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Ways forward to preserve the character of the Sacred City

Concrete suggestions on the protection and preservation of holy and historic sites for the benefits of all cultures and faiths

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Concrete suggestions for the protection and preservation of Jerusalem's historic and sacred sites for the benefit of all cultures and faiths

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Over the past two decades, Jerusalem's historic sites have been gaining greater national and religious significance. This process is both the result of, and contributes to, the radicalization and the hardening of positions on both the Israeli and Palestinian sides with respect to issues of historic rights and sovereignty over the historic city.

Before I begin, I would like to clarify the parameters of two aspects of my discussion. First of all, when I talk Historic Basin I am referring to an area of approximately six square kilometers which includes the Old City, the neighborhood of Silwan, including the "City of David" archaeological park, the Kidron Valley, the Mount of Olives, Mount Zion, the Ben Hinnom Valley and a thin strip to the north of the Old City. Secondly, in this discussion I will refer both to historic and sacred sites in terms of their archaeological and cultural heritage values and how these are being transformed by politically motivated agendas and policies. Issues more commonly discussed with respect to sacred sites in Jerusalem, such as matters of access or the relationship between the government and the various churches or the Islamic Waqf are not part of the scope of my discussion.

Premise:

In the absence of a meaningful diplomatic process, Jerusalem's Historic Basin has been subject to unfettered development by the Israeli government who, in cooperation with settler groups, have initiated extensive excavation and development of ancient sites turning them into meaningful sites with a Jewish-Israeli nationalist identity, while underplaying historical layers or sites of importance to other religious and cultural communities. Whereas in the 1990s these ideologically motivated actions were pioneered by the settlers, in recent years the Israeli government has taken the lead on these initiatives. In the past 14 years, the government has been pouring enormous resources into archaeological-tourism projects which are transforming the physical, cultural and religious identity of the historic city.

The process of entrenching an exclusive religious and historical narrative is also apparent on the Palestinian side. In the past twenty years a phenomenon that can be called 'temple denial' is on the rise, resulting in a negation of a shared Jewish-Muslim heritage on the Holy Esplanade. The effacement of the historical link of the Jewish people to the holy esplanade

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mainly takes the form of verbal statements and is displayed on all levels of society from the general public to the higher echelons of Palestinian officials.

Yet, although the denial of the Other's narrative is prevalent on both sides, Israel as the governing power in Jerusalem has the capacity to use excavation, preservation and development of archaeological sites to physically change the terrain and transform the historical narrative and identity of the city. This construction of historical narratives through excavations and archaeological tourism in the areas near or adjacent to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif is complimented by the piecemeal take-over of Palestinian residential areas in an overt attempt to shift the demographics and national identity of the Historic Basin. It should come as no surprise then that the same settler organizations who are involved in taking over Palestinian homes are also the ones taking the lead on archaeological development.

These processes in the area around the Holy Esplanade are often overshadowed by a focus on the Esplanade itself, with perceived infringements to the status-quo usually grabbing headlines. Yet, beyond the status-quo on the Esplanade, the changes to the cultural-historical landscape and narrative of the historic basin at large contribute to the political and religious tensions and have far-reaching implications for the future contours of a geopolitical solution to the conflict in Jerusalem.

Confidence Building Measure:

It is impossible to imagine a solution to the conflict over Jerusalem that does not give adequate expression to the deep cultural, national, and religious attachments that both sides harbor towards the historic city. In this context, the ancient sites play a crucial role.

In the absence of peace negotiations, it is still possible, in fact it is crucial, to take steps to de-escalate tensions in the present and contribute to a climate more conducive to successful future negotiations on Jerusalem.

To tackle the unilateral nature of archaeological development and the policies driving them, we, in Emek Shaveh, would like to suggest the convening of a roundtable of Palestinian-Israeli-international experts, opinion shapers and stakeholders to articulate principles for the protection and preservation of Jerusalem's multilayered historic and sacred sites and to devise mechanisms to mitigate against developments that threaten the multicultural character of the historic city.

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Operative Steps:

The premise that would guide the establishment of such a committee is that in the absence of a political agreement, major decisions about development, preservation and the presentation of sites in historic Jerusalem must be subject to joint approval by the Israelis, the Palestinians and other key stakeholders. The basic assumption guiding the committee would be an understanding that Jerusalem is important to a multiplicity of faiths and cultures and that there is a need to preserve the heterogeneous character of its ancient sites. Accordingly, the following basic principles should guide the committee's work:

1. The excavation, conservation and development of sites shall be conducted as part of a commitment to remain faithful to Jerusalem's multi-layered heritage and a broad vision to reflect a multiplicity of historical periods and cultures. A comprehensive vision would for example be applicable per site, or empower one narrative at site A and another narrative at site B.
2. The sites will be managed according to the highest professional standards and the managing bodies will aspire to reflect the cultural diversity embodied by the archaeological finds. Decisions about who manages the sites will be taken by the joint committee.
3. Any conservation of sites undertaken to convert spaces for public, commercial or tourism purposes shall preserve the original architectural-historical context and refrain from creating artificial links between structures that were used for different purposes or belong to different periods.
4. Jerusalem is a World Heritage Site. Tourism and transportation development in Jerusalem should be based on the guidelines for safeguarding world heritage sites. Infrastructure and development should contribute to a comprehensive solution to the challenges of historic Jerusalem, rather than cater to the needs of a specific public in a single location.

I believe that the key to peace between Israel and the Palestinians is an agreement over its historic core. Creating the approach and mechanisms to preserve Jerusalem's historic sites in all their cultural variety is a necessary step in this direction.