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PA slams NIS 85 million Kotel development project

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"This move preventing us from reaching solution," PA spokesman says; project to help accommodate 8 million annual visitors to Western Wall.

The Palestinian Authority slammed a Sunday cabinet decision to allot NIS 85 million to a development project for the Western Wall over the next five years, AFP reported.

Ghassan Hatib, a PA spokesperson reportedly said: "Israel does not have permission to make changes in the occupied territories, especially in Jerusalem."

"This move is preventing us from reaching an agreement, because any solution must include Jerusalem," Hatib added.

The project will upgrade physical and transportation infrastructure at the site, provide access to new archeological findings, and run educational programs for soldiers and students.

The approved plan is a continuation of another five-year project that began at the site in 2004 and, according to a statement put out after Sunday's cabinet meeting, led to a phenomenal growth in the number of visitors to the Wall, from 2 million annually before the project began to 8 million visitors in 2009. The Wall is the most visited site in the country.

The continuation of the development project will be managed by the Prime Minister's Office and carried out by the Western Wall Heritage Foundation, with the funds coming from the Interior, Transportation, Tourism, Public Security, Defense and Education ministries, as well as from the Israel Lands Authority.

?The Western Wall is the Jewish people's most important heritage site,? Prime Minister

Binyamin Netanyahu said during the cabinet discussion. "We are obligated to develop and preserve it so it can continue to be a focus for visitors and a source of inspiration for millions of visitors, tourists and children and adults from Israel and around the world."

Rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Sites Shmuel Rabinovitch lauded the decision and noted that the site is frequented by people "seeking a visit of meaningfulness and connection to generations of Jewish continuity..." Thanks to this ongoing support, the Western Wall Heritage Foundation will be able to continue and act to promote the well-being of those praying and the tourists. "Women of the Wall chairman Anat Hoffman, however, said that if there won't be a pluralistic plaza for joint prayer, not necessarily in the place of the existent praying sections, "we can forget about international tourism."

She noted that the majority of Jewish tourists are not Orthodox, and that Christian tourists also feel ill at ease when haredi ushers at the site instruct them to remove crosses from their necks.

"We must not think only of the Orthodox Jews," she said.

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