

Israel arrests senior Palestinian official

Author:

Wed, 2019-02-27 21:33

JERUSALEM: Israeli police on Wednesday arrested a senior Palestinian official after recent scuffles at a highly sensitive holy site in Jerusalem, officials said.

The Palestinian governor of Jerusalem, Adnan Gheith, was among 22 Palestinians arrested overnight in raids in East Jerusalem, official Palestinian news agency WAFA said.

Police spoke of two arrests, including "a senior official from the Palestinian Authority," over suspicions of fraud and forgery.

Police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld told AFP they were also arrested in connection with "recent incidents" at the Haram Al-Sharif, or Holy Sanctuary, which includes the Al-Aqsa Mosque and Dome of the Rock.

The suspects were being questioned, Rosenfeld said, without providing further details.

The arrests risked further raising tensions surrounding the site holy to both Muslims and Jews, who refer to it as the Temple Mount.

There have recently been scuffles between worshippers and police there over access to a side building in the compound closed by Israel since 2003.

Arguing there was no longer any reason for it to remain closed, Palestinian officials reopened the building on Friday and worshippers prayed inside despite an Israeli order barring access.

The building is known as the Golden Gate or Gate of Mercy in Arabic.

On Sunday, police arrested and later released a top Palestinian Muslim official, Abdel Azeem Salhab, and his deputy after the holy site incidents.

Salhab is the head of the council of the Waqf in Jerusalem, the religious authority that governs the site in the disputed city.

The arrest drew condemnation from Jordan, the custodian of the holy compound. The site is the third-holiest in Islam and a focus of Palestinian aspirations for statehood. It is also the location of Judaism's most holy spot, revered as the site of the two biblical-era Jewish temples.

It is a frequent scene of conflict between the two sides.

Palestinians fear Israel will seek to assert further control over it, while Israel accuses Palestinians of using such claims as a rallying cry to incite

violence.

Access to Golden Gate was closed by an Israeli court order in 2003 during the second Palestinian intifada over alleged militant activity there, police say. Waqf officials argue that the organization that prompted the ban no longer exists.

The site is located in East Jerusalem, occupied by Israel in the 1967 Six-Day War and later annexed in a move never recognized by the international community.

Palestinian Authority activities are barred from Jerusalem by Israel.

As a result, the PA has a Jerusalem governor located in Al-Ram, just on the other side of Israel's separation wall from the city in the occupied West Bank.



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Qatar Airways complains boycott forced suspension of planned Africa routes

Wed, 2019-02-27 20:22

JEDDAH: Qatar Airways has been forced to suspend planned new routes to Africa because of pressure from a boycott over Doha's links to extremist groups.

The airline said the sanctions by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt meant it "had to suspend some planned new destinations especially in West and Central Africa."

Since the 2017 boycott, Qatari jets have been banned from the airspace of its three Gulf neighbors, forcing flights to carry out large detours.

The quartet of Arab nations cut transport, trade and diplomatic ties with Qatar, accusing the country of hosting and funding terror groups and interfering in their internal affairs.

Qatar Airways chief executive, Akbar Al-Baker, has previously blamed the boycott for his airline's poor financial performance. In September, the airline said it suffered a \$69 million loss for the financial year and said the severing of ties with other Arab countries was behind it falling into the red.

Due to the unjust blockade against [#Qatar](#), we had to suspend some planned new destinations especially in West and Central Africa, highlighting how the illegal blockade has not only impacted my country but also other innocent countries. [#avaf19](#)
pic.twitter.com/4tAQzGLvVf

– Qatar Airways (@qatarairways) [February 27, 2019](#)



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Qatar Airways announces \$69 million revenue loss this year

[Syria's Bashar Assad invites Iran FM Zarif to visit Damascus](#)

Author:

Reuters

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1551286191092276100

Wed, 2019-02-27 16:46

LONDON: Syrian President Bashar Assad on Wednesday invited Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif to visit Damascus, state news agency IRNA reported, without specifying a date for the trip.

Zarif tendered his resignation two days ago but Iran's President Hassan Rouhani rejected it on Wednesday, calling it "against national interests." More to follow.



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[Airstrikes up sharply in anti-Assad bastion](#)

Author:
Tue, 2019-02-26 22:57

BEIRUT: War monitors said on Tuesday there had been a marked escalation in airstrikes in opposition-held northwestern Syria, the last major bastion of opponents of Bashar Assad, prompting thousands of civilians to flee the town of Khan Sheikhoun.

Rami Abdul Rahman, the director of the British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, said the regime forces had intensified artillery shelling and airstrikes that have been ramping up over the past 10 days.

"The bombing is focused mainly on towns along the Damascus-Aleppo international road," he said. "Khan Sheikhoun has turned into a ghost town."

According to a senior data analyst at Hala Systems, which operates an early warning system for aerial bombardment called Sentry, 13 strikes had been

observed in Idlib and northern Hama on Tuesday.

“This is the third straight day in which a significant increase in airstrikes has been observed. The pace of attacks seems high – and certainly unusual compared to the last few months,” the analyst, who declined to be named, told Reuters.

Evacuation

Hundreds of suspected militants and their relatives exited the last Daesh group holdout in eastern Syria aboard 11 trucks on Tuesday, an AFP reporter said.

The huge double-trailer trucks snaked toward a screening point manned by the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) across the plain from Baghouz, the last hamlet still held by Daesh.

Women could be seen spilling out of the trucks as SDF fighters prepared to screen yet another batch of survivors from the last speck of the “caliphate.”

On Monday alone, 46 such trucks left the Daesh pocket, bringing to around 50,000 the number of people who quit militants-held territory since December.



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Idlib extremists kill 20 Syria govt loyalists in 3 days Syria force carries

out major evacuation from last Daesh holdout

Iranian-backed Houthis responsible for Yemen woes: UK envoy

Author:

Tue, 2019-02-26 22:42

DUBAI: The Houthi militia's occupation of parts of Yemen has increased people's suffering, which has been falsely blamed on a "Saudi blockade," said the British ambassador to Yemen.

"It's no coincidence that the number of people in need of aid, now at a staggering 24 million, has increased enormously since the Houthis took over parts of the country," Michael Aron told Arab News in an exclusive interview.

The British diplomat, who was appointed ambassador to Yemen in February 2018, said the UK supports the internationally recognized government of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, who "was forced to flee Sanaa following a rebel insurgency that took the capital by force (in September 2014) and overthrew the legitimate government. This is a fact."

The Iranian-backed Houthis took over the presidential palace, where Hadi and his ministers remained under house arrest.

He managed to return to his hometown of Aden. In response, Houthi forces advanced toward Aden, causing Hadi to flee to Saudi Arabia, which led an air campaign to defeat the Houthis.

Almost four years of fighting and five attempts at peace talks later, there is no end to the war in sight.

"There can be no military solution to this war. The longer the conflict continues, the more the people of Yemen will suffer as the humanitarian crisis worsens," Aron said.

According to the independent Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), 60,000 people have been killed since 2016.

British charity Save the Children estimates that 85,000 children under the age of 5 have starved to death since 2015.

Meanwhile, a devaluation of Yemen's currency and food shortages have led to famine in parts of the country.

"The worsening economy has devastated people's purchasing power. In many cases, there's food and fuel, but people can't afford to buy it," Aron said.

“Many people believe that there’s a ‘Saudi blockade’ attempting to starve the northwest of the country in order to defeat the Houthis. This is simply not true ... The reality is that there’s no blockade.”

The UK and the UN monitor food and fuel going into Hodeidah and other Yemeni ports, in an agreed process for the inspection of ships, the ambassador said.

The UN had been prevented from entering the Red Sea Mills, which has enough grain to feed 3.7 million people for a month, in Hodeidah since September 2018. Officials finally gained access on Tuesday.

A humanitarian corridor was meant to be opened in Hodeidah last month as part of the deal that was signed in December in Stockholm by the Houthis and the Yemeni government, but the UN said the militia has failed to honor the agreement.

However, Aron said the talks were a success. “Many believed they wouldn’t happen or we’d be in the same situation we were in Geneva, when the Houthis didn’t arrive,” he added, referring to when the Iranian-backed militia refused to attend peace talks in Switzerland in September 2018.

Although slow, progress has been made, and there has been a significant reduction in military activity, specifically in Hodeidah, as well as regular meetings between the warring sides, which was not the case previously, Aron said.

Last month, delegations from both sides met in Jordan to discuss prisoner swaps. As a result, Saudi Arabia released seven prisoners the day after a Saudi prisoner was freed by the Houthis.

Last week, the warring parties agreed to start withdrawing forces from the main port of Hodeidah.

This came after Maj. Gen. Patrick Cammaert, who had been heading the UN operation monitoring a cease-fire in Hodeidah, was replaced by Lt. Gen. Michael Lollesgaard due to a disagreement with the Houthis.

Aron said the international community will react strongly if the Houthis put the peace process at risk.

The next round of talks will take place when “sufficient progress has been made” on the Stockholm agreement, he added.

“I hope and believe we’re much closer to the end than the beginning of this war,” he said, although adding that there is still a long way to go.



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