

Erosion of the Status Quo on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif – Latest Developments

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This paper summarizes alarming developments that took place during the recent Jewish High Holiday season, in October 2022, and that have further contributed to the erosion of the status quo on the Temple Mount/Haram a-Sharif. It is important to note that these developments took place under the outgoing “government of change” and are likely to deteriorate even further under the incoming government. Expected members of the new government, such as MK Itamar Ben-Gvir, have long been active with the Temple Movements. Indeed, as part of his election campaign Ben-Gvir visited the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif several times in what was considered a very provocative stunt. This paper should, therefore, be read in accordance with these upcoming political changes and their implications on Jerusalem’s future.

Immediately after the Jewish High Holiday season in October 2022, then-Prime Minister Yair Lapid declared that Israel is committed to the status quo on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, whereby Muslims hold worship rights while non-Muslims, including Jews, enjoy visitation rights.

Lapid stated:

“Regarding Al-Aqsa [mosque], I have clarified at every possible opportunity: *We are not changing the status quo on Al-Aqsa* and we will ensure Muslim freedom of worship on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif ... Our obligation as a government is to allow freedom of worship for every Muslim who wants to pray at Al-Aqsa and we will uphold this... we allow for Jews to visit the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, but we do not allow Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount...” (emphasis added)

The reality, however, is in stark contrast to Lapid’s declaration. As Ir Amim has recently demonstrated in multiple letters, inquiries, and petitions to the Israeli authorities, not only is Jewish prayer now occurring in the Al-Aqsa compound with the complicity of the police, but during the course of the High Holidays the number and frequency of Jewish groups violating the status quo occurred at a serious and alarming frequency.

The following describe systematic and increasingly public violations of the status quo, as documented by Ir Amim over recent weeks, leading to a conclusion that these are new policies decided and backed by the government:

New signage by Temple Movements at the entrance of the Mughrabi Gate that declare Jewish visitation to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif as a religious act

- In recent weeks, Ir Amim documented that the police have erected prominent, new signs in the waiting area where non-Muslim visitors – including Jewish visitors - gather before entering the Holy Esplanade.



These signs were both created and selected for use by the Temple Movements in order to shape the meaning and the experience of visitors to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. They explicitly present the framing that the entrance of Jewish visitors to the holy site isn't simply within the framework of visitation status, as laid out by the status quo, but as an expression of religious ritual.

The placement of these signs in an area under the supervision of a government entity such as the police shows the close cooperation between the police and the Temple Movements, and also constitutes a public statement on the Israeli government's stance on this matter.

- These signs were placed after Tisha B'Av – the 9th of Av (18 July 2022), a Jewish day of mourning commemorating the destruction of the Temple 2000 years ago. On that day, Temple Movement activists uprooted the metal signs by the Chief Rabbi that had previously been in place for decades. The previous sign warned that due to the holiness of the Temple Mount, it was religiously forbidden for Jews to enter it.¹

The police and security guards stationed by the sign did nothing to prevent its forcible removal nor did they detain the ones who did it.

¹ This statement was in accordance with Jewish tradition since the fall of the Temple, as Jewish law demands ritual purification to enter this holy site. Furthermore, due to lost information about the exact location of the "Holy of Holies" – the innermost sanctuary of the Temple where Jewish tradition holds that God resided - all but the High Priest, after extensive purification, on the holiest day of the year are forbidden from entering. This led generations of rabbis to forbid pilgrimage to the destroyed holy site, lest a Jewish visitor who had not undergone proper preparation trod on the sacred ground.

Over four months have passed since the sign was removed and despite an appeal to the Prime Minister and Minister of Public Security (and as of the writing of this report), it has yet to be reinstated.

- In contradiction to the previous sign by the Chief Rabbi, the new signage not only welcomes those who are coming to visit the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, but also *encourages Jewish prayer* at the site. The sign widely calls on the Jewish public to visit the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif “in holiness” (ie: after undergoing proper ritual purification) as it is “the place where the most prayer is heard”. The sign also bears in prominent writing that “The Temple Mount Administration welcomes those making pilgrimage to the Temple Mount... may their prayers be well accepted.”

Beyond the explicit encouragement of Jewish prayer in opposition to the status quo, the signage being written in the name of the “Temple Mount Administration” provides an impression that it is written by a formal organization associated with state bodies. However, the “Temple Mount Administration” is simply a moniker that the position-less organizers of several extreme Temple Movements gave to themselves. Among these activists is Ayala Ben-Gvir, the wife of provocateur politician Itamar Ben Gvir who stands to be appointed National Security Minister following the November 2022 elections.

Despite the spurious name, the police cooperate closely with these representatives and aid them in conveying their messages to the public through the display of these signs.

- The interior of the Mughrabi Ramp corridor in which non-Muslim visitors wait before entering the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif has been completely redesigned in recent weeks. Up until a few weeks prior to the writing of this report, the layout of the waiting area was purely functional - a few places to sit, some drinking fountains, and some shade. Now, posters have been hung that unequivocally declare that the entrance to the Temple Mount for Jews is a religious act.

One such poster spans an entire wall and is divided into 3 sections: An illustration of the eternal flame – an adornment within the Temple that represented God’s eternal presence there, a chapter from the book of Psalms that describes the desirable characteristics of those who make



pilgrimage to the Temple Mount, and the rules of ascending the Temple Mount according to Jewish Law.

- A second poster announces that visitors are standing at “Hallel’s Gate”. Hallel Ariel was a young girl from Kiryat Arba who was killed by a Palestinian in 2016. Her parents, Amichai and Rina Ariel, are Temple Movement activists and since her murder the Temple Movements have begun to call the Mughrabi Gate “Hallel’s Gate”. With this new sign, the police are allowing them to present “Hallel’s Gate” as if it’s the official name of the entrance.



- A large diorama of the Temple has also been recently placed in the corridor, and next to it is a large-scale aerial photograph that shows the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif as it looks today. Superimposed on the photograph are notes identifying and explaining remnants of the Temple that were supposedly found there. The photograph was edited in order to blur out the Dome of the Rock and impose the supposed location of the Temple on top of it.



Temple activists often call the Dome of the Rock “Shikutz” (ie: ‘abomination’ according to Jewish law) that needs to be destroyed. Temple Movements call for the rebuilding of the Temple in the spot of the Dome of the Rock and their activists state that they are working to fulfill this mission.



Collective restriction on Muslim worship and facilitation of Jewish visits during the High Holiday season

- During the High Holiday season, the police continued to enable violations of the status quo by permitting groups of Jewish visitors to pray on a daily basis. These occurrences have been covered by many Israeli news outlets, therefore the government cannot claim that they have no knowledge of this fundamental violation of the status quo.

- Other holiday-specific rituals that have previously been banned, such as blowing the shofar and blessing and shaking the lulav and etrog², occurred time and again without any police intervention. In previous years, the police had prevented these religious observances through limiting the size of groups entering the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif or properly inspecting visitors' belongings prior to ascending.
- In contrast to police permissiveness regarding Jewish prayer, a severe violation of the status quo during which collective restrictions were imposed on Muslim worshippers took place during the High Holidays. This violation of Muslim worship rights saw police preventing Muslim men under the age of 40 from entering the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif during certain hours, collectively denying thousands of worshippers access to the site.

Such collective restrictions on Muslims in favor of facilitating the visitation and prayer of Jewish groups have not been seen since 2015, when it led to a deterioration of the security situation and a months-long violent outbreak that required international intervention to subside.

- The status quo determines that Muslim worshippers are allowed to enter the holy site at all hours that it is open, while there are specific visitation hours for non-Muslims. The Temple Movements have been pushing the agenda of division of worship/entry times for Jews and Muslims, in a similar vein to procedures in place at the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron.

In fact, one Muslim woman documented being told by police that her and a group of women – citizens of Israel – were not allowed to enter the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif because “it is not your day. These hours are not for you.”

This testimony indicates that the idea of dividing time and space on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif is gaining traction among the police.

The combination of the above phenomena illustrates the dangerous dynamics that the government and the police have jointly allowed on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. Contrary to claims that Jewish visitors ‘only wish to pray’ at their holy site, enabling Jewish worship while strengthening the Temple Movements results in a serious violation of the

² A *shofar* is a ram’s horn ritually blown every day during the Jewish month of *Elul* prior to Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. The shofar is also traditionally blown on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The *lulav* is a set of 4 species of plants tied together; the *etrog* is a type of citron. They are waved together as part of celebrating the holiday of Sukkot.

worship rights of Muslims on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif as well as Palestinian freedom of movement. By legitimizing the “Temple Mount Administration”, the police have once again capitulated to the Temple Movements’ desires for collective restriction on Muslim worshippers – a dangerous precedent.

It is evident that any violation of the status quo serves as a slippery slope to further violations: what began as permitted quiet, individual prayer has led to facilitated public prayers in coordination with the police and hints of furthering the Temple Movement agenda for divided entry and worship times.

Official Israeli statements aimed at normalizing violations of the status quo

Ahead of the High Holidays this year, high-ranking Israeli officials issued several alarming statements about far-reaching changes regarding the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif in an attempt to normalize a new standard with which to approach status quo violations.

- Five days before Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, then-Prime Minister Yair Lapid met with King Abdullah of Jordan and explained that, "during the High Holidays there will be an increase in the number of Jews going up to the Temple Mount" and that "in Israel, we expect the Jordanians to support [Israeli] conduct." This statement requires Jordanian acquiescence to Israeli demands and ignores both the peace agreement with Jordan, in which Israel respects Jordan’s special status as overseer of the holy site, and also Lapid’s abovementioned statement during Passover in which he expressed conciliatory messages in order to build trust with the Jordanians.
- A week before the High Holidays, Commander of the Jerusalem District Police Major General Doron Turgeman praised the “Temple Mount Administration” at a press conference and said that, “we will meet with [the Temple Mount Administration] before the holidays and they are helping us lead an orderly ascent [of visitors to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif]." This is the first official statement in which such a senior police official publicly acknowledges the coordination between the police and this unofficial group.

It is hard to imagine a similar case in which the police coordinate their decisions regarding the management of a site together with a private entity with no authority, all the more so when it comes to a sensitive location such as the Temple Mount / Haram al-Sharif.

- During the High Holidays, the right-wing newspaper Israel Hayom conducted an interview with policewoman Yaffa Asmara, who in recent years has been in command of organizing visits to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif as part of the police's "Holy Sites" unit. Similar to the statement made by Major General Tourgeman, Asmara also describes "cooperation with the Temple Mount Administration." She further explained that she "believes with all my heart that we need to allow freedom of worship and visitation for all religions on the Temple Mount."

In light of all this, it is not a reach to say that all of these activities come closer to pointing to Israel establishing facts on the ground in violation of the status quo, whereby Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount is explicitly allowed.

The government must act to return the situation on the Temple Mount/ Haram al-Sharif in accordance with its commitments to the status quo. In light of the growing gap between the statements by the Prime Minister and his ministers and the facts on the ground, further declarations are not enough to fix the damage that has been done to the status quo. Serious procedures must be implemented with the goal of the police upholding their obligation, and that the management of the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif is fulfilled as obligated by the status quo. This will also serve to lower the current distrust of Muslim and Arab stakeholders regarding Israel's management of the holy site.

Recommendations

In order to reduce tensions and prevent a further escalation towards unrest, the Israeli government must be called upon to undertake the following measures:

1. **Remove the new signage.** The police should return the entrance via Mughrabi Gate to its previous state. Specifically, there is no place for signage that encourages Jewish prayer or assigns a religious meaning to non-Muslim visits to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif in accordance with the status quo. All signage at the Mughrabi gate entrance must be by official, governmental organizations while signs by private organizations – especially Temple Movements – must be removed and not permitted.
2. **The police must renounce its cooperation with the Temple Movements,** as reflected, for example, in the coordination meetings it holds with the body that calls itself "[the Temple Mount Administration](#)."
3. **Decisive action must be taken to cease Jewish prayers and other holiday rituals on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif.** This is ongoing evidence that the government does not uphold the status quo.

4. **Limit the size of visiting Jewish groups.** The larger the number of Jewish visitors, the more difficult for the police to maintain order and uphold the status quo on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif.
5. **Return of police conduct to when they successfully acted to prevent provocations by Temple Movement activists on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif.** In light of the police's ongoing lack of enforcement, the burden of proof is now on the police to underscore that the State of Israel is committed to the status quo.
6. **Removal of age restrictions on the entry of Muslims into the Old City and/or the Holy Esplanade.** These restrictions should certainly not be imposed in order to allow Jews to visit the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. This is inconsistent with Israel's commitment to the status quo where the rights of worshippers should trump the rights of visitors.
7. **The rising tension on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif demonstrates once again the necessity for the police and government to act in coordination with the Jordanian Waqf.** In the absence of such coordination, the police continue to act against the Waqf and prevent any possibility of joint action to prevent escalation and maintain order on the Temple Mount / Haram al-Sharif.