

What's been happening at the Al-Aqsa Mosque?

[The events leading up to Israel's bombing of Gaza included a number of violent incidents in East Jerusalem: in particular, the burning alive of 17-year-old Mohammed Abu Khdeir in July. The past few months have seen an intensification of Israeli acts of aggression, expulsions and expropriations in the West Bank and in Jerusalem. In October clashes between Palestinians and Israeli forces focused on the Haram al-Sharif and, especially, the Al-Aqsa mosque. However, these should not be seen in isolation but as part of a wider push towards the expulsion of Arab residents from East Jerusalem and the Judaisation plan for the city of Jerusalem as a whole.]

Background

The Haram al-Sharif (Noble Sanctuary) or Temple Mount is a 35-acre, walled area comprising one-sixth of Jerusalem's Old City. The site includes three principal structures: the al-Aqsa Mosque, the Dome of the Rock and the Dome of the Chain, as well as a number of museums, gardens and religious schools.

An informal agreement has existed since 1967 under which 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. This understanding allows for the Jerusalem Islamic Waqf and the Ministry of the Islamic Waqf in Amman to run the affairs of the mosque and to regulate visitors to it. The Waqf has governed access to the area since the Muslim reconquest of the Kingdom of Jerusalem in 1187. The Waqf consists of a director, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, and the Islamic Council. This arrangement exists without Israel formally ceding what it considers to be its sovereignty over and right to east Jerusalem, which it annexed unilaterally within weeks of its 1967 occupation.

These arrangements were further embedded in the 1994 peace agreement between Israel and Jordan, which states that the Hashemite Kingdom has preferential status on the Temple Mount. Any change in arrangements on the Haram al-Sharif necessarily involves the Hashemite Kingdom and Israel's relations with it. Guards from Jordan's Ministry of the Islamic Waqf are stationed at all but one of the compound's entrances alongside Israeli police.

Until the mid-twentieth century, non-Muslims were not permitted in the area. Since 1967, non-Muslims have been permitted limited access; however non-Muslims are not permitted to pray on the Temple Mount, or to carry any

form of religious artifact or anything with Hebrew letters. The Israeli police help enforce this. Normally, West Bank Palestinians are allowed access to Jerusalem only during Islamic holidays, with access usually restricted to men over 35 and women of any age eligible for permits to enter the city. Palestinian residents of Jerusalem, who hold Israeli residency cards, and Palestinians with Israeli citizenship are permitted unrestricted access.

Since 2006, the Haram al-Sharif has been open to non-Muslim visitors during the hours of 7:30–11:30 am and 1:30–2:30 pm during summer and 7:30–10:30 am and 1:30–2:30 pm during winter. Non-Muslims are prohibited from entering after 2:30 pm and may not enter on Fridays, Saturdays, or Muslim holidays. Non-Muslims are prohibited from entering the mosques, entering the Dome of the Rock, and accessing the Temple Mount through the Cotton Market. Visitors are subject to strict security screening.

Initially, the problem of Israeli and other Jewish zealots entering the compound was limited as a result of a religious edict forbidding religious Jews to enter for fear that they might desecrate the remnants of a holy Jewish site. Many Orthodox rabbis regard entry to the compound to be a violation of Jewish law. This is based on the belief that since the time the Temple was destroyed during the siege of Jerusalem in 70 CE, the precise location of the Holy of Holies, the sanctuary entered only by the High Priest, is not known. Hence a restriction applies to the entire compound.

According to an article in The New York Times (September 21st 2014) "Israel's chief rabbinate still maintains the Mount is off limits to Jews – a sign saying so is posted at the gate." However, other rabbis believe that modern archaeological and other evidence has enabled them to identify areas that can be safely entered without violating Jewish law; but even those opinions forbid Jews from entering the Dome of the Rock.

The decades-long understanding has been shaken in recent years as the Israelis, who have exclusive control over the Mughrabi gate (through a wooden walkway next to the Western Wall), have been directing tourists and Israelis to use that gate rather than the other official, authorized entrances. This means that entrance to the Islamic site is not regulated on the basis of respect, such as appropriate dress; time, i.e., no entry during prayers; or finances, as entrance at authorized gates for tourists is fee based, but free at the Mughrabi gate.

Trouble increased this year with the election of Israeli extremists to the Knesset, some of whom are now part of Benjamin Netanyahu's government.

In the eyes of these religious politicians, the right of Jews to access the area they call the "Temple Mount" should be vigorously asserted. The best known of the Temple Mount NGOs, the Temple Mount Faithful, headed by Gershon Salomon, makes no bones about its intentions. On its website, the first of the group's "Long Term Objectives" is:

Liberating the Temple Mount from Arab (Islamic) occupation. The Dome of the Rock and the Al Aqsa mosque were placed on this Jewish or biblical holy site as a specific sign of Islamic conquest and domination. The Temple Mount can never be consecrated to the Name of G-d without removing these pagan shrines. It has been suggested that they be removed, transferred to, and rebuilt at Mecca.

In their joint 2013 report, *Dangerous Liaison: The Dynamics of the Rise of the Temple Movements*, Israeli NGOs Ir Amim and Keshev trace the growth of these movements, along with their ideological underpinnings and ties to Israeli governmental institutions. According to the report, over the last decade, the status quo carefully maintained since the Ottoman era has progressively shifted as a result of activity by Jews determined to strengthen the status of the Temple Mount as a Jewish religious centre, while marginalizing the claims of Muslims to the Mount.

In the past year alone, hundreds of national religious Jewish pilgrims have ascended the Mount, including groups of rabbis, women, members of Knesset and uniformed soldiers. While the various Temple organizations may have differing goals and varying impacts, a common denominator of religious and nationalist messianism distinguishes the movement as a whole. Religion has become a tool for realizing extreme national goals at a site that is a focal point of political and religious tension.

Likud member Moshe Feiglin actively calls for ascent to the Mount. The Ministry of Education funds curricula promoted by temple groups. The Temple Institute, a group devoted to the rebuilding of the Third Temple, organizes an annual conference promoted and attended by members of the political establishment.

Palestinians strenuously object to this development and have tried to stop it through a physical presence. Israeli security forces regularly assess the situation, and if they find it dangerous they ban entry from the Mughrabi quarter. Their decisions of late have favoured restricting Palestinians' entry rather than blocking entry from the only unregulated gate.

Political pressure on the police from the Israeli government and Knesset appears to be aimed at softening Palestinian resistance in an attempt to get them to accept a new understanding. Israeli police are increasingly barring all Palestinians from the entire compound to allow Israelis and Jewish groups to enter uninterrupted.

The biggest fear for Palestinians is that Israel will try to apply a shared-time arrangement to allow Jews to pray in the area of Al-Aqsa Mosque. This situation could evolve into one similar to that at Hebron's Ibrahimi Mosque, where Muslim control over their own mosque compound is divided with the Israelis, who make all the decisions regarding who prays and when. The fear is that this would be followed by the building of a Jewish structure on the mosque compound, and then ever so slowly, the issue of rebuilding the Jewish Temple on the site of Al-Aqsa will arise.

Chronology of events in 2014

[These notes focus on two periods of heightened tension when Jewish people were celebrating two major religious festivals, Passover and Sukkot.]

Wednesday 26th February 2014

Jordan's parliament votes unanimously to expel the Israeli ambassador and recall its own envoy, after Israeli lawmakers debate whether Israel should wrest control of Muslim holy shrines from Jordan. The debate was initiated by the Likud party's Moshe Feiglin.

Monday 14th April 2014

Jewish Israelis celebrate Passover, a seven-day holiday which in ancient times was marked by mass pilgrimage to the Temple Mount. Police arrest five people suspected of intending to sacrifice a goat at the al-Aqsa mosque complex in an attempt to re-enact an ancient Jewish Passover ritual.

Wednesday 16th April 2014

Dozens of Palestinians are wounded by rubber-coated bullets and stun grenade canisters fired by Israeli police. The clashes erupt when the al-Aqsa mosque compound in Jerusalem is opened to Jewish visitors. Wounded Palestinians stay inside the mosque out of fear they will be arrested when leaving.

Thursday 17th April 2014

A leaked email from Ateret Cohanim, an organisation that buys properties for settlement, reveals that it has completed renovation work on a large religious school in the Palestinian commercial hub of occupied East Jerusalem. The organization has secretly purchased more than 1,000 sq m in a building that houses the main post office and Israeli police station, and overlooks the Flowers Gate entrance to the walled Old City.

According to Ateret Cohanim's website, one group has already visited the yeshiva- students from a pre-army educational programme associated with the former Gaza settlement bloc of Gush Katif. Although material published by Ateret Cohanim says it acts "legally" and "tactfully" - insisting it wants to peacefully co-exist with its Arab neighbours - it also boasts of seeking to "redeem" and "return" land to Jewish ownership in the Old City and East Jerusalem beyond the Green Line.

Daniel Seidemann, a lawyer, human rights activist and head of the organisation Terrestrial Jerusalem, says: "This is a hugely symbolic building for East Jerusalemites and seems to be further evidence of collusion between the state and settler groups. ... I also think the impact of this is more insidious - this notion of the radical transformation of the public domain by groups seeking to create a pseudo-biblical realm."

Wednesday 8th October 2014

Israeli border police prevent men under 50 from worshipping at the Al-Aqsa mosque. Israeli police then escort members of a right-wing Jewish group into the mosque to observe the Jewish holiday of Sukkot.

Monday 13th October 2014

Israeli police release footage showing security forces clashing with Palestinians who have barricaded themselves inside the al-Aqsa mosque. A police spokesperson says youths are planning to disrupt morning visiting hours for Jews and tourists.

Thursday 16th October 2014

A 13-year-old boy is shot and killed by Israeli forces in a village near the occupied West Bank city of Ramallah. Bahaa Badr is shot in the chest during clashes between protesters and Israeli forces who have entered Beit Liqya near the separation wall with Israel. According to reports, soldiers opened fire after demonstrators threw stones and Molotov cocktails at three Israel

army Jeeps that entered the village west of Ramallah. It is still unclear whether Badr took part in the clashes, which the Israeli army described as an "illegal riot".

In a separate incident in Jerusalem's Silwan neighbourhood, Arab Israelis throw Molotov cocktails at a car and a police vehicle.

Sunday 19th October 2014

An Israeli settler runs over two Palestinian children near Ramallah, killing one and leaving the other in a serious condition. According to witnesses, the settler hit the two girls, both aged 5, on the main road near Sinjil town, leaving them badly injured. Eye witnesses added that the driver fled the scene after running over Toleen Omar Asfour and Inas Shawkat Khalil, who were returning from kindergarten.

Tuesday 21st October 2014

An Arab Knesset member, Masoud Ghanayim, reveals that there will be a vote in the next month on a law drafted by an Israeli committee regarding the partition of the Al-Aqsa Mosque between Muslims and Jews. "This is based on a proposal that gives Muslims and Jews equal rights in their access and use of the holy site. It also specifies certain locations where Jews can perform their prayers." According to Ghanayim, the same draft law also bans the organising of civil protests and demonstrations in the Al-Aqsa compound, and sets out punishment for any violations. Ghanayim describes the proposal as part of the Judaisation plan for the city of Jerusalem.

Wednesday 24th October 2014

Abdel Rahman al-Shaludi rams his car into the Ammunition Hill light rail station, running over nearly a dozen people and killing an infant girl. He is shot by security officers as he tries to flee. He later dies of his wounds.

Monday 27th October 2014

The Israeli government gives the green light for more than 1,000 new Jewish settler homes in annexed East Jerusalem. "The government has decided to advance the planning of more than 1,000 units in Jerusalem – roughly 400 in Har Homa and about 600 in Ramat Shlomo."

Speaking to parliament, Netanyahu defends the stance saying there is a wide consensus in Israel to continue building throughout the city, just as

every Israeli government has done since Israel captured east Jerusalem in 1967.

"Even the Palestinians know that these places will stay in Israeli sovereignty under any agreement," he said. "The French build in Paris, the English build in London and the Israelis build in Jerusalem. To come and tell Jews not to live in Jerusalem - why?"

A statement from PLO Executive Committee Member Saeb Erekat says, "This settlement expansion coincides with proposed Israeli legislation to change the status quo over the al-Aqsa compound and the seizure of 35 Palestinian homes in Silwan by state-supported extremist settlers. The announcement by Israel's housing minister, Uri Ariel, who is already a settler, of his intent to occupy a seized Palestinian home in Silwan is just another shocking reminder of Israel's accelerating efforts to forcibly displace Palestinians from Jerusalem and turn the Holy City of three faiths into an exclusive Jewish city."

Wednesday 29th October 2014

A conference titled "Israel Returns to the Temple Mount" is held in Jerusalem's Menachem Begin Heritage Center. The conference is attended by Likud Members of the Knesset, Moshe Feiglin and Miri Regev, as well as Yehuda Etzion, who was imprisoned in the early 1980s for leading a plot by the terrorist organization, "Jewish Underground", to blow up the Dome of the Rock.

At approximately 10.30 pm, one of the key speakers at the conference, Rabbi Yehuda Glick, is shot several times at close range by a gunman who escapes by motorcycle. Critically wounded he is rushed to hospital. In the immediate aftermath of the shooting police set up road blocks in the hunt for the suspect.

A Temple Mount activist, Glick has often led groups of religious Jews to visit the site. US-born Glick is closely associated with the Temple Mount Faithful. Publicly, he heads an organization called the Temple Mount Heritage Foundation, and formerly led the Temple Mount Institute, both of which express the hope of rebuilding the Temple alongside the Muslim holy sites, not in their place.

Israeli housing minister Uri Ariel said following the shooting: "I am praying for the full recovery of Yehuda Glick. The bullets fired at him were directed

at all the Jews that want to exercise their Jewish and moral right to visit the most holy place to the Jewish people and to pray at the Temple Mount.

"I call on the prime minister to immediately allow every Jew to freely go to the Temple Mount, and to act with an iron fist against the criminals responsible for this deed."

In the aftermath of the shootings, Israeli security forces brought reinforcements – some called in from the West Bank – into the Old City and Palestinian neighbourhoods of East Jerusalem as helicopters flew overhead and observation balloons were deployed in several locations.

Thursday 30th October 2014

Police take the rare step of shutting the compound to all visitors until further notice, after far-right Israeli activists had called for supporters to go to the site in response to the shooting.

The Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, responded angrily to the closure of the al-Asqa Mosque: "This dangerous Israeli escalation is a declaration of war on the Palestinian people and its sacred places and on the Arab and Islamic nation," he said through his spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeina, warning it would only fuel "more tension and instability".

Israeli police in East Jerusalem announce that they have shot dead a Palestinian man suspected of being the gunman in the attempted murder of far-right rabbi, Yehuda Glick. They claim he was killed while resisting arrest. "Anti-terrorist police units surrounded a house in the Abu Tor neighborhood to arrest a suspect in the attempted assassination of Yehuda Glick, immediately upon arrival they were shot at. They returned fire and shot and killed the suspect." According to the police account Hijazi was hiding behind solar panels on the roof when he shot at officers who returned fire, killing him. Bloodstains were visible on the roof.

The dead man, whose family identified him as 32-year-old former prisoner Muataz Hijazi, was jailed in 2002 for security offences reportedly committed during the second intifada against Israeli occupation and had been released in 2012. Hijazi had worked in the canteen at the Begin Centre. Following Hijazi's death the Islamic Jihad group published an obituary notice, saying he was a member of the organisation but without claiming responsibility for the attack.

Neighbours described hearing a burst of gunfire at about 5.30am as armed police swamped the area. Hijazi's aunt Taghreed said he had been beaten before being shot, contradicting the police account. According to some Israeli media reports, quoting sources in the Israeli domestic security agency, armed officers approached Hijazi near his house. His family, however, said he had been inside the house in his bedroom.

Neighbours added that they were awoken by the sound of shooting and that police shot baton rounds at those who had tried to leave their houses to see what was happening. "It was between 5.30 and 5.40," said Ra'ad Aliyan, a pharmacist who lives next door, told the Guardian as police kept reporters from Hijazi's house. Another resident of the same building, Mandi Burkan, showed an injury to his back where he said he had been hit by a baton round trying to go and see what was happening. As police removed Hijazi's body, residents threw objects from their balconies on one group while police fired teargas and stun grenades.

Friday 31st October:

Israel reopens the al-Aqsa mosque compoundThe streets of east Jerusalem were calm before midday prayers, following an Israeli clampdown on the shrine on Thursday.

Police spokeswoman Luba Samri told Agence France-Presse that because of fears of unrest, entry for Muslim men would be restricted to those over 50. Additional police were deployed around the compound in the heart of the Old City. Local media reported the presence of 3,000 officers, three times more than usual.

At least 28 Palestinians are injured in clashes with Israeli forces that continue into the late hours of the night. Clashes occur in the occupied East Jerusalem neighborhoods of Silwan, al-Issawiya, al-Tur, and Wadi al-Joz, as hundreds march and fight pitched battles with security forces in anger over the killing of Mutaz Hijazi, 32 as well as the killing of Abd al-Rahman al-Shaludi, 21, the week before.