

September 3, 2023

As UNESCO prepares to declare ancient Jericho and the Second Temple-era Jewish city a “Palestinian heritage site,” the Knesset Land of Israel Caucus conducted an emergency field tour of the threatened archaeological sites of the region: “UNESCO is rewarding the Palestinian Authority’s ongoing campaign to eradicate our history.”

The Knesset Land of Israel Caucus conducted an emergency field tour today (Sunday), headed by Caucus Co-Chairs MK Limor Sohn Har-Melekh (Otzma Yehudit) and MK Simcha Rothman (Religious Zionist Party), against the backdrop of the impending declaration by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) of Tel Yericho, the ancient biblical city of Jericho, a “Palestinian heritage site.” The tour was co-hosted by “Preserving the Eternal” and The Regavim Movement, two extra-parliamentary organizations that continue to take an active role in lobbying and empowering the Israeli government to protect endangered archaeological sites throughout the Land of Israel, as well as the Council of Jewish Communities in Judea and Samaria (Yesha Council); the Binyamin Regional Council; Minister of Heritage Amichai Eliyahu; Minister for Settlement Affairs Orit Strock, and Minister of Environmental Protection Idit Silman.

The tour began in Mitzpeh Yericho, where legislators were given an overview of the history of Jewish settlement in ancient Jericho and saw documentation of the destruction of historical sites in the area by the Palestinian Authority. From there, the tour continued to the Hasmonean Palaces, where participants viewed the decimation of sites of national and international importance at the hands of the Palestinian Authority. The portions of the site placed under Palestinian Authority jurisdiction have been plowed over and looted; condominiums are being built on sections of the ancient Jewish burial ground and the nearby ancient city, where priestly families that served in the Second Temple in Jerusalem lived and are buried.

Caucus co-Chair Limor Sohn Har-Melekh: “There are those who seek to erase the story of the Jewish People; their efforts are relentless and focused. Jericho has historically been known as the keyhole through which the Land of Israel is accessed. The story of the Jewish People and Jericho has remained immutable and embedded in Jewish historical consciousness for millennia and anyone who attempts to peddle lies and to erase the history of the Jewish People will fail. We know the truth; our nation knows the truth about what Jericho means for us, that it is part of the bedrock of the history of the Jewish People. This is eternal truth that no one can erase.”

Caucus co-Chair Simcha Rothman: “There is no better place than this to understand the massive injustice and folly that lies behind UNESCO’s intention to declare Jericho a ‘Palestinian heritage site’. On the one hand, we see the area placed under Israeli jurisdiction under the Oslo Accords: we see scientific excavation and exploration, documentation of the history of this area and of the eternal heritage of the People of Israel who lived here. We see that the site is protected access is organized, and signposts explain the context and history of the site. On the other hand, we see the areas placed under Palestinian Authority jurisdiction: everything has been laid to waste, paved over, built on, covered in heaps of

rubbish, and the stench of the destruction of world heritage sites, is everywhere. This is neither a coincidence nor an incidental lapse, it is a Palestinian Authority program that is being carried out systematically, at this site and many others. There is no doubt that UNESCO, which was created in order to protect and preserve world heritage sites and the cultural artifacts of the human race, cannot reward this sort of terrorism or condone the eradication of the physical record and the denial of history.”

Minister of Settlement Affairs Orit Strock: “Thirty years ago, when the cursed Oslo Accords were signed, the Palestinian Authority was not granted sovereignty over Jericho; it was given responsibility for civilian and security matters. The security responsibilities were violated and abandoned long ago, when Jericho became a hub for terrorism, and for this reason the State of Israel reclaimed its security responsibility twenty years ago. The Palestinian Authority is also violating its commitments regarding civil matters. I call upon the Director General of UNESCO Audrey Azulay: Don’t allow yourself to be a part of this disgrace. Don’t hand out prizes to those who are destroying world heritage assets.”

Minister of Environmental Protection Idit Silman: “There is no doubt that Jewish heritage and Jewish identity are intertwined in this place, from antiquity through the Second Temple era. This place is steeped in Jewish history. It is shocking to see that the ancient sites located in Area A are unprotected and are being destroyed, and it is clear that one of our missions is to protect our Jewish heritage and identity. This government has taken significant steps in this regard, at the Hasmonean places, Sebastia and other heritage sites. Every time one of these unique sites is damaged, all of humankind loses something that cannot be replaced.”

Minister of Heritage Amichai Eliyahu: “Not a single person in the world who has read the Bible can think for a moment that Jericho can be disconnected from the heritage of the Jewish People. It is unthinkable that this site might be declared a Palestinian heritage site; you can dig 3 kilometers deep into the ground and never find a single Palestinian coin or pottery sherd. This denial of history is an international disgrace. We will not lend a hand to these efforts – not the Israeli government, and I hope, not UNESCO. Falling into this trap will severely damage the trust which the nations of the world have placed in this organization; UNESCO could and should be an important body but it is presently taking steps that are very, very convoluted and that are harming the faith of the nations of the world in UNESCO’s ability to protect their heritage.”

Head of the Binyamin Regional Council Israel Ganz: The Palestinian Authority is destroying Jewish heritage sites and it is unthinkable that the world will collaborate in this falsehood and destruction. We demand that Members of the US Congress sound the alarm and inform UNESCO in no uncertain terms that if the commitment to refrain from anti-Israel activity is violated, the United States will immediately and irreversibly withdraw its membership, with all that this entails. At the same time, it is incumbent upon the Civil Administration to step in and act in Area A in order to protect and preserve the heritage sites that are being destroyed by the Palestinian Authority, in blatant violation of the international agreements and commitments it signed.

Shlomo Neeman, Head of the Gush Etzion Regional Council and the Yesha Council: “Jericho is a biblical city that has tremendous importance to the history of the Jewish People. The attempt by the World Heritage Committee of UNESCO to rewrite history and to designate Jericho as a Palestinian heritage site will set a dangerous precedent and will cause irreversible harm. No one can disagree that there is no historic or cultural basis for this designation, and the request that is being voted on is purely political in nature. We thank the Ministers and MKs of the Land of Israel Caucus who came out to the field this morning and are leading the fight for truth and justice. We will continue to work together until this antisemitic motion is rejected.”

Director of “Preserving the Eternal” Moshe Gutman: “Recently, the Palestinian side has intensified their activity against heritage sites throughout Judea and Samaria. The State of Israel has the moral and legal responsibility to protect world heritage sites. The upcoming UNESCO hearing is a disgrace to the United Nations, and it will leave a moral stain on anyone who lends their voice or their hand to this decimation of historical truth. The National Emergency Plan for Heritage Site Preservation is an important step taken by the current Government of Israel to stop the free-for-all, and we expect to see action on the ground.”

Avraham Binyamin, Regavim’s Director of Parliamentary Affairs: “Once again, UNESCO has been exposed as an anti-Israel body that denies facts and history and violates its own charter, principles, and signed treaties. The enormity of Jewish history that lies on and below the surface of Jericho cannot be obscured, and we must not allow the Palestinian Authority to rewrite history while it continues to demolish and erase the ancient Jewish history of this land – not in Jericho, and not in dozens of other threatened archaeological sites throughout the territory.”

Naomi Linder Kahn
Director, International Division
+972-52-238-1039

