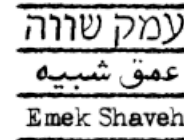


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**Gov't scheduled to approve massive investment in West Bank antiquity sites**

1 message

Sat, Jul 15, 2023 at 3:05 PM



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July 15th, 2023**Government Scheduled to Approve Massive Development of Antiquity Sites in the West Bank**

This Monday, July 17<sup>th</sup>, the government is scheduled to approve a [plan](#) of 120 million NIS to “salvage, preserve, develop and prevent antiquity theft at heritage sites in Judea, Samaria and the Jordan Valley.” The plan which was revealed on Thursday follows the coalition agreement with the “Jewish Power” party and a government [decision](#) from January to draw up a “national emergency” plan to “safeguard” heritage sites from “damage, destruction and theft” and joins a plan from May to invest 32 million NIS for the development of the historic site of [Sebastia](#) in the northern West Bank, taking the total budget for the development of heritage sites in the West Bank to over 150 million NIS (see budget breakdown below).

Both plans join a government [decision from Jerusalem Day](#) to allocate over 40 million NIS for the third stage of the Shalem Plan to develop heritage sites in East Jerusalem (for 2023-2024) and 146 million NIS for the Western Wall (for 2023-2026) taking the overall investment in the development of heritage sites over the green line to 340 million NIS.

The “national emergency” plan and the plan to develop Sebastia are the result of an aggressive five-year [campaign](#) by the settlers which utilizes antiquity sites to take over land, shape an exclusive historic narrative and delegitimize the Palestinian communities and their heritage. The campaign (like the plan) does not distinguish between sites in areas A, B or C.

Over the past few years, the campaign has yielded [dividends](#) of millions of shekels for surveillance aimed at preempting construction and other activities by the Palestinians in or near antiquity sites, the [expropriation](#) of antiquity sites, and measures to [expand the jurisdiction](#) of the Israeli Antiquities Authority into the West Bank in a move that we have described as tantamount to annexation in the realm of antiquities.

The “national emergency plan” represents the highest allocation of resources and funding to date. The budget is contributed to by a variety of ministries including the Ministry of Heritage (Jewish Power), Ministry of Settlements and National Missions (Religious Zionism), Ministry of Tourism (Likud) and the Ministry of Defense and Civil Administration (Religious Zionism). See budget breakdown below.

Minister of Heritage Amichai Eliyahu (Jewish Power) whose party had secured the “national emergency plan” as part of a coalition agreement [told](#) the Yisrael Hayom newspaper that the plan “*is fantastic news for the settlements and for Zionism. We will not let our enemies erase the Jewish past and the history of the people of Israel which is represented in the sites in Judea and Samaria for thousands of years.*”

Although the title of the plan suggests it is primarily aimed at countering the destruction of antiquities and antiquities theft, in fact only 10 million NIS of the total budget are earmarked for this objective (mainly for acquisition of technological equipment). Eighty million NIS of the budget are earmarked for tourism development and infrastructure which includes educational programs to cultivate the significance of sites to the (Jewish) public, roads and transportation, signage, and a site that will serve as a “heritage house” for antiquities from the West Bank. In addition, the decision includes a plan to develop between 4-7 sites which will serve as “anchors” or focal points for Jewish tourism in the area.

It should be noted that of the 80 million NIS, 20 million NIS have been allocated to the development of the Hasmonean Palaces which will be developed as a tourist settlement near Jericho including a new access route to the site. The Binyamin Regional council is slated to operate the site and together with the development of Sebastia this will significantly expand and consolidate Israeli presence in areas which are not populated by Israelis

The national plan does not distinguish between areas A, B and C and based on previous statements by the Minister of Heritage and recent measures taken by the Staff Officer for Archaeology (SOA) in area B (see recent alert on [Mt Ebal](#) and at [Khirbet Tarfin in November](#)), it remains unclear from the plan whether the government intends to act in areas A and B. Together with the decision to develop [Sebastia, one of the most important sites to the Palestinians](#) (it is on UNESCO’s Tentative List as a Palestinian World Heritage Site), the massive investment in site development, tourism infrastructure and educational content brings the process of weaponizing historic sites to expand and entrench Israeli control, justify the settlements and promote annexation to a new and unprecedented level.

Although the plan outline repeats the accusations of antiquities destruction (claiming 1000 sites have been damaged), these are not backed up by any data, a fact that reflects on the quality of the research which informs the plan.

The plan is clearly the brainchild of the settlers. For example, the group Guardians of Eternity (an offshoot of Regavim) and the Shiloh Forum (offshoot of Kohelet) who spearheaded the settler campaign accusing the Palestinians of destroying antiquities celebrated their role in advancing this plan in a [facebook post](#). Contrary to the position papers the settlers have published in the past which featured concrete recommendations, the plan lacks detail, a fact that in light of past experience suggests the settlers are likely to use the budget and develop the sites as they see fit.

The “national emergency” plan stands in complete violation of international law, particularly the 1st Protocol of the [1954 Hague Convention](#), to which Israel is a signatory, which limits the range of action by the occupying power to safeguarding antiquities for the benefit of the population under occupation.

In the plan, 4 million NIS are allocated for the development of a database of the current state of archaeological sites in the West Bank and for the encouragement of scientific publications concerning West Bank antiquities. Encouragement of archaeological research in occupied territory is also a violation of international law and ethics. In fact, the ongoing violation of international law in this regard has prevented Israeli and international archaeologists who have been working in the oPt from publishing their findings in international journals and conferences. Only recently, an archaeologist from Ariel University was [dropped](#) from a conference in Copenhagen. Excavations where findings are not subsequently published in scientific platforms are twice as destructive: an excavation in and of itself always entails an element of destruction and in an excavation where findings are not published the data and analysis are meaningless.

Regarding Israel’s commitments under the Oslo Accords, any action in Area B or A would violate the third annex to the Interim Agreement which was applied to the West Bank by proclamation by the Military Commander in 1995. The annex [addressed archaeology](#) stipulating that in areas under Palestinian civil responsibility (Areas A and B), the authority for safeguarding antiquity sites would be transferred to the Palestinian Authority’s (PA) Department of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage (DACH), while the SOA would retain responsibility for sites in Area C.

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**Emek Shaveh’s response:** With Bezalel Smotrich responsible for the Civil Administration and Jewish Power in charge of the Ministry of Heritage, the archaeological sites are weaponized more than ever before as a means for justifying ‘touristic settlements’, significantly entrenching and expanding the occupation and have become a central component in the present government’s steps towards advancing annexation. Along with massive settlement expansions, settler violence and legislation, the development of heritage sites in the West Bank will give control over substantial public areas and transform the multi-layered historical character of the area beyond recognition.

Although the plan is titled “an emergency plan for protection of antiquities”, only 10 million NIS of a budget of 120 million NIS are actually earmarked for defending sites against antiquity theft. Most of the budget is allocated to acts that constitute de facto annexation of the West Bank in complete violation of international law and the Oslo Accords. It is quite clear that for the current government the plan is yet another component in its efforts to thwart any possibility for a two-state solution and establish a biblical theocracy. We call on the international community to hold the State of Israel accountable to its own commitments under the Oslo accords, to the Two States Solution and to international law.

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**Budget breakdown for "National Emergency Plan" and plan to develop the ancient site of Sebastia (in millions of NIS)**

Gov't Decision Number	<a href="#">491 (07.05.2023)</a>			N/A							Total Ministry Budget Allocation
Project	Development Sebastia			Hasmonean Palaces (Jericho)			WB Emergency Heritage Plan			Antiquity Heritage Center	
Years	2023	2024	2025	2023	2024	2025	2023	2024	2025	2024	
<a href="#">General Budget (551)</a>											0
Ministries											
Tourism	2	2	2				2.1	2.1	2		12.2
Environmental Protection	0.75	0.75	4.5								6
Culture and Sport	1	1	1	1	1	1					6
Heritage	2	2	2	1	6	0	16	16	7	5	57
Foreign Affairs	0.5	0.5	0.5	1.5	1.5						4.5
Settlements and National missions	1.5	1									2.5
Diaspora	0.6	0.6	0.8				2	1.5	1.5		7
Technology and Science	0.4	0.6	1								2
Economy and Industry	1	1	1								3
Defense / ICA				1	6		15	15	8	5	50
Transportation								0.45			0.45
Public Diplomacy							1				1
Sum	9.75	9.45	12.8	4.5	14.5	1	36.1	35.05	18.5	10	151.65
	Sebastia		32	Palaces		20	"Emergency"		89.65		
						Total West Bank			151.65		

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