

US Army Tour with Hebron Settler-extremist Legitimizes Occupation of Palestine and Signals Biden's Collapse

By [Rabbi Michael Davis](#)

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A recent US military visit to the illegal Jewish settlement in occupied Hebron shows that the Biden administration is accepting the one-Jewish-state reality. The tour's host was settler Noam Arnon – who has called Jewish terrorists “heroes”.

Why did US officers visit the illegal, fortified Israeli settlement in the Palestinian city of Hebron earlier this month? I want the Biden administration to answer this question.

Like many who have Palestinian friends or who follow events in Israel/Palestine, I was dismayed to learn of the visit three weeks ago by U.S. Army officers to the militarized compound in the heart of the West Bank city. The U.S. personnel chose to bypass a major Palestinian city completely and visit the Israeli settlers instead.

The military's recognition of the settlers emboldens violent Israeli extremists and undermines the Biden administration's ability to mediate between Israel and Palestine.

Even worse, the U.S. officers were in Hebron at the invitation of long-time Israeli, settler leader Noam Arnon, “the spokesman of the Jewish community in Hebron”.

Noam Arnon is a mid-level leader in the successful Israeli project to create a one-state reality– One Jewish State stretching from the Mediterranean coast across the entire Palestinian West Bank to the Jordan River.

The resonance of the U.S. military visit to Hebron extends far beyond Hebron and is emblematic of the one-state reality that is Israel/Palestine– and the American political acceptance of apartheid at the highest levels.

And the Israeli government is taking similar steps. Israeli President Herzog visited the Jewish

settlement of Hebron in December to celebrate Hanukkah. The relative lack of public outcry at this visit reflects the established reality of One Jewish State combining the State of Israel and the Palestinian occupied territories. But it's the U.S. that makes the One Jewish State possible through outsized financial aid, massive military assistance and unique diplomatic protection on the world stage. We should expect our country to be better than this.

Let's step back to look at some history to appreciate the significance of this historic recognition by the US military of the Israeli settlement in the heart of Hebron.



“A US MILITARY ATTACHÉ AND AN AMERICAN SECURITY COORDINATOR” ACCOMPANIED BY U.S. SOLDIER AND ISRAELI MILITARY PERSONNEL, TOUR THE IBRAHIMI MOSQUE/TOMB OF THE PATRIARCHS IN OCCUPIED HEBRON WITH SETTLER LEADER NOAM ARNON. PHOTO POSTED BY HEBRON FUND, JANUARY 18, 2022.

It has taken half a century to kill the two state solution and the possibility of a Palestinian state living in peace alongside Israel. This One Jewish State reality was accomplished in two phases. Phase one: build a network of Israeli cities and outposts on occupied Palestinian land.

But the settlements alone were not enough to end the dream of an independent Palestinian state. The Israeli colonists could have been required to leave or accept life under a Palestinian government.

Phase Two was an even bolder move: to link these Israeli militarized outposts to each other, breaking up the Palestinian territories into isolated cantons and then connecting this Jewish settler network back to Israel to establish de facto Israeli sovereignty across all the occupied Palestinian territories.

Both colonization and annexation of occupied territories are prohibited under international law. These Jewish-only Israeli colonies have long been considered illegal by the international community, including the United States.

Colonizing occupied territories is illegal under Israeli law too, So how could this plan get off the ground?

A legal fiction had to be engineered outside of Israeli law but under Israeli control. Enter the quasi-governmental “Jewish Agency”, the so-called representative body of the world’s (Zionist) Jews, whose offices are located in Jerusalem under the control of the Israeli government. The illegal colonization of the West Bank by Israel was launched in the name of the world’s Jews. This makes the West Bank settlements the particular responsibility of world’s Jews (known in Israeli and Zionist parlance by the ideologically laden misnomer “the Diaspora.”)

Who was the driving force behind the settlement project? This was the community I grew up in: Orthodox Jews who believe the State of Israel was a Divinely-instituted vessel of the Messianic age, long foretold.

Who else would have been willing to leave the relative comfort of Israel to start families in harsh, pioneer conditions in hostile, Palestinian territory? There is no gold to be found under the rocks of the Holy Land, but there is high octane religious fervor buried in these biblical hills. The Israeli colonization of the West Bank was spearheaded with revolutionary zeal, by idealistic, nationalistic young Jewish Orthodox men.

During my high school years, my Orthodox high school was a card-carrying member of this settler movement. At schoolwide gatherings, hundreds of us teenage boys belted out anthems of love for the Land of Israel – by which we meant, the West Bank and Gaza. We trothed our youthful pledge to build Jewish settlements “everywhere”. We looked up to the young men just a few years older than us who would slip out in the middle of the night to engage in the illicit activity of building these new settlements. When we sang our hymns of love to the West Bank, we riffed off the politically correct “occupied territories”, roaring “....and the LIBERATED territories!” Our generation’s mission was “to return” to the Holy Land east of the Green Line.

I was vague on what my role exactly was beyond enthusiastically supporting this effort. But I knew from my peers and teachers that colonizing and annexing the West Bank was respectable and commendable.

How did the messianic, nationalist, religious young settlers take control of government policy? How did they win the confidence of the grown ups, the sober, secularist, Israeli generals and politicians, Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres and their cohort?

This is a classic Zionist story: working off the emotional appeal of centuries-old traditions to fashion an entirely different modern, secular, nationalistic ideology of colonization and exploitation.

This chapter begins not in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem, but in Hebron. Jerusalem has been the most sacred Jewish place on earth for thousands of years. But just 17 miles south along the hilltop range is an even more venerable Jewish touchstone: Hebron, King David’s first capital. Hebron runs deeper in the Jewish mind than Jerusalem.

While Jerusalem is never once mentioned explicitly in the Torah (Pentateuch), stories about Hebron abound, including an unusual reference to its great antiquity. Early in the Pentateuch's first book, the Book of Genesis, Hebron is the site of the first land purchase recorded in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) and Jewish tradition, when Abraham purchases a burial plot there for his wife Sarah.

Jews have sustained a religious connection to Hebron continuously ever since. A small, Jewish community lived in Hebron until 1929. Judaism's only extant building from antiquity is right there holding up the Ibrahimi Mosque/ the Cave of the Machpelah, Sarah's burial place. This monumental stone enclosure was built over 2,000 years ago by King Herod. He is the same King Herod who built Judaism's most famous religious site and synagogue, the massive Western Wall in Jerusalem. Alongside Jerusalem, Hebron is revered by Jews as one of the Land of Israel's Four Sacred Cities.

The Cave of the Machpelah became the family burial site for the Jewish patriarchs and matriarchs, Sarah and Abraham's family. According to tradition, in due course, Isaac and Rebecca and then Jacob and Leah were buried there too. Other, lesser, biblical figures later joined them. And so, Hebron was always a site of Jewish pilgrimage to the graves of the patriarchs and matriarchs.

As a rabbi and as a teacher of rabbinical students I regularly encounter the figures of Abraham and the other patriarchs and matriarchs in text, in the stories of the Torah and Midrash (ancient Rabbinic commentary). They live in my imagination as paragons and teachers. Many Jews are still drawn to Cave of the Machpelah to pray at their shrine. These Jews experience a unique bond with the Divine in the presence of the patriarchs' and matriarchs' earthly remains.

I confess, I am not drawn to shrines housing the earthly remains of religious or secular icons. Partly, like many other modern Jews, I recoil from the sanctification of land and human relics but also I am deterred by the divisiveness of this particular shrine. After all, the Jewish side of the Cave of Machpelah/Ibrahimi Mosque is an armed settler outpost; and the Muslim mosque reminds me of how much work there is to do before this can be a place of peace. The tension between occupier and occupied is palpable here. This is not the place where I can enter into my own prayerful ideas of Abraham.

And frankly, I feel even more inconsequential in this place. The task is daunting. I am more prayerful about the Jewish matriarchs and patriarchs back home in the United States than at this shrine in Hebron.

But for many Jews today, as in centuries past, The Cave of the Machpelah/the Ibrahimi Mosque continues to be a sacred place with a powerful spiritual presence. Their expectation to have access to pray there is appropriate and should be honored by all.

Indeed, Israel has long guaranteed that Jews will have access to prayer at the Cave of Machpelah/the Ibrahimi Mosque.

This is the point where Noam Arnon and his cohort of settlers make their big lie. Noam Arnon promotes the Jewish outpost on the grounds that the settlers guarantee Jewish access to the shrine and are rebuilding the old Jewish community. This was the community that fled the city in 1929 in the wake of an Arab pogrom that claimed the lives of 57 Jews, some 15% of the small Jewish community.

Neither of these arguments are remotely true. The Israeli authorities guarantee Jewish access to the shrine, and Arnon does not speak for the heirs of the 1929 Jewish community. For instance, Dr. Yona Rochlin, whose father Moshe Hasson owned property in pre-1929 Hebron slammed Arnon ([Hebrew](#)):

“This is infuriating. I am beside myself with anger. My family holds the titles to several properties that the Hebron settlement wants to build on. [Prime Minister Naftali] Bennett and the settlers [claim to] speak in our name when they say they are righting a historic injustice and are reclaiming “their” real estate! What an arrogant, blatant lie! I am incensed at the settlers’ claim that the entire Jewish community in Hebron was wiped out and therefore they have taken over these properties.”

Arnon also fails to acknowledge the many acts of human solidarity by Hebron’s Muslim Palestinians who gave sanctuary to their Jewish neighbors in the 1929 riots, even at mortal risk to their own families.

Arnon, in fact, has a much bigger and more bellicose agenda than rebuilding old Jewish communities. The 20th century left behind any number of abandoned Jewish communities. Between the destruction of European Jewish civilization by Nazi Germany and their allies in the Holocaust and the subsequent Zionist-led dissolution of the millennia-old Arab Jewish world, it’s just a matter of putting a pin anywhere on the map. But Arnon only cares about Hebron and the West Bank.

That the colonization of the West Bank began in Hebron over fifty years ago and Noam Arnon is based today in Hebron is no accident. The settlers started out in Hebron less than a year after the 1967/Six Day War when Israel occupied the West Bank precisely because of its significance as home to a major Jewish religious shrine. They leveraged the religious claim of access to a house of worship into a secular, colonialist claim to land rights. They replaced the Jewish prayer book with the gun and the talit prayer shawl with the battle gear of the Israeli soldier. The claim to the land continues to be expressed and enforced solely under the authority of the gun, the ubiquitous badge of the settlers and their uniformed protectors, a privilege denied the occupied people of Palestine.

This is the host who welcomed US army officers to Hebron three weeks ago.

As I wrote in my [own report from Hebron lately](#), Arnon’s colony has shut down the heart of its Old City. Many Hebronites have fled the area under the constant menace of settler violence. Others live in terror of heavily-armed, racist Jewish thugs who routinely harass Palestinians in Hebron. It’s always an unfair fight: the settlers are armed, the Palestinians are not. And as a backup, the Israeli army can be counted on to side with their fellow Israelis, the settlers, not the occupied Palestinians. In 11th grade some 39 years ago, several of my more extreme classmates disappeared for a few days. When they came back they told us of their exploits. They had gone to Hebron. The Israeli army had forced out the Palestinian residents and guarded the perimeter. My classmates were part of a larger group that entered the vacant Palestinian homes and wrecked them. One classmate told us nonchalantly how he had tipped over a large TV crashing it to the ground.

Hebron epitomizes the entire ongoing crisis that is Israel and Palestine. A savvy, well-funded, heavily-armed group of Israeli Jews has leveraged a traditional religious claim into a secular, colonialist presence dominating and disrupting life in the heart of the city.

In this view, the Palestinian indigenous people can stay so long as they are neither seen nor heard. The temporary-turned-permanent shutdown of Hebron's Old City near the Ibrahimi Mosque is intentional. The ugly walls of the Israeli settlement backing into the market and disrupting its flow place a giant's footprint inside the Arab market. The massive concrete walls and watchtowers separating Palestinians from Jews and the signs in Hebrew warning Israelis to stay away all make the hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Hebronites invisible to Israelis and other Jews.

Arnon may have a beard and yarmulke and proclaim to be an observant Jew, but his occupier's game has nothing to do with Judaism. It's colonialism with all the brute force of any occupying force. He and his cohort rule by the gun.

Despite living in one of the most dangerous Israeli settlements in the Occupied Territories and his vociferous support of violent felons, Arnon has received accolades and holds public positions within the Israeli establishment for his work in Hebron. In Israel, Noam Arnon, and by extension all he stands for, is respectable.

A crowning moment in legitimizing the Hebron Israeli colony came when the U.S. army accepted that invitation. That Palestinians were not included in the visit confirms the reality: Noam Arnon and his settler cohort are not interested in peaceful coexistence but in military domination of the occupied Palestinians.

In Judaism, Joshua's military conquest of most of the Land of Israel, as recorded in the eponymous book of the Tanakh, carries less legitimacy than Abraham's purchase of the burial plot in Hebron. The ancient story of Abraham's purchase in the Torah's Book of Genesis is cited continuously across millennia of Jewish tradition in various contexts: Arnon's supersessionist colonialism deceptively upends that legitimacy by employing Joshua-like violence under the guise of peaceful, Abraham-like commerce.

Any military occupation, colonization or forced annexation can only be maintained against the will of the people through the constant application of violence. Jewish violence on the West Bank is so ubiquitous that it has been reduced to white noise.

However, inevitably the dull rumble of a volcano presages a spectacular eruption into something so violent that it commands the public's attention.

The first time I remember the violence surfacing was in high school. One day, in April 1984 the news broke that a Jewish terrorist network had been exposed on the West Bank. We were shocked. The "Jewish Underground" had been murdering and maiming Palestinians public figures and other citizens for the previous five years. The "Jewish Underground" targeted Palestinian mayors. Bombs were placed in their cars, killing or maiming these democratically elected Palestinians leaders. One had both legs amputated. The general population was terrorized too. A girls' school was intended to be the site of a shooting massacre. This grim story is recorded in dispassionate detail in the court cases of the Israeli Jewish perpetrators and conspirators.

Some of the attackers were convicted and, predictably, given very short prison terms, if at all. And when they were released from jail, it was Noam Arnon, who was at the prison gates leading the singing and dancing, welcoming his comrades, the convicted murderers. [He went on record saying](#): "They are heroes because they decided to sacrifice themselves, their future, their families, for the security of Jews."

Then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon dedicated many years of his career to building brand new Jewish-only towns straddling both sides of the Green Line. These new borderline settlements obliterated the old border between Israel and the West Bank under suburban Jewish-only streets and playgrounds. Jewish-only roads were extended from Israel into the West Bank. Jewish-only settlements bypassed the Palestinian electric grid and were hooked up to the Israeli national grid. Other major Israeli state-funded infrastructure went into creating today's reality of a single Jewish state for Israelis living between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River.

Hebron was the first Jewish settlement in the One Jewish State's first phase of illegally colonizing the occupied territories. Hebron continues to be at the forefront of this second phase, that of annexation, normalizing the inherently abnormal. One Jewish State from the Mediterranean to the Jordan River. What to do with the non-Jews in the occupied territories? They are tucked out of sight behind 20-foot walls and Israeli military watchtowers. The Israeli gun holds them back and holds them down.

All, so that Noam Arnon and his messianic, nationalistic, racist cohort can indulge in his violent all-Jewish fantasy starting at a religious shrine in the heart of the ancient Palestinian city of Hebron and emanating out across the occupied territories.

This is the reality US armed officers blessed with their visit earlier this month. This was a moment we might have expected from President Trump, not from President Biden.

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Rabbi Michael Davis is an independent Rabbi in suburban Chicago.

Featured image: U.S. ARMY PERSONNEL MEETING WITH HEBRON JEWISH SETTLERS, INCLUDING NOAM ARNON, SECOND FROM LEFT, AND RABBI YISHAI FLEISHER (R) OUTSIDE IBRAHIMI MOSQUE. "A U.S. MILITARY ATTACHE AND SECURITY COORDINATOR" WERE ACCOMPANIED BY ISRAELI FORCES, ACCORDING TO HEBRON FUND, WHICH POSTED THE PHOTO, JANUARY 18, 2022.

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