

Jesus baptism site along Jordan River now open daily

13 JULY - QASR EL-YAHUD, West Bank (AP) — Israel opened the traditional baptism site of Jesus to daily visits Tuesday, a move that required the cooperation of Israel's military and the removal of nearby mines in the West Bank along the border with Jordan.

The location, where many believe John the Baptist baptized Jesus in the waters of the Jordan River, is one of the most important sites in Christianity.

Until now, it was opened several times a year in coordination with the Israeli military, but because of its sensitive location, it had not been regularly open to the public since Israel captured the site from Jordan, along with the rest of the West Bank, in the 1967 Mideast war.

That war left the site in a heavily mined no-man's land along a hostile frontier until Israel and Jordan signed a peace treaty in 1994.

Today, the baptism site sits among old minefields and near an Israeli military post in the Jordan Valley, where the famous river described in the Bible appears from afar as a dusty green gash of vegetation across a desert moonscape. Perhaps 10 yards (meters) of opaque green water separate the baptism site on the Israel-controlled side from a Jordanian baptism site on the other bank.

Israel hopes the opening of the site will help draw Christian tourists, who have been coming to Israel in growing numbers in recent years. Of the 3.45 million tourists who arrived last year, about 69 percent were Christian, and 38 percent defined their visit as a religious pilgrimage, according to the Tourism Ministry.

Israel renovated the site at a cost of \$2.3 million and removed some of the nearby mines, Israeli officials said. Tuesday's ceremony was attended by Silvan Shalom, the Israeli minister for regional development, and by representatives of Christian denominations in the Holy Land.

No representatives of Jordan or the Palestinians were present. Each side has its own objections.

Palestinians reject any Israeli moves to develop the West Bank, where Palestinians hope to establish an independent state.

"This is a site in the occupied territories, and whatever Israeli authorities are doing on Palestinian sites we consider illegal and part of seizures related to the occupation and Israel's monopoly over our historic and touristic resources," said Khoulood Daibes, the Palestinian tourism minister.

Jordan maintains that its site on the other side of the river is the actual place where Jesus was baptized, competing for Christian tourism.

Metropolitan Isykhios, a representative of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch, called on Israel to remove the rest of the thousands of land mines nearby. Addressing Shalom, the Cabinet minister, in a speech at the ceremony, he said, "We have a request for the minister — that they clear the mines from the way in, and turn this into an area of peace, and not an area of occupation and mines."

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