



Dr. Sarah Sallon holds an illustration of how the historic hilltop in Abu Tor, Jerusalem, looked 200 years ago, February 17, 2016. Credit: Tali Mayer

Arabs and Jews join forces to oppose development on historic Jerusalem hilltop

Plan for luxury housing in Abu Tor threatens famous view and archaeologically significant sites. Says resident: 'It would be an absolute catastrophe.'

Judy Maltz

17.02.2016 | 18:43 [1 comments](#)

As the battle lines are drawn in the latest dispute over land in Jerusalem, Jews and Arabs find themselves, for a rare change, on the same side.

Residents of Abu Tor, one of the few mixed Jewish-Arab neighborhoods in the Holy City, have in recent weeks begun organizing against plans to build a hotel and luxury apartments on a historic hilltop compound in their midst. With its magnificent view of Jerusalem's Old City and abundance of wildflowers and antiquities, this 2.5-acre plot of land, frequented by both Jewish and Arab residents of the neighborhood, is considered a local treasure.

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Owned by the Greek Orthodox Church and recently leased to a pair of big-time Jewish financiers, the hilltop in question is believed by many to be the site of the infamous Hill of Evil Counsel — the place where the Jewish high priest Caiaphus and his associates presumably agreed to hand over Jesus to the Romans.

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“If this project is approved, it would be an absolute catastrophe,” warns Naomi Sussmann, a neighborhood resident leading the protest. “It would destroy one of the last gems in this city.”

Dr. Gabi Barkay, a prominent Jerusalem archeologist, concurs. “Not only is this site unique in the views it provides of the Mount of Olives, Mount Zion and the Hinnom Valley,” he says, “but on the premises, there are also remnants of a church dating back to the Byzantine period, an underground cistern from the Second Temple era and many other antiquities scattered around. There aren’t many places like this left anymore.”

To date, the protesters have garnered more than 400 signatures for a petition they plan to present to the municipality. Their next step, they say, is to formally enlist the support of Arab residents of this neighborhood, which straddles the border between the eastern and western parts of Jerusalem.

That shouldn't be hard, according to Mohammed Agbaria, a municipal planner responsible for the Arab section of Abu Tor. "I'm sure that once all this is explained to the Arab residents of Abu Tor, you will have even more than 400 signatures from them," he says. "After all, this is a place sacred not only to Christians, but also to Muslims and Jews."



A woman walks past Greek Orthodox Church in Abu Tor, which owns the land which has been leased for development of a hotel and luxury apartments. February 17, 2016. Credit: Tali Mayer

Agbaria notes that the name Abu Tor, (Arabic for "Father of the Ox") refers to a famous Muslim general who rode into battle against the Crusaders on a white ox, and as a reward for his bravery, was given a Greek convent on the site.

Referring to the third holiest Muslim site in the world, located in the Old City of Jerusalem, he adds: "If this plan were to be implemented, it would be the equivalent of building a hotel right next to the Al-Aqsa mosque."

David Maeier-Epstein, a local fundraising consultant, serves as the neighborhood liaison with the Jerusalem municipality. In an urgent letter sent to residents this week, he stressed that far more was at stake than in most “not in my backyard” campaigns.

“Preservation of the hill is not only in the interest of the Jewish and Arab parts of Abu Tor, nor just the residents of Jerusalem, but is important for all those for whom the history of the city and Israel are important,” he noted.

Residents of Jewish Abu Tor, Maeier-Epstein told Haaretz, plan to meet in the coming days with their Arab neighbors to “make the case for them to join us in this campaign.” This would not be the first time that Jewish and Arab residents of Abu Tor had found common cause, he said. “By joining forces, we were recently able to obtain money from the city to undertake a major renovation of a park here,” he reported.

Plans to develop the area known as the Greek Compound have been circulating among city planning officials in the past few weeks. According to residents who have seen the blueprints, the project includes a small hotel and four residential buildings — one seven stories high but partly built into the ground and three that are four stories high.

Michael Steinhardt, the American hedge-fund manager and philanthropist who helped found Taglit-Birthright, is one of the developers. The other is the London-based Israeli businessman David Sofer, who made his fortune as a trader on the Israeli and American stock exchanges. Ironically, neighborhood activists point out, both are known to be avid antiquities collectors.

Under the plan proposed by the developer, the Greek Orthodox Church currently situated on the site would remain in its place, as would the antiquities located above ground.

In a contract signed about a year ago, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, a major

landowner in Jerusalem, leased the land to the investors for an undisclosed period, though presumably long enough to make real estate development financially worthwhile. To facilitate the project, the investors set up a company called Abu Tor Properties and hired Ari Cohen Architects and Town Planners in Jerusalem to draw up a development plan.



A hotel and luxury apartments are slated to be built on this historic hilltop in the Abu Tor neighborhood in Jerusalem, February 17, 2016. Credit: Tali Mayer

The land is currently not designated for residential construction, so for the plan to be implemented, the developers will be required to obtain special permits from the Jerusalem planning authorities.

Although Jewish and Arab residents of the neighborhood are expected to join forces in fighting the plan, the demarcation lines drawn in this particular battle cut across the classic right-left divide. Among the neighborhood activists leading the protests is Daphne Netanyahu, sister-in-law of Likud leader and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, while the law firm representing the developers is run by former Labor party Knesset member and peace activist Tzali Reshef.

Yonatan Schiff, a partner in the law firm representing the two developers, did not

respond to questions about details of the contract signed with the Greek Orthodox Church. Nor was he willing to address questions regarding concerns raised by local residents.

Because of the religious and historical significance of the site, as well as its unique aesthetics, Professor Moshe Margalith, a prominent architect and the UNESCO chair on modern heritage at Tel Aviv University, urges the planning authorities to give very careful consideration to the land development proposal. “Decisions can only be taken after all those who have some stake in the matter are allowed to weigh in,” he said.

Dr. Sarah Sallon, a local resident and specialist in ancient medicine, said the compound has come to serve as a type of neighborhood sanctuary. “This is one place in Jerusalem where Jews and Arabs, and Muslims and Christians can interact peacefully,” she noted. “People come here to do yoga, they come to paint, they come to walk their dogs, and if you’re lucky, you’ll even find shepherds roaming the hilltop here with their sheep. It’s a very special place, indeed.”

This is not the first time real estate developers have cast their sights on this hilltop. Back in the 1980s, an investment group led by former Finance Minister Yigal Cohen-Orgad also planned to build a hotel on the spot. Two residential homes in the compound were bulldozed to make way for construction before the plan was ultimately scrapped because of building limitations imposed by the city.

“This is not just any other place,” says Tzipi Ron, an environmental activist who led the protests back then. “True, every place in Jerusalem is sensitive, but this particular place is more sensitive than others.”

In response to a query from Haaretz, the Jerusalem municipality said that it had not yet received any formal plan for developing the site. “If and when we do, the plan will be examined by our professional staff, and all the needs and issues that arise will be addressed.”

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