

Jerusalem Eth Monastery Emergency

By Sheera Frankel, [TIMES ONLINE](#)

JERUSALEM - An unholy dispute over the rights to a rooftop section of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre could bring the entire structure tumbling down, destroying Christendom's holiest site.

While renovations are needed across the Church, the small Deir Al-Sultan monastery on a part of the Church's rooftop has reached an "emergency state", according to engineers who completed an evaluation earlier this month.

The Times has learnt that the two chapels and 26 tiny rooms which comprise the monastery were pronounced in dire need of reinforcement in 2004. They have since deteriorated to the point where engineers now fear they will crash through the roof and into the Church, venerated by millions of Christians as the site of Jesus' crucifixion and burial.

Yigal Bergman, the engineer who led the investigation, reported that the church, situated in the Christian Quarter of Jerusalem's Old City, was in "a dangerous state of construction. The structures are full of serious engineering damage that creates safety hazards and endangers the lives of the monks and the visitors. This is an emergency ... also due to the immediate danger to the site that would damage other parts of the nearby churches."

Local officials are pressing the Church to begin repairs before the autumn's heavy rains begin, but have stopped short of directly interfering in the Church's notoriously acrimonious affairs.

The Church has been vigilantly managed by six competing and often fractious Christian denominations — Roman [Catholic](#), Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, [Coptic](#), Syrian Orthodox and Ethiopian — since an agreement reached under Ottoman law in 1757.

Rival denominations often battle for access or space and the congregation at the annual Easter service sometimes resembles the terraces of a boisterous football match. Under British rule soldiers with fixed bayonets had to separate brawling

Christians. To this day the keys to the Church's main entrance are held by a Muslim family, because the Christians do not trust each other.

The dispute over the the Deir Al-Sultan monastery is a more recent phenomenon dating back to Easter 1970. When the Coptic monks, who had controlled the area, went to pray in the main church and left the rooftop unattended, Ethiopian monks seized the opportunity to change the locks at the entrances before the Copts returned.

Relations between the two groups have remained tense ever since, with the Coptic church refusing to relinquish its claim to the monastery and posting a single monk there at all times. In the midst of a blistering heat wave in the summer of 2002, the Coptic monk on duty moved his chair from its agreed spot to a shadier corner. The move was taken as a hostile manoeuvre by the Ethiopians and eleven monks were hospitalized in the ensuing fracas.

The rest of the Church's factions have been unable to mediate between the two groups, even in the case of minor repairs or renovations to the rooftop. Earlier this month, [Archbishop](#) Matthias, head of the Ethiopian Church in Jerusalem, wrote a letter to the Israeli Interior Ministry and the Bureau of Jerusalem Affairs describing the dire state of affairs.

The Archbishop stated in the letter that he did not recognise the right of the Coptic church in any part of the disputed area. He said, according to the Haaretz Hebrew daily, that it was "inconceivable that the implementation of emergency repairs at the holy site would be conditioned on the consent of the Coptic church." The Archbishop added that he was turning to Israeli authorities, as a neutral party, to carry out the repairs.

Israel has offered to shoulder part of the cost of repairs, but will only do so if the Christian factions first come to an agreement among themselves.

"We are afraid that if we proceed with the renovations before the two sides come to an agreement themselves we will be accused of favouritism? we are trying to keep our hands clean of the politics here," said an Israeli Interior Minister official.

The Copts, who are mainly of Egyptian origin, received preferential treatment during Ottoman, British and Jordanian rule. That changed after Israel took control of Jerusalem in the in the 1967 Six-Day war, fought against a combined Arab force, including Egypt. The Copts accused Israel of using its position in Jerusalem to aid the

Ethiopians in 1970 in their takeover of Deir Al-Sultan. Nine years later, when Israel and Egypt signed the Camp David peace accords, Coptic officials hoped that rooftop monastery would be restored to them. But Israel is mindful of its sensitive relations with Ethiopia, where hundreds of thousands of Ethiopian Jews lived and were brought to the Jewish state in the 1980s and 1990s.

Greek Orthodox Patriarch Theophilus III said: "There is a greater issue here, something that has to be addressed sooner or later. To be honest, so far the (Israeli) government has tried to keep out of the dispute. But now it seems that the government is under pressure to demonstrate concern in helping resolve the issue."

He added, however, that the Israeli government ultimately had to wait until there was "an internal solution or agreement within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre."