

Desecration, attacks at ancient Jewish cemetery

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By JOSH LEDERMAN

JERUSALEM (AP) - A wide patch of steep hillside overlooking Jerusalem's Old City holds row after row of graves. Biblical prophets, revered rabbis and a prime minister are buried there. Yet many of the tombstones have been smashed, litter is strewn around and tethered donkeys defecate on top of graves.

The ancient cemetery is just one point of contention in the struggle for control of Jerusalem, an explosive issue in decades of Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts.

Israelis and American Jewish leaders are demanding that the Israeli government increase protection to ensure that those buried on the Mount of Olives can rest in peace.

The cemetery is believed to hold the graves of biblical prophets Haggai, Malachi and Zechariah. The list of modern Jewish figures buried there includes Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, the father of modern Hebrew, and Nobel Prize laureate Shai Agnon.



(AP) In this photo taken Friday, Feb. 18, 2011 Malcolm Hoenlein, the executive vice chairman of the...
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Rabbi Avraham Kook, the chief rabbi of British Mandatory Palestine, and Rabbi Shlomo Goren, a former chief rabbi of Israel, are also buried there.

Some Israelis claim Palestinians from surrounding east Jerusalem neighborhoods attack visitors two to three times a week, sometimes stoning funeral processions. They accuse Arabs of building illegally on top of graves, using tombstones as goalposts for soccer games and lobbing firebombs to desecrate the cemetery.

At a recent visit to the cemetery, Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, said he's heard from hundreds of families in the U.S. who can't visit buried

relatives without protection from armed guards.

"If you hear the families, the pain and the fact that they're afraid to come here, what does it say?" Hoenlein asked. "In Jerusalem, Jews can't go and visit an ancient burial site that is supposedly sacred?"

The Mount of Olives has held a holy place in Judaism since the period of the biblical First Jewish Temple more than 3,000 years ago.

It appears in the Second Book of Samuel, when King David weeps upon climbing the hill. Some Jews believe that in the end of days, the dead will be resurrected there, and Christians regard it as the place where Jesus ascended to the heavens.

At least 150,000 graves line the hill opposite the gold-capped Dome of the Rock mosque, built atop the ruins of the biblical Temples. On Friday afternoons, visitors to the cemetery can hear the Muslim prayer calls echoing across the valley from the site.

Between 1948 and 1967, the Mount of Olives was under Jordanian control. The International Committee for the Preservation of Har Hazeitim (Mount of Olives), a Jewish group, claims that during that period, 40,000 graves were destroyed, and new graves were



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built on top of old ones.

Israel seized east Jerusalem in the 1967 Mideast war and annexed it in a move not recognized by the international community. The cemetery has been under Israeli control ever since, surrounded by Arab neighborhoods.

Palestinians claim all of east Jerusalem, including the Mount of Olives, as the capital of a future state. Projects that strengthen the Jewish presence in east Jerusalem are hotly opposed by the Palestinians and frequently lead to protests. The issue of Israeli construction in east Jerusalem and the West Bank lead to a breakdown in peace talks between Israelis and Palestinians last year.



(AP) In this photo taken Friday, Feb. 18, 2011 Israeli border police officers and tourists stand...

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Parts of the sprawling cemetery on the Mount of Olives are pristine and tranquil. In other areas, vandalism has reduced many gravestones to piles of shattered shards. Arabic graffiti blots some of the walls lining the narrow, winding pathways. In the sparser areas, farm animals can be seen standing on graves and grazing on wild grass.

There are conflicting claims that the Mount of Olives is being used as a political tool.

The Jewish activist leading the campaign to protect the cemetery is Aryeh King, who manages the nonprofit Public Office of East Jerusalem.

King said the vandalism and violence are a part of an Arab plan to make Israel more willing to cede east Jerusalem in future negotiations.

"Nobody will fight against giving these dirty, dangerous places to Arabs, because nobody's coming here," King said.

Others argue it's exactly the opposite.

"They have an interest in giving the impression that there are security problems in order to legitimize the Jewish settlements up there," said Orly Noy of Ir Amim, an Israeli nonprofit that opposes Israel's policies in east Jerusalem.

Palestinian officials and organizations declined to comment.

Jewish groups have secured the support of American and Israeli leaders for increased protection. U.S. Rep. Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y., wrote to Israel's ambassador to the U.S. requesting a timetable for securing the cemetery. Information Minister Yuli Edelstein toured the Mount of Olives to show his support.

Although the Israeli government hasn't announced an increased police presence on the Mount of Olives, the Jerusalem Development Authority said it is installing 180 motion-sensitive cameras to blanket the area.

The video feeds will be monitored from a control room by a private security company. Police will also have access, enabling them to dispatch officers at the first sign of trouble.

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