

Palestinians fear Israeli violence in Jerusalem during Ramadan



Israeli police detain a Palestinian worshipper at the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound in the Old City of Jerusalem during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, Wednesday, April 5, 2023. Palestinian media reported police attacked Palestinian worshippers, raising fears of wider tension as Islamic and Jewish holidays overlap.v(AP Photo/Mahmoud Illean)

Ramallah, March 10 (RHC)-- The mood in occupied East Jerusalem is tense as the city's Palestinians prepare for Islam's holy month of Ramadan. From dawn to sunset, Ramadan requires practising

Muslims to abstain from eating, drinking, smoking and sexual relations before they break their fast with friends, family and communities.

But the Palestinians who spoke to Al Jazeera say they are too depressed to hang up decorations or engage in festivities. Many are just praying for a ceasefire in Gaza, where more than 31,000 people have been killed by Israel in retaliation for a deadly attack on Israeli civilians and military outposts by the Qassam Brigades and other Palestinian armed fighters on October 7th.

Others fear that Israeli authorities and far-right settlers will attack Palestinians during the holy month as part of a broader campaign of collective punishment, as has happened before. "I'm really worried about possible provocation," said Munir Nuseibah, a Palestinian human rights lawyer who lives in East Jerusalem. "We learned from the past that the more there is a police presence and police intervention in East Jerusalem during Ramadan, the more we will see [violent] confrontations."



Palestinians pray on Laylat al-Qadr of Ramadan in the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, in Jerusalem's Old City, on April 17, 2023 [Raneen Sawafta/Reuters]

During Ramadan, tensions frequently mount around Al-Aqsa Mosque, the third-holiest site in Islam. Palestinians from across the occupied West Bank yearn to pray in the mosque, yet Israeli police have traditionally obstructed access and attacked worshippers.

Last year, Palestinians resorted to barricading themselves inside the mosque to prevent Israeli police from interfering with itikaf, a religious practice that entails spending whole nights in prayer and worship in mosques. But Israeli security managed to break through, firing stun grenades and tear gas and indiscriminately beating worshippers, including women and the elderly. At least 450 Palestinian men were arrested.

“There is nothing inherently violent about Al-Aqsa and certainly nothing inherently violent about Ramadan. It’s important to recall that because some people get the idea that this is all about Islam,” said Daniel Siedmann, a lawyer and resident of Jerusalem.

Palestinians attribute most of the violence to the provocative measures taken by Israeli authorities, which occupy the city and the holy site. Israeli police often allow hundreds of Israeli Jews – who refer to Al-Aqsa Mosque as the Temple Mount – access to the holy site, which violates the latest status-quo agreement that Israel, Jordan, Palestine and the United States affirmed in 2015.

The agreement stipulates that Al-Aqsa Mosque is a place of worship exclusively for Muslims, yet grants access to non-Muslims on specific days and hours. However, many fear that far-right Israeli ministers may try to provoke Palestinians by allowing Israelis into the mosque to taunt or clash with worshippers.

“There is caution and fear from everyone that Israeli settlers will try and provoke Palestinians. The Israeli government is against the Palestinian people,” said Rony, a 27-year-old Palestinian from occupied East Jerusalem.

Israeli police are controlled by Itamar Ben-Gvir, the far-right minister of national security. In February, he called for barring Palestinian residents in the West Bank from praying in the mosque during Ramadan. Israeli officials later overrode his suggestion in an apparent attempt to maintain calm in Jerusalem, but did say they would impose some restrictions on “security grounds”.

Seidmann said Ben-Gvir could still spark chaos, even if he is commanding officers outside the compound. “Just because Ben-Gvir is not influencing what happens at the gates of Al-Aqsa doesn’t mean that he won’t cause problems 200 or 300 metres [220 to 330 yards] away from the mosque,” he told Al Jazeera.

Any violence against Palestinian worshippers in East Jerusalem or the rest of the occupied West Bank could trigger mass unrest, warns Ibrahim Matar, a Christian Palestinian from occupied East Jerusalem.

He said Al-Aqsa is symbolic for all Palestinians and recalled how the late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat walked away from the heavily criticised peace process in 2000, in part because Israel insisted on maintaining sovereignty over the mosque.

Two months later, Israel’s then-opposition leader Ariel Sharon stormed Al-Aqsa with more than 1,000 heavily armed policemen and soldiers. The move led to outrage which culminated in the second Intifada, a Palestinian uprising against Israel’s occupation, that lasted for five years.

Tens of thousands of Muslims pray near the Dome of the Rock in Al-Aqsa Mosque compound on April 17, 2023, 27 Ramadan, believed to be Laylat al-Qadr, one of the holiest nights during the month [Hazem Bader/AFP]

In the shadow of Israel’s war on Gaza, Matar believes that a similar move by the Israelis could set off another chapter of popular unrest. “Al-Aqsa could be a flashpoint for another war,” he told Al Jazeera.

Palestinian citizens of Israel and those in the occupied territory say the ongoing bloodshed in Gaza is hanging over everyone like a dark cloud.

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