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Violent clashes in East Jerusalem and the al-Aqsa compound

In the weeks leading up to Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year), tension increased in the area of the Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, culminating in a series of violent incidents over the holiday period (September 13th to 15th). Israeli forces clashed with worshipers and fired tear gas, sound bombs, and rubber bullets, resulting in injuries to many Palestinians. Since the beginning of September, Israel has detained 150 Palestinians in Occupied East Jerusalem. A third of the arrests took place near al-Aqsa – dozens more were detained in Silwan, Issawiya, Wadi Joz, Sur Baher and Sheikh Jarrah. Israel has also banned 37 Palestinians from al Aqsa for periods ranging from ten to sixty days.

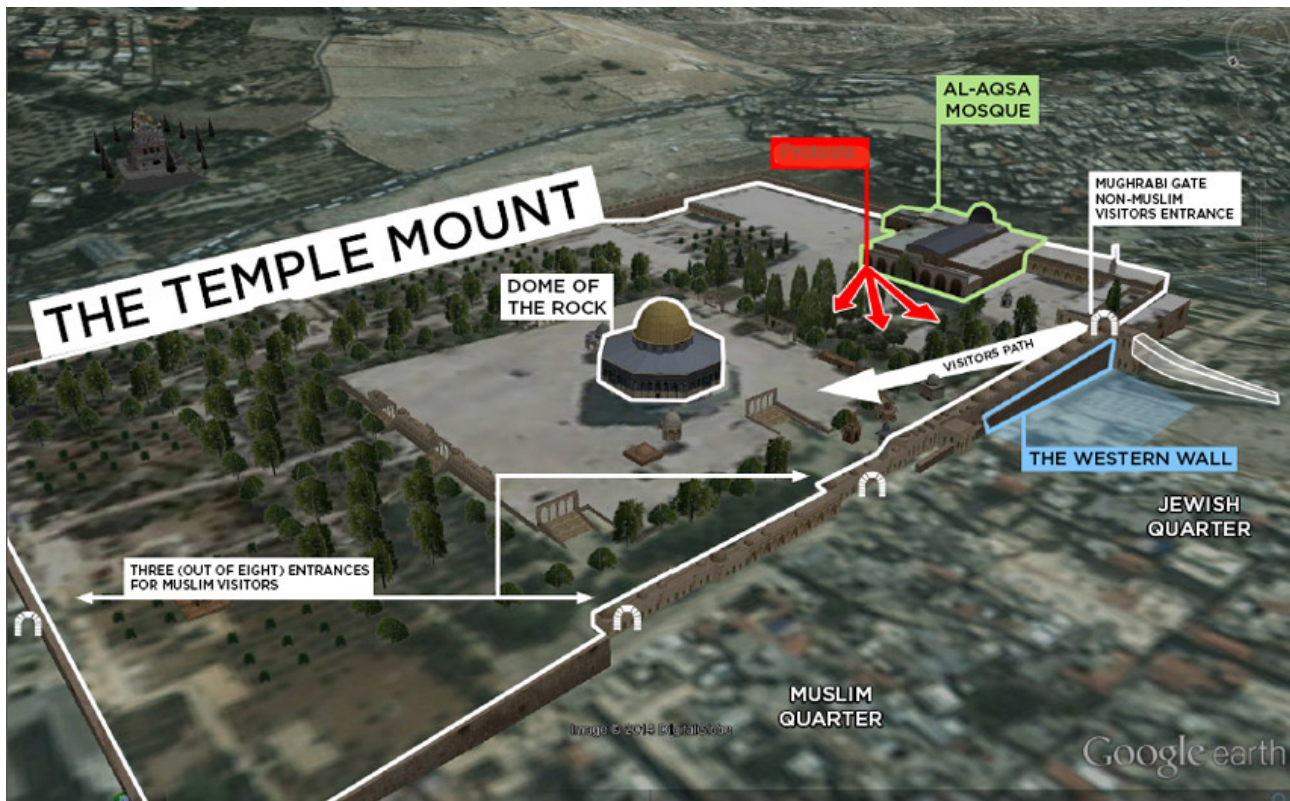
Since 1967, non-Muslims have been permitted limited access to the Haram al-Sharif (Noble Sanctuary) or Temple Mount; under the status quo agreement non-Muslims are permitted to enter the area but are not allowed to pray or to carry any form of religious artefact. Muslims are able to conduct their religious worship at the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock, while Jews worship at the Western Wall. Under the terms of the 1994 peace agreement between Israel and Jordan, Jordan has custodianship rights over Muslim holy places in Jerusalem. The entire area of the Haram al-Sharif is nominally administered by the Islamic Waqf of Jerusalem and the Jordanian Ministry of the Islamic Waqf (Ministry of Religious Endowments). It is the only place in the West Bank where Jordan has a formal role and where, in Jerusalem, Palestinians can organise with relative autonomy. In practice, the mosque area is gated and controlled by Israeli police along with a token number of unarmed Jordanian guards.

In recent years, under the growing influence of the so-called 'Temple Mount Movement', more and more observant Jews have been insisting on their right to enter the Al-Aqsa mosque compound. In 2014, almost 11,000 entered the area. This represented a 28 percent increase from the previous year – and almost double the number of Jewish visitors in 2009. While in 2012, Jewish activists entered the compound on average once every 2 weeks, in 2013 this had become once every 4 days, and in 2014, closer to every 2-3 days.



Following a series of clashes in October 2014, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made a pledge to Jordan's King Abdullah and other international officials that the status quo that has existed for decades would be maintained. It was this undertaking given on November 6th 2014 that led to the return of Jordan's ambassador to Tel Aviv on February 2nd 2015.

One of the key undertakings Netanyahu gave King Abdullah concerned the number and nature of individuals who would be allowed to visit the mosque. No Knesset members or other officials would enter the sensitive mosque area under the guise of a tourist visit. However, since then religious Jews have been allowed to ascend in larger and larger groups. Instead of small groups of 5-15 people, the groups that visited the mosque during the Jewish New Year celebrations were up to 30 persons. This is a large number for the Jordanian-employed Waqf guards to monitor and ensure that the status quo is being maintained.



September 8: The Israelis allowed Agriculture Minister, Uri Ariel, of the far-right HaBayit HaYehudi party, to visit the site in direct contravention of the understanding between Netanyahu and King Abdullah. In 2013 Uri Ariel, called for a Third Temple to be built on the compound. (Education Minister, Naftali Bennett, has also suggested greater Israeli control over Al-Aqsa, while in May 2014, Likud – and Labour – Members of the Knesset proposed a change to the status quo that would permit Jews to pray at the compound.)

Many Muslims saw Ariel's visit as a step toward the temporal division of the site — Jews on some hours and Muslims on other hours — in the same way that the Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron is now divided in time and space between worshiping Jews and Muslims.

September 9: Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon announced that he was outlawing the Muslim civilian guards stationed at the al-Aqsa mosque compound. The guards, known as Mourabitoun, or defenders of Islam, say they are there to protect the site, the third-holiest in Islam, from Jewish extremists. Women calling themselves mourabitat, hold religious study sessions in the mosque's yard. When Jewish visitors are given access to the mosque's open area, the women suspend their studies and watch them closely for violations of the status quo agreement. Any hint of prayer and the women start shouting.

September 14: Early on Monday, Israeli forces forcibly expelled Palestinians from the Bab al-Silsila entrance to the compound.

September 15: Israeli forces entered the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound's southern mosque, sparking the third straight day of violent clashes. According to Israeli police, Palestinians had barricaded themselves inside the mosque overnight as they had over the two previous days. Police proceeded to close the doors of the southern mosque with chains.

Dozens of Palestinians were injured in the clashes, during which Israeli forces fired stun grenades, tear gas canisters and rubber-coated steel bullets at Palestinian worshipers. The Palestinian Red Crescent's Jerusalem director, Amin Abu Ghazala, said that 36 Palestinians had received treatment. He said that some of the Palestinians had suffered wounds and bruises, while others had suffered excessive tear gas inhalation. At least two were hospitalized. The director of the Al-Aqsa religious school for boys, Nadir al-Afghani, said that a 14-year-old boy was hit in his head by a rubber-coated steel bullet and had received 10 stitches.

The Jordanian-run Waqf organisation said that police entered deep inside the mosque and caused damage. Witnesses said that heavily-armed Israeli forces wearing military boots trod on the carpets and entered as far as Saladin's Minbar (pulpit). Witnesses said that stun grenades caused a fire to break out near the mosque's Bab al-Janaez (funeral door).

September 16: Israeli forces assaulted three Palestinian guards as they attempted to prevent Israeli soldiers from attacking Palestinian women inside Al-Aqsa. The Israeli forces then enabled Jewish settlers to enter the mosque. Israeli police banned all women and most men, except the elderly, from entering the mosque. A large number of Palestinian worshipers protested at Al-Silsila Gate, demanding that the Israeli forces lift the ban.

September 18: Israeli security forces stood guard as Palestinians performed Friday Prayer in the streets, due to the ban on Palestinians under the age of 40 entering the mosque.

The Israeli army prevented the Palestinian Prime Minister, Rami Hamdallah, from entering Jerusalem. Hamdallah and his delegation had intended to go to the Al-Aqsa Mosque to see the damage and violations against the mosque and to stand with worshippers.

Israeli police deployed large numbers of forces in occupied East Jerusalem especially in the old town, its alleys and the area around Al-Aqsa Mosque.

It is anticipated that tensions will erupt again during the Jewish holiday of Sukkot (September 27th to October 4th).