

PALESTINE

Destruction of Mamluk-era houses for settlers' road through Hebron's Old City

August 9, 2004 – After almost two years of legal delays and a court-ordered reduction in the number of historic buildings slated for destruction from 22 to 3, Israeli bulldozers flattened three centuries-old building complexes and damaged five others in Hebron, West Bank.

The area lies between Kiryat Arba settlement where 6,000 Israelis reside on the outskirts of Hebron, and Ibrahim Mosque. Many families have vacated the area since 1990 due to harassment from settlers and military forces, but 30 families still live on al-Haram street. Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon first proposed in 1996 that a settlers' corridor of 1,000 housing units be built in the historic Arab area to connect sprawling Kiryat Arba with the micro-settlements of militant settlers in the midst of Hebron.

Following a military attack in the area on twelve Israeli soldiers in November 2002, Sharon told army commanders that Israel would "take advantage of the opportunity" to "minimize the number of Palestinians living among the Jewish settlers." A settlement strip, six to twelve meters wide, 730 meters long, and fortified by a two-meter-high concrete wall, was proposed by Israel at the time, for "security." 61 parcels of family-owned land and 22 houses – 3 Mamluk, 13 Ottoman, 4 Mandate era, and 2 modern – were targeted for demolition, but due to the nature of old city construction, the projected collateral damage threatened 150 historic houses. The Hebron Rehabilitation Committee (HRC), which

implements an international award-winning restoration program in Hebron's Old City, appealed to the Israeli High Court to stop the order, with the support of residents and Palestinian, international and Israeli experts, including Bimkom, an Israeli planning-rights NGO, which compared the architectural importance of Hebron's Old City to that of Acre, a World Heritage Site.

An initiative in 2000 by HRC to rehabilitate the neglected area had earlier been stopped by Israeli military orders. In their official statement against the 2002 proposed demolitions, the HRC argued for the historical, civilizational value of the Old City: "These historic buildings in the Jaber neighborhood and the adjoining cross-vaulted alley ... comprise an integral part of the architectural fabric of the old town as well as an intrinsic part of the historic surroundings of the Ibrahim Mosque." The High Court recommended that the army "reconsider" or adjust the order, citing the diplomatic harm to Israel that might ensue, and eventually approved the demolition of three of the buildings. Hebron residents expect more demolitions in future.

This experience demonstrates that international concern should be expressed and can be effective in protecting cultural heritage wherever it is endangered and whatever the pretexts used for its destruction. The Palestine National Committee of ICOMOS urges you to be alert to the ongoing destruction of World Heritage in Palestine that Israel claims is necessary for specious reasons of security.

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Destruction of Nablus cultural heritage continues

In ICOMOS' last *Heritage at Risk* report for 2002–2003, ICOMOS Palestine reported extensively on the damage to the cultural heritage of the Old City of Nablus. The online report in particular (<http://www.international.icomos.org/risk/2002/palestine2002.htm>) shows photographs of the destruction to several heritage sites. This took place during 2002 and created an international outcry, that included a statement by UNESCO:

...grave concern for the continuing loss of all innocent lives and at the destruction and damage caused to the cultural heritage in Palestinian territories in particular the reported damage caused to the Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem Birth Place of Jesus Christ and one of the most significant historic sites on earth; the historic centre of Nablus including its mosques and the old City of Hebron. (UNESCO 2002)

In April 2002, UNESCO declared that the historic city of Nablus was of 'outstanding universal value according to article 12 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention and urged Israel to ensure the protection of all heritage in the Palestinian territories in its multicultural diversity'. (UNESCO 2002)

In January 2004, several institutions concerned with cultural heritage met to condemn further Israeli military acts that inflicted damage on Palestinian heritage sites. Again Nablus' heritage suffered severely. ICOMOS presents a press release by the Palestinian Department of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage, Department of Tourism and Antiquities:

Press Release – Intentional Destruction of the Historic City of Nablus

At the time when the world was celebrating the advent of the New Year 2004, the Israeli military was busy demolishing the remaining part of the historic town in Nablus. During a week of continued military siege imposed on the city, a series of historic buildings were demolished by the Israeli forces, including the Abdelhadi Palace in the Qaryoun quarter. The palace, which was built in the 17th century, is regarded as a major cultural heritage site in the old city of Nablus. Archaeological tunnels and more than five other major buildings were also demolished.

We recall the great damage that has been inflicted on cultural heritage sites in the Palestinian areas since October 2000. These sites have suffered military bombing and shelling, causing partial or even total destruction. The attack on cultural heritage sites has intensified since the major incursion in April 2002, causing irreparable damage, especially in the historic towns and cities, including Bethlehem, Hebron, Gaza, Beit Jala, Tulkarem, Salfit, Jenin and Nablus. Sieges, curfews, roadblocks and military closures imposed on Palestinian cities and villages have prevented the Palestinian Department of Antiquities from attending to its task

of protecting its cultural heritage. Many archaeological sites, historical buildings, public and religious buildings have been the target of the Israeli military aggression. But the old city of Nablus represents the most severe case. The damage in Nablus is spread all over the old city, including private dwellings, religious buildings (churches, mosques and sanctuaries), traditional soap factories, old markets, historical bathhouses, water tunnels and the city's infrastructure. The damage in the historic core is estimated at more than 70% of the city's fabric and includes Al-Khadra Mamluk Mosque, the Greek Orthodox Church, and the Sheikh Musallam Sanctuary. Six traditional soap factories, including Al-Nabulsi and Canaan factories in Al-Yasmina quarter, and the Caravanserei of Khan Et-Tujjar were demolished. More than one hundred private dwellings are estimated to have suffered partial or complete damage, including the damage to the infrastructure such as roads, electricity supply and sewage.

The name of Nablus is identified with the Roman city of Neapolis founded in 72 AD by the Flavian emperors and it has been continuously inhabited since then. It is the political and economic capital of the northern districts of Palestine. The city, famed for its history, handicrafts and sweets, looks now as though it was devastated by a severe earthquake. The collapsed buildings have created a situation of great danger to public safety. In addition to the many people who were killed and wounded, hundreds of families were obliged to leave their homes forever.

The old city of Nablus is an important component of the cultural identity of the Palestinian people and an integral part of its heritage. Its intentional destruction has an adverse consequence on the human dignity and the human rights of the Palestinian people. At the same time its destruction is a great loss for humanity.

The renewed attack on the old city of Nablus is a clear violation of the UNESCO declaration against intentional destruction of cultural heritage. The Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities appeals to the international community, especially the UNESCO World Heritage Committee and other international organizations to condemn Israel for its continuous violations of international law and its targeting of cultural heritage sites. The Ministry urges the member states of UNESCO and its Director General to take immediate measures to stop the intentional destruction of cultural heritage in the old city of Nablus.

Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities
Department of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage
(www.thisweekinpalestine.com)

References

UNESCO 2002 Report of the Rapporteur, UNESCO Convention concerning the Protection of the Cultural and Natural Heritage, Bureau of the World Heritage Committee, 26th session, 2-13 April 2002 (<http://whc.unesco.org/archive/repbur02.htm#sec16>).