

Ben Gvir Declares Jewish prayer on Temple Mount to be Allowed – Contrary to Status Quo

National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir on Wednesday surprisingly declared a change to the long-standing status quo on Jerusalem's Temple Mount prohibiting non-Muslims from praying at the holy site.

"I was on the Temple Mount last week. I prayed on the Temple Mount and we pray on the Temple Mount. I am the political echelon, and the political echelon allows Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount," Ben Gvir declared.

As national security minister, Ben Gvir is responsible for the police which enforces Israeli law on the site, which is mainly governed by an Islamic organization controlled by the Kingdom of Jordan.

His controversial statement came during a speech at the Israel's Return to the Temple Mount" conference in the Knesset building on Wednesday, and against the background of Prime Minister Netanyahu's visit to the U.S.

"It's no secret that I had an argument with the Prime Minister about closing the Temple Mount in the last ten days of Ramadan. I thought that the Temple Mount should not be closed even for a minute," Ben Gvir said.

According to the status quo governing the Temple Mount since Israel captured it in the Six-Day War of 1967, Muslims can pray at the site with few restrictions, while non-Muslims have only limited time slots to visit, can only enter by one gate, and cannot carry out religious ceremonies, including prayer.

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Visibly religious Jews can only walk along a predetermined route on the mount under heavy police protection. However, in recent years the police has increasingly tolerated individual prayers without immediate arrests.

“There is more to progress, but I remember there were days when they shouted at me ‘Allahu Akbar’ and I shouted back to them ‘Shema Israel’ and they arrested me,” Ben Gvir noted.

“Today is different, a lot of people enter the mountain, walk around proudly and pray and that’s how it should be... There will be no discrimination against Jews on the Temple Mount, that’s what I strive for,” Ben Gvir said.

Acts seen by Palestinians as Jewish “provocations” or threats against their rights on the Temple Mount have often been exploited in the past to kick off violent riots, most famously, the Second Intifada in the year 2000.

Hamas has claimed that the “Guardian of the Walls” riots in 2021, as well as its October 7 massacre which it dubbed “al-Aqsa Flood,” were launched in response to such threats.

During last month’s Jerusalem Day celebrations, Ben Gvir already championed Jewish prayer rights on the Temple Mount, prompting a quick rebuttal by the Prime Minister.

“The status quo on the Temple Mount has not changed and will not change,” Netanyahu’s office stated.

This time, Ben Gvir made the declaration as Netanyahu and his team were asleep in the U.S., making it impossible to coordinate an immediate response.

Last Thursday, Ben Gvir again ascended the mount to “pray for the hostages, that they may return home, but without a reckless deal,” he said at the time.

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The majority of ultra-Orthodox rabbis have long held the belief that Jews are forbidden from ascending the Temple Mount due to its sanctity. The National Religious Movement, despite being Orthodox, allows its members to enter certain areas of the mount.

Interior Minister Moshe Arbel from the ultra-Orthodox Shas Party slammed Ben Gvir's declaration, noting that "All the elders of Israel agreed on a complete ban on going up to the Temple Mount. The big blasphemy he committed, it is under the punishment of Kareth [being cut off from the people Israel]."

Moshe Gafni from the ultra-Orthodox United Torah Judaism Party demanded from Netanyahu "not to allow the status quo to change on the Temple Mount, and if there are changes then to close the Temple Mount to Jews."

The Democrats Knesset Member Gilad Kariv, who himself is religiously observant, stated: "Ben Gvir announced a policy change on the Temple Mount, while the Prime Minister in the United States is preparing his speech."

He accused Ben Gvir of throwing "a match into the hottest barrel to ignite an intifada in the territories [Judea and Samaria], like a second 'Guardian of the Walls'. The headline 'Israel returns to the Temple Mount' is an anti-Zionist headline."

Wednesday afternoon the Prime Minister's Office issued a statement refuting Ben Gvir's declaration.

"Israel's policy of maintaining the status-quo on the Temple Mount has not changed and will not change," read the statement.

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