

Israel: Netanyahu forced to remove metal detectors from the al-Aqsa compound

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Last week, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ordered the removal of metal detectors and security cameras that provoked mass protests by the Palestinians in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. But he has ordered them to be replaced with “smart” cameras that identify faces and “see through” clothing for weapons.

Israel installed the metal detectors at the entrances to Jerusalem’s al-Aqsa/Temple Mount complex following an attack on July 14 by three Israeli Palestinians in which two policemen were killed. Palestinians responded by boycotting the al-Aqsa Mosque and holding their prayers outside the compound. This and the broader protests were attributed to Hamas, the militant Islamist group that controls Gaza.

Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas used the opportunity to posture as an opponent of Israel. The Palestinian Authority (PA) would freeze ties with Israel until all the recently installed security devices were dismantled, he said, while worshippers would continue to stay out of al-Aqsa and hold prayers in the street.

Netanyahu removed the metal detectors under pressure from Washington, after the Saudi Arabian and Jordanian monarchs warned their US protectors that unrest could spiral out of control, destabilise their regimes, give succour to Qatar, which sponsors Hamas, and derail Washington’s broader machinations against Iran. Nearly all the Arab media sought to minimise their coverage of the conflict so as not to bring protestors out onto the streets.

Jordan, where the economic situation for workers is dire, is particularly vulnerable. The Muslim Brotherhood there, in contrast to Egypt and Saudi Arabia, enjoys legal status, has 16 of the 130 seats in parliament and is able to mount demonstrations over relations with Israel and the holy sites.

Palestinians held street parties around the Old City after the withdrawal of Israeli police checkpoints at the entry points to the al-Aqsa compound.

The crisis had intensified on July 23, after an Israeli guard at the embassy in Amman, Jordan, which is the ultimate controlling authority of al-Aqsa, shot dead two Jordanians while allegedly fighting off a stabbing attack in retaliation for imposing the metal detectors.

Jordan, one of two Arab states with which Israel has peace treaties, had refused to allow the Israeli ambassador Einat Shlein and her staff to return to Amman unless the guard was put on trial. Jordanian forces held the embassy in lockdown, as Amman demanded the guard’s handover for questioning and trial--which Israel rejected citing diplomatic immunity.

Jordan’s King Abdullah held telephone calls with US President Donald Trump. After this, Netanyahu despatched Shin Bet security service director Nadav Argaman to join Trump’s special envoy, Jason Greenblatt, in Amman to resolve the standoff and seek the release of the embassy staff to return to Israel.

After speaking with Abdullah, Netanyahu reluctantly agreed to the removal of the metal detectors as the price for their release. But, in a move aimed at shoring up his support among his political base, Netanyahu publicly embraced the returning Jordanian guard as a hero.

Infuriated and embarrassed Abdullah said, “We demand that the Israeli prime minister abides by his commitment and takes all measures to ensure the trial of the killer and not to handle this like a political show to achieve personal political gains.”

The Israeli authorities have also handed over the bodies of the three Israeli Palestinians who killed the two police officers to their families.

Greenblatt said that he “welcomes the efforts undertaken to de-escalate tensions in Jerusalem today”

and added that, “calm and security will create the best opportunity to return to dialogue and the pursuit of peace.”

However, the number of people praying on the streets outside the compound in Jerusalem continued to increase as a mark of opposition to Israel, with the PA, Fatah’s militia Tanzim and Hamas all calling for protests across the Occupied Territories. Israel has responded with its customary brutality. Israel’s Defense Forces ordered the deployment of six more battalions to the West Bank ahead of Friday prayers, while police restricted access to the mosque to men over the age 50.

Israel’s ultra-nationalists feel emboldened by Trump’s declared support, including his visit to the Old City of Jerusalem, which takes place in the context of his attempt to build a regional alliance against Iran encompassing the Sunni oil monarchies. As a result, Netanyahu is coming under increasing pressure from the right wingers within his cabinet, who accuse him of surrendering Israeli sovereignty over the issue. He also faces several investigations for fraud and breach of trust for accepting very expensive gifts from businessmen who are his close friends that could lead to an indictment.

Thus, far from seeking to calm the situation, Netanyahu has further inflamed tensions. Speaking at a visit to Halamish, where a Palestinian stabbed to death three members of the Salomon family, Netanyahu called for the death sentence for terrorists.

The prime minister’s office announced that Netanyahu had “instructed” Likud legislator Yoav Kish to submit a bill that would expand Jerusalem’s municipal boundaries to incorporate Ma’aleh Adumim and the settlements of the Gush Etzion Regional Council in the West Bank.

Netanyahu’s office also announced that he would take action to stop Al-Jazeera broadcasts from Israel, a move that delighted Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies which are locked in a bitter conflict with Qatar.

On Thursday, thousands of worshippers poured into the compound and neighbouring areas of the Old City, protesting Netanyahu’s announcements. Police fired stun grenades, fired rubber-coated steel bullets and tear gas, wounding around 100 people.

On Friday, angry clashes also broke out in the West

Bank and Gaza on Friday, leading to the killing of two Palestinians and injuries to around 122, bringing the total to six deaths and 225 wounded since the violence started on July 14, according to the Palestinian Red Crescent. Fifty-four Palestinians have been killed by Israeli fire so far this year.

Israel’s continuous provocations threaten the precarious compromise over the management of al-Aqsa Mosque/Temple Mount compound, regarded as sacred by Muslims and Jews alike. Under the arrangement between Israel and Jordan, following Israel’s illegal annexation of East Jerusalem after the 1967 June war, the site continues to be managed by the Islamic Waqf trust and Jews are allowed to enter, but not pray, inside the compound.

For some years, Zionist leaders and politicians, including the leader of the Temple movement Likud legislator Yehuda Glick, have been agitating for Jews to be able to pray inside the compound, once the site of two ancient Jewish temples, as well as visit it. The additional security measures, coming atop a series of provocations surrounding the mosque, angered the Palestinians who viewed them as the first step by Israel to assert greater control over the al-Aqsa Mosque compound.

Sections of the military-intelligence forces fear that inflaming Muslim sentiment across the Middle East could disrupt the plans for an anti-Iranian alliance.

The head of the Arab League warned that Israel’s attempts to control the highly sensitive religious sites in Jerusalem risked igniting a “religious war.” Ahmed Abul Gheit, speaking at a meeting of Arab foreign ministers in Cairo, said that Israel’s actions were “playing with fire, and will only ignite a religious war and shift the core of the conflict from politics to religion.”



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