

Document reveals Ariel Sharon's plan to expel 1,000 Palestinians

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A 40-year-old document found in the Israel State Archives recently offers a rare look into the state's actions to force Palestinians from their homes. It shows that in the 1980s, the state declared an area as a military shooting zone for the sole purpose of removing its residents.

The document was submitted to the High Court of Justice in July, in a bid to help a few hundred Palestinians who remained in the vicinity of Yatta, a town in the South Hebron Hills, to fight the state's efforts to remove them.

The document – minutes of a July 1981 meeting of the Ministerial Committee for Settlement Affairs – indicates that Ariel Sharon, who was the minister of agriculture at the time, proposed that land in the South Hebron Hills be allocated to the Israel Defense Force for live-fire training. Sharon explained that he wanted the military to use the land on account of “the expansion of the Arab villagers from the hills.”

He prefaced his remarks by saying: “I want to tell the representatives of the general staff, we want to offer you additional training



A structure in the South Hebron Hills.

Yafit Jamila Bisso / Association for Civil Rights in Israel

areas. Additional training areas must be closed in at the border, [between] the bottom of the Hebron Hills and the Judean Desert. In light of that phenomenon – the spreading of the Arab villagers on the mountain-side toward the desert.”

Sharon added: “We have an interest in expanding and enlarging the shooting zones there, in order to keep these areas, which are so vital, in our hands... Many additional

areas for training could be added, and we have a great interest in [the army] being in that place.” An IDF representative said in response: “We’d be very happy to have that.” Later in the meeting it was decided that the agriculture minister’s adviser on settlement affairs would meet with representatives from the IDF and show them the places marked for additional shooting zones “to keep the areas in our hands.”

The meeting protocol was found by Akevot Institute for Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Research in the archives’ collection of meeting minutes from the committee’s meetings. According to Lior Yavne, the executive director of Akevot, “The document is expected to greatly support the position of the Palestinian residents” against the evictions in the area.

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This isn’t the first time that a document like this has been used in legal battles against the state. The Association for Civil Rights in Israel, which battles expulsions in the courts, occasionally submits historical documentation to support its claims. Roni Pelli, a lawyer for ACRI, told Haaretz that the protocol from the 1981 meeting shows “the cynical use of shooting zones.”

The petition to the High Court, which was also signed by the association’s chief legal counsel, Dan Yakir, states that the document “offers a rare peek into the way in which it was decided to declare shooting zones in the South Hebron Hills and the motivations for that declaration.” Pelli and Yakir added in their petition that “Contrary to the principles of international law, the decision-makers did not have the welfare of the residents at heart.” On the contrary, “The declaration of the shooting zones was designed to force out the locals due to the territorial interests of the government,” they wrote.

For more than 20 years, around 1,000 Palestinians from 12 area villages have been living under the threat of home demolitions and eviction. In the early 1980s, after the July 1981 committee meeting, the IDF declared the area of these communities as military firing zones, in accordance with Sharon’s proposal. In the following decade, residents were served with evacuation orders due to their “illegal habitation in a firing zone,” and in 1999 the IDF removed some of the residents. In 2000, the High Court issued an interim injunction freezing the evacuation, and the state later announced it would reduce the

area of the shooting zone in order to reduce the number of residents who were to be evacuated.

The current legal proceeding concerns the fate of a few hundred Palestinians living in eight villages that are still slated for evacuation. The residents maintain that they have been living in the area for many decades, long before Israel conquered and occupied the West Bank in the 1967 Six-Day War, and in any event long before the land was declared a military firing zone. Historical maps support these claims.

The protocol from the 1981 meeting is likely to strengthen their arguments. Its discovery by Akevot cannot be taken for granted, considering that many historical documents dealing with security issues remain sealed for decades in the state archives, even after the law requires them to be open to the public. A state comptroller’s report published last week dealt with this at length, criticizing the fact that over 1 million historical documents have remained classified despite having reached their declass-

ification dates. Another historical document submitted to the High Court in the past is a letter sent in late 1981 by a representative from the Agriculture Ministry to an IDF representative, urging the army to move on declaring the area a shooting zone: “The situation on the ground is getting worse... residents [who moved into permanent residences] are increasingly taking possession of and working the land.” He added, “It seems we are losing another year and additional territory... The recommendations should be implemented quickly.”

Pelli told Haaretz last

week that both the meeting protocol and the letter that was sent a few months later prove that the initiative for declaring the area a firing zone did not come from the IDF, but rather from the political leader – Ariel Sharon – with the support of professionals in the Agriculture Ministry, rather than the Defense Ministry or the army.

A third document tracked down by Akevot staff members and submitted in the past to the court was a legal opinion written in 1967 on behalf of then-Military Advocate General Meir Shamgar, who went on to become the chief justice of Israel’s Supreme Court. The document, which was found in the Israel Defense Forces and Defense Establishment Archive, states that “Civilians cannot be evacuated from an area in order to create training zones for the IDF, both for political and humanitarian reasons, and for reasons related to the provisions of international law.” It goes on to cite Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, prohibiting “the forcible transfer of civilians in an occupied territory, unless so required for imperative military reasons,” and to determine that “it cannot be said that military reasons clearly compel the evacuation of the territories designated to become training zones.”

These archival documents contradict the official position of the state, as presented at various opportunities, according to which areas were only declared firing zones in response to a genuine military need. More recent protocols also support this. In 2014, for example, Haaretz’s Amira Hass reported remarks by an IDF colonel in a closed meeting in the Knesset. He said that training in firing zones in the West Bank was a means to reduce the number of Palestinians living in them.



Ariel Sharon at Mount Grizim in 1982.

Max Nash / AP

By law, the IDF is permitted to remove people from a shooting zone unless they are permanent residents. The state claims that these Palestinians are in fact nomads and therefore not protected by the law. “This claim completely ignores clear historical documentation, including Defense Ministry publications, that shows generations-long Palestinian settlement in these villages,” ACRI says on an online information sheet on the matter, which also notes that the evacuation would leave entire families, including children and elderly, without a roof over their heads.

Pelli told Haaretz last