

Jordan tells Israel to halt Western Wall expansion plans

Amman minister says opening of mixed-gender plaza violates Waqf jurisdiction over Jerusalem's holy places

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Jordan is protesting Israeli plans to expand the Western Wall plaza as part of a landmark agreement that will open the plaza to pluralistic prayer, saying the move will damage ruins of a 7th-century palace that once stood at the site.

A Jordanian minister on Saturday expressed the Hashemite kingdom's displeasure with Israel's announcement that it will allocate an area of the Western Wall plaza for mixed-gender prayer.

Jordanian Media Affairs and Communications Minister Muhammad Momani urged Israel "not to meddle" with the Umayyad Palaces area, using an alternate term for an area south of the Western Wall, adjacent to the Temple Mount.

In a landmark decision last week, Israel's cabinet voted to push ahead with a plan to expand the Western Wall plaza into that area to allow for pluralistic, mixed-gender and non-Orthodox services at the site, the holiest place where Jews may pray.

Momani called on Israel to return jurisdiction of the area to the Jordanian Waqf, which administers the Temple Mount, known as the Al-Aqsa compound to Muslims, under an arrangement in place since 1967.

Palestinians have also come out in opposition to the plan to expand the plaza. Disputes over control of the flashpoint holy site and charges of violations have often devolved into periods of increased Israeli-Palestinian tensions and spiraling violence.

The area is already home to a small wooden platform set up recently to accommodate non-Orthodox prayer

The official Petra news agency called the small platform and new plan part of "continued Israeli violations against Islamic sites and heritage in occupied Jerusalem."

The Umayyad Palaces were two large buildings constructed in the late 7th and early 8th century

that some researchers believe were once palaces for the Umayyads, who ruled Jerusalem from 660 to 750 and built the Dome of the Rock and a number of other Jerusalem landmarks.

The buildings were destroyed in an earthquake in 749 and were excavated by Israel in the 1970s. Today they are part of an archaeological park adjacent to the southwest corner of the Temple Mount that is open to the public.

Jordan has protested the excavations, accusing Israel of destroying Islamic heritage, and last week Jerusalem Waqf head Azzam Khatib Tamimi sent a letter urging Israel to stop work at the site.

While the Jordanian-run Waqf governs the top of the Temple Mount — the site of the biblical Jewish temples that is known as the al-Aqsa compound to Muslims and is home to the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque — Israel maintains control over access to the site as well as areas below the Mount, as part of a status quo agreement in place since 1967. Israel does not allow Jews to pray atop the mount.

Last week, Palestinian Minister of Waqf and Religious Affairs Youssef Ideiss said the planned Israeli plaza was “[another Israeli attempt](#) to change the status quo at the Temple Mount.”

Israel will use the expansion of the non-Orthodox section to carry out archaeological digs and “Judaicize the holy site,” he claimed.

Ideiss claimed the Western Wall was a part of the Temple Mount compound and “a holy Islamic site expropriated by Israel in 1967.” According to Muslim tradition, the Western Wall is where the prophet Mohammad tied the winged animal Buraq, which he rode on the night he ascended to heaven.