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THE TEMPLE MOUNT / AL-AQSA: HEADING TOWARDS LOSS OF CONTROL?

DEVELOPMENTS AND TRENDS, 2015-2022

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Abstract

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Jerusalem, 2022

This publication was made possible through the generous support of our partners:



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The Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research | Publication no. 596

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Abstract

Introduction

Israel's policy on Jewish prayer at the Temple Mount has undergone change over the past seven years. Ever-growing numbers of religious Jews have been visiting the Temple Mount for purposes of worship, and the police have been permitting prayer services, Torah lessons, and other rituals that were prohibited in the past (special religious visits by grooms, brides, and bar mitzvah celebrants; birthdays and memorial days; ritual dough offering by women, upsherin (children's haircutting ceremony), the raising of Israel's flag, the singing of "HaTikva" (Israel's anthem), and the like). During the Jewish month of Tishrei (September 16 – October 15, 2022), a total of 7,995 Jews visited the Temple Mount in accordance with Halachic precepts (after purification and without wearing leather shoes) – more than the total number of Jews who visited the Temple Mount for religious purposes in 2012 (7,724). During the 2021-2022 Jewish year, 48,000 Jews made religious visits to the Temple Mount, compared with 29,000 in 2018-2019 (before the outbreak of Covid-19) – an increase of 65%.

The main element of the "status quo" as formulated in 1967 by Defense Minister Moshe Dayan and the government – namely, a prohibition on Jewish prayer at the Temple Mount, with Jewish worshippers routed to the Western Wall – has been changing before our eyes. This change also reflects profound developments that are taking place among the Jewish public, particularly the national-religious public, regarding the place of the Temple Mount in religious consciousness and practice. These developments starkly contravene the position of the Chief Rabbinate and important Haredi (ultra-orthodox) adjudicators, who prohibit religious visits by Jews to the Temple Mount.

Over the past two years, the new state of affairs on the Temple Mount has received coverage in the local and international media as well as social media, in both the Israeli and Palestinian arenas and in the Arab and Muslim arenas. Its echoes have reverberated throughout the Arab and Muslim world, with a significant impact on events at the Temple Mount during Ramadan in recent years. Nor did it escape the notice of the US

administration, which in 2015, following fierce confrontations and crises, strove along with Jordan to reinforce this aspect of the status quo on the Temple Mount and affirm, with then Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's agreement, that prayer by non-Muslims would be prohibited on the compound.

The issue also took center stage in the negotiations for a new Israeli government (under Netanyahu) following the November 1, 2022, elections, with MK Itamar Ben-Gvir, a prominent Temple Mount activist and leader of the Otzma Yehudit party, was appointed Minister of National Security in charge of the police. At a November 9, 2022, meeting with Shas party representatives, President Isaac Herzog cautioned, "There's one issue I haven't mentioned because I don't want to shame anyone, but you're going to have a problem with the Temple Mount. This is a critical issue. You have a partner [Itamar Ben-Gvir] that the whole world around us is worried about.... You have a responsibility in this regard."

Concurrently there have also been changes on the Muslim side: The influence of the Jordanian establishment, Palestinian Authority representatives, and Waqf leaders over what happens at the Temple Mount/Al-Aqsa is declining, while the strength of East Jerusalemites and local "bottom-up" Al-Aqsa activists is increasing. This development has been evident since the summer of 2017, when East Jerusalemites succeeded in having the metal detectors (magnetometers) removed from the entrance to the compound, and later in instigating the removal of fences that the police had set up near the stairs leading to Damascus gate during Ramadan 2021. It was also evident in the Palestinian protests on the Temple Mount during Ramadan 2022. In all these cases, an important role was played by young East Jerusalemites acting at their own initiative, with no institutional guidance. From their perspective, they were now the vanguard of Palestinian resistance to Israeli rule and defenders of the Al-Aqsa compound and the Holy City.

The key questions at the heart of this study are: What are the factors that led to erosion of the status quo regarding Jewish prayer at the Temple Mount, and to the change in the position of the police and Israeli authorities regarding this sensitive issue? Was it a bottom-up or top-down change? Did it happen as a result of directed, deliberate policy on the part of decision-makers and the top executive echelon, or in response to pressure exerted by Jewish organizations that focus on the Temple Mount? And what are the implications and consequences of this change for the activity of various players in Israel, the Palestinian arena, Jordan, and broader circles in the Middle East, the Muslim world, and the international arena?

The aim of this report is to describe these developments over time, analyze the factors behind them and their significance and repercussions for policymakers, the top executive echelon, the media and public influencers, tour guides, and anyone else interested in this sensitive, important issue.

The study was conducted in partnership with the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom.

Key Findings

Since 2015, a new reality has gradually been emerging on the Temple Mount. Many religiously observant Jews – particularly among the national-religious public – are not willing to settle for the Western Wall as the Jewish people's main place of prayer and worship. Instead, they seek to enter and pray at the Temple Mount, near the site of the First and Second Temples. This position is driven both by growing religious activism, which aspires to commune with the sacred (and lacks consensus on the steps that would come after the institutionalization of Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount), and by political and policy-based circumstances – a desire to rival the Islamic sanctity of the compound and its centrality in Palestinian national consciousness, and to establish Jewish sovereignty over the compound. These trends, which evidently intensified after the disengagement from the Gaza Strip, meet fierce resistance from the official religious Jewish establishment embodied in the Chief Rabbinate, from “Yeshivot HaKav” (“the yeshivas that follow the line”), led by Yeshivat Har HaMor (under Rabbi Zvi Yisrael Thau), which backs the Chief Rabbinate's ruling, and from prominent Haredi adjudicators (followed by the Haredi political establishment), who uphold the Halachic prohibition against religious visitation and prayer at the Temple Mount. Presumably these establishment leaders sense the revolutionary potential inherent in any change at the Temple Mount, both internally for Jews and outwardly in terms of external repercussions.

The main source of change surrounding the Temple Mount is the intensive activity by Jewish organizations that aspire to increase the number of religious visits to the mount, institute regular Jewish prayer services at the sacred compound, and establish it as the main holy site in national and Jewish consciousness. These organizations succeeded in dramatically increasing the number of religious Jewish visits to the Temple Mount, acquiring significant influence among political institutions (both within the Likud and among, and beyond, parties in the national-religious camp), and in particular, establishing

closer cooperation with police leaders and police officers stationed at the Temple Mount, who largely back expansion of the Jewish presence and Jewish prayer at the compound.

Since the summer of 2017, it appears that every wave of Muslim protest and violence has fostered stronger ties on the part of the police and the establishment with the Temple Mount organizations, and facilitated religious Jewish visitation and prayer at the compound. It is possible that these closer relations reduce the likelihood of desperate Jewish extremists sabotaging Islamic monuments on the Temple Mount, particularly the Dome of the Rock – which had been a salient concern in various scenarios entailing escalation at the Temple Mount in the 1980s. Conversely, they might increase the motivation for acts of desperation among Muslim extremists.

Jewish Visitation, including religious visitation, at the Temple Mount also became easier and calmer after an entryway to the Mughrabi Ramp was established and the Murabitat women and Waqf guards who had clashed with religious Jewish visitors were expelled, following the murder of three police officers on the compound in July 2017. The growing number of religious Jewish visitors to the Temple Mount (about 48,000 in the 2021-2022 Jewish year according to data from the organization Yaraeh) has caused a shift among a significant portion of politicians aligned with the right, religious Zionism, and even the center in terms of their stance on Jewish religious visitation to and prayer at the Temple Mount. The debate on rights, the strengthening of Jewish sovereignty, and messianic claims about the approaching redemption and rebuilding of the Temple have become intertwined in the discourse among activists and politicians who focus on the issue. The Temple Mount organizations have succeeded in shifting the police and Israeli authorities to support their struggle and reinforce the Jewish presence on the compound. Through their demand for Jewish prayer to be permitted and institutionalized on the Temple Mount, they have generated public and political power in pursuit of their short-term goal – establishing a permanent Jewish presence on the compound alongside the spatial and temporal division of the site between Jews and Muslims, similar to that established at the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron. Countering these trends through a policy shift by the police or the ruling authorities appears politically very difficult at this time.

On the Muslim side we see the declining influence at the Temple Mount of the Jordanian establishment, Palestinian Authority representatives, and Waqf leaders, alongside the growing strength of East Jerusalemites and various religious and political actors engaged in “bottom-up” activity surrounding the compound. As noted, this trend has been evident ever since East Jerusalemites succeeded in having the metal detectors (magnetometers)

removed from the Temple Mount in the summer of 2017, in having the police fences on the stairs at entrance to Damascus gate removed, and in the expulsion the Palestinian Authority's appointed mufti, Muhammad Hussein. His expulsion was accompanied by calls of support for Muhammad Deif, after what was seen as Hamas's success in defending Al-Aqsa and East Jerusalem residents during Ramadan 2021 and Operation Guardian of the Walls.

A comprehensive look at the developments underway on both sides, Jewish and Muslim, with respect to the Temple Mount / Al-Aqsa points to a common theme that might have far-reaching repercussions: The institutional bodies – the Chief Rabbinate, the Waqf, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, and to some extent the Israeli government as well – are “hamstrung” by “bottom-up” pressure from the Jewish and Muslim publics. The difficulty faced by decision-makers in actually making decisions regarding such a sacred compound and sensitive issue has cleared the path for “players on the field” who have, to a large extent, seized the reins from the institutional bodies, which in turn are finding it hard to withstand the pressure and maintain a balanced policy. This dynamic, which is also characteristic of other holy sites, can lead to institutional loss of control over events at the Temple Mount, particularly in times of crisis.

The Israeli governing system is subject to conflicting forces: on the one hand, pressure from the Temple Mount organizations and political bodies that support them, and on the other hand pressure from Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, and the United States, as well as the impact of Israel's developing ties with the United Arab Emirates, Gulf states, and perhaps also Saudi Arabia and Turkey, all of which urge preservation of the status quo, at least as far as prohibiting prayer by non-Muslims.

Of particular note on the Palestinian side is Hamas's interest in presenting itself as the defender of Al-Aqsa, who is fighting on its behalf and capable of “igniting” the other arenas – including via demonstrations and disturbances within Israel – in continuation of the events that transpired during Operation Guardian of the Walls. The Jewish side, too, has extremist elements who do not fear escalation and in fact hope to exploit it to advance what they perceive as Jewish interests on the compound and progress towards construction of the Third Temple.

Some in the Israeli security establishment are concerned about the Temple Mount violence spreading to other arenas and beyond, but they are reluctant to confront the Jewish

Temple Mount organizations or the political bodies behind them. In addition, within the Israeli security establishment there has gradually emerged a perspective according to which a balance should be struck between Muslim rights of worship and Jewish rights that would, in practice, include silent prayer, Torah lessons, and the like. The police, the main actor in charge of Temple Mount affairs on the Israeli side (usually with no clear directive from the political echelon), use the growing Jewish presence on the compound and their own increasingly closer ties with Jewish Temple Mount organizations as a counterweight to the Muslim presence, while also trying to strike a new balance on the compound by cautiously navigating among various players that are stirring the pot. Official Israeli spokespeople, ignoring the major changes in the field, continue to claim that the status quo on the compound has not been altered.

What are the implications of these developments? Should we be concerned about the governing bodies in Israel, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, and the Waqf losing control to the “bottom-up” forces that exist on both sides and enjoy the backing of large communities and political actors? Will these governing bodies have the tools and abilities, in the next major crisis, to restrain the groups operating on each side and fueling one another? What will happen to the Jewish movement of religious visitors to the compound? Does it have a “glass ceiling” that will curtail its future expansion in the face of opposition by Haredim, the Chief Rabbinate, and the “Yeshivot HaKav” led by Rabbi Thau? Can a balance be struck – and if so how – between the authentic desire of Jews to visit and pray at the Temple Mount and Israel’s practical and existential geopolitical needs? And what will be the image of the Jewish religion and the State of Israel if some of the ideas advocated by the Temple Mount organizations – from the construction of a synagogue on the Temple Mount to active measures in furtherance of building the Third Temple – are realized?

As a historian I try to avoid forecasts and apocalyptic prophecies, but I would definitely recommend that policymakers and all who are engaged in the issue deepen the discussion regarding the developments underway at the Temple Mount/Al-Aqsa compound and among the Jewish and Palestinian publics, and certainly regarding their potential repercussions in various arenas – Jerusalem, Israel, the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the Arab and Muslim world, and the global arena generally. The history of the many struggles between Jews and Arabs over the Temple Mount and the Western Wall, which began roughly a century ago, point to the importance of this sacred compound and the powerful emotions it stirs up in various circles. A possible objective of such a discussion should be a persistent search for ways to reduce the flames surrounding what is considered one of the most sacred and explosive compounds in the world.

Recommendations

The complex reality described here and the queries posed above point to the question of what can be done in the short term to reinstate stability on the compound. Below are a number of operational recommendations, some of which build on similar measures already taken in recent years:

- Reinforcing the coordination with Jordan (despite and because of its weakening) and with the Waqf – continuing the effort undertaken prior to last Ramadan (2022) – and to the extent possible with other actors; establishing a coordination mechanism or “situation room” to handle crises and loss of control; involving experts from all parties in crisis management.
- Installing cameras at the gates to the Temple Mount, which would stream to a joint center of the police and the Waqf, backed by Jordan, in furtherance of the understanding reached by US Secretary of State John Kerry with King Abdullah and Prime Minister Netanyahu in October 2015.
- Reinforcing the Waqf and measures against Hamas actors and radical Islamists operating on the compound. One of the possibilities to consider would be increasing the number of Waqf guards, in coordination with the authorities in Israel and after receiving approval from security bodies.
- Assigning Waqf guards the role of responding in the event that young Muslims engage in rioting or barricade themselves in any of the structures on the compound. If the Waqf is unsuccessful, the police would step in. The guiding principle should be that the police could only break into the mosque in special emergency cases.
- Dealing with the core group of young Palestinians (about 500 youths according to the police) who took part in the demonstrations and protests at Damascus Gate and the Temple Mount, among other means through educational-leadership and occupational programs similar to the District Attorney’s project for dealing with stone-throwing youths in the neighborhood of At-Tur.
- Increasing the height of the wall or installing a net that would prevent stone-throwing into the Western Wall Plaza. Such measures would prevent the spread of violence and stone-throwing from the Temple Mount to the Western Wall Plaza.
- In coordination with Jordan and the Waqf, removing construction debris (which currently provides a supply of stones for rioters) from the compound.

- Creating a mechanism for the police and authorities to handle the fake news being disseminated through social media, which fans the flames among both the Jewish and the Muslim-Palestinian publics; developing quick, efficient ways of disseminating credible information that could help instill calm.
- Enhancing coordination among the Israeli authorities focused on the Temple Mount: the police, Israel Security Agency (Shin Bet), National Security Council, Foreign Ministry, Antiquities Authority, and others. One possibility for consideration is the creation of a permanent apparatus or body to handle Temple Mount affairs and crises, alongside the police, which currently bear nearly sole responsibility for the day-to-day management of the Temple Mount.
- Preserving the Western Wall's status as the main Jewish site of worship, with the Western Wall Heritage Foundation and the Chief Rabbinate providing a counterweight to the Temple Mount's rising status.
- Restraining the radical Jewish groups among the Temple Mount organizations: those seeking to sacrifice lambs, those who enter the compound disguised as Muslims (to "stir things up"), and others – along the lines of measures taken by the police and the Israel Security Agency in preparation for Ramadan 2022.
- Restraining Jewish worship on the compound; ensuring that the groups of Jewish religious visitors are small enough for the police to supervise; prohibiting loud public prayer services (beyond quiet prayer); instituting a prohibition on prostrations, loud singing, blowing a shofar, displaying flags, and the like – including stricter enforcement by the police against violators. Hints of such stricter enforcement were evident in the preparations for and during the 2022 Tishrei holidays. During Sukkot the police took measures to prevent rituals – such as the lulav ceremony, prostration, public prayer services, and the like – but not always successfully. Clear boundaries have to be established surrounding Jewish ritual on the compound: delineating what is permissible and what is prohibited, so as to prevent further escalation.
- Assigning a role to the Waqf guards (whose duties relating to Jewish activities on the mound have been rendered hollow) alongside the police, in order to redeem their honor in the eyes of the Muslim population.

The three final recommendations naturally depend on the policy of the new government, formed on 29 December 2022 under the leadership of Benjamin Netanyahu following the victory in the November 2022 elections. The Temple Mount, as noted, was already a central

issue in the negotiations on a coalition government, with MK Itamar Ben-Gvir, a prominent Temple Mount activist and leader of the Otzma Yehudit party, was appointed Minister of National Security in charge of the police. Ben-Gvir and the five other members of his party are expected to demand significant changes at the Temple Mount, in favor of the Jewish side. Conversely, however, it appears that the Haredi party leaders who support the Chief Rabbinate position and oppose religious Jewish visitation to the compound (along with Avi Maoz, representative of the Haredi nationalist party Noam) will voice objection to any change regarding religious Jewish visitation and prayer at the compound. Presumably, the United States, Jordan (which warned against any change in the status quo at the compound), Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Morocco, and perhaps also Turkey and Saudi Arabia will exert pressure on the new government to refrain from unilateral measures that would favor the Jewish side and could fan the flames of protest and violence on the Muslim side, and this pressure, too, will likely have an effect. Significant changes on the Temple Mount in favor of the Jewish side could undermine the Abraham Accords and Israel's developing ties with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco. Who will prevail in this battle of the titans? The banal and best answer might be: Time will tell.

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Israeli policy on the Temple Mount has undergone a transformation in recent years. The main element of the “status quo” as formulated by the government – namely, a prohibition on Jewish prayer at the Temple Mount – has been changing before our eyes. The number of religious Jewish visitors to the Temple Mount has been growing, and a variety of religious rituals (including prayer services and Torah lessons) have gradually been shaping a new reality on the compound. This change reflects profound developments that are taking place among the Jewish public, particularly the national-religious public, regarding the place of the Temple Mount in religious consciousness and practice, and it starkly contravenes the position of the Chief Rabbinate and important Haredi (ultra-orthodox) adjudicators, who prohibit religious visits by Jews to the Temple Mount. Concurrently, there have also been changes on the Muslim side: The influence of the Jordanian establishment, Palestinian Authority representatives, and Waqf leaders over what happens at the Temple Mount / Al-Aqsa is declining, while the strength of East Jerusalemites and local “bottom-up” activists is increasing.

This study, conducted in partnership with the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, surveys the developments and trends that took place at the Temple Mount during 2015-2022, examines the factors that led to erosion of the status quo regarding Jewish prayer at the Temple Mount, and considers the repercussions of these changes for various actors in Israel, the Palestinian arena, the Muslim world, and the international arena. The study focuses primarily on changes that have taken place on the Israeli-Jewish side since 1967, yet without overlooking developments on the Palestinian and Jordanian side, given that the two stories are intertwined and reciprocally influential.

Dr. Amnon Ramon is a historian, a senior researcher at the Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research, and the deputy director of the Institute for Research on Eretz Israel at the Yad Ben-Zvi Institute. His main fields of research are the history of Jerusalem in the modern era, the Temple Mount and holy sites, modern Christianity, the Christian world’s ties to the holy land, and the Arab population of East Jerusalem.

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