

## Netanyahu's career as prime minister bookended by conflagrations on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif

One of the memorable events during Netanyahu's first term as prime minister in the 1990's was the opening of the Western Wall tunnels. The Western Wall tunnels had been opened to the public since the 1980's, but the inauguration [Netanyahu presided over in 1996](#) was the section that ends in the Muslim Quarter at the Via Dolorosa. The decision to open that exit point was made about three months after Netanyahu became prime minister for the first time and was his first major decision relating to the Palestinian-Israeli issue.

The opening of the tunnels was interpreted on the part of Palestinians as a breach of the status quo and a violation of al-Aqsa. From the Palestinian perspective, the tunnels adjacent to the foundations of the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif complex are a threat to the al-Aqsa complex. While Israel correctly asserted that the Western Wall tunnels excavations did not penetrate under the Temple Mount complex, the Palestinians regard the excavation along the complex's foundations as a provocation and an infringement of their rights. The Palestinians' concerns were not completely unfounded. [In 1981, tensions rose at the site](#), when excavators working under the Western Wall's then rabbi, Rabbi Yehuda Meir Getz, dug a tunnel in the area called the "Warren's Gate," in the direction of the Temple Mount which led to a confrontation between the Islamic Waqf and the excavators. The Israeli authorities ordered the opening closed and sealed with concrete. These and other events prompted UNESCO in 1982 to declare Jerusalem as a World Heritage Site in Danger.



Tunnel at Western Wall underneath the Davidson Center

Netanyahu's 1996 decision led to three days of violent confrontations between Israelis and Palestinians, which [took the lives of 17 Israelis and nearly 100 Palestinians](#).

Netanyahu, who throughout his years as prime minister has been known to avert military confrontations, demonstrated weakness when it came to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. During the past decade we have witnessed a sharp increase in the number of Jewish pilgrims to the Temple Mount. Recently, the police even permitted Jewish prayer services on the Mount, a measure that was perceived as a breach of the status quo.

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In spite of Netanyahu's image as a cautious and measured leader, in 2017 pressure around the Temple Mount resulted in a decision to set up cameras and [metal detectors](#) at the entrances to the complex. The decision, made in the wake of the murder of two policemen at the entrance to the complex, led to protests on the part of the residents of East Jerusalem and after several days the metal detectors were removed and order was restored.

Apparently, in order to preclude politicians bent on political conflagration, or publicity hounds from setting the city on fire, a significant portion of the authority over the Old City is vested with the Prime Minister's Office. Thus, for example, the Western Wall Heritage Foundation, which is responsible for the Western Wall plaza and the tunnels leading to the Muslim Quarter, is a government organization which comes under the direct authority of the Prime Minister's Office.

In recent years, the administration of some of the tunnels was transferred to the settlers of the Elad Foundation. For example, [Elad has responsibility for a tunnel](#) which ends at a point alongside the Western Wall at the foot of the Temple Mount/ Al Aqsa complex. The privatization of one of the most sensitive sites in the entire area may yet turn out to be a mistake (see Mount Meron). However, presently, it appears that Israel, driven by political interests, continues to allow changes to the status quo on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif and the Old City, despite being fully aware of the potential ramifications.

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Wilson's Arch in the Western Wall Tunnels

If there is a leader who knows how sensitive a place Jerusalem is, especially the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif and its surroundings, it is Binyamin Netanyahu. Perhaps, it is merely a coincidence that the events of recent days on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, Damascus Gate and the surroundings, are concurrent with (as it appears at present) the final days of Netanyahu's tenure as prime minister, but it may be that it is not coincidental that the person who began his first term as prime minister, 25 years ago, with a conflagration on the holy esplanade, is ending his final term in the same manner.