

## **Statement on Attack on Holy Family Church in Gaza, new developments in Hebron, and summary of the 47<sup>th</sup> World Heritage Committee Session regarding sites in E. Jerusalem, W.Bank and Gaza**

The following includes Emek Shaveh's statement regarding last Thursday's attack on the Roman Catholic Church in Gaza, new developments at the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron, and an update regarding decisions on World Heritage Sites in East Jerusalem the West Bank and Gaza.

-----  
On Thursday, July 17th, the Israeli army attacked the Holy Family Catholic Church in Gaza city. Three people were killed in the attack and the compound suffered serious damage. The Prime Minister's office and Foreign Ministry expressed regret, saying "stray ammunition" hit the church. Following the attack, we issued the following statement:

*It's hard to believe the strike on the Holy Family Church was a mistake. Gaza's heritage sites are well known, their locations clearly documented—and known to the Israeli military. Since the war began, over 70% of Gaza's cultural and religious buildings, monuments, and heritage sites have been severely damaged or obliterated.*

*International law is unequivocal: cultural and religious sites are the heritage of all humanity and must be protected. For this reason, the attack on the Holy Family Church is very likely a war crime, regardless of the Israeli government's apology. More than anything, the destruction of these sites represent an attempt to erase the Palestinians' deep connection to their faith, culture, and land.*

The Church of the Holy Family is not far from the Greek Orthodox Porphyrius Church also in Gaza's Old City. An airstrike hit Porphyrius on the 19<sup>th</sup> October 2023. [Eighteen people died](#) in the attack when the building [they had been sheltering](#) in collapsed on top of them. There were also reports of damage to the facade of the historic structure.

For a concise summary of the destruction of Gaza's cultural heritage sites see the UN [Report by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Including East Jerusalem and Israel](#).

For an article in Haaretz by Professor Greenberg, Chairperson of Emek Shaveh's Board, and Alon Arad, Executive Director of Emek Shaveh about Israel's attitude towards Gaza's cultural heritage see [here](#).

### Hebron:

According to a "[Israel Hayom](#)" report on Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> July, a "legal obstacle" has been resolved" enabling the Civil Administration to transfer the management over the Tomb of the Patriarchs from the Palestinian-run Hebron Municipality to the settler-run Kiryat Arba religious council. Later, the Israeli Civil Administration (ICA) said there had been a mistake and the authority would be [transferred to the Planning and Building Council](#) in a move tied to a plan to build a permanent roof over the courtyard of the Tomb of the Patriarchs.

Two years ago Israel violated the status quo by building an elevator at the Tomb of the Patriarchs, ostensibly to improve accessibility. The Palestinian Hebron municipality opposed it. An [objection](#) submitted on behalf of Palestinian residents from Hebron and Emek Shaveh against the decision to grant a permit for an elevator highlighted the unilateral nature of project at a highly sensitive site mired by political controversy, as well as the absence of a documentation file, which is the standard at sites of historic and archaeological significance. More than anything the construction of the elevator was clearly designed to further erode Palestinian and Waqf authority.



New elevator at the Tomb of the Patriarchs

### UNESCO's 47<sup>th</sup> World Heritage Committee

The 47th session of the World Heritage Committee (WHC), held in Paris on July 6–16, maintained the four World Heritage Sites in East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza on the endangered list. All of them are subject to continuous threats stemming from the occupation and made acute by the war.

The decisions for the World Heritage Site of the Old City and its Walls (nominated in 1981 by Jordan and added to the list of World Heritage Sites in Danger in 1982) and the three World Heritage sites for the State of Palestine made reference to the external threats posed by the long-standing occupation, increasing encroachment by the settlers into the sites and the impact of intense warfare and displacement on cultural sites in Gaza, specifically the World Heritage Site of St. Hilarion/Tel Umm Amer. The following is a brief summary of the latest developments that have significantly heightened the risks to the sites.

**St. Hilarion/Tell Umm Amer** an ancient monastery 10 km. south of Gaza's Old City is named after a saint considered a native of Gaza and the founder of monasticism in the region. The site contains remains from periods spanning from the late-Roman to the Umayyad period including five churches, a bath and elaborate mosaics.



Mosaic at St. Hilarion/Tell Umm Amer, Gaza (Photo: UNESCO site page)

It was discovered in archaeological excavations in 1999. Since 2012, it has been included on UNESCO's Tentative List of World Heritage Sites. Tel Umm Amer/St. Hilarion Monastery had been undergoing restoration for four years prior to the war. In response to an urgent request by the Palestinian Authority, it received [enhanced protection](#) from UNESCO in December 2023. In July 2024 it was [inscribed](#) to the list of World Heritage Sites and World Heritage Sites in Danger. The latest reports suggest that although the site itself has not been directly hit, its setting has been significantly impacted by internal displacement and collapse of governance.

UNESCO also [announced](#) that it is developing plans in cooperation with other donors to protect and enhance the site. In addition, the preamble to the decision outlines UNESCO plans to support the inventory and securitization of

archaeological artefacts in the Ecole Biblique (EBAF) storage, highlighting items found at the St Hilarion/Tel Umm Amer site which are currently at risk of damage or loss. This includes preventive measures to counter the illicit trafficking of cultural property from the site and the Gaza Strip in general.

To recall, in January 2024, the Director of the Israel Antiquities Authority announced soldiers had “[discovered](#)” an archaeological storeroom in Gaza. It quickly emerged that the storeroom belonged to the Ecole Biblique et Archeologique Francaise (EBAF) who have been leading excavations in Gaza for three decades, including at the site of St. Hilarion/Tel Umm Amer.

The site is currently monitored from afar through an updated Emergency Programme for the Safeguarding of Cultural Heritage in All its Forms in the Gaza Strip. Established in [April 2025](#), the program uses satellite imagery in coordination with UNITAR/UNOSAT and emergency first aid actions and when possible urgent structural stabilisation for identified damaged properties.

The World Heritage Site (WHS) of the [Land of Olives and Vines, Cultural Landscape of West Jerusalem, Battir](#) west of Bethlehem between the villages of Husan, Battir and Walaje and the towns of Beit Jala and el-Khader is renowned for its ancient terraces and sophisticated irrigation systems, evidence of thousands of years of human activity. Located southwest of Jerusalem, the World Heritage Site consists of 11 square kilometers of agricultural landscape.

The decision regarding the WHS referred to multiple threats to the landscape including road construction and the establishment and rapid expansion of an outpost/settlement of Nahal Heletz, now renamed “Bar Kokhva” – all of which pose an acute threat to the Outstanding Universal Values (OUV) for which the area was [inscribed in 2014](#) as a World Heritage site in Palestine.

A recent UN [report](#) (the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territories) published in June, which dedicates a substantial section to attacks on Palestinian cultural sites and monuments also made reference to the external threats to the unique World Heritage landscape west of Bethlehem. In our previous update we listed recent developments:

- 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. In a recent visit to the settlement/outpost on July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2025, we documented works to expand the outpost in order to make room for new families and a kindergarten. Bulldozers were documented levelling the land causing unequivocal damage to the World Heritage property.

- A plan to [pave a road \(No. 3742\)](#), which will run between the settlement of Beitar Illit and the village of Wadi Fukin linking Road 375 to Road 367. Although not within the core zone of the WHS, Wadi Fukin's agricultural lands are part of the cultural landscape and a natural extension of the World Heritage area.



Land of Olives and Vines, Cultural Landscape of West Jerusalem, Battir (photo, site page, UNESCO)



Caravans and new expansion area at settlement/outpost (Bar Kochva) in the core zone of the World Heritage Site (photo: Emek Shaveh, July 2025)

The decision regarding **Hebron/Al-Khalil Old Town** reiterated Palestinian concerns over violations including closure of facilities at the Al-Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs and a plan to erect the abovementioned roof cover. In the State of Conservation Report the State of Palestine had reported various violations by Israel threatening the OUV of the site, some of which we have outlined in previous updates.

These include:

- Settlement expansion and archaeological excavations.
- Physical interventions such as closing doors, changing windows, installing electrical cabinets, allegedly risking architectural integrity.
- Notifications by Israeli authorities about plans to proceed with the courtyard covering.
- Preventing access and maintenance by locking doors and cabinets inside the mosque.

As for the [courtyard covering](#) as written above, last week it was reported authority will be withdrawn from the Hebron Municipality and transferred to the ICA's building committee for the purpose of stalling a roof cover over the courtyard.

The World Heritage Centre, ICOMOS and ICCROM recommended the presence of a Reactive Monitoring Mission to assess the situation. To date, Israel has not enabled a visit by such a mission to the World Heritage property.

## Sebastia

The site of Sebastia in the Tentative list of sites was not inscribed this year. In May 2025 UNESCO called on Israel to refrain from any action that could undermine the archaeological site near Nablus, emphasizing collective responsibility to protect the historical and cultural values of the site for the present and future generations. UNESCO stressed that all such work must comply with international law and be carried out with the approval and cooperation of all relevant parties. UNESCO also [pledged](#) \$30,000 for an assessment file for Sebastia.



Excavations at Sebastia by ICA Staff Officer for Archaeology Unit (photo: Emek Shaveh, June 2025)