



28 January 2022

Update

**Knesset Committee Recommends Expanding Israel Antiquities Authority Oversight into Area C of the West Bank**

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- **Minister of Heritage and Jerusalem Affairs allocated an additional 10 million NIS to protecting ancient sites in Area C.**
- **Knesset's Education Committee recommends government consider expanding remit of the Israel Antiquities Authority into Area C.**

On Sunday, Minister of Heritage and Jerusalem Affairs, Ze'ev Elkin, announced he would allocate 10 million NIS towards safeguarding heritage sites in area C. A year ago, we released an [update](#) describing a steep increase in citation of archaeology as a reason for strengthening Israeli control in Area C: Then Minister of Heritage, Rafi Peretz, had allocated 24 million NIS to increase the number of inspectors with the Staff Office for Archaeology; Relatively minor sites in the West Bank such as the ancient mound near the village of Tuqu' were placed at the center of a conflict between the settlers and local Palestinians, while sites like Deir Sam'an and Deir Kala' had been expropriated – constituting the first time ancient sites in the West Bank were confiscated since the 1980s.

On Monday, the Knesset's Education Committee met to discuss the destruction of heritage sites in the West Bank. The basis for the **session** on Monday was a report written by "Guardians of the Eternal" (an offshoot of Regavim, an NGO dedicated to safeguarding land for the Jewish people) and the "Shiloh Forum" (a right-wing research and policy forum) which accuses the Palestinians of widespread and often intentional destruction of antiquity sites associated with Jewish heritage. The report claims to have surveyed 365 sites of high "national and human" importance. Emek Shaveh reviewed the document and found that the report is highly questionable. The report does not seem to reflect a representative sample and its authors (the scientific editor of the report is unknown as the editors chose to keep him/her anonymous) did not use acceptable archaeological methodology for surveying the different sites. In addition, the data on which it has based its conclusions and recommendations has not been made public. Yet the report is frequently quoted by various right-wing MKs who have been heard to liken Palestinian antiquity destruction to actions taken by ISIS. A major concern was marked as Knesset members from the right and centrist parties reiterated calls for immediate Israeli action to safeguard Jewish heritage sites, including those inside Area B, such as the site at **Mount Ebal**.

The committee's recommendations, among other things, included considering the expansion of the Israeli Antiquities Authority's (IAA) remit to area C by subordinating the Staff Officer for Archaeology to the IAA or creating a new "Judea and Samaria district" within the IAA. In addition, the Committee recommended authorizing settler regional councils to protect and manage antiquity sites in area C and demand that the Palestinian Authority do more to safeguard antiquity sites within their jurisdiction – in areas A and B.

#### **Emek Shaveh's position:**

In recent years, antiquity destruction has become a serious problem throughout the region, including inside sovereign Israel, the West Bank and in territories governed by the Palestinian Authority. The primary causes of destruction are conflicts and modern development.

There are approximately 6000 antiquity sites in the West Bank. The significance is that practically in every village or town there are archaeological remains of varying scale from a watering hole to a multilayered mound. It follows that there is always a tension between the need for modern development and the safeguarding of heritage sites.

It is also clear that the problem of antiquity destruction is used by settlers and

right-wing MKs as a justification for displacement. As mentioned in last year's **update** – in just two years from 2017-2019, there was a 162% rise in demolition orders citing archaeology.

Emek Shaveh believes that the destruction of antiquities should not be used as a justification for settlement expansion nor for promoting actions which advance de facto annexation. The appropriate approach to safeguarding antiquities in Area C must include the following:

- Israel must respect International Humanitarian Law and conventions which outline its duties vis-à-vis cultural heritage sites as the occupier in occupied territory, including maintaining separation between the IAA and the Staff Officer for Archaeology.
- Israel should promote cooperation with the Palestinian Authority on all levels: information sharing, oversight, and enforcement – something that was mutually agreed in the Oslo Accords.
- Israel must outlaw the trade in antiquities which gives impetus to antiquity theft.

