

Over 300 settlers storm Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque



Settlers under Israeli police protection raid Al-Aqsa Mosque Compound in East Jerusalem on 14 March 2019 [Faiz Abu Rmeleh/Anadolu Agency]

Over 300 settlers yesterday stormed Al-Aqsa Mosque compound in the Old City of Jerusalem, under the protection of Israeli police and armed forces.

From the early hours of the morning, groups of settlers entered the compound through Al-Maghrebi Gate, accompanied by members of the Israel Police and the Israeli army. Over the course of the day, some 320 settlers stormed the holy site.

The settlers then performed prayers and rituals to celebrate the Jewish holiday of Passover, violating the status quo agreement which prohibits non-Muslims from worshipping at the site.

Israeli forces simultaneously imposed restrictions on Palestinian Muslim

worshippers trying to access Al-Aqsa. According to local news agency *Ma'an*, "Israeli checkpoints were erected throughout the streets and alleyways around the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, and many others were blocked off with iron barriers and sandbags blocking the movement of locals."

"Israeli forces [also] searched Muslim worshippers and checked their identity cards prior to allowing them entry to the compound," *Ma'an* added.

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Yesterday's storming of the compound was not the only such incident this week. On Monday Israel's Agriculture Minister, Uri Ariel, led a group of around 170 settlers onto the compound, again to perform prayers for Passover.

On Wednesday, over 500 settlers stormed the compound, according to Firas Al-Dibs, head of the public relations office at the Islamic Endowment Department (Waqf) which administers Al-Aqsa Mosque and its compound. Israel also issued bans for two Palestinian worshippers; Thaer Abu Sbeih and Rohi Kalghasi for six and four months respectively.

Palestine News Network estimates that since the Passover holiday began on 19 April, more than 1,600 settlers have stormed Al-Aqsa compound.

Tensions over Al-Aqsa Mosque have been high in recent months following Israel's moves to stop Palestinian access to Bab Al-Rahma and the protests which followed. Though the gate had been sealed off by an Israeli military order since 2003, Israel in February added new locks to the door, violating the status quo agreement in the process. Palestinians protested against the change, later that month praying at the gate for the first time in 16 years after it was opened by the Waqf.



Palestinians perform prayer in front of Al-Rahma Gate (Gate of Mercy) of Al-Aqsa Mosque Compound, as Israeli security forces stand guard behind them after Al-Rahma Gate was chained by Israeli police in Jerusalem on 22 February 2019 [Faiz Abu Rmeleh/Anadolu Agency]

In March, the Jerusalem Magistrate's Court accepted a request by Israel's Attorney General, Avichai Mandelblit, to extend the closure of Bab Al-Rahma. Palestinian factions slammed the move, with the Palestinian Authority (PA)'s Foreign Ministry saying in a statement the move "aims to consolidate the Israeli grip on the whole Al-Aqsa Mosque compound".

Just this month, Jordan – to whom the Waqf and therefore responsibility for Al-Aqsa belongs – rejected a US proposal to mediate between it and Israel over Bab Al-Rahma. Jordan cited the US' recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in December 2017 and its decision to move the US embassy to the Holy City as justification for its decision. It also pointed to the long-awaited "deal of the century" – the US-led peace plan which has been vehemently rejected by Jordan and other Arab states for its presumed bias in favour of Israel – as a reason for rejecting US mediation.

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