

IDF uses live-fire zones to expel Palestinians from areas of West Bank, officer admits

Officer tells Knesset committee method used to reduce illegal construction, Palestinian population in Area C; Habayit Hayehudi MK urges crack-down on international groups who assist construction.

By [Amira Hass](#) | May 21, 2014 | 8:58 AM



The Palestinian community of Um al Heir, South Hebron Hills, West Bank. Photo by Mairav Zonszein

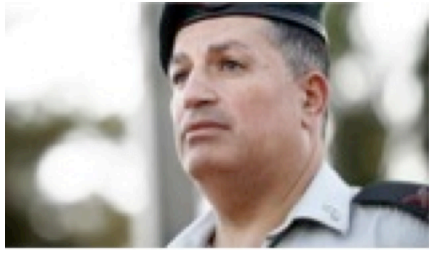
Military training in live-fire zones in the West Bank is used as a way of reducing the number of Palestinians living nearby, and serves as an important part of the campaign against Palestinian illegal construction, an army officer revealed at a recent Knesset committee meeting.

Col. Einav Shalev, operations officer of Central Command, was addressing a subcommittee of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, which discussed “illegal Palestinian construction in Area C” of the West Bank, and ways of expelling Palestinian residents from areas such as E1, the Jordan Valley and Susya, south of Hebron.

He told those at the meeting that the goal of preventing illegal construction is one of the main reasons the Israel Defense Forces has recently increased its training in the Jordan Valley.

MKs Mordechai Yogev and Orit Strock (Habayit Hayehudi), the only committee members in the meeting, and some other attendees complained that the Civil Administration and the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories were not doing enough to stop what they said was the spread of illegal Palestinian construction.

They mentioned the involvement of international organizations and foreign countries in supporting such building. “They are inciting the Arabs and others to chaos,” said Yogev, demanding that Israel take strong steps against them. Yogev, chairman of the panel, said its next meeting would focus on the international organizations.



Brig. Gen. Yoav Mordechai.
Photo by Tomer Appelbaum

IDF Gen. Yoav Mordechai, coordinator of government activities in the territories, was invited to the meeting, which took place April 27. He said his bureau complains immediately to the embassies of countries whose organizations are involved in illegal construction. "From our perspective, it's not important who finances illegal construction," he said. "In the past three months, the appropriate embassy has received a letter within an hour of an organization being caught building illegally."

Mordechai complimented Regavim, an NGO that challenges Arab use of land on either side of the Green Line and that was represented at the meeting, for doing what he said was important work. But he rejected accusations of laxity in preventing illegal Palestinian building. In answer to participants in the meeting, who included Ma'aleh Adumim Mayor Benny Kashriel, that the E1 area was being abandoned, Mordechai said enforcement and monitoring activities in E1 and along the Jerusalem-Jericho road were a priority.

Thus, he said, the Civil Administration was focused on the removal of Bedouin from the area and their concentration in permanent settlements. Mordechai stressed it was the Civil Administration's job to enforce the law on Israelis as well as others. He presented 2013 data on building demolitions, both Palestinian and Israeli, which he said proved the wide range of enforcement. For instance, he said the Civil Administration had confiscated 217 kilometers of irrigation pipes and destroyed seven rainwater collection ponds.

Closed military areas

Some 18 percent of the West Bank is defined as closed military areas designated for military training, while Area A, which is under Palestinian civil and policing authority, is 17.7 percent of the area of the West Bank. Israeli settlements, unlike the veteran Palestinian villages, are not included in the firing zones, and the residents of outposts that have expanded into firing zones are not removed.

Some 6,200 Palestinians in 38 communities live in live-fire areas, making a living from livestock and agriculture. Most of the communities have been in existence since long before Israel conquered the West Bank in 1967, and certainly before the areas were designated live-fire zones.

Shalev said that "in places where we significantly reduced the amount of training, weeds have grown," referring to Palestinian communities. "This is something that should be taken into consideration," he said.

Referring to the IDF's policy of confiscating humanitarian equipment before it got to its destination, Shalev said this serves as "a punch in the right places. When you confiscate 10 large, white and expensive tents, it's not easy. It's not simple to recover." Because of the confiscation policy, the Red Cross had decided to stop providing tents to shepherd communities whose huts and barns were destroyed by the Civil Administration, he noted.

The European Community and international aid organizations have devoted much of their humanitarian and diplomatic activities to Area C in recent years. As they see it, the Israeli veto on connecting communities to water, electricity and transportation infrastructure is contrary to Israel's obligations as an occupier. They describe Israel's plans to relocate the Bedouin to permanent communities and destroy various villages in the south of the West Bank as transfer and forced removal, which are illegal under international law.

The Europeans are also concerned that actions that effectively annex Area C areas to Israel close the door on the two-state solution. Several international organizations, funded by Europe, are helping Palestinians in Area C dig pools for the collection of rainwater, erect latrines, establish solar power facilities and swap their tents and huts for caravans. According to the Civil Administration, those are illegal structures.

Yogev distinguished between humanitarian activities by international organizations that assist Israel and others. "There are those that are only involved in humanitarian activities ... there are those who distribute food

and other things in places where there is poverty, and when they undertake such activities they in fact assist the Civil Administration, the Coordinator of Activities and the State of Israel.”

He suggested focusing on “those who break international law, come here into our space and cause chaos ... as emissaries of anti-Israel interests in order to take control of state land or other things. The Civil Administration and Coordinator of Activities should stop cooperating with them. ... An Arab doesn't have the money for a bed, but they come and give him a “caravilla” costing 150,000 to 200,000 shekels (about \$43,000 to \$52,000) and they do it only as emissaries of those who want to incite.”

David Perl, head of the Gush Etzion regional council, said: “What we need is a new command spirit, similar to what has happened under your command... Bring 100 inspectors who will work daily and throw out all that needs to be thrown out, without going to the supreme court or injunctions.”

Yogev said: “I have raised the issue of regulation (the concentration of Bedouin in several permanent locations against their will) to the top of the order of priorities, because there is a difference between an Arab who has a house in Yatta or Tubas and should be kicked back to there and an Arab who, if you throw him out he will go to the closest wadi.”

Danny Tirze, chairman of Kfar Adumim, chairman of the Gush Adumim settlement association and the person who planned the original course of the separation wall (which has since changed in various places due to court applications regarding over-zealous land grabs without apparent security justification,) said: The public as a whole (referring to the settlers who he represents - A.H.) is left speechless in the face of our lack of answers for the solution of a small problem which is clear to all – the national importance of ensuring that this place remains ours. “

Mordechai said that, at the instruction of the attorney general, the Civil Administration is preparing a unit that will deal on a criminal basis with illegal construction by both Palestinians and Israelis. He rejected Strock's claim that the unit would target Israelis only. Strock asked: “Do you verify that the Bedouin are actually Bedouin and not just Arabs? I don't understand how you got to such astronomical figures for the Bedouin.”

Mordechai replied that “the Bedouin doesn't announce that he's Bedouin and for that reason he's Bedouin. By the way, all the rest are not just Arabs; they're Palestinians living in part of the area of Judea and Samaria.” Strock replied: “I call them just Arabs.” Mordechai said that the Civil Administration is mapping all the Bedouin tribes very precisely and “therefore there is no problem if there is a certain overlap of city folk who become Bedouin.”

Nitzan Horowitz, a member of the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, told Haaretz, “It's unacceptable that they hold a hearing on illegal Palestinian construction without inviting any Palestinians or organizations that don't belong to the settlers. It was a meeting of the settler committee, which is out of order and distorts the discussion.”

Horowitz, who expressed shock and dismay at what he said were denigrating and racist references to Palestinians, knew of the meeting but was participating in another committee meeting at the same time. “If Israel would allow the Palestinians to build in a regulated manner, to trade and do business in Area C, which is a majority of the West Bank, and not suffocate them, I assume that there wouldn't be so much illegal construction.” He said that he had heard clearly from Israeli security sources that commerce is a stabilizing factor “so the prevention of building and commercial activities is a folly, even in their eyes.”

Also participating in the meeting were representatives of the Israel Police, the Interior Ministry, the Foreign Ministry, the Prosecutor's Office and the Housing and Construction Ministry.