



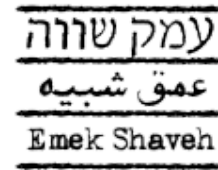
Kristin McCarthy <kmccarthy@fmepeace.org>

# Alert: Military issues order to seize land at ancient site of Sebastia

1 message

Talya Ezrahi , Emek Shaveh <talya@emekshaveh.org>  
Reply-To: "Talya Ezrahi , Emek Shaveh" <talya@emekshaveh.org>  
To: Kristin McCarthy <kmccarthy@fmepeace.org>

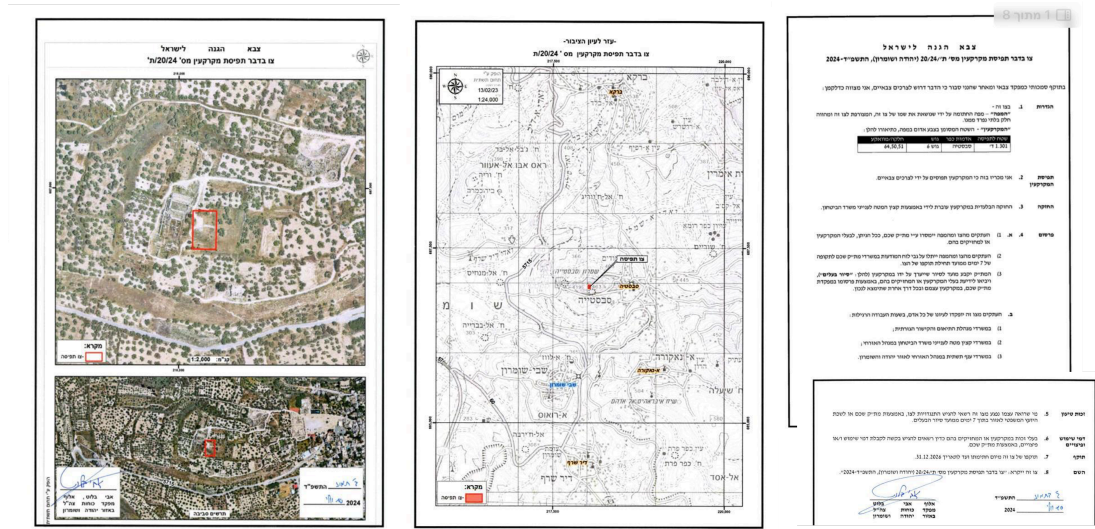
Thu, Jul 25, 2024 at 8:25 AM



July 25th, 2024

## Alert: Military issues order to seize land at summit of ancient site of Sebastia

Yesterday (July 24th, 2024) we learned that the Israeli army has issued (on July 10th, 2024) an order to seize 1.3 dunam at the archaeological site of Sebastia in the northern West Bank. The order signed by Major General Avi Bluth, the new commander of the Central Command, is for a plot at the summit of the antiquities site.



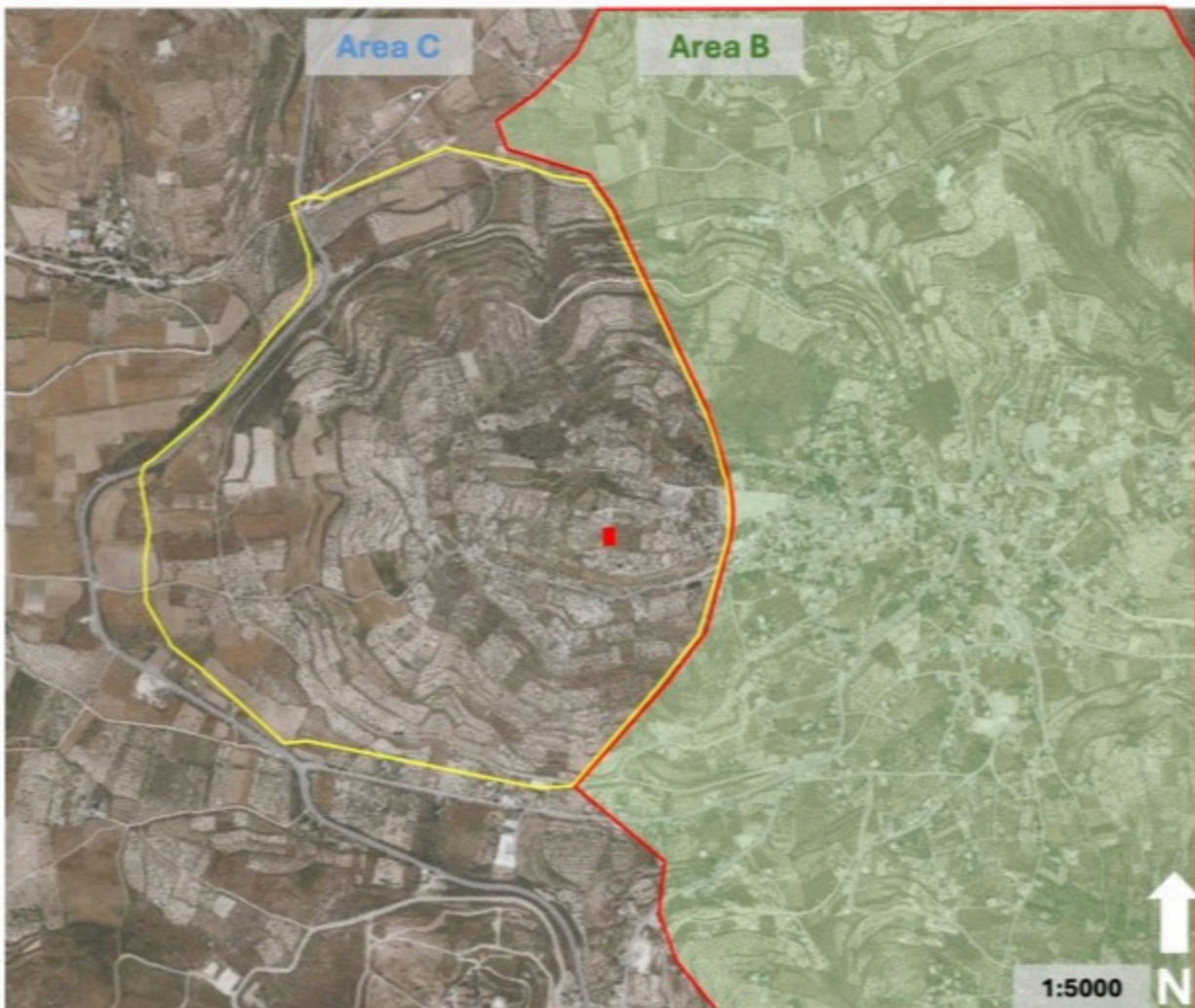
Seizure order and accompanying maps

The site of Sebastia consists of an acropolis and a village which contains structures and

finds from multiple periods of history. Excavations have revealed a continuum of diverse cultures and peoples. Traditions and stories from the Old and New Testament are associated with the site. In 2012, Sebastia was added by the State of Palestine to [UNESCO's Tentative list of World Heritage Sites](#), for what it considers to be the outstanding universal value of the site. Sites on the tentative list are candidates for inscription as World Heritage sites.

Since 1967, Israel's actions at archaeological sites located in the West Bank are underscored by an intention to prevent Palestinian access to land and heritage, frequently in violation of international law. At the same time Israeli settlers, with the aid of the government, are developing heritage sites in an attempt to entrench Israeli control over Palestinian sites in the oPt.

Since the signing of the 1995 Oslo II Interim Accords, and particularly over the past five years, Jewish settlers with support from the government have attempted to impose a separation between the acropolis of the ancient site of Sebastia, situated in Area C, and the village of Sebastia which is in Area B. The military order is for a plot in Area C.



Sebastia. Area seized is marked with a red square

In 2023, the Israeli government [approved a massive development plan](#) aiming to turn the site into an “anchor site” for tourists which would emphasise Jewish history and Jewish rights to the site. The [plan](#), designed to complete the separation of the acropolis from the village and divert tourism away from the village itself, also threatens the Outstanding Universal Values attributed to the site by the State of Palestine and international experts in the field of heritage.

Following statements at a meeting by the Knesset Subcommittee on Judea and Samaria on July 11th, we suspect that the seizure is for the erection of a flag pole for an Israeli flag.



Clip from Knesset's Subcommittee on Judea and Samaria meeting on 11.7.24

The maps accompanying the seizure order show that the expropriation will be at the highest point on the summit of the ancient mound, marking the “ultimate” location for the flag pole but more importantly it will place a military post which controls the entire area.

This development occurred against the backdrop of a dramatic cabinet decision from late June (2024) to allow Israeli Civil Administration jurisdiction at heritage sites in Area B of the West Bank (More [here](#)) and the proposed amendments to the Antiquities Authority Law to expand authority’s jurisdiction into the West Bank (More [here](#)).

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### **Background:**

Since 2019, Jewish settler organizations working in the West Bank have promoted long-term plans for the touristic development of archaeological sites. The plans were accompanied by a campaign claiming an orchestrated and deliberate effort by Palestinians to destroy Jewish antiquities. The campaign has led to measures Emek Shaveh previously described as tantamount to de facto annexation of the sites.

Sebastia has been one of the main sites at the focus of the campaign. Sebastia is an archaeological mound (tel) and a historic village. The multilayered mound includes impressive Iron Age remains and is considered to be the site of the ancient Israelite city of Samaria. Other important remains were found from the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine periods. The Palestinian village of Sebastia has developed around part of the archaeological site since the Mamluk period. Thus, the ruins of Sebastia are an integral component of the cultural identity of the residents of the village of Sebastia.

The campaign depicting Palestinians as intent on destroying Sebastia is part of a broader attempt to sever the village of Sebastia from the archaeological site. The first attempt was in 1995, when according to the Oslo II Interim Accords between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA), a jurisdictional separation was drawn between the village and the acropolis. The village of Sebastia was designated as Area B, according to which the PA is responsible for the management of all civil issues, including the management and safeguarding of heritage sites, but Israel maintains security control. The acropolis was designated as Area C, and therefore remained under full Israeli control.

In 2019 the site became a major point of contention when the Palestinian Authority's Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities developed the square adjacent to the archaeological site (the square is situated in Area B) in a project overseen by UNESCO and funded by the Belgian government. The Shomron Regional Council (settlers council of the Samaria area of the West Bank) [blamed](#) the Palestinians for destroying the site and UNESCO for supporting the Palestinians.

In May 2023, the Israeli government [allocated 32 million NIS](#) for the "restoration and development of Tel Sebastia as a touristic site". The plan may be understood as an attempt to obstruct the Palestinian plan for the site, as suggested by the [explanation](#) accompanying the decision: "In recent years the Palestinian Authority has declared Sebastia as a Palestinian heritage site and is advancing illegal and destructive actions at the site in an attempt to take control over it. In so doing they are harming antiquities and [violating](#) the Interim Agreements."

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### **Historical, Archaeological, and Cultural Background**

The history of Sebastia demonstrates historic and cultural continuity in the region. The site was first settled during the Iron Age. Called Samaria, it served as the capital of the ancient

kingdom of Israel. During excavations at the site the western wing of a citadel built during the reign of king Omrides and Ahab was uncovered. In 2003 it was suggested that previous excavations at the site also unknowingly uncovered the two royal tombs.<sup>[1]</sup> The city was destroyed in 721 BCE when it was captured by the Assyrian army. However, it continued to function as an important administrative center until destroyed by the Hasmonaean king John Hyrcanus.<sup>[2]</sup>

During the 1st Century BCE, the city was rebuilt by king Herod. He renamed it “Sebaste”, in honor of Augustus (Sebaste was Augustus’ Greek name). Excavations at the site yielded remains of substantial construction projects. Among other structures, Herod built a temple, theater, and a stadium.<sup>[3]</sup>

The settlement in Sebastia continued into later periods. During the Byzantine period, a church was built on the acropolis marking the site at which, according to tradition, John the Baptist was executed. A church built to the east of the acropolis commemorated the location which Christians believe is the site where his body was buried. The churches were in use for centuries. The church situated in today’s village of Sebastia was destroyed by an earthquake in the 8th century and rebuilt during the Crusader period as a cathedral. The church on the acropolis was also renovated following the capture of the site by the Crusaders in 1099.<sup>[4]</sup> Excavations, conducted along the columned street dating to the Roman period, uncovered remains of domestic buildings as well as a glass factory.<sup>[5]</sup>

When Saladin conquered the region (1187 A.D), he converted the cathedral into a mosque, also dedicated to John the Baptist and named it Nabi Yahya - John in Arabic. The mosque/church served as the core of the modern village of Sebastia, and now functions as the main mosque in the village.<sup>[6]</sup> Writings by pilgrims who visited Sebastia in the 17th century inform us that although the cathedral was converted into a mosque, Christians still visited and even prayed at the site, alongside Muslim worshippers.<sup>[7]</sup>

During the Ottoman period, Sebastia was recognized as a “Throne Village” - about two dozen villages which functioned as administrative and political centers in the rural hinterland of Palestine. A palace known as Qasr al-Kaed (the al-Kaed palace) which was built during this period served as the residence of the village’s governor. In 2013, thirteen of these Throne villages - including Sebastia - were inscribed to the Tentative List of World Heritage Sites.<sup>[8]</sup>

- [1] — Franklin, N. 2003 The Tombs of the Kings of Israel: Two Recently Identified 9th Century Tombs from Omride Samaria. *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins* 19(1): 1-11.
- [2] — Zissu, B., Raviv, D. 2015. [Samaria. Oxford Classical Dictionary](#).
- [3] — *ibid*.
- [4] — Pringle, D. 1998. The Churches of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem: A Corpus, Volume 2, L-Z (Excluding Tyre). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 283-297.
- [5] — Hamdan, O., Benelli, C. 2017. [Tourist Guide - Sabastiya \(2nd Edition\)](#). Jerusalem: ATS Pro Terra Sancta, Foundation Assistance Internationale, Mosaic Center, Mission Zentrale der Franziskaner.
- [6] — Hamdan, O., Benelli, C. 2017. [Tourist Guide - Sabastiya \(2nd Edition\)](#). Jerusalem: ATS Pro Terra Sancta, Foundation Assistance Internationale, Mosaic Center, Mission Zentrale der Franziskaner.
- [7] — *ibid* pp.28-29
- [8] — [Throne Villages](#), UNESCO.
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## **Recommendations**

Demand Israel cancel the seizure order.

Remind Israel that making military use of cultural properties in the West Bank is a violation of its obligations as a signatory to the first Protocol of the [1954 Hague Convention](#).

Remind Israel of its obligation as a signatory to the [1972 Convention](#) concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage to respect and protect the Outstanding Universal Value of the site.

Demand that Israel withdraws its plan to develop the site into a major Judeo-centric tourist attraction, which would displace the Palestinian community of Sebastia from their lands, sever them from their cultural heritage which they have cultivated for centuries, and deprive them of their identity and livelihood.

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For more information contact Alon Arad: [alon@emekshaveh.org](mailto:alon@emekshaveh.org), 054-6363013

Or Talya Ezrahi: [talya@emekshaveh.org](mailto:talya@emekshaveh.org), 054-5981865



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Emek Shaveh  
P.O.Box 8580, Jerusalem, Israel  
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