

Israel removes landmines from Jesus baptism site

by [Judith Sudilovsky](#) in the [June 14, 2011](#) issue

Pilgrims are flowing back to the traditional site of Jesus' baptism on the West Bank of the Jordan River as Israel removes 40-year-old landmines and makes improvements to the area.

"It is a very sensitive place politically and religiously and is of importance to both Christians and Jews," said Lt. Col. Ofer Mey-tal of Israel's department of Civil Administration, which oversees the project.

Located in a closed military area near Jericho, the site—called Qasr el Yahud—has been revered since the fourth or fifth century as the place where John the Baptist recognized Jesus as the Messiah. Jewish tradition holds that this site is also where the ancient Israelites crossed into the Promised Land following their flight from Egypt.

Visitors to Qasr el Yahud have tripled since 2004, numbering almost 60,000 last year and some 44,000 in the first four months of 2011, said site manager Saar Kfir, who works in the Civil Administration.

While the Israelis maintain that the baptism took place on their side of the river, the Jordanians insist it occurred a few meters across the water on theirs.

So far, various Israeli government agencies have spent \$2.9 million on the site, Mey-tal said, including an effort to remove landmines that were placed by Israel in the 1970s under threat from Jordanian incursions. For now, other landmines will remain behind clearly marked barbed wire

fencing.

Additional funds, Mey-tal said, will finance shower facilities for pilgrims, a larger parking lot, more shaded areas and accessibility to the river for those with disabilities. —RNS/ENInews