

UNESCO adds sites in Palestine and Lebanon under assault from IDF to list of World Heritage in danger

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At its 48th Session held in Busan, South Korea, last month, UNESCO's World Heritage Committee added three heritage sites under assault from Israel to its List of World Heritage in Danger.

The list is made up of World Heritage locations (defined as natural or cultural locations "deemed to have Outstanding Universal Value") under threat of severe damage and requiring emergency intervention. Two were inscribed as World Heritage sites for the first time at the Busan meeting—the five castles that make up the Mount Amel Castles, in southern Lebanon, and the archaeological site of Sebastia on the occupied West Bank near the city of Nablus. These were immediately added to the list. UNESCO also added the ancient Lebanese city of Tyre, already a World Heritage site, to the danger list.

Of the Amel Castles, UNESCO notes:

Occupying prominent hilltops and strategic ridges overlooking major regional routes, the castles formed an integrated defensive and administrative network that controlled movement, communication, and agricultural resources across a vast territory. Developed between the medieval period and the 19th century, they illustrate successive phases of occupation and adaptation by Crusader, Ayyubid, Mamluk, Ottoman, and local feudal rulers.

Their fortifications, keeps, towers, gateways, and residential quarters preserve evidence of the continuous exchange of military knowledge, construction techniques, and territorial management practices between European and Near Eastern traditions, while demonstrating the evolution of defensive architecture and fortified network over nearly a millennium.

Among the five castles is the well-known Beaufort Castle (known as Qal'at al-Shaq?f in Arabic), built by Crusaders in 1139, handed over to the Muslim general Saladin in 1190 and back in Crusader hands by 1240.

It was seized by the Israel Defense Force (IDF) in the 1982 Lebanon war and held until 2000. In May, as part of its current homicidal onslaught, the IDF bombed the castles, resulting in direct hits to the castle's perimeter, entrance areas and administrative structures. Thick smoke plumes and localized structural destruction around the main site were recorded via satellite and local footage.

Now back in IDF hands, the archeological site overlooks the Litani River, which the Netanyahu government claims will become the northern border of its illegal occupation of Lebanon.

Tyre, one of the most ancient continually inhabited cities in the world, is about 50 miles (80 km) south of Beirut on the Mediterranean. Ruled by the Egyptians in the Bronze Age, it became one of the great trading cities of the Phoenicians, who invented the alphabet as early as 1,500 BC. The city was ruled over thousands of years by Assyrians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, the Ottomans and the French.

In May and June, the IDF scored direct hits on Roman columns in Tyre's Al-Bass Archaeological Site and Entrance, severely damaged Lebanese Directorate General of Antiquities administrative offices and archaeological storage facilities. The ancient Roman hippodrome—one of the largest and best-preserved of the Roman world—sustained surrounding shockwave damage and debris accumulation.

The Israeli bombing in Tyre has had a direct human cost, damaging hospitals and ambulance stations, water and power systems, commercial and residential buildings and forcing thousands to flee the city.

Equally dangerous to humanity's cultural heritage are Israel's constant attacks, often in conjunction with pogroms against Palestinians, on the West Bank archaeological site of

Sebastia near Nablus.

Sebastia is the site of Samaria, the capital of ancient Israel, one of the two Jewish kingdoms, along with Judah, from the 9th to 7th century BC, until it fell to the Neo-Assyrian Empire in 722 BCE.

The archaeological site of Sebastia holds ruins spanning nearly three millennia. At the summit of the acropolis lies the foundational stonework of the royal Israelite palace compound—where archaeologists discovered famed 8th-century BC carved ivories and inscribed potsherds—alongside massive round watchtowers from the Hellenistic period.

The site also includes a grand colonnaded street lined with standing stone pillars, a semi-circular Roman theater, a temple dedicated to the Emperor Augustus, a forum and a stadium, erected when the Roman client king Herod the Great rebuilt and expanded the city after 27 BC.

Above these classical monuments are sacred Christian and Islamic structures, most notably the ruins of a Byzantine basilica and a 12th-century Crusader church dedicated to St. John the Baptist, whose tomb traditionally has been placed at the site since early antiquity.

Because of the ancient Israelite foundation of the site, there is intensive interest by the Zionist state in using it to promote nationalist mythology.

The site is divided into an Area C run by the Israeli state, and an Area B run by the Palestinian Authority (PA).

In late 2025 and early 2026, the Israeli Civil Administration issued major land expropriation orders targeting about 500 acres (about 202 hectares) around Sebastia and neighboring Burqa.

This is the largest land appropriation carried out for archaeological purposes in West Bank history. The seized land borders directly on Area B and encompasses thousands of privately owned Palestinian olive groves, as well as businesses and gift shops tied to the village's tourist economy.

Palestinian authorities and international human rights organizations point out that Israeli security forces frequently conduct military operations inside parts of Area B surrounding the site.

Local municipal projects funded by the PA or international agencies (like UNESCO restoration projects) in or near Area B are frequently halted by Israeli authorities under the justification of protecting archaeological integrity or security.

Local Palestinian municipal workers attempting to maintain the archaeological area, install lighting, construct public facilities or fly Palestinian flags over the site have repeatedly been confronted by the Israeli military and settlers. Israeli authorities routinely issue stop-work orders,

seize maintenance equipment and halt Palestinian-led preservation efforts near Area B/C boundaries.

Palestinian gift shop owners, restaurant workers and vendors catering to visitors at the site's plaza have had their properties demolished or raided by the Israeli military. Israeli forces have repeatedly bulldozed tourist infrastructure constructed by the Sebastia municipality, citing a lack of Israeli-issued permits.

The Israeli government allocated over 30 million shekels (about \$8.5 million) to turn Sebastia into a major national heritage site aimed primarily at Israeli and international tourists.

Infrastructure plans include new access roads, tourist centers and a permanent military presence. Local residents report that during military-escorted visits by Israeli settlers, village access points and shops in Area B are regularly forced to close.

Groups of armed Israeli settlers—frequently escorted by military patrols—regularly enter Sebastia to visit the archaeological park or host religious/political rallies. During these incursions, clashes frequently break out. Settlers have thrown stones at homes, set fire to nearby olive groves and vehicles and fired live ammunition toward residents.

The Israeli government reacted to UNESCO's decision to place these sites on the World Heritage in Danger list by condemning the international body. The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs denounced the claims that IDF military action was the primary threat to the Lebanese sites as completely baseless. Amichay Eliyahu, Israel's Heritage Minister, publicly stated in response to UNESCO's decisions on Sebastia: "UNESCO can say whatever it wants ... it won't change the facts: this is the capital of ancient Israel."

These statements demonstrate that the distortion of history and destruction of the historical record are an essential part of the prosecution of war in the Middle East by Israel and its sponsors in Washington.



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