

Wadi Hilweh Information Center – Silwan



| The Story Behind
| The Tourist Site

* Wadi Hilweh

On the southern slope of the Old City of Jerusalem lies a historic valley once known as Wadi An-Nabah and known today as Wadi Hilweh, a valley considered to be the very heart of ancient Jerusalem and whose population has lived through the many eras and periods of rule which have left their mark on the land. Yet in the modern era, since the occupation of Jerusalem, the valley has transformed into an excavation site for artifacts as tunnels have eaten away at the foundations of its homes and streets. Settlements have spread throughout the valley as has violence and hostility towards its residents while hundreds of buildings are threatened with demolition under the pretext of lacking permits.



* The Name



Wadi Hilweh derives its name from the wife of Ahmad Siam, the village chief martyred in 1948 when a Zionist gang shot and killed him. The neighborhood had been known as Wadi An-Nabah after the cries, heard by its residents, of a young woman murdered by her brother. In another telling, the neighborhood was so named for the barks of the dogs and wandering hyenas that roamed among the cacti that once covered its outskirts.

Thousands of years have passed since the village of Silwan was founded in its current location owing to its abundant resources and fertile soil in addition to the presence of that vital source of life, a natural spring, around which gathered buildings and civilization and which contributed as well to the building of Jerusalem.

* Civilizations and Peoples of Silwan

The village of Silwan, which extends from the walls of the Old City to Jabal Mukabar, has been home to many peoples who established civilizations that left their mark on its history, among them the Canaanites who invented a system for groundwater withdrawal in order to irrigate Jerusalem, the Assyrians and Babylonians.

The village was subject to the rule of the Egyptians, Persians, Greeks, Romans and Byzantines on through the era of Islamic rule initiated by the Caliph Omar Ibn Al-Khattab and ending with Ottoman rule. This too was followed by the British Mandate, Jordanian rule and finally the Israeli occupation.



* Silwan: A Buried Treasure

The Wadi Hilweh neighborhood has emerged as the target of Israeli expropriation owing to its historical importance and to Israeli claims regarding the existence of a stone structure and Jewish artifacts in the area, in addition to the presence of the "sacred spring" (according to the Torah).

The archaeological excavations in Wadi Hilweh began in the late nineteenth century when the German researcher Charles Warren discovered the neighborhood's underground water system and was thereby able to determine the location of the Old City. Warren was followed by a number of archaeologists who undertook digs and excavations, a process which has been continued today by Israeli archaeologists in an attempt to substantiate their presence in, and settlement of, the area.

Indeed, the frequency of these digs and excavations increased, over time, alongside the confiscation of lands and houses in numerous roundabout ways. Then, in 1986, the settler organization ELAD began its activities in the village. In the organization's mission statement it notes that its goal is to authenticate the Jewish connection to Jerusalem through visits, guided tours, inhabitation of the area and educational materials. The group has also worked to transfer ownership of the village's homes and lands into its own hands.



* The Al-Abbasi House: In the Settlement's Clutches

The 1980s brought a period of calm and prosperity that led to an influx of tourists to the village. A group of tourists took advantage of residents' kind and simple nature in order to take control of their property, home and land alike. Among the homes seized in this manner was Musa Al-Abbasi's home, which is located near the Wadi Hilweh spring.

Owing to the house's proximity to the spring and the influx of tourism to see it ELAD's founder, David Be'eri, impersonated a tour guide and managed to gain Al-Abbasi's trust by bringing tourists to purchase his lemons. In truth, however, Be'eri was collecting information about the property and in this manner took advantage of Al-Abbasi's kindness and gullibility to transfer a large part of his house to the Israeli Custodian of Absentee Properties which entitles the Israeli authorities to confiscate the house without compensation and to authorize a transfer of ownership to other residents. Thus a contract was signed between the Israeli authorities and ELAD without the knowledge of the Al-Abbasi family and in October 1991 settlers raided the Al-Abbasi home and seized the property.



* ELAD and its Cancerous Settlements

ELAD takes control of citizens' property in a number of roundabout and malicious ways with the help of Israeli authorities and government institutions as well as weak-hearted individuals after their own personal interests in the following ways:

1. Transfer of property confiscated under the Absentees Property Law without a public bidding process and in return for a symbolic leasehold.
2. Transfer of Jewish National Fund property, seized before the Nakba, without a public bidding process and for a symbolic sum.
3. Purchase of homes from their owners with the help of brokers using pressure tactics and extortion.



* The turning point

The turning point on the path towards ELAD's control over the village's homes came in 1997 when the organization took over responsibility for protection and preservation of the City of David national park from the Israel Land Authority. In 2002, a group of archaeologists filed an appeal to the Israeli Supreme Court over the Israel Land Authority's decision to transfer management of the City of David from the Israel Nature and Parks Authority to ELAD without any opposition from the Israel Antiquities Authority.

Since ELAD's assumption of responsibility for the City of David it has raised millions of dollars and intensified its digs and excavations with the help of the Antiquities Authority and through an illegal process which it has called "rescue digs."

These illegal excavations are completed quickly and then covered up in order to forestall any legal actions by archaeologists and licensed institutions. One such example, exposed by Haaretz, is an excavation that took place on the site of Islamic graves during which skeletons were exhumed and removed without informing the Ministry of Religious Services.

Numerous tunnels have been dug throughout the village of Silwan, underneath the homes of residents and without their knowledge. These tunnels have led to the collapse of residential structures, among them the walls of a local kindergarten, which led the municipality to temporarily close off part of these structures until such time as the excavations, which represent a danger to people's daily lives, ceased operations.

* The City of David, Built on the Rubble of Palestinian Culture

ELAD has managed to transform the neighborhood of Wadi Hilweh in Silwan into the tourist site known as the "City of David" (estimates put the number of tourists who visit the site at more than 400,000 a year), where the group showcases the Jewish narrative through pictures and films which ignore or otherwise abrogate the presence of any civilization or culture proceeding or following the period of Jewish settlement in the area. It is in this context that visitors to the site move through the "City of David," entering tunnels where they watch films which give life to the area's Jewish history, far removed from its Arabic and Islamic history as well as its present state of neglect, drowning in poverty and unemployment. Indeed, visitors to the site hardly feel as though they have entered a Palestinian village, one which possesses a beautiful past and a worrisome present.



* ELAD



ELAD has cut the residents of Silwan off from the area's tourism, such that tourists do not leave the boundaries of the "City of David" and, therefore, the village and its families do not benefit financially or culturally from the presence of tourists. In addition, units of the Israeli armed forces routinely visit the settlements spread throughout Silwan.

The construction in and around the "City of David" site comes at the expense of residents' comfort and rights, ignores the harassment which residents suffer at the hands of settler guards, prevents them from building themselves and constricts their livelihoods.

* Construction Prohibited!

Since the 1980s, Silwan has suffered – as have other Palestinian neighborhoods and villages in and around Jerusalem – from the absolute negligence of the Jerusalem municipality concerning the village's needs. The village remains without infrastructure – residential, educational or economic – and since the occupation of Jerusalem the occupying forces have not granted any building permits for apartments or residential buildings in the Wadi Hilweh neighborhood. This status quo has driven the residents to build without permits, turning the average resident into a “viola-tor of the building code” pursued by various Israeli authorities who levy upon him exorbitant fines and punishments, up to and including imprisonment. Typically, the Israeli courts have ruled in favor of housing demolition, either at the hands of the municipality or the residents themselves.



The occupying forces distribute three types of demolition orders in Silwan, the most dangerous of which is administrative demolition which the municipality may carry out within 24 hours and which has become the most widespread of the three, particularly in those areas sought after by the “Nature and Parks Authority.” The other types of demolition orders include judicial orders issued by the Israeli courts and orders to “clean the area.” While the former are often postponed, the latter have been used by the municipality in the past two years to clear large swaths of land using various pretexts. Throughout 2013, the municipality demolished residential buildings and cleared land in Wadi Hilweh, Al-Abbasiya and Wadi Al-Rababa under the cover of such an order.

www.silwanic.net

* Israeli Plans to Judaize Silwan

From the very first days of the occupation of Jerusalem, the occupying forces took control of Silwan and began a series of demolitions, arrests and confiscations of land alongside the construction of settlements. In the past few years, the occupying forces have worked to gradually implement their plans for the land.

The occupying forces in Jerusalem have planned to authorize the implementation of the "Kedem - Ir David - Historical Basin" project in the Dung Gate area (Plan 13542), property owned by residents of Silwan and used for agricultural purposes up until the occupation of the city in 1967, during which time the municipality confiscated the land, destroying two rooms belonging to the Abdou family and turning the area into a parking lot. In 2003, ELAD took control of the area in a roundabout way and from that time began planning construction of a new settlement there.

Meanwhile, the "Kedem" project, which is to be built on an area of nearly 16,000 square meters, is to be comprised of several floors set aside for the use of scholars and the Israel Antiquities Authority in addition to conference halls, educational facilities and parking lots for tourists and settlers. The project will also include areas designated for settler tourism, retail stores and ELAD offices.



* The Plans for the Umayyad Palaces

It should be noted that since 2003 ELAD has undertaken continuous excavations in the proposed project area, demolishing a 1,200 year-old Islamic graveyard and destroying rooms, columns and archways from the Byzantine and Roman periods. Indeed, the settlers have intentionally destroyed archaeological artifacts in the Dung Gate area in an attempt to dismantle the historic gate adorned with a cross and when confronted by residents imprisoned the monastery's guard and threatened him in order to force him to remove the cross himself. In the same vein, most of the area's Christian artifacts have been destroyed, with only a few left behind to be claimed by the occupying forces as artifacts belonging to the alleged "Second Temple." Settlers have similarly removed crosses from the Ain Silwan area. In 1981, the Israeli forces renamed the Dung Gate area the "Givati Site" following an attack by a number of Palestinian youth against the occupation army's Givati Brigade which left six soldiers dead. The site has, since its renaming, been used as a parking lot for settlers, their guards and tourists. In the past, the Dung Gate had been used as a commercial area for Palestinian merchants who sold their goods to tourists, their chief source of livelihood. The area was also used by children as a soccer field during off hours, by the Silwan Sports Club for practices and training sessions after its headquarters was shut down during the First Intifada and by the residents of Silwan for various events and celebrations. The Dung Gate Judaization project serves only the settler population. Not only does it not serve the area's original residents it resigns them to settler control over the area by permanently removing their deep connection to the old city, confiscating a wide swath of land and hemming in neighboring residents for the comfort of an invading group of settlers.



* The Plans for the Umayyad Palacest

The Umayyad Palaces are among the most important Islamic archaeological sites in Jerusalem, located at the northern entrance to the village of Silwan. In June 2011, the Israeli authorities inaugurated these palaces as the bathhouse of the alleged "Second Temple.» There they built an iron platform in the form of the «Biblical pathway to the bathhouse.» The authorities are planning on building a bathhouse for the very women who invade the nearby Al-Aqsa. Excavations have been ongoing in the palaces for years, and the Israeli authorities have stolen a boulder and dust and placed them on display in the «Israeli Knesset,» which is built on land belonging to Lifta in West Jerusalem.

* The National «Biblical» Parks

A large amount of territory in Jerusalem is occupied by what the Israeli authorities call «National Biblical Parks.» The authorities seek to establish nine parks that will take the place of historical Palestinian archeological sites and convert them into Jewish holy sites. These parks are strategically placed in order to keep these areas of Jerusalem under Israeli control in the event of a final status agreement between the Israelis and the Palestinians, and they begin in the south of the city and move through to the northeast. They pass through the village of Silwan and the Mount of Olives, damaging the walls of the Old City, stretching north to the hills of Issawiya and finishing in the area known as E1, north of the settlement of «Maaleh Adumim.»

In the village of Silwan in particular, the authorities refuse to grant building permits in a number of neighborhoods considered to be part of these «National Parks» and a number of houses and buildings have been demolished (as was the case with the Cultural Center in Wadi Hilweh, which was demolished in 2012 under the pretext of «cleaning» the National Park). They have bulldozed land and houses built before the occupation – which itself is the source of the conflict – began. It is worth noting that many of those who have distributed these demolition orders, whether as employees of the Nature and Parks Authority or of the Jerusalem municipality, have been former employees of the ELAD settler organization! This explains how the settlers have been able to build or else expand their buildings unchecked and unbothered in a number of Silwan's neighborhoods.



Wadi Al-Rababa, Wadi Hilweh, the Bustan neighborhood and Al-Abbasiya are all neighborhoods in Silwan that are endangered by the «National Parks» scheme. The municipality has distributed hundreds of administrative demolition orders in these neighborhoods over the past few years. In addition to demolition, residents of these neighborhoods suffer from the destruction of facilities and the sabotage of roads and streets. The entire Bustan neighborhood is under threat of demolition and removal as part of the implementation of the «National Parks» project.

* Plan 11555

The plan known as «11555,» which is still under discussion, aims to confiscate 70% of the territory of the Wadi Hilweh neighborhood. It aims to expand and protect the excavations, to transform the area into a religious and touristic center, and to expand the tunnels, all without regard to the interests and needs of the Palestinian population.

The total area of Wadi Hilweh encompasses 548.5 acres, only 18.7% of which is designated to be residential area according to the plan, including houses and their surrounding plots, as well as the settlement built on the residents' land. The project allocates 8.14% of land to graveyards – which is nearly half of the area allocated to the residential area – and 9.6% to roads and streets, as well as an additional 1.7% to public buildings and 2.4% to religious buildings. The neighborhood already has a mosque and a church, which means that the plan intends to add at least one synagogue. The remaining 70% of the land in the area is to be confiscated for the benefit of the Jerusalem municipality, the District Committee, the Israel Antiquities Authority and the Nature and Parks Authority in the form of parking lots and open spaces.



* The Occupation: Persecuting the Dead of Silwan

In Silwan, the Israeli occupation does not differentiate between the living and the dead, and just as it destroys houses and confiscates neighborhoods, the Israeli Supreme Court ruled in favor of the confiscation of 1,800 square meters of the southern section of the Old City's Gate of Mercy cemetery, known as the «Silwan Cemetery.»



The authorities plan to demolish 39 empty graves, to prevent burial in ancient tombs, and to work to rehabilitate the area – in order to create a tourist path and convert it to a National Park. It is worth noting that the Gate of Mercy cemetery is an Islamic cemetery and a land endowment, but the confiscated section, known as the Silwanah Cemetery was used as a burial site for Silwan residents up until 2004. Now, families preparing to bury their dead there are threatened with arrest and prevented from completing the burial process. Some families have resisted, and continue to bury their dead there.

* The «Cancer» Tunnels

The Israeli authorities have dug tunnels under the houses and streets of Silwan continuously for years such that foundational cracks and landslides have become regular occurrences, especially in the neighborhood of Wadi Hilweh. Residents of the neighborhood have often felt strange vibrations and heard noises coming from the ground below them. They eventually understood that the source of these vibrations and noises was the Israeli authorities digging beneath their homes. In 2007, they erected a protest tent and even appealed to the Israeli Supreme Court to put an end to the excavations, but their appeal was rejected and nothing has changed since. In fact, many of those who filed the appeal to stop the excavation were arrested. The excavation has been described as a «cancer» because of the threat it poses to the lives of the population, and because it spreads under, and infiltrates, residents' homes. The Darj Al-Ayin area of Wadi Hilweh alone has experienced three major collapses over the past two years, not to mention the landslides in the main streets and the cracks in the houses. Despite the objections of the residents and their appeals for the cessation of the excavation, the ELAD settlement organization and the Israel Antiquities Authority have continued to dig.



* The Settler Guards

The settler guards are the most prominent reason for the outbreak of clashes between young Palestinian Jerusalemites and the settlers and Israeli Police. These guards consider themselves «above the law» and «above accountability,» and under this mandate carry out provocations as they «police» the neighborhood. The settler guards, or «settler militia» as they are called in Silwan, use their weapons to attack residents and demonstrators, and they even detain minors under the pretext of stone throwing. A number of residents have been injured or even killed by these guards over the past few years, including the martyr Samer Sirhan (the Israeli courts closed his case but there are ongoing attempts to appeal the decision), and the martyr Milad Ayyash, who was killed near the settlement outpost known as «Beit Yonatan» (whose case was also closed).



The settler guards, contrary to Israeli law, train in the streets, raising fear in the hearts of the population and endangering the lives of pedestrians passing by. There have been several cases of hand-to-hand clashes, as well as cases of death threats made against young boys and girls.

Additionally, the guards often block traffic, or stop individual cars provocatively and participate in confrontations with residents. Members of the Israeli Police have also used the guards' cars to hide in during arrest operations, which is itself a violation of the occupation's own laws.

The estimated number of settler guards is about 375, including 175 working in Silwan. Their budget is an estimated 75 million shekels a year. They are under the jurisdiction of the Israeli Ministry of Housing, and use armored vehicles supplied by the Israeli government.

Residents have petitioned the Israeli courts to stop the employment of these private settler guards, arguing that they pose a danger to the lives of the residents, and asking the Israeli judges to end their sympathetic treatment of these settler guards once and for all.

* Hebraization of Street and Neighborhood Names

Since the beginning of the occupation of Jerusalem, the occupying forces have sought to Hebraicize the names of streets and entire neighborhoods throughout Silwan, particularly in the Wadi Hilweh neighborhood (the most sought after area by the settlers). Indeed, a number of street names have been Hebraicized without consulting or even informing residents and despite their rejection of these names and opposition to this process. Streets and neighborhoods whose names have been Hebraicized to date include: Wadi Hilweh (renamed City of David), Al-Bustan (renamed Gan HaMelach or King's Garden), Wadi Hilweh Street (renamed Maalot Ir David), Al-Mussatar Street (renamed HaShalom Street), Al-Tourba Street (renamed HaOfel Street) and the Dung Gate (renamed after the Israeli army's Givati Brigade).

* Simmering Tensions in Silwan

For over a decade, the residents of Silwan have lived under daily threat by occupying forces and settlers alike throughout the alleyways and streets of the village, transforming the entire village into a game of cat and mouse between the two sides.

The announcement of intentions to demolish the Al-Bustan neighborhood and to excavate tunnels underneath the area's homes may yet represent another spark of the fuse in Silwan.



Silwan has been transformed into a laboratory for Israeli weapons, for sound bombs, for expired tear gas and for live and rubber bullets – the sound of which ring out night and day – and which have caused hundreds of injuries, of choking and panic victims, particularly among women, children and the elderly. Israeli aggression has led to hundreds of arrests, a phenomenon from which no resident of Silwan has been spared, such that a five-year-old child, a sixty-year-old sheikh and a young woman have all been imprisoned or detained. And the charge? Defending their home and their land. Defending Silwan.

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