

Israel cries foul after UNESCO lists Ariha ruins as World Heritage Site in Palestine

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Tel Aviv, September 19 (RHC)-- Israel cries foul after a UN conference votes to list the ruins near the ancient West Bank city of Ariha as a "World Heritage Site in Palestine." Ariha or Jericho is one of the

oldest continually inhabited cities on earth, and is in a part of the West Bank that is administered by the Palestinian Authority.

The listing refers to the Tel es-Sultan archaeological site nearby, which contains prehistoric ruins dating back to the ninth millennium BCE and is outside the ancient city itself. The vote was held during a meeting of the World Heritage Committee, overseen by the UN cultural agency UNESCO, in the Saudi capital city of Riyadh on Sunday. It is the fourth site in the occupied West Bank to receive UN recognition as a World Heritage Site. The Church of the Nativity and the pilgrimage route in Bethlehem, the cultural landscape of southern al-Quds and Battir, and the Old City in al-Khalil are the other sites.

“The natural resources and strategic location of Ancient Jericho/Tell es-Sultan made it ... a major node of human development for millennia,” the Palestinian Tourism and Antiquities Ministry wrote in an executive summary for the committee.

Ariha is one of the world’s oldest continually inhabited places, where excavations have unearthed traces of Neolithic populations and materials from the Early and Middle Bronze Ages. The decision angered Israel, with its foreign ministry accusing Palestinians of “cynical use of UNESCO and politicization of the organization” and promising to work “to change the distorted decisions that have been made.”

Israel quit UNESCO in 2019, accusing it of diminishing its connection to the Holy Land. The regime also objected to UNESCO’s acceptance of Palestine as a member state in 2011.

Israel occupied the West Bank, along with Gaza and East al-Quds, in the 1967 Six Day War. The Palestinians want all three territories for their future state.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas said UNESCO’s decision “testifies to the authenticity and history of the Palestinian people,” adding that “the state of Palestine is committed to preserving this unique site for the benefit of mankind.”

Similarly, the Palestinian Foreign Ministry lauded the designation as an acknowledgment of Ariha's “cultural, economic, and political significance” and a testament to “10,000 years of human development.”

The modern city of Ariha is a major draw for tourism to the Palestinian territories, both because of its historical sites and proximity to the Dead Sea. In 2021, the Palestinian Authority unveiled major renovations to one of the largest mosaics in the Middle East, in an Ariha palace dating back to the 8th century.

Tell es-Sultan, an oval-shaped mound, contains evidence of one of humanity’s first-known villages and an important Bronze-Age town dating back to 2600 BCE. It is around 2 kilometers (1.2 miles) from the remains of the first city of Ariha.

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