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WEEK

Masjid Al-Aqsa

Sacred Site in Jerusalem Under Seige

Friends of Al-Aqsa Report
2026

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Summary

This report has been prepared for Aqsa Week 2026 and is to be presented in the British Parliament.

Masjid Al-Aqsa, located in the heart of Jerusalem's Old City, occupies a unique and irreplaceable significance to Muslims worldwide, Palestinian identity, and an international heritage site. As Islam's holiest sanctuary in Jerusalem, it is inseparably linked to revelation, prophecy, and centuries of Muslim stewardship. Yet despite this status, Al-Aqsa remains widely misunderstood, frequently misrepresented, and increasingly endangered. This report seeks to address that gap by documenting the religious, historical, legal, and political realities surrounding Masjid Al-Aqsa, and by examining the mounting threats to its integrity and future.

It is important to note, Al-Aqsa is not merely a single building but an entire sacred sanctuary encompassing the Dome of the Rock, the Qibli prayer hall, and numerous historic structures across a 35-acre compound. Its significance predates Islam itself, as it is believed to be the second house of worship established on earth, the first direction of Muslim prayer, and the site of the Prophet Muhammad's Night Journey and Ascension. These foundations place Jerusalem at the core of Muslim belief and identity, both spiritually and historically.

Throughout centuries of Muslim governance, Jerusalem was administered as a pluralistic city. From the time of Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab (7th Century) to the

Ottoman era (20th Century), Islamic rule generally upheld religious coexistence while safeguarding Muslim custodianship of holy sites. This balance was formalised through the "Status Quo" arrangements governing access and worship, later embedded in international law. These arrangements recognised Masjid Al-Aqsa as an Islamic Waqf (endowment trust) while permitting non-Muslim visitation without worship, a framework reaffirmed repeatedly in modern diplomatic agreements.

The modern crisis surrounding Al-Aqsa emerged following Israel's occupation of East Jerusalem in 1967. Although Israel publicly claims to uphold the status quo, the reality on the ground has been one of gradual erosion. Increasing restrictions on Muslim worship, frequent security incursions, and a sharp rise in organised settler visits have undermined long-standing arrangements. These developments have fuelled widespread Palestinian concern and triggered repeated cycles of unrest.

Central to this escalation is the growing influence of messianic Zionist movements that seek to impose Jewish sovereignty over the Al-Aqsa compound and ultimately replace it with a Third Temple. While these views remain contested within Judaism, they have gained unprecedented political backing within Israel and strong support from international actors, particularly



evangelical Christian groups in the United States. Their ambitions pose a direct challenge not only to Muslim religious rights, but also to international law, regional stability, and prospects for peace.

This report also highlights the precedent of the Ibrahimi Masjid in Hebron, where gradual encroachment, violence, and administrative takeover culminated in the effective division and loss of Muslim control. Many fear that Masjid Al-Aqsa is now on a similar trajectory. Such an outcome would devastate Palestinian cultural heritage, extinguish hopes for a viable Palestinian state, and provoke far-reaching regional and global consequences.

At this critical juncture, Masjid Al-Aqsa stands at a boiling point. Preserving its sanctity, protecting the status quo, and upholding international law are not merely religious imperatives, but also requires essential political steps toward preventing wider conflict. This report is offered as both documentation and warning: the future of Al-Aqsa is inseparable from the future of Jerusalem, Palestine, and peace itself.

Introduction

Discussions about Muslims heritage and tradition often highlight the importance of the Kaaba in Makkah and the Masjid in Madinah. However, Jerusalem and its Masjid Al-Aqsa are frequently overlooked, despite forming an equally third key holy site in Islam.

Many recognise Al-Aqsa by its distinctive golden dome on the Jerusalem skyline. Known as Al-Aqsa Sanctuary or Masjid Al-Aqsa to Muslims. However, the Al-Aqsa Sanctuary includes not only the Dome of the Rock and the grey domed prayer hall called Qibly, but the entire compound with numerous monuments reflecting the city's Islamic heritage.

Spanning 35 acres in eastern Jerusalem's Old City, the site has been developed by successive Muslim rulers since the Islamic liberation of the Levant. The legacy began with the second Caliph Umar, who cleaned the sacred grounds, which had been used as a garbage dump by the Romans during his visit in 637, and reestablished a prayer Hall on the Holy site.

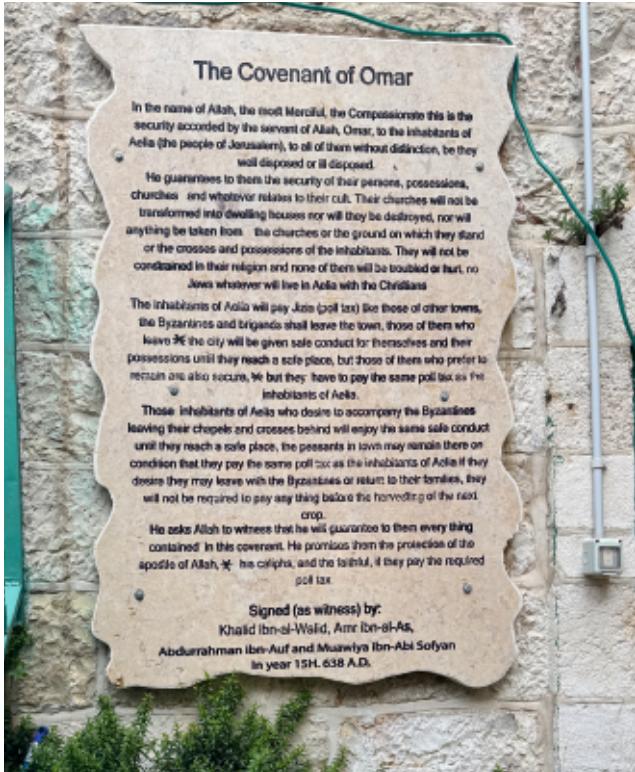
Religiously, the significance of Al-Aqsa predates these developments. For Muslims Al-Aqsa was the second house of worship built on earth after the Kaaba in Makkah, with forty years between their construction.¹ As Islam regards itself as the successor to previous monotheistic faiths, Al-Aqsa is positioned at the origin of humanity's devotion to a single, supreme creator in the Islamic tradition.

Although Al-Aqsa was the second house of worship, it also served as the first Qiblah, or direction of prayer, for early Muslims, including after the Prophet's migration from Makkah to Madinah. This changed in the fourteenth year of Prophethood of Muhammad (pbuh) with the Kaaba in Makkah becoming the Qiblah.² Despite the change of the Qiblah, Al-Aqsa's significance endured.

Al-Aqsa's prominence was further established during the Prophet's (pbuh) night journey (Isra wal-Mi'raj) from Makkah to Jerusalem, an event that surprised both believers and non-believers. In Jerusalem, he prayed with all previous prophets at Al-Aqsa, leading them in prayer. This act affirmed his status among the prophets and marked Jerusalem as the only place where all prophets are believed to have gathered in collective worship.

This celestial event, with the Quranic verses and other historical incidents came to reinforce the historical legacy for Muslims, which anchored Al-Aqsa as part of Muslim's faith and thus Jerusalem shaped their worldview.

For the Muslim world and for Palestinian, Al-Aqsa is not just a historical land but a divinely honoured sanctuary linked to prophecy and revelation. It forms part of their identity and faith.



Upon the reconquest of Jerusalem by the famed Salahuddin al-Ayyubi, the scholar and imam Muhyi ad-Din ibn al-Zaki is reported to have perfectly summarised the city's historic significance and its sanctity to Muslims in his speech at the first Friday prayers following the ousting of the crusaders. "It was the dwelling place of your father Abraham; the spot from which your blessed Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) mounted to heaven; the qibla toward which you turned to pray at the commencement of Islam, the abode of the prophets".³

He added that the land surrounding is “where mankind will be assembled for judgement, the ground where resurrection will take place; the holy land whereof God hath spoken in his perspicuous book”. The Al-Aqsa Sanctuary, he proclaimed, “It is the first of the two qiblas, the second of the two mosques, and the third of the holy sanctuaries”.

The Challenge Over Al-Aqsa's Muslim and Palestinian Identity

When Caliph Umar visited Jerusalem nearly 1,400 years ago, he declined to pray inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. He wished to avoid any future claims to the Christian holy site. His decision, along with the issuance of the 'Assurance of Umar' guaranteeing the protected status of Christians and 'People of the Book' under Islamic rule, established a significant precedent for religious freedom. For many Jews, their prayer had been answered. For the first time in over six hundred years, Jews under Muslim rule once again entered Jerusalem and seventy Jewish families found immediate accommodation within it.⁴

The conviviality was shattered under the Christian crusader project that saw thousands of Muslim and Jews killed and exiled from Jerusalem. It was upon Salahuddin's liberation that Jews were once again able to reside in Jerusalem. While during Muslim eras there have been incidents of marginalisation of other faith groups, particularly during the era of Fatimid Caliph Al-Hamik (996-1020), Jerusalem has, for the most part, been a pluralist city under Muslim rule.

Muslim rules from Caliph Umar, Salahuddin to the Ottomans adapted their management to account for non-Muslim residents, visitors, and pilgrims. The Ottoman Sultan Abdulmejid I (1823-1861) in 1852 passed an order that regulated Latin, Armenian, Greek, Syriac, and Coptic access to Christian holy sites. This aimed to preserve the delicate intercommunal balance of the city and its surroundings.⁵ That marked the beginning of an official 'Status Quo' over the holy sites in Jerusalem.

Following the end of the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878, the Ottomans and other European powers enshrined the status quo in the Treaty of Berlin. This cemented 'Status Quo' in international law for the first time and established a new standard for governing Jerusalem's holy sites. Not only did that cover the Christian communities, but Article 62 of the treaty also included the Muslim and other sites within that same status quo.⁶

Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent division of the Middle East, the establishment of the State of Israel significantly altered the dynamics of Jerusalem and Al-Aqsa. The city of Jerusalem was divided, with the west under Israeli control and the east under Jordanian administration.



In 1967, Israel's victory in the Six-Day War led to its control of East Jerusalem and the rollback of Jordanian authority in the West Bank. For the second time since the Crusades, Jerusalem came under the control of a non-Muslim power, this time under Israeli administration, which regards the city as its exclusive capital.

Israel government publicly adopted the principle of maintaining the Ottoman status quo in Jerusalem, particularly regarding Masjid Al-Aqsa. Administratively, the site is managed by the Jerusalem Islamic Waqf, a public endowment fund that has operated for nearly a millennium and since 1967 came under Jordanian custodianship.

Access to Al-Aqsa for worship is reserved for Muslims. Non-Muslims may visit, but are not allowed to worship there. This arrangement was reaffirmed in the 1994 Oslo Accords and the Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty. However, the situation remains unclear and unstable from the Israeli side⁷, as no lasting guarantees exist for Muslims in Palestine, the region, or the international community.



Israel maintains security control and exercises authority over East Jerusalem and its surroundings, extending its presence into much of the West Bank. The majority of the international community considers Israel's occupation and annexation efforts illegal under international law, and many diplomatic initiatives support East Jerusalem as the future capital of a Palestinian state.

This perspective has guided interventions by international organisations, mediators, and regional blocs beyond the United Nations. In early 2025, the European Union and its heads of missions in Jerusalem and Ramallah issued a statement emphasising the importance of upholding the Status Quo and ensuring that worshipers can access their holy sites freely.⁸

The representatives also recalled "Jordan's special role with respect to upholding the Status Quo and reiterate their support to the implementation of this role through the Jerusalem Waqf." The EU's position on Jerusalem, they stressed, "remains unchanged: the special status and character of Jerusalem and its Old City, the inviolability of its sacred spaces and the viability of all its communities must be preserved and respected by all." They warned that "any unilateral attempt to change the Status Quo would have deeply destabilising effects."

A primary obstacle to Islamic ownership of Al-Aqsa, and thus to Palestinian Muslim sovereignty over the site and East Jerusalem, is the Israeli claim that the compound stands on the ruins of the biblical Jewish temples: the first built by King Solomon in the 10th century BCE and the second destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE.



Jews refer to the site as the 'Temple Mount' and consider it the holiest location in Jewish tradition, leading many to believe it takes precedence over the Islamic claim.

Israelis refer to the Western Wall of the Al-Aqsa Sanctuary compound, also known as the 'Wailing Wall,' as evidence supporting their claim. They consider it the last remnant of the Second Temple and a central site for Jewish prayer. Muslims call it the 'al-Buraq Wall' and view it as integral to the Prophet Muhammad's night journey to the heavens from Jerusalem. Historically, Muslim authorities have generally not prevented Jews from praying in front of the Wall.

The ownership of that wall, however, was decided almost a century ago. Following the Buraq Uprising in 1929, which saw Jews confront Palestinians in British Mandatory Palestine over religious access to the Wall, an International Commission was set up to investigate the matter. Its findings were published the following year, in 1930, in the Report of the International Commission on al-Buraq/ Western Wall. It concluded that the ownership and proprietary rights to the wall belong solely to the Muslims and that it forms an integral part of Masjid Al-Aqsa area, which is Waqf property.⁹

It also ensured that Jews would have free access to the wall for worship at all times.

This was subject to certain restrictions, including a prohibition on worship in the main parts of the Al-Aqsa Sanctuary. Essentially, the commission recognised the status quo established by the Ottomans regarding religious freedoms, and set boundaries necessary for managing the holy sites and avoiding contention.

A year later, the report's findings were approved by the League of Nations, further solidifying international recognition of Muslim ownership over Al-Aqsa and its components.

Despite this, following the capture of Jerusalem in 1967, Israel annexed the wall. It also demolished the adjacent Maghariba Quarter, including its Waqf properties.

Since then, Israel has deferred ownership and religious access questions to Al-Aqsa. During the 1993 Oslo Accords, these issues were postponed to future "final status" negotiations. With no permanent agreement, control and access to Al-Aqsa remain unresolved and contentious.¹⁰

Currently, Israel maintains security authority over Masjid Al-Aqsa Sanctuary, while 'technically' the Islamic Waqf and Jordanian authorities retain administrative control of the site.

In recent decades, Israeli activists, students, and settlers have increasingly entered the Al-Aqsa compound.



In September 2000, former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon visited the Al-Aqsa sanctuary with a large security presence. This unprecedented event disrupted ongoing peace negotiations and raised doubts about the guarantee of exclusive Muslim access to the site.¹¹

This event led widespread Palestinian protests, and the start of the Second Intifada. In response, Israel imposed increased restrictions on Muslim access to the site. These included age limitations and bans on worshippers, particularly on Fridays and during occasions such as Ramadan.¹²

Since then, Israeli political figures and activists have continued to visit the Aqsa Sanctuary. In August last year, Israel's National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir visited the site and reportedly prayed, a practice that has become increasingly common.¹³

Despite that, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu released a statement following the incident claiming that Israel's policy of maintaining the status quo at the compound "has not changed and will not change".

Incursions by Jewish settlers and raids by Israeli security forces have occurred frequently. In April 2023, a notable incident involved Israeli police entering the compound and arresting hundreds of worshippers during clashes.¹⁴

According to Israeli authorities, the incident was in response to Palestinian worshippers and protestors taking refuge inside the prayer halls of Al-Aqsa. Security forces damaged the building to gain entry and used rubber bullets and stun grenades. The event was widely viewed by Palestinian Muslims and others as a violation of the Islamic holy site. It prompted international outrage and concerns about further escalation.

Messianic Movements

Targeting Al-Aqsa

Contrary to the common perception that all Jews are Zionist or seek to establish a third temple on the site of Al-Aqsa, Jewish beliefs are more diverse, particularly within classical tradition.

Historically, Jewish law and the Israeli Rabbinate have prohibited Jews from entering the Al-Aqsa compound, or 'Temple Mount,' and praying there, as it is considered too holy. Mainstream Orthodox Judaism also maintains that Jews should not ascend the site or attempt to rebuild the temple until the arrival of the Messiah, directly opposing Zionist and ultra-nationalist efforts to assert Jewish prayer rights at the site.¹⁵

Classical Jewish theology and literature anticipate an era when a descendant of King David will restore Israel and its religious institutions, including the third temple, its priestly class, and sacrificial rituals. Many, especially among ultra-Orthodox Jews, believe the temple's reconstruction will occur through divine intervention after the Messiah's arrival.

Despite these beliefs, some Zionist groups seek to impose Jewish sovereignty over all of Jerusalem and Al-Aqsa, with networks extending within Israel and internationally. Instead of waiting for the Messiah, they aim to establish primacy now, preparing for the Third Temple's construction and seeking to hasten the Messiah's arrival through these actions.



Prominent Zionist organizations pursuing this messianic vision has expanded over the past century. Zionist plans to destroy the Buildings at Masjid Al-Aqsa emerged in the 1930s with members of the Brit HaBirionim organisation.¹⁶ These plans gained momentum following Israel's capture of Masjid Al-Aqsa in 1967. Rabbi Shlomo Goren, then Chief Rabbi of the Israeli military forces, advocated for the demolition of the Dome of the Rock and other structures at Masjid Al-Aqsa.¹⁷ The restraint of Zionist military leaders at the time prevented the destruction of these buildings.¹⁸

However, as Israeli colonisation expanded and received increased support from the United States, previous reservations diminished. Although Goren lacked the authority to implement his plans, he played a pivotal role in galvanising the Temple Mount Movement. A significant turning

point occurred with the Jewish Underground movement in the early 1980s, whose members, including Yehuda Etzion, plotted to destroy the Dome of the Rock to incite a “messianic revolution”.¹⁹

The Temple Institute, established in 1987, also explicitly advocates for rebuilding the Third Temple on the site of Al-Aqsa Sanctuary, and provides education and training for priestly services in preparation for the temple.²⁰

Other groups include the Temple Mount Administration, which seeks to change the long-standing status quo to allow Jewish prayer and ultimately rebuild the temple, and the Hozrim LaHar Movement ('Returning to the Mount'). The latter includes prominent figures in Israeli politics, such as Itamar Ben-Gvir, Minister of National Security, and his far-right party Otzma Yehudit.



This movement gained further traction in the 1990s as religious Zionist rabbis, including the Yesha Rabbis Committee, began to reinterpret halachic rulings to permit Jewish entry onto Masjid Al-Aqsa.²¹

The Temple movements began to receive direct funding from the Israeli government and its international supporters, including those in the United States and other countries. Although precise figures are difficult to determine, documented sources include the Jerusalem Municipality, the Ministry of Culture, Science and Sports, and the Ministry of Education.²² Verified data from 2015 indicate that between 2010 and 2015, the Temple movements received over half a million dollars,²³ supplemented by donations from American donor Kenneth Abramowitz,²⁴ a close associate and key supporter of Netanyahu.

The integration of the Temple Mount movements with the core principles of Zionism has resulted in increased incursions onto the grounds of Masjid Al-Aqsa, with the number of such incidents rising from 4,000 in 2003 to 22,000 in 2017, and 52,000 in 2025.²⁵ This escalation is a direct outcome of the tacit approval of the Israeli government, which facilitated the emergence of the Temple Mount movements. Currently, there is little distinction between these movements and broader Israeli government efforts to assert control over Jerusalem, as both converge on the objective of establishing the Jewish Temple as a symbol of Israeli national identity.²⁶

This convergence is reflected in their ‘national anthem’ where a concluding line states, “To be a free people in our land, the land of Zion and Jerusalem”. This is entrenched in the Israeli psyche and reiterated by Zionist colonialist leaders, as did Netanyahu at the annual Jerusalem Day, “There is no Zionism without Zion, and no Israel without Jerusalem”.²⁷ Implicit in the mantra is the building of a Jewish temple upon Masjid Al-Aqsa. That is, the Israeli colonial economy is not merely materially exploitative and ever expanding but structured to maintain deep spiritual inequalities.²⁸

These groups are supported by a broad network of overseas political organizations, lobby groups, and funding campaigns that significantly influence policy and decision-making in Israel and among foreign backers, including the United Kingdom and United States.

American religious support, especially from segments of evangelical Christianity, has played a significant role in advancing third temple movements. Many evangelicals adhere to Christian Zionism, viewing the modern Israeli state and Jewish control over Jerusalem as fulfilment of biblical prophecy. They see the reconstruction of a Jewish Temple as essential to an end-times narrative, including the return of Jesus.²⁹

This religious support intersects with US political support, most notably because evangelical Christians form a powerful voting bloc, particularly within the Republican Party.³⁰ Over recent decades, American politicians from both parties have increasingly adopted strong pro-Israel positions, framing them in religious and geopolitical terms.



This influence was evident during President Donald Trump’s first administration, when policies such as US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and recognition of the occupied Golan Heights as Israeli territory were widely celebrated by evangelical leaders, some of whom directly linked these actions to biblical prophecy.³¹

These positions contradict the US’s stated commitment to protecting holy sites and maintaining the status quo in Jerusalem



and Al-Aqsa Masjid. They may also be perceived by third temple activists as indirect approval of long-term Zionist messianic goals regarding Al-Aqsa.

The influence of foreign supporters of messianic Zionism has grown in recent years, with Americans increasingly playing a leading role in facilitating biblical end-times prophecies.

Since 2022, reports have emerged of sacrificial red heifers being brought to Israel by an evangelical Christian businessman from Texas. According to the Book of Numbers, a flawless red heifer must be ritually sacrificed on a hill overlooking the ancient

temple site to enable its reconstruction. This act is believed to usher in the kingdom of God, ruled by a messianic figure, Christ for Christians and another messiah for Jews.

This vision advanced in July 2025, when the Texas businessman and Jewish rabbinic figures conducted a practice ritual involving a red heifer on a remote hilltop in northern Israel. Similar heifers are being bred and raised on a farm in the occupied West Bank in preparation for the messianic ritual.³²

The Precedence of Ibrahimi Masjid in Hebron

(Cave of the Patriarch)



Ibrahimi Masjid houses the tombs of Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham), his wife Sarah, Prophet Ishaq (Isaac), and other family members, serves as a troubling model for the future of Masjid Al-Aqsa. Almost the entire area of Hebron is an Islamic waqf property.³³

Under Israeli colonisation, the surrounding villages of Khalil were ethnically cleansed during the 1948 Nakba and ultimately occupied in 1967. Israel deposed the Palestinian mayor and implemented a series of repressive measures: restricting movement, ignoring violence by Jewish settlers, and engaging in systematic harassment and intimidation. As a result, the Palestinian population in the old city of Hebron plummeted from 7,500 in 1967 to just 1,501 by 1990, an eighty percent drop.³⁴ Israel then began eroding Muslim access and control over the Ibrahimi Masjid. Initially, they demanded a share of time by designating a portion for exclusive Jewish access. This was followed by demands to allow Jewish prayer at all times. As both

Jews and Muslims shared the space, tensions and confrontations became frequent. Israel then prohibited Muslim access during Jewish festivals.

In 1994, Baruch Goldstein, an American-Israeli settler, entered the Masjid with a submachine gun during Fajr (dawn) prayers. He killed 29 Palestinians while in Salaah and injured over 100 others. In the massacre's aftermath, Israeli authorities closed the Masjid to Muslims and imposed a curfew on Palestinians.

An Israeli commission that followed the massacre recommended increased surveillance, the installation of separate entrances, and the construction of a physical barrier dividing the Masjid.³⁵ In practice, these measures only intensified the restrictions on Muslim worshippers, who continued to face harassment from soldiers and unchecked Jewish settler violence.

After the division of the Masjid, in 2025, Israel dealt a final blow by stripping the Palestinian-run Hebron municipality of even symbolic administrative authority over the Ibrahimi Masjid, transferring control to a Jewish settler council.³⁶ This act marked the complete usurpation of the waqf, the desecration of a sacred site, and the collective memory, heritage, and culture of Ibrahimi Masjid.

At The Boiling Point

Israel has also changed the status quo that allowed Jews to enter Masjid Al-Aqsa as visitors to worshipping within it. Further, Israel has increased the number of hours Jews can be in Masjid Al-Aqsa from 3 to 6 per day.³⁷ This demand to what the Israelis project as increased sharing of time mirrors what happened to Masjid Ibrahimi in Hebron.

Linked with building a Temple on Masjid Al-Aqsa is the expulsion of Palestinian termed Judaizing Jerusalem. In first year since October 2023³⁸ there isn't a Palestinian man in Jerusalem who has not been searched, cursed or beaten. There are also increased restriction on the ability of Palestinians to build or expand homes, more of their homes destroyed, more residents having their residency rights revoked and increasing discrimination.³⁹

In August 2025, Israel announced to build 3,000 Jewish only settler homes on Palestinian land to complete its E1 plan.⁴⁰ This will totally isolate Masjid Al-Aqsa from the wider Palestinian community in the West Bank.

Since October 2023, the Israel deadly ambition of destroying Masjid Al-Aqsa is no longer shrouded in diplomatic terms nor implemented through indirect strategies. From Israel's Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi David Lau to Moshe Lion, Mayor of Jerusalem, Moshe Fleiglin an Israeli MP, to ministers Smotrich,⁴¹ Yitzhak Wasserlauf⁴² and Ben-



Gvir,⁴³ all are now publicly demanding the building of the Temple by destroying Masjid Al-Aqsa. Even the US defence secretary Pete Hegseth⁴⁴ has joined the chorus. These shifts, now the norm in public declarations, have raised Palestinian and regional alarm about the fate of Al-Aqsa.

Security analysts warn that any attempt to build a Third Temple on Al-Aqsa could spark broad violence. As Jerusalem lawyer Daniel Seidemann puts it, religious factions are "weaponising religion" at the Temple Mount and are on "a trajectory that will lead us to a conflagration".⁴⁵ Even inside Israel, public opinion reflects fear of a backlash: in a 2022 survey, a majority of Jews who opposed changing the prayer rules cited worry about "a severe negative reaction from the Muslim world".⁴⁶ In short, any assault on Al-Aqsa would very likely reignite conflicts across Jerusalem and beyond.

End of Two-State Hopes

Building a Third Temple on the site of Al-Aqsa would all but eliminate any prospect of a Palestinian state. Al-Aqsa is often described as the heart of Palestinian aspirations, “their last bastion of control” and the basis for demanding Jerusalem as their capital.⁴⁷

Converting the compound into a Jewish Temple would erase the last contiguous territory Palestinians claim in the city. The Palestinian Authority and even Jordan have warned that such a move would be tantamount to killing off any two-state solution.

Palestinian officials have described the Temple project as a “comprehensive colonial plan”, a deliberate attempt to uproot the Arab and Islamic presence from Jerusalem.⁴⁸

By seizing Al-Aqsa and replacing it with a synagogue/Temple, Israel would be unilaterally annexing East Jerusalem and leaving no Palestinian capital at all. In effect, experts say, the Al-Aqsa-to-Temple plan would annihilate the very idea of a viable Palestinian state.

Eroding Palestinian Heritage

Al-Aqsa Sanctuary is more than a political symbol; it is a living piece of Palestinian cultural heritage. Its ancient mosaics, architecture and role in daily Muslim life embody centuries of Palestinian history in Jerusalem. Palestinians view any attack on Al-Aqsa Sanctuary as an existential threat to their identity.

Such plans, observers note, would not only destroy a religious site but also erase a core element of Palestinian heritage. UNESCO and the international community have long recognised the Old City (including Al-Aqsa) as Palestinian cultural patrimony. As one commentator puts it, allowing Al-Aqsa to be “desecrated” or razed is seen by Palestinians as tantamount to erasing the memory of generations.⁴⁹

Desecrating a Muslim Sanctuary

From the Muslim perspective, any act that damages or replaces the buildings upon Al-Aqsa Sanctuary is widely viewed as a profound desecration. Israeli researchers echo this assessment; they note that Palestinians interpret every Jewish ceremony or prayer on the mount as “a desecration of the holiness of the Temple Mount to Muslims”.⁵⁰

Western and Muslim leaders alike warn that converting the site into a Temple would inflame the entire Muslim world. Indeed, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and Arab League have been urged to “take serious action” to halt such violations.⁵¹

In short, building a Third Temple on Al-Aqsa would shatter a cornerstone of Islamic faith and is seen by Muslims worldwide as an outrage.

Regional and International Fallout

Undermining the Al-Aqsa Sanctuary status quo would not just destabilise Israeli-Palestinian relations, it would shake up the entire Middle East order.

The 1967 understanding on Jerusalem was enshrined in numerous peace initiatives, from UN resolutions to U.S. accords. Scholars warn that if Israel appeared to seize Al-Aqsa, Arab states would withdraw their support for peace.

A recent policy study notes that “escalatory challenges to the Jerusalem status quo will make it more difficult for any Arab state to strengthen cooperation with Israel”.⁵²

Crucially, normalisation with key players like Saudi Arabia seems unlikely if “the entire Muslim world sees the third holy mosque in Jerusalem under threat”.⁵³ Even moderate governments have raised alarms: the Palestinian Foreign Ministry and Jordan have publicly denounced any hint of building a Temple as breaching the “fragile status quo” and derailing negotiations.⁵⁴ As one Palestinian official bluntly warned, ignoring these provocations “could lead to disastrous repercussions affecting security and stability throughout the region.”⁵⁵

In short, destroying Al-Aqsa’s sanctity for a Third Temple would destroy hope of regional peace, scuttle a Palestinian state, and inflame conflicts far beyond Jerusalem’s walls.

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