

West Bank: In Masafer Yatta, our very right to education is under fire

Wednesday 13 November 2024, by [Al-OMOUR Mahmoud](#) (Date first published: 7 November 2024).

Amid Israeli settler attacks, military raids, roadblocks, and an economic crisis, simply getting to school can be a challenge. But still we fight for our students.



Palestinian students pass an Israeli military jeep on their way home from school in the village of At-Tuwani, Masafer Yatta, occupied West Bank, September 28, 2022. (Oren Ziv)

In Masafer Yatta, a collection of villages in the [South Hebron Hills](#) of the occupied West Bank, being a teacher is a hefty responsibility. The future of the children who live in this remote community — the very existence of which has been [under sustained threat](#) from Israeli state and settler violence for decades — depends on us.

Until 2009, there were no schools here at all. Students were forced to choose between either foregoing an education entirely, or attending school in the nearby city of Yatta; the latter required spending long periods away from family, staying with friends or distant relatives in the city — something my siblings and I did as children.

But 15 years ago, under the supervision of the Palestinian Education Ministry, teachers and local residents began building Masafer Yatta's first school, in the village of Al-Fakheit — initially with tents, and later using more permanent materials. This became known as Al-Masafer Mixed Secondary School, and I am now one of its teachers.

I come from a family of educators: my father helped to establish three of the four schools that exist in Masafer Yatta today. I grew up witnessing the significance of being a teacher in our region, and decided from a young age that I would follow in his footsteps. And so, after graduating from the Open University in Yatta two years ago, I started teaching English at Al-Masafer School.

Needless to say, my job has never been easy. But since October 7, the challenges have grown exponentially. For the first month of the war, we were forced to close the schools and resort to online teaching due to [new restrictions on our movement](#) and a [sharp intensification of settler violence](#), even [targeting children](#). The situation was further exacerbated by the dire economic situation in the West Bank — the outcome of Israel's decision to [withhold tax revenue](#) owed to the Palestinian Authority, which pays our salaries.



Mahmoud Al-Omour. (Emily Glick)

Yet learning online during that month was a near impossibility for many students in our region. Most children in Masafer Yatta don't have computers; some don't even have phones. Moreover, the Israeli army [frequently confiscates](#) students' electronic devices during [nighttime raids on our villages](#), leaving them with no way to access the internet.

Shortly after October 7, [settlers in military uniform](#) raided the home of Rasmiya, one of my students who was in her final year of high school. They significantly damaged many of her family's belongings, and stole the tablet that she and her two sisters shared between them for their studies. This was devastating for Rasmiya.

But the return to in-person classes last November came with its own set of challenges: the journey to and from school was imperiled by constant road closures and routine violence and harassment by settlers and soldiers. As teachers, these conditions also compromised our ability to be present with our students. A few days after October 7, the army bulldozed a giant hole in the middle of the only road that connects the cities of Al-Karmil and Yatta — where many of the schoolteachers live — to the villages of Masafer Yatta.

In light of these difficulties, the director of education for the Yatta region decided that classes would be held in person only three days a week for the rest of the academic year, with the remaining two online. This meant that students were only physically in their classrooms around 12 days per month, which is not enough for them to progress in their studies; I noticed a decline in their educational achievements as a result.

This situation is especially challenging for high school seniors. Eight students from my school commuted to the larger neighboring village of At-Tuwani, where I live, to take the Tawjihi (university application exams) last academic year. On the first day of exams in late June, the Israeli army entered the village and raided the school. Only after soldiers subjected each student to an ID check — another arbitrary means of "[making their presence felt](#)" in our lives — were the children allowed to return and complete the assessment.



Israeli soldiers, standing in front of settlers, prevent Palestinian farmers and activists from harvesting olives in an area near the illegal settlement of Havat Maon, in the occupied West Bank village of At-Tuwani, October 22, 2022. (Oren Ziv)

It is a testament to the resilience of these children and their teachers that seven of my eight students passed their Tawjihi exams under these circumstances. Rasmiya, whose tablet was stolen

by settlers, was one of them: not only did she pass, but she received the highest marks in all of Masafer Yatta and is now studying nursing at a college in Hebron.

‘Invaders’ in our own land

The challenges facing our community did not begin last year. In the early 1980s, already after more than a decade of military occupation, Israel declared a large part of Masafer Yatta to be a military [firing zone](#) — a tool the state uses [to expel Palestinians](#) from their land and facilitate settlement expansion.

In 2022, the Israeli High Court [greenlighted the expulsion](#) of over 1,000 residents, who for the most part remain steadfast and defiant in their homes. And while Israel regards the Palestinians who have lived in this region for generations to be “invaders,” it has allowed Israeli settlers to establish [six new herding outposts](#) in the area over the past few years.

Because the Israeli army denies building permits to the residents of Masafer Yatta, and [regularly demolishes](#) anything Palestinians do build, most of the roads between villages are unpaved, and some are in such poor condition that they can only be traversed by jeep. Road conditions in the winter get so treacherous that many schoolchildren are collected from their villages by teachers, whose cars are hardly suitable for the drive; others resort to walking or riding a donkey all the way to school.

Since settlers and the army closed off the roads between Yatta and Masafer Yatta last year, there are only two options for teachers who live in the city to reach our school. The first is to drive as far as the roadblock, park, and walk the remaining kilometer to At-Tuwani where, if they’re lucky, they can catch a ride for the remaining seven kilometers to Al-Fakheit. But this can be very dangerous: in late January, settlers watched the teachers leave their cars at this spot and proceeded to vandalize them during classes. The teachers returned to find their windows smashed and tires punctured.



Teachers’ cars destroyed by settlers in Masafer Yatta. (Courtesy of the author)

The second option is to travel on a bypass road that connects the Israeli settlements of Ma’on, Karmel, Susya, and Beit Yatir and cuts off the agricultural roads that once connected the villages of Masafer Yatta. In addition to adding another hour to the journey, this route regularly involves having to pass through “flying checkpoints” — random, temporary, unannounced military posts — which further delay teachers’ arrival. On a bad day, this can mean missing an entire day of school.

But despite these difficulties, we teachers continue to come to school every day. We are committed not only to ensuring that our students receive their education, but to protecting them and instilling

in them a sense of their own power. Thanks to the efforts of people like my father, there are now four schools in Masafer Yatta, the newest of which opened in 2022 in the village of A-Sfai.

I am proud to be a teacher, especially to provide educational opportunities in my own community that I didn't have as a child. I hope to see the results of my hard work when the children of Masafer Yatta grow up to be lawyers, doctors, teachers, or managers. But above all, I want my students to know how to fight for their human rights through non-violent means — for them to be able to speak out about their suffering to the world, exposing the crimes of the settlers and the Israeli state.

Mahmoud Al-Omour November 7, 2024

P.S.

- +972. November 7, 2024:

- <https://www.972mag.com/masafer-yatta-education-schools/>

- Mahmoud Al-Omour is an English teacher at Al-Masafer Mixed Secondary School in the village of Al-Fakheit in Masafer Yatta, and is from the village of At-Tuwani.

- Our team has been devastated by the horrific events of this latest war – the atrocities committed by Hamas in Israel and the massive retaliatory Israeli attacks on Gaza. Our hearts are with all the people and communities facing violence.

We are in an extraordinarily dangerous era in Israel-Palestine. The bloodshed unleashed by these events has reached extreme levels of brutality and threatens to engulf the entire region. Hamas' murderous assault in southern Israel has devastated and shocked the country to its core. Israel's retaliatory bombing of Gaza is wreaking destruction on the already besieged strip and killing a ballooning number of civilians. Emboldened settlers in the West Bank, backed by the army, are seizing the opportunity to escalate their attacks on Palestinians.

This escalation has a very clear context, one that +972 has spent the past 13 years covering: Israeli society's growing racism and militarism, the entrenched occupation, and an increasingly normalized siege on Gaza.

We are well positioned to cover this perilous moment – but we need your help to do it. This terrible period will challenge the humanity of all of those working for a better future in this land. Palestinians and Israelis are already organizing and strategizing to put up the fight of their lives.

Can we count on your [support](#)? +972 Magazine is the leading media voice of this movement, a desperately needed platform where Palestinian and Israeli journalists and activists can report on and analyze what is happening, guided by humanism, equality, and justice. Join us.

[BECOME A MEMBER](#)