

PA, Jordan to tell Kerry they want Muslim control over Jewish visits to Temple Mount

Abbas and King Abdullah to present demand in upcoming talks with secretary in Amman, say restoring authority to Waqf would calm tensions

Jordan and the Palestinian Authority are expected to demand from the US that control over Jewish visits to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem be restored to the Muslim authority that administers the site, Palestinian sources say.

PA President Mahmoud Abbas and Jordan's King Abdullah II were to raise the issue with Secretary of State John Kerry, who is in the region this weekend, the sources said.

Amman and the PA are seeking to return the running of the Temple Mount — the holiest site in Judaism and third-holiest in Islam — to how it was before the start of the intifada in September 2000, and before the visit of then-opposition Likud leader Ariel Sharon, when the Waqf was responsible for Jewish visitors' access to the site.

The Jerusalem Islamic Waqf, controlled by Jordan, administers the Islamic sites at the compound, including the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock. Sharon's visit is often said to have been the pretext for the Second Intifada, which broke out just a few weeks later and which saw hundreds of Palestinian suicide bombings that claimed the lives of over a thousand Israelis during a span of five years.

Until 2000, the entry of Jewish visitors to the Temple Mount was coordinated with the Waqf. The site was closed to Jews from 2000 until 2003, as the Second Intifada raged. Since then Israel Police have overseen visits by Jewish visitors. Under Israel's regulations, imposed after the Old City was captured in the 1967 Six-Day War, Jews are allowed to visit, but not pray on, the Temple Mount.

The demand for Muslim oversight on Jewish access to the Temple Mount was first made by the Palestinian Authority on Thursday. "Israel must restore control of the

Temple Mount to the Waqf,” said one official close to Abbas. “This is one of the only measures that can help calm the current situation.”

Palestinian sources also told The Times of Israel that Abbas will tell Kerry during their meeting in Amman on Saturday that he is interested in renewing peace talks with Israel and abiding by previous agreements, but that Jerusalem must first freeze all settlement activity and release the final 26 prisoners it had agreed to free last year as part of a US-brokered concession to Abbas.

Israel had agreed to release a total of 104 security prisoners jailed before the 1993 Oslo Accords in four phases. It went through with three of the four releases, setting free some of the worst orchestrators of terrorism, before talks collapsed in April 2014.

Senior Palestinian officials also told The Times of Israel that Israel had tried to create friction between Jordan and the Palestinian Authority by conveying messages to King Abdullah II warning him that Abbas’s inciting statements endangered Jordanian interests on the Temple Mount.

Abbas is expected to demand deeper American involvement in any renewed political process with Israel, and warn that if Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu continues with his current policies, he is dooming the region to more violence and bloodshed.

When asked if they understood that meeting their demands would spell the end of the Netanyahu-led government, the sources said the Israeli prime minister must choose between his government and a willingness to make peace.

The PA’s demands for Waqf control of the Temple Mount come amid a wave of Palestinian terror and violence which has seen 10 Israelis killed in the past month and a half. More than 40 Palestinians have also been killed — about half of them while carrying out attacks, and most of the rest in clashes with Israeli security officials in the West Bank and on the Gaza border.

Israel has accused Abbas and the PA of partial responsibility for the terror surge, with Netanyahu repeatedly castigating Abbas for telling “lies” about purported Israeli plans to change the status quo at the Temple Mount and for inciting violence over the issue. Netanyahu, who has denied any such plans and offered to meet Abbas without preconditions, has also vowed to make no concessions to the

Palestinians in response to the current surge in terrorism.

The PA officials said that their security forces have prevented a series of recent attacks on Israeli targets, including stabbings, shootings and the planting of explosives. PA security forces have also been active during Palestinian demonstrations to prevent the use of live fire against IDF soldiers, and intervened when a gunman opened fire on soldiers during a recent protest near the Beit El settlement, they said.

Israeli security officials have acknowledged the value of the ongoing PA security coordination.

On Wednesday, the Prime Minister's Office denied that Israel has offered to reduce the number of Jewish and non-Muslim visitors to the Temple Mount in an effort to calm tensions at the site and help end the wave of terror attacks. Arab diplomatic officials had told The Times of Israel that this offer was rejected by Palestinian and Jordanian leaders as not going far enough to meet their demands.

Source:

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