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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

# Israel's Assault on Al-Aqsa and Plans to Upend the Status Quo

Policy Analysis Unit | July 2017

Israel Takes another Step towards Sovereignty of Al-Aqsa

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## Introduction

Following more than two weeks of Palestinian civil disobedience in Jerusalem, Israel has removed a barrier which had served to prevent Muslim Palestinians from worshipping at the Al Aqsa Mosque. A stabbing attack on July 14, when Palestinian citizens of Israel killed two Israeli policemen before being killed themselves, gave the Israeli occupying powers in East Jerusalem the opportunity to put into place a premeditated plan for radical change in the status quo<sup>1</sup> of the Al Aqsa Mosque compound, a site venerated by Muslims worldwide<sup>2</sup>. Following the incident, Israeli authorities closed the mosque to Palestinian worshipers, and evacuated Waqf employees including the Palestinian guards working there, arresting and interrogating dozens of them. Additionally, and for the first time since 1967, the Israeli municipality in West Jerusalem sent garbage trucks and a number of cleaners to the Al Aqsa compound under the pretext of cleaning the mosque buildings. This task is traditionally reserved for the Waqf offices in Jerusalem, a religious trust which is funded by the Jordanian government. The use of the West Jerusalem municipality was seen as an effort by Israel to assert sovereignty over Al Aqsa which, as a part of East Jerusalem, remains occupied Palestinian territory.

Following two days of closure, the Israeli authorities installed metal detectors at the entrances to the mosque compound, suggesting that Palestinian Muslim worshippers would have to pass through them to enter Al Aqsa. Palestinians had successfully campaigned to prevent such metal detectors being installed in 2014. The diverse Palestinian leadership in occupied East Jerusalem, including religious figures and political leaders, were in unison in decrying the imposition of the metal gates and demanded that they be removed before entering the compound. The principle driving the Palestinian demands is their complete rejection of Israeli attempts to change the status quo and impose Israeli sovereignty over the Al Aqsa Mosque Compound, also known as the "Haram ash Sharif" ("Noble Sanctuary" in Arabic).

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<sup>1</sup> In the first weeks of the occupation of the Al-Aqsa Mosque in 1967, Israel's Minister of Defense, Moshe Dayan, imposed a new "status quo" in the Al-Aqsa Mosque under which the Wall of Al-Buraq, or what Jews call the Wailing Wall, would be a place for Jewish prayer. This would be under the supervision of the Islamic Waqf. At the same time, Israeli Jews were allowed to enter Al-Aqsa Mosque as tourists in the hours reserved for foreigners.

<sup>2</sup> The Al-Aqsa Mosque, also known as Al-Haram Al-Sharif, is 144 dunums. It includes Al-Aqsa Mosque, the Dome of the Rock Mosque and many other mosques. Jews call the al-Aqsa Mosque "Temple Mount".

## A Provocative and Rash Decision

Israeli media analysis lends credence to the view that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's decision to erect metal detectors at the entrances of Al-Aqsa was not fully thought through, and done without prior coordination with the military and security establishment<sup>3</sup>. In light of the timidity of any official response from the Arab states, and given the preoccupation of Arab states—including the Palestinians—in their own internal disputes, Netanyahu seemingly believed that he could turn the killing of two border guards into an occasion to establish Israeli sovereignty in East Jerusalem. Another consideration here was the improvement in relations between Israel and the so-called “moderate” Arab states, with Netanyahu seemingly hoping that his Arab allies would embrace the Israeli description of the metal detectors as a necessary measure.

At first glance, Netanyahu seemed to have succeeded. Online newspaper *Elaph*, close to the Saudi royal palace, reported that King Salman bin Abdul Aziz personally intervened with the White House to reopen Al-Aqsa and that “the agreement to reopen the mosque to worshipers and pilgrims was the result of that”, and that Netanyahu pledged “not to change the current situation in Al-Aqsa.” The newspaper added: “As for the issue of metal detectors, it has become commonplace in holy places because of terrorism, which strikes indiscriminately and in the most sacred sites of different religions,” indicating that the Saudis accepted that the Israeli actions were purely motivated by security concerns.

The steadfast resistance of the Jerusalemite Palestinians—who are slightly distinguished in terms of pass papers compared to Palestinians from the rest of the West Bank—reversed these calculations. Refusing to accept any change to how business is done in occupied East Jerusalem, the residents engaged in the struggle to defend the Al-Aqsa Mosque, backed by both the Palestinians in the occupied Palestinian Territories as well as those behind the “Green Line” and who hold Israeli citizenship. Civil disobedience increasingly took the form of a widespread popular uprising, after renewed and increased Palestinian operations against the occupation army and settlers, in the form of stabbings, shootings and vehicle ramming.

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<sup>3</sup> Amos Harel, “Temple Mount Crisis: Israeli Defense Chiefs Believe Metal Detectors Not Worth the Bloodshed”, Haaretz, July 21, 2017, available online (English version): <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.802607>

In this context, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas cut short his trip to China and on July 21 announced that he would "freeze contacts with the occupying state at all levels." He called for the cancellation of all measures taken by the occupation authorities in Al-Aqsa Mosque and the return to the previous state of affairs. Jordan, as the custodian of Al-Aqsa in accordance with the Wadi Araba agreement, supported the position of the Jerusalemite leadership with Jordanian officials demanding the removal of the metal detectors.

## Trouble at the Embassy

As pressure mounted on the Israeli government to remove the metal detectors and signs of its imminent stepdown appeared, an Israeli security guard working for the Israeli Embassy in Amman—customarily, a member of the intelligence services—killed two Jordanian citizens who had brought furniture to an apartment owned by the Israeli diplomatic mission. According to the Israeli narrative, one of his victims, a 17 year old, had attacked him with a screwdriver.

Following the attack on its citizens Jordanian forces surrounded the embassy and refused to allow those inside to leave until the perpetrator was interrogated. American-mediated negotiations between Jordanian and Israeli officials resulted in the killer of two Jordanian citizens being allowed a safe departure. The Israeli mini-cabinet later announced its decision to remove the metal detectors from the entrances to the Al-Aqsa Mosque. The next day, however, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu decided that manual inspections would be conducted using a hand held device on everyone who enters the Aqsa Mosque to pray as an alternative to fixed gates. The national and religious authorities rejected these procedures and decided to continue protesting outside the Al-Aqsa Mosque.

## The Decision

The decision to erect metal detectors at the entrances to the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound fits within a wider Israeli strategy which has crystalized over the previous three decades, and which takes the form of a gradual, piecemeal approach to establishing Israeli sovereignty over the Al Aqsa compound before it is eventually carved up in preparation for the construction of the so-called "Third Temple" in its place.<sup>4</sup> Since the mid-1980s, Israeli society has been subject to

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<sup>4</sup> For more on the Israeli strategy towards the Al Aqsa Mosque which has developed over the previous three decades, see: Mahmoud Muhareb, "Israeli Policy towards the Al Aqsa Mosque", *Siyasat Arabiya*, Volume 19, March, 2016, pp. 5-22;

intense political, religious, media and public activism on the part of extreme right-wing and religious political forces together with dozens of associations and movements pushing for the construction of this Temple. These organizations have received financial support from various Israeli state institutions and have publicly called for a change in the status quo. They demand the right of Jewish worshippers to pray at the Al Aqsa, and the construction of the Third Temple in the place of the mosques within the compound, such as the Al Aqsa and the Dome of Rock. These groups ramped up their activities following the Oslo Accords in 1993 for fear that the peace process would lead to Al-Aqsa being returned to the Palestinians.

These changes represent a sea-change in the Israeli position towards the idea of Jewish prayer on the grounds of the Al Aqsa Compound. In terms of ideology and religion, these changes include:

1. Changes in the mainstream Jewish trends within Israeli society. In 1996, the Yesha Rabbinical Council (of the Settlers' Council), led by the religious Zionist movement, ruled that it was religiously permissible<sup>5</sup> for Jews to enter the Haram ash-Sharif. All rabbis were invited to enter Al-Aqsa Mosque and to encourage their pupils and followers to do so. This call was an important turning point in the position of the religious Zionist movement towards the idea of Jews entering the compound and praying in it. Gradually the majority of rabbis adopted this standpoint and became advocates for changing the status quo. Most of the orthodox Haredi Jews, especially followers of the "Chabad" movement, have adopted the same position.
2. Likud, the "Jewish Home" ("Habayit Hayahudi") Party, and other extreme right-wing political parties which form part of Israel's legislature have also called for a change in the status quo and allowing Jews to enter the Al-Aqsa Mosque in order to pray and some of these groups also call for the construction of the Third temple. This is reflected in increased debate on the status of Al Aqsa within the Israeli legislature. Many Knesset members have proposed laws to change the status quo and allow Jews to enter Al-Aqsa Mosque to pray at allocated times.
3. In the late 1980s, the Israeli Supreme Court changed its position on the entry of Jews to the Al-Aqsa Mosque in order to pray there, and ruled that the Jews had the right to

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<sup>5</sup> Traditionally, Jewish religious law has strictly forbidden observant Jews from entering all of the 144 dunams (about 36 acres) of the site of the Al Aqsa Mosque. Similar religious laws have also generally prevented Jewish communities from living on the land of Palestine until the appearance of the Messiah.

enter Al-Aqsa Mosque based on the "Protection of Holy Places Law,"<sup>6</sup> introduced after the 1967 war, along with what it called "religious and historical rights of Jews". However, the Israeli Supreme Court authorized the Israeli police to prevent Jews from entering the Haram ash-Sharif for prayer for reasons of keeping the peace and public safety. At the same time, however, it stressed that such a prohibition should be based on the ability of the police to prove, on a case-by-case basis, that Jewish prayer at the compound would endanger public safety. In other cases, the court retained the right to permit Jews entry to the Haram for religious services.

4. The shift of Israeli society towards the right at both secular and religious levels has brought the question of the Al Aqsa Compound to even greater prominence. In recent years, many Israeli Jewish public opinion polls have shown a majority in Israeli society favoring a change in the status of the Haram Al-Sharif, and 59 percent of Israeli society supports a division of the Haram between Muslims and Jews, as was imposed in the Ibrahimi Mosque (also known as the Tomb of the Patriarchs) in Hebron, following a massacre of Palestinian civilians there in 1995.
5. In recent years, an increasing number of Jews have been allowed enter the Aqsa compound during the 5-hour daily time slot allotted to tourists. This has been organized by the "Third Temple" movements, in the hope that the recitation of Jewish prayers on the site will ultimately lead to Israeli sovereignty there. Groups of religious zealots, numbering in the dozens, are now accompanied by the Israeli police for tours of the compound. Previously, groups of more than two Jews could only enter the Al-Aqsa Mosque if they were escorted by guards from the Islamic Waqf as well as Israeli police, to ensure they did not pray on the grounds of the site. In September 2015, the Israeli Minister of Defense banned two Palestinian groups—the "Mourabitoun" and "Mourabitat"—which had made it their mission to monitor Jewish access to the Al Aqsa compound.

## Conclusion

The Israeli government may have backed down on the imposition of metal detectors at the entrances to Al-Aqsa Mosque, but it has not yet allowed situation to return to pre-July 14 status quo. Netanyahu's government continues to insist on setting up security cameras and

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<sup>6</sup> See: <https://www.knesset.gov.il/laws/special/eng/HolyPlaces.htm>



conducting manual searches with hand-held detectors on the Muslim worshipers who want to pray in Al-Aqsa. The move is a political action, as was the decision to set up the fixed metal detectors. It is intended to impose Israeli control over the Al-Aqsa Mosque and, by humiliating Muslim worshipers, to reduce their number thereby reducing the powers of the Islamic Waqf in Al-Aqsa.

The issue for Israel is not one of metal detectors and video footage, but rather sovereignty and domination of the Arabs. It carries out its policies in a step-by-step, gradual manner and exploits every opportunity to gain ground, taking advantage of any setback in the Arab or Palestinian position. What is surprising and disappointing is the failure of the Arab and Islamic countries to shoulder their responsibilities, and the failure to take any serious measures to put an end to Israeli profaning of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, even to condemn it more forcefully.