

Tensions rise in Jerusalem over site of Temple Mount and Dome of the Rock

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A site holy to both Jews and Muslims, the Temple Mount—known as the Haram al-Sharif to Muslims—is at the center of an intense debate.

Tensions were sparked in late October by the attempted assassination of Yehuda Glick, an advocate for building a third Jewish temple on the Temple Mount. He is also at the forefront of a campaign to allow Jewish prayers at the site, believed to be where two Jewish temples stood thousands of years ago. Israel currently bans Jews from praying on the plateau because it wants to prevent clashes with Muslims worshipping at the nearby Noble Sanctuary, a mosque considered to be Islam's third-holiest site.

Glick was hospitalized with four bullet wounds in the chest. Afterward, Israelis and Palestinians ramped up violence and traded recriminations over whether Glick and like-minded activists are responsible for the clashes.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has blamed “terrorists” for the clashes over Temple Mount. On November 10, he ordered his security cabinet to increase the number of security forces on the ground and move forward on the demolition of “terrorists’ homes.”

The next day, Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas, speaking in Ramallah at an event marking the tenth anniversary of the death of the former PLO leader Yasser Arafat, said Israel's settlement policies and actions at the Temple Mount have led to a “detrimental religious war.”

The conflict has created rifts in the Jewish community, too.

Ignoring Netanyahu's call for restraint, Moshe Feiglin, deputy Knesset speaker, went to the Temple Mount and vowed to “change the reality” of a ban on Jewish prayer at the site.

Later, Yitzhak Yosef, Sephardi chief rabbi of Israel, spoke at the funeral of a teenager who was the victim of a Palestinian attack at a Jerusalem light rail station in early November.

“We need to stop the incitement provoked by people going to the Temple Mount,” Yosef said, according to Israeli news site Ynet.

Motti Inbari, a religion professor at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, worries about the increasingly popular campaign to build a third temple—a proposal that would fan the flames of hatred against Jews around the Middle East.

Inbari noted how advocates of a third temple recently posted a video on Facebook and YouTube that uses computer-generated graphics to illustrate a reconstructed shrine on the Temple Mount. The video then links to an online fund-raising campaign that has generated \$104,814 toward the construction of the temple.

In the video, “you don’t see any mosques on the Mount,” said Inbari, who specializes in studying fundamentalist movements. “The clip suggests that the temple replaces the mosques on the Mount. This can explain why Muslims are nervous.”

Inbari said Temple Mount activists mobilized financial and political support in Israel, particularly through the Temple Institute, a Jerusalem-based nonprofit dedicated to rebuilding the temple.

“The Temple Institute is supported with millions of shekels by the state every year,” he said. “They get money from the Ministry of Religious affairs and the Education Ministry, and even the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption is giving them money, so it is already part of the mainstream being supported by the state.”

The tensions have sparked concerns in Jordan also. Jordan has been the official guardian of the Noble Sanctuary and other Islamic institutions in Jerusalem since 1919, a status reaffirmed in the 1994 peace treaty with Israel.

Jordan withdrew its ambassador from Tel Aviv in early November after Israeli police instituted closures at the Al-Aqsa Mosque.

Wasfi Kailani, director of the Jordanian Hashemite Fund for the Restoration of Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock—the two buildings that make up the Noble Sanctuary—said Glick and his compatriots are dangerous.

Just how influential Glick and other third-temple enthusiasts are is debatable. Several lawmakers from Netanyahu's ruling coalition were in attendance at the seminar in Jerusalem where Glick was speaking before he was shot. And after being removed from a respirator, Glick called Knesset speaker Yuli-Yoel Edelstein, a member of Netanyahu's Likud party, according to Israel's Channel 7 website.

But Mordechai Kedar, an Arabic language lecturer at Bar-Ilan University in Tel Aviv, rejected the idea that Temple Mount activists were influential.

"I know Yehuda Glick—he's one of a handful of lunatics who represent nobody but themselves," Kedar said.

Kedar insists that Palestinian leadership has provoked the crisis in Jerusalem. He criticized Abbas for sending a condolence letter to the family of the suspect in Glick's shooting, Mutaz Hijazi, who was killed by Israeli police at his home the morning after the attack.

"The Temple Mount activists are not violent," Kedar said. "They just work on the Jewish right to pray at the Temple Mount." —Religion News Service

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