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Middle East Brief

How Israel's New Government Will Challenge the Status Quo in Jerusalem

Peter Krause

On January 3, 2023, Itamar Ben Gvir strolled up the Mughrabi Bridge, through the gate, and into the most contested sacred site in the world, the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem.¹ For Ben Gvir, a firebrand activist once convicted of inciting racism and supporting terrorism who had been sworn in days before as the national security minister in the most right-wing government in Israel's history, it was a symbolic act of triumph. Indeed, Ben Gvir was escorted on his walk by—and is now in charge of—the very Israeli police forces that used to regularly arrest him.

Ben Gvir's deliberately symbolic act immediately received worldwide attention and near-unanimous international condemnation, including rebukes from the U.S., Europe, and all of Israel's Arab neighbors.² The United Nations Security Council held an emergency meeting to discuss the incident, during which its fifteen members warned against threats to the Jerusalem status quo.³ All remember the visit by then Israeli opposition leader and soon-to-be prime minister Ariel Sharon to the same location in 2000, which helped spark the Second Intifada—also called the “Al-Aqsa Intifada” owing to the Palestinian desire to fight for the sacred mosque on the site. The subsequent five years of conflict left 1,000 Israelis and 3,000 Palestinians dead—and that conflict destroyed not just lives, but also belief in the peace process.

Observers are correct to point out the inflammatory potential of Ben Gvir's actions, especially given the recent clashes in and around Al-Aqsa Mosque, as well as the ongoing, unprecedented civil unrest in Israel over the government's attempted judicial reform.⁴ But most are unaware both of the small but significant changes on the ground that predate Ben Gvir's ascension—and of the major differences of opinion regarding Jerusalem's holy sites within the

Peter Krause is a faculty leave fellow at the Crown Center and associate professor of political science at Boston College.

governing coalition of which he is a part. To begin with, the “status quo” that the UN, the U.S., and Arab states want the Israelis and Palestinians to maintain is neither unitary nor invariable: It has informal and formal dimensions that have been continually challenged and occasionally altered in recent decades. And because of the “status quo” bias that surrounds the site, dynamic attempts to rapidly and formally change access protocols, prayer restrictions, or the site’s physical infrastructure have often been reversed. It is the incrementalism of small, informal actions by activist individuals and organizations that has slowly altered the informal status quo, without governments formally acknowledging any changes.

Ben Gvir’s walk provides a unique window into these dynamics because it straddles the line between incremental and dynamic challenges to the status quo that Israeli governments have continually debated. And that debate will continue, because the status quo at the Temple Mount is perhaps the issue on which there is the greatest disagreement among coalition partners even in this right-wing government. The ultra-Orthodox parties want no change; nationalists like Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu mostly support incremental, informal change; and the national religious, like Ben Gvir, want *formal* change and will push for it, this time from inside the government.

This Brief will explain why the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif is such a sacred and important site; the recent history of both incrementalist and dynamic challenges to the status quo that has heretofore defined the site; how the factions in Israel’s current governing coalition perceive the situation; and what new developments involving the site mean for the stability of Israel’s government and its relations with the Palestinians, with Arab states, and with the U.S.

What the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif Is—and Why It Matters

The overlapping religious significance of the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif is what makes it the most contested site in world history.⁵ Jews believe that Mount Moriah, which is underneath the stone floor of the site, is where God began creating the world, where the Hebrew patriarch Abraham prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac, and where the First and Second Jewish Temples were located before they were destroyed by the Babylonians and the Romans, respectively, in 586 BCE and 70 CE. These temples were the center of ancient Jewish life, and their former location is considered the holiest site in Judaism. It was likely not a coincidence that Ben Gvir walked up to the Temple Mount on the 10th of Tevet, a day on which Jews mourn the ancient siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the First Temple (Solomon’s Temple).

Muslims believe that this same site, which they call al-Haram al-Sharif, or “the noble sanctuary,” is where the Prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven around the year 621 CE to communicate with prior Jewish and Christian prophets and, ultimately, Allah. The Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa Mosque were built on the site by Umayyad caliphs around 691 and 705 CE, respectively, to commemorate Muhammad’s nighttime journey from Mecca to Jerusalem and his ascension. These two mosques and the broader complex, sometimes collectively referred to as “Al-Aqsa,” represent the third holiest site in Islam. It was in Muslim hands with few interruptions for nearly 1,300 years, until Israel took control of East Jerusalem and occupied the entire West Bank in the Six-Day War of 1967.

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Control of the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif has enormous religious, economic, and political implications, not least because it is located at the heart of the most populated city in the region, which Israelis and Palestinians both claim as their capital. After taking control of the area from Jordan in 1967, the Israeli government established a compromise scenario in an attempt to satisfy its Jewish population without overly angering the broader Muslim and Palestinian populations: People of all religions can access the holy sites, but only Muslims can pray on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif.⁶ The site would continue to be administered by the Jordanian Waqf, whose “special role” was reinforced by Israel in the 1994 peace agreement between Jordan and Israel.⁷ Jews are allowed to pray at the Western Wall below the site. This arrangement is collectively referred to as the “status quo.”

The Reversal of Dynamic, Noticeable, Formal Changes to the Status Quo

Since 1967, there have been a number of formal, state-led attempts at significant change to the status quo surrounding the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. Such large, noticeable modifications—what I call dynamic changes—are always either the cause or consequence of conflict, and they have often been rejected and/or reversed. In 2017, two Israeli border police were shot and killed on the Temple Mount, prompting Israel to set up metal detectors for Muslims entering the site; massive Palestinian and Jordanian protest caused them to be removed days later.⁸ The very ramp that Ben Gvir walked up on January 3 was constructed as a temporary solution in 2007 after the prior earthen ramp collapsed owing to storms. The wooden structure was meant to last a few months but stands to this day because of mass protest and conflict that has occurred whenever large-scale, permanent renovation is discussed or initiated. The digging of tunnels underneath the Western Wall and heading toward the Al-Aqsa Mosque (purportedly to find the Ark of the Covenant) was re-initiated in 1982, but the passage was quickly resealed after clashes, along with claims from Muslim leaders that the excavations could—or even were intended to—weaken the stability of the mosques above.

A few important changes to the broader status quo have endured, though never without significant conflict. Tunnels that parallel the Western Wall have remained open for Israelis and tourists alike since the 1990s, and non-Muslims have been barred from entering the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa Mosque since the Second Intifada. In 1996, the opening of one end of the Western Wall tunnel into the Muslim Quarter sparked days of riots and led to dozens of Palestinians and Israelis being killed.

The Israeli leadership has generally understood, and taken into account, the sensitivity of state-led dynamic changes to the status quo. Military and political leaders rejected the suggestion during the 1967 war from Shlomo Goren, who was then head of the military rabbinate and later became chief rabbi of Israel, to blow up the Dome of the Rock in order to build the Third Temple.⁹ Ben Gvir and other activists have expressed similar desires to build the Third Temple and assert full Israeli authority over the Temple Mount, though to this point much of their approach has been more incremental, less noticeable, and therefore more effective at generating enduring changes to the status quo.¹⁰

The Effectiveness of Incremental, Slow, Informal Adjustments to the Status Quo

I have visited the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif dozens of times over the past two decades amidst fieldwork trips to the region.¹¹ In that time, I have noticed a number of small but important changes. In the summer of 2022, I was preparing to go up the Mughrabi Bridge and was surprised to see that the waiting area inside, just before ascending the ramp, had been transformed: What used to be a bare wooden space had been replaced with multiple benches, colorful hanging posters with maps and instructions, and a miniature model of the Second Temple prominently displayed (see Figure 1). The posters instructed individuals that ascending to the Temple Mount was allowed if one had been ritually cleansed in a *mikveh* (ritual bath), did not wear leather shoes, and walked around the perimeter of the site, thus avoiding walking over the Second Temple site itself—which the map suggested was centered around the Dome of the Rock.



Figure 1. Renovated Waiting Room inside the Mughrabi Bridge

These additions represented another step in a long-running incrementalist challenge to the status quo. Just before entering the bridge complex, there used to be a prominent sign, signed by the chief rabbinate of Israel, that said in both English and Hebrew, “According to Torah law, entering the Temple area is strictly forbidden due to the holiness of the site.” But in 2015, the Hebrew part of the sign was changed to read, “According to Torah law, it is forbidden for any *impure person* to enter the Temple Mount because of its holiness.”¹² (Italics mine.) This literally as well as figuratively opened the door to entry for Jews under the conditions noted in the previous paragraph. As activist and former Knesset member Yehuda Glick claimed in the aftermath of the sign change, “We’re in the middle of a revolution. Today we’ve advanced another millimeter in the process.” Those few centimeters of altered text helped lay the groundwork for a few meters of change inside the bridge, as incremental change continues apace with little notice on the part of many locals and almost all foreigners.

These relatively unnoticed “qualitative” adjustments to the site are both causes and effects of increasingly noticeable—but still informal—*quantitative* changes in the number of Jewish visitors. Over the past decade, the number of visits from Jews has increased sixfold, from 8,548 in 2013 to 51,483 in 2022. These numbers come from Beyadenu, an organization trying to strengthen Jewish presence at the Temple Mount that Glick helped found in 2013.¹³ Beyadenu, along with organizations like The Temple Institute¹⁴ and others within the umbrella group HaLiba, is part of a growing, organized effort to change the status quo. The numbers mean that 2022 likely saw the most annual Jewish visitors on top of the Temple Mount since 1967. Beyadenu supporters would suggest that these numbers alone do not amount to a formal violation of the status quo, as Jews are allowed to visit the site. But an increasing number of visitors are not simply visiting but also singing the Israeli national anthem while they are there, taunting Palestinians in the area, or—a clear violation of the status quo—praying.

The increase in praying has also occurred in incremental fashion, from Jewish visitors being stopped and arrested by police for doing so, to *not* being stopped by certain police officers while praying silently, to being allowed to pray quietly, and then even to being allowed to pray openly at certain places and times.¹⁵ By altering both the numbers and actions of Jewish visitors, these activists have effectively pushed the informal status quo closer to that at the Tomb of the Patriarchs/Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron, where both Muslims and Jews are allowed to visit *and* pray, although they are given access on different days and times. The incrementalist strategy is thus a conscious choice by groups like Beyadenu, who have learned through a process of trial and error how they can best shift the status quo without gaining control of the government.

If these small adjustments nonetheless do lead to conflict, the Israeli state as well as international observers are less likely to blame the incrementalists and more likely to place themselves in the middle, or even on the incrementalists’ side. In such a scenario, the incrementalists’ small shifts ironically move them from being attackers to defenders of the *new de facto* status quo, thus requiring others to push for change, *back* to the way things were.

This exact approach has been employed successfully in West Bank settlements by some of the very same activists, who informally and incrementally have established unauthorized outposts on Palestinian land.¹⁶ These settlers received

protection from the IDF even though their outposts were not legal in the eyes of the Israeli government. Those who opposed them have had to push for *formal* destruction of the *informal* status quo on the ground. Despite some withdrawals over the years, the Israeli government has authorized many former outposts, and just voted on February 12 to legalize nine more.¹⁷ These post-hoc recognitions change informal status quos to formal ones after decades of incrementalist action.

In a situation with a status quo bias—like the one at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif—detering reversals is far easier than compelling new changes. These small, informal changes can thus create a ratcheting effect, as the longer they last, the more they become part of the new formal reality.

Policy Disagreements on the Temple Mount within Israel's New Governing Coalition

The dynamics and ultimate impact of new challenges to the status quo in Jerusalem will depend in large part on Ben Gvir's coalition partners, who have different priorities and plans with respect to the Temple Mount. All of the Knesset members in the current coalition generally agree on the broad strokes of establishing a united Jerusalem under Israeli sovereignty with no Palestinian control. They disagree on how the Temple Mount should be managed, however, as well as whether and how any changes should be made. Ben Gvir and most of his supporters emerged from the national religious community, who combine strident Zionism with Orthodox Judaism. They make up the vast majority of those who are visiting the Temple Mount and pushing the boundaries of permissible Jewish prayer, in part because they combine the nationalist goal of establishing Israel's sovereignty over the site with the religious permission for prayer they have obtained from some of their rabbis. They have perfected the strategy of incrementalism, but they long for dynamic change. Now that they are more powerful than ever inside the government, they may push for that.

On the other hand, the ultra-Orthodox (*Haredim*), who dominate the rabbinate and the religious sector in Israel, have regularly criticized those who attempt to change the status quo at the Temple Mount. After Ben Gvir's ascension on January 3, Sephardi chief rabbi Yitzhak Yosef sternly wrote to him: "As a minister representing the government of Israel you should be acting according to Chief Rabbinate instructions, which have long forbidden visiting the Temple Mount."¹⁸ The Haredi

parties, United Torah Judaism and Shas, make up a key part of the new governing coalition, without which it would collapse. They generally believe that the ban on accessing the Temple Mount is total and that individuals cannot currently be purified to ascend—the punishment for ascension being death at God's hands.

As Rabbi Moshe Shaffir, editor of a Shas journal, affirms, "The Haredi stance remains loyal to the pledge not to advance redemption through force. We hope to receive everything on a gold platter, without having to enter the site like thieves in the night."¹⁹ That is, they believe that redemption and the Messiah will come about through Torah study and prayer, not by means of direct action at the Temple site. Furthermore, they generally agree with a member of United Torah Judaism who argued that "[a]longside the halachic ban, we see that the desire of different groups to visit the Temple Mount does not come from a real need to pray in a holy site, but is nothing more than a political and nationalistic issue, which seeks to prove control of the area. Therefore, it is a dangerous act of unnecessarily provoking the world's nations."²⁰ The Haredim are wary of coming across as anti-Zionist in their appeals, so they both focus on religious law and emphasize that they believe challenges to the status quo endanger the state and its people.

That approach resonates with the leading party in the current government, Likud, which is torn between the national religious and Haredi stances on this issue. On the one hand, Prime Minister Netanyahu and Likud want to expand Israel's sovereignty and control over all of Jerusalem, including the holy sites. Indeed, 75.5% of Likud voters support Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount, essentially the same as among national religious voters (and compared with 3% of United Torah Judaism voters, the lowest percentage of any group).²¹ On the other hand, Likud voters are mostly not the ones physically ascending to pray. Furthermore, although he does not want to be seen as backing down in the face of Hamas threats and its "red lines" regarding the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, Netanyahu wants to maintain growing international ties with Arab states via the Abraham Accords, while preventing significant backlash from the United States and the international community. Netanyahu and Likud are therefore supportive of incrementalism, but their stance on dynamic changes to the status quo depends on the political cost.

What Happens Next? Incremental vs. Dynamic Change, and the Gray Area in Between

Netanyahu knows that with Ben Gvir in his coalition he is playing with fire, but he needs Ben Gvir in order to remain prime minister and handle his legal woes. Netanyahu is betting that he can keep any changes to the status quo within the Israeli consensus, where he has made his career. The risk is that the line between effective incrementalism and dynamic escalation is blurred. The national religious movement's incrementalist calibration stems from a time when they were weaker and largely operating outside of government ministries. The unprecedented power and profile that Ben Gvir and other national religious leaders now have makes it more likely that formerly incremental actions will escalate, with dynamic and undesired effects for Netanyahu, his coalition, and Israelis in general. What would incrementalist vs. dynamic approaches look like under the current government, and to what extent can Ben Gvir and his supporters toe the line between them?

As with the effort to change the Jerusalem status quo, Ben Gvir and his Jewish Power party have moved incrementally into positions of power: from being nongovernmental activists who for many years could not pass the electoral threshold for Knesset elections, to opposition Knesset members, to now powerful ministers in the ruling coalition. On the one hand, Ben Gvir's position as national security minister opens up new possibilities for more significant, formalized change to the status quo. On the other hand, Ben Gvir's newfound prominence and position means that incrementalist actions he used to take with little fanfare—such as the walk up the Mughrabi Bridge—now become worldwide escalatory incidents, potentially setting back his cause.

More than anyone else in the Knesset, Ben Gvir has experience pushing up to and beyond the boundaries of acceptable behavior. He has some sense of what changes can be made and be defended by the Israeli government, and he may start by calibrating his actions accordingly. Indeed, Israel's ambassador to the United Nations, Likud member Gilad Erdan, argued at the UN Security Council meeting on January 5 that Ben Gvir's January 3 Temple Mount visit was “in line with the status quo, and whoever claims otherwise is only inflaming the situation. Jews are allowed to visit the Temple Mount.”²²

In this incrementalist scenario, Ben Gvir would personally avoid overly inflammatory actions and not

demand any formal changes from the government. Instead, he might push the police to not prevent Jews from praying on the Temple Mount—though the Supreme Court ruled on March 19 that he can only “outline policies and general principles for the Israel Police” and cannot issue operational orders.²³ In any case, an incrementalist Ben Gvir would allow his supporters to push the boundaries while he acts as a sympathetic minister, ensuring they face no repercussions while nudging the status quo in their direction.

Ben Gvir does not want the formal status quo to remain, however, as he has called for ending the ban on Jewish prayer and would love to see larger, more rapid change sanctioned by the government. He has made a career of being a strident instigator, and he may not want—or be able—to change his approach now that he is more powerful than ever. Unlike Netanyahu, Ben Gvir will be less concerned with backlash from Palestinians and from Arab states. In fact, he will somewhat welcome it, because when conflict is joined, “rally round the flag” means the government and the army come in on his side, regardless of who is responsible for sparking the tension. The week-long conflict in May 2021—which was initiated around Jerusalem and Al-Aqsa and left at least 232 Palestinians and 12 Israelis dead—is instructive.²⁴ Though Ben Gvir opened his office in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah, he closed it at the request of then prime minister Netanyahu, who was concerned about Hamas rocket attacks.²⁵ In exchange for his withdrawal, however, Ben Gvir did receive a promise of a heavier police presence in the area, foreshadowing how he and his supporters could utilize a more aggressive strategy to obtain concessions, even if incremental ones.

A similar dynamic recently played out amidst the mass civil unrest overtaking Israel, which demonstrates how internal Israeli protests can impact Israeli-Palestinian relations with regard to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif and in general. In order to keep Ben Gvir from leaving the coalition in response to his decision to pause judicial reform, Netanyahu granted Ben Gvir the ability to create a “national guard” under his control. Although Israeli protesters are worried that this new security force will be used against them, it is more likely to be used against Palestinians, as indeed Ben Gvir openly threatens. Frustrated by the Supreme Court's recent ruling that he cannot give operational commands to the police, Ben Gvir will seek to shape this new force to do his bidding. This may involve a more aggressive stance regarding the Temple Mount, in mixed neighborhoods and in the West Bank, especially amidst rising unrest and the recent Ramadan clashes in and around Al-Aqsa.

Such changes could lead to a Hebron-like arrangement whereby Muslims and Jews are separated on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif site, but both have full access during their respective appointed times. Ben Gvir and his supporters could thereby manipulate the security dilemma to their advantage. Although the government may be unwilling to take the first step to formally declare a change in the status quo, it may feel obligated to defend Israeli Jews if they are threatened, thus resulting in what will in effect be offensive gains for defensive reasons.²⁶

If such changes occurred, they might endure because they are within the Israeli consensus, which has a status quo bias of its own reflected both in public opinion and institutionally: The majority does not want to make a change to the situation, but once it *has* changed they also do not want to change it back, especially if it's seen as a one-sided concession. Yair Lapid, the center-left prime minister who criticized Ben Gvir and pledged that Israel would maintain the status quo, nonetheless said in the next breath, "By the way, I don't feel comfortable with the idea that Jews do not have freedom of religion in the State of Israel and that Jews are banned from the site."²⁷

How New Challenges to the Status Quo Will Impact Israel and Its Neighbors

The more that Ben Gvir and others within his movement escalate the situation, the greater the risks with respect to both the cohesion of the Israeli government and stability in the broader region. Internally, this is a sensitive issue that could spark a major fight between the national religious and Haredi parties—not simply over the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif site itself, but also over their voters. These parties view each other as electoral threats—especially the Haredim, who fear that Ben Gvir might attract the younger members of their community to vote for national religious parties. And the more the Temple Mount issue becomes a central one in Israeli politics, the more infighting may occur, to the point that sitting in a coalition together becomes an undesirable headache.

Externally, the temperature at this most sacred and sensitive site is being turned up just as the Palestinian Authority is teetering, Mahmoud Abbas turned 88 years old, and a major power struggle for Palestinian leadership is on the horizon. Fragmentation in Palestinian politics also incentivizes parties and leaders to take hard-line stances on Al-Aqsa in order to avoid being outflanked by rivals. The images of Palestinians being struck and hundreds arrested by Israeli police inside Al-Aqsa during Ramadan only adds more fuel to the fire.²⁸

In the broader region, escalatory challenges to the Jerusalem status quo will make it more difficult for any Arab state to strengthen cooperation with Israel. The Abraham Accords have become increasingly unpopular with the relevant Arab publics, the majority of whom disapprove of their country's participation in the Accords.²⁹ It is noteworthy that the state that pushed for the United Nations Security Council meeting on Ben Gvir's visit was the United Arab Emirates, the Arab state that has been by far the most supportive in building strong political, economic, and cultural ties to Israel. Indeed, Netanyahu's first official visit as prime minister was to be a triumphant one to the UAE in early January, but it was postponed on account of Ben Gvir's visit.³⁰

Sporadic, occasional tension in Jerusalem will slow but not stop progress in the Israel-UAE relationship, given the substantial mutual interests involved. But significant conflict in Jerusalem definitely increases the possibility that the Abraham Accords will become a cold peace like that with Egypt and Jordan—without regular diplomatic visits or extensive cooperation.

Dynamic challenges to the Jerusalem status quo would also threaten the biggest foreign policy prize for the current Israeli government: normalization with Saudi Arabia, a diplomatic achievement that would have major political and security benefits for Israel. The custodian of the two holy mosques in Mecca and Medina is unlikely to formally recognize Israel when the entire Muslim world sees the third holy mosque, in Jerusalem, under threat. This will weigh heavily on Netanyahu as he considers when and how to restrain Ben Gvir and his supporters, especially in light of Saudi Arabia's rapprochement with Iran.

Netanyahu may seek to kill two birds with one stone by offering Saudi Arabia an incentive: a role in administering the Haram al-Sharif and/or other Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem. That this would be done over the heads of the Palestinians and Jordan (the current custodian of the Haram al-Sharif) may give the Saudis pause, but it also fits the diplomatic pattern of the Abraham Accords and the current Israeli government. Nonetheless, the Saudis are far more likely to accept such a deal amidst stability, not conflict, at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount site and in the broader region.

Conclusion

Despite all three Israeli prime ministers who served in 2022—Naftali Bennett, Yair Lapid, and Benjamin Netanyahu—stressing that the situation on the Temple

Mount/Haram al-Sharif remains “All can visit, but only Muslims can pray,” the status quo at the site has been far from unchanged and unchallenged. For years, those who would alter it have practiced a policy of incrementalism: slowly and imperceptibly changing the number and character of Jewish visits to this sacred space. With advocates both of Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount and of the building of the Third Temple now holding prominent positions in government, the already simmering conflict around Jerusalem may escalate further, with significant implications for Israel’s government and its relations with the Palestinians, with its Arab partners, and with the United States. A strong grasp of the history and dynamics of prior struggles over the sacred site can help us understand the causes and effects of challenges to the status quo, now and in the future.

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