

Outrage at Israeli Plan to Build on Historic Muslim Cemetery

By [Jonathan Cook](#)

Global Research, August 19, 2015

[Jonathan Cook: the View from Nazareth](#) 28
July 2015

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [History](#)

Officials in Jerusalem have approved a massive construction project, including plans for housing, shops and a hotel, on one of the largest and most historically important Islamic cemeteries in the Middle East.

A previous project to build a courthouse at the site, part of Mamilla Cemetery, was scrapped two years ago after it provoked a storm of protest.

The graveyard, just outside Jerusalem's Old City walls, is said to be the final resting place of the Prophet Mohammed's companions as well as thousands of Saladin's warriors who helped expel the Crusaders from the Holy Land nearly 1,000 years ago.



A partial view of Mamilla Cemetery in Jerusalem (Yoninah/Wikimedia Commons) - See more at:

<http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/outrage-israeli-plan-build-historic-muslim-cemetery-18396073#sthash.wO87BCxN.dpuf>

It also served as a cemetery for leading Palestinian families in Jerusalem until the city's division in 1948, when Mamilla fell just within the borders of the newly established state of Israel.

Jerusalem City Hall triggered huge controversy seven years ago when it approved a Museum of Tolerance over another section of the cemetery, requiring the hurried disinterment of as many as 1,500 remains.

Zaki Aghbaria, a spokesman for the northern Islamic Movement in Israel, said the new project was effectively an extension of the Museum of Tolerance development and would lead to further "desecration" of the site.

"Israel is determined to intensify its Judaisation of this area and of the whole of Jerusalem. It has given no thought to how important the cemetery is not only to Palestinians but to the whole Muslim world," he told Middle East Eye.

He added that the project should be seen in the context of Israel's "continuing efforts to seize control of Jerusalem's Islamic holy sites", including the highly sensitive Al-Aqsa Mosque compound close by.

Dangerous developments

The plan to develop the Mamilla Cemetery comes as the Arab League [announced](#) that it would hold an emergency meeting next week to discuss what Palestinian officials have called “dangerous developments” at the mosque site.

Some 19 Palestinians were reported to have been [injured](#) in the Al-Aqsa compound last Sunday after Israeli police stormed the area to allow Jewish worshippers, including an Israeli government minister, to enter.

The new construction plan, approved this month by Jerusalem’s local planning committee, requires building nearly 200 houses, as well as a 480-room hotel, shops and parking over the graveyard.

Gideon Suleimani, an Israeli archeologist who worked on the Museum of Tolerance excavations but has since become a critic of the work, said the new plan continued a long-term process.

“The policy is to dismantle what is left of Islamic heritage in Jerusalem piece by piece to clear the area and make it Jewish,” he said.

Meir Margalit, a researcher at the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem and a former city councillor, said the next and final stage of approval – by the regional planning committee – was all but a foregone conclusion.

“There seems to be nothing now to stop the project going ahead,” he told MEE. “Building work is almost certain to begin next year.”

He added that the city council had been seeking ways to develop the site after its original plan, for a courthouse, was overruled by the then-president of the Supreme Court, Dorit Beinisch.

Margalit said that behind the scenes she had come under great pressure from European jurists, who wrote to her to protest against building on such a sensitive site.

The switch to a commercial project at the same spot, he added, meant it would be much harder to pressure developers to withdraw.

Part of the development site is currently occupied by a school built in the 1970s. Much of the rest of the cemetery now lies under Independence Park, established to celebrate Israel’s victory in the 1948 war.

Work on the Museum of Tolerance began in 2011, despite vocal opposition from Islamic groups, dissident Israeli archeologists and Palestinian families.

‘Erasure of Muslim past’

When the courthouse project was proposed five years ago, the Antiquities Authority – Israel’s national archeological body – conducted six preliminary excavations in the school grounds to determine whether there were graves.

In five of the six digs, graves and bones were identified. Margalit said archeologists and the

municipality had tried to hush up the findings at the time.

In the earlier work on the Museum of Tolerance, the Supreme Court approved the construction after officials promised that only “a few dozen graves” would be found at the entire site.

However, [an investigation](#) by the daily Haaretz newspaper revealed that, amid great secrecy, some 1,500 graves were disinterred with little proper oversight. Workers told the paper that the dig was done so quickly that skulls and bones disintegrated and other remains were stuffed into cardboard boxes.

Rafi Greenberg, a professor of archeology at Tel Aviv University, said time pressures meant it was likely the new excavations at the school site would be conducted in a similar manner and almost certainly lead to hundreds more graves being destroyed.

“The problem here is that no one in an official position appears concerned about the rights and dignity of the dead,” he told MEE.

The Jerusalem municipality knows it is easier to get past religious objections when it affects a Muslim graveyard because the Muslim population [in Jerusalem] hold a far weaker political position.

If this was being done properly, all the stakeholders would have a say in what happens. Can we imagine a Jewish graveyard being dug up in Europe without there first being a very serious discussion with the local Jewish community?

The Jerusalem municipality told MEE that, if the development went ahead, “the private contractor who wins the bid to develop the site will be obliged to take any sensitivities into account”.

False claims

Fears have nonetheless been heightened by a report published this month by Israel’s National Academy of Sciences that [accuses](#) Israeli officials of making false claims about archeological sites. It suggests that Israeli archeologists have conspired to advance political agendas, especially in Jerusalem where they have worked closely with settler organisations.

The report, written by one of Israel’s leading archeologists, Yoram Tsafir, also highlights Israel’s double standards in archeology. There are severe restrictions on carrying out excavations if they threaten to unearth Jewish remains.

Aghbaria said there were few hopes of challenging the new plan after the northern Islamic Movement and others failed to persuade the Supreme Court to block the construction of the Museum of Tolerance in 2008.

“Now our only hope is by protesting and trying to bring international pressure to bear on Israel,” he said.

He added that the Islamic Movement was currently considering its response.

Efforts to stop development at the Mamilla Cemetery have largely fallen to the Islamic Movement, because since 2000 Israel has cracked down on most organised political activity

in the city by Palestinian organisations.

Israel has expelled Hamas leaders from the city and barred any activities connected to the Palestinian Authority of Mahmoud Abbas, a report by the Washington-based think-tank the International Crisis Group [noted](#).

However, the Islamic Movement too has struggled to maintain a presence in Jerusalem, with restrictions placed on many of its top officials.

The movement's leader, Sheikh Raed Salah, has been repeatedly banned from the city, and jailed for his activities there. In March he was [sentenced to 11 months](#) for incitement over a sermon he delivered in Jerusalem.

According to Meron Benvenisti, a former deputy mayor of Jerusalem, many Islamic sites in Jerusalem have over the years been "turned into garbage dumps, parking lots, roads and construction sites".

Rami Nasrallah, head of the International Peace and Cooperation Centre, a Palestinian organisation in Jerusalem, said the city suffered from "extreme partisan planning".

"The policy for 48 years now has been designed to erase Jerusalem's Palestinian identity and replace it with a Jewish identity," he said. "The challenge for us is how to stop such a policy when it is enforced by the state and endorsed by the courts."

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