

Israel adds WestBank shrines to protected list: Rachel's Tomb and the Tomb of the Patriarchs

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A decision to include two West Bank shrines in a list of Jewish heritage sites slated for preservation has been praised by religious and right-wing Jews and scorned by Palestinians and their supporters.

Speaking at a February 21 cabinet meeting, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he would add Rachel's Tomb and the Tomb of the Patriarchs to the list of dozens of heritage sites he recently unveiled. Netanyahu has pledged more than \$100 million to revitalize Jewish heritage sites and build a historical trail linking them.

Israeli media said Netanyahu took the step after religious members of his government blasted the sites' exclusion from the list.

[Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas warned February 23 during a visit in Belgium that the region could plummet into "a religious war" even as some Palestinians protested the decision in Hebron.]

Rachel's Tomb is the traditional burial place of the biblical matriarch Rachel. It is located just inside Palestinian-controlled Bethlehem, next to Jerusalem.

The Tomb of the Patriarchs, located in the even more volatile West Bank city of Hebron, about 20 miles south of Jerusalem, is believed to contain the remains of the biblical patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as well as the matriarchs Sarah, Rebecca and Leah. The second holiest site in Judaism, it is also sacred to Muslims, who call it Al-Haran Al Ibrahim.

Hebron is home to several hundred Jewish settlers and more than 160,000 Palestinians who often clash, resulting in decades of violence. In 1929, Arabs murdered 67 Jews in Hebron, and in 1994, Jewish settler Baruch Goldstein murdered 29 Palestinians at prayer at the Patriarchs' tomb.

The West Bank, part of the biblical land of Israel, is home to many places that are holy to Jews, Muslims and Christians. Israel captured the territory, as well as East Jerusalem and Gaza, during the 1967 war.

Palestinians, who want these territories to form the basis of a future state, insist that Netanyahu included the tombs in order to thwart Palestinian sovereignty.

“This particular violation is especially dangerous because it will add to the religious component of the conflict in a way that might bring dangerous consequences,” Ghassan Khatib, a Palestinian government spokesman, told the *Jerusalem Post*.

The New York-based Orthodox Union, meanwhile, commended Netanyahu for his move, saying, “While some continue to wage a campaign to deny and obscure the historic connection of the Jewish people to the land of Israel . . . nowhere is that Jewish connection more obvious than these two biblical sites.” -*Religion News Service*