruction are jeopardizing healthcare providers’ ability to deliver medical care to populations in need, as provided for in both International Human Rights Law (IHRL) and International Humanitarian Law (IHL).

While the statistics on the increased physical violence are dire, they do not capture the generalized insecurity and feelings of humiliation that many Palestinians in Masafer Yatta report experiencing daily.

³ OCHA Protection of Civilians Report, 20 December 2022 – 9 January 2023 [Protection of Civilians Report | 20 December 2022 – 9 January 2023 | United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs - occupied Palestinian territory \(ochaopt.org\)](#)

⁴ [هيئة مقاومة الجدار والاستيطان - \(cwrc.ps\)](#)

⁵ WHO Monthly report on health access. [October 2022. Oct_2022_Monthly.pdf \(who.int\)](#)

MASAFER YATTA, AN ISRAELI-DESIGNATED “FIRING ZONE”

THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK



“One day, we will be forced to leave, because there will be nothing left.”

Layla*,

resident of Al Jinba, Masafer Yatta

Masafer Yatta, ©Juan Carlos Tomasi/MSF

Masafer Yatta is a desert region of the southern West Bank that is home to 1,144 Palestinians living across 12 villages. Their lives—and the lives of their 569 children—changed drastically in the 1980s when the land on which their homes are built was declared to be a ‘closed military zone’ (i.e. “firing zone 918”) by the Israeli authorities. This unilateral decision rendered thousands of Palestinians ‘illegally’ residing in a firing zone and at immediate risk of forced evictions.

Under the Oslo accords and subsequent agreements, Masafer Yatta became part of ‘Area C’ of the occupied West Bank in the 1990s. While this agreement was supposed to end in 1999, it never came to its conclusion. As a result, the area remains under the civil and military control of Israel.⁶ In theory, Palestinians can build in ‘Area C’ with a special permit from the Israeli ‘civil administration’. In practice, more than 98% of these permit requests are rejected.⁷ This makes it near impossible for Palestinians in Masafer Yatta to build ‘legally’, which exposes them to home demolitions.

In 1999, over 700 Palestinians were expelled from their homes in the ‘firing zone’. A few months later, an interim injunction was issued by the Israeli High Court which temporarily halted the risk of eviction and allowed the expelled Palestinians to return to their homes. **However, the decision was not final, which has caused the communities in Masafer Yatta to live under the looming risk of evictions, demolitions and risk of forcible transfer for over a decade.**

On 4 May 2022, the Israeli Supreme Court declared that there were no ‘legal barriers’ to the evictions, putting the final nail in the coffin of a two-decade-old legal battle. The decision has been widely criti-

6 Diakonia: International Humanitarian Law Centre ‘The Israeli Supreme Court Decision Permitting Eviction of Palestinian Communities in Masafer Yatta’ (13 May 2022), Available [here](#)

7 (Dis)Approvals for Palestinians in Area C – 2009-2020 (Peace Now, 31 January 2021). (Dis)Approvals for Palestinians in Area C – 2009-2020 - Peace Now).

cized by the international community as violating Israel’s obligations under International Humanitarian Law and International Human Rights Law. As a result of the decision, 211 Palestinian households (1144 people) are at immediate risk of forced evictions, arbitrary displacement, and forcible transfer.⁸ Moreover, since the court’s decision, the imposition of coercive measures in Masafer Yatta has substantially increased.



“I have lived in Al Halaweh my whole life, but the last 8 months are the worst I have experienced.”

Walid*,

resident of Al-Halaweh, Masafer Yatta

Safa, resident of Al Markez, Masafer Yatta. Her house was demolished in May 2022.

©Juan Carlos Tomasi/MSF

The eviction risk is arguably a violation of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) which Israel is bound to respect as an occupying power. IHL expressly prohibits ‘individual or mass forcible transfers’ of persons from occupied territory, other than in a limited set of circumstances.⁹

As set out by OCHA, ‘forced eviction resulting in displacement could amount to forcible transfer, which is a grave breach of the Fourth Geneva Convention and thus a war crime.’¹⁰

International Criminal Law also recognizes forcible transfers as a war crime, and may constitute a crime against humanity when carried out as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against the civilian population.¹¹

Forced evictions also amount to a gross violation of human rights, particularly the right to adequate housing and the right to non-interference with privacy, home and family.¹² A decision by a national court to ‘rubber-stamp’ a forced eviction does not render the evictions legal if they violate the state’s obligations under International Human Rights Law (IHRL) and IHL.¹³ Finally, evictions resulting in forced displacement, run contrary to soft-law frameworks such as the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement which holds that:

⁸ ‘Fact sheet: Masafer Yatta communities at risk of forcible transfer’ (UN OCHA, 6 July 2022) available [here](#)

⁹ The Fourth Geneva Convention prohibits the forcible transfer of civilian populations from occupied areas other than for evacuations in a limited set of circumstances. Evacuations may occur for the civilian populations’ own safety, or for ‘imperative military reasons’. However such evacuations may only be temporary. Legal scholars have noted that seizing land for military training, particularly when another land is available, is unlikely to meet the threshold of imperative military reasons as envisaged by IHL.

¹⁰ Fact sheet: Masafer Yatta communities at risk of forcible transfer’ (UN OCHA, 6 July 2022), p3.

¹¹ Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998), Article 7(1)(d) and Article 8(2)(b)(viii)

¹² International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), article 11; International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), article, 12.

¹³ UN Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR) ‘Factsheet No 25: Forced Evictions’ (United Nations, 2014), p5. Available [here](#)

'EVERY HUMAN BEING SHALL HAVE THE RIGHT TO BE PROTECTED AGAINST BEING ARBITRARILY DISPLACED FROM HIS OR HER HOME OR PLACE OF HABITUAL RESIDENCE.'¹⁴

The decision of the Israeli Supreme Court in May 2022 has resulted in a sharp uptick in hostile measures applied by the Israeli authorities in Masafer Yatta to put extraordinary pressure on residents of Masafer Yatta to leave their homes. Such measures include:



DEMOLITION OF HOMES AND SCHOOLS



ISSUANCE OF EVICTION NOTICES



INCREASE IN CHECKPOINTS



CONFISCATION OF RESIDENTS' VEHICLES



MILITARY TRAINING



ENFORCED CURFEWS

AND OTHER MOVEMENT RESTRICTIONS, MAKING PEOPLE'S LIVES **UNBEARABLE.**

14 United Nations, 'Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement', Principle 6, Article 1. Available [here](#)

LIVING UNDER CONSTANT FEAR, THE DAILY STRUGGLES OF THE RESIDENTS OF MASAFER YATTA



“I feel fear, an immense fear, is there a word greater than fear to express how I feel?”

Amal*,
resident of Jinba, Masafar Yatta

Safa, resident of Al Markez, Masafar Yatta. Her house was demolished in May 2022.

©Juan Carlos Tomasi/MSF

Communities in Masafar Yatta live under constant threat of home demolition, eviction risk, and increasingly severe movement restrictions. The traditional pastoralist community faces growing challenges in keeping their herd fed, as the grazing space is restricted by the Israeli army, shepherds are attacked by settlers, and grain prices are surging. The heightened movement restrictions have negatively impacted access to livelihoods, resulting in families being forced to take on accumulating debt. The recent court ruling, and political developments, have meant that **the risk of mass displacement—which may amount to forcible transfer—is increasingly imminent.** In some villages, all the houses have demolition orders. When such demolitions do occur, they are still unexpected. People have moved into tents, yet even tents are demolished.

“WE ARE LIKE IN A JAIL. EVEN FAMILY CANNOT VISIT US.”

LAMA*, RESIDENT OF JINBA, MASAFER YATTA

Residents in Masafar Yatta report living in continual fear for their safety. They experience fear when bombs, live ammunition, and tanks are used during military training right next to their village. They experience fear when settlers come to their village or harass their children on the way to school. Or at night, when the soldiers can be heard and seen between the houses with a bright light. The loss of hope and worries about the future keep them awake at night. Parents report feeling unable to protect their children from violence; they talk about the time when their children were woken at night by an armed soldier with an aggressive dog in their bedroom, or when their children returned from school to find their house demolished. Residents of Masafar Yatta express feeling powerless

and humiliated as someone else (i.e. the Israeli army) decides if and when they can enter and exit their own village. All these elements factor into a reduction in people's access to medical care and a decline in their mental and physical health.

“THE WORST ARE THE HOME INCURSIONS BY SOLDIERS. IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT, AFTER MIDNIGHT, SUDDENLY THEY ARE IN YOUR HOME. EVERYBODY HAS TO GO OUT, MEN, WOMEN CHILDREN, AND THEY ARE SEPARATED. SOLDIERS SEARCH ALL HOUSES AND ANIMAL SHEDS. THEN EVERYBODY IS INTERROGATED, EVEN CHILDREN.”

YASSER*, A RESIDENT OF UMM AL-KHAIR, MASAFER YATTA.

1. MULTIPLE BARRIERS ARE IMPEDING THE RESIDENTS' ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE

Access to medical care has never been easy in Masafer Yatta. Masafer Yatta is a remote desert area, and its villages are connected by mainly unpaved roads. The provision of services in general, and medical services in particular, is limited. The Palestinian Ministry of Health (MoH) provides primary healthcare in various villages in Masafer Yatta, however, services are infrequent, often disrupted, and not available within the 'firing zone'. Patients need to pay for these services and medication is not provided.

All MoH health clinics in Masafer Yatta face demolition orders and MoH cars have been confiscated when travelling within the 'firing zone'.

In addition, due to funding cuts and the COVID-19 pandemic, medical care provided by a local organization within the 'firing zone' was terminated, which prompted MSF to start providing medical services through a mobile clinic in February 2021. As the ambulance from Yatta hospital (the nearest secondary hospital) takes a long time and is costly, people usually rely on family members to transport them to the hospital. As a result, access to healthcare is highly susceptible to movement restrictions, reducing the certainty that persons in need will have timely access to medical care.

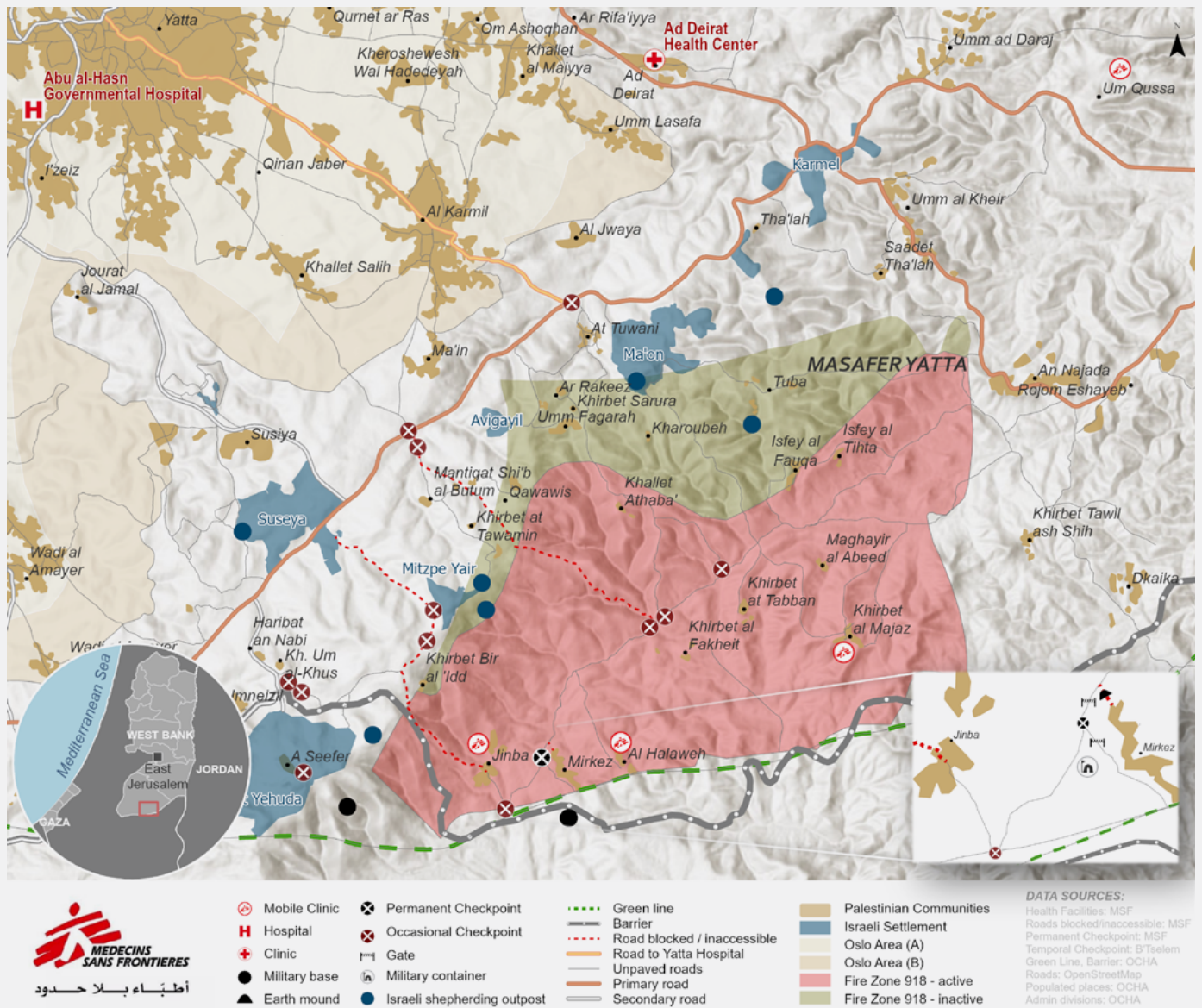
“THREE WEEKS AGO, WE WAITED FOR TWO HOURS IN HEAVY RAIN WITH A NEW BORN AT THE CHECKPOINT.”

ZEINA*, RESIDENT OF JINBA, MASAFER YATTA.

On the road, people face armed checkpoints with gates, earth mounds blocking the road, confiscation of their cars, violence and harassment. Family members—trying to pick up ill relatives—are often obstructed from reaching the Masafer Yatta villages as they do not have identity cards from the specific village. MSF patients from neighbouring villages are denied access to the village where MSF provides its medical services if their identity card shows they are not from the village they are trying to access. These factors make people's journey to all services, including medical services, longer, more expensive, more uncertain, more dangerous, and at times even impossible. This is especially problematic in cases of medical emergencies.

Normally, people from Masafer Yatta would travel to Yatta to receive medical care, including emergency medical care. The debilitating movement restrictions imposed by the Israeli army have made this option uncertain, expensive, time-consuming, humiliating, risky at best, and unavailable at worst.

When MSF assessed people's access to medical care in the summer of 2022, the most frequently cited barrier to accessing care was the 'risk of violence', even in cases of medical emergencies.



AN ELDERLY COUPLE DESCRIBING RESTRICTED ACCESS TO MEDICAL CARE, SUMMER OF 2022

Sanaa*: *"I had shingles and was in a lot of pain, I felt it on the inside. I called my son to come with his car to take me to the hospital. [Israeli] soldiers stopped him close to At-Tuwani. That was at 4 pm. They held him for 3 hours, even though his car was registered. After that, he reached our house, but was escorted by two cars from the Israeli soldiers."*

Ahmad*: *"I carried my wife to the road when I saw the lights from the car. And then the soldiers stopped me with weapons. They asked me, 'what is going on' in Hebrew. I said that my wife was sick, and then they allowed her to go in our son's car."*

Sanaa and her son were taken to the military camp at the checkpoint. Her husband was not allowed to join. At the military camp, the son was blindfolded. Later, the son's blindfold was taken off and he was allowed to be with his sick mother.

Sanaa*: *"There was a military doctor, she examined me, and she found that I was tired, and not feeling well. They said we are taking you to Seroko [an Israeli hospital] and they said that my son's car would be confiscated. They said that they will leave my son in an area close to Masafer Yatta. My son was extremely affected by this event."*

The couple reported that finally, they let them take the car and go. It was 1 am when they reached the hospital in Yatta. Sanaa had to stay in Yatta for one month to be close to the hospital and separated from her husband who had to stay with the herd in their hometown.

Obstructions of and attacks on medical personnel and vehicles are becoming more common. **The community container where MSF provided mental health consultations in Umm Qussa, clearly identified by MSF logos, was confiscated by the Israeli army in July 2021.**

Disconcertingly, Israeli soldiers and settlers have blocked or delayed the Palestine Red Crescent Society's (PRCS) ambulance when responding to emergency calls from Masafer Yatta. In September 2022, when responding to a medical emergency in At-Tuwani (Masafer Yatta), the PRCS' medics and ambulance were attacked by settlers, and Israeli forces detained their patient.

An interviewee from the Palestine Red Crescent Society recalled: *"Israeli occupation forces detained the injured person who our crew was attending in this incident for around two hours inside the PRCS ambulance until they arrested him by transferring him to a military ambulance."*

During the attack, settlers slashed two ambulance tires on the driver's side. Since this attack—in combination with the repeated attacks against PRCS staff and ambulances across the West Bank—the PRCS ambulance crew express increased fear of entering Masafer Yatta to provide medical care.

"PRCS' MEDICAL CREW AND AMBULANCES ARE CLEARLY IDENTIFIED, BUT IT DOES NOT MATTER, THE CREW FEELS LIKE THERE IS NO PROTECTION FOR THEM."

(PRCS INTERVIEWEE)

Although the Israeli army confiscated the container where MSF provided mental health consultations in Umm Qussa in 2021, MSF was never denied access to the Masafer Yatta region. However, the Israeli military training and increased movement restrictions imposed by the Israeli army (e.g., checkpoints and confiscation of cars), have made it more difficult for our patients to reach our mobile clinic.

In June and July 2022, the people of Masafer Yatta experienced the meaning of a 'firing zone' more

unequivocally when the Israeli army conducted a one-month military training on their doorstep. The training took place in between villages and close to people's homes, using tanks, explosives, and live bullets. Residents were told not to move from Mondays to Wednesdays after mid-day. The people of Masafer Yatta recounted to us how the sounds terrified their children. MSF adapted the mobile clinic schedule for three weeks to facilitate patients, but during the last week, the mobile clinic was cancelled; patients were not reaching us, and our Palestinian colleagues were too scared to enter the region.

2. DISRUPTION IN HEALTHCARE PROVISION IS LEADING TO INCREASED HEALTH RISKS

Movement restrictions continued after the military training. While MSF's mobile clinics previously served patients from surrounding villages, MSF's team recorded—for the most restricted villages, such as Jinba—patients reduced to only residents from the village where the mobile clinic is located. **To keep our mobile clinic services available to our patients, over the last few months, MSF had to adapt the mobile clinics' schedule and location repeatedly.** While this allowed the MSF team to continue providing medical care to our patients, these repeated changes and irregularity of services inevitably led to additional uncertainty regarding access to medical care.

Between May and October 2022, our team recorded an 18% decrease in the number of consultations at the mobile clinics compared to the same period in 2021. While this decrease could be partially explained by reduced community access to our services, it is also linked to the decrease in the number of mobile clinics we ran during the same period, including the cancellation of some of our activities due to military training.



Sara, a resident of Umm Qussa gathering in Masafer Yatta. Her son's house was demolished in July 2022. ©Juan Carlos Tomasi/MSF

Many residents reported to us that the uncertain access to medical care in Masafer Yatta has forced medically vulnerable people, such as pregnant women in their last trimester, elderly and seriously ill patients, to leave their homes and family, and move to Yatta city. They had no choice but to leave to be closer to medical facilities to guarantee timely access to medical care that they can't ensure if they stay in Masafer Yatta.¹⁵

“FOR A PREGNANT WOMAN, IT IS ABOUT LUCK. IF SHE CAN REACH THE HOSPITAL [WITHOUT BEING TURNED BACK AT A CHECKPOINT], THEN SHE WILL BE SAFE. IF NOT, SHE WILL GIVE BIRTH ON THE WAY. GOD HELPS US.”

RAGHDA, RESIDENT OF UMM QUSSA, MASAFER YATTA.

The effects of reduced access to medical care are also reflected in MSF's medical data. When comparing May to October 2022 (the period during which the restrictive measures increased) to the same period in 2021, MSF observed a 27% reduction in the total number of consultations for chronic diseases per mobile clinic.¹⁶ From May to September 2021, MSF recorded a loss of follow-up with an average of 1.2 chronic patients per month, which dramatically increased to a loss of 4.6 chronic patients per month during the same period in 2022. During follow-up interviews with four chronic patients, three reported that they stopped coming because of access-related issues (e.g., car confiscation by the Israeli army and the need to spend more time in Yatta to be closer to medical facilities).

Based on the feedback of our patients and the residents of Masafer Yatta, it was evident that people who need regular medical attention, such as chronic patients, are forced to leave Masafer Yatta because they cannot risk losing their regular check-up visits as this will have dire consequences for their health.¹⁷

“MY MOTHER-IN-LAW IS SICK, SHE HAS DIABETES AND DIFFICULTY WALKING. SHE DECIDED TWO WEEKS AGO TO MOVE TO YATTA. BEFORE, SHE WOULD GO TO YATTA EVERY WEEK, NOW SHE HAD TO MOVE PERMANENTLY BECAUSE OF THE CHECKPOINT.”

HODA*, RESIDENT OF JINBA, MASAFER YATTA.

People also reported that they delay seeking medical care due to the increased risks involved with travelling to health facilities in Yatta. Specifically, they explained that the increased difficulty and cost of transportation have pushed families to adopt negative coping mechanisms such as postponing their medical check-ups, spacing out their medication, or self-medicating.

MSF's staff have witnessed first-hand the negative ramifications when patients delay seeking medical care. In one case, a one-year-old child was sick for over two weeks, but because of the dangers on the road, her mother did not take the child to the doctor in Yatta and instead waited for MSF's mobile clinic to come to her village. This also caused a delay in the child's one-year vaccinations. Another man described interrupting his chronic medication because he did not want to leave the house due to fear of the soldiers.

¹⁵ Whereas pregnant women in Masafer Yatta are for a long time used to move to Yatta during the last weeks of their pregnancy or when the contractions already started, now it is more common for pregnant women to move to Yatta one or two months before their due date, separating them from their family during the final months of their pregnancy.

¹⁶ From May to October 2021: 537 chronic illness consultations, 68 mobile clinics, 7.9 chronic illness consultations per mobile clinic; From May to October 2022: 354 chronic illness consultations, 61 mobile clinics, 5.8 chronic illness consultations per mobile clinic; 34.1% reduction in chronic illness consultations; 26.6% reduction in chronic illness consultations per mobile clinic.

¹⁷ Jacobson AM, Hauser ST, Willett J, Wolfsdorf JJ, Herman L. Consequences of irregular versus continuous medical follow-up in children and adolescents with insulin-dependent diabetes mellitus. *J Pediatr.* 1997 Nov;131(5):727-33. doi: 10.1016/s0022-3476(97)70101-x. PMID: 9403654.

These difficulties in accessing timely healthcare including specialized hospital care expressed by the residents of Masafer Yatta will have a long-term impact on people's health, as delays in accessing healthcare allow conditions to progress or worsen.¹⁸

The blocking and delaying of ambulances, attacks on the medical staff, car confiscations, and restricting family members from Yatta from reaching the villages are making people from Masafer Yatta increasingly vulnerable in case of medical emergencies as it is increasingly uncertain if they can reach the hospital on time if at all.

“THE SITUATION IS DIFFICULT. IMAGINE YOUR SON IS SICK AND YOU WANT TO TAKE HIM TO THE DOCTOR, BUT THERE IS NO CAR AND THE ROAD IS LONG. IF YOU WANT TO GO ON FOOT, YOU WILL NEED A MINIMUM OF FOUR HOURS. EVEN YOU, HEALTHY, YOU END UP SICK”.

JAMLA, RESIDENT OF KHIRBET AL-FAKIH, MASAFER YATTA.

PHYSICAL HEALTH AFFECTED BY POOR LIVING CONDITIONS



Mahmoud, resident of Al Markez, Masafer Yatta ©Juan Carlos Tomasi/MSF

Demolitions of houses, toilets, and water tanks, combined with movement restrictions which impede access to livelihoods and basic services, impact on overall well-being. Residents of Masafer Yatta report that their diet is becoming unbalanced and restricted due to the limited access to shops and markets in Yatta, increased food prices, and limited financial resources to spend on fresh food. This directly impacts physical health.

¹⁸ Prentice JC, Pizer SD. Delayed access to healthcare and mortality. *Health Serv Res.* Apr 2007 Apr;42(2):644-662. doi: 10.1111/j.1475-6773.2006.00626.x. PMID: 17362211; PMCID: PMC1955366.



“Our health is destroyed, physically we are more tired. If the herd is in an open space, we don’t need to prepare fixed meals for them. When they are here [detained in the barns in between the houses, because the army does not allow them to move closer to the wall] we must feed them and clean the dung, which is hard work. Even the children must help. They wake up at 4:30 am to help feed the herd before going to school, and after school, they continue this work.”

Rama*,

resident of Al-Hlaweh, Masafer Yatta

MSF’s medical and mental health team also observed that people prioritize fodder and water for their herd over their own food and over seeking medical support. This self-sacrifice is a long-term coping mechanism as their future income—and therefore food and ability to continue living in Masafer Yatta—is dependent on their animals. Other interviewees reported that access to potable water is more difficult and expensive. In February 2019, 5 kilometres of a water network serving 12 villages in Masafer Yatta was uprooted and confiscated.¹⁹ The remaining water pipes are regularly cut off, water tanks are destroyed, trucks delivering water tanks are stopped and confiscated, and these challenges are further compounded by a lack of rain.

Based on what is known about the consequences of delayed access to medical care, an unbalanced or restricted diet,²⁰ and insufficient access to potable water,²¹ **MSF is highly concerned about the negative consequences of the arbitrary movement restrictions and other restrictive measures on people’s health and well-being.**

¹⁹ B’Tselem. (2019, 13 February). [Civil Administration cuts and confiscates water pipes servicing 12 communities in the Masafer Yatta area in South Hebron Hills \(btselem.org\)](#)
OCHA Protection of Civilians Report, 12-25 February 2019 [Protection of Civilians Report | 12 - 25 February 2019 | United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs - occupied Palestinian territory \(ochaopt.org\)](#)

²⁰ WHO. (2021, June 9). [Malnutrition \[Factsheet\]. Fact sheets - Malnutrition \(who.int\)](#)

²¹ WHO. (2022, March 21). [Drinking-water \[Factsheet\]. Drinking-water \(who.int\)](#)

3. THE DAILY STRUGGLES ARE TAKING A HUGE TOLL ON PEOPLE'S MENTAL HEALTH



“It is a terrifying life, 24 hours a day.”

Issa*,

the director of the school that was demolished in Isfey Al-Fauqa, Masafer Yatta.

MSF provides mental health services in Hebron in the West Bank.

© Alfredo Caliz/El País Semana

The uncertainty about the future and the daily challenge of navigating severe movement restrictions wears down people's mental health. Residents perceive that Israeli policies are designed to create an atmosphere of constant fear to exhaust the psyche of the people in Masafer Yatta until they give up and leave. However, the people from Masafer Yatta communicate a strong determination to not leave their home and land, but at the same time express a lack of hope for the future.

“THE PLAN IS TO SWEEP US FROM THE AREA, BUT WE WILL STAY HERE EVEN IF THERE IS ONLY ONE CHICKEN LEFT.”

YASSER* RESIDENT OF AL-HAWALEH, MASAFER YATTA.

People's fear is grounded. Homes do get demolished²² and innocent people—including children—do get killed across the West Bank. For this reason, MSF mental health experts highlight the importance of not pathologizing people's mental health states. *“Mental health problems are a normal response to an abnormal—and even pathological—situation,”* an MSF psychologist confirms. People remain steadfast and adapt but adapting to a situation that is psychologically harmful and does not give much room for hope, is suffering.

MSF's mental health team reports that mothers worry and wait for their children to return home safely every day. *“They could be shot, dead, for no reason, they were trying to ram the checkpoint, they would say. No trial, just executions,”* a mother said to our team.

22 According to OCHA, in 2022, 79 structures were demolished in Masafer Yatta (a 46% increase from 2021), affecting 538 people of which 148 were displaced;

“YOU FEEL LIKE YOU ARE GOING TO EXPLODE. SOMETHING WAS TAKEN FROM YOU, AND YOU CANNOT DO ANYTHING.”

SAMAR*, A RESIDENT OF SHA'B AL BUTUM, MASAFAER YATTA, COMMENTING ON HER HOME BEING DEMOLISHED THE DAY BEFORE.

Prolonged feelings of insecurity and continuous fear spread into every area of life in Masafer Yatta. Parents described the persistent fear for their children’s safety; on the way to school, in school, and even in their own homes. Children are scared due to the presence of soldiers and settlers.

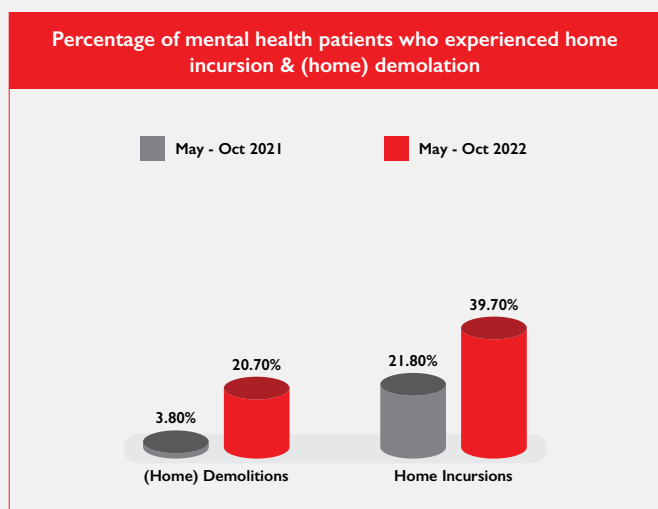
Education is often disrupted by movement restrictions, teachers are blocked at checkpoints and generalized fear detracts from the ability to focus in a safe learning environment. A mother reported to an MSF team member how her young son was wearing a shirt with a picture of a gun. A soldier stopped him, made him take off the shirt, and return home shirtless.

The unpredictable nature of the occupation and repression makes it impossible for people to ever find peace of mind because they don’t know what will be next. Many of MSF’s patients report being exhausted and experiencing sleeping problems. People are increasingly afraid to leave their houses. Children are more likely to stay inside, and some express mental health symptoms such as bedwetting.

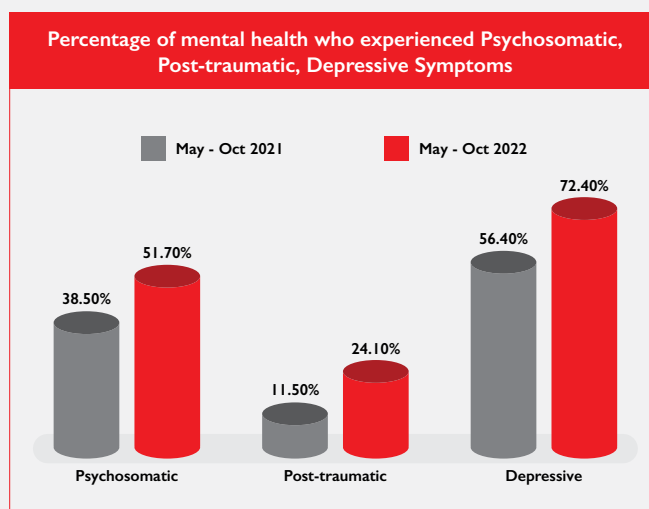
“WHAT THEY DID, WHAT WE SAW. IT WILL IMPACT THE CHILDREN, FOR YEARS. IN ONE HOUR, THEY BROKE HOPES AND DREAMS.”

ISSA, THE DIRECTOR OF THE SCHOOL THAT WAS DEMOLISHED IN ISFEY AL-FAUQA, MASAFAER YATTA.

Between 2021 and 2022, MSF observed a sharp increase in Masafer Yatta residents seeking mental health support who have experienced home incursions and demolitions of homes, or other properties. Between May and October 2021 and 2022, the number of patients who experienced home incursions increased from 20.7% to 39.8%; while those whose property have been demolished went up from 3.8% to 21.8% (Graph 1).



Graph 1: Increase in homes demolitions and incursions



Graph 2: Increase in patients experiencing psychosomatic, post-traumatic, and depressive symptoms

These events have profoundly impacted the mental health and well-being of the residents, who are already grappling with stress, uncertainty about their future and generalized feelings of insecurity. Following these incidents, more than half of the patients in 2022 reported an increase in psychosomatic symptoms; one quarter showed post-traumatic symptoms; and two-thirds described having depressive symptoms (Graph 2).

“I FELT LIKE I WAS SUFFOCATING LIKE I WAS BLIND LIKE MY HANDS WERE TIED. I COULD NOT DO ANYTHING.”

NADA*, A RESIDENT OF SHA'B AL-BUTUM, MASAFER YATTA, WHOSE HOME WAS DEMOLISHED THE DAY BEFORE.

Commenting on this data, *MSF's Mental Health Activity Manager* stated: *“These findings are important, yet not surprising. Mental health has to do with basic things: dignity and basic rights like the right to protect yourself and your children, the right to a future, the right to privacy. All of this is taken away from the people of Masafer Yatta. They are treated as if they are not equal to the others, as if they are worth less than other human beings. They are not welcome on their own land, and their capacity to object to what is being done to them has been taken away from them. They are surviving but are left with no choice or control. This means they are very vulnerable to whatever happens.”*

As it becomes more difficult to manage the emotional response, stress, anxiety, and depression, problems within families and between communities arise.

The impact on domestic violence

Consistent with what is known about the association between political violence and heightened occurrence of male-to-female intimate partner violence in the West Bank,²³ in Masafer Yatta MSF observes that in periods where political violence goes up, there is an increase of new patients who report experiencing domestic violence. During structured interviews, women from the community have shared how the increased oppression and coercion imposed by the Israeli forces impact their family dynamics, a woman reports: *“there are fights within the families because of the stress. It starts with the husbands and then the wives start behaving the same”*. This is in line with what MSF's team observes during the mental health sessions. An MSF psychologist noted, *“People become tough to survive because everything is difficult. They don't differentiate between the enemy, family, and the self. Parents don't think they abuse, they think they are making their children strong. They are tough, because they expect life to be tough and unsafe for their children in the future, so they prepare them by being tough. They think the best way to make their children listen is by exercising power.”*

MSF's data reveals that 50% of mental health patients—the vast majority of women and children—report experiencing domestic violence. Political violence seeps into the home and family relationships. By upsetting the domestic dynamics, an already unbearable situation becomes even more challenging, especially for the most vulnerable people within the community.

23 Clark, C.J., Everson-Rose, S.A., Suglia, S.F., Btoush, R., Alosno, A., & Haj-Yahia, M.M. (2010). Association between exposure to political violence and intimate partner violence in the occupied Palestinian territory: a cross-sectional study. *The Lancet*, 375: 310–316.; Haj-Yahia, M.M., & Clark, C.J. (2013). Intimate partner violence in the occupied Palestinian territory: Prevalence and risk factors. *Journal of Family Violence*, 28: 797–809.; Müller, C., & Tranchant, J.-P. (2017). Tackling violence against women and girls in Gaza. International Institute for Environment and Development. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep02733>

CONCLUSIONS



“We are human. Here, humanity is for some people, but not for others.”

MSF staff member*,
Hebron, West Bank.

Mahmoud, resident of Al Markez, Masafer Yatta ©Juan Carlos Tomasil/MSF

The hostile environment in Masafer Yatta has a negative impact on the health of residents—beyond the people directly affected by the violence. According to an MSF’s psychologist, “some patients are getting worse since May, the general situation influences the personal situation.” Moreover, in addition to violence, it is the daily oppression and coercion that negatively impacts people’s everyday life, access to medical care, mental health, family dynamics, and eventually their future. In Masafer Yatta, the humiliation and dangers of the occupation are an everyday reality, whether it takes the shape of movement restrictions, home demolitions, violence, car confiscations, night raids, detentions, harassment at checkpoints, or villages being turned into open-air prisons; all aimed to push Palestinians out of their homes and away from their land.

Masafer Yatta’s people’s ability to ‘adapt’ to an unbearable situation does not mean they are not severely impacted. It impacts their lives, livelihood, and mental health, and, most likely soon if not already, their physical health too. People need support, but no amount of support will help them as long as the soldiers and settlers remain present and their harassment and violence continue. As an MSF psychologist puts it— *“nothing will change if the situation stays the same”*.

While the people in Masafer Yatta have a particularly tough time, most of their struggles can be extrapolated to the lives of other Palestinians living in the West Bank. We see this reflected in what our Palestinian colleagues share:

“WE ARE TIRED TOO. WE FEEL ANXIETY. WE EXPECT BAD THINGS TO HAPPEN AND THE SITUATION TO GET WORSE. NOW IS A HARD TIME. IT IS ALSO CHALLENGING TO HEAR THE STORIES DURING THERAPY BECAUSE THEY ARE PART OF THE SAME CONFLICT. SOMETIMES IT GETS A BIT LIGHTER AND YOU WANT TO BREATHE, BUT THE MOMENT YOU BREATHE, IT GETS WORSE AGAIN. I TRY TO ENJOY THE QUIET MOMENTS, BUT I ALSO KNOW I NEED TO EXPECT THINGS TO GET WORSE AGAIN. ONE DAY, ONE HOUR, THE SITUATION IS STABLE, AND WE DANCE AND ENJOY, BECAUSE WE KNOW IT WON'T LAST.”

MSF STAFF MEMBER, HEBRON, WEST BANK.

The testimonies collected during this report reflect the Palestinians' remarkable strength, bravery, and humanity, but also their loss of hope and everyday fear for themselves and their loved ones. The people from Masafer Yatta, our colleagues, and all Palestinians deserve more than this. They deserve access to medical care, mental health, physical health, a peaceful home, safety, and humanity.

ASKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders (MSF) condemns the Israeli authorities' measures aiming at putting extraordinary pressure on the residents of Masafer Yatta to leave the area. As well as demolishing people's homes, they have installed checkpoints, confiscated residents' vehicles, and enforced curfews, and other movement restrictions. These measures, which have intensified since May 2022, have severely impacted residents' freedom of movement, mental health and ability to access basic services, including medical care. Therefore, MSF calls for the following:

The Government of Israel to:

- Immediately cease the confiscations and demolition of Palestinian homes, schools, and other property and infrastructure in Masafer Yatta. Stop providing new demolition orders and do not interfere with the rebuilding of demolished property. Ensure Israel complies with its obligations under IHL and IHRL that protect the people of Masafer Yatta against forced evictions, forced displacement, and individual or mass forcible transfer.
- Stop the use of arbitrary movement restrictions in Masafer Yatta—including the confiscation of cars and discriminatory practices at checkpoints—which have impeded the passage of school-teachers, shepherds, and ambulances, undermining access to healthcare, education, and livelihoods.
- Ensure that Israeli forces uphold their obligations under IHL to ensure and maintain medical services in the occupied territory, to the fullest extent possible. Medical personnel must be allowed to carry out their duties without undue delays or obstruction. This includes the requirement that ambulances are able to move freely and respond to calls for assistance.
- Refrain from undertaking disproportionate “security measures” such as night-time home incursions, which violate the right to privacy and create a sense of humiliation and constant fear among Palestinians in Masafer Yatta.
- Respect and fulfil Israel's obligation as an occupying power to provide safety to the Palestinian people and their children, this includes protection from settler violence.

The Palestinian Authority to:

- Provide assistance for Palestinians in Masafer Yatta.
- Scale up the provision of (emergency) medical care in hard-to-reach villages in the ‘firing zone’, including increased services for pregnant and lactating women, persons with chronic illnesses and persons with disability, who may have increased medical needs.
- Increase efforts towards establishing a comprehensive mental health strategy to be incorporated into public health facilities at the primary care level, to ensure the delivery of holistic care.

Third States – particularly the USA, EU,²⁴ UK, Jordan, UAE and Egypt to:

- The international community must urgently intervene. Specifically, third states—in particular the USA, EU, UK, and Arab countries that have normalized ties with Israel—must act individually and collectively to call on the Israeli government for a cessation of violations of IHRL and IHL in Masafer Yatta.
- Press Israel to ensure access to medical care, to cease not only the demolitions and confiscations but also the demolition orders, to stop movement restrictions to act against settler violence and intimidation, and to stop causing unnecessary suffering by continuous harassment and humiliation.
- Acknowledge that, while mass evictions have not taken place yet, Israel’s restrictive measures, oppression, and coercion, are directly and indirectly affecting the mental and physical health of Masafer Yatta residents, and, over time, make it unbearable for Palestinians to continue living in Masafer Yatta, effectively resulting in forced evictions. When this happens and an entire community is displaced, the damage done is irreversible.
- Call for accountability regarding the demolition of donor-funded structures in Masafer Yatta.
- Ensure to provide the necessary funding for humanitarian activities by international and especially local organizations who are providing direct responses to people in Masafer Yatta, including assistance to rebuild demolished homes and community structures, and psychosocial and medical services.

Names with * were changed for confidentiality.

²⁴ On the 14 November 2022, 24 members of European Parliament (MEPs) posed a Parliamentary question to the European Commission (EC) in which they specifically refer to the demolition of EU-funded structures in Masafer Yatta. Importantly, the question mentions that the EC has recently admitted that the EC’s “use of diplomatic and political channels [to make requests to Israel] has been ineffective”. The MEPs pose the question “Will it [the EC] provide an explanation of what other options have been discussed to secure compensation from Israel after nearly a decade of EU concerns, condemnations and unsuccessful political engagement?” ([Parliamentary question | Compensation following the demolition of EU-funded structures | P-003694/2022 | European Parliament \(europa.eu\)](#)) In its response, the EC acknowledged that “at this stage a list of possible options to secure compensation from Israel for EU funding lost in demolitions has not been discussed” ([P-9-2022-003694-ASVW_EN.pdf \(europa.eu\)](#)).

**“I TOLD YOU MY STORY, BUT NO ONE
WILL BE ABLE TO TOUCH THE PAIN,
ONLY THE PEOPLE LIVING IT.”**

ISSA, A RESIDENT IN MASAFER YATTA

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