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Hebron: the endangered city

Hebron is one of the oldest cities in Palestine, perhaps one of the oldest in the world, and is located in the south-central area of Palestine. Archaeological remains suggest that people were living on the site more than 6000 years ago; it was ruled by the Canaanites between 4000-1200 BCE. Hebron stands about 1,027 metres above sea level, 36 kilometres south of Jerusalem. Its mountainous location overlooks the Jordan valley and the Dead Sea to the east, and the coastal plain of Palestine up to the Mediterranean to the west.

The large number of springs in the foothills and valleys around Hebron provide it with regular fresh water; when viewed, you see a sprawling orchard with fruit and olive trees, vineyards and other crops suited to the soil and the local climate. It is this which has attracted many people of the centuries, including the grandfather of the Prophets, Ibrahim (Abraham), peace be upon him, who lived and is buried in Hebron. His presence attached a degree of sanctity to the city. Today, more than 200,000 people live within the Hebron district covering 42 square kilometres.

The [Old city of Hebron](#) is characterized by its historic buildings dating back to the Ayyubid, Mamluk and Ottoman periods. There are 150 mosques, including the famous Ibrahimi Mosque, and religious sites including the Rabat-Mansouri, as well as a castle, turned into a school by Sultan Hassan.

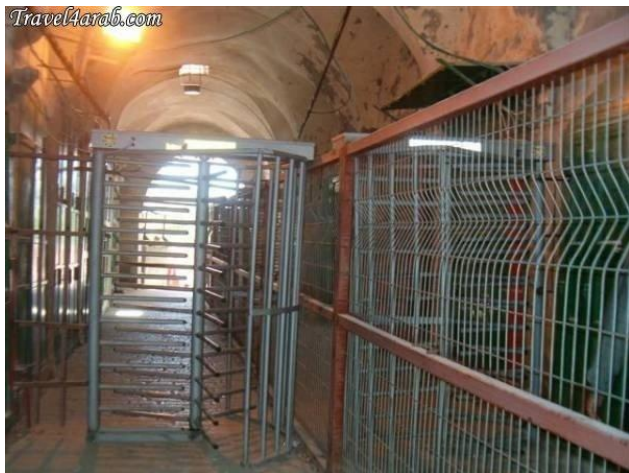
The Ibrahimi Mosque is built on the site of the Tomb of the Patriarchs which contains the burial places of Prophets Ibrahim (Abraham), Ishaq (Isaac) and Yacoub (Jacob) along with their wives Sarah, Rebecca and Laeka respectively, as well as the grave of Prophet Yusuf (Joseph), peace be upon them all. The wall surrounding the mosque is built of massive blocks of stone up to 7 metres long and 1 metre wide. It is believed that this is part of the remains of a building dating back to the reign of Herod the Edomite in 37 BCE. The cave of Machpelah which contains the tombs is reported in the scriptures to have been bought by Prophet Ibrahim from Ephron, son of Zohar the Hittite.

Since the occupation of the West Bank in 1967, Israel has slowly but surely Judaised the Ibrahimi Mosque, making it progressively more difficult for Muslim worshippers and visitors to get into the mosque, and increasing Jewish access from a temporary Saturday synagogue arrangement in September 1968 to a permanent allocation of most of the mosque space today. In May 1968 the Israeli military Governor ordered the grounds of the mosque to be opened at night for the illegal Jewish settlers, and the stairs, the eastern door, and the well were destroyed; all were valuable archaeological sites. In 1972 some wings were allocated to the Jews and the Muslims were banned from using them, and in 1991 a Jewish school was established. Israel took advantage of the massacre in 1994 (see below) to split the mosque into two parts, one for [Muslims](#) and another for Jews, and turned it into a fortified site.



On Friday 25th February 1994, while Muslims were performing the early morning prayer during the month of Ramadan, one of the settlers from the illegal settlement nearby entered the Ibrahimi Mosque and used his army-issue rifle, machine-gun and hand grenades to kill 29 men and boys; the attack took place while the worshippers were prostrating on the ground; estimates of those who were injured vary between 120 and 350. Those who did not seek medical attention would not have been included in semi-official casualty figures, which could account for the difference in the estimates. The killer, an immigrant from New York called Baruch Goldstein, was beaten to death by the survivors when his ammunition ran out. His grave in the nearby illegal settlement of Kiryat Arba is the scene of annual celebrations by Jewish settlers of the person they regard as a martyr. [One Rabbi](#), Moshe Levinger, said that the killing of so many Arabs affected him about as much as the killing of a fly. [Yisrael Shahak, Jewish Law]

Today, most Palestinians avoid going to pray in the Ibrahimi Mosque because of the complex Israeli security arrangements; visitors also have to go through the Old City, which is virtually empty of Palestinians these days in order to “protect” the hard core Israeli settlers who live in the centre of Hebron. These fanatics are fully armed and assault local Palestinians with sickening regularity, often under the gaze of the Israeli soldiers sent there to protect Jews from Arabs. If Muslims do venture to the mosque, they have to pass through an outer gate manned by the Israeli army before being subjected to two electronic inspections, removing watches, belts, telephones, etc. Then they go along a couple of narrow corridors surrounded by barbed wire to another inspection point, this time for their identification cards; another electronic gate



has to be tackled at the main door of the mosque. Jews do not have to do any of this; they have their own gates. This is rather strange given that the only time serious trouble has occurred in the mosque it was [Jew on Muslim](#) violence, not the other way round.

**1 The first gate to reach the Ibrahimi Mosque
Revolving gate where soldiers control movements in
and out after a careful inspection**



2 The second gate for Muslims to enter and be searched

On the 16th anniversary of the massacre in the Ibrahimi Mosque, the Israeli government decided to Judaize the sacred precinct (Haram), as well as the tomb of Bilal bin Rabah. This policy targeted the religious and national feelings of Palestinians, and was a breach of the Fourth Geneva Convention. The Ibrahimi Mosque is a World Heritage Site, declared by UNESCO.



Indeed, Israeli efforts to change the nature of the Mosque break the Hebron Agreement of 1997, signed by the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority during Benjamin Netanyahu's first term as Prime Minister. Clearly, it is an agreement, [like many others](#), that Israeli actions demonstrate is not worth the paper it is written on.

According to the director of the Hebron Waqf (religious endowment body), Zeid Al-Jabari, the occupation authorities continue to target Muslims' religious freedom in the Ibrahimi Mosque by putting a stop to the call to prayer and general harassment of worshippers.

"The occupation authorities stopped the Azan (call for prayer) in the Ibrahimi Mosque last January about 54 times," said Mr. Jabari. The statistics for 2009 show that the Israeli authorities and illegal settlers prevented the Azan 680 times, an average of 57 times per month, he added. In fact, the [Azan](#) is prevented nearly every Friday and Saturday every week.

The prohibition on the call to prayer is imposed ostensibly to stop any inconvenience or disturbance for the settlers, in contravention of all laws, regulations and conventions granting freedom of worship and access to religious sites in [freedom and safety](#).

Hebron lost most of its territory in the catastrophe of 1948 when the state of Israel was established. At that time, the city itself covered 2.76 square km. Hebron province consists of the city of Hebron, 35 large village, and 109 small villages and two Bedouin clans. After the Nakba of 1948 Hebron lost 1,012 km², about 47% of the total area; 16 of its villages were occupied and around 20,000 people were dispossessed. Most of Hebron's agricultural land to the West and part of the territory of the lower hills was also lost to the state of Israel. Villages which lost most of their land include Beit Awa, Beit Maram, Ezna, Beit Ula, Sikka and Alburj. The province was also disconnected from the Dead Sea.

About 143,000 [refugees](#) from Palestinian land occupied by the Zionists in 1948 live in the province.



Hebron itself was occupied by Israel on the 5th June 1967, after which illegal Jewish settlers began to arrive on the outskirts of the city and then inside the old city itself. There are now 5 settler areas:

1. The Jewish settlement of [Tel Rumeida](#) Just a few metres from the Ibrahimi Mosque. The settlers have damaged Palestinian relics in the vicinity, which is not only a UNESCO World Heritage Site but has also been a recognised site of archaeological interest since the beginning of British Mandate rule in the early 1920s. The Israeli authorities allowed settlers to establish mobile homes on this important site on the grounds that “it belongs to Jews”. Benjamin Netanyahu gave permission for permanent buildings to be built there in 1999.

Palestinian families in Hebron live in a state of tension since the advent of the Jewish settlements. Tel Rumeida looks like a fortress surrounded by iron gates and control towers around the clock and bristling with Israeli army weapons. A long list of prohibitions inhibits normal Palestinian life.

One thousand Palestinians face the pressure of having settlers living near their homes. When the settlers attack the Palestinians – a frequent occurrence – ambulances are unable to attend.

The many Jewish holidays are exploited by Jewish settlers living in Tel Rumeida as excuses to throw stones at Palestinians and knock on their doors and windows with sharp instruments, screaming, to such an extent that these actions appear to have replaced their [religious rituals](#).

2. In April 1979, Miriam Levinger, the wife of the aforementioned Rabbi led a march of women who decided to settle in the heart of [Hebron](#), in Beit Hadassah - Aldbuya, which was a building first used as a police station and detention camp in the Ottoman period before it was handed over to the Jordanians who in turn passed it on to the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in 1953. The building was used as a school before it became an UNRWA store.
3. Extremist settlers occupied Osama bin Munqiz School in 1981, a Palestinian school; they turned it into a Jewish school called “Beit Romano”, now attended by nearly 250 students attend it.
4. At the end of 1985, a huge apartment block was built next to the central vegetable market and the settlers called it Apino Abraham Synagogue.
5. A tourist rest area near the Ibrahimi Mosque now houses settlers.

In addition to these settlements in the city itself, there are large two Jewish settlements on the outskirts to the east; Keryat Abaa and Kharsena.



Israeli settlements now surround Hebron on all four sides; there are 27 settlements in the province occupying an area of 8 km² inhabited by around 18,000 Jewish settlers. In addition, the five permanent outposts in the heart of the city are now occupied by 530 ultra-extremist settlers.

Military checkpoints

There are more than 155 military checkpoints, 7 of which are at the entrances to the province. Inside of the city there are 32 checkpoints; an additional 39 checkpoints separate the city from the surrounding villages. There are 34 watchtowers, 15 iron gates which open and 14 permanently closed gates. Twenty-four sand and concrete mounds impede traffic in the area.

Bypass roads

The Israeli occupation authorities have built settler-only bypass roads which take up around 30% of the land in Hebron province. The roads are a total of 117.1 km in length and divide the province into four main blocks. The Israelis prohibit any construction on either side of these roads up to a distance of 150 metres.

The bypass roads provide territorial contiguity between the settlements, while the movement of Palestinians subject to severe restrictions and procedures.

The Wall

The length of Israel's "apartheid" wall in Hebron province is 72 km, taking up about 55,000 acres of agricultural land and pastures containing a number of water basins and wells. The wall runs from Jabaa in the north west of the province to the Dead Sea; it passes through land belonging to a number of villages, including Jabaa, Surif, Ethna, Tarqumiya, Nuba, Kharas, Der Samit, Beit Awa, Beit Rewish Tahta and Fawqa.

The wall is built in two sections, the first of which surrounds the settlements of Karmi Thor, Kiryat Arba, Harchina, Thielm, Adora and Bani Hever. It then snakes around the province to divide the occupied Palestinian territories into isolated cantons, creating "facts on the ground" to make the establishment of a contiguous Palestinian state near impossible to achieve.

Economy

The important footwear, leather, stone and marble industries, as well as the food industry have been hit hard by the occupation. Checkpoints, barriers, settlements, bypass roads and the wall have destroyed much of the local Palestinian economy, leading to a flight of capital from Hebron province.



The Temporary International Presence

The “Temporary International Presence” in Hebron is a civilian observer mission established after the 1994 mosque massacre. It consists of observers from Denmark, Italy, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and Canada with a mission to monitor and identify settler-Palestinian incidents. According to a [report](#) by the Director of the Mission, Jan Christensen, the Israeli occupation authorities exercise a policy of ethnic cleansing in the city of Hebron to displace Palestinian residents of the old town.

Hebron Agreement

The Likud Party came to power in May 1996 led by Benjamin Netanyahu, an opponent of the Oslo Accords who believes that the Palestinians have too much or more than they deserve. The Palestinian Authority was forced to make concessions regarding the status of the city of Hebron for the Hebron Agreement signed on 15th January 1997. The agreement divided the city into two: a Jewish area in the heart of the city and including the Ibrahimi Mosque; and a Palestinian area to include the wider the city. Complex security arrangements have been put in place to ensure the security of the 400 Jewish settlers in the city centre living among more than 120,000 Palestinian indigenous residents of Hebron; these arrangements make the lives of Palestinians a living hell.

The tragedy of the Hebron Agreement

In order to sign the Hebron Agreement (also known as the Hebron Protocol) the Palestinian negotiators gave up the old city, passing the Ibrahimi Mosque to Israeli control, as well as the areas in which the settlements listed above are located.

The specific situation of settlements in the occupied city of Hebron

The settlements in and around Hebron are part of the general settlement pattern across historic Palestine which is at the core of Zionist ideology. Under the entirely false premise that Palestine was “a land without a people for a people without a land”, Zionists (Jews and non-Jews alike) have sought to populate Palestine with immigrants and displace the indigenous population. Many methods have been used to try to establish a link between the Jewish settlers and the land of Palestine, and the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from their land, including intimidation, massacres, racist laws and contempt for international law and conventions; the Zionist colonisation of Palestine adds up to a policy of genocide against the Palestinian people.

The settlements in the heart of Hebron differ only in the detail from other settlements across the occupied West Bank. All of the Israeli policies enacted in the West Bank are intended to create economic and physical hardship so that Palestinians will be pressured to migrate from their land. Those who have the determination to stay on their land will be, and are, subject to a policy that matches, indeed exceeds, the discredited system of apartheid.



Settlements create not only pockets of alien communities among the indigenous population but also have wide-ranging effects on the Palestinians among whom they are built. Backed by a massive Israeli security presence, the settlers themselves constitute a heavily-armed militia which provokes and assaults the local civilian Palestinian population. Settler attacks occur against people and their homes, farms and their crops; and schools and their pupils. They include beatings, shootings, vandalism and crop burning to the extent that the Palestinians in Hebron are unable to lead normal lives by any measurement whatsoever.

The city of Hebron is the only city under Israeli occupation where the occupation forces and the settlers have made sure to seize and control the main arterial roads; where the 1,300 shops on the main roads are for settler-use only; where the Palestinians' Central Market is closed as a collective punishment for a crime committed by a settler, Baruch Goldstein; where tens of thousands of Palestinians have their lives controlled to suit the whims of a few hundred illegal Jewish settlers.

Furthermore, Hebron is the only city among all the Palestinian cities of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank which the Palestinian Authority has agreed to leave in the custody of the Israeli army and settler militias. It is the only Palestinian city where local elections must take Israeli interests into account as a priority.

In a nutshell, the situation created by Jewish settlements in the city of Hebron is a security, political, economical, cultural, scientific and health nightmare. This should not be a surprise, for Hebron was the most important economic centre of the country pre-occupation. It was an obvious target for the lion's share of Zionist aggression.

Those responsible for signing the Hebron Agreement should be ashamed of themselves for having such a short-sighted approach. They who signed away the rights of the Palestinians had little or no knowledge of or affiliation to the city and its province; thus, they had no right to do what they did, especially after ejecting the Hebron delegation from the discussions. Moreover, it is still not too late to avoid concessionary bartering of the holy sites in Jerusalem and Hebron. A long-term vision is essential in negotiations and the people of Hebron must not be sold short as they have been in the past.

