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Police Evacuate Scores of Jewish Activists Barricading in King David's Tomb

Hardline Jews barricade inside flash-point religious site, attempting to prevent Christian prayer service.

Yair Ettinger | Jun 01, 2015 11:57 AM

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Border Police officers at the King David Tomb compound, Jerusalem, June 1, 2015. Credit: Yair Ettinger

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A violent confrontation broke out Monday morning on Mt. Zion in Jerusalem's Old City when a group of Jews tried to prevent some 100 Greek Orthodox worshippers from praying in the complex housing the tomb of King David.

Access to the compound, whose upper floor houses the traditional site of the Last Supper, has been a source of friction in the past.

The Greek Orthodox group was celebrating the holiday of Pentecost.

The Jews holed themselves up in the complex for a long period until police and Border Police removed them by force, so as to maintain the status quo at the site and allow the Christians to commemorate the holiday. Police also used force against journalists at the scene.

In negotiations that preceded their eviction, Jewish worshippers on the premises – including Rabbi Shalom Arush, head of the Kiseh Rahamim yeshiva, from the Bratslav Hasidic sect – presented a series of conditions for allowing the Christian service there. The terms were conveyed to the Greek Orthodox worshippers via the police.

In the wake of the agreement that was struck, and unlike previous years, the Christians were not allowed to bring incense to the site, their bishop was not allowed to bring in a ceremonial rod with a crucifix, candles were not lit, and the number of persons allowed to reach the site of David's tomb was limited to 10.

Pentecost is observed on three different dates by the various Christian denominations; the Greek Orthodox Church marked it this year on June 1.

The service on Monday, led by Bishop Dorotheus and a group of clergymen and women and other worshippers, was more highly charged than the other denominations' observances.

In response to the arrival of the Greek Orthodox group on Monday, Rabbi Yosef Berger, who presented himself as one of the "rabbis of the tomb," told the police, "Here at David's tomb, [people] will not enter with a cross. It's idol worship," he said, and "an abomination."

In addition, before the incident, a group of Jews dedicated to what they called "saving King David's tomb" had called on members of the public to come to the site to prevent "idol worship" there.

On Sunday, a group of Jews unsuccessfully sought to disrupt a small procession of Armenian Orthodox worshippers in the Old City, but police also intervened. In the afternoon, Greek Orthodox Christians began praying, under the watchful eye of security forces.

The official arrangements at the site, established by Israel's Interior Ministry, allow Greek Orthodox visitors, unlike the Catholic and Armenian worshipers, access not only to the upper chamber but also to the lower one, which Jewish tradition says is the site of King David's tomb. The lower level is used by Jewish worshippers throughout the year.

Pentecost - a Christian holiday that shares some elements associated with the Jewish festival of Shavuot - is one of the very few occasions throughout the year in which Christians are allowed to pray at the site on Mt. Zion.

Last Sunday (May 24), when crowds of Jews marked Shavuot in the Old City, was also the date on which the Catholic Church marked the Pentecost. The Catholic media reported that some Jewish individuals shouted curses at the Christian worshippers, and the two groups had to be separated by Israeli police.

Custodian of the Holy Land, which oversees Christian holy sites in Israel for the Vatican, issued a statement in response to the incident, which read "these are ceremonies that occur every year, commemorating Christian holidays, and for hundreds of years have been part of the status quo in the area. In recent days, extremists have been trying to sabotage these ceremonies by using violence against worshippers. We find these events very troubling, and call on the state of Israel and the police to continue using all methods necessary in order to allow for prayer services to be held, as they have been for hundreds of years."

Last year, ahead of Pope Francis' visit to Israel, police arrested 26 demonstrators for disturbing the peace at the complex. At the time, some 150 right-wing activists arrived at the complex and began demonstrating, allegedly attacking police officers with stones and bottles. Some of them entered the compound and barricaded themselves inside.