

Israel's Provocation at al-Aqsa

Rabbi Plans 'Miracle' at the Western Wall

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The Israeli government has indicated that it will press ahead with a plan to enlarge the Jewish prayer plaza at the Western Wall in Jerusalem's Old City, despite warnings that the move risks triggering a third intifada.

Israeli officials rejected this week a Jerusalem court's proposal to shelve the plan after the judge accepted that the plaza's expansion would violate the "status quo" arrangement covering the Old City's holy places. Islamic authorities agreed to the arrangement after Israel occupied East Jerusalem in 1967.

The site eyed by Israeli officials is located at the Mughrabi Gate, an entrance to the mosque compound known as the Haram al Sharif, the most sensitive site in the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Inside are Al Aqsa Mosque and the golden-topped Dome of the Rock.

Earlier encroachments by Israel on Islamic authority at the site have triggered clashes between Israeli police and Palestinians. A heavily armed visit to the compound by Ariel Sharon in 2000, shortly before he became prime minister, to declare Israeli rights there sparked the second intifada.

In recent weeks, analysts have grown increasingly concerned that a third intifada is imminent as Benjamin Netanyahu's government has advanced settlement building in East Jerusalem and declared several places deep in the occupied West Bank as Jewish heritage sites.

Another assault on Muslim control so close to Al Aqsa Mosque risked "pouring fuel on the fire", said Hanna Sweid, an Arab member of the Israeli parliament who filed the original planning objections to the Israeli scheme.

According to evidence presented to the Jerusalem court, Israeli officials used minor storm damage to a stone ramp leading to the Mughrabi Gate as a pretext to tear it down six years ago. The intention is to replace the ramp with a permanent metal bridge and then extend the Jewish prayer plaza into the area where the ramp was.

The scheme is the brainchild of Shmuel Rabinowitz, the rabbi in charge of the Western Wall, who declared the damage to the ramp in 2004 a "miracle" that had offered Israel the chance to take control of more land from Islamic authorities in the Old City.

The rabbi's plan was approved in late 2007 by a special ministerial committee headed by

Ehud Olmert, then the prime minister. The project has also won backing from Mr Netanyahu, though he froze construction work in July under orders from the Jerusalem court.

The judge, Moussia Arad, proposed in January that the ramp be reinstated, or at the very least that the bridge follow the exact route of the ramp, and that all prayer at the site be banned. That position won the backing of United Nations officials monitoring Israel's work at the Mughrabi Gate.

The Jordanian, Turkish and Palestinian Islamic authorities have all expressed deep concern at Israeli excavations at the Mughrabi Gate that are seen as a prelude to the plaza's expansion.

Observers had hoped that, faced with the danger of another row with the United States so soon after the diplomatic crisis sparked by Israeli settlement building in East Jerusalem, Mr Netanyahu might agree to the court's compromise.

They have been proved wrong.

"Netanyahu has a history of trampling on Palestinian rights in the Old City," Mr Sweid said. "There is every reason to be worried about what he plans to get up to this time."

In 1996, during his previous stint as prime minister, Mr Netanyahu opened the Western Wall tunnel, another excavation close to the mosque compound, resulting in clashes in which 75 Palestinians and 15 Israeli soldiers were killed.

Israel, which says the mosques sit on the ruins of two ancient Jewish temples, built by Solomon and Herod, refers to the site as Temple Mount and has staked a claim to a degree of sovereignty over the area in recent peace negotiations.

Last week, in a sign of the explosive consequences of tampering with the status quo concerning Jerusalem's holy places, riots broke out in a "day of rage" in East Jerusalem following Israel's announcement that it had rebuilt an old synagogue, the Hurva, close to the mosques.

"The Haram al Sharif is a site of unrivalled Muslim sensitivity and the Israeli government is playing with fire here," said Mohammed Masalha, a lecturer who heads a coalition of Islamic groups inside Israel that brought the court case.

In evidence presented to the court, Meir Ben Dov, an Israeli archaeologist and the excavations director at the Western Wall for nearly four decades, produced photographic evidence showing that the storm had caused only a minor landslide.

"I was asked by the government to inspect the damage two days after it occurred and I found maybe a dozen stones had been dislodged," he said. "The ramp could have been repaired in less than a week but instead they decided to demolish it."

Judge Arad, Mr Ben Dov said, had been "shocked" when she saw the photographs.

Mr Ben Dov said his recommendation that the walkway be repaired for \$14,000 was ignored by Israeli officials, including the then-tourism minister, Benny Elon, a settler rabbi who heads

a far-right party. Instead the government tore down the ramp and built a temporary wooden bridge to the Mughrabi Gate while excavations were carried out in the area exposed by the ramp's destruction.

The Jerusalem comptroller, Shulamit Rubin, the city's watchdog official, criticised the excavations at the time, saying they were illegal because the necessary authorisations had not been sought.

The secretive nature of the excavations was widely assumed by Islamic groups to be evidence of an Israeli intention to search for parts of the destroyed temples. With such evidence, Israel would have a stronger claim to extend its control.

The unscientific approach to the excavations was highlighted in early 2007 when it emerged that three years earlier Israeli archaeologists had unearthed at the site a Muslim prayer room from the time of the Saladin, dating to the 11th century, but had kept the discovery quiet.

In February 2007, when Israel brought heavy machinery to the Mughrabi Gate excavations, hundreds of Palestinians clashed with police while the Islamic Movements within Israel staged large demonstrations. Islamic Jihad said it had fired two Qassam rockets from Gaza in response, and Al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade threatened to carry out attacks if the work was not halted.

Islamic authorities also expressed fears that the compound of mosques might be damaged by the bulldozers, and that the heavy machinery might also destroy the as-yet-undiscovered Al Buraq mosque, believed to be located close to the Mughrabi Gate and marking the site where the Prophet Mohammed tethered his horse on his Night Journey between Mecca and Jerusalem.

To calm the situation, Israel allowed Turkish experts to examine the excavations a short time later. They reported that Israel was trying to sideline Jerusalem's Islamic history so that its Jewish aspects could be emphasised.

Israel had another reason for pushing ahead with the illegal excavations, said Kais Nasser, the lawyer representing the Islamic groups. "They needed to unearth something, anything, that could be claimed as an antiquity to nullify Muslim demands for the ramp to be reinstated. Rebuilding the ramp would then be impossible because it would risk damaging an archaeological site."

Mr Nasser said Israel hopes that if it can present the bridge as the only feasible option, then there will be no obstacles to expanding the prayer plaza.

Mr Ben Dov said he shared such suspicions about Israel's activities at the site, adding that the goal of Israeli officials seemed to be to gain control over the whole 480-metre length of the Western Wall.

He and other observers have said this is just one more example of a long-standing policy to gradually encroach on Muslim control of the mosque compound.

Among the most significant has been the creation of the City of David, an Israeli

archaeological park, directly south of Al Aqsa Mosque in the Palestinian neighbourhood of Silwan. The site is run by Elad, an extremist settler group, that has taken over neighbouring Palestinian homes and, along with the Jerusalem municipality and government officials, is pushing for dozens more to be demolished. It eventually wants to link up the park with the Temple Mount.

Jewish settlers have also been concentrating their efforts on taking over Palestinian homes in the Muslim quarter, close to the Haram al Sharif, and have been supported by right-wing politicians, including in the past by Mr Netanyahu.

One settler organisation, Ateret Cohanim, has been especially active, and is known to be excavating under Palestinian homes around the compound in the hope of discovering traces of the temples.

“What we see here is an unholy alliance of government ministers, Jerusalem municipality officials and settler organisations trying to revive a supposed golden era of Jewish sovereignty from thousands of years ago,” Mr Sweid said.

In addition, he said, Israel believed that a more significant Israeli presence close to the mosques would strengthen its hand in any final peace talks over the division of Jerusalem with the Palestinians, with Israel able to stake a bigger claim to sovereignty over the site.

At the Camp David talks in 2000, Bill Clinton, then US president, proposed dividing sovereignty so that Israel would have control over both the “subterranean spaces” of the mosque compound and the Western Wall. During the talks Ehud Barak, the Israeli prime minister of the day, alarmed observers by calling the whole compound the Jewish “holy of holies”, a term previously used in referring only to the inner sanctum of the destroyed temples.

There are additional fears among Palestinians, and the wider Muslim world, of darker plots being hatched by even more extreme groups.

Although Jewish religious purity laws have traditionally forbidden Jews from entering the Temple Mount, a growing number of rabbis are demanding that Jews be allowed to pray in the compound. Even more fanatical groups are known to favour blowing up the mosques and building a third temple in their place.

The recent rebuilding of the Hurva synagogue has added to such concerns. The Israeli media reported that, according to a 300-year-old rabbinical prophecy, the synagogue’s rebuilding would herald the construction of the third temple.

A sordid affair: The Mughrabi quarter’s ethnic cleansing

Israel’s ethnic cleansing of the Mughrabi, or Moroccan, quarter of Jerusalem’s Old City after its capture in 1967 is one of the more sordid episodes of the 1967 war.

Until it was destroyed by Israel in 2004, the stone ramp that led to the Mughrabi Gate — one of the main entrances to the elevated compound of mosques known as the Haram al-Sharif

— was the only visible reminder that the quarter, once home to 1,000 Palestinians, had ever existed.

At the end of the Six-Day war, as Israeli troops poured into the Old City, the Israeli government was presented with an opportunity not only to restore a Jewish presence to the walled city but to create a newly expanded Jewish quarter that would have the Western Wall at its centre.

Before 1948, prayer at the Wall had been possible only at several points along a narrow alley at the margins of the densely populated Moroccan quarter, an area bequeathed in the twelfth century to Saladin's followers by his son Malik al-Afdal.

But in the immediate wake of the “miraculous” victory in 1967, the Israeli government saw the chance to create a wide prayer plaza in front of the Wall, making it the symbolic heart of an expanded Jewish state that could unite religious and secular Jews.

All that stood in their way were the quarter's 135 homes.

On the night of 10 June, Uzi Narkiss, head of the army's central command, authorised 15 private demolition crews to raze the quarter under cover of dark. He, like the politicians, knew that neither the international community nor the Israeli courts would consent to such a brazen violation of international law.

When Teddy Kollek, the mayor of West Jerusalem, had consulted the justice minister, he had been told: “I don't know what the legal status is. Do it quickly and may the God of Israel be with you.”

Uzi Benziman, an Israeli journalist, described the “near-mystic” compulsion that drove those behind the act of ethnic cleansing: “The officers and the contractors considered themselves emissaries, come to renew Jewish statehood as it had been 1,897 years earlier.”

An officer went from house to house ordering the residents to evacuate. According to observers, those who refused finally fled when the walls of their homes came down. One old woman, found amid the rubble, died a short time later.

As the ruins were cleared and the ground levelled to create an expansive plaza in front of the Western Wall, the contractors were told to use the rubble from the homes to build a ramp up to the Mughrabi Gate. The gate is the only entrance to the compound for which Israel kept the key. Today it is the access point for all non-Muslim visitors, including the Israeli police.

The Western Wall and the plaza, on land that had previously fallen under the control of the Islamic authorities, was placed under the jurisdiction of the Israeli religious affairs ministry. A few days later, on the Jewish holy day of Shavuot, an estimated 200,000 Israeli Jews — one in 10 of the population — came to visit the Wall.

Although Israel had effectively annexed East Jerusalem, its leaders were still troubled by the possible international repercussions of being seen to seize control of the Old City's holy places, especially the compound of mosques. Under a so-called “status quo” agreement, Muslim officials were supposed to continue controlling the mosque compound, with Israeli

oversight.

But that did not stop the rapid emergence of a movement in Israel seeking control of the compound too. Many Jews believe the ruins of the temples of Solomon and Herod can be found under the mosques.

From the early 1970s, extremist rabbis — led by the Shlomo Goren, then the chief rabbi of Israel — began lobbying for Jews to be allowed into the compound to pray, despite traditional rabbinical rulings against such a practice.

Jewish groups soon sprang up demanding more: that the mosques be blown up to make way for a third temple that would bring nearer the arrival of the Messiah.

Since the outbreak of the second intifada, little of the status quo agreement remains. Israeli movement restrictions affecting both Gaza and the West Bank mean that today only a tiny number of Palestinians can reach the mosques. Palestinian institutions are also barred from operating inside Jerusalem.

Meanwhile, settlers and Israeli officials have encroached on more and more land around the mosque compound. At the Camp David talks with the Palestinians in 2000, Israel proposed for the first time that Jews be allowed to pray in the compound and that Israel have a degree of sovereignty over the site.

In recent years Jews have started to be escorted by Israeli police inside the compound through the Mughrabi Gate, though praying so far has not been sanctioned.

Jonathan Cook is a writer and journalist based in Nazareth, Israel. His latest books are "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His website is www.jkcook.net.

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