

Jordanian officials lambast Israel over Al-Aqsa Mosque break-in

Mon, 2021-03-01 03:14

AMMAN: Jordanian officials have denounced the Israeli government's decision to allow 230 radical Jews to break into Al-Aqsa Mosque on Sunday. The radicals were celebrating the Jewish festival of Purim and had called the day earlier to hold "carnival" festivities on this holiday, which is often celebrated with Jews wearing costumes and colorful outfits and masks. Others were filmed drunk and brandishing a wine bottle outside one of the mosque's gates.

Daifallah Al-Fayez, a spokesman from the Jordanian Foreign Ministry, said that the Israeli police allowed hundreds of radicals to enter into Al-Aqsa Mosque without coordination with the Jordanian Waqf (endowment) officials. The Jordanian spokesman called the Israeli action a "stark violation" of the historic and legal status quo as well as a violation of international law and commitments made by Israel.

Al-Fayez stressed that the Jerusalem Waqf department is the only legal party responsible for the management of the mosque, including deciding who can enter.

Al-Fayez said that Israel must respect the status quo and the authority of the Jerusalem-based waqf officials.

The Israeli action comes at a time when the country's media has claimed that Israel's Defense Minister General Benny Gantz held an unannounced meeting with the Jordanian monarch last Friday. Jordan has not commented on the issue and the Jordanian media has been relatively silent, except for some platforms republishing Israeli media reports.

Gantz, the leader of the Blue and White party, reportedly told his party members earlier that he was conducting secret meetings with top Jordanian officials. Gantz publicly criticized Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for failing to improve relations with Jordan.

"I think our relationship with Jordan could be 1,000 times better.

Unfortunately, Netanyahu is an unwanted figure in Jordan, and his presence harms the two countries' relations," Gantz said.

Jordan's king has been unhappy with the way Israel is violating an understanding reached in Amman in 2014 in the presence of then-US Secretary of State John Kerry, Netanyahu and Jordan's king, in which they had agreed that Al-Aqsa Mosque is for "Muslims to pray and for all others to visit."



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[Lebanon reopens malls amid slow vaccination campaign](#)

Author:

Mon, 2021-03-01 02:19

BEIRUT: Lebanon entered the third week of its coronavirus disease (COVID-19) vaccination campaign on Monday, with stores and malls reopening for the first time since the closure on Jan. 21.

But warnings about reopenings are being heard from the country's medical experts. The director of the Hariri Governmental University Hospital, Dr. Firas Al-Abyad, said "we are fooling ourselves because the reality is different."

Statistics published by the Ministry of Health show that the average number of daily recorded cases remains above 3,000 and the average number of deaths is hovering above 40. The total number of recorded COVID-19 cases in Lebanon

was 372,792 as of Saturday, while 4,652 deaths were recorded during the same period.

Medical professionals have claimed that the vaccination campaign is going as slow "as a turtle." The vaccination of 11 MPs at the parliament, which was not in line with the vaccination process taking place at hospitals, was another violation that has sparked outrage among the public.

Health Ministry adviser Mohammed Haidar said that "the slow vaccination process is due to the small number of vaccines that arrive every week and that need to be distributed to all the hospitals. Around 100,000 doses of the Pfizer vaccine have arrived in Lebanon so far, while 300,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine are expected to arrive this month."

Lebanon received a loan from the World Bank to purchase 2.2 million doses, of which 28,080 doses arrived in the first week, 31,590 doses arrived in the second week, and 41,300 doses arrived on Saturday.

The health minister had revealed that "Moderna had notified Lebanon a while ago that it will not be able to conclude any agreement in order to provide the country with its products because it had previous commitments to marketing its products in five countries only. However, it is ready for its agreement to take effect starting January 2022."

The ministry believes that the 2,730,000 vaccine doses that have been reserved will be enough to vaccinate 20 percent of Lebanon's population. According to the national plan, 249,000 are expected to be used during the first quarter of the year, while the remaining doses are to be divided into three batches to cover the rest of the year.

However, the number of those who were vaccinated during the first two weeks based on the national platform, meaning the medical and nursing staff along with the elderly over the age of 75, constitute less than 3 percent of the targeted group.

SPEEDREAD

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According to the American University of Beirut's coronavirus observatory, 2,858 vaccine doses were given out on a daily basis, while the daily capacity of the vaccination centers is 14,000 doses.

Dr. Abdul Rahman Bizri, head of the National Committee for the Administration of the Coronavirus Vaccine, decided not to resign after the scandal that involved the vaccination of MPs in the parliament building. He confirmed that the vaccination process will go on, noting that "gambling with people's lives is unacceptable. Instead, we should count on the continuation of the vaccination process, while ensuring its absolute transparency and justice in giving the vaccine without any discretionary exceptions."

He said: "I understand the calls of the medical staff, nursing staff and paramedics, who are most exposed to virus and have not yet received the vaccine," adding that "everyone is at risk with the pandemic's outbreak, but the problem is that the number of vaccines is not enough. We have to bear

three additional weeks for larger vaccine quantities to arrive and move forward with the desired immunization process.”

Dr. Firas Al-Abyad called for “the restoration of public trust and the better implementation of safety measures across society, as it is hard to know if the public behavior will change due to the lack of a proper awareness campaign that explains the plan to people, their role in it and the repercussions of its failure.”



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[Five civilians killed in Hodeidah as fighting rages in Marib](#)

Mon, 2021-03-01 02:15

AL-MUKALLA: The UN mission in Yemen’s western province of Hodeidah said on Sunday that five civilians were killed and three more wounded on Saturday night, when an explosion ripped through their house in Hodeidah’s Al-Hawak district.

“Last night, an explosion occurred in a residential area in Hodeidah’s Al-

Hawak district, reportedly resulting in the deaths of up to five civilians with injuries to a further three,” the UN Mission to support the Hodeidah Agreement (UNMHA) said in a Twitter post, urging warring factions in Yemen to avoid targeting civilians. “UNMHA strongly condemns such acts of violence that breach the Hodeidah Agreement, and demands that the parties refrain from hitting residential areas and causing more suffering to a population in an already dire situation.”

Sharing graphic images of the dead, a local government official told Arab News that a mortar shell fired by the Houthis exploded inside the house of Saber Ameen Al-Futaini, killing him and a number of his family in the Houthi-controlled Rabaseh neighborhood.

“The Houthis committed this crime. They have committed many similar crimes in the past,” the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to brief the media.

Last month, five women were killed in the same district when a projectile exploded at a wedding held on New Year’s Day in Hodeidah. In December, a missile attack by the Houthis killed 10 workers in an industrial complex in the Red Sea port city, sparking outrage inside and outside Yemen.

On Sunday, the Joint Forces, an umbrella term for three major military units in the country’s western coast, said that they traded heavy machine-gun fire with the Houthis in the city.





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Mon, 2021-03-01 01:32

ANKARA: The diplomatic crisis between Ankara and Tehran has escalated following the latest statement from Iran's Ambassador to Baghdad Iraj Masjedi, who reiterated an opposition to Turkish military intervention in Iraq, a new move that highlights a broader rivalry between the two countries in the region.

"Turkish forces should not pose a threat or violate Iraqi soil," Masjedi said on Sunday.

"We do not accept at all, be it Turkey or any other country, to intervene in Iraq militarily or advance or have a military presence in Iraq," he said, calling on Ankara to withdraw its troops from Iraq and respect international borders.

"The security of the Iraqi area should be maintained by Iraqi forces and (Kurdistan) region forces in their area," he said.

Turkey has deployed several military outposts deep inside Iraqi territories for decades to eradicate the presence of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Its forces conduct aerial and ground cross-border operations, which have increased in recent years.

These operations have recently drawn anger from Baghdad over territorial violations of Turkish forces and aircraft. But Ankara has continued airstrikes in the Kurdistan region of Iraq to kill senior members of the PKK. The latest Turkish operation on Feb. 19 to free 13 nationals held captive by the PKK for many years failed in the Gara mountains in northern Iraq. While Ankara accused the PKK of killing the prisoners during the operation, the PKK asserted that Turkey fortuitously bombed the cave where the captives were held.

The Iran-backed Iraqi militia, the Popular Mobilization Units also known as Hashd Al-Shabi, has deployed three brigades to Sinjar along the Syrian border to counter Turkish moves in the region.

Ankara summoned the Iranian envoy on Sunday following his remarks on Iraq operations. "Ankara expects Iran to support, not oppose, Turkey's fight against terrorism," the Turkish Foreign Ministry reportedly told the ambassador.

"The Ambassador of Iran would be the last person to lecture Turkey about respecting the borders of Iraq," said the Turkish Ambassador to Iraq Fatih Yildiz.

Turkey recently arrested an Iranian official Mohammad Reza Naserzadeh over the killing of an Iranian dissident, Masoud Molavi Vardanjani, who was murdered in Istanbul in November 2019. This move further strained ties between Turkey and Iran.

"Turkish-Iranian relations are set to become more turbulent," Galip Dalay, an associate fellow at Chatham House in London, told Arab News.

"Iraq still stands as the most important Middle Eastern country for Iran. The increased military presence and political leverage of Turkey in northern Iraq increasingly disturbs Iran, while the Iraqi central government would not welcome any Turkish operation into Sinjar," Dalay added.

According to Samuel Ramani, an academic and analyst at Oxford University, Turkey-Iran relations are volatile, as phases of escalated competition and cooperation quickly follow each other.

Ramani told Arab News: "Right now, we are entering a phase of heightened competition, as Turkey sees a rising security threat from the PKK in Iraq, while Iran's relationship with Iraqi Kurdistan has a positive moment following Iran's most-senior commander Qassem Soleimani's death last year." He added that Turkey's expanded bilateral engagement with Iraq threatens Iran's aspirations for hegemony, and that Iran is trying to capitalize on latent discontent in Baghdad with expansive Turkish military operations that violate Iraqi sovereignty.

"There is a broader context of tension between Turkey and Iran. Russia-Iran relations are growing in the Caspian region to counter Turkey, Ankara has arrested alleged Iranian spies and both countries are disagreeing over the situation in northern Syria, especially Ayn Issa," he said.

Given the broader state of tensions, Ramani expects Turkey and Iran to continue having a rhetorical war of words about the legitimacy of Ankara's

anti-PKK operations and of Iran's interference in Iraq, but direct conflict between Iranian and Turkish forces or local allies is unlikely. But Dalay expects that a US-supported Turkish operation into Sinjar is highly likely. He said that if the ongoing crisis between Hashd Al-Shabi and Ankara escalates, Iran is likely to be drawn into this regional equation. "Hashd Al-Shabi provides a cover to the PKK in the region, while the presence of Shingal Resistance Units, a Yazidi militia that collaborates with Hashd Al-Shabi, could trigger an international awareness about the Yazidi religious minority," he said.



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[Syria reports Israeli missile attack near capital, Damascus](#)

Sun, 2021-02-28 23:31

DAMASCUS: Syrian air defenses were activated in the capital Damascus and its southern suburbs Sunday night to repel an Israeli missile attack, state media reported. There was no word on casualties.

State TV quoted an unnamed military official as saying that most of the Israeli missiles were shot down before reaching their targets near Damascus. Israel has launched hundreds of strikes against Iran-linked military targets in Syria over the years, but rarely acknowledges or discusses such operations.

Israel views Iranian entrenchment on its northern frontier as a red line, and it has repeatedly struck Iran-linked facilities and weapons convoys destined for Lebanon's militant Hezbollah group.

The attack comes after the United States launched airstrikes in Syria on Thursday, targeting facilities near the Iraqi border used by Iranian-backed militia groups.

The Pentagon said the strikes were retaliation for a rocket attack in Iraq earlier this month that killed one civilian contractor and wounded a US service member and other coalition troops.



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