

JERUSALEM



CONFRONTATION: An Israeli woman walks through a group of Palestinian women protesting at Jewish visitors to the compound known to Muslims as Noble Sanctuary and to Jews as Temple Mount in Jerusalem's Old City last October. **REUTERS/FINBARR O'REILLY**

After 900 years, Jews are chipping away at Muslims' exclusive control of a Jerusalem site considered holy by both religions

Holy rights

BY LUKE BAKER



SELFIE STICKS: Right-wing Jewish activists during a May visit to the compound. **REUTERS/AMMAR AWAD**

JERUSALEM, JUNE 4, 2015

Every morning at 7.30, Murad Hamad sets up a flimsy plastic chair in the shade of the Moroccans' Gate entrance to Al-Aqsa Mosque compound in Jerusalem and waits for the tourists to arrive.

Hamad's job is to help keep the peace at one of the world's holiest places, a site sacred to both Muslims, who call the compound the Noble Sanctuary, and to Jews, who refer to it as the Temple Mount because of the building that once stood there. The guard is not much concerned with the

sun-creamed tourists. But he pays close attention to the groups of devout Jews and Israeli nationalists who try most days to enter the site and pray.

Those groups are at the centre of a creeping shift in Jerusalem: After 900 years, Jews are chipping away at Muslims' exclusive control of the site, the third holiest in Islam. The shift, which has provoked violence in the past, threatens to open a dangerous new front in the Israel-Palestinian conflict, adding religious enmity to a political struggle in the very heart of the disputed city.

Al-Aqsa has banned non-Muslim prayer since 1187. Like Muslims across the region,

Hamad and the other 70 or so guards employed by the Waqf, the Islamic trust that oversees the mosque, see Jews praying there as a serious insult.

The risk of confrontation remained small as long as the groups pushing for the right to pray remained at the fringes of Judaism. A decade or so ago, a handful of Jewish faithful would enter the compound each day. Attempts at prayer were rare. The Chief Rabbinate of Israel declared in 2007 that Jews should not visit the site because it was too holy.

But in recent years the radical fringe has become increasingly mainstream, drawing



MISSION MAN: Yehuda Glick, here in 2011, wants Jews to be allowed to pray at the Old City compound. Below, right: A security guard for the Waqf, the custodians of Muslim sites in Jerusalem.

REUTERS/EMIL SALMAN, AMMAR AWAD

in nationalist, secular supporters and backing from high-profile politicians. A hundred or more Jews can arrive at the mosque some days, in large, organised groups. Last year Yossi Farenti, then Jerusalem District Police Chief, told the Israeli parliament's Internal Affairs committee that the number of Jews visiting the site had increased 27 percent in the first half of 2014. "There is indeed a worsening in the past few years as to what happens at Temple Mount," he said. "This is a fact. No one disagrees. You can see it in the numbers."

A growing number of rabbis have contradicted the Chief Rabbinate, saying visits should be encouraged precisely because the Temple Mount is divine. Jewish visitors mumble prayers under their breath and walk barefoot on the ancient stones in a sign of obeisance.

A range of groups, some of them well financed by the Jewish diaspora, are campaigning for open access to Temple Mount, which Jews believe is the point from where

God created the world and was the site of the second Jewish temple until 70 AD (see "Disputed land"). They want the right for Jews to pray alongside Muslims. Some even want to build a new temple and have crafted sacred gold-and-silver vessels and hand-stitched priestly vestments ready for the day it is sanctified. Other supporters are breeding red heifers, hoping for one without a white blemish that can be sacrificially slaughtered at the temple, as described in the Book of Numbers.

Palestinian Muslims and others across the region fear their control is slipping.

"They want to change the rules," said Hamad, the Waqf guard.

CHANGE IN STRATEGY

Perched on an esplanade at the eastern edge of Jerusalem's Old City – the Mount of Olives and the Garden of Gethsemane behind – there are few patches of land more contested than this 35 acres.

The critical moment in the modern

Disputed land

The history of the ground where the Dome of the Rock stands is one of repeated conquest and destruction.

The area was first settled by the Canaanites some 4,000 years ago. Jews believe that a temple was built during the reign of King Solomon around 1000 BC, and then destroyed by the Assyrian King Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC. Construction of a second Jewish temple began in 516 BC and that building stood – with occasional renovations and additions – until the Romans destroyed it in 70 AD.

Control traded back and forth between Christians, Persians, Arabs and others for a thousand years.

Muslims constructed the Dome of the Rock in 691 AD, and Al-Aqsa Mosque, the third holiest shrine in Islam, 14 years later. The Dome of the Rock is built right at the point where the Prophet Mohammad is said to have ascended to heaven. That point also happens to be atop the site of Judaism's Second Temple, and encompasses the Foundation Stone, a rock holy to Muslims, Jews and Christians.

When the Christian Crusaders wrested Jerusalem from Muslim control in 1099, they turned Al-Aqsa and the Dome of the Rock into a palace and stables for the Knights Templar, according to archaeologists.

Saladin recaptured Jerusalem in 1187 and Muslims have controlled the site ever since, whether the Mamluks, the Ottomans or the Jordanians, who oversee it to this day via a trust known as the Islamic Waqf.



REUTERS/AMMAR AWAD

era was Israel's capture of the Old City in the six-day war of 1967. For Israeli Jews, control of the Old City tied together politics, religion and nationhood. Following the victory, tens of thousands flocked to the Western Wall, believed to have been a retaining support for the second Jewish temple built 2,500 years ago. It was the first mass Jewish pilgrimage to the site since the temple's destruction.

But days later, with the approval of the prime minister, Defence Minister Moshe Dayan went to see the imams of the Islamic Waqf and handed them back the keys to the mosque.

"I said that Israeli troops would be removed from the site and stationed outside the compound," Dayan wrote in his autobiography. "The Israeli authorities were responsible for overall security, but we would not interfere in the private affairs of the Muslims responsible for their own sanctuaries.

"We had no intention of controlling Muslim holy places or of interfering in their religious life."

Over time, a status quo evolved under which Jews have been allowed to enter and tour the area but forbidden to pray. Israeli police and some military help provide security, but the Waqf administers the compound.

There were some early attempts to change that. In the 1980s, a messianic terrorist group called the Jewish Underground plotted to blow up the Dome of the Rock and replace it with a temple. That plan was foiled by the Shin Bet, Israel's domestic intelligence agency.

In 1990, another group calling itself the Temple Mount Faithful tried to lay a cornerstone for a new Jewish temple, provoking riots that killed 22 Palestinians.

The Waqf says things really began to shift from September 2000, when Ariel Sharon, then Israel's opposition leader, visited Temple Mount with a large delegation just before an election. Many Palestinians



SIX-DAY WAR: Defence minister Moshe Dayan (centre) walks with General Uzi Narkiss (left) and Chief of Staff Yitzhak Rabin after Israel captured the Old City in June 1967

REUTERS/GPO/

ILAN BRUNER/HANDOUT

saw the move as a provocation. It led to a violent uprising called the Second Intifada, also known as the Al-Aqsa Intifada, which continued for five years and left about 3,000 Palestinians and 1,000 Israelis dead. Access to Al-Aqsa for both Muslims and non-Muslims was greatly restricted.

In recent years the groups committed to overturning the status quo have shifted strategy, becoming more organised and gaining donors and influence.

While there are still radical elements, and frequent verbal and physical confrontations with Muslims at Al-Aqsa, the groups try to cast the issue as one of religious freedom, arguing that Jews should enjoy the same prayer rights as Muslims.

A SHOOTING

The most visible proponent of the new approach is Yehuda Glick, a red-bearded, American-born rabbi who set up the Temple Mount Heritage Foundation in 2007 and now acts as a spokesman for several Temple Mount organisations.

A 49-year-old father of eight, Glick has become a rallying figure for the movement, frequently photographed with supporters such as an outspoken politician from Netanyahu's right-wing Likud party, or studying pictures of a possible new temple.

In 2013 and again in 2014 he was arrested by police after confrontations at Al-Aqsa and banned from visiting. He sued and won a court ruling allowing him to return once a

Holy sites in Jerusalem's Old City

1 Temple Mount/Noble Sanctuary

Jews call the 35-acre compound Temple Mount because it was the site of their Second Temple, which was destroyed by the Romans. Muslims call it the Noble Sanctuary and see it as the third most Holy site in Islam. The site is controlled by Muslims but some Jews and Israelis want the right to pray there.

2 Dome of the Rock

Islamic tradition says that the Prophet Mohammad ascended to heaven on a winged horse from this spot.

3 Al-Aqsa Mosque

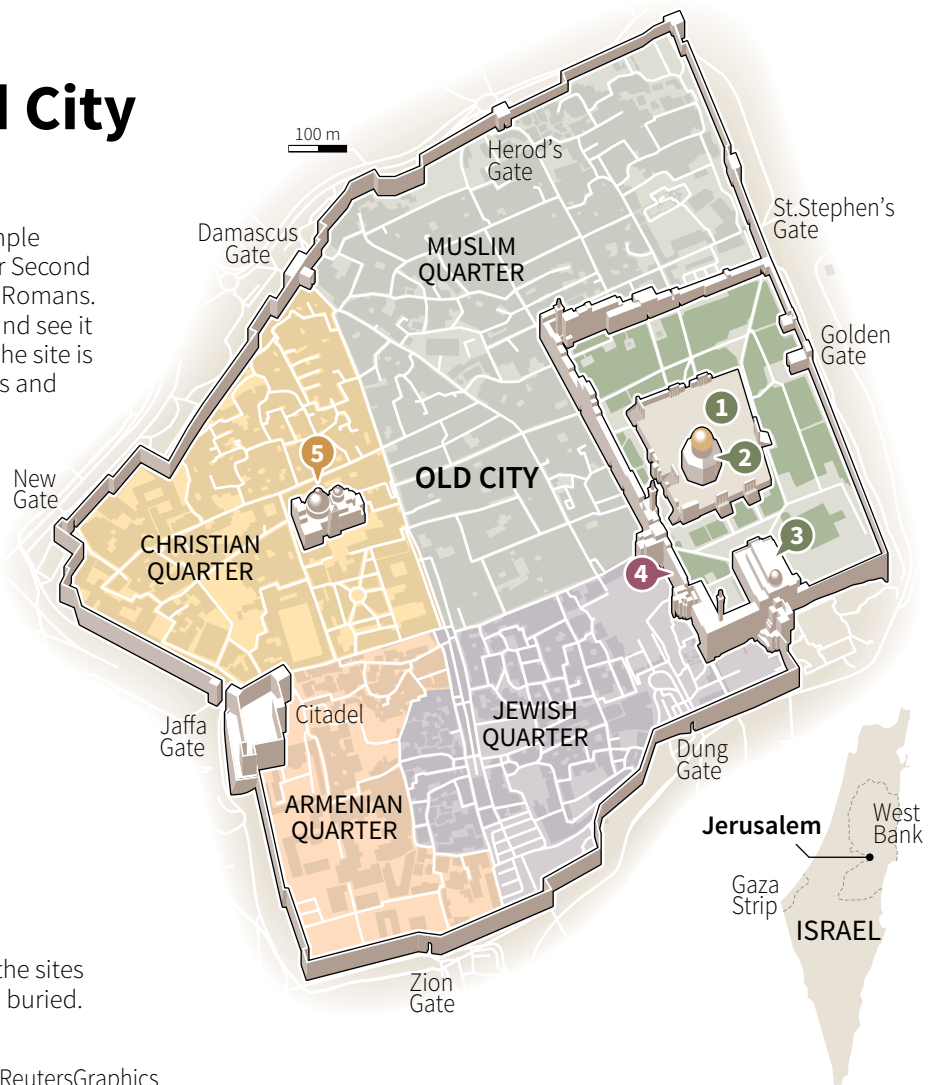
The third holiest in Islam after Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia.

4 Western Wall

The last remnant of the Second Temple compound and one of the holiest sites in Judaism.

5 Church of the Holy Sepulcher

Christians believe the church marks the sites where Jesus Christ was crucified and buried.



Sources: XPlore Jerusalem | C. Inton, F. Chan/ReutersGraphics

month under tight supervision.

Last October, as Muslim anger at the presence of Jewish worshippers triggered clashes, Glick was shot four times by a Palestinian when he left a conference in central Jerusalem. After 10 days in a coma, and life-saving operations by a Muslim surgeon, Glick came around.

"I respect the Muslims' right to pray," he told Reuters as he recovered from his injuries. "But there is no reason in the world that at the only holy place for the Jewish people, a Jew should not have the right to pray.

"The Temple Mount is the holiest place in the world according to the Bible and there should be freedom to pray for all believers – Jews, Christians and Muslims."

"AN AGGRESSION"

That is not how Mohammad Ahmed Hussein, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem and the head of the Waqf, sees it.

As the inheritor of a job handed down almost without break since the 12th century, Hussein is the overriding religious authority at Al-Aqsa and holds the keys to the mosque. He believes the precedent

created by more than 800 years of religious practice is incontrovertible.

"No one but Muslims are allowed to perform any kind of prayers at Al-Aqsa," he told Reuters, referring to the compound rather than just the mosque itself.

"Jewish prayer at Al-Aqsa is not so much an insult as it is an aggression. If Jews try to pray at Al-Aqsa, it will only create more tensions in the region."

For Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, that is potentially a big problem.

Netanyahu has repeatedly said the

arrangement that has governed Al-Aqsa since 1967 should not change. But after Glick was shot, Israeli authorities temporarily shut all access, including for Muslims. In protest, Jordan withdrew its ambassador to Tel Aviv, the first time it had taken such a step since signing a peace deal with Israel in 1994. Jordan has had special responsibility for Al-Aqsa since the 1967 war. The Hashemite Kingdom has financed the Waqf and paid for renovations to the mosque and the Dome of the Rock. Its anger was echoed in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and beyond, leaving Netanyahu worried about regional stability.

He beefed up Israeli security around the Old City, a move that many Palestinians saw as proof that change was coming.

"A SMALL GESTURE OF DEFIANCE"

Six months on, the situation appears calmer, though tensions remain.

Five days a week – there is no access on Fridays or Saturdays – religious-nationalist Jews join foreign tourists to walk up the covered wooden ramp, through the Moroccans' Gate, the only one of the 11 ancient gates non-Muslims can use, and into the holy compound.

Israeli guards assemble the Jews into groups of 10, confiscate their religious and prayer accoutrements for the length of the visit, and then assign them Israeli police escorts.

At the top of the ramp, where Israeli forces keep dozens of riot shields and other security equipment, Waqf guards join the Jewish groups. The Israeli police lead the visitors around, while the Waqf guards maintain more distance.

On one recent visit, a pious Jewish teenager, yarmulke on his head and long curls hanging either side of his face, fell to the ground in the act of prayer. Police quickly hoisted him to his feet and warned that he would be thrown out if he tried to pray again.

As the group passed in front of Al-Aqsa



CHALLENGE: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the Western Wall, Judaism's holiest prayer site, in February. Netanyahu has repeatedly said the status quo should remain. **REUTERS/MARC SELLEM/POOL**

“The Third Temple, which will be a house of prayer for all nations, will be built very soon.

Yehuda Glick

Temple Mount Heritage Foundation

mosque, the police urged them not to get too close. Several ignored the warnings and stepped towards the portico, where Muslim men and women enter via separate doorways.

A group of women in headscarves and veils began shouting “Allahu Akbar” (“God is Greatest”) at the top of their voices, protesting the group’s presence.

As the Jewish group moved away from the mosque into a grove of trees on the eastern edge of the plaza, it was left alone, allowing surreptitious prayer to begin.

Efrem Goldberg, an American rabbi, wrote an account of a visit he made to the Temple Mount last year, in which he

described feeling intimidated by Muslims there. “In a small gesture of defiance,” he wrote, “we continuously prayed in our hearts and when we paused opposite the Kodesh Ha’ Kadashim” – the Holy of Holies, where Jews believe the Ark of the Covenant once stood – “we even had Daniel Katz,” a rabbi, “give us the priestly blessing.”

A THIRD TEMPLE?

Last month, an estimated 30,000 Jews waving banners and carrying Israeli flags marched through the Old City to celebrate Jerusalem Day, the anniversary of Israel’s victory in the 1967 war. Palestinian protesters clashed with Jewish marchers as they thronged to the Western Wall.

Some left-wing Israelis criticise the event as a provocation. For supporters, the march is a chance to impose a Jewish presence throughout the Old City.

Netanyahu said in a speech that “only under Israeli rule will there be freedom



ENTRANCE: The Dome on the Rock, seen through one gate to the compound that is sacred to both Muslims and Jews. **REUTERS/AMMAR AWAD**

of worship for all religions in Jerusalem. Believers pray at their holy sites not in spite of our rule in the city, but precisely because of it.”

Some Palestinians think it is a matter of time before Temple Mount supporters in the Israeli government propose dividing up prayer times, giving Muslims certain hours to worship and Jews others.

Glick said the momentum is all in one direction.

“The Third Temple, which will be a house of prayer for all nations, will be built very soon,” he said, repeating a mantra of the Temple Mount faithful.

Hamad, who said he has seen a steady change during his 10 years as a Waqf guard, is convinced a crisis is coming.

“It’s going to blow up,” said the 36-year-old. “It’s certain.”

Edited by Simon Robinson

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Luke Baker, Bureau Chief Israel and the Palestinian Territories

luke.baker@thomsonreuters.com

Simon Robinson, Enterprise Editor, Europe, Middle East and Africa

simon.robinson@thomsonreuters.com

Simon Newman, Photo Editor

simon.newman@thomsonreuters.com

Michael Williams, Global Enterprise Editor

michael.j.williams@thomsonreuters.com