

*Israel blocks thousands of
Palestinians from worshiping at
East Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa
Mosque*



Occupied East Jerusalem, March 15 (RHC)-- Israeli authorities have blocked thousands of Palestinians in the occupied West Bank from reaching the Al-Aqsa Mosque in occupied East Jerusalem for prayer during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, adding to mounting tensions.

Despite tight Israeli restrictions on access to Al Aqsa Mosque, 80,000 worshippers made it to the holy site for the first Friday prayers of Ramadan, the Quds News Network reported, citing the Islamic Waqf that manages the mosque compound.

But thousands more Palestinians from the occupied West Bank were denied entry to occupied East Jerusalem, where a heavy Israeli security presence surrounds the mosque. Only men over the age of 55 or women over the age of 50 are allowed to enter the mosque, and all must have a valid permit, making the site, which is the third holiest site in Islam, inaccessible to the vast majority of Palestinians.

More than 95 percent of all Palestinians are prohibited from reaching the Al-Aqsa Mosque, according to Mustafa Barghouti, the secretary-general of the Palestinian National Initiative.

“The portion of the community that is allowed is very small – people who are above the age of 55,” he told Al Jazeera from Ramallah, adding that even they had to go through a hard process to enter the holy site.

“First of all, they have to get a special magnetic security card from the Israelis, which takes a lot of time to acquire. Not everybody can get it and many people are deprived from it,” the Palestinian official said. “They also have to get a special permit from the Israelis directly. These complications prevent many people.”

He said the situation was creating more tension “because many people are angry.” “The tension inside the mosque is very high because of the Israeli restrictions, beating of the people and provocations. I expect that there will be trouble, because of all these provocations,” Barghouti concluded.

One Palestinian Muslim, who did not wish to be identified, told Al Jazeera that when he attempted to visit Al-Aqsa Mosque, he was turned away by the Israeli army. “The number of soldiers is greater than the number of worshippers,” he said. “I’m 62, and I presented my ID, but my access was denied ... although [the Israeli army] said that those who are over 55 can enter the mosque without a permit.”

Al Jazeera’s Nida Ibrahim reporting from the Qalandiya checkpoint outside East Jerusalem said previously, there were no age restrictions on women, and the age restriction for men was 45. “All worshippers must also have valid entry permits, a document many Palestinians say they did not know they needed. We’ve seen people being turned away at the checkpoint for this reason, and Israeli soldiers are surrounding the nearby area,” she said.

“There are additional restrictions on Palestinians leaving Al-Aqsa. They must submit their papers at a checkpoint while leaving Jerusalem or even take a selfie and submit it on an application managed by the Israeli government.”

On Friday, the Palestinian Foreign Ministry accused Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of “deceiving the world” when he said no additional measures would be imposed to limit access to Al-Aqsa Mosque during Ramadan compared with previous years. The ministry said in a statement posted on X that the Israel prime minister had given far-right National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir the freedom to implement restrictions, including erecting barricades, to prevent the entry of Palestinian worshippers.

The ministry called on the international community and the United States to intervene to end these “racist” policies and ensure that the right to worship is upheld. According to a 1967 status quo agreement with Israel, Jordan is responsible for overseeing the Al-Aqsa compound via the Waqf Council.

Al-Aqsa Mosque preacher Sheikh Ikrimah Sabri said there is “no room for compromise on Al-Aqsa” after Israel implemented restrictions on Palestinian access. Al-Aqsa “will remain open no matter what happens,” the preacher said, adding that the fact that worshippers were travelling to the compound despite the circumstances was “a message to those who want to harm Al-Aqsa”.

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