

Museum of Intolerance: Domestic Unburial and American Influences in the Desecration of Mamilla Cemetery

Though Israel is a sovereign, settler colonialist power in its own right, the United States' role in its current regional standing cannot be denied. From foreign policy to private investors that strengthen internal oppression, it is important to acknowledge Israel's brand of settler colonialism as one which has been explicitly enabled by America.¹ The construction of the Simon Wiesenthal Center's Center for Human Dignity–Museum of Tolerance in Jerusalem over parts of the Mamilla Cemetery exemplifies both Israel's own settler colonialism—complete with minority displacement, “justification,” and land expansion—and private America's role in maintaining it.

Unburial at Mamilla Cemetery

The Mamilla Cemetery is a historic Muslim cemetery that serves as a resting place for significant Islamic figures, including 70,000 of Saladin's soldiers from the Crusades. Some accounts claim its origins as a cemetery began with the burial of the Prophet Muhammad's companions at the site.² Mamilla Cemetery is a Muslim place of pilgrimage, and burials in the cemetery continued until 1948 when Israel overtook western Jerusalem. The site has been protected as a historical site by the Muslim Supreme Council since 1927, with this order of protection being reiterated by the Israeli Religious Affairs Ministry in 1948 with the promise that “Israel will always know to protect and respect this site.” However, the cemetery has experienced infringement as buildings, parks, parking lots,

¹ Center for Preventive Action. “Israeli-Palestinian Conflict | Global Conflict Tracker.” Council on Foreign Relations. Council on Foreign Relations, April 25, 2023.

<https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/israeli-palestinian-conflict>.

² “Erasing the Past: The Destruction of an Ancient Muslim Cemetery in Jerusalem.” Mamilla Fact Sheet IR. Center for Constitutional Rights, 2010. <https://ccrjustice.org/sites/default/files/assets/Mamilla%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf>.

and a public bathroom were constructed on cemetery grounds. In 1938, the cemetery occupied over thirty-three acres; as of 2009, it has been reduced to little more than two.³

Construction of the Museum of Tolerance began in 2000 and faced delay after encountering human remains in its construction—uncovered from the parking lot which it built over and the new ground it broke—to the point where it is unclear whether it is currently open. The situation is comparable to the desecration and forcible relocation of Black cemeteries in the United States to make space for city expansion, as was the case in Clearwater Heights, Florida. Like in Clearwater Heights, the parts of Mamilla Cemetery which have been built over may still contain remains which were never properly exhumed; *unlike* Clearwater, there is no evidence of any chances to relocate and reintern unburied remains—there are no easily accessible accounts of bodies being returned to families or being memorialized.⁴ Despite two decades of protests, gravesites have been hidden behind construction tents, and exhumations have happened at dawn in the absence of onlookers, with construction operators fleeing the site when press appeared.⁵

Museum of Tolerance Controversy

The domestic settler expansion of the Museum of Tolerance is inherently international, making discussing the history of the naming of the Museum of Tolerance necessary. Originally the

³ Khalidi, Asem. “Mamilla And The Museum Of Intolerance.” Israel/Palestine Center for Research and Information. Israel/Palestine Center for Research and Information, January 2009.

<https://archive.ph/20130415050603/http://www.ipcri.org/files/khalidi.html#selection-41.0-51.11>.

⁴ “Florida City Reckoning with Its Past as Paved over Black Cemeteries Uncovered.” CBS News. CBS Interactive, November 27, 2022.

https://www.cbsnews.com/news/clearwater-florida-black-cemeteries-60-minutes-2022-11-27/?fbclid=IwAR1UCTJGVvwxnKekiiQU-HAwC4ddV8R3hOFv50QtrFdRT7WtP_mWXc-1RXI.

⁵ “Jerusalem Municipality Destroys Cemetery Headstones, Approves ‘Museum of Tolerance’ Construction.” Center for Constitutional Rights. The Bigger Picture, June 29, 2011.

<https://ccrjustice.org/home/press-center/press-releases/jerusalem-municipality-destroys-cemetery-headstones-approves-museum>.

Winnick Institute of Jerusalem, the Museum of Tolerance drew its name from Gary Winnick, who donated \$40 billion to the building's construction. The Simon Wiesenthal Center (SWC) is a Jewish human rights organization and was founded by Rabbi Marvin Hier.⁶ Simon Wiesenthal was a well-known Jewish Nazi hunter. Israel's welcoming of the SWC's project in Jerusalem in the land adjacent to Mamilla demonstrates two things: first, Israel welcomes American intervention and private American businessmen and uses that support to propagate settler colonialism, and second, Israel must destroy important non-Jewish sites for that colonialism.

American support manifests as financial backing and social capital. Winnick and the SWC had both, hence the original naming of the institute; both Winnick, Simon Wiesenthal, and Marvin Hier were or are notable Jews, all of them are White, and all of them are "successful."⁷ These factors are important to note given Israel's nationalist movement, which helps drive its colonialism.⁸ When Winnick went bankrupt, the Winnick Institute was quickly renamed to the Center for Human Dignity–Museum of Tolerance likely *because* of this loss of social and financial capital.⁹

A Museum of Tolerance already exists in Los Angeles. Hier explicitly described this museum, which came under fire from the LA Jewish community for attempting to replace the existing Museum

⁶ Davidovich, Joshua. "After Years of Delays and Strife, Jerusalem Tolerance Museum Nears Completion." The Times of Israel, April 18, 2021.

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/after-years-of-delays-and-strife-jerusalem-tolerance-museum-nears-completion/>.

⁷ It is important to note that none of these men are Israeli.

⁸ This Zionist movement focuses on hypermasculinity, physical strength, and Jewish exceptionalism, which may be why Arnold Schwarzenegger was invited to break the ground of the Museum of Tolerance; though not Jewish himself, Schwarzenegger is an avid Jewish rights activist and can be considered a pinnacle of traditional masculinity and physical strength.

⁹ Tham, Isaac. "Masculinity, Nationhood, and the Military in Israel and Singapore." Kedma: Penn's Journal on Jewish Thought, Jewish Culture, and Israel. University of Pennsylvania, 2019.

<https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1036&context=kedma>.

of the Holocaust,¹⁰ as a demonstration of wealth: “We will do it bigger, better, faster--and without the [Holocaust] survivors.”¹¹ With this financial backing from the SWC and (likely) with the supposition that the Simon Wiesenthal Center did not prioritize Jewish communal wellness, Israel, already receiving legitimization from the American government¹² and invested in maintaining connections, sanctioned the Museum of Tolerance for the social value of being American-funded and for its efficacy in destroying the Mamilla Cemetery. This could explain why 1) the Israeli Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Tolerance Museum despite Mamilla’s historical status as, 2) the municipality urges the museum to open despite the controversy, and 3) why the museum is barred from discussing the Holocaust.^{13,14}

Finally, the current name of the Museum of Tolerance stands as a symptom of domestic Israeli colonialism. “Tolerance” is often defined by disagreement and disapproval; it implies allowing the existence of something that is unsavory. “Allowing” implies being in a position of power. In the case of the museum, “tolerance” inherently differs from acceptance, which at least can imply a welcoming of different peoples and cultures—which raises the questions of who is doing the tolerating, and who is being tolerated. At its core, the Museum of Tolerance—and especially the name “Center for Human Dignity”—stands hypocritically; what is tolerant about desecrating burial sites? Whose dignity is being

¹⁰ Named the Martyr’s Museum at the time.

¹¹ Teitelbaum, Sheldon, and Tom Waldman. “The Unorthodox Rabbi : By Invoking the Holocaust and Bullying the Establishment, Marvin Hier Has Made the Simon Wiesenthal Center the Most Visible Jewish Organization in the World.” Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles Times, July 15, 1990. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-07-15-tm-548-story.html>.

¹² See Trump Administration policies.

¹³ Jerusalem Post Staff. “Museum of Tolerance, Municipality Dispute Intensifies Ahead of Court.” The Jerusalem Post | JPost.com, October 26, 2022. <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-720635>.

¹⁴ In the Zionist lens, the Holocaust has been as much a mark of shame as it was a tragedy, and displaying the Holocaust could be interpreted as a sign of “weakness.”

respected? In this case, the Muslim community bears this indignity, but the use of “human” in this center’s name suggests, through the lack of dignity afforded to Palestinian Muslims, that Israel as the institution which sanctioned the Museum’s construction does not consider Palestinian Muslims as human. Hier’s description of the Museum illustrates the irony perfectly: “The museum will not seek to impose any political, theological or ideological point of view, except that of promoting mutual respect.”¹⁵

Narratives

The SWC’s primary argument for its construction over Mamilla is that the area the Museum resides over already existed as a parking lot, so it is not violating the graveyard. However, the parking lot was built because of (and the SWC’s argument cites) the 1964 ruling of a Shari’a law judge who deemed the gravesite no longer sanctified.^{16,17} However, this judge was never supported by the Muslim community and a Shari’a court of appeals in Israel voided that ruling. Next, the use of the word “discovery” is also prevalent around the gravesite, implying the graves had been abandoned and forgotten, or were otherwise mysteriously materialized into being. This, of course, invalidates the history of Mamilla Cemetery and relies upon the fact that it is currently not used in active burial.¹⁸ Active burial in Mamilla Cemetery was banned after the Israeli Religious Affairs Ministry took custody of the graveyard. These instances are reminiscent of the erasure of gravesites and gravesite history found

¹⁵ Teitelbaum, Sheldon, and Tom Waldman. “The Unorthodox Rabbi : By Invoking the Holocaust and Bullying the Establishment, Marvin Hier Has Made the Simon Wiesenthal Center the Most Visible Jewish Organization in the World.”

¹⁶ “Erasing the Past: The Destruction of an Ancient Muslim Cemetery in Jerusalem.”

¹⁷ This ruling also allowed the construction of Independence Park across from the cemetery and Museum of Tolerance.

¹⁸ Jerusalem Post Staff. “Museum of Tolerance, Municipality Dispute Intensifies Ahead of Court.”

in American institutions.¹⁹ Just as Microsoft hid the “discovery” of Black graves during the construction of its data center in Virginia, the Museum of Tolerance aims to hide its trespassing in Mamilla—though for the Museum, it does so by denying the existence of graves, hiding excavations, and absolving itself of guilt.

Finally, the SWC argues that its construction site has nothing to do with disrespect and in fact does not intend to desecrate—Marvin Hier consistently reiterates that he and the center hold close ties with Arab world leaders and respect Arab practices and people. Each of these instances are indicative of the settler colonist tendency to justify, excuse, and deny its wrongdoing.

Displacement

Unburial itself is a form of colonialist expansion which displaces existing peoples and removes their claim to what is really their land. By unburying and destroying a gravesite, Israel removes evidence of a history before its existence on the land it now occupies. The Gaza Strip is one of the most densely populated places on Earth, averaging about six people per square meter; in physically crowding out Palestinians, it literally leaves no room for reinterment of remains—if it returns them in the first place. This only serves to further sever the connection between the land and the displaced peoples; it prevents them from regaining their histories or establishing new ones.²⁰

¹⁹ Wessler, Seth Freed. “How Authorities Erased a Historic Black Cemetery in Virginia.” ProPublica, December 16, 2022. <https://www.propublica.org/article/how-authorities-erased-historic-black-cemetery-virginia>.

²⁰ Dispossessed Lives; Rivero, Daniel. “You’re Possessing Our History’: Seminole Tribe Could Get Back Remains of Ancestors Taken by Smithsonian.” WLRN, December 11, 2020. <https://www.wlrn.org/news/2020-12-09/youre-possessing-our-history-seminole-tribe-could-get-back-remains-of-ancestors-taken-by-smithsonian>.

Additional Research Notes

This site presents unique challenges that prevent a full understanding of the situation. Many commonly cited articles in other writings, such as Haaretz's "Jerusalem's Museum of Tolerance Has Little to Do With Museums or Tolerance," are blocked by paywalls.²¹ Though many English sources exist, the sources are a) primarily Israel-based and may carry colonial biases, or b) based internationally, from the perspective of an outsider looking in. There was no Palestinian commentary throughout this entire investigation, continuing the imposition of silence upon a people being colonized. Further, many basic facts simply are not available in sources which *are* accessible; instances of disinterment are vaguely alluded to but were difficult to confirm and no sources mentioned where remains which *were* disinterred were put—were they returned to family? What happened to ancient remains or ones with difficult lineages to trace? Were bodies and gravesites paved over more often than they were unburied?

Conclusion

In building the Center for Human Dignity–Museum of Tolerance over the ancient Mamilla Cemetery, Israel continues its legacy as a settler colonialist power—and especially as one supported by the United States. The Museum of Tolerance displays apathy and intolerance for existing peoples and remains in its steadfast construction; through the American funding the Museum receives, Israel continues to displace and remove evidence of Palestinian and non-Jewish society as it expands into already-occupied places. The Simon Wiesenthal Center, like any institution supported by and operating under a settler colonial system, justifies and excuses its actions, citing laws unsupported by

²¹ Hasson, Nir. "Jerusalem's Museum of Tolerance Has Little to Do with Museums or Tolerance." Haaretz.com. Haaretz, June 12, 2022.

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-06-12/ty-article-magazine/.premium/jeruselems-museum-of-tolerance-has-little-to-do-with-museums-or-tolerance/00000181-53fb-d03f-a3e7-d7ffccdb0000>.

the oppressed and enforced by the oppressor. The irony of the Museum of Tolerance's name is left unaddressed, suggesting an image of progress—but only for those whom progress and tolerance are deemed worthy.