

Israel Uses Closed Military Firing Zones to Drive More Palestinians From Their Land

By Jonathan Cook

The Nakba Continues



Herder Burhan Daragmeh (above) and the martyr poster for his slain son, Sakher (inset).

In the midst of the international furor that erupted over the June 12 abduction and killing of three Israeli teenagers, the death of an 18-year-old Palestinian shepherd in the West Bank went unremarked.

Sakher Daragmeh was killed on June 21, as he tended goats close to the remote village of al-Aqaba, on the high slopes of the northern Jordan Valley.

His father, Burhan Daragmeh, said he and other relatives found Sakher's body covered in blood, with a bullet wound to the chest. The army quickly took charge of his body, which was sent into Israel for an autopsy.

The Israeli authorities so far have declined to divulge their findings, said the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem. However, the Israeli police have initiated an investigation.

Whatever the precise circumstances of Daragmeh's death, everyone agrees that the Palestinian youth died in an area that Israel

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has declared a closed military firing zone since the 1970s.

It is one of several that have hemmed in al-Aqaba on all sides, making life for the 300 villagers—as well as dozens of Bedouin families encamped in the surrounding hills—a continuous game of Russian roulette. Most are engaged in grazing animals.

"He was shot on purpose by the Israeli army, in cold blood," said Burhan Daragmeh. "There was no reason to shoot him. But everyone of us who lives in this area knows that we are not safe."

B'Tselem spokeswoman Sarit Michaeli said that, based on her previous experience, the Daragmeh family might have to wait years before they receive an official explanation from Israel about how their son died.

Over the years, six other villagers from al-Aqaba, including a six-year-old girl, have been killed in firing zones, two by live fire and

four by faulty shells that exploded. A further 38 inhabitants have been injured.

Following a petition to the Israeli courts in 1999, the army agreed not to continue conducting live-fire exercises in al-Aqaba or carry out maneuvers among the houses. However, according to the Israeli human rights group ACRI, the pledge has been violated on several occasions.

As a result, more than 700 villagers have become "refugees," according to the mayor, Sami Sadeeq, fleeing al-Aqaba to seek greater safety in nearby cities under Palestinian control. Sadeeq himself was injured in 1971, at the age of 16, by bullets that paralyzed him from the waist down.

Sakher's death occurred shortly after Israel's former Deputy Defense Minister Danny Danon was questioned about the true purpose of the firing zones.

Since Israel's occupation began in 1967, military training zones have proliferated across Area C, the nearly two-thirds of the

West Bank that were assigned to temporary Israeli control under the Oslo accords.

The West Bank is expected to be the bulk of a future Palestinian state.

Danon admitted that the firing zones provided a justification for forcing Palestinians off their lands. "Whoever is in an area that doesn't belong to him, that has been declared a firing zone, will have to be evacuated from there—and yes, we plan to remove more people," he said, responding to an official parliamentary question.

Currently, 18 percent of the West Bank has been declared as Israeli military training and firing zones—about the same land area as designated under Palestinian control, officially termed Area A in the Oslo accords. In the Jordan Valley, the figure for such zones rises to 56 percent.

Michaeli said that international law clearly prohibited Israel from locating military training and firing zones in occupied Palestinian territory.

"Israel is entitled to build a military base to protect an occupied area," she explained, "but not to use Palestinian land for its long-term training needs. It has to do that inside its own sovereign territory."

Some 38 Palestinian villages have found themselves, like al-Aqaba, trapped in firing zones, endangering the inhabitants' safety and in many cases providing grounds for Israeli officials to demolish their homes and forcibly remove them.

Herders like the Daragmeh family face particular difficulties moving around firing zones.

Israel is currently trying to expel the entire population from eight villages in an area known as the South Hebron Hills that has been declared "Firing Zone 918."

"Israel has many different ways to make life very hard for Palestinians so that they will be driven off their land," said Dror Etkes, an Israeli expert on the settlements. "But the firing zones are the number one method."

The Israeli deputy defense minister's comments in June were in response to a question prompted by testimony from a senior Israeli army officer to a parliamentary committee.

Einav Shalev, in charge of military operations in the West Bank, stated in April that

firing zones were designed to displace Palestinians from sections of Area C. He added that the army had recently increased its use of military firing and training zones in the Jordan Valley to stop Palestinians living there.

He told legislators: "I think that the movement of armored vehicles, other vehicles and more in this region and the thousands of soldiers marching clears the way. When the battalions march, people [Palestinians] move aside."

He also referred to Palestinian homes as "weeds," saying, "There are places where, when we reduced the quantity of training substantially, weeds started growing."

The Jordan Valley, nearly 30 percent of the West Bank, became a key diplomatic battleground in the nine-month, U.S.-led peace process that collapsed acrimoniously in April. Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu had insisted that the Israeli military be allowed to continue operating in the Jordan Valley for the foreseeable future.

Tamar Zandberg, a dovish legislator whose question prompted Danon's statement, commented on Facebook that the firing zones were being exploited for political purposes. "Apparently the deputy minister

is starting to prepare to implement the Bennett plan to annex Area C while cleansing it of as many as possible Palestinians."

Naftali Bennett, a senior government minister, has proposed annexing much of the West Bank as an alternative to reaching a peace agreement with the Palestinians. A recent poll of Israeli Jews living outside the settlements showed that one in three supported the West Bank's full or partial annexation.

Israel has been stepping up its destruction of homes in the Jordan Valley, according to recent data from the United Nations. Some 390 homes were demolished last year, more than double the number the previous year. The Jordan Valley is home to 65,000 Palestinians, and another 6,000 Jewish settlers.

Etkes said he had begun mapping the firing zones to determine how many of them were in actual use.

"It will be another six months till I have the results, but I'd be extremely surprised if the army actually needs more than a tenth of the area it has zoned for military training," he said. "Instead they are used as a pretext for expelling Palestinians."

Sakher Daragmeh's death has evoked troubling memories for Al-Aqaba's mayor. Sadeeq, who has been confined to a wheel-

chair for more than 40 years, said he had been shot at the same location as Daragmeh.

"When I heard the army had killed Sakher, it brought back very painful memories," he said. "The reality is that nothing has changed here with the army's policy in more than four decades."

Sadeeq said that despite the court ruling 15 years ago, the army continued to make regular forays into al-Aqaba, including in early July, when Israeli soldiers destroyed a house and five animal shelters. "The constant pressure of facing the soldiers is intended to make us fearful and leave," he stated.

He estimated that more than 2,000 villagers were living outside al-Aqaba, most of them in Tubas and Nablus, cities in Area A, under Palestinian control.

Etkes said: "Life is very difficult at the best of times for Palestinians in Area C, but those in the firing zones are in the worst situation of all. The immediate goal is to drive them out and into Areas A and B [under greater Palestinian control]. Ultimately, Israel wants them out of the West Bank entirely."

"Israel comes to our village and demolishes homes even in the winter rains," said Burhan Daragmeh. "They'd prefer to see us homeless, wandering from place to place." □