



Alarming: New Israeli Military Orders Effectively Annex Vast Areas of East Bethlehem, Composing 3% of the West Bank

In an alarming move to fast-track Israel's annexation policies in the West Bank, the Israeli army issued two military orders¹ that effectively annex 167,000 dunams of lands of the Eastern part of the Bethlehem Governorate, classified as Area (B), and "Contractual / Agreed-Upon Reserves", constituting around 3% of the West Bank². Combined with adjacent areas that Israel has designated as "firing Zones", Israel has entrenched its *de facto* annexation from Bethlehem all the way to the Dead Sea.

The military orders target "Agreed- Upon Reserves", a term that was invented in the Wye River Memorandum³ in 1998 (Wye River Agreement) for areas from which Israel was supposed to redeploy its authorities to the Palestinian Authority (PA), as per the Oslo Agreements, but then relinquished its commitment of this already settled issue upon the election of Netanyahu as Prime Minister in 1996, and imposed an arrangement by which the PA acquired jurisdiction over the "Agreed-Upon Reserves" in Area (B), but is not allowed to use it to build on these areas. However, under the same designation in the Wye River Agreement, Israel has no enforcement authority over "Agreed-Upon Reserves", except for "security" pretexts.

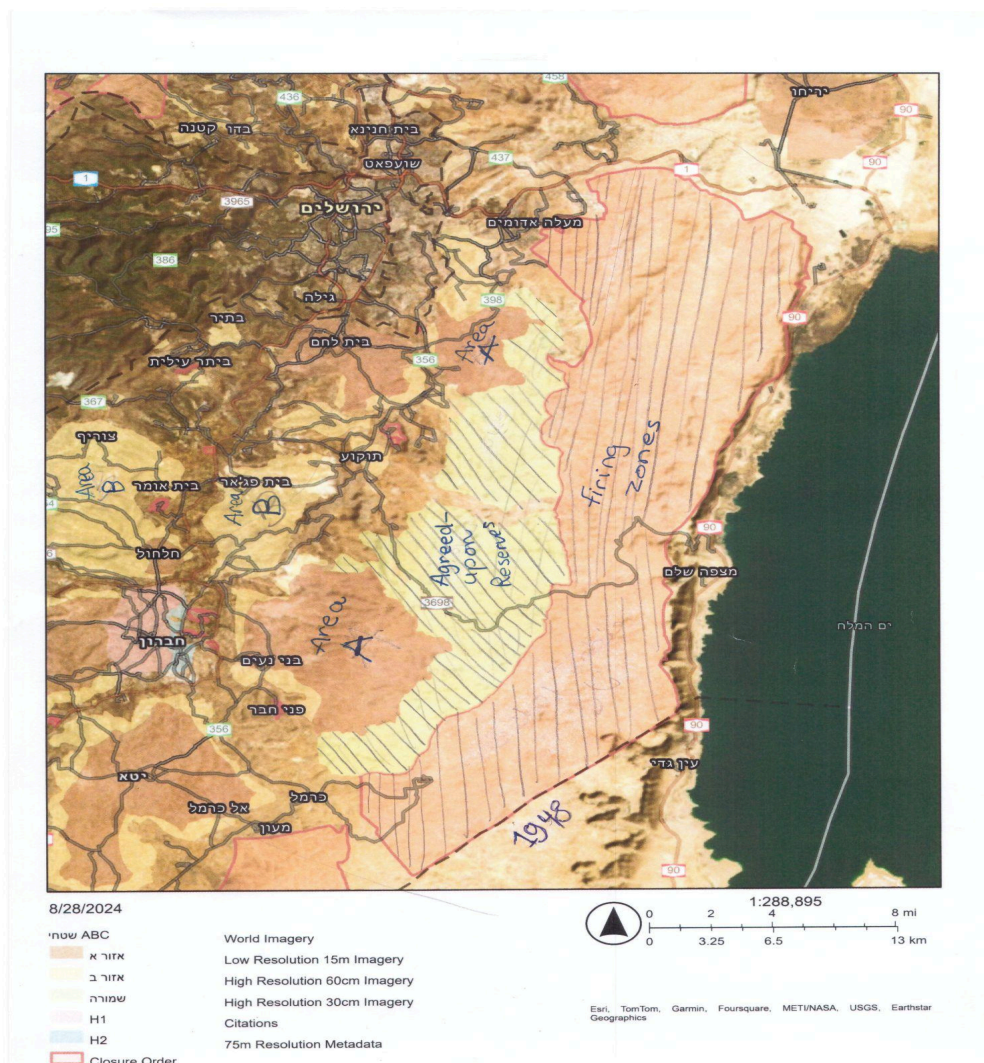
The two new military orders, which come in a context of Israel's ultra- nationalist settler government's exploitation of its atrocious War on Gaza to enforce its illegal annexation of the West Bank, introduce very alarming changes: the first order effectively alters the enforcement authority in the "Agreed-Upon Reserves" from the PA to the Israeli army, while the other order prohibits Palestinian building and construction in the designated "Agreed-Upon Reserves", and considers all buildings built after the Wye Agreement (after 1998) as "unlawful", effectively granting the "Civilian Deputy" of the head of the Civil Administration, the authority to demolish Palestinian structures and homes **retroactively** for any building that was built after 1998. The order also makes it effectively impossible to object against the demolition order, reverse it, or seek to obtain a building permit.

¹ "Amendment to the Directive Regarding Implementation of the Interim Agreement No. 7" and Directive Regarding Restriction of Construction in the Agreed-Upon Reserve No. 2198" - July 2024.

² Peace Now: " Israeli Government Assumes Authorities of the Palestinian Authority in Area B", link: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1QvJUuutsCh4-N6JodrbmcGBQPnNHLvEOsUEGw48rlc8/edit>

³ An agreement negotiated between Israel and the Palestinian Authority at a summit in Wye River, US in 1998, seeking to resume the implementation of the Oslo Accords (Interim Agreements)

Israel's military orders come under the pretext of "nature preservation". However, according to the BIHR's field documentation, Israeli settlers are setting up permanent infrastructure in the same areas, indicating their long term plans of building settlements there, which was confirmed by the statements made by Israel's Minister of Finance, Smotrich, who visited the threatened Eastern Bethlehem areas in August 2024 and vowed to solidify Israeli settlers' illegal presence and control over these areas. Moreover, Israel's recent decision to build a new illegal settlement "Nahal Heletz" in the heart of Bethlehem's last green area (Battir and Makhroun) and a UNESCO World Heritage Site⁴, reflects its complete disregard not only of international law, which deems annexation and settlements illegal, but also of nature, culture and history.



⁴ BIHR, July 2024. "New Israeli Settlement Poses Imminent Threats on Bethlehem's Last Remaining Green Areas". Available at: <https://balasan.org/new-israeli-settlement-poses-imminent-threats-on-bethlehems-last-remaining-green-areas/>