



Palestine Association On Monuments And Sites
الجمعية الفلسطينية للمعالم و المواقع التاريخية
National Committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS)

Statement of Condemnation and Warning

Issued ICOMOS Palestine Regarding the Israeli Occupation Authorities' Decision to Expropriate the Archaeological Sites of Sebastia and Al-Mas'oudiya heritage railway station

ICOMOS Palestine expresses its strong condemnation and grave denunciation of the escalating violations committed by the Israeli occupation authorities against the archaeological sites of **Sebastia and Al-Mas'oudiya**. The most recent of these violations is the decision to impose **full control and expropriation** over the entire **Acropolis area**, hundreds of dunums of agricultural land owned by the residents of the towns of **Sebastia and Burqa**, the historic agricultural terraces, the historic core of the town of Sebastia, and the **Hijaz Railway Station in the Al-Mas'oudiya area**, which historically belongs to the town of Burqa.

Tell Sebastia is one of the most significant Palestinian archaeological sites, reflecting the **succession of civilizations** that have inhabited the land of Palestine. Archaeological evidence indicates continuous settlement since the **Bronze Age**, when agricultural communities relied on rock-cut wells and cisterns. The site reached the height of its importance during the **Iron Age**, when it became the capital of the **Kingdom of Samaria** and a major political and administrative center. It later witnessed architectural developments and fortifications during the **Assyrian and Hellenistic periods**, before being reorganized and expanded during the **Roman and Byzantine eras**.

The archaeological tell, with its accumulated stratigraphic layers, constitutes a **tangible testimony to historical continuity and civilizational transformation** over thousands of years.

The residents of the village of Sebastia represent a **natural historical and human continuation** of the ancient tell's population. Continuous human settlement reflects an **organic and inseparable relationship** between the archaeological site and the village. Over centuries, the inhabitants of Sebastia have maintained their connection to the site through habitation, agriculture, and the sustainable use of natural resources—particularly agricultural lands and springs.

The archaeological tell occupies a central role in the **economic and social life** of the community. It is surrounded by olive groves and fruit trees that provide livelihoods and constitute a fundamental element

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of daily life. Accordingly, the archaeological tell represents the **backbone of the social and economic fabric** of Sebastia.

The archaeological tell and the historic core of the town together form a **single, integrated cultural landscape that cannot be separated** (Figure 1). Owing to its outstanding cultural and natural heritage values, **Sebastia has been included on the Tentative List of Palestinian Cultural Heritage Sites**, as a preliminary step toward inscription on the **UNESCO World Heritage List**.¹

Al-Mas'oudiya, located approximately **4 kilometers from the archaeological area of Sebastia** and about **13 kilometers northwest of the city of Nablus**, holds significant heritage value due to the presence of the **historic Ottoman Hijaz Railway Station**.

The area was named Al-Mas'oudiya after the **Al-Mas'oud family from the village of Burqa**, which donated approximately **26 dunums of land** to the Hijaz Railway Company for the construction of the station buildings. The Mas'oudiya station functioned as a key railway junction connecting **Nablus to the south, Jenin to the north, and Tulkarm to the west**.

The station forms part of the **Hijaz Railway**, established by the Ottoman government during the reign of **Sultan Abdul Hamid II**, beginning in 1908. The railway aimed to connect Greater Syria with **Madinah and the Holy Mosque in Mecca**, easing the arduous pilgrimage journey that previously could take up to three months. The Mas'oudiya station began operation in **1912** and remained in use until the period of the **British Mandate in Palestine (1948)**.

The archaeological site of Sebastia has been subjected to a **series of systematic and deliberate violations**, which have intensified following the onset of the Israeli aggression against the Gaza Strip. The most recent of these measures is the decision issued on **12 November 2025**, announcing the expropriation of **1,800 dunums** from the archaeological site, in addition to hundreds of dunums of land belonging to Sebastia and Burqa.

This decision follows **Resolution No. 491**, issued in **May 2023**, through which the occupation authorities allocated **32 million Israeli shekels** for the establishment of what they term the “**Shomron-Samaria National Park**.” The plan includes extensive construction and infrastructure works, a visitor center, parking facilities, and a separation fence isolating the **Acropolis (archaeological area)** from the town.

These confiscations are justified under claims of “**preservation, development, and public access**,” while in reality **archaeology is being instrumentalized as a political tool** to facilitate land seizure,

¹ <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5718/> , UNESCO, 2/4/2012

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advance settlement expansion, alter the demographic and cultural identity of the site, and sever Palestinians from their land and heritage.²

The most recent decision is part of a broader sequence of Escalating Occupation Measures Targeting the two sites measures, including:

- **May 2023:** Allocation of 23 million shekels to transform Tell Sebastia into a tourist site for Israeli settlers.
- **July 2023:** Allocation of an additional 120 million shekels for the development of archaeological sites in the occupied West Bank.
- **2024–2025:** Proposed Knesset legislation to apply Israeli antiquities law in the occupied West Bank and replace the military antiquities officer with a civilian authority affiliated with the Israeli Ministry of Heritage.
- **June 2024:** Granting the Israeli antiquities officer authority within **Area B**.
- **July 2024:** Military order confiscating **1.4 dunums** of the tell to establish a watchtower.
- **May 2025:** Commencement of excavation works by the Israeli Ministry of Heritage at the Sebastia archaeological site.
- **August 2025:** Declaration of **63 archaeological sites** in the occupied West Bank as Israeli historical and archaeological sites, including Sebastia and the Hijaz Railway Station in Al-Mas‘oudiya.

Violations in Al-Mas‘oudiya

In Al-Mas‘oudiya, occupation machinery has, since **25 November 2025**, begun constructing a **complete fence with gates** around the historic buildings, accompanied by road construction over an area of approximately **eight dunums**. The works remain ongoing. On **10 December 2025**, an iron gate was installed, **fully isolating the site and preventing access** by residents of Burqa, Sebastia, and neighboring villages (Figure 2).

² The announcement of Sebastia confiscation rule ‘

https://www.gov.il/BlobFolder/reports/archaeological_site/he/%D7%94%D7%95%D7%93%D7%A2%D7%94%20%D7%91%D7%93%D7%91%D7%A8%20%D7%9B%D7%95%D7%95%D7%A0%D7%94%20%D7%9C%D7%91%D7%A6%D7%A2%20%D7%94%D7%A4%D7%A7%D7%A2%D7%94%20%D7%9C%D7%90%D7%AA%D7%A8%20%D7%90%D7%A8%D7%9B%D7%99%D7%90%D7%95%D7%9C%D7%95%D7%92%D7%99%20%D7%A1%D7%91%D7%A1%D7%98%D7%99%D7%94%20-%20%D7%A2%D7%A8%D7%91%D7%99%D7%AA.pdf

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Violations of International Law

These measures constitute **serious violations of international law and relevant international conventions**, particularly:

- The **Fourth Geneva Convention (1949)**
- The **1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict** and its **Protocols (1954 and 1999)**
- The **1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage**
- The **1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property**

Call for International Responsibility

The continued colonial policies of the occupation authorities—particularly the **unprecedented misuse of archaeology to serve settlement expansion and cultural domination**—constitute a flagrant breach of international norms governing the protection of cultural property during armed conflict.

ICOMOS Palestine affirms that the protection of **Sebastia and Al-Mas‘oudiya is a shared human responsibility**. International silence in the face of these practices enables the **gradual erasure of historical memory** and the distortion of Palestinian cultural heritage, which forms an **integral part of the heritage of humanity as a whole**.

On the 29 December, 2024 ICOMOS Palestine issued an **Urgent Heritage Alert**³, warning of the grave threats facing the Sebastia archaeological site and stressing that these violations endanger its **integrity, authenticity, and cultural value**. The organization reaffirmed that these actions violate international law and called for **immediate and effective protection** of the site.

³ <https://palestine.icomos.org/reports/heritage-alert-the-archaeological-site-of-sebastia/>

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Demands

We hereby as ICOMOS Palestine call upon the **international community, UNESCO, and all relevant cultural and human rights institutions** to uphold their legal and moral responsibilities and to take **immediate and concrete action** to:

- Protect the archaeological site of Sebastia from annexation and Judaization
- Prevent the displacement of the indigenous population
- Ensure residents' access to their lands and cultural heritage
- Exert maximum pressure on the occupying authorities to **remove the fences and gates** erected around the **Hijaz Railway Station in Al-Mas'oudiya**, which constitute forced isolation and deny communities access to their property and socio-economic life

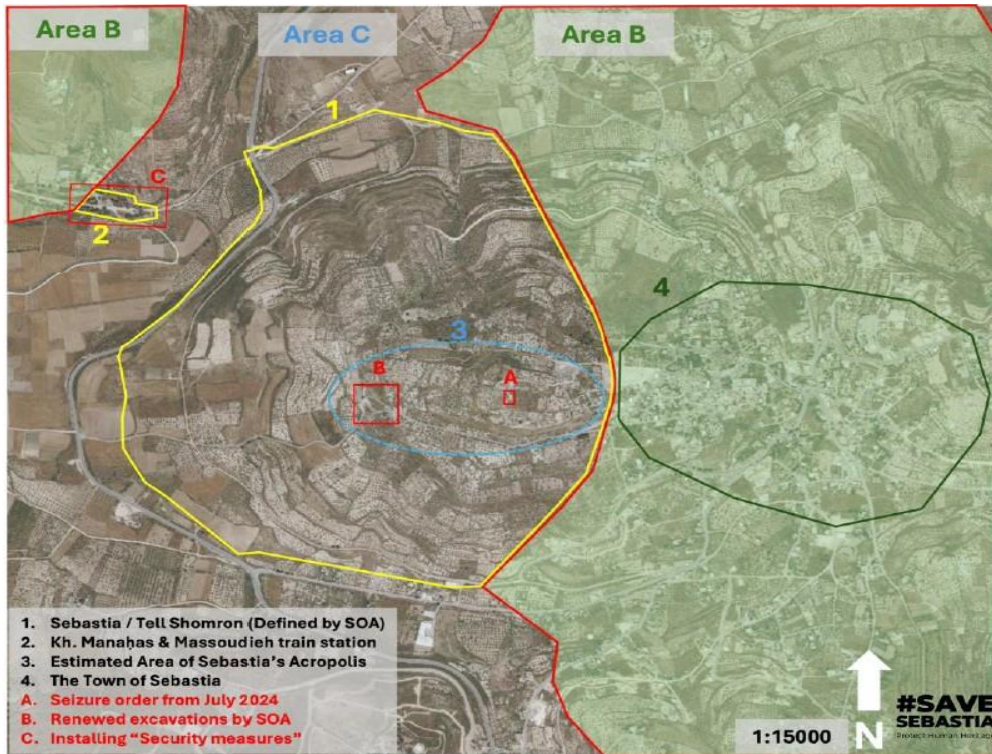


Figure 1: Map of Sebastia illustrating the close relationship between the village and the archaeological area.

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Figure 2: Fence and gate surrounding the Ottoman Hijaz Railway Station buildings in Al-Mas'oudiya

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