



Wadi Hilwah Information Center

# **The Story Behind the Tourist Site**





Once upon a time, where you're standing right now, there was a small valley called Wadi Hilwah, part of the large Silwan village.

Hilwah was the wife of the *mukhtar* Siyam. She was killed during armed clashes in the valley. Before her death, the valley was called *Wadi Al-Nabah*, Valley of Wails. They say that at nights one could hear among the hedges of cactuses the wails of the innocent girl who was viciously murdered by her brother.

The Muslim village of Silwan started to develop in the 16th century. The village was famous for its quality agricultural produce, and served as a resting point on the way to the old city.

Today the village counts 55,000 people. 5,500 live in Wadi Hilwah neighborhood, which lies on the Old City's southern slopes. Here, evidently, is where ancient Jerusalem was established. The Gihon Spring (Ein Silwan) is the reason why people settled on the spur more than 5000 years ago and built the city which became holy to the three monotheistic religions.

Many cultures left their mark on the spur's slopes and valleys that set the boundaries of Wadi Hilwah: the Canaanites, who established the city and built the impressive underground water system; the Judeans, who expanded the city; the Assyrians, who besieged it; the Babylonians, who destroyed it and banished its people; the Persians; the Greeks, the heralds of Hellenism; the Romans; the Byzantines; and finally the Muslims, who ruled the city for 1300 years.

In the 20th century, the villagers lived under four different rules: Ottoman, British, Jordanian, and, since 1967, Israeli, under which the Palestinian residents have no citizenship – a vulnerable and dangerous status.

### **Archaeology**

Archaeological excavations in Wadi Hilwah started during the late Ottoman rule. Charles Warren discovered the underground water system at the close of the 19th century (a site known as Warren's Shaft), identified the site



*Silwan Village - Wadi Hilwah neighborhood is seen on the slopes of the Old City*

in the heart of Wadi Hilwah neighborhood as ancient Jerusalem, and called it "City of David".

Ever since, many archaeologists of different nationalities have conducted excavations in the area. The locals never initiated the excavations, but they were always conducted with respect for them, and the residents enjoyed the visits of tourists. In the 70s Israeli archaeologists began to excavate in Wadi Hilwah, led by the renowned Prof. Yigal Shilo.

### **Wadi Hilwah 1967 - 1987**

Soon after the 1967 War, Israel formally annexed East Jerusalem into the municipal borders of Jerusalem. Silwan grew rapidly and welcomed many Palestinian refugees from the '48 and '67 wars. However, development in Palestinian neighborhoods in East Jerusalem was little compared to in other parts of the city.



*Wadi Hilwah in the 70s, looking from Shiloah/Silwan Pool*

Nevertheless, the 70s and the beginning of the 80s were also a period of hope for the village, and especially for the residents of Wadi Hilwah neighborhood, which was the closest to the old city walls. The village was teeming with visitors. The archaeology attracted many tourists, who the residents welcomed heartily: with them came somewhat financial stability.

In Haj Musa Hamada Siyam's Coffeeshop (today, only the entrance sign is left...) one could often find local Palestinian residents, Israeli archaeologists and tourists sitting together. Also, at that time several young Israelis lived in the village and had good neighborly relationships with the Palestinians.



*The entrance sign of Haj Musa Hamada Siyam's coffeeshop*

### **Building is Not Permitted!**

During the 80s, the residents started to realize that their status as non-citizens was problematic. The municipality did not invest in the development of East Jerusalem, in the improvement of the education system, or in the municipal planning of East Jerusalem. Silwan was neglected. Most of the young residents had to take low-paying jobs. The once pastoral village sunk into poverty and neglect. Concerning construction, since 1967, not a single building plan has been approved in Wadi Hilwah. This means that the residents cannot build or expand their homes. As families grew, the residents were compelled to build without permits. Hundreds of families found themselves in an impossible situation. In addition to poverty, a deficient education system and poor physical infrastructure, the state also turned the residents into criminals who had to pay hundreds of thousands of Shekels in fines, and issued demolition orders to many homes.



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*A recently demolished house in Silwan*

In the 80s, the young residents' frustration, fear and resentment caused by the state of Israel translated into their participation in the first Intifada, in which Silwan became known for its strong involvement. This marked the end of the age of innocence.

### **The Israeli Settlement in Silwan**

In the beginning of the 90s, a private organization called Elad (*El Ir-David*, To City of David) started to operate in the village. In Elad's mission statement it is written that its mission is to "strengthen the Jewish connection to Jerusalem, and this in the means of tours, guidance, populating, and publishing material." In practice, Elad feverishly worked to gain ownership of houses and lands in the village and particularly in Wadi Hilwah neighborhood.



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*Guard booth above a settlement house, in the heart of Wadi Hilwah neighborhood*

## The Story of a House

One of the first houses Elad entered was Musa Abbasi's house. The house lies next to the famous "Warren's Shaft". Elad's founder, David Be'eri, impersonated a tourist guide and gained Abbasi's trust by bringing groups of tourists to his house. Residents friends of Abbasi remember that Abbasi saw in David Be'eri, who brought tourists to purchase his lemons, a true friend. Be'eri collected information about the property in his visits and used it in a legal procedure to declare most of Abbasi's house "Absentee Property". This means that the legal owner lives in an enemy state and that, according to the Absentee Property Law, the state of Israel can confiscate the property without compensation. It appears a contract was signed between the state and Elad without a tender and without Abbasi's knowledge, and so, in the dead of night in October 1991, Elad's people entered the house and removed Musa and his family.



*Elad's people in Abbasi's house after the takeover, October 1991*

In the first years, Elad gained control on several additional properties in different means:

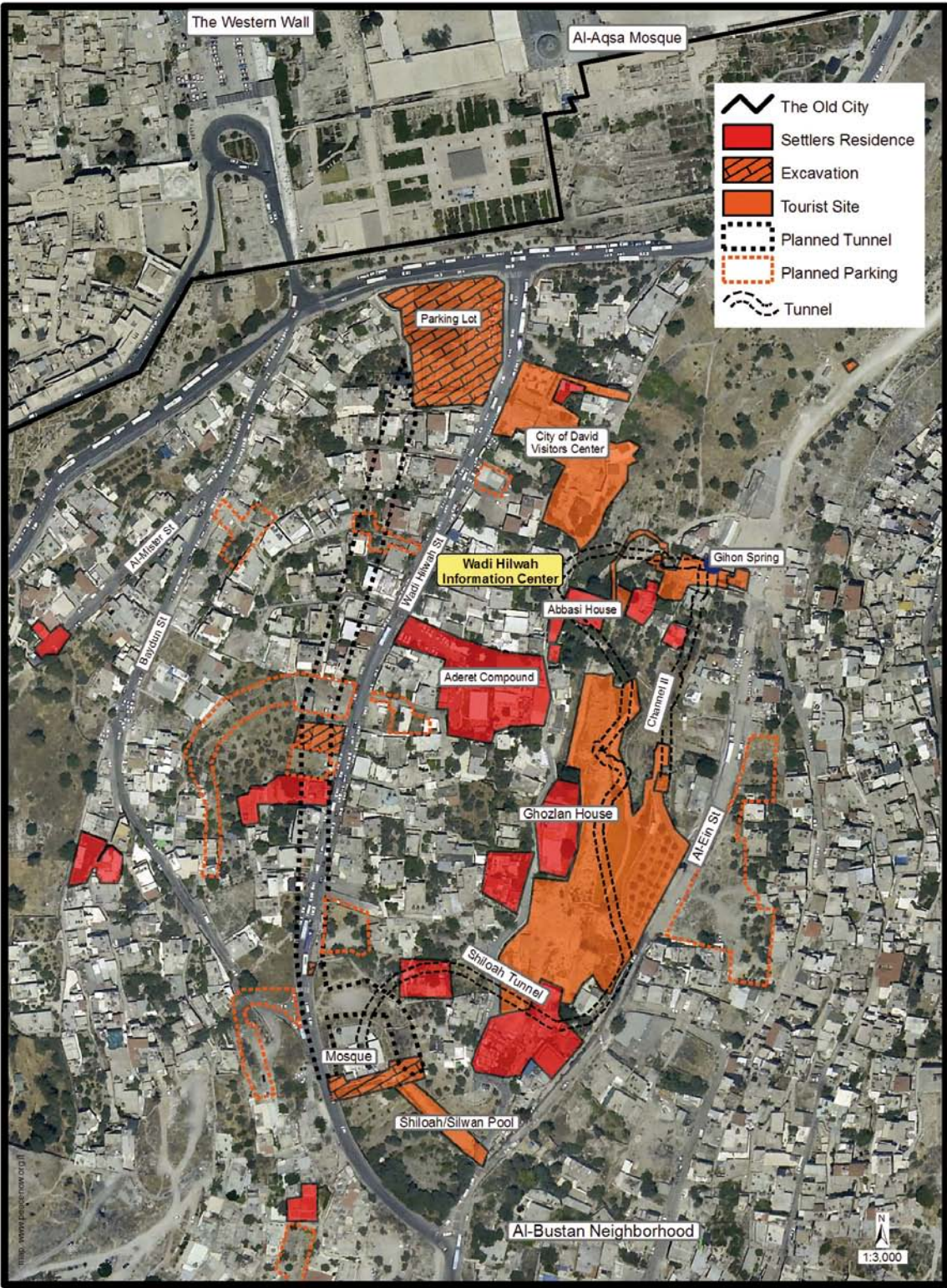
1. Properties were located by Elad and declared "Absentee Property" according to affidavits written by Elad's people. Then they were confiscated and transferred to Elad without a tender and in return for minimal fees. For instance, Abbasi's house was transferred this way. The court ruled that the house was declared absentee property based on a perjured affidavit.
2. Properties owned by the Jewish National Fund before 1948 were transferred to Elad without a tender and in return for minimal payment.
3. Purchasing of properties from local residents using middlemen. Residents who knew these men, say that they have used dubious means and pressure in order to achieve the deal.

A special report (Klogman) from 1992 that was commissioned by the state to investigate the methods of property-transfer in East Jerusalem, showed that some of the means to transfer properties to the hands of settler organizations who operated in East Jerusalem were ineligible.

By the mid-90s, Elad had managed to transfer to its control only several properties. The turning point was in 1997, and is explained in the next section.



*Ghozlan's house - the Ghozlan family, who had rented the house for decades, was removed as the JNF rented it to Elad instead*



The Western Wall

Al-Aqsa Mosque

-  The Old City
-  Settlers Residence
-  Excavation
-  Tourist Site
-  Planned Tunnel
-  Planned Parking
-  Tunnel

Parking Lot

City of David  
Visitors Center

Wadi Hilwah  
Information Center

Gihon Spring

Abbasi House

Aderet Compound

Ghozlan House

Shiloah Tunnel

Mosque

Shiloah/Silwan Pool

Al-Bustan Neighborhood

http://www.palestine-now.org.il

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## Turning Point

In 1997, Elad received from the Israeli Land Administration the responsibility for the preservation and maintenance of City of David national park, which lies in the heart of Wadi Hilwah neighborhood, the internationally significant site of ancient Jerusalem. Perhaps that is why the Israeli Antiquities Authority opposed handing responsibility to Elad, a private body with a clear political agenda for the area. Following an appeal to the Israeli High Court, the contract with Elad was annulled. However, the contract was reenacted in 2002 by the Israeli Parks and Nature Authority. Surprisingly, the Antiquities Authority did not oppose the move in its second round.

## Archaeology in Elad's Era

Since Elad received responsibility for the national park's management, the rate of archaeological excavations has doubled and tripled. Mobilizing millions of dollars, Elad initiates many controversial excavations that are carried out by the Antiquities Authority. It is important to understand that almost all excavations in Wadi Hilwah are defined as salvage excavations.

In contrast to excavations licensed and executed by academic institutes, salvage excavations are authorized by an internal process of the Antiquities Authority in order to rescue and document findings before future construction. In Wadi Hilwah, however, building is completely prohibited, and therefore, it is not clear under which provision and authority these salvage excavations are carried out.



*Excavations are conducted behind fences, security and curtains, which stress the estrangement between the residents and the archaeology in the village.*

Many of the excavations are done rapidly and in a manner that archaeologists in Israel and abroad find unacceptable. In some sites archaeological strata have been removed with no public discussion: in Elad-sponsored excavations next to the old city walls, skeletons were removed by the Antiquities Authority from tombs from the Muslim period without the Ministry of Religion being notified, according to the Haaretz newspaper; this is against the regulations of the Antiquities Authority itself.

Archaeological excavations are also planned and carried out beneath private residences without the residents being consulted. In the last couple of years, parts of houses have collapsed, land has subsided and roads have caved in. In one case, the walls of a kindergarten collapsed next to an excavation. As a result the municipality closed-off two rooms in the kindergarten but offered no alternative for the children. More encouragingly, one of the lateral diggings was temporarily stopped as a result of the residents' petition to the Israeli High Court.



In contrast to the excavations of the 70s, led by Prof. Shilo, which were part of the village and to its benefit, today's excavations are done under a mantle of heavy security: armed guards, 24-7 surveillance cameras, fences and locks.



*Dozens of security cameras are installed in the neighborhood - some intrude on the residents' privacy*

## History as Told by Elad

The City of David is one of the most famous tourist sites in Israel. More than 400,000 tourists visit the site annually, with many Israeli students and thousands of IDF soldiers among them. A perceptive tourist will probably notice that the official guides focus almost exclusively on the King David and Jewish periods. Poor signposting in the national park tells the Jewish narrative of Jerusalem while neglecting the stories of many other cultures whose part in the city's history is no less significant than the Jewish one.

It is worth examining the decision to design an important national park in the context of a Jewish heritage while ignoring all other cultures. Ironically, findings that prove unequivocally the existence of King David and his city remain to be found. A balanced history would tell a story that relates to most of the world's population: Muslims, Christians and Jews.

Such a multi-cultural narrative of the chronicles of Jerusalem might encourage tolerance and reconciliation in a split and contested Jerusalem. Instead, today the site is used by Elad as an educational tool to promote an agenda of exclusively Jewish settlement.

## A Visit to a National Park or a Settlement?

The common visitor to the City of David begins his tour on cobbled floors in a closed compound guarded by armed personnel. The tour continues into a closed construction that in part emulates a tunnel. In this fashion the tourist is denied contact with Silwan, a lively Palestinian village with a pastoral past and a troublesome present. Village life - and the residents - are concealed from the visitors as if they have no significance. From the site guide or the film, the tourist learns that he is in the historical City of David.

The park's design represents a choice to value the interests of the past over those of the present inhabitants. The separation between the residents and the tourists fosters feelings of alienation and bitterness in the locals. The residents have become a disturbing element in the City of David - foreigners in their own village.



*Wadi Hilawah's streets are closed off during Jewish holidays*

In contrast, settlers' houses in Silwan are strongly connected to the tourist site. Security arrangements are shared between settlers and site, and tours sometimes include private settlers' compounds. However unintentionally, visitors to the City of David have become an active part of the settlement of East Jerusalem in the eyes of the local residents.



*Soldiers enter a settlers compound as part of their tour in City of David*

### **National Park: Private Property!**

Elad's stewardship of the national park has heralded a new era of change in the neighborhood. After decades of neglect, the authorities have started a project of regeneration undertaken without the consultation of local people. The work is carried out at the expense of the locals' quality of life and living space.

Public and private spaces used by residents for hundreds of years have been blocked off and incorporated into the national park, and the municipality wishes to expropriate those remaining for "public needs". And what are the public needs according to the Jerusalem municipality, in a neighborhood where there are no playgrounds, no public gardens, no sport facilities, few classrooms and no clinics? Answer: parking lots for the site's visitors.

The neighborhood streets have also been suddenly changing their names: Wadi Hilwah street is now "City of David Ascent". Dozens of security cameras and armed guards have been installed in the streets and alleys. Palestinian residents have no protection from the settlers' activity in the neighborhood, and episodes of increasing violence occur between residents and guards who see themselves as law-enforcers.



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*An armed guard walks in Wadi Hilwah*

Today the Jewish settlement in Silwan constitutes around 5% of the population of Wadi Hilwah. However, the presence of these 400 people is endangering the way of life of Wadi Hilwah's residents. While on the one hand many of their houses are slated for demolition by the municipality, on the other Elad initiates numerous projects that limit their living space to further its agenda of changing the demographic reality in Wadi Hilwah. Residents feel unwanted and as if they are being systematically expelled from their homes in the name of archaeology, history and Elad's crusade for Jewish settlement.



Behind the scenes of the tourist site live people. They should be seen, heard and helped to oppose the injustices they face.

The residents of Wadi Hilwah ask the people of Israel and the world to support their struggle for the right to live in their village as part of a multi-cultural Jerusalem based on principles of equality and peace.



**Additional Information**

*Human Rights in East Jerusalem*

» [www.acri.org.il/pdf/eastjer2009.pdf](http://www.acri.org.il/pdf/eastjer2009.pdf)

*Alternative Archaeological Tours in Silwan*

» [www.alt-arch.org](http://www.alt-arch.org)

**Video Articles**

*ELAD co-funds municipal construction plans in East Jerusalem*

» [www.youtube.com/watch?v=INS6k-TUWzc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INS6k-TUWzc)

*Digging for Trouble - Israel/Palestine*

» [www.youtube.com/watch?v=aRNAJCHxa7w](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aRNAJCHxa7w)

**Articles**

*Archaeology in Jerusalem 1967 - 2008*

» [alt-arch.org/jerusalem.php](http://alt-arch.org/jerusalem.php)

*Parks Fortify Israel's Claim to Jerusalem*

» [www.nytimes.com/2009/05/10/world/middleeast/10jerusalem.html?\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/10/world/middleeast/10jerusalem.html?_r=2)

*Court orders state to explain construction in Jerusalem's Holy Basin*

» [www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1036990.html](http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1036990.html)

*Islamic-era skeletons 'disappeared' from Elad-sponsored dig*

» [www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/988803.html](http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/988803.html)

*Elad accused of withholding donor information*

» [www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=926546](http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=926546)

*City of David tunnel excavation proceeds without proper permit*

» [www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/821774.html](http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/821774.html)

*Digging too deep?*

» [www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1204214000979&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull](http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1204214000979&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull)

*Land Lords (concerning the Absentee Property Act)*

» [news.haaretz.co.il/hasen/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=530047](http://news.haaretz.co.il/hasen/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=530047)

*The very eye of the storm*

» [www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1076058.html](http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1076058.html)

*New Tensions in Jerusalem's Arab Neighborhoods*

» [www.nytimes.com/2008/12/07/world/middleeast/07jerusalem.html?\\_r=2&hp](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/07/world/middleeast/07jerusalem.html?_r=2&hp)

*What Lies Beneath*

» [www.thenation.com/doc/20080818/hoffman](http://www.thenation.com/doc/20080818/hoffman)

*Archaeologists for Hire*

» [www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/may/01/archaeologistsforhire](http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/may/01/archaeologistsforhire)

*A Separate Peace*

» [www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/973870.html](http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/973870.html)