

# Jerusalem's Holiest Site, a Raw Nerve in Mideast Conflict

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JERUSALEM (AP) — A rectangular hilltop compound in Jerusalem is ground zero of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Known to Muslims as the Noble Sanctuary, it is Islam's third holiest spot and is home to an iconic golden-domed shrine. But to Jews it is the Temple Mount, their holiest place, and the only religious site in the world revered by Jews where Jews are explicitly forbidden to pray. This sensitive arrangement — and attempts to change it — lie at the heart of the unrest that rocked Jerusalem this week.

Growing numbers of religious Jews are paying visits to the site, feeding longstanding fears among Muslims that they intend to take over the area and build a new biblical temple, despite Israel's repeated insistence that no such plans are in the works.

In a new development, Israel has been restricting some Muslims from the compound when Jews visit. Israel says this is to reduce friction, but Palestinians fear that Israel intends to establish Muslim-free Jewish visiting hours, upsetting the fragile status quo in place since Israel captured the site in the 1967 Mideast war.

Israel says it has no plans to change the status of the site and will reserve it for Muslim prayer only, but even rumors to the contrary are enough to spark unrest — or worse. Fifteen years ago, a visit to the compound by then Israeli opposition leader Ariel Sharon set off deadly violence that escalated into the second Palestinian uprising.

Here is a look at the compound and why it is so explosive.

### WHY IS THE SITE HOLY?

In ancient times, the compound was home to the First and Second Jewish Temples — the center of ancient Israelite worship. Religious Jews pray that a third temple will one day be built there.

After the Muslim conquest in the 7th century A.D., the Dome of the Rock was built to shelter an exposed slab of bedrock where tradition says the Prophet Mohammad rose to heaven. Jewish tradition holds that the bedrock slab at the site might be where the holiest part of the Temple once was.

The Al-Aqsa Mosque is also on the compound, and Muslim prayers are held inside.

The site is so holy to Jews that many rabbis say Jews should not even enter. Instead, Jews today congregate at the adjacent Western Wall, a retaining wall of the ancient Temple complex.

But attitudes among Orthodox Jews have been evolving, and growing numbers of Jews, backed by their rabbis, have begun ascending the compound. They risk arrest if their lips are seen moving, and sometimes resort to tricks to pray, like pretending to speak on their phones.

### WHO CONTROLS THE SITE?

Israel has maintained control over the site since capturing it from Jordan in the 1967 Mideast War. But soon after, Israel established what's called the status quo — regulations that maintain Muslim rights and seek to keep religious tensions in check.

Under this arrangement, Muslim authorities manage the site's religious and civilian affairs under Jordanian supervision, while Israeli police oversee security. The status quo forbids Jews from praying at the site, but they are allowed to visit along with other tourists.

In recent years, fringe movements of Jewish activists have been gaining support and Jewish visits have been on the rise, with annual numbers in the thousands. Some ultranationalist Israeli politicians have also joined the visitors, adding to Muslim fears that Israel wants to take over the site. Members of a youth wing from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party visited the site Thursday.

Israel has begun to enforce restrictions on Muslims at the site. This month, Israel outlawed an informal Muslim activist group that gathers around Jewish visitors to the site and chants religious slogans in protest.

In the last two months, Israel has also been enforcing intermittent bans on Muslims under the age of 50 from entering the complex during Jewish visiting hours in the morning, according to the director of Al-Aqsa Mosque, Omar Kiswani. Similar restrictions were put in place last year during an outbreak of violence in Jerusalem and the Gaza War, and lasted for about half a year.

Israeli police say the restrictions are based on daily security assessments, but Muslims fear Israel is planning a shared arrangement by which Jews and Muslims have their own times to access the site.

Dore Gold, the director of Israel's Foreign Ministry, dismissed such speculation Thursday as false rumors meant to "put fear in the hearts of many Muslims" and incite violence.

#### WHY DID VIOLENCE ERUPT THERE THIS WEEK?

Jewish activists publicized a notice for "a mass visit to the Temple Mount" to take place on Sunday, the eve of the Jewish new year. Rumors quickly spread among Palestinians that "settlers" were plotting to take over the site.

For three days, police entered the compound to disperse Muslim protesters who had holed up in the mosque and hurled rocks, concrete blocks and firebombs at security forces.

The Israeli response was condemned across the Arab world, raising concerns that the tensions could spiral out of control.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas condemned the clashes in particularly harsh language, insisting that none of Jerusalem's holy sites belonged to Israel.

An official from Saudi Arabia's Foreign Ministry held Israel responsible and said the clashes could lead to "serious consequences." The Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the world's largest Islamic body, comprised of 57 majority-Muslim nations, urged the U.N. and E.U. to act against the "Israeli violations." The U.S. State Department urged both sides to maintain calm.

Israeli police said they would beef up security patrols in east Jerusalem and the Old City and ban Muslims under the age of 40 from praying at the holy site Friday because of intelligence that protesters were planning riots at the site.

#### WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF THE SITE?

Netanyahu insists the status of the site will not change.

Religious Jewish activists have been lobbying Israeli leaders to enforce an arrangement modeled after another contentious site: a West Bank site known by Jews as the Cave of the Patriarchs and by Muslims as the Ibrahimi Mosque, where Israeli soldiers oversee a tense regime of alternating prayer times for Jews and Muslims.

Jewish activist Yehuda Glick, who survived a Palestinian assassination attempt for his campaign to allow Jewish prayer at the Jerusalem holy site, said he pressed his case recently in a meeting with Netanyahu.

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### Old City - Temple Mount

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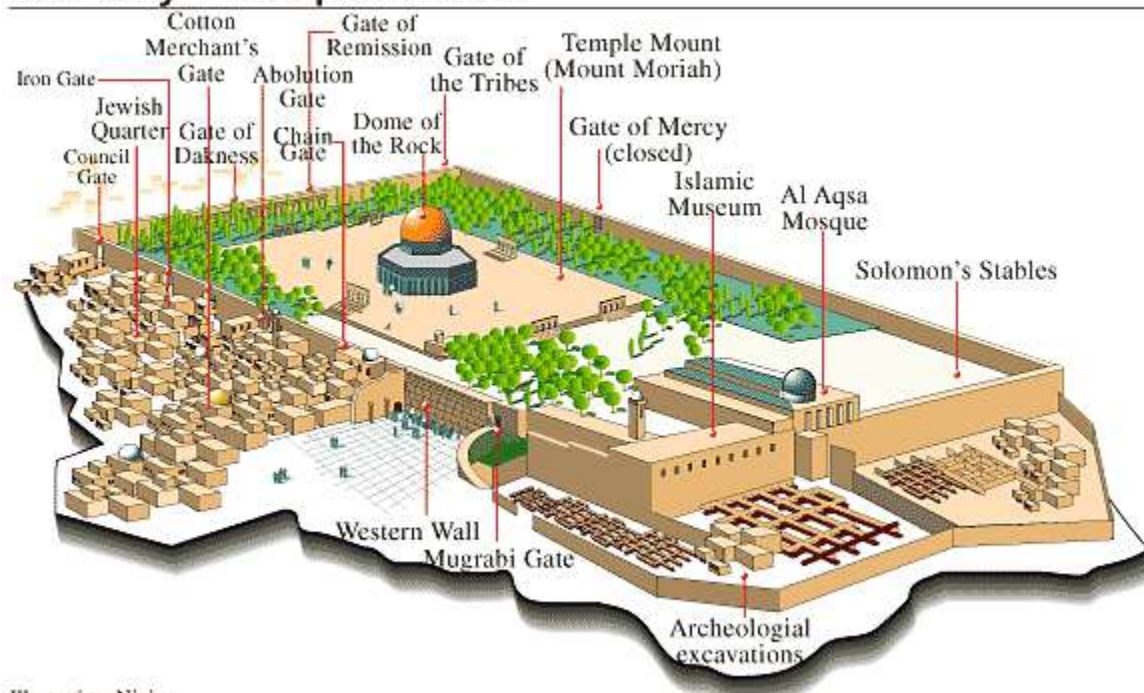


Illustration: Ninio

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