

Al Aqsa Mosque: Can Israel, Jordan prevent Jerusalem from catching fire?

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) The images on social media this week made Jerusalem's Old City look like a conflict zone, with black smoke rising above the Al Aqsa Mosque and the flash of firecrackers exploding inside.

Several days of violence between Israeli police and Palestinian activists on a plaza holy to Muslims and Jews have triggered a new political and diplomatic crisis for Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and neighboring Jordan.

With the start this week of the month-long string of holidays marking the Jewish New Year, Israeli right-wing activists have renewed their push for more access and prayer rights on the plaza—known as the Temple Mount to Jews and the Noble Sanctuary to Muslims. Palestinian activists are rallying to “defend” the mosque, alleging a violation of the decades-long religious balance in the Old City referred to simply as the “status quo.” But Israeli police say they are fomenting the clashes by stockpiling rocks, barricades, and explosives inside the mosque, echoing months of clashes that destabilized Jerusalem and caused 11 deaths one year ago.

At stake is the potential repeat of religious eruptions that have plagued the holy city for centuries and of a spillover to the Palestinian territories. It was a visit to the holy complex by Ariel Sharon, the hawkish late former prime minister who was then leader of the Likud party, just before the New Year that triggered the second Palestinian uprising 15 years ago.

Already, disturbances elsewhere in Palestinian areas of Jerusalem have become more frequent and Israeli police are cracking down in response. On Thursday, police announced restrictions on Friday prayers at the Temple Mount, barring any males under 40 years old.

The tensions have prompted Jordan, which is recognized as a guardian of the Temple Mount/Noble Sanctuary compound, to protest to the UN and threaten to

downgrade of diplomatic ties with Israel. Last year, Amman temporarily recalled its ambassador to Israel in protest over the clashes. On Thursday, Saudi King Salman also called on the international community to intervene.

The crisis poses a test for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Jordan's King Abdullah, who have strengthened ties between the countries despite the lack of a Middle East peace process. Along with the United States—which has a strategic interest in avoiding a breakdown between two major allies in the region—they were able to agree on measures last year that removed restrictions on Muslim worshippers and eventually ended a months-long grass roots uprising in Palestinian neighborhoods of Jerusalem. Like last year, both sides have sought out top U.S. officials to mediate a return to calm.

“The Temple Mount is the most sensitive place in the world in its potential to trigger conflict between religions,” said Yair Yitzhaki, a former Israeli police chief in an interview with Israel Radio. “The need to preserve the status quo is critical, and every remark from a politician regarding a change in the status quo can lead to clashes like this and even worse.”

Muslim activists outlawed

What triggered the current round of tension were Israeli government decisions to outlaw two groups of Muslim activists that frequented the site, and to restrict Muslim access at times that Jewish religious activists—many of whom aspire to rebuild the ancient Jewish Temple on the plaza—are permitted to visit the site. Compounding the offense was a video showing Israeli housing minister Uri Ariel violating rules against Jewish prayer at the site.

Palestinians activists allege an Israeli government conspiracy to alter the status quo giving Muslims exclusive religious rights over the holy site, and have rallied to Al Aqsa in what they say is its defense.

Though Netanyahu has resisted calls in the past from his own constituency to assert greater Israeli sovereignty over the plateau, the recent shift in Israeli rules at the site is “pushing the limits” of the fragile religious balance in the Old City, said Daniel Seidemann, an Israeli lawyer who is an expert on East Jerusalem. “The [Palestinian] sense of violation is genuine and reasonable, and the fear justifiable,” he adds.

'Playing with fire'

Netanyahu has been under rising domestic pressure as stone-throwing spread through mostly Palestinian East Jerusalem over the past week—leaving one Israeli motorist dead over the Jewish holiday. On Thursday, Netanyahu vowed to toughen punishment against rock-throwing “terrorists.”

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, meanwhile, said Wednesday that the bloodshed by Muslim demonstrators at the Aqsa mosque is “pure,” which Israelis see as a call to escalate the clashes.

Palestinian legislator Hanan Ashrawi said Israel is gradually trying to establish access for Jewish worshipers at the holy site.

“This is an incremental process. [Netanyahu] knows that the world is busy with the refugee issue, and the Iran deal,” she said. “They seem to think that this is an opportunity to create facts on the ground without provoking, but they are playing with fire.”