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Who Should Pray on Jerusalem's Temple Mount?

Palestinians are killing Israelis in Jerusalem, saying al Aqsa mosque is threatened by Jews wanting to pray on the Temple Mount. Does this justify murder?

As the home of two Jewish temples dating back 3,000 years, the Temple Mount is the holiest site in Judaism, and Jews the world over still come to pray at its Western Wall. Situated atop the Temple Mount today are al Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock, from which Muslims say Mohammed ascended to heaven. Claiming that al Aqsa is in danger because some Jews want to pray on the site, Palestinian terrorists have begun murdering Jewish civilians. Should only one group be allowed to pray there?

What are the facts?

According to the Bible and substantiated by archeological research and even Muslim historians, the First Jewish Temple was built by King Solomon on the Temple Mount in 957 BCE. After it was destroyed by the Babylonians, the Second Temple was built in 516 BCE, and this Temple, like its predecessor, was the focal point of Jewish life. The Second Temple, destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, also figured prominently in Christianity, since it was here that Jesus studied Torah as a youth and later overturned the moneychangers' tables.

However, in order to impugn Jewish historical rights to a state in Israel, many Palestinian academics, politicians and educators today deny the existence of these Jewish Temples, just as they deny the Jews' well-documented, millennia-old history in the Holy Land. Palestinians also want to prevent Jews and other non-Muslims from visiting or praying on the Temple Mount. Indeed, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has warned Jews against "contaminating" al Aqsa.

After Israel's war of independence in 1948, Jordan seized the eastern part of Jerusalem, including the Old City and the Temple Mount. For the next 19 years, no Jew was allowed to visit the Western Wall or the Temple Mount. Since the 1967 war, when Israel liberated Jerusalem from Arab control, members of all religions have been able to visit the Wall and the Temple Mount.

Why do Palestinians deny Jewish rights to the Temple Mount? In 2000, against all evidence, then Palestinian President Yasser Arafat claimed that "Solomon's Temple was not in Jerusalem, but in Nablus." Since that statement, "Temple Denial" has become a central tenet of Palestinian political ideology. Recently Palestinian Authority advisor on Religious and Islamic Affairs Mahmoud Al-Habbash claimed that "all of al-Aqsa Mosque . . . including the Al-Buraq Wall (i.e. the Western Wall)" are inalienable and non-negotiable Islamic properties. These crude fabrications seem like nothing more than an effort to delegitimize the Jewish state

No group in Israel, including Muslim Palestinians, should be allowed to restrict the rights of other religious groups to visit and pray where they wish, provided these groups don't disrupt others. Jews should be allowed to advocate for these rights without fear of violent attacks by those who disagree with them. What's more, if Israel's democratically elected officials see fit to grant equal rights to all religious groups on the Temple Mount, this, too, should be allowed.

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and foment terrorist acts. To a Palestinian population indoctrinated with such falsehoods, they have been effective.

Who should be allowed to pray on the Temple Mount?

Though non-Muslims are still not allowed by Israeli law to pray or bring religious artifacts to the Temple Mount, some Jews have openly advocated that they be allowed to pray on ancient Temple sites around the Muslim sanctuaries. One such temple activist, Yehuda Glick, was shot and nearly killed by a Palestinian terrorist, precipitating additional terrorist acts, including car attacks that killed a three-month old baby and others, and the murder of four rabbis at prayer by axe-wielding killers. According to

President Abbas and other Palestinian leaders, even the mere suggestion that non-Muslims be granted equal access to the Temple Mount is a "declaration of war" by Israel. Palestinian leaders now also call for a ban on Jewish visitors to the site. This denial of Jewish (and Christian) rights on the Temple Mount underlies recent cries by Abbas and the terrorist group Hamas to defend al-Aqsa using "any means" necessary.

Despite the fact that Israel's policies on the Temple Mount have not changed in decades and despite Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's repeated insistence that Israel is committed to the status quo—meaning *no* prayer—on the Temple Mount, Palestinian incitement and violence against Jews continue.

What is to be done? Imagine a law in any democratic country that forbids religious groups to practice their religion freely—wherever and whenever they choose. It shouldn't happen, because democratic states protect freedom of religion—which means equal rights for, and tolerance of, all religious groups. As a fiercely democratic country, Israel is entitled to enforce those same rights and values. Indeed, as long as Israel gives Muslims special privileges and denies other religions equal access, it is guilty of repression. Ironically, Israel is exerting this repression against its own majority *Jewish* population.

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