

Fact Sheet

UNESCO's Inscription of Sebastia on the World Heritage List and the List of World Heritage in Danger Reaffirms the Site's Legal Status and Strengthens Its International Protection

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The archaeological site of Sebastia contains the remains of successive civilizations dating back to the 9th century BCE, spanning the Roman, Byzantine, Islamic, Crusader, and Ottoman periods. It is one of the most significant archaeological and cultural sites in Palestine and possesses an outstanding historical and universal value that extends beyond national boundaries.

UNESCO's decision comes at a time when the site faces serious threats resulting from Israeli measures aimed at expanding control over it, including the announced plan to confiscate approximately 1,800 dunums of land surrounding the site under the pretext of development. These measures threaten the integrity of the archaeological site and directly affect the Palestinian residents, many of whom rely on tourism as their primary source of livelihood.

The inscription of Sebastia on the List of World Heritage in Danger carries particular legal and international significance. It constitutes formal recognition by the international community that the site is facing genuine and imminent threats requiring urgent measures for its preservation and protection. It also strengthens international monitoring mechanisms and technical support in accordance with the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage.

In contrast, the Israeli government rejected the decision, describing it as politically motivated, while Palestinian authorities expressed hope that the international recognition would help mobilize greater international support to halt Israeli measures aimed at altering the existing reality in Sebastia.

The Palestinian human rights organizations express their deep concern over reports regarding a proposed Israeli bill intended to expand Israeli civil authority over archaeological sites in the occupied West Bank. Such legislation would undermine the powers entrusted to the Palestinian Authority under existing agreements and impose a new legal reality that is inconsistent with the rules of international humanitarian law.

The Palestinian human rights organizations emphasize that the protection of cultural heritage in the Occupied Palestinian Territory is not merely a cultural issue but a binding obligation under international law incumbent upon the occupying Power pursuant to the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, the 1972 World Heritage Convention, as well as the Fourth Geneva Convention and the customary rules of international humanitarian law, all of which prohibit the destruction, appropriation, or alteration of cultural property.

The Palestinian human rights organizations further affirm that any measures intended to alter the historical, cultural, or legal identity of archaeological sites located in the Occupied Palestinian Territory are null and without legal effect. Such measures do not affect the legal status of these sites as part of the occupied Palestinian territory, which remains protected under international law and the relevant resolutions and decisions of UNESCO and the United Nations.

The Palestinian human rights organizations call upon the international community, States Parties to the World Heritage Convention, and UNESCO to ensure the effective implementation of this decision, guarantee meaningful protection for the archaeological site of Sebastia, and hold the occupying Power accountable for any actions that damage the site or alter its historical and cultural character, thereby safeguarding this irreplaceable heritage for future generations.

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