

[kansascity.com](https://www.kansascity.com)

# Israeli restrictions on 'Holy Fire' ignite Christian outrage

JOSEPH KRAUSS

8-10 minutes

---

FILE - Christian pilgrims hold candles as they gather during the ceremony of the Holy Fire at Church of the Holy Sepulchre, where many Christians believe Jesus was crucified, buried and rose from the dead, in the Old City of Jerusalem on May 1, 2021. Christians have vowed to defy what they say are new and unfair Israeli restrictions on the "Holy Fire" ceremony to be held Saturday, April 23, 2022 at Christianity's holiest site, raising the possibility of even more religiously-charged unrest in Jerusalem. (AP Photo/Ariel Schalit, File)

FILE - Christian pilgrims hold candles as they gather during the ceremony of the Holy Fire at Church of the Holy Sepulchre, where many Christians believe Jesus was crucified, buried and rose from the dead, in the Old City of Jerusalem on May 1, 2021. Christians have vowed to defy what they say are new and unfair Israeli restrictions on the "Holy Fire" ceremony to be held Saturday, April 23, 2022 at Christianity's holiest site, raising the possibility of even more religiously-charged unrest in Jerusalem. (AP Photo/Ariel Schalit, File) AP

## JERUSALEM

Christians celebrated their "Holy Fire" ceremony at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem on Saturday against a backdrop of rising

tensions with Israel, which imposed new restrictions on attendance this year that it said were needed for safety.

Israel says it wants to prevent another disaster after a crowd stampede at a packed Jewish holy site last year left 45 people dead. Christian leaders say there's no need to alter a ceremony that has been held for centuries.

In the dense confines of Jerusalem's Old City, where Jews, Christians and Muslims must share their holiest sites — no matter how reluctantly — even small changes can cause prophetic angst.

The city has already seen a week of clashes between Palestinians and Israeli police at the nearby Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, the third holiest site in Islam. It stands on a hilltop that is the holiest site for Jews, who refer to it as the Temple Mount.

This year major Jewish, Christian and Muslim holidays have converged against a backdrop of renewed Israeli-Palestinian violence. Tensions have soared as tens of thousands of people flock to Jerusalem's Old City to visit some of the holiest sites for all three faiths for the first time since the lifting of pandemic restrictions.

Eastern Orthodox Christians believe that on the Saturday before Easter a miraculous flame appears inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, a sprawling 12th century basilica built on the site where Christians believe Jesus was crucified, buried and resurrected.

On Saturday, Greek Patriarch Theophilos III entered the Holy Edicule, a chamber built on the traditional site of the tomb, and returned with two lit candles, passing the flame among thousands of people holding candles, gradually illuminating the walls of the darkened basilica. The flame will be transferred to Orthodox communities in other countries on special flights.

The source of the Holy Fire has been a closely guarded secret for centuries, and highbrow skeptics going back to the Middle Ages have scorned it as a carnival trick for the masses.

Two years ago, the church was nearly empty because of a coronavirus lockdown, but Israel made special arrangements for the flame to be carried abroad. Hundreds attended last year, when travel restrictions were in place and the ceremony was limited to the fully-vaccinated.

This year, Israel applied a safety law that limits crowd size based on space and the number of exits. Authorities say they want to prevent a repeat of last year's stampede on Mount Meron in northern Israel during a religious festival attended by around 100,000 mostly ultra-Orthodox Jews.

It was one of the worst disasters in the country's history, and authorities came in for heavy criticism over alleged negligence.

“There’s never a problem until there’s a problem, and this is what happened last year in Meron,” said Tania Berg-Rafaeli, the director of interreligious affairs at the Israeli Foreign Ministry.

If something were to happen at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, “we would have to take responsibility for that, and we want to avoid any problem,” she said.

Authorities said they would allow a total of 4,000 people to attend the Holy Fire ceremony, including 1,800 inside the church itself, which has a single large entryway with a raised step. Berg-Rafaeli said Israeli authorities have been in close contact with the churches and would revise the quota upwards next year if more doors in the basilica can be opened.

“It’s totally about safety and not at all about anything else,” she said.

Church leaders rejected any restrictions on principle, saying they infringe

on religious freedom. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, like Al-Aqsa, is governed by a decades-old set of informal arrangements known as the status quo. As at Al-Aqsa, seemingly minor violations have ignited violence, including notorious brawls between monks of different denominations.

In a statement released earlier this month, the Greek Patriarchate said it was “fed up with police restrictions on freedom to worship.”

“The orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem has decided, by the power of the Lord, that it will not compromise its right to provide spiritual services in all churches and squares,” it said. “Prayers will be held as usual.” The patriarchate says up to 11,000 people attend in normal years.

Police sealed off the main entrances to the Christian Quarter with barricades. Large crowds jostled to get in, as the police waved through a trickle of local residents and some foreign tourists.

The ceremony, which goes back at least 1,200 years, hasn't always passed peacefully.

In 1834 a frenzied stampede broke out in the darkened church, and the ruler of the Holy Land at the time barely escaped with his life after his guards drew swords and hacked their way through the crowd, the historian Simon Sebag Montefiore recounts in his history of Jerusalem. Some 400 pilgrims died in the melee, most from suffocation or trampling.

Israel says it is committed to ensuring freedom of worship for Jews, Christians and Muslims, and has long presented itself as an island of tolerance in the Middle East.

In recent years, however, tensions have risen with the local Christian community, most of whom are Palestinian Christians, a population that has steadily dwindled through decades of conflict as many have sought

economic opportunities abroad.

Israel captured east Jerusalem — which includes the historic Old City and its religious sites — along with the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, in the 1967 Mideast war.

The Palestinians want all three territories for a future state with east Jerusalem as its capital. Israel annexed east Jerusalem shortly after the war in a move not recognized internationally, and considers the entire city to be its unified capital.

In recent years, the Greek Patriarchate has been locked in a legal battle with a Jewish settler group over the sale of three properties in the Old City, including two Palestinian-run hotels. The patriarchate says it has proof of corruption in the disputed 2004 sale.

Israel's Supreme Court upheld the sale in 2019, ruling in favor of Ateret Cohanim, an Israeli organization that seeks to expand the Jewish presence in mostly Palestinian neighborhoods of east Jerusalem.

The settlers took over part of one of the hotels — a popular backpacker hostel — last month. Christian leaders denounced the move, accusing them of trying to change the religious character of Jerusalem's Christian Quarter.

The frustration could be felt outside the New Gate leading to the Christian Quarter on Saturday, as crowds waited to enter. Some lifted baby strollers and small children over the barricades as they were waved through.

“It’s like this every year and every year there’s a different excuse,” said Dr. Muna Mushahwar, a physician who argued with police as she tried to organize the entry of a foreign delegation.

“They don’t want the Christians here. The more you push people the

more frustrated they get and then they leave.”