

Netanyahu prohibits Israeli parliament from visiting Temple Mount

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JERUSALEM (RNS) In a bid to defuse the wave of Palestinian violence that has struck Israel and the West Bank during the past few weeks, Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu today (October 8) prohibited all of the country's parliamentarians from visiting the Temple Mount, a contentious site holy to both Jews and Arabs.

Netanyahu made the controversial decision in order to quell Muslims' fears that Israel was preparing to assert sovereignty over part or all of the Mount, the site of the Al-Aqsa Mosque and Dome of the Rock, as well as the long-destroyed Jewish biblical Temples. Netanyahu has long denied such intentions.

Far-right-wing Jews, including Israeli agricultural minister Uri Ariel, say Jews should have the right to pray at Judaism's holy site, and some have vowed to build a Third Jewish Temple on the Temple Mount. Arab leaders, including Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, have said such a move would result in a regional war against Israel.

Since 1967, when Israel captured East Jerusalem from Jordan, it has permitted the Wakf, a Jordanian Islamic trust, to administer the Temple Mount, or Haram al-Sharif in Arabic. Under this "status quo" agreement, non-Muslims are permitted to visit the site but not to pray there.

Now Muslim leaders are insisting that the Temple Mount belongs to Muslims only and that Jews must not visit.

The latest round of violence began in September, when right-wing Jewish parliament members and other Jews visited the Temple Mount, and Muslims stockpiled rocks and metal bars inside the Al-Aqsa Mosque. When Israeli police—acting on intelligence that the Muslims planned to throw the stones at Jews praying at the Western Wall, below the Temple Mount—confronted them at the mosque, televised news footage outraged the Arab world.

The violence has escalated in the past week. Palestinians have held dozens of protests across Israel and the West Bank and have carried out several terrorist attacks. Israelis and Palestinians have been injured or killed.

Thursday's prohibition against visiting the Temple Mount has angered both Arab and Jewish parliamentarians.

"We [spit on] the prime minister's decisions. They are illegal according to international law, and I do not recognize them," Arab parliament member Jamal Zahalka told the Israeli media site NRG. "Netanyahu has done well in preventing the ascent of extreme right [parliament members] because all they want is to cause provocation. In contrast with them, who come as occupiers, we go to the mosque because we belong to the place, because we want to keep its peace and protect it. Our right to ascend to the Temple Mount supersedes any prohibition imposed by Netanyahu."

Ariel said the prohibition "may be seen by the rioters and terrorists as capitulation to their demands, and will, of course, increase rather than decrease terror," according to Walla, an Israeli news site.