

Itamar Shapira, anthropologist and activist, “Protective presence in Masafer Yatta”, 25.8.2025

Introduction

Hello, and thank you for joining today’s daily gathering of *Eyes on Gaza*. It is impossible to begin without mentioning the shocking bombing of Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis, where medical teams came under attack and dozens were killed — among them four photojournalists. This strike is yet another instance of the horrifying violence that Israel directs against those who serve as our eyes: journalists, photographers, and everyone in Gaza who reaches out and transmits the truth to the world. But Gaza is not the only place in the headlines. In the West Bank, daily violence continues to destroy lives and communities. The most recent case was the uprooting of thousands of trees in al-Mughayyir, ordered by the general Avi Blut. To shed light on the West Bank, we are joined today by activist Itamar Shapira, a member of the organization *Protective Presence* and also an anthropologist studying the group’s work. Shapira will discuss the activities of *Protective Presence* in Masafer Yatta. Thank you, Itamar, for being here with us today.

Presentation

Hello, it is good to see you all. Thank you for coming and thank you as well to those organizing *Black Flag*. It is important to know that there is also an academic voice refusing to deny what is happening in Gaza. I will say a few words about the West Bank, though I will focus mainly on Masafer Yatta. Let me share my screen so you can see the location on B’Tselem’s interactive map. Here is the West Bank, Jerusalem in the middle, Hebron here, and this area here is known as the South Hebron Hills or Masafer Yatta. Hebron lies here, alongside the towns of Yatta and A-Samu’, relatively large towns within Area A. The area known as Masafer Yatta is marked within this circle, most of it in blue and white, denoting Area C — under direct Israeli control — while Areas A and B appear in brown, such as Yatta and A-Samu’, under army authority but in many respects administered indirectly by the Palestinian Authority.

Since the Oslo Accords in the 1990s, Areas A — covering 96–97 percent of the Palestinian population of the West Bank but only 18 percent of the territory — have become increasingly cut off from Palestinians living in Area C. This area was designated both for settlements and as reserve land for future expansion, as well as for military use. Open lands and Israeli nature reserves all lie within Area C. For Palestinians in Masafer Yatta, this has meant increasing disconnection from their parent villages, which over time have grown into towns. Entrances and exits are always under army control — sometimes direct, sometimes looser, but often restrictive. Gradually, this area became increasingly vulnerable to both settlers and the army. The pattern began in the early 1980s — in 1980 itself — when Ariel Sharon, among others in government discussions, began promoting settlement in this area. The first settlements there were Carmel, Susya and Maon, founded in 1980–81 as Nahal military outposts. They soon became civilian settlements, spawning further outposts that encroached on the grazing lands of local residents.

The people of Masafer Yatta are primarily shepherds, with small-scale olive cultivation and a little wheat for fodder. They live with the bare minimum, in regards to capitalist production. The area is extremely vulnerable in terms of water and electricity infrastructure: these communities are not connected to either, in contrast to the nearby settlements which are of course connected. Shepherds often sit beside electricity poles and water pipes that run beneath their homes, hearing the flow underground, while they themselves live without — despite having been there first. This disconnection from infrastructure, combined with isolation from other Palestinians, has given both settlers and the army the ability to gradually reduce their lands and ultimately expel them. Without water, without electricity, without building permits — and as houses are demolished by the Civil Administration — it becomes much easier to push residents out.

Their struggle to remain in Masafer Yatta since the 1980s has been carried out largely alone. In 1999, for the first time, 700 people were expelled en masse from Masafer Yatta to Yatta itself. Residents began to return almost immediately. By 1997, some had started rebuilding homes, digging cisterns again, and trying to store water — efforts that were repeatedly destroyed. Their method of resistance follows the Palestinian principle of *sumud* — steadfastness, remaining rooted in the land. It is a broadly non-violent approach, centred on daily life itself. The slogan is well known: “existence is resistance”, or “resistance is existence”. To cope is simply to continue living, to stay on the land, to keep returning to the grazing fields, to marry, to raise children, to dig another cistern, to plant again.

But since 1997 this has become harder, as the army has carried out mass expulsions. This was the Oslo period, when Area C became the main focus of Israeli policy, with a sense of urgency — especially among settlers — that a Palestinian state was about to emerge and whatever was not seized immediately would be lost. That urgency translated into further expansion, with the army accompanying settlers at every step. Settlers advanced into new hills and ridges; unarmed Palestinian shepherds were easily driven off. If they resisted, the army arrived within minutes. This was the “less violent” method of expansion against communities that had never been deeply involved in the armed struggle.

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From 1999, Israeli activists began arriving. By 2000, they had formed *Ta'ayush*, using their privilege as Israelis — with rights in a state democratic for Jews — to stand against the army and settlers. They could say: “This land is not yours. You cannot take it. I am filming you.” Thus, an external, privileged eye appeared, capable of shifting the situation. Today, a new generation has taken root in these villages — not the 50–70-year-olds of *Ta'ayush*, but younger people living directly in the communities, resisting in new and creative ways. Their actions have a striking effectiveness. Many are secular Ashkenazi Israelis, some are American Jews, and there is openness to others: members of the radical left, many queer activists, and people blending multiple struggles — queer rights in Jerusalem, Palestinian liberation, and more.

It is fascinating to watch this generation, because their politics are so different from those of the older activists. Their approach is less theoretical, more physical, more “embodying”— a politics of presence. They put their bodies in the field and, through that, come to grasp the complexities of privilege and difference, including cultural ones. In a sense, efficiency becomes secondary. And yet, paradoxically, it is often more effective, because they reach closer to the communities themselves.

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The daily routine is one of presence across about twenty villages, three of them larger. Activists remain on constant rapid response alert, ready to drive at once to any site of confrontation between settlers, soldiers, and shepherds. Increasingly, these incidents occur within villages and homes rather than in the grazing fields. They always go in pairs, sometimes more. Their arrival immediately shifts the balance of power. Even an unarmed 16-year-old settler can terrify a family into hiding in a tent, fearing that any confrontation could bring soldiers and end violently. But when activists arrive, the dynamics change. The settler suddenly faces witnesses, and the shepherd boy with his flock loses his power over the family. This is the routine: long stretches of waiting and presence, punctuated by crisis. And in between are the moments of daily life — sharing tea, weddings, funerals, ordinary human connection.

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Since October 7, one of the central developments — even before events inside Gaza — was the collapse of the army’s structure in the West Bank, an army already heavily influenced by settlers. Settlement security coordinators, funded and armed by the army, but are themselves settlers. In practice, settlers had long shaped what orders the army carried out. After October 7, the chain of command disintegrated — from Yehuda Fuchs, then head of Central Command, down to soldiers on

the ground. Soldiers effectively became territorial defense units: settlers who are recruited, uniformed, armed by the IDF, driving their own vehicles. In the first months, regular soldiers were sent to Gaza, and settlers *became* the army in the West Bank. Palestinians had to find new ways to cope with this reality, because settlers no longer operated with the restraints or fears that had once applied to the army. The “logic of order” disappeared. This fundamental shift has not been reversed. Months later, the army has restored its chain of command — but it has fully absorbed the settlers’ agenda. The result is clear: in the West Bank, the settler coup is already complete.