



State Comptroller | Annual Report 71B | 2021

National-Strategic Spheres of Activity

IDF Land Training Areas



IDF Land Training Areas

Background

In order to maintain the preparedness and competency for war or operational activity, the IDF closes areas and uses them for training exercises. The training areas are closed areas extending over about one third of Israel's land mass. The IDF closes these areas pursuant to section 125 of the Defense Regulations, regardless of the State planning institutions' zoning of the land (for industry, agriculture, housing). Some of the training areas include nature reserves, antiquity sites and agricultural areas. Pursuant to the law, any person wanting to enter or exit a closed area must coordinate with the IDF. Repurposing IDF training areas for civilian use requires the IDF or the Israel National Mine Action Authority (INMAA) in the Ministry of Defense to scan and clear the area of duds. Due to the shortage of land in Israel, there is inherent tension between the various national needs, including security needs.

Key figures

78

closed training areas exist in Israel (excluding Judea and Samaria)

About 35%

of the State lands

are closed areas being used for IDF training (about 7,660 square kilometers out of about 22,000 – excluding Judea and Samaria)

Fourfold

increase in the total volume of training areas in Israel since 1955, when the first closure order was issued, compared to the volume on the audit completion date

About 73%

of the training areas

designated for repurposing for civilian needs in 2015 have still not been repurposed by the audit completion date (11 out of 15 areas)

1,300

declared antiquity sites

are located within the training areas on the Golan Heights


3

coordination centers

in the IDF's regional commands coordinate civilian entries into training areas






Audit Actions

 From February to June 2020, the Office of the State Comptroller examined the conduct of the IDF and other authorities with regard to the training areas (excluding training areas in the vicinity of Judea and Samaria). The examination focused mainly on training area lands as a national resource; evacuation of duds from the training areas; civilian entries into the training areas; and preventing damage and restoring antiquity sites within the training areas. The audit was performed mainly in the IDF – in the Ground Forces; in the Planning Directorate; in the Regional Commands; in the Ministry of Defense, including in the INMAA; in the Planning Administration; in the Antiquities Authority; and in regional and local councils.





The subcommittee of the Knesset State Audit Committee decided not to place on the Knesset's agenda and not to publish particular data in this report for national security reasons, pursuant to section 17 of the State Comptroller Law, 1958 [Consolidated Version]. The withholding of these data does not obfuscate the fundamental issues in this audit.

Key findings



-  **Implementation of national outline plans in the training areas** – The legal status, whereby the IDF may, at any time, select areas zoned for other purposes and close them for its training purposes – albeit for vital security purposes – creates uncertainty with regard to the ability to carry out the national outline plans for these areas and, in some instances, adversely impacts the integrity of the planning process itself.
-  **Training area closure orders** – Closure orders relating to three of the closed training areas were not found, and discrepancies in the borders of the closed areas were found between the closure orders and the various sources of information about them.
-  **Supervision and control over the extent of the use of the training areas** – The training department of the IDF Ground Forces, which is tasked with planning, operating and controlling the ground training exercises, has no reliable and complete situation report about the extent and mode of use of the training areas. The Planning Directorate is not proactively requesting reports from the IDF Ground Forces and the Regional Commands about the extent of utilization of the training areas in order to ensure that the training areas are being used efficiently and to enable repurposing of areas.





-  **Ongoing civilian uses within the training areas** – Civilians have been making use of some of the training areas for decades. This situation not only poses safety risks to civilians who are actually located in these areas, but also constrains the IDF in conducting trainings on the entire area because of this civilian presence.
-  **Evacuation of duds in training areas** – The processes of repurposing training areas that the IDF agreed may be evacuated and repurposed for civilian use have been delayed for at least five years as a result of a failure to demine those areas. This derives both from the IDF's procrastination when it comes to demining for civilian purposes and from the fact that the INMAA did not receive a budget designated for this purpose.
-  **Informing the public about training areas and the restricted entry into them** – The IDF's website displays no information about how civilians can coordinate entry into the training areas, about contact information, opening dates of the areas, warnings or any other relevant information.
-  **Damage to and restoration of antiquities within the training areas** – Over the years, damage has been caused to several antiquity sites in the training areas under the Northern Command as a result of training exercises. Joint efforts by the Antiquities Authority, the Ministry of Defense and the IDF to protect these sites, prevent additional damage to them and restore them have been unsuccessful, as of the audit completion date.








Publication of a directive to manage an archive of duds in firing ranges – In December 2019, while the audit was underway, the chief engineering officer published a new directive that defines the mode of management of such an archive, which will constitute the foundation for creating an information base to be used, inter alia, for evacuation of duds activities in firing ranges in the future.

Key recommendations

-  It is recommended that the national planning institutions and the IDF should form a joint forum for periodic examination of the planning needs on the one hand, and the need for training areas on the other hand. It is also recommended that they should consider formulating a mechanism to help them resolve conflicting demands that arise between defense and national civilian interests in relation to areas closed for training purposes and issue their recommendations to the government according to the outcomes of their examination.
-  It is recommended that the IDF and the planning institutions should routinely map the differently zoned areas that overlap with the training areas, as part of the information



base, for the purposes of future planning and while taking into account the IDF's operational needs.

-  It is recommended that all military units controlling training areas should perform annual mapping of their utilization of these training areas, both in terms of number of days of use and in terms of the size of the utilized area, and should forward these data to the Ground Forces for the purpose of optimal planning of training area utilization.
-  It is recommended that the Ground Forces should coordinate all of the usage data for all of the training areas and should define uniform indicators for measuring utilization; additionally, the Planning Directorate should proactively conduct examinations of the mode of utilization of all of the training areas, and not merely conduct examinations in response to incidental requests to repurpose areas.
-  It is recommended that the Minister of Defense should examine the duration of the evacuation of duds processes and the obstacles in the process and should define the entity responsible for such action (the IDF or the INMAA), especially if the evacuation of duds is in areas being used regularly by civilians. It is advisable that this examination should take into account the years of delays in evacuating duds from training areas earmarked for projects of national importance, particularly in outlying regions. It is further recommended that the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Finance should take action to formulate an annual budget for INMAA actions so that it can carry out its annual work plan.
-  It is recommended that the IDF should consider establishing an official website that is updated frequently, is accessible to incoming tourists and provides up-to-date information to the general public about how civilians can coordinate entry into training areas and about the restrictions imposed in these areas.
-  The IDF and the Ministry of Defense, in collaboration with the Antiquities Authority, should advance solutions to ensure that antiquity sites will not be damaged during military training exercises, to the extent possible, and to ensure that damaged sites are restored to their previous condition.



Training areas (excluding training areas in Judea and Samaria)



Source: IDF Unit 9900, May 2020 (based on the Ground Forces information on training areas)



Summary

Israel's population is steadily growing and so are its various land use needs for the purposes of housing, agriculture, tourism, industry, etc. The training areas, which extend over about one third of Israel's land mass and take up areas that have been zoned for diverse purposes in national outline plans, are closed to the public. The training areas are essential to the IDF for the purposes of maintaining its operational readiness. However, the IDF's closure of the training areas sometimes adversely impedes implementation of national outline plans. Considering the shortage of land in Israel, it is recommended that the National Planning and Building Council and the IDF should jointly examine the IDF's closure of the training areas against the Planning Administration's planned zoning. They should take a systemic view of all current and future national development needs, including defense needs, coordinate between these two processes, which currently take place under separate sets of laws, draw conclusions and accordingly issue their joint recommendations to the Government.