

Israel's "Museum of Tolerance": Round Two

Israel plans second dig in ancient Muslim graveyard

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Jerusalem — Israeli authorities are pressing ahead with plans to build a courthouse complex on a large historic Muslim cemetery in Jerusalem that is already at the centre of protest over plans to locate a "Museum of Tolerance" there.

The proposed courthouse is expected to provoke stiff opposition, especially from Islamic groups, after it was revealed that an excavation last year for the museum, close by, unearthed as many as 1,500 Muslim graves.

Dorit Beinisch, the president of the Supreme Court, who last year expressed reservations about the location of the new courthouse, is reported to have lifted her objections recently. According to Meir Margalit, a Jerusalem city councillor, municipal officials said they had assured the judge that no graves had been discovered at the new site during excavations.

However, a spokeswoman for the Israeli antiquities authority, which is responsible for carrying out such digs, said in an interview that ancient graves were found at the proposed courthouse site when a trial excavation was conducted two years ago, and that the discovery was reported to the government.

Archaeologists and Islamic groups point out that the courts were similarly misled when they approved the museum project in 2008, after they had been promised that only "a few dozen graves" would be found at the site, not many hundreds.

"The municipality and government simply can't be trusted on this issue as has been amply demonstrated over the Museum of Tolerance plans," Mr Margalit said. "They have a history of not acting in good faith."

The courthouse plan is certain to revive a long-running controversy over what Muslim organisations have called Israel's "desecration" of the Mamilla cemetery, which lies just outside Jerusalem's Old City walls. The graveyard dates back 1,000 years and, according to Islamic tradition, includes the resting places of the Prophet Mohammed's companions and tens of thousands of Saladin's warriors.

Plans for a Museum of Tolerance, unveiled in 2004 by the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, a US Jewish group that has built a similar museum in Los Angeles, provoked a row that has yet to abate.

Palestinian families whose relatives are buried in Mamilla and the Islamic Movement, the main group representing religious Muslims in Israel, lost their legal battle against the museum in the Supreme Court in October 2008.

But they are to revive their legal action after an investigation by the liberal Haaretz newspaper last month revealed major irregularities in a dig to prepare the site for the museum's construction. The groups also believe the investigation provides them with ammunition against the courthouse plan.

According to Haaretz, the antiquities authority oversaw a five-month excavation last year at the museum site that was carried out in record time as three teams did shifts around the clock amid great secrecy to excavate graves and rebury the remains nearby.

No Palestinians were employed, and all workers had to sign a confidentiality agreement. They were searched for any electronic devices, including phones, before entering the site, were not allowed to leave during their shift, and were watched at all times by security cameras.

The measures, the Haaretz report suggested, were designed to ensure that no word leaked out about the large number of graves found there or that promises to the courts about treating the graves with the utmost respect were being violated.

Workers told the paper that, faced with a large number of graves exposed in five layers down to the bedrock, Israeli officials cut corners and hurriedly dug out ancient skulls and bones, some of which disintegrated in the process.

The paper published photographs appearing to show that remains had been stuffed into cardboard boxes rather than removed using advanced techniques the antiquities authority had proposed, including one that was supposed to freeze the earth around the bones before their removal.

Gideon Sulimani, a senior archaeologist with the antiquities authority who carried out initial excavations, told Haaretz: "They call this an archaeological excavation but it's really a clearing-out, an erasure of the Muslim past. It is actually Jews against Arabs."

Rafi Greenberg, an archaeologist at Tel Aviv University, was also critical. "In another country, they would devote years to such an excavation, and also build a special lab to analyse the results." He accused the antiquities authority of betraying its role as the guardian of the country's historical assets and instead promoting the "wellbeing of entrepreneurs".

Haaretz's investigation has worried observers that similar deceptions may be employed in the case of the courthouse.

Kais Nasser, a lawyer for seven Palestinian families and for an Islamic charity opposed to the museum project, said he would petition the courts to reverse the museum ruling and ask them to block the courthouse plans.

"The graves have already been removed, but we hope to persuade the courts to order that the remains be returned and this uniquely important site rehabilitated," he said.

"Be sure that, if the courthouse goes ahead, as many graves will need to be removed as the 1,500 that were unearthed for the museum."

A new courthouse in Jerusalem has been under consideration for at least a decade, Mr Margalit said, but it had been difficult to find a large enough site in such a crowded city. A spokesman for the municipality termed the new court complex “a strategic project to strengthen the centre of the city”.

A school is currently on the site proposed for the courthouse, close to an area known as Independence Park. Mr Margalit said the authorities may have found graves when they dug the school’s foundations in the 1970s and kept the information secret.

Prof Greenberg said claims that there were no graves under or close to the school were “ridiculous”.

He added that at both sites there was a wealth of other important antiquities that were being ignored or destroyed by the current excavations. He said they included an Iron Age house, an aqueduct and a dam built across what was once a valley.

The antiquities authority, he said, should have announced the important finds and fought to preserve them. Instead, he said, in what he called “a pattern of submitting to outside pressure”, the authority had spread “misinformation” about the site.

Despite the rushed excavations, work on the museum has yet to begin. It has been delayed by the departure of Frank Gehry, the project’s world-famous architect, and financial troubles caused by the global economic downturn.

The museum has attracted growing opposition from within the Jewish community in both Israel and the US. Last year American Reform rabbis, representing the largest stream of Judaism in the US, called for the museum to be relocated, comparing the plans to the historic “desecration” of Jewish cemeteries.

Leading Israeli intellectuals have voiced opposition too, including Shimon Shamir, a Tel Aviv University professor and a former ambassador to Jordan, and Yehoshua Ben-Arieh, considered one of Israel’s foremost experts on Jerusalem’s history.

Rabbi Marvin Hier, head of the Wiesenthal Centre, has defended the museum on the grounds that part of the site was used as a municipal car park from the 1960s, following the site’s deconsecration by a Jerusalem qadi, or Islamic judge.

However, Islamic groups have pointed out that the judge was appointed by the Israeli authorities and was later jailed for corruption. They have also noted that there was no chance to oppose his decision at the time because Israel’s Muslim population was living under martial law.

Jonathan Cook is a writer and journalist based in Nazareth, Israel. His latest books are “Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East” (Pluto Press) and “Disappearing Palestine: Israel’s Experiments in Human Despair” (Zed Books). His website is www.jkcook.net.

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