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## Jerusalem Holy Site a Tense Crossroads Again

By JAMES BENNET

Quietly but insistently, the Israeli authorities have pried open to non-Muslims the man-made plateau here that is one of the world's tinderboxes, the symbol and nexus of conflict between Jews and Arabs.

Known to Jews as the Temple Mount and to Muslims as the Noble Sanctuary, the holy site had been closed to non-Muslims since September 2000, when Ariel Sharon, then a candidate for the post of prime minister he now holds, paid a visit there in the company of hundreds of armed policemen.

That visit, and the riots that ensued, provided what Palestinians consider the provocation and Israelis consider the pretext for the Palestinians' uprising, the Aksa Intifada. It is named after the mosque on the 35-acre plaza, which is framed by imposing stone walls built by Herod the Great in the decades before Jesus walked there.

In allowing groups to tour the plaza on most mornings, Israeli officials say they are merely reasserting the old status quo, to maintain calm over a site sacred to three religions. But Muslim authorities say that, by acting while the overall status quo is a shambles between Israelis and Palestinians, the Israeli government is risking a backlash here and throughout the Muslim world.

Today, the stone-paved plaza was a quiet refuge above the maze of Jerusalem's Old City. A cooling breeze swept through the olive trees and cypresses as scores of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim visitors walked the grounds.

But, with their plexiglass shields nearby, dozens of Israeli police officers in blue uniforms studied the scene. For some of the visitors had radically differing religious visions of not only the past but also the future of this compact place.

"Now we're in front of the Holy of Holies," announced Tsvi Rogin, 51, who was guiding a few religious Jews around the plaza, shadowed by a frowning, unarmed guard of the Islamic Waqf, the Islamic religious authority that oversees Muslim holy sites.

Though Mr. Rogin, a rabbi, was gesturing toward the gleaming gold cap of the Dome of the Rock, the sanctuary that dominates the plaza, he was not referring to it. He was referring to the Jewish temple that once stood on this plaza, and particularly to its holiest part, which he believes occupied precisely the same spot as the dome 2,000 years ago -- and which he believes will stand there once again.

Orthodox Jewish religious authorities differ on the location of the Holy of Holies. But they generally agree that Jews should not visit the Temple Mount, to avoid accidentally stepping on

sacred ground. For fear of doing so, two of Mr. Rogin's charges walked only along the edges of the plaza.

In a sermon this week, Ovadia Yosef, a leading rabbi of the Sephardic Jews, lashed out at Jews now ascending the Temple Mount as "wicked." In an interview with an Israeli paper, Jerusalem's mayor, a devoutly religious Jew, compared visiting the Temple Mount to urinating outside a department store.

But Mr. Sharon and other Israeli authorities feared that the Waqf was establishing new rules barring Jews and Christians from the plateau. They argued that that was provocative, because it upset the status quo existing here after Israel seized the plateau and East Jerusalem in the 1967 war.

"Status quo is more powerful than law here, and more important than law," said a senior Israeli security official, who spoke on condition his name not be published. "When you get political issues in a holy place, it's not good for all sides."

The security official said that some Waqf officials wanted to welcome tourists in hopes of reviving business in the Old City, but that Yasir Arafat, the Palestinian leader, had blocked them for political reasons.

Adnan Husseini, the director of the Islamic Waqf, said that Israel had simply imposed its decision. He said that, with Muslims under 40 routinely prevented from reaching the Noble Sanctuary, and Palestinians now held under travel restrictions throughout the West Bank, Israel was seeking not to restore the status quo on the plaza but, rather, to permit Jews to pray here.

"This is God's will for this to be a mosque," he said in his office, the multicolored, tiled walls of the Dome of the Rock glittering beyond his windows. "They have to recognize this. They should not make a war with Islam, with the Islamic world."

Within Mr. Sharon's right-wing base, it never sat well that his high-profile visit to the holy site might make him one of the last Jews to go there. Further, both secular and religious Jews were offended and alarmed by claims by some Palestinian officials that no Jewish temple ever stood on the plateau, claims that struck at Zionism's core.

But in the zero-sum politics of this conflict of nations, any reassertion of an Israeli hold on the plateau was bound to inflame Palestinians' own fears. It is not only Islam's third-holiest site but also the secular symbol of Palestinian nationalism.

"That is the epicenter of Jewish-Arab tension in this land since the beginning of the national conflict," said Gershom Gorenberg, the author of "End of Days," a book about the struggle over the holy site. "One way of expressing your connection to the land as a whole, the sanctity of your connection to the land -- the shorthand for doing that is to talk about the Temple Mount or Haram al-Sharif," the Noble Sanctuary.

The visits for non-Muslims began earlier this summer, but were suspended after a short time as the Israelis unsuccessfully negotiated with the Islamic Waqf. Last week they started up again, generally in the morning hours. The police permit non-Muslim visitors to ascend a narrow ramp beside the Western Wall and pass through Mughrabi Gate onto the plaza.

To non-Muslims accustomed in recent years to seeing only the peeling green paint of the Mughrabi doors, it is startling to see them standing open, a gap in the wall revealing trees and sky beyond.

Israeli intelligence agents are on constant guard against the possibility that Jewish extremists will attempt to destroy the Muslim holy places in hopes of building a third temple, a move that some Christians support as a condition for their Messiah's second coming. Re-opening the plaza, the Israeli security official said, "calmed the people who want to come here."

He said that the Israeli police carefully screened visitors and prevented Jews from praying on the plaza, a violation of government rules. Nisso Shacham, the commander of police in the Old City, temporarily blocked one religious Jew from entering the plaza today because he was sobbing in his fervor.

Eyal Kaminka, 29, brought an American relative to the site today. "If there would be a church, a mosque, and a synagogue inside here, I think it would be ideal," he said. "It's hard to see so much hatred in such a holy place."

But Muslims said that they feared Israel was seeking to undermine their own ability to worship, while encouraging Jews to do so. The groups entering are bigger than before the intifada, they said, and more of them were praying.

"This is not tourism," said Ahmed al-Batsh, a Palestinian legislator from Jerusalem. "These are extremist groups that enter the compound to pray."

Mr. Rogin, the rabbi, said he also detected a change in the old status quo, saying the groups were now larger and had more freedom to roam the plaza. "We're really trying to establish a different status quo, I think," he said.

Mr. Rogin, a cheerful man who said he works part of the year as an accountant in Los Angeles, helps run the "Temple Mount Center" in the Jewish Quarter here. The small center is dominated by a wooden model of the third temple he envisions. Over an aerial photograph of the plaza, Mr. Rogin laid transparencies indicating where, he said, the temple once stood and should stand again.

Asked if he favored violent action to replace the Muslim holy places, Mr. Rogin replied: "We assume everything is being recorded. Officially, we only support legal activities." He said rebuilding the temple was a project requiring the cooperation of "the Jewish people as a whole."

For now, he held out a more modest goal, erecting an altar outside the Dome of the Rock. "If this broke into an open war, with people rioting in the streets," he said, "then it would be possible to bring up a small truck with the altar, and start the sacrifice of animals."

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