

Why Al-Aqsa is the epicentre of Israeli-Palestinian tensions

Analysis: In response to repeated violations since 1967 of the fragile status quo, protecting the Al-Aqsa compound in occupied East Jerusalem has become a focal point of the Palestinian fight against dispossession and erasure.

Described as 'the most contested piece of real estate on earth', Al-Aqsa Mosque Compound, known as Haram Al-Sharif (Noble Sanctuary) to Muslims and Temple Mount to Jews, is today the epicenter of Israeli-Palestinian tensions.

Many aspects of the site's history, religious significance, and socio-political status long precede Israel's inception and are closely entwined with the overall historical status quo of the Old City of Jerusalem itself.

In 1917, having defeated the Ottoman Empire, the British army seized control of Jerusalem. Upon arrival at the Old City's Jaffa Gate, General Allenby dismounted his horse and entered on foot in what was then understood as a show of respect to the ancient site. It signaled that the British authorities intended to maintain the status quo upheld by the Ottomans in the city for four hundred years.

Under the Ottoman Turks, Jerusalem's Muslims, Christians, and Jews in their separate quarters coexisted in relative harmony, with edicts granting the various religious groups shared rights in the holy places, demarcating areas of control and establishing time schedules in areas shared by more than one religion. This came to be known as the 'status quo'.

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The status quo acquired additional legitimacy by being included in the 1856 Paris Peace Convention Treaty, the 1919 Versailles Peace Treaty, and the British Mandate government's 1922 Palestine Order-in-Councils.

Key to the success of this arrangement was the lack of a single sovereign entity or a power hierarchy prioritizing one group's religious needs over others, and this is

precisely what would gradually change in the coming decades.

Facilitated by the British authorities in the 1920s and 1930s, Jerusalem saw an influx of European Jewish settlers, which aroused fear in the local Palestinians of a Jewish takeover of the Holy City. Clashes and riots between Palestinians and Jewish settlers were inevitable.

In 1947 the UN adopted the Partition Plan for Palestine, which set to divide the country into Arab and Jewish states. It assigned an international status (*corpus separatum*) to Jerusalem with the intention to retain the city's status quo.

In 1948, Israel was established and Palestinians were dispossessed and displaced. This saw the Israeli state seize the western part of Jerusalem. The Israel-Jordan Armistice Agreement of 1949 formalised the *de facto* division of the city into an eastern sector, including Haram Al-Sharif, controlled by Jordan, and a western sector controlled by Israel.

Israel occupied East Jerusalem in June 1967, and within days it demolished the 800-year-old Arab Muslim quarter of Al-Maghraba (Moroccan quarter) and expelled its residents to provide increased access for Jews to the Western Wall. Although Muslims still claim the land as *waqf* (Islamic religious property), the area now is a hub for religious and ultra-nationalist Jews.

The adjacent Haram Al-Sharif was initially spared direct Israeli control, fearing such a step would ignite the region and bring about sharp international criticism. The Israeli occupation allowed the Islamic *waqf*, mainly supervised and funded by the Jordanian government, to continue to administer the Muslim site.

This, in theory, is what stands today. But the events on the ground suggest that Israel's alleged commitment to the Muslim site's status quo has been dangerously eroded.

The incremental takeover of Al-Aqsa

The 35-acre compound of Haram al-Sharif has been under Muslim rule for nearly 14 centuries and houses the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa Mosque, Islam's third holiest site.

For Jews, the same area is believed to be the site of the destroyed First and Second Temples (586 BC and 70 CE respectively). However, independent

scientific verification is scarce, as Jewish claims are solely biblical and no significant archaeological remains have been found to support them.

Soon after Israel occupied East Jerusalem in 1967, it claimed it had no wish to change the situation in the Old City. The country's Ashkenazi and Sephardi chief rabbis issued a Halachic decree forbidding the entry of Jews into the Al-Aqsa compound on the grounds it was deemed a violation of Jewish religious law.

The decree was approved by even fundamentalist Rabbi Zvi Yehud Kook, a key leader of religious Zionism whose followers represent the core of religious settlers in the occupied West Bank today.

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For Palestinians, the signs were ominous from day one. Demolishing the Moroccan quarter soon after the occupation was, effectively, an encroachment upon the status quo. This was immediately followed by the Israeli Border Police taking control of a building near the Compound's northern wall, turning it into a permanent Israeli police headquarters. Protecting Haram Al-Sharif from Jewish violations was the pretext.

Yet, in 1969 a fundamentalist Australian Jew, Denis Michael Rohan, managed to enter Al-Aqsa Mosque and started a fire in the building. With mostly buckets of water, Palestinian Muslims and Christians rushed to put out the fire, only to be obstructed by the Israeli authorities, leaving the fire to rage for hours. The ancient mosque suffered significant damage.

Over the next decades, it would become clear that the initial religious decree to ban Jewish entrance into Haram Al-Sharif and Israeli governments' commitment to the legal status quo were not upheld. This would be confirmed by Israel's 1980 unilateral and illegal annexation of East Jerusalem.

The annexation provided the Israeli authorities with the legal tools to gradually create facts on the ground in the compound with the hope of diminishing the Jordanian custodianship over the site, weakening Palestinians' attachment to it and eventually establishing a permanent Jewish presence there.

Dismantling the Dome of the Rock and building the temple on its ruins continues

to be the goal of some Jewish far-right groups. Between 1967 and 2000, dozens of Israeli incursions by religious Jewish fanatics occurred, trying to lay the so-called Temple cornerstone at Al-Aqsa. Several excavations were also carried out under the compound.

Each time, Palestinians protesting these incursions were met with violence by Israeli police.

In April 1982, the Israeli security opened fire within the Dome of the Rock, killing and injuring six Palestinians and causing physical damage to the building. A raid inside the Compound in October 1990 led to the death of nineteen Palestinians. In 1996, widespread protests erupted following Israel's opening of a tunnel under Al-Aqsa. Over 100 Palestinians were killed and a thousand others injured by Israeli forces.

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Staring into the abyss

The watershed moment came in 2000 with former PM Ariel Sharon's ‘visit’ to Haram Al-Sharif, surrounded by over a thousand security personnel. The visit, which ignited the Second Intifada, opened the door to more intensive and organized incursions into the compound.

On security grounds allegedly in response to the Intifada, Israel revoked the waqf's administration of visits by non-Muslims.

Before 2003, the Israeli government allowed a maximum of three religious Jews to visit the site at the same time. From 2017 onwards, the incursions became a daily routine, normally carried out between 7.30am and 10.30am, and again between 1pm and 2pm under police protection. Dozens of settlers join each tour, with the number rising to hundreds on Jewish holidays, such as Passover, Purim, and Jerusalem Day.

In 2009, the number of settlers raiding Haram Al-Sharif reached 5,000. It rose to 15,000 in 2016, then 25,000 in 2017, and 30,000 in 2019. In the first three months of this year, the raids saw a 35% surge compared to the year prior.

Marking the so-called ‘Jerusalem Day’ this year, Haram Al-Sharif saw a record

number of settler incursions under unprecedentedly heavy police protection. Some 2,600 Jews stormed the Muslim holy site.

Simultaneously, Palestinians were banned from entering the compound and were met not only by police brutality but also by settler violence at Al-Aqsa gates and across the Old City, including the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood.

Imam and Director of Al-Aqsa, Sheikh Omar Kiswani, said that the Jerusalem Day incursions this year were the most dangerous since Israel's occupation of East Jerusalem in 1967 and that the Israeli authorities have been planning to move the battle to the inside of Haram Al-Sharif. "In so doing, the occupation aims to ignite a religious war," Kiswani warned.

Similarly, Jerusalem's PA-appointed governor, Adnan Gheith, told Al Jazeera Arabic that the final goal of the Bennett government is starting a regional religious war.

In a fiery speech last month commemorating the Gaza war's first anniversary, Hamas leader Yehiyah Sinwar warned that Al-Aqsa Mosque is a red line and that what happened during Ramadan, when the Israeli troops stormed the mosque and attacked the worshippers, could be a prelude for a widespread religious war.

Pointing at a large poster behind him showing Israeli troops inside the mosque in full gear, Sinwar threatened that, "The Sword of Jerusalem (a reference to the Gaza battle) remains unsheathed, and [the resistance] will never allow [the storming of Al-Aqsa Mosque] to happen again".

Palestinians believe that reframing their anti-colonial struggle in religious terms would ultimately play into Israel's hands. Israel actively promotes the idea that Jews, represented by Israel, and Christians, represented by 'the West', are in a global struggle against 'radical Islam'. A religious war can be endless, and that suits Israel perfectly.

Meanwhile, a political struggle has an end, and this framing is at odds with Israel's final goal of a complete takeover of Palestinian land. What is more, in a religious war, the illegality of the occupation and international law becomes irrelevant.

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intensive campaigns to change the status quo at Haram al-Sharif, for without the compound, Israel's 'sovereignty' over East Jerusalem remains incomplete”
To protect Haram Al-Sharif, Palestinians have, among other things, organized what is known as Murabiteen, a social and religious sit-in where worshippers form a permanent presence in the mosque to prevent the settlers from taking over.

The Murabiteen, however, have been routinely targeted by the Israeli authorities, either through physical abuse, arrest, or temporary banishment from the Compound.

With the dramatic increase in the number of raids on the Compound and police brutality, this time directly supported and facilitated by Israel's far-right government, protecting the Muslim holy site has become extremely challenging.

To Palestinian-Israeli Knesset member (MK) Sami Abu Shihadeh, what is happening in Jerusalem reflects a fast and dangerous deterioration of the majority of the Jewish population toward fascism.

Celebrating the occupation of another people, a reference to the Jerusalem Day's flag parade, is a sure sign of a society-wide moral decline, MK Ahmed Tibi commented. Whether there is indeed a decline toward fascism remains a subject of debate; what is certain is that Israeli society has been marching steadily towards the far-right.

All evidence suggests that what is coming is further escalation, and more intensive campaigns to change the status quo at Haram al-Sharif, for without the compound, Israel's 'sovereignty' over East Jerusalem remains incomplete.

Only further violence, more Palestinian dispossession, and the increased intractability of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will be the result.

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