

June 16th, 2025

**Destruction, Appropriation, and Displacement: Emek Shaveh's response to latest report by the UN's Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territories, including East Jerusalem, and Israel**

As we were preparing to send out this response last Thursday evening, Israel launched an attack on Iran, opening a new front in the conflict. But while global attention shifts to the latest escalation, the situation in Gaza and the West Bank remains dire. We continue to monitor developments at ancient sites to ensure that actions taken under the cover of this new crisis do not go unnoticed.

In this context, we would like to share our response to the latest [report](#) by the UN Commission of Inquiry pertaining to Gaza, the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Israel. We will relate to those sections outlining developments at ancient sites in the oPt and Gaza. Those familiar with our work will not be surprised by the report's findings – the clearest and most damning to date regarding Israel's use of archaeology and cultural heritage in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and its systematic assault on cultural heritage sites in Gaza.

The report published Tuesday, June 10th, by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry claims that some of the actions amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity of extermination. The report covers attacks on educational, cultural and religious facilities and draws a direct line between these attacks and the right to self-determination. In this position paper we will address the points made in relation to cultural heritage sites and landscapes.



Great Mosque of Gaza after bombardment (Ali Jadallah/Andalou/Getty Images as seen in the [Guardian](#))

### **Emek Shaveh:**

This is the first report in years by a UN body that we are aware of which specifically and comprehensively addresses the issue of violations at cultural heritage sites and which encompasses Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

This report reinforces a point we have long made: Israel is weaponizing cultural heritage to undermine Palestinian peoplehood. By severing communities from their cultural sites and landscapes, Israel is not only asserting territorial control but also assaulting the basic cultural assets that ground a community's daily life and collective identity. The development of these sites as exclusive, narrowly curated tourist attractions further betrays the rich, multilayered, and multicultural character that defines the heritage of this land.

In an article published last year for Haaretz, Professor of Archaeology, Rafi Greenberg, and Alon Arad, Executive Director of Emek Shaveh, [wrote about](#) the destruction of cultural heritage sites as part of the attack on perception and memory.

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Our response to the [report](#) in detail:

### **Gaza:**

The report finds that Israeli military operations have caused widespread destruction of heritage sites since October 2023. Over 75 cultural and religious sites in Gaza, were verified by UNESCO (as of 29 November 2024) as damaged or destroyed—including mosques, churches, museums, archives, cemeteries, monuments, and archaeological sites. A more [recent report by UNESCO](#), from the end of May 2025, not cited by the Commission's report, increased the number of sites verified as damaged or destroyed to one-hundred-and-ten.

The Commission listed the attacks against several of Gaza's most important historic and religious sites and buildings, such as St. Porphyrius Church, in October 2023, the Great Omari Mosque in December 2023, the Pasha Palace struck twice since December 2023 and now completely destroyed and others. The Commission concluded that even when the presence of military targets were cited in the abovementioned cases, these would not have justified the enormity of the destruction – arguing that Israel failed to take protective measures. It also concluded that in the cases where demolitions using explosives were employed in the knowledge that these would cause extensive damage to civilian objects and were not proved as justified by military necessity Israel has committed war crimes.

### **West Bank:**

For the West Bank including East Jerusalem the commission documented numerous incidents where the authorities or the settlers seized or enabled the seizure of Palestinian cultural heritage sites. The report cited how these sites were excavated, developed, and expanded—often for tourism—and curated in a manner that excludes non-Jewish historical narratives. Palestinian access was blocked or severely restricted, effectively changing the character and use of these sites. It cited the phenomenon of 'rescue excavations' which have paved the way for tourist attractions controlled by Israeli authorities.

### **The World Heritage Site of Palestine: Land of Olives and Vines, Cultural Landscape of Southern Jerusalem, Battir ([inscribed for the State of Palestine in 2014](#))**

- In 2019 [a new settlement](#) outpost Neve Ori was established in Makhroun in the core zone of the World Heritage Site.
- In December 2023, authorities allowed yet another illegal settler outpost on UNESCO-listed agricultural terraces.
- In June 2024, [the new settlement](#) Heletz (now renamed "Bar Kochva") was approved within the core zone, a key step towards disrupting Palestinian territorial continuity

linking Bethlehem to Jerusalem. In February, 2025, over a dozen families moved into the site.

### **Nabi Aner (springs, W. of Ramallah)**

- The site of Nabi Aner houses a Maqam (Muslim shrine) which was a place of pilgrimage for the local communities and is located on the route historically taken by Muslim pilgrims to Jerusalem and Hebron. It also features a system of springs whose waters were channeled and collected by a system of canals and pools by local farmers. In 2014 the settlers of Neriah and the Binyamin Regional Council began developing the site and named it “Gan Hashlosha” after the three Israeli youths who were murdered that year. Benches, picnic tables and paths were added without the permission of the Palestinian landowners, and it has become a major settler leisure destination.
- The land is privately owned by Palestinians. Despite a High Court ruling in the context of our petition ordering the [removal of settler structures](#) at the site, they have not been removed.

### **Sebastia**

- Sebastia is a historically significant archaeological site with layers from the Iron Age, Assyrian, Persian, Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, Crusader, Mamluk, and Ottoman periods. It embodies rich significance in Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions. It was identified as the capital of the Israelite region of Samaria (Shomron) in the Iron Age. The site is on the State of Palestine’s [tentative](#) list of World Heritage Sites.
- **May 2023:** The Israeli government [allocated 32 million NIS](#) for site development, including an access road which would allow tourists to bypass the adjacent Palestinian town and essentially sever the Palestinian town by the same name from the site that has been at the heart of the cultural life of the community for centuries. The allocation was followed by another [120 million NIS](#) two months later for the development of other antiquity sites in the West Bank into tourist attractions.
- **May 2025:** Our objection to a military seizure order at the summit of the site was [rejected](#) and works on [excavating Sebastia](#) began ahead of development.

### **Susya (South Hebron Hills)**

- In 1986, following the discovery of an ancient synagogue, Israel designated the area as an archaeological site and forcibly expelled the local Palestinian community.
- The community faces repeated settler violence, demolitions orders, and denial of access to the site, which is presented as predominantly Jewish in focus.

### **Jerusalem:**

The commission outlined the situation in the East Jerusalem neighbourhood of Silwan which is home to the City of David archaeological park reflecting over 7,000 years of diverse cultural history. Although formally under the oversight of the Israel Nature and Parks Authority, the running of the site has, since the early 2000s, been subcontracted to the settler organization Elad.

Elad's activities, such as the [Shalem Plan](#), the [cable car](#) and the [Siloam Pool excavation](#), heavily supported by the Israeli government, include archaeological excavations, development of touristic facilities and the promotion of Jewish settlement in Silwan. Elad and the Israel Nature and Parks Authority present a selective historic narrative highlighting periods of history associated with the Jewish past of the city, particularly the Kingdom of Judea and the Second Temple period, while underplaying the significance of other cultures and historical periods associated with the site.

In 2024, Israel [demolished](#) 23 Palestinian homes and a community center in the neighbourhood of al Bustan in Silwan to make way for a new biblically themed park to replace the neighborhood of 1000 residents.

### **Changes in antiquities governance in the oPt:**

The Commission finds that recent changes in the governance of antiquities in the West Bank—particularly Israel's [legislative move](#) to transfer control of antiquities to the Israel Antiquities Authority— would be tantamount to de facto annexation (at this point the [bill has changed somewhat](#), suggesting the establishment of a new civilian archaeological authority within the Ministry of Heritage to replace the Staff Officer for Archaeology). This shift in authority is viewed as part of a broader strategy to replace military governance of the oPt with Israeli civilian control in grave violation of international law.

### **Conclusion:**

The report claims that the stated goal of preserving “Jewish heritage” is a façade to further Israel's territorial claims, undermining Palestinian rights and deepening the occupation. It outlines a detailed picture of systematic attacks on mainstays of Palestinian culture – including sites and landscapes.

In the West Bank and East Jerusalem, the emphasis is on cultural appropriation, whereby archaeological sites are seized, redeveloped, and narratively reshaped to legitimize Israeli

territorial claims, while at the same time, Palestinians are severed from the sites and landscapes that are central to their collective and communal cultural identity.

Significantly, the commission highlighted – for the first time, we believe – the illegality of “rescue excavations” that lead to settler-led tourism development. It cited that such actions violate the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. The report further noted the connection between these excavations, site development, and settlement expansion – all in defiance of international humanitarian law and the 2024 ICJ Advisory Opinion.

In Gaza, the targeting of cultural heritage sites was framed as part of a systematic strategy of religious and cultural erasure.

The report is important not only for its detailed references to Israel’s actions at a series of sites in the oPt and how they should be treated under international law, but equally for its attention to the long-term consequences. It underscores the damage to non-tangible elements of culture – including religious and communal cultural practices – and the lasting impact on future generations of Palestinians who will no longer benefit from a cultural life rooted in the sites and landscapes of the land.

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### **Our Recommendations:**

- We call on our colleagues in the Israeli archaeological community to uphold international law and professional and ethical standards by refraining from conducting or supporting Israeli excavations and archaeological activity in the Occupied Palestinian Territories that does not benefit the local Palestinian population.
- We echo the Commission’s call for Israel to investigate the alleged crimes and to comply fully with the 1954 Hague Convention.
- We urge Israel to uphold the right of people under occupation to participate in the cultural life of their communities, as enshrined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.
- We also call on Israel to meet its obligations under the 1972 World Heritage Convention, to which it is a signatory, and refrain from taking any measures that could harm World Heritage Sites belonging to another State Party.
- Finally, we urge the international community to use the upcoming UNESCO World Heritage Committee meeting in July to take a firm stand against Israel’s ongoing violations at the World Heritage Sites of Battir and Hebron, as well as Sebastia – the latter currently on the Tentative List pending inscription.

