

“Israel Exploits Palestinian Antiquities to Serve Its Settlement Agenda” An Interview with Mohammad Jaradat



Palestinian heritage faces grave challenges under Israeli occupation, amid Judaization policies, settlement expansion, and systematic acts of sabotage and looting. Preserving archaeological sites and Palestinian historical identity has thus become a matter of existential urgency.

Palestinian heritage is more than just ancient ruins and stones it is the memory of a nation and the identity of a people. Safeguarding this legacy requires ongoing Palestinian efforts and effective Arab and international support to ensure that the Palestinian narrative remains documented and visible to the world, with every artifact serving as a living testament to a civilization that has endured for millennia.

To shed light on this critical issue, Noon Post spoke with Mohammad Jaradat, Director of the Inventory Department for Archaeological Sites at the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities. He discussed the scope of Israeli violations, Palestinian documentation efforts, and the importance of evidence-based historical narratives.

After October 7, how did the rate of attacks on Palestinian archaeological sites change?

Since 2013, Palestinian antiquities and heritage have faced an unprecedented and systematic campaign of looting whether through the annexation of archaeological sites or the theft of historical artifacts. This campaign intensified significantly in 2024, with the Israeli government endorsing this approach by granting the Civil Administration full authority over all archaeological sites located in Area B under the Oslo Accords.

Area B, rich in archaeological sites, is under Palestinian administrative control. This new Israeli decision means that roughly 25% of the approximately 7,000 archaeological sites within the 1967 borders of Palestine are now vulnerable to Israeli control either through extensive excavations or outright artifact confiscation.

Israeli authorities have also granted expanded powers to those working in the field of antiquities and cultural heritage, enabling them to seize control of these sites and conduct excavations and confiscations. One recent example is Khirbet al-Burj.

Khirbet al-Burj lies about 1.5 km west of the town of al-Mazra'a al-Sharqiya, east of Ramallah, atop a hill. It includes layers of archaeological remains dating back to the Iron Age and classical periods, including Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, Umayyad, Abbasid, Crusader, Ayyubid, Mamluk, and Ottoman eras.

Some of these remains are visible on the surface, including building foundations, church remnants, two rows of column bases, six columns, rock-hewn structures, and cisterns. Israeli forces have confiscated these columns particularly those that had fallen relocating them to unknown sites or into Israel itself.

Would you describe what's happening as organized looting of antiquities or a wartime escalation?

This is a systematic campaign unfolding alongside a broader escalation. In addition to direct attacks, Israeli authorities are clearly working to assert control over Palestinian archaeological sites. One of the most significant developments is the establishment of what they call an “archaeological park” in the area of Sebastia, covering approximately 800 dunams.

Sebastia, located north of Nablus, is the site of a Roman city perched on a hill overlooking surrounding plains. It is on the tentative list for World Heritage designation, and the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities is currently preparing its formal nomination file.

Israeli seizures of such sites are part of a broader agenda tied to settlement

expansion in the West Bank. Previously, Israeli authorities confiscated 63 archaeological sites in the Nablus area, most of them on elevated terrain or near bypass roads. The goal is not simply to annex these sites but to repurpose them to serve the broader colonial project.

Why have archaeological sites become a direct target at this stage?

Archaeological sites are intimately linked to the land, so seizing land often means seizing its heritage. Today, Israeli authorities openly declare intentions to annex archaeological sites under the guise of development or the creation of “archaeological parks.” However, these projects are ultimately aimed at consolidating settlements.

Among the key goals are legitimizing illegal outposts especially those not officially recognized by disguising them as heritage sites. This strategy often includes annexing the surrounding lands. It also supports the expansion of pastoral settlement, a growing phenomenon in which Israeli herders are allowed to roam freely across vast areas, sometimes even entering Area A under Oslo, claiming they’re grazing sheep.

Additionally, existing settlements are being expanded by linking them with confiscated archaeological sites, thereby absorbing more land. This is particularly evident in areas like Nablus and Sebastia, where the goal is to isolate Palestinian towns and villages and construct settlement infrastructure, including roads.

These actions deprive Palestinians especially the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities of the ability to protect and develop critical heritage sites. Some of the affected sites include Khan al-Lubban, Khirbet al-Awaf near Sinjil north of Ramallah, Khirbet Seilun (Tel Shiloh), Khirbet al-Bubariya, Khirbet al-Tana al-Tahta in the heart of Nablus governorate, and Khirbet Masoudiyya Station, an early 20th-century Ottoman rail stop. There’s also Khirbet al-Kanisa (or Sheikh Ghanem) on Mount Gerizim, which already hosts an Israeli outpost.

In total, dozens of sites have been annexed by Israel as part of a strategy to expand settlements, establish outposts, and reinforce its control of West Bank land, especially through pastoral colonization and agricultural exploitation.

What is the historical and archaeological value of these areas?

Every archaeological site carries inherent historical and cultural value, but some like Sebastia hold exceptional significance. Sebastia is a fully developed Roman city with all the hallmarks of classical urban planning, including an acropolis, a temple, Augustus’s palace, a theater, a colonnaded street, a gate, and a hippodrome. Collectively, these elements mark it as a site of extraordinary

importance.

The site’s nomination to UNESCO’s tentative World Heritage list in 2004–2005 and the preparation of its final submission file drew strong Israeli protests, as Palestinians spearheaded the nomination independently.

Khirbet al-Burj, meanwhile, rises 920 meters above sea level, offering panoramic views in all directions. Its ancient columns some dating back over 3,000 years have been relocated by Israeli authorities to Israel. This hilltop site has strong potential to become an archaeological park and a tourist destination due to its elevation, historical depth, and scenic beauty.

What role do settlers and the so-called “Israeli Antiquities Authority” play? Are these actions protected by the Israeli army?

Yes. In the West Bank, there is an entity officially known in Israel as the “Staff for Antiquities in Judea and Samaria,” under the Civil Administration. This team includes officers in the Israeli army who specialize in antiquities. As the occupying power, they were initially tasked with overseeing heritage management.

After the 1993 Oslo Accords, authority over antiquities in Areas A and B was transferred to the Palestinian side, while Area C remained under Israeli control. International law prohibits occupying powers from altering antiquities except for preservation or essential infrastructure projects.

However, under settler pressure, the Israeli military and political leadership integrated this staff into the Israeli Antiquities Authority. Consequently, Israeli universities began conducting excavations in Area B. For example, two or three years ago, Bar-Ilan University excavated Khirbet Tibneh near Nabi Saleh, northwest of Ramallah.

This intervention prompted by settler lobbying and sanctioned by Israeli officials is part of a larger policy aimed at asserting sovereignty and annexing West Bank territory.

Where are the stolen artifacts taken? Are they displayed in Israeli institutions or used to promote false historical narratives?

Artifacts looted from the West Bank were long stored in facilities in Sheikh Jarrah in East Jerusalem, while those from Gaza were stored in Ashkelon. We’re talking about millions of pieces obtained either through official Israeli excavations or illegal digs by antiquities thieves. These items often end up in Israel’s antiquities market.

Some artifacts are displayed in Israeli museums—there are over 200 such institutions in Israel, including small private venues. One notable example is the

personal collection of Moshe Dayan, which was massive and largely sourced from the West Bank.

These items are not held in anticipation of future negotiations with Palestinians, as in Egypt's case with Sinai. Instead, Israel treats them as its own property, conducting research on them and sometimes even exporting them abroad.

This conduct underscores Israel's refusal to treat the West Bank as occupied territory. Recent efforts to reassert control over Area B are part of the same broader annexation campaign.

Do you believe this looting is part of a wider Judaization strategy?

Yes. Judaization is a long-standing Israeli policy that began in Jerusalem and the Galilee and has since expanded across historic Palestine. Today, it extends deeply into the West Bank. The aim is to erase Arab, Islamic, and Christian identities from cities like Jerusalem, Hebron, Galilee, and Nablus, and impose a Jewish identity instead.

This involves distorting historical facts and suppressing the Arab narrative in favor of what we see as a fabricated Israeli one. Rather than allowing the evidence to speak, Israel imposes pre-written biblical narratives onto archaeological sites a clear violation of archaeological methodology.

This approach is also reflected in Israeli school curricula, which present these antiquities as part of “Jewish heritage,” even though they are Palestinian in origin. It is a comprehensive policy to Judaize the land, its identity, and its historical memory.

How are stolen artifacts used to rewrite the land's history?

Israel refuses to acknowledge Palestinian history as a rich, cumulative narrative spanning centuries. Instead, it promotes a narrowly defined Jewish history, superimposing ready-made stories onto archaeological sites and interpreting them in ways that reinforce the notion that the land's entire past belongs exclusively to Jews.

This reinterpretation co-opts Bronze Age, Canaanite, and early Philistine periods, folding them into a singular ethno-religious story, typically tied to the Israelites. Thus, all archaeological evidence is redirected to support and reinforce this singular narrative.

What is the cultural and national cost of this looting?

The damage is immense. Palestinians are denied the ability to protect, study, or integrate these sites into their tourism sector, which has economic implications as well.

More importantly, false narratives are constructed based not on scientific data but on political agendas, and these are promoted globally. In Jerusalem, for instance—a city historically sacred to all three Abrahamic faiths the narrative is now almost entirely framed around the concept of the “Temple,” marginalizing Islamic and Christian stories.

This control extends to access: Palestinians are often denied entry to places like Jerusalem and Hebron’s Ibrahimi Mosque. These sites’ Arab, Islamic, and Christian identities are being erased.

Israel markets its version of history internationally, reinforcing its narrative among sympathetic audiences. Meanwhile, the Palestinian narrative though grounded in evidence is marginalized by restricted access and global indifference.

If looting continues, what will it mean for the Palestinian historical narrative?

Two conflicting narratives now dominate globally: the well-funded Israeli one and the constrained Palestinian one. Nevertheless, the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, universities, and academic institutions continue working to produce a scientifically grounded, evidence-based Palestinian narrative.

Israel’s narrative, however, is bolstered by massive cultural output books, exhibitions, and media which frame the land as “the Promised Land” and “the Land of the Patriarchs,” supported by selectively interpreted archaeology.

Narrative, therefore, is a central battleground. While some liberal Israeli scholars acknowledge Palestinian history, most archaeologists in Israel promote and globalize a biblical narrative aligned with Israeli political goals.

Would you characterize this as a form of cultural cleansing alongside geographic displacement?

Absolutely. While military aggression is overt, cultural warfare can be even more insidious. Israel is cultivating a generation raised on a one-sided story that denies Palestinian presence and erases their role in shaping the land.

The danger also lies in global academia. Because of the scarcity of accessible Arabic sources, some researchers rely on Israeli narratives, which risks altering perceptions and facts on the ground. Military control can obscure or destroy evidence, allowing fabricated stories to take hold.

Take Masada as an example. In 1951, an Israeli officer published a brochure claiming it was the site of a great battle between Jews and Romans. Despite the lack of archaeological evidence only a single arrowhead was found this version persists. Even today, Israeli soldiers often swear their oaths at Masada.

Such myths, unsupported by science, are passed down as unquestioned truth, exemplifying a strategy of cultural cleansing aimed at memory, history, and identity.

To what extent do these practices constitute international crimes?

International law protects cultural heritage during armed conflict, as stipulated by the 1954 Hague Convention and the 1972 UNESCO Convention. These agreements prohibit occupying powers from altering or appropriating cultural property.

Deliberate attacks or misappropriations of heritage sites are clear violations and constitute crimes under international law. Palestine gained full UNESCO membership in 2011, giving it a platform to raise such violations and apply pressure on Israel.

World Heritage sites like Bethlehem’s Church of the Nativity, Battir, and Hebron are already recognized. Jerusalem has been on the list since 1982.

What role do The Hague and Geneva Conventions play in protecting heritage in occupied territories?

Both conventions prohibit attacks on cultural property during war or occupation. The 1954 Hague Convention specifically mandates protection of such property and obligates occupying powers to preserve it.

These legal instruments give Palestinians a framework for documenting violations and advocating internationally. Additional protection comes from the 1999 Second Protocol to the Hague Convention, which further emphasizes cultural safeguarding during armed conflict.

What is required—locally, regionally, and internationally—to stop this looting?

The Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities must act decisively to safeguard heritage, particularly under growing Israeli expansionist policies. Preserving cultural heritage should be a national priority, on par with health, education, and agriculture.

Palestinian efforts should include:

Protecting heritage under Palestinian control using all available means.

Daily or near-daily documentation of Israeli violations, leveraging digital tools.

Organizing festivals, exhibitions, and conferences to raise awareness.

Intensifying Palestinian archaeological activity; while Israel operates at hundreds of sites, Palestinian efforts must expand with scientific rigor.

Promoting cultural awareness through public campaigns, schools, and

universities.

Publishing the Palestinian heritage narrative in foreign languages to reach international audiences and expose Israeli practices.

Regionally and internationally:

Establishing a unified Arab legal framework criminalizing heritage violations.

Strengthening ties with UNESCO and UN bodies to keep them informed of Israeli abuses and ensure Palestinian participation in global heritage forums.

What is your message to the international community, which remains largely silent? How can we protect what remains?

In a world beset by wars and crises, our message is this: Like all peoples, Palestinians possess a rich cultural legacy that stretches from the Stone Age over a million years ago into the present. This heritage is a human treasure that must be protected for future generations.

We call for international solidarity and action to counter Israel’s cultural colonization. Despite the economic and political hardships we face, Palestinians continue their efforts to document, preserve, and share their heritage as part of humanity’s shared history.