

The Minister of Tourism for Settlements

Yariv Levin, Minister of Tourism (2016-2019)

Settlement Watch Team, August 2023, Peace Now

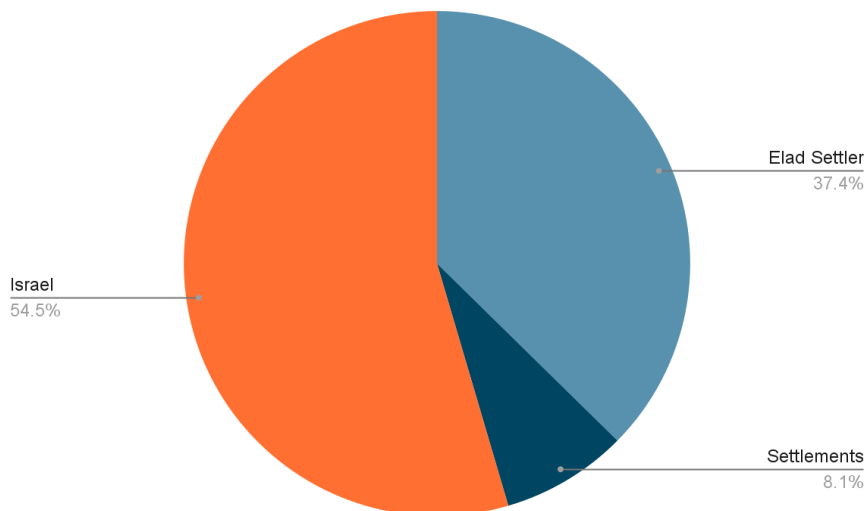
During Minister Yariv Levin's tenure as Minister of Tourism:

- Close to half of Israel's tourism development budget was allocated to plans in the settlements and East Jerusalem.
- Over 37% of the development budget, nearly 350 million shekels, was allocated to projects associated with the right-wing and settler organization of Elad, operating in Palestinian neighborhoods in East Jerusalem.
- 84.3% of the investments in Jerusalem went to the Elad settler organization.
- In the settlements (excluding East Jerusalem), approximately 70% of the funds submitted for approval to the Ministry of Tourism were approved, while in Israel, only 20% were approved.

Each year, Israel invests hundreds of millions of shekels in promoting tourism projects in Israel and the settlements. Some of these investments are made by the Ministry of Tourism through the Development Budget Team (DBT), which approves requests from local authorities and various bodies for tourism project funding. The Movement for Freedom of Information (MFOI) succeeded in obtaining from the Ministry of Tourism the list of submitted requests and the projects approved by the Development Budget Team during Minister Levin's tenure as Minister of Tourism (2016 to 2019).

During his tenure, out of an investment of 929 million shekels, approximately 424 million shekels (46%) were designated for projects beyond the Green Line in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

The tourism projects in these areas and in East Jerusalem are primarily intended to serve the Israeli presence around Palestinian cities, towns, and villages, and they constitute tourism settlement - (Israel develops sites in the West Bank in order to bring Israeli tourists despite the political situation). They are definitely not intended to serve the Palestinians.



PEACE NOW

Projects approved under Minister Levin for tourism development:

Year	WB Settlements		Elad		Rest of Israel		Total	
	%	NIS	%	NIS	%	₪	%	NIS
2016	10%	18,542,952	19%	36,000,000	71%	132,748,920	100%	187,291,872
2017	7%	14,790,000	12%	25,000,000	81%	171,904,666	100%	211,694,666
2018	10%	27,741,080	55%	145,200,000	35%	92,275,960	100%	265,217,040
2019	6%	16,307,400	53%	140,850,000	41%	108,043,862	100%	265,201,262
Total	8%	77,381,432	37%	347,050,000	54%	504,973,408	100%	929,404,840

I. Jerusalem: 84.3% of investments - allocated to the Elad settler organization

A. Investments in projects related to the Elad settler organization:

During Levin's tenure as Minister of Tourism, the ministry approved tourism plans totaling 411,650,000 NIS in Jerusalem, which accounts for 44.3% of all approved projects in Israel. Jerusalem, the capital of Israel and the largest city in the country is one of the most important tourist destinations in the country, and it is reasonable for the government to invest in tourism development there.

However, an examination of the list of approved projects in Jerusalem reveals that 84.3% of the investments (347,050,000 ₪) are in projects related to and serving the settler activities of Elad in Palestinian neighborhoods in East Jerusalem. These projects aim to create [tourist settlements](#) in disputed areas.

Name of the Project	Budget in NIS
Beit Shatz (Visitors Center of Elad in Jabal Mukabbar)	19,000,000
Development of Ben Hinnom Valley and Construction of Pedestrian Bridge (Project led by Elad)	11,500,000
Davidson Center (Southern Western Wall Excavations Area) – Elad manages an underground tunnel to the Davidson Center and conducts archaeological excavations in the area	9,050,000
Western Jerusalem Cable Car to Elad's Visitor Center in Silwan	210,500,000
The Second Temple Period Pilgrimage Road	23,000,000
Kedem Compound - Elad's visitors center at the entrance to Silwan	54,000,000
Upgrading the Dung Gate and Cable Car Integration - Connecting the Elad site with the Old City	20,000,000
Total	347,050,000

PEACE NOW

B. Projects around the Old City:

12% (49,600,000 ₪) of the approved budget for tourism projects in Jerusalem were designated for projects around the Old City (not directly related to Elad).

Name of the Project	Budget in NIS
Beit HaKnesset HaHadash - Tower of David Museum	7,000,000
The Herodian Quarter in the Jewish Quarter	4,000,000
Bus Parking Lots - Planning and Execution (Around the Old City, in Palestinian neighborhoods)	10,000,000
Muristan Square in the Christian Quarter	5,000,000
Tower of David Museum - Visitors Center "Herod's Palace"	5,000,000
The Greek Garden Project in Mount Zion	5,000,000
Tourism projects in the Jewish Quarter - Hurva Square	5,000,000
The Sheeps Market - Walls Circuit (Adjacent to the Muslim Cemetery, north-east of the Old City)	7,000,000
Monuments lighting (Various monuments around the Old City)	1,600,000
Total	49,600,000

C. The rest of Jerusalem - only 3.6%.

For the rest of Jerusalem, including museums, the Machane Yehuda Market, the Zoo, and more, only 3.6% (15,000,000 ₪) was allocated. This policy aims to divert tourists' interest from Western Jerusalem to Palestinian areas under settler control or influence around the Old City, neglecting West Jerusalem.

Name of the Project	Budget in NIS
Amphitheater in Ammunition Hill	1,000,000
Roofs for the Machane Yehuda Market	3,000,000
The Biodiversity Exhibit and Butterfly House next to the Biblical Zoo.	1,500,000
Museums Complex	7,500,000
Urban Planning Budget	2,000,000
Total	15,000,000

PEACE NOW

The Elad Settler Organization- An Organization with a State

[The Elad settler organization](#) is one of the strongest and wealthiest organizations in Israel, with connections and broad support from all government institutions, through budgets and the allocation of numerous areas it received without tender. In 2021, its annual financial turnover stood at [107,420,000 NIS](#), and its assets, according to its financial report, amounted to 490,641,000 NIS (it should be noted that the organization tends to acquire assets through foreign companies registered in tax havens, so the full extent of its financial resources is unknown).



In addition to these funds, the organization benefits from millions of shekels in tax payments, with government investments in projects related to the organization. In most cases, these funds do not go directly to the organization's bank account, but rather represent payments made by the government for activities related to the organization.

The Elad settler organization [has been operating since the late 1980s](#) to change the landscape in East Jerusalem. Elad is known for its sophisticated methods of acquiring Palestinian properties in East Jerusalem, [often exploiting the vulnerabilities and difficulties faced by Palestinians](#). In addition to settlement activities, Elad operates tourism projects aimed at transforming the Palestinian areas of Jerusalem into Jewish areas, both in terms of physical presence and public awareness.

Over the years, the Israeli government has entrusted the ideologically driven organization with [managing some of the most important and sensitive assets in the area](#). It allocated numerous areas within Palestinian neighborhoods to Elad through various means, [sometimes suspicious, without tender processes](#), and provided various forms of assistance in advancing its goals. However, in recent years, and particularly under Minister Levin, the government has started funneling hundreds of millions of shekels into Elad's settlement tourism activities.

It is important to note that Elad enjoys additional government funding for its projects. For example, the "[Shalem Plan](#)," initiated by the Israeli government in 2017, aims to develop tourism sites in the Old City Basin with an emphasis on Jewish history. The budget allocated for this program is 350 million NIS, and the area covered by the program includes the Old City, City of David, Mount of Olives, Peace Forest area, and the Armon HaNatziv Promenade – sites where the Elad settler organization and its initiatives have a notorious presence. In previous publications of the program, the government committed to investing around 47 million NIS in archaeological excavations in the Old City Basin in 2018-2019. In return for this commitment, Elad pledged to raise 43 million NIS.

The connection between Levin and the Elad settler organization

Minister Levin has visited sites managed by the Elad settler organization on many opportunities. The Elad settler organization [boasted on Facebook a photo of its CEO, David Be'eri, with Minister Levin](#) during one of the visits. Even before his appointment as minister, Levin organized a tour for Likud members at the "City of David" site, which is managed by Elad. Shortly before assuming the position of Minister of Tourism, Levin created a [program that would require all students in Israel to visit ten](#)

PEACE NOW

[sites, including the "City of David."](#) As Minister of Tourism, he met with Elad's CEO, David Be'eri, at least four times between 2016 and 2018 (according to the minister's diary published by the "Hatzlacha" Association on the "Information for the People" website). Minister Levin views tourism activity in Silwan as a politically significant action that aims to "prove" Israel's control and sovereignty over these areas in Jerusalem. In November 2015, during the peak of the "Knife Intifada," he visited the "City of David" site in Silwan and called on the public to come and visit, saying, "Especially in these days, when there are those who try to weaken our spirit, it is important that we stand on our feet and say clearly: the Land of Israel belongs to the People of Israel, and Jerusalem is in its heart."

When David Be'eri received the Israel Prize, Minister Levin posted a congratulatory [message on Facebook](#), stating, "We need more people with a deep sense of mission like you. Congratulations, David, you deserved the prize, and Jerusalem and the State of Israel have benefited from you."

Projects approved by the Ministry of Tourism in connection with the Elad settler organization:

Kedem Complex - In 2018, the Ministry of Tourism sanctioned a fund allocation of 54 million shekels for the Kedem Compound. This ambitious venture, spearheaded by the Elad settler organization, envisions a visitor center situated at the entrance of the Silwan neighborhood. The design entails a grandiose structure towering meters away from the Old City wall. Encompassing an expansive area of at least 15,000 square meters and spanning seven floors in height, the initiative has generated significant public opposition. However, its approval was secured through political interventions. The complex's scope encompasses a diverse range of features, including retail spaces, offices for the Elad settler organization, tourist attractions, and even a cable car station. Notably, despite the private ownership of the complex by the Elad settler organization, the government has committed tens of millions of shekels toward its realization. Presently, the complex remains unbuilt, and recent years have witnessed archaeological excavations on the designated site. Originally intended to be financed by the venture itself, which is the Elad settler organization, the Israeli government has gradually become involved in funding these excavations.

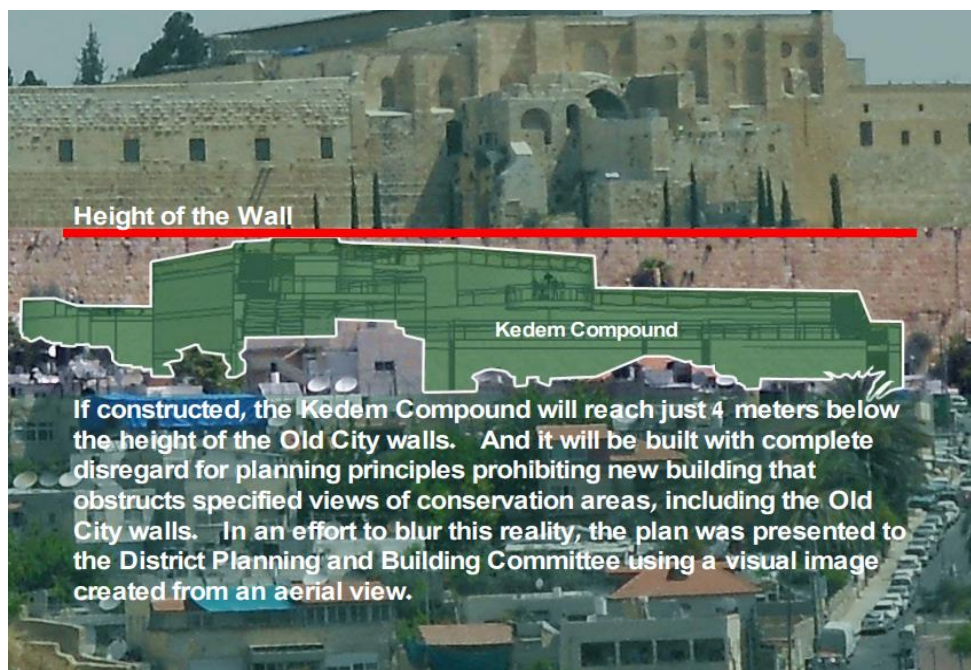
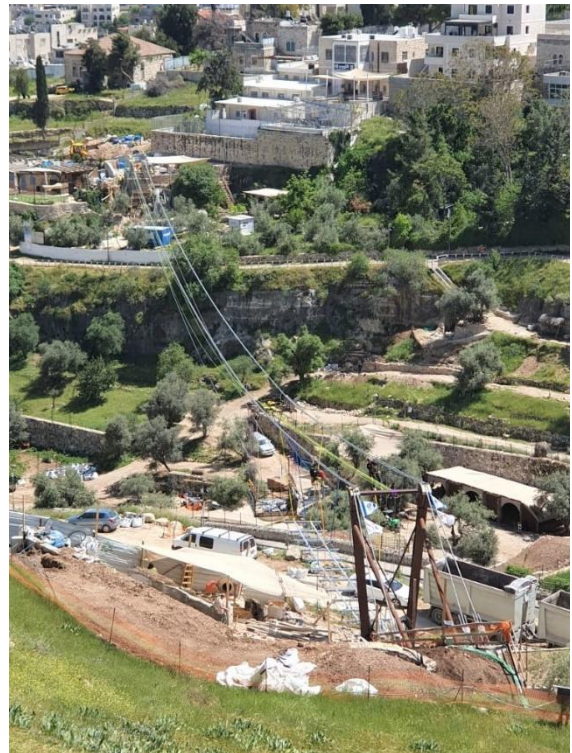


Image of the planned Kedem Compound, courtesy of [Ir Amim](#).

PEACE NOW

Ben Hinnom Valley - One of the areas undergoing significant development in recent years is the Ben Hinnom Valley, situated between the Silwan neighborhood and Abu Tor, at the foot of Mount Zion. This area is designated as part of the Jerusalem Walls National Park. Over the past decade and particularly since 2020, the Nature and Parks Authority, the Jerusalem Municipality, and [the Elad settler organization](#) have been creating tour routes and tourist attractions all over the valley. On the southern side, [the Elad organization has established a café](#), which can be approached from the Palestinian neighborhood of Abu Tor or by a relatively long walk through the valley. To facilitate access and integration, the Jerusalem Development Authority has recently finished the construction of a pedestrian bridge connecting the northern side (at the base of Mount Zion) with the southern side of the valley. [The bridge was approved through an expedited and shortened process](#) for obtaining



building permits, without the need for publishing objections, rather than by approval from an urban building plan. The bridge connects directly to the Elad Association's café complex, and it will be the primary beneficiary of the bridge's construction, [which cost 20 million shekels](#), funded by taxpayers' money, including 7.5 million shekels from the Ministry of Tourism. Additionally, in 2019, the Ministry of Tourism approved an extra 4 million shekels for tourism development in the Valley. All tourism sites in the Ben Hinnom Valley are [under the responsibility of Elad and are operated by them](#).

Beit Shatz - In 2018, the Ministry of Tourism approved funding of 19 million shekels for Beit Shatz, located on the outskirts of Jabel Mukaber, a Palestinian neighborhood near the Armon HaNatziv Promenade. Beit Shatz, which is currently under construction, is a visitor center owned by the Elad settler organization. The government is providing substantial financial support for its construction, with 19 million shekels coming from the Ministry of Tourism. Previously, [we revealed](#) that according to estimates given to the Jerusalem Municipality, out of the total cost of 43 million shekels, around 93% (40 million shekels) is being funded from public sources, while only 7% comes from the Elad settler organization. This project obtained fast-track building permits instead of being approved within a standard urban building plan.

Adjacent to Beit Shatz, an Omega (Zip Line) station is planned, initiated by the Elad Association, which will connect Beit Shatz to the Elad management compound in the Peace Forest. The Zip Line station is expected to become a significant tourist attraction and a major source of income for the association.

PEACE NOW



[Visualization of Beit Shatz](#) - Visitors Center by the Elad Settler Organization

The Cable Car to the Old City - One of the significant projects that garnered attention during former Minister of Tourism Yariv Levin's term was the cable car initiative. Between 2016 and 2019, the Ministry of Tourism greenlit a budget allocation of 210.5 million shekels for this endeavor. The primary goal of the cable car project is to establish a link between Western Jerusalem, starting from the site of the old train station (in the Baka'a neighborhood), and Silwan in East Jerusalem. This connection aims to streamline the direct movement of tourists and visitors to the Palestinian areas surrounding the Old City. The central disembarkation station is planned to be nestled within the "[Kedem Compound](#)," a visitor center owned by the Elad settler organization. Notably, this complex's funding primarily comes from public sources, including a substantial contribution of 19 million shekels from the Ministry of Tourism.

- אוגוסט 21 2016
2016 אוגוסט 27

יום שני 22 אוגוסט	
00:00	אנימה בחופש
10:00 - 11:15	חצגת פרויקט הרכבל + דוידלה (לשכה) - ליון יריב
11:15 - 12:00	פגישה עם אריק זיו + חיים כחלון (לשכה) - ליון יריב
12:00 - 13:00	פ.ע. מנכ"ל (לשכה) - ליון יריב
12:30 - 13:30	ברית לבן של שרון וניר מנדל (גן האירועים "קדמא" גוה אילן) - ליון יריב
12:30 - 13:00	יציאה

Notably, this complex's funding primarily comes from public sources, including a substantial contribution of 19 million shekels from the Ministry of Tourism.

The cable car venture was met with opposition from various quarters, including [organizations](#), architects, environmental advocates, and heritage enthusiasts. Their objections were based on concerns that the project would significantly alter the unique character of the Old City, potentially transforming it into something resembling "Disneyland." They also raised alarms about the potential impact on the visual aesthetics and historical integrity of the city. Furthermore, Palestinian residents

PEACE NOW

voiced their objections due to the planned route passing over their homes, which could entail land requisition for construction purposes.

Despite facing legal challenges, the plan was eventually approved, with the Supreme Court rejecting the challenges against its authorization. The implementation of the cable car project is poised to directly impact several Palestinian families, either due to the cable cars passing above their homes or due to the land appropriation required for its realization.

The connection between the project and the Elad Association is quite evident. The cable car project essentially leads right to its visitor center and aims to funnel a substantial number of visitors to sites managed by the association. Furthermore, indications suggest that members of the Elad Association were actively involved in the project. For instance, Minister Levin's meeting records show that on June 21, 2016, a meeting was convened to "present the cable car project," attended by David Be'eri, the head of the Elad Association. Similarly, another meeting held on January 8, 2018, focused on the cable car project and also included Be'eri's participation.

Davidson Center and the Underground Tunnel - The Davidson Center stands as an archaeological site just south of the Western Wall, showcasing historical artifacts spanning various eras. Within the framework of excavations for an intricate network of underground tunnels beneath the Silwan neighborhood, initiated by the Elad settler organization, a connecting tunnel was unearthed. This tunnel links Silwan directly to the heart of the Old City, meandering beneath its historic walls. Access to this tunnel is provided through the "City of David" site, under the management of the Elad settler organization in Silwan. This entryway leads visitors into the precincts of the Davidson Center, located in proximity to the foundational structures of the Western Wall.

The Second Temple Period Pilgrimage Road - Over the course of several years, the Elad settler organization has been actively involved in crafting a tourist route that offers a glimpse into the pilgrimage experience of Jewish worshippers during the era of the Second Temple. This journey begins at the historic Pool of Siloam, located near the Silwan mosque. From there, the route traverses through an underground tunnel that meanders beneath Silwan, leading toward the Temple Mount. The culmination of this pilgrimage takes place near the Western Wall, under the Davidson Center.

The creation of this route, often referred to as the "Pilgrimage Road," [necessitated an extensive engineering endeavor](#), including substantial subterranean archaeological excavations [beneath the residential structures of Silwan](#). These excavations have unearthed ancient streets dating back to both the Roman and Byzantine periods. However, the excavation techniques employed have faced notable criticism within the archaeological community. Records revealed by Emek Shaveh have surfaced indicating that prominent figures within the Antiquities Authority distanced themselves from the project, describing it as questionable in terms of archaeological rigor.

Nevertheless, the Israeli government has invested considerable financial resources — amounting to [tens of millions of shekels](#) — in the excavation and development of this initiative led by the Elad settler organization. This decision was underpinned by a political perspective that sought to assert a particular narrative: the notion that anyone exploring the tunnel would gain an understanding of "who the true custodians of this city are," as articulated by Nir Barkat, the former Mayor of Jerusalem.

Since the commencement of the excavation, it has become apparent that various structural issues have arisen. Cracks have appeared in multiple homes, localized collapses have occurred, and sinkholes have formed within the excavation area. Consequently, several families from Silwan have been forced to relocate due to the resultant damages.

PEACE NOW

The Dung Gate – The Ministry of Tourism approved an investment of 20 million shekels in the development of the vicinity around the Dung Gate, adjacent to Silwan. The infrastructure work is intended to establish a connection between the Old City and the sites managed by the Elad settler organization, as well as to integrate with the cable car system planned for Elad's Kedem Compound. The entire infrastructure system in East Jerusalem, especially within the Old City area, requires significant upgrades, regardless of the planned projects. In order to advance these ambitious projects, such as the cable car and the organization of transportation to the Western Wall and the City of David, it is essential to improve sewage, water, and transportation infrastructure.

Continuing Flow of Funds to Elad Projects Even After Levin – Despite the end of Yariv Levin's tenure at the Ministry of Tourism, the Elad Association continues to receive budget allocations for tourism development. In 2022, the Ministry of Tourism approved a budget of 12.5 million shekels for excavations at the Siloam (Shiloh) Pool. The ancient pool is part of the City of David site and is located in close proximity to the Silwan neighborhood in East Jerusalem. The City of David site, including the pool, is operated as a tourist attraction by the Elad settler organization. The initiative for the excavation comes from Elad.

Considering the cost of archaeological excavations, allocating such a substantial amount of 12.5 million shekels from taxpayer money is significant. On average, an excavation costs several hundred thousand shekels, and typically, before embarking on such sizable digs, a preliminary investigation is carried out to determine whether extensive investment is warranted. Even deep-pocketed entrepreneurs don't commit 12.5 million shekels to an archaeological dig until clear signs emerge that a comprehensive excavation is necessary.

However, the Elad settler organization managed to secure astronomical government funding for the excavation. Yet, [recent reports in the media](#) reveal that despite this massive investment, no ancient pool has been discovered. For several months, the excavation has not yielded any significant findings, despite the substantial resources dedicated to it.

In summary, the Elad Association has directly or indirectly benefited from around 350 million shekels in investments from the Ministry of Tourism during Yariv Levin's tenure. Even if one were to argue that projects like the cable car, the Dung Gate project, and the City of David Center are not considered projects directly serving the Elad settler organization, it's evident that under Yariv Levin's leadership, the Ministry of Tourism approved projects closely tied to Elad, amounting to a substantial 107.5 million shekels.

II. "Settlement Tourism? You Got it!" - Tourist Development in the West Bank

During Yariv Levin's tenure as Minister of Tourism, investments in tourism within the West Bank (excluding East Jerusalem) amounted to **over 77 million shekels**, which is nearly 8.32% of the tourism budget. This is noteworthy given that the Israeli population in the West Bank is less than 5% of Israel's total population. Tourism in the West Bank holds significantly less potential compared to tourism in cities like Tiberias and Acre, or regions like the Galilee, Negev, and the Coastal Plain.

Moreover, when examining the requests that were submitted but not approved, it becomes evident that while approximately 20% of the requested amounts were approved by local authorities and various bodies in the rest of Israel, the approval rate in settlements stood at 70%. **Local authorities in settlements submitted requests for support for tourism projects totaling around 110 million shekels, of which 77 million shekels were approved. In contrast, Arab local authorities within Israel received**

PEACE NOW

approval for less than 13% of the requested amounts, and as mentioned, the overall approval rate in non-settlement Israel was only 20%.

The approved projects in settlements include the establishment of visitor centers with costs in the millions in various settlements. Examples include the "Country's terrace" Visitor Center in Peduel (approximately 5.5 million shekels), the "Land of Psalms" Visitor Center commemorating King David's life in Susya (approximately 6 million shekels), visitor centers in Beit El (1.6 million shekels), Gush Etzion (1.4 million shekels), the Jordan Valley (1.4 million shekels), Elon Moreh (1.5 million shekels), Shiloh (2.4 million shekels, plus an additional 3.4 million shekels for a "Tabernacle model").

Additionally, projects for bicycle paths, trails, and viewpoints totaling around 8.2 million shekels were approved in the Benjamin region, Efrat, Hebron Hills, and Samaria.



Observation Tower at Tel Shiloh Site

PEACENOW

List of tourism projects in the West Bank (Excluding Jerusalem):

Year	Settlement	Name of the Project	Budget
2016	Gush Etzion	Central Heritage Site for Gush Etzion - Phase B	1,454,253
2016	Hebron Hills	Tourism Complex in Susya	1,953,000
2016	Megilot	Dead Sea Gate - Tourism Space Development	8,000,000
2016	Binyamin	The Bridge Over Nahal Shiloah	1,680,000
2016	Binyamin	Mountain Biking trail	1,300,000
2016	Karnei Shomron	Nature reserve development of the Kanah River	355,699
2016	Shomron	The Country's Terrace - Touristic Laser Show	3,800,000
2017	Efrat	Mountain Biking trail	700,000
2017	Beit El	Visitors Center - Jacob's dream site	1,600,000
2017	Beitar Illit	Development of the Hidden Cistern Caves of Bar Kochba, Site Preparation for Visitors, Audiovisual Presentation	2,950,000
2017	Hebron Hills	Tourist trail	3,230,000
2017	Binyamin	Visitor Center of the Ancient City Gate in Shilo - Phase A	2,400,000
2017	Binyamin	Single Track Bike Trail in the Judean Desert - Nahal Perat	960,000
2017	Aravot HaYarden	Agricultural Tourism Center	1,400,000
2017	Shomron	Construction of Visitor Center and Rehabilitation of Mount Kavir Trails	1,550,000
2018	Efrat	Phase A: Amot HaMayim Park to Jerusalem	3,829,000
2018	Gush Etzion	Tourism Development Plan for the Northern Judean Desert Region	4,900,000
2018	Megilot	Budget According to Government Decision	6,000,000
2018	Binyamin	The Storage House and Tabernacle Replica in Ancient Shiloh	3,440,000
2018	Binyamin	Tourism Development and Enhancement Plan	5,600,000
2018	Nature and Parks Authority	Upgrade of the Archaeological Site of Qumran's Dead Sea Scrolls	2,250,000
2018	Shomron	The Country's terrace	1,722,080
2019	Gush Etzion	The Herodion Site	3,500,000
2019	Gush Etzion	Development of the Isolated Oak Site - Phase B	945,000
2019	Hebron Hills	Land of Psalms Center	5,862,400
2019	Megilot	Dead Sea North - Budget According to Government Decision	6,000,000