

# Mikhmas

## Introduction

Upon entering Mikhmas, you may get a sense of what Palestinian villages would look like were it not for the occupation. The village is still replete with everything familiar to Palestinian collective imagination, geographic and cultural: women's embroidered thobes, the elderly's koufiyas, old domed houses amongst modern buildings, and a serene rural atmosphere. However, the scenery is disfigured as you reach the outskirts of the village overlooking the alien and insidious Israeli colonies.



## Location and Area

Mikhmas is located eight kilometers northeast of Jerusalem. It is one of the largest villages in the Jerusalem Governorate, with an area of over 13,000 donums.<sup>1</sup> It borders the Jericho

---

<sup>1</sup> Mustafa Murad al-Dabbagh, *Our Homeland, Palestine, on Palestine Remembered*. [مُخماس - القدس - فلسطين في الذاكرة - Mikhmas](#)

Governorate to the east, Jabaa to the west and Deir Dibwan to the north and east. The history of the village dates to the Roman era.

Following the Oslo Agreement, most of Mikhmas's land, nearly 12,770 donums, was designated as area C. The rest, estimated at 872 donums, was designated as area B.<sup>2</sup>

## Origin and History

The origin of the name bears two interpretations. The first suggests that it means “the hill of the moon,”<sup>3</sup> in relation to its location on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho, the latter being known as the city of the moon. The second interpretation suggests that it is derived from the root *Kamas* (to hide), implying that *Mikhmas* is a refuge or hiding place.<sup>4</sup>

The village was certainly known in the Roman era,<sup>5</sup> but it is likely to have been established in the Canaanite era.

## Population

Among Jerusalem villages, Mikhmas has a relatively low population density. In 1931, it was inhabited by 404 people living in 80 houses,<sup>6</sup> and by 1961, the number had increased to 774. Today, the village has a population of approximately 1,400 people, in addition to 3,000 living abroad.<sup>7</sup> The majority of Mikhmasis live in the United States, following waves of economic emigration in the 1960s and 70s that affected many Jerusalem villages and Palestine more broadly.

The families of Mikhmas descend from six clans, namely: Canaan, Abu Siam, Abu Awwadeh, Abu Ali (branches out into the Hussein and Mhanna families), and Mkhammen.

## Social and Economic Context

Historically, Mikhmas, like most neighboring villages, relied on rainfed agriculture and the cultivation of olives, barley, Palestine vetch and wheat, which were mainly grown for subsistence.

For water, Mikhmasis relied on digging wells, which are abundant in the village and were an important component of social life, a gathering place for women fetching water for their households. The names of the wells are mostly associated with the families (clans) who dug them rather than the families who owned the plots on which they were located.

---

<sup>2</sup> The Applied Research Institute (ARIJ), *Mikhmas Village Guide* (Jerusalem: ARIJ, 2012). [مخماس، قرية دليل](#)

<sup>3</sup> According to information provided by Samir Canaan, head of the Mikhmas Village Council in an interview conducted on May 6, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Abu Khair, Naser al-Din, “Asma Qura al-Quds: Dirasa Lughawiya Dalaliyah” (*Names of Jerusalem Villages: A Semantic Linguistic Study*). *Bab el-Wad*, December 6, 2016. [أسماء قرى القدس، دراسة لغوية دلالية](#)

<sup>5</sup> See note 1.

<sup>6</sup> E. Mills, *Census of Palestine 1931: Population of villages, towns and administrative areas*, p. 41.

<sup>7</sup> According to information provided by Samir Canaan, head of the Mikhmas Village Council in an interview conducted on May 6, 2018.

Socially, the village maintains its rural features, and most of its inhabitants are originally from Mikhmas. These features are evident in the old center of the village or *Jithr al-Balad* (the village root), where one can see elderly folk sitting there under the famous mulberry tree known as al-Tuteh and drinking coffee. It is a sight rarely seen today in Palestinian villages due to urbanization and the fact that so many tend to seek employment outside of their home villages.



## Education

After the 1948 Nakba, two schools were established in Mikhmas, a school for girls and a one for boys.<sup>8</sup> Schools consisted of one classroom located in the center of the village. Students who wanted to continue their education did so in the nearby village of Deir Dibwan.

---

<sup>8</sup> Mustafa Murad al-Dabbagh, *Our Homeland, Palestine, on Palestine Remembered*. [مُخماس - القدس - فلسطين في الذاكرة - Mikhmas](#)

Today, there are two Palestinian Ministry of Education secondary level schools, one for boys and another for girls. The number of students is relatively low due to the emigration of most of so many villagers and the low population density.<sup>9</sup> The number of students is no more than 90 in the boys' school, and no more than 180 in the girls' school. Due to the small number of students, boys and girls attend the same school from the first to fourth grades.<sup>10</sup>

## Landmarks

There are several archaeological, historical, religious, and natural landmarks in the village in Mikhmas.

Maqam al-Duwair is among the most prominent religious landmarks in Mikhmas. Located on the eastern side of the village, the tomb and shrine is that of a religious saint and is attached to a mosque. In popular memory, it is associated with saints and *Karamat* (miracles performed by Muslim saints). The shrine is currently being renovated and a park is being built around it built by the Rozana Association for the Development of Architectural Heritage.

There are also several mosques in the village, including al-Zoabi mosque in the center, facing Mikhmas's most famous café by the mulberry tree. There is also Sultan Ibrahim mosque, distinguished by its turquoise mosaic-adorned dome, which is said to have been built during Ottoman rule. Additionally, there is al-Dabour mosque, and another under construction by the Siyam family.<sup>11</sup>

Mikhmas also contains many important natural landmarks, such as Wadi al-Suwanit valley, which runs through the village. The valley stretches from the eastern slopes of the Jerusalem and Ramallah mountains, 20 km into Mikhmas until it reaches Ein al-Fawwar and merges with Wadi Fara valley, running through Wadi al-Qelt and finally reaching the Jordan River. Over this stretch, there are cavities, caves, agricultural structures, ruins, wells, walls, and remnants of ancient castles. Between Jabaa and Mikhmas, in Wadi al-Sowanit, lies al-Jayeh (al-jiy) cave.

Wadi al-Suwanit is an attractive hiking trail for those looking for natural scenery and traces of the Roman period in Palestine. The best time to visit is in spring.

Among the historical and archeological sites in the village are the khirbahs (ruins): Khirbat al-Hay is located on the eastern side of the village, close to Khirbat al-Duwwara. Both ruins contain caves. There is also Tal Miriam, located in the southwestern part of the village and

---

<sup>9</sup> According to information provided by Samir Canaan, head of the Mikhmas Village Council in an interview conducted on January 16, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> According to information provided by Samir Canaan, head of the Mikhmas Village Council in an interview conducted on May 6, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Mustafa Murad al-Dabbagh, Our Homeland, Palestine, on Palestine Remembered. [مُخماس - القدس - فلسطين في الذاكرة - Mikhmas](#)

attributed to the Virgin Mary, who is said to have passed through there. Archaeologists who excavated the valley, Ein al-Sowanit, al-Jayeh cave (al-Jiy) and the monasteries claim that the most significant historical periods in Mikhmas are the Roman and Byzantine eras.<sup>12</sup>

## History of Resistance

Among the most prominent patriotic figures of the village is Yehya Alian Canaan, who passed away in the late-1990s. Canaan was a resistance fighter in al-Jihad al-Muqaddas (Army of the Holy War), and a military leader in the Palestinian Great Revolt in 1936. Also from Mikhmas was Fahmi Canaan who fought beside Abd al-Qadir al-Husein in the Battle of al-Qastal during the 1948 Nakba and was wounded. He was transported to a hospital in Nablus by the British, where he was reportedly poisoned with an injection but ultimately survived.<sup>13</sup>

Although Mikhmas did not partake in the battles or events of the Nakba in 1948, it welcomed refugees from villages uprooted by Zionist militias, including Lifta and al-Haditha. According to oral accounts, a village elder named al-Haj Ali donated a fig orchard to refugees from Deir Yassin (uprooted following the infamous massacre there at the hands of Zionist militias in April 1948).<sup>14</sup>

Mikhmas was occupied in the 1967 Naksa. Its residents sought refuge for several days in the nearby caves, namely in al-Huta and Erak al-Waar caves, and in al-Sahm area east of the village. During that time, a woman who happened to be a refugee was killed in the shelling and buried in the village cemetery.

Another story is that of a woman who was fleeing Mikhmas with her two children, a two-year old son and a daughter less than two months old. Her strength was depleted, and she could no longer carry on. The woman is said to have left her daughter on the side of the road and continued. A while after reaching the caves where everyone had gathered, a man arrived carrying her baby. He had found her on his way and had asked people if they knew her family until finally, he was able to locate the mother and return her child to her.<sup>15</sup>

In the Intifadas of 1978 and 2000, Mikhmas's contribution was mostly financial. With the financial income provided by their expatriate relatives, the affluent families of the village provided support to the families of prisoners and martyrs and to refugee camps.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Aqrabawi, Hamza, "Wadi Suwanit: Sihr al-Narjis wa Sada Ibtihalat al-Ruhban" (Wadi Suwanit: The Magic of Narcissus and Echoes of Monks), Ultra Palestine. January 26, 2016. <https://bit.ly/2xsUxvL>

<sup>13</sup> According to information provided by Samir Canaan, head of the Mikhmas Village Council, in an interview conducted on January 16, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> According to information provided by Samir Canaan, head of the Mikhmas Village Council, during a phone call made on May 25, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

## Colonization

The most visually dominant colonial presence in the villages of Jerusalem, the Annexation and Expansion wall, is absent in Mikhmas. However, like all Jerusalem villages, Mikhmas is not spared from the assaults of the Occupation army and authority, in addition to land confiscation. 28 donums of its land were annexed to Sha'ar Binyamin colony, established in 1998 and built mostly on Jabaa village land.<sup>17</sup> 160 donums were also seized from Mikhmas and annexed to the Neveh Erez colony established in 1999.

Highway 60 and the colonial bypass road, Route 457, were constructed over parts of the village as well.<sup>18</sup> The Occupation authorities' aim was to connect colonies established on Mikhmas land to other colonies, with the village's northern entrance closed off in order to block it from the colonial bypass road. Moreover, in order to establish a military base for the Occupation's so-called Border Police, 258 donums were confiscated from eastern Mikhmas.<sup>19</sup>

Colonial projects have gone even further. Over the last decade, large swathes of land have been confiscated for the future expansion of colonies. According to the Mikhmas Village Council, the area of land confiscated in recent years is estimated at more than 2,000 donums.<sup>20</sup>

## Epilogue

In light of the emigration of most of its inhabitants, Mikhmas's population decreased significantly. Many of its houses became vacant, giving the village an atmosphere of stillness and emptiness. This was followed by regular attacks launched by Zionist colonists since the 1990s, particularly at night, which have resulted in thefts, burning of trees, vandalism of property (including the destruction of hundreds of olive trees, wheat crops, among others), in addition to the removal of the fence separating Highway 60 from Mikhmas properties.<sup>21</sup>

These attacks prompted the villagers to set up a voluntary night watch team to protect the village from the colonists' attacks. The initiative was launched in 2010 and continues today. The night watch designated main observation points where the village youth carry out shifts from nine in the evening until the dawn prayer, armed with nothing more than sticks and flashlights. The idea of a night watch can be traced back to the first Intifada, which witnessed successive colonist attacks that continued for an extended period of time, prompting people to come up

---

<sup>17</sup> "Mikhmas Village Guide," The Applied Research Institute (ARIJ), (Jerusalem: ARIJ, 2012). [مخماس قرية دليل](#)

<sup>18</sup> There is a main entrance to the village on its western side, which converges with the bypass road. It was blocked by the Occupation with a dirt barrier.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> According to information provided by Samir Cnaan, head of the Mikhmas Village Council, during a phone call made on May 25, 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

with this practical solution. Over the years, the communal experience of guarding Mikhmas has deepened and strengthened social bonds among its people. A village elder notes that “the village became safer after the formation of the night watch. On several occasions the youth prevented colonists from entering the village at night, and home robberies have ceased altogether.”<sup>22</sup>

In parallel to the night watch initiative set up by the residents, many of whom hold American citizenship, and despite the prevailing calm and low population that characterizes the current rural atmosphere of the village, Mikhmas is witnessing an expansion in construction projects funded by its expatriates. This activity has produced luxurious homes and solid infrastructure. Most houses remain shuttered throughout the year, except when its owners return to Palestine for the summer holiday.

These financial contributions have also funded several service projects and the development of infrastructure in the village to compensate for administrative and service neglect on the official level, which Mikhmas faces, as do most villages in occupied Jerusalem.

Most of Mikhmas’ expatriates live in Philadelphia and New Jersey. One Mikhmasi expatriate notes that “in the summer, when all the expatriates return, the number of Mikhmas’s residents triples as compared to winter.”<sup>23</sup> As noted by Jerusalemite writer Jamil Salhout, expatriates frequently donate to their village: “years ago in Mikhmas, I saw a model school with proper playgrounds established in the best location in the village. The residents told us that an expatriate donated the land and funded the construction of the school building.”<sup>24</sup>

When the Mikhmas amusement park is mentioned, one might think that it is located in the village itself. It is in fact owned by one of the village families, but is located in the town of Beitunia (west of Ramallah).

Others associate Mikhmas with the traditional embroidered Palestinian thobes that distinguish its women. The style of embroidery is very similar to that found in Ramallah, al-Birah and Deir Dibwan, renowned for their embroidered dresses until today.

---

<sup>22</sup> Abu Eram, Amir, “Ribat Maqdisi ala Aatab Qariyet Mikhmas” (Steadfastness on the Outskirts of Mikhmas). Al Jazeera, May 1, 2017. <https://bit.ly/37cEuiO>

<sup>23</sup> Siyam, Abd Al-Hamid, “A Quick Glimpse of Occupied Palestine,” Al-Quds Al-Arabi, July 19, 2018. <https://bit.ly/36UQ9Tj>

<sup>24</sup> Salhout, Jamil, “To Solve the Issue of School Buildings,” Dunia al-Watan, September 12, 2013. <https://bit.ly/35SeUy7>