

# 'This Place Has a Major Historical Value Since Prophet Elijah. How Can They Do This?'

**An Israeli army base is set to be vacated in Haifa's Stella Maris area, which houses a Carmelite monastery and a Bahai holy site. Residents are horrified at the idea of turning such a rich historical site into housing**

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Aug 31, 2023 4:29 pm IDT

Rosh Hacarmel looks like a giant balcony. The mountain face is flat up to the cliff, and from there it descends sharply to the coast. The window we're looking out from, on an upper floor of a residential building, faces north, and from it, Haifa looks different. I've never seen Mount Carmel from this elevated angle. Most of the area that we're looking at is an army base that has been closed to visitors for decades. From street level, you can't see it at all, because a wall and barbed wire fence block the view.

The Stella Maris (Star of the Sea) area, also called the French Carmel – is on the brink of decisive moments that will determine its future. The military is supposed to vacate the air force base on Rosh Hacarmel – one of the three bases in the area, belonging to the air force and navy. The Israel Land Authority has already submitted a plan to build about 20 multistory residential buildings where the base was.

The buildings in the plan are about 15 stories high and will include a total of 460 apartments. Many Carmel residents are vehemently opposed to the building plan. They want the large site, 51 dunams (about 12.5 acres), to be turned into a spacious park, whose visitors will be able to hike on a path stretching along the length of the cliff, with a view of Haifa's Bat Galim neighborhood and the Haifa Bay.

My view from the upper floor spans three complexes – the Bahai complex in the south (about 1.5 kilometers – less than a mile – from the famous Bahai Gardens), the military base in the center and the Carmelite Monastery to the north. According to the construction plan, the areas belonging to the Bahai and to the Carmelite Monastery won't be damaged, but it's clear that if the planning committee approves it, it will also affect them – and the entire city of Haifa.

In the Bahai complex, there is now a nursery that serves the gardens. The middle of this area prominently features a tall white obelisk, which was placed there to mark the 1891 visit of Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the religion, to the site. The Bahai have a building permit, and are planning to build a temple in the complex in the future.

The military base looks like an undeveloped, rocky area, with little greenery and a few temporary structures in the center. In the middle of the base is a high concrete wall, apparently designed to protect the missile batteries operators who are no longer there.

The dome of the Carmelite Monastery's church, which was built in the 19th century, stands out when you look northward. The walls and ceiling of the church (which I visited earlier), host beautiful paintings, and the many burning candles add to the atmosphere. The Carmelites also have a permit to build on their land, but according to the area residents, the head of the monastery gave them his word that it

From *Haaretz*, online at <https://www.haaretz.com/life/2023-08-31/ty-article-magazine/.premium/can-haifas-carmelite-monastery-and-bahai-gardens-be-saved/0000018a-4b76-d252-abdf-5b7e4c370000>

won't happen. They say that the members of the monastery want to maintain its greenery, and agree to cooperate on tourism initiatives, which would bring hikers to the area.

At the northern end of Rosh Hacarmel, there's a great view of the Stella Maris lighthouse, which is painted in shades of red and white and is now located in a navy base. The structure was built about 200 years ago to serve as the summer palace of the Ottoman ruler Abdullah Pasha ibn Ali. It's the oldest residential building preserved in Haifa, and it stands on the edge of the cliff, overlooking the sea. By 1834, the Carmelites had already settled there. The lighthouse is an addition; it was built atop the palace about 100 years ago. Today it's on the property of the small base, which sits on one of the most beautiful places in Israel. It is not slated to be vacated as part of the construction plan, but there has already been talk in recent years of possibly clearing it out.

North of there, hidden on the slope of the Carmel between Stella Maris and Bat Galim, is the Cave of Elijah. According to tradition, the Prophet Elijah hid here when he fled from the Israelite King Ahab. The cave is sacred to Jews, Christians, Muslims and Druze. Folk belief holds that a visit there will help heal the sick. The complex underwent a comprehensive and expensive renovation that was completed last year – it took about two years, and included reinforcing the structures, recreating the original facades and making the site handicapped accessible. Afterward, some complained that the site's Jewish character was strengthened by the renovations, at the expense of elements of the other religions.

And beyond all these sites, you see the sea – vast and blue. Ten ships waiting to enter the port are scattered in the bay. The window of the lofty apartment where we're standing is situated about a kilometer away from the Stella Maris lighthouse. The distance as the crow flies from the lighthouse to the Cave of Elijah is about 200 meters, and a similar distance separates the cave from the Bat Galim beach and the lowest station of the cable car that ascends to the monastery. The difference in height between the monastery and the beach is about 350 meters.

Yael Amitai of the Carmel Public Forum, a nonprofit of the city residents, does not live far from the apartment where we're standing. She explains that the forum mobilized to halt the construction on Rosh Hacarmel, and to redirect it to building a large municipal park, the largest in Haifa, to be called Friendship Park.

"The forum," says Amitai, "wants to preserve Haifa's special character. We're in favor of residential construction, but in a smart way that preserves the urban character. We're dealing with issues that are changing the face of the city, and at the moment, all our strength is focused on saving Rosh Hacarmel. We think that a construction plan in this special area is a mistake that will change Haifa, and will be an embarrassment for generations to come."

Israel is in the midst of a housing shortage – what's the problem with building residential towers on a soon-to-be vacated military base? "Just as nobody would think of building residential towers in the Western Wall plaza or on Ammunition Hill" – a Six-Day War memorial site – "there should be no building here either. This place has a unique cultural and historical value. It's a region that's sacred to the Bahai and the Carmelites. It's near the Cave of Elijah, which is important to Jewish tradition. The entire area has major historical value, from the days of the Prophet Elijah, the Crusades, Napoleon and the battles of the War of Independence. How can you plan to change it into a construction and residential zone?"

She adds, "In Haifa, there are plans to build tens of thousands of apartments. The 460 apartments planned here are a drop in the bucket in the overall picture of the housing shortage, but the open area of the base is of great significance in many other ways."

I note that despite the historical value, what impressed me was the view, which would be blocked by the residential project.

"True, the view is breathtaking, but it's important to us to stress that it's an area of tremendous historical value. We prepared a future tourism map that links the tourist attractions in the neighborhood," she says, that will "keep tourists in Haifa and help to develop the city. They shouldn't just add apartments. We want to breathe, too. In Herzliya and Ra'anana, they built large and wonderful parks; we have nothing like that."

Amitai shows me a map of a route that extends from the Bahai Gardens in the south, and includes the Tikotin Museum of Japanese Art; the Monastery of Our Lady of Mount Carmel (a Carmelite convent on Tchernichovsky Street); the Bahai obelisk; the soon-to-be vacated base, where, according to Amitai, the Friendship Park will be built; the Stella Maris Monastery, and, further down the slope of the Carmel, the Cave of Elijah and the Bat Galim beach.

At present, the area belongs to the Israel Land Authority, Amitai notes. The government body "was established in order to preserve public areas for the benefit of future generations. They aren't doing their job here. They behave like any other entrepreneur, who wants to maximize the money from the lots and doesn't consider the history of the region and what Haifa needs."

The plan it submitted "ignored the residents of Haifa," she says. "Not only do they not ask our opinion, they take over the area, block us with tall towers and steal the entire landscape for the benefit of new residents of the planned neighborhood. They'll block the neighborhoods where they want to carry out urban renewal. That's how they'll build a kind of closed neighborhood."

The authority, she says, "refused to come for a follow-up meeting with the municipality. [The municipality] wanted to offer them alternative areas, and they're refusing because they claim that they've already spent millions on the plans and it's already in a district committee. Sometimes you have to know you made a mistake and stop."

The Israel Lands Authority refused to respond to this article; the Haifa District Planning and Building Committee said: "This is a plan that is in the stage of public oppositions, and therefore we are unable to comment at this stage."

The Carmel Public Forum has few resources, and its workers are volunteers. Its fight, Amitai says, is draining, but crucial. "In the past three months, I've been preoccupied with that alone. I worked in high-tech before, and I left in order to focus on the present battle. It's more important to me than any other preoccupation."

When it comes to the municipality, it seemed that they did not notice the unique beauty of the area, from the outset, "but I hope that now that's changed," she says. "Few people are aware of the uniqueness or the history that's here. Because of the walls, you don't see the landscape from street level, and that's why the local committee didn't notice how special the area is. The Land Authority turned to the district committee. Now there's only a moment before they submit the building plan – now

is the time to express our opposition. We convinced the members of the local committee that a mistake was made. At the moment, it looks to us like the members of the local committee have unanimously decided to oppose the construction plan.”

Haifa Mayor Einat Kalisch-Rotem sounded decisive and clear this week regarding the future of the French Carmel. “This is the most wonderful land reserve for establishing a future enormous green park that will be open to the public, with a glorious history as well as sites sacred to the Bahai and the Carmelites. This is a unique area with a breathtaking view that’s rare in Israel. There’s no other area as significant and convenient for a city park as this.

The residential plan, she notes, is for "a small number of residential units, compared to the entire urban renewal plan that we’re advancing, which includes over 80,000 apartments. There’s no logic to destroying such important land. There’s no question that the complex must remain a green space for the surrounding neighborhoods, which will become more crowded.”

Kalisch-Rotem says that the municipality will continue, together with the Carmel Public Forum, to oppose the Land Authority's construction plan in the planning committees. Most of the other candidates for the upcoming mayoral election expressed similar opposition to the plan.

Israeli Movement, an NGO that helps local civic initiatives grow to the national level, and the Sheli Fund, a partnership of environmental foundations that operates through the New Israel Fund, are helping the residents of the embattled neighborhoods.

Liat Halperin, Israeli Movement's senior field coordinator, is working alongside the French Carmel neighborhood committee. She explains: “This isn’t just another area that you can build in. It’s an area with sacred sites, it’s an important crossing between the Carmel and the Lower City and it’s the only pearl of greenery left in the area.”

This isn't NIMBY-ism, she says. "I’m optimistic because the neighborhood residents were able to convince the council members and the mayoral candidates within three months. All the professionals agree on the space's future. I believe that although the Land Authority worked a lot on the plan, they aren’t really familiar with the area. If they put their egos aside, they’ll be convinced.”

Landscape architect Hanna Yaffe prepared for the Carmel Public Forum an initial plan for a park that they hope will be built on the site of the base. She says that there's a charm in the site's size, as well as the "Spirit of the Bahai and the Carmelites."

“For me the starting point is passing the idea of the Friendship Park," she says. Haifa needs a park like this that will attract visitors to the city. They’ll come for the experience of the park, where there will be unique sculptures, and I hope that people come and experience discovery, transcendence, excitement. The park in Stella Maris will connect all of Haifa’s religions. We have to save Haifa’s last remaining gem in as an open area.”

Aside from local residents, the construction plan's opponents include the Council for Conservation of Heritage Sites in Israel NGO and the Bahai World Center. The latter expressed “strong fears” regarding the plan to develop a residential area. They say that this is a sacred and significant site, and yet “the plan totally ignores the existence of the holy Bahai site and, in any event, did not examine or consider the plan's effect on the site.” Among other things, they mention the Bahai plan to build a new house of

prayer in their compound. According to the Bahai, “It’s obligatory to plan the compound while taking the holy site into consideration, and to coordinate the planning with the Bahai Center.”

The members of the Carmelite Monastery also expressed their opposition: “The order believes that the goal of the plan is to reap financial benefits from the land alone, and this is being done by promoting a dense building plan while ignoring additional considerations. Damage to the values embedded in the site is damage to the entire city of Haifa and its residents. The construction will be beneficial only to the Land Authority, and later to a small handful of residents who will be able to purchase an apartment in the planned project.”

The Carmelites' resistance comes against a backdrop of worsening relations between Christians and Jews in Haifa. The city residents have prided themselves on the excellent relations between the faiths, but in recent months, ultra-Orthodox Jews have come from outside the city, apparently followers of Hasidic Rabbi Eliezer Berland, and tried to enter the monastery compound and to pray there.

They've scuffled with the monks and with young Christians, and tensions have risen; when I visited, a police car was stationed in front – a permanent fixture. The Haredim claim that they are coming to pray at the grave of the Prophet Elisha, which is located inside the monastery's compound. In early August, President Isaac Herzog visited the Stella Maris Monastery, and promised the abbot that the government would protect freedom of religion and worship.

The Defense Ministry said in response to this report: “The Defense Ministry is working to renew IDF infrastructure while taking into consideration the national need to vacate land, particularly in regions where there is demand. In the Stella Maris area, there are three operational bases belonging to the air force and the navy. These bases are not slated to be vacated at this point, because there is not yet an agreement with the Israel Land Authority concerning them. The Defense Ministry is working, and will continue to work, to vacate IDF camps from in-demand areas.”