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**FROM WND'S JERUSALEM BUREAU**

## Muslims solidifying Temple Mount takeover

Olmert OKs Islamic prayer tower, but denies Jewish plans for synagogue

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**JERUSALEM** – Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's reported decision to allow Muslims to construct a massive minaret on the Temple Mount will "serve to solidify Islam's take over of Judaism's holiest site," a leading Israeli archaeologist charged in a WND interview.



Temple Mount in Jerusalem

Hebrew University's Eilat Mazor said Muslims are turning the Temple Mount into a "giant mosque for Islam only," and that the new minaret will "serve as a prize to the Muslims, who have been erasing Jewish ties to the site by openly discarding Jewish artifacts they find."

Mazor was referring to Muslim excavations near a new mosque constructed at the Temple Mount's Solomon's Stables. During the excavations, the Waqf, or Muslim custodians of the Temple Mount, reportedly disposed truckloads of dirt containing Jewish artifacts from the First and Second Temple periods. After the media reported this, Israeli authorities froze the construction permit given to the Waqf.

Mazor, a third-generation Israeli Temple Mount archaeologist, is the discoverer and lead archaeologist of [Israel's](#) City of David, believed to be the palace of the biblical King David, the second leader of a united Kingdom of Israel, who ruled from around 1005 to 965 B.C. She is also a fellow at Israel's Shalem Center and serves on the Israeli government's Public Committee for Prevention of the Destruction of Antiquities on Temple Mount.

*(Story continues below)*

Earlier this month, [WND first reported](#) Olmert granted permission to Jordan to construct a large minaret at a site on the Temple Mount where Jewish groups here had petitioned to build a synagogue.

A minaret is a tower usually attached to a mosque from which Muslims are called to the five Islamic daily prayers.

There are four minarets on the Temple Mount. The new minaret will be the largest one yet. It will be the first built on the Temple Mount in more than 600 years and is slated to tower over the walls of Jerusalem's old city. It will reside next to the Al-Marwani Mosque, located at the site of Solomon's Stables.

Aryeh Eldad, a Knesset member from Israel's National Union party, last year drew up plans with Jewish groups to build a synagogue near the Marwani Mosque. The synagogue was to be built in accordance with rulings from several prominent rabbis, who said Jews can ascend the Mount at certain areas.

A top leader of the Waqf told WND Olmert's granting of permission to build the minaret in the synagogue's place "confirms 100 percent the Haram al-Sharif (Temple Mount) belongs to Muslims."

"This proves Jewish conspiracies for a synagogue will never succeed and solidifies our presence here. It will make Muslims worldwide more secure that the Jews will never take over the Haram al-Sharif," the Waqf official said.

Sources in the Jordanian monarchy and the Waqf told WND Olmert last month gave Jordan's King Abdullah official permission to build the minaret. The sources said the minaret will rise 130 feet above the ancient walls of Jerusalem.

A senior Olmert adviser confirmed to WND the Israeli prime minister told Abdullah he will allow the minaret's construction.

The adviser said he could not speak on the record because Israel has been waiting for an "opportune time" to officially announce permission for the new minaret.

Mazar slammed Olmert's decision to allow the minaret, which has not yet been officially announced.

"This needs to be discussed on wide scale and not just given as a manner of any gesture to anyone," Mazar said.

She accused the Israeli government of "completely neglecting" the Temple Mount.

"Jews are only allowed up there at certain hours. Muslims can construct and destroy Jewish artifacts and we don't hear any contempt for these actions coming from the government. It's disgusting," Mazar told WND.

"But the Muslims are very loud about anything related to the Temple Mount," she said.

The past few weeks, Muslim leaders worldwide have been criticizing Israeli renovation work near the Temple Mount in the Old City of Jerusalem to replace a ramp that provides access to a gate leading to the Mount. Muslim leaders claim Israel is trying to weaken the foundations of the Mount. The Israeli government contends the work, taking place in the Jewish Quarter outside the Temple Mount, poses no threat whatsoever to the Mount, but the mayor of Jerusalem yesterday postponed construction of the new gate.

In October, King Abdullah announced plans to build the fifth minaret, although at the time the Jordanians reportedly did not have Israel's permission to commence construction. Abdullah said the minaret would bear the symbol of the Jordanian monarchy.

The Temple Mount's first minaret was constructed on the southwest corner in 1278, the second was built in 1297 by order of a Mameluke king, the third by a governor of Jerusalem in 1329 and the last in 1367.

Prominent Israeli archaeologist Gabi Barkai of Tel Aviv University slammed the new minaret plans.

"I am against any change in the status quo on the Temple Mount. If the status quo is being changed, then it should not just be the addition of Muslim structures at the site," Barkai said.

Rabbi Chaim Richman, director of the international department at Israel's Temple Institute, told WND Olmert's decision to allow the minaret "is repugnant to anyone who knows what it is to be a Jew."

"The decision and Israel's general attitude toward the Temple Mount is the manifestation of spiritual bankruptcy in the country's leadership. Olmert is turning his back on our Jewish heritage while the rest of the world looks at us with amazement at how we can be so insensitive to our own spiritual legacy."

### **Al Aqsa mosque built by angels?**

The Temple Mount is the holiest site in Judaism. For Muslims, it is Islam's third holiest site.

The First Jewish Temple was built by King Solomon in the 10th century B.C. It was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. The Second Temple was rebuilt in 515 B.C. after Jerusalem was freed from Babylonian captivity. That temple was destroyed by the Roman Empire in A.D. 70. Each temple stood for a period of about four centuries.

The Jewish Temple was the center of religious Jewish worship. It housed the Holy of Holies, which contained the Ark of the Covenant and was said to be the area upon which God's "presence" dwelt. The Al Aqsa Mosque now sits on the site.

The temple served as the primary location for the offering of sacrifices and was the main gathering place in Israel during annual holidays.

The Temple Mount compound has remained a focal point for Jewish services over the millennia. Prayers for a return to Jerusalem have been uttered by Jews since the Second Temple was destroyed, according to Jewish tradition. Jews worldwide pray facing toward the Western Wall, a portion of an outer courtyard of the Temple left intact.

The Al Aqsa Mosque was constructed around A.D. 709 to serve as a shrine near another shrine, the Dome of the Rock, which was built by an Islamic caliph. Al Aqsa was meant to mark the place where Muslims came to believe Muhammad, the founder of Islam, ascended to heaven.

Jerusalem is not mentioned in the Quran. Islamic tradition states Muhammad took a journey in a single night from "a sacred mosque" - believed to be in Mecca in southern Saudi Arabia - to "the farthest mosque," and from a rock there ascended to heaven. The farthest mosque later became associated with Jerusalem.

Most Waqf officials deny Israelite temples ever existed in spite of what many call overwhelming archaeological evidence, including the discovery of Temple-era artifacts linked to worship, tunnels that snake under the Temple Mount and over 100 ritual immersion pools believed to have been used by priests to cleanse themselves before services. The cleansing process is detailed in the Torah.

According to the website of the Palestinian Authority's Office for Religious Affairs, the Temple Mount is Muslim property. The site claims the Western Wall, which it refers to as the Al-Boraq Wall, previously was a docking station for horses. It states Muhammad tied his horse, named Boraq, to the wall before ascending to heaven.

In an interview with WND, Kamal Hatib, vice-chairman of the Islamic Movement, which will take part in the podium installation ceremonies, claimed the Al-Aqsa Mosque was built by angels and that a Jewish Temple may have existed, but not in Jerusalem. The Movement, which works closely with the Waqf, is the Muslim group in Israel most identified with the Temple Mount.

"When the First Temple was built by Solomon - God bless him - Al Aqsa was already built. We don't believe that a prophet like Solomon would have built the Temple at a place where a mosque existed," said Hatib.

"And all the historical and archaeological facts deny any relation between the temples and the location of Al Aqsa," he continued. "We must know that Jerusalem was occupied and that people left many things, coins and other things everywhere. This does not mean in any way that there is a link between the people who left these things and the place where these things were left."

### **Al Aqsa official: Jewish temples existed**

Last June, in a widely circulated [WND interview](#), a former senior leader of the Waqf contradicted his colleagues, saying he has come to believe the first and second Jewish Temples existed and stood at the current location of the Al Aqsa Mosque.

The leader, who was dismissed from his Waqf position after he quietly made his beliefs known, said Al Aqsa custodians passed down stories for centuries from generation to generation indicating the mosque was built at the site of the former Jewish temples.

He said the Muslim world's widespread denial of the existence of the Jewish temples is political in nature and not rooted in facts.

"Prophet Solomon built his famous Temple at the same place that later the Al Aqsa Mosque was built. It cannot be a coincidence that these different holy sites were built at the same place. The Jewish Temple Mount existed," said the former senior Waqf leader, speaking to WND from an apartment in an obscure alley in Jerusalem's Old City.

The former leader, who is well known to Al Aqsa scholars and Waqf officials, spoke on condition his name be withheld, claiming an on-the-record interview would endanger his life.

He told WND "true" Islamic tradition relates the Jewish temples once stood at the site of the Al Aqsa Mosque.

"[The existence of the Jewish Temple at the site is obvious] according to studies, researches and archaeological signs that we were also exposed to. But especially according to the history that passed from one generation to another – we believe Al Aqsa was built on the same place where the Temple of the Jews – the first monotheistic religion – existed."

He cited samples of some stories he said were related orally by Islamic leaders:

"We learned that the Christians, especially those who believed that Jesus was crucified by the Jews, used to throw their garbage at the Temple Mount site. They used to throw the pieces of cotton and other material Christian women used in cleaning the blood of their monthly cycle. Doing so, they believed that they were humiliating, insulting and harming the Jews at their holiest site. This way they are hurting them like Jews hurt Christians when crucifying Jesus.

"It is known also that most of the first guards of Al Aqsa when it was built were Jews. The Muslims knew at that time that they could not find any more loyal and faithful than the Jews to guard the mosque and its compound. They knew that the Jews have a special relation with this place."

### **Temple Mount: No-prayer zone**

Currently, even though the Jewish state controls Jerusalem, the Waqf serve as the custodians of the Temple Mount under a deal made with the Israeli government that restricts non-Muslim prayer at the site.

The Temple Mount was opened to the general public until September 2000, when the Palestinians started their intifada by throwing stones at Jewish worshippers after then-candidate for prime minister Ariel Sharon visited the area.

Following the onset of violence, the new Sharon government closed the Mount to non-Muslims, using checkpoints to control all pedestrian traffic for fear of further clashes with the Palestinians.

The Temple Mount was reopened to non-Muslims in August 2003. It still is open, but only Sundays through Thursdays 7:30 a.m. to 10 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. to 1:30 p.m., and not on any Christian, Jewish or Muslim holidays or other days considered "sensitive" by the Waqf.

During "open" days, Jews and Christian are allowed to ascend the Mount, usually through organized tours and only if they conform first to a strict set of guidelines, which includes demands that they not pray or bring any "holy objects" to the site. Visitors are banned from entering any of the mosques without direct Waqf permission. Rules are enforced by Waqf agents, who watch tours closely and alert nearby Israeli police to any breaking of their guidelines.