

# Why Is Jerusalem's Temple Mount Important to Jews, Muslims and Christians?

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**By Benjamin Weinthal**

JERUSALEM—Israel's new right-wing National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir managed to upset the U.S., France, the Palestinians and Sunni Arab countries on Tuesday due to his 15-minute visit to the holiest site for Jews, called the Temple Mount. It is now reported that the U.N. Security Council will meet later this week in New York to discuss the visit.

The area is also the third most important site in Islam, the Al-Aqsa Mosque, which is also located on the Temple Mount—the Jewish name for the compound—in the Old City of Jerusalem. The Temple Mount is where both temples stood in Jerusalem before they were destroyed by invading armies.

Israel's new right-of-center coalition government entered office last week. Since Israel captured the Temple Mount in the Old City of Jerusalem during the 1967 Six-Day War, Israeli governments have permitted the Jordanian religious institution, the Waqf, to manage the Temple Mount and Al-Aqsa Mosque. Jews and Christians are largely not permitted to pray on the Temple Mount, and there are severe restrictions for non-Muslim visitors to enter the compound.

The controversial firebrand Ben-Gvir tweeted a picture of himself on the Temple Mount with security officials, writing, "The Israeli government of which I am a member will not surrender to a vile organization of murderers. The Temple Mount is open to all and if Hamas thinks that if it threatens me, that will deter me, they had better understand that times have changed. There is a government in Jerusalem."

Israel has declared all of Jerusalem its indivisible capital. Palestinians want East Jerusalem, where the Temple Mount is situated, as their capital of an independent a state along with the absorption of the disputed West Bank territory.

The Temple Mount is the most significant holy site for Jews because two ancient temples were located on the compound and later destroyed. The Babylonians destroyed the First Temple in 586 B.C., and the Romans annihilated the Second Temple in year 70. A section of the Second Temple—the Western Wall—is still standing.

According to Jewish tradition, the 3,000-year-old Temple Mount is the location where God collected dust to create Adam—the first human being. The Temple Mount is also holy for Jews because it is the location where Abraham almost sacrificed his son Isaac to affirm his faith. The Jewish King Solomon built the First Temple of the Jews at the site.

Muslims also term the Temple Mount the Haram al-Sharif, the Noble Sanctuary, where the Al-Aqsa Mosque and Dome of the Rock are located. The founder of Islam, Prophet Muhammed is, according to tradition, said to have ascended to heaven from the Noble Sanctuary.

For Christians, the site is very significant as it was where Jesus would have been as a young boy, where he attended festivals, and he is also said to have taught there. Additionally, it's believed that Jesus foretold the destruction of the temple while there.

Rev. Dr. Petra Heltd, a leading Christian scholar, told Fox News Digital that "The significance of the Temple Mount cannot be overstated in the Christian world. We can go back to the New Testament where Jesus prayed and got his Brit Milah (circumcision) and then his Barmitzvah."

She added, "The disciples constantly went to the Temple Mount to pray. We have the story of Peter who healed sick people on the Temple Mount. And where the disciples and many people received the Holy Spirit on the Temple Mount. This constitutes the beginning of the Church. The Church writings are full of importance of the Temple Mount."

Heltd continued, "It is a very deep and intimate connection for Christians to the temple. The churches in the Middle East still commemorate each year of the circumcision of Jesus on the first of January and the Barmitzvah and the healing of the sick by Peter."

The Temple Mount has long been a flashpoint for tension. When as opposition leader the former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon visited the compound in 2000, the late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat used his visit as a pretext to launch a new war of terrorism against the Jewish state called the Second Intifada, according to Israeli security experts.

U.S. criticism of the visit came from U.S. Ambassador to Israel Thomas Nides, who said that the U.S. "has been very clear in conversations with the Israeli government on the issue of preserving the status quo," in a statement.

Ned Price, the U.S. State Department spokesman, told reporters, "The United States stands firmly for preservation of the historic status quo with respect to the holy sites in Jerusalem. We oppose any unilateral actions that undercut the historic status quo. They are unacceptable. The President has previously underscored the need to preserve that historic status quo at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, as has the Secretary."

Egypt's Foreign Ministry expressed a warning about "the negative repercussions of such measures on security and stability in the occupied territories and the region, and on the future of the peace process."

Turkey termed Ben-Gvir's visit as being "provocative," while the Palestinian Authority (PA) also condemned the visit as an "unprecedented provocation." The PA added that "Netanyahu bears responsibility for this attack on Al-Aqsa."

Additional Sunni Muslim countries, with which Israel has diplomatic relations, condemned Ben-Gvir's visit. The United Arab Emirates rebuked Ben-Gvir for his "storming of the Al-Aqsa Mosque courtyard" and urged an end to the "serious and provocative violations."

Jordan blasted "in the severest terms the storming of the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the violation of its sanctity." The Jordanian Foreign Ministry in Amman summoned the Israeli ambassador Eitan Sorkis, who got a dressing down from the Hashemite Kingdom.

It is unclear what Jordan meant by the "storming" of the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Ben-Gvir did not enter the mosque and his presence on the compound went without friction.

Rabbi Abraham Cooper, the associate dean of the Los Angeles-based Jewish human rights organization, the Simon Wiesenthal Center, told Fox News Digital that Jordan is, "The last country on earth to lecture Israel. Jordan destroyed Jewish life in the Old City in 1948."

Jordan controlled the Old City in Jerusalem from 1948 until 1967. Cooper noted that Jordan "barred Jews for 19 years from praying at the Western Wall" and "it is the height of hypocrisy," for Jordan to lash out at Israel.

The Palestinian terrorist organization Hamas, which was designated a foreign terrorist entity by the U.S. and European Union and rules the Gaza Strip, warned the "continuation of this behavior will bring all parties closer to a big clash." Hamas threatened a "religious war" against Israel in September 2022, after Jewish activists visited the Temple Mount.

Rabbi Yishai Fleisher, an adviser to Ben-Gvir, told Fox News Digital, "Freedom to pray at one's holy sites is a basic human right—and that is why Minister Ben-Gvir visited the Temple Mount today. The fact that Jews are barred from praying or condemned for ascending is racist and discriminatory. This government has shown today that it will not be held hostage to terrorist threats—and will promote the values of religious freedom and freedom of expression for all."

The Israeli organization Beyadenu documented the number of visits in 2022 as 51,483 Jews to the site. Beyadenu said in 2021 that 34,651 Jews visited the Temple Mount.

"There should be no discrimination against Jews visiting the Temple Mount. At the end of the day, visits are not mass prayers anyway, so it cannot be argued that they harm the status quo," Matan Peleg, the CEO of Im Tirtzu, told Fox News Digital.

Peleg said that "After 150 years of conflict, it is time for the Arabs to show some maturity and responsibility and stop their racist incitement, which historically has only hurt them."

Israel does not have diplomatic relations with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, but Netanyahu has made it a top goal to normalize relations with Riyadh. Saudi Arabia blasted Ben-Gvir's visit as "provocative practices" and said his action amounted to a "storming" of the Al-Aqsa courtyard.

In a statement to the media, Prime Minister's Benjamin Netanyahu's office noted, "Netanyahu is committed to strictly maintaining the status quo. We will not be dictated to by Hamas. Under the status quo, ministers have gone to the Temple Mount in recent years, including (former) security minister Gilad Erdan. Therefore, the claim that a change has been made in the status quo is without foundation."