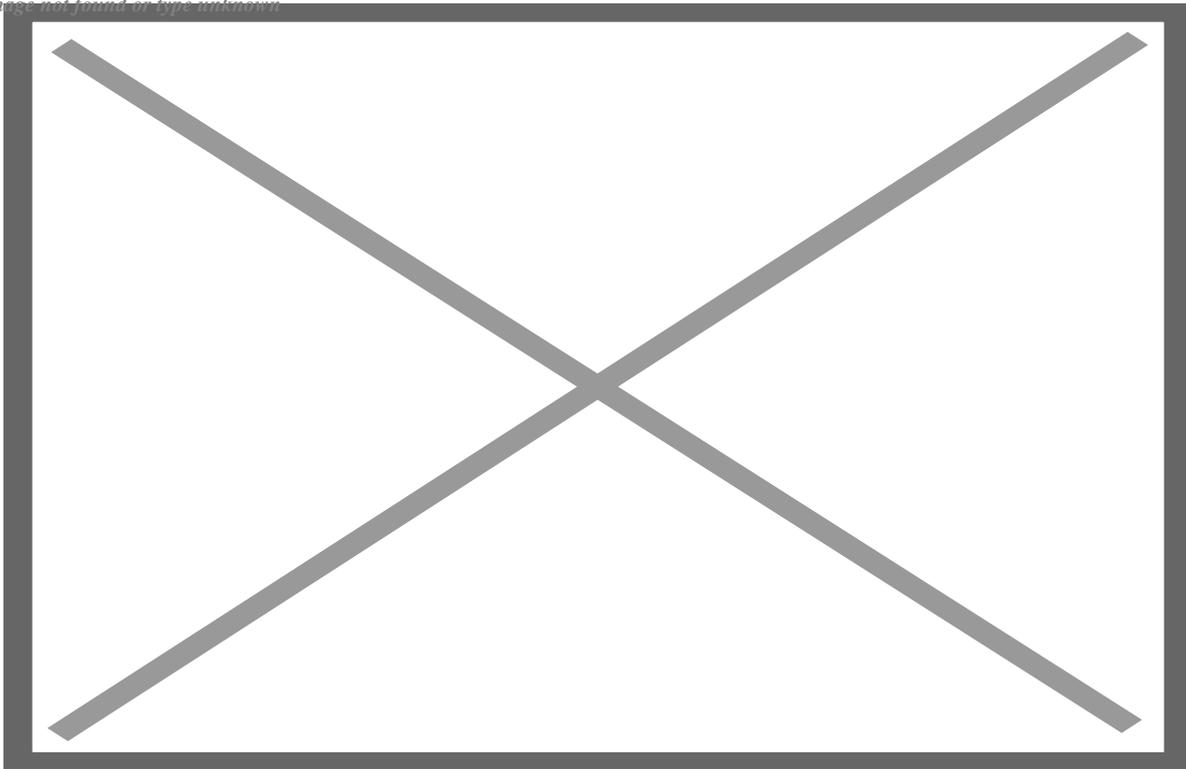


Israeli far-right minister visits Al-Aqsa compound

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Jerusalem, May 22 (RHC)-- Israel's far-right National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir entered the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound in occupied East Jerusalem and declared Israel was "in charge" -- drawing condemnation from Palestinians after months of escalating tension and violence.

The comments during his early morning visit on Sunday to the compound came days after groups of Jewish youths scuffled with Palestinians and chanted racist slogans during the annual far-right "flag march" through the Old City.

The event, held on "Jerusalem Day" -- which marks the 1967 capture and annexation of East Jerusalem, a move considered illegal under international law -- has led to violence in recent years, as far-right Israelis shout provocative slogans and insults, as well as physically attack Palestinians and even journalists.

"I'm happy to ascend the Temple Mount, the most important place for the people of Israel," Ben-Gvir said during his visit to the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, also known as Al-Haram al-Sharif by Muslims and the

Temple Mount by Jews.

In 2021, tensions around Al-Aqsa were followed by an 11-day Israeli assault on the Gaza Strip. Hamas, which controls the Strip, has warned repeatedly that it would react to what it sees as Jewish incursions on the site, which stands in Jordanian custodianship under a long-standing “status quo” arrangement put in place to contain tensions.

“All the threats from Hamas will not help, we are in charge here in Jerusalem and all of the land of Israel,” said Ben-Gvir, who has repeatedly visited the compound. Under the status quo arrangements, non-Muslims may visit the site in the heart of the Old City but are not allowed to pray. However, Jewish visitors have been increasingly defying the ban, more or less openly.

Palestinians consider defiance of the ban on prayer as a provocation and fear that Israel intends to take over the site. The increased number of ultranationalist Jews entering the compound, and the frequent storming of the site by Israeli security forces, including inside the prayer hall of Al-Aqsa Mosque, has increased Palestinian anger.

A spokesman for Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas said Ben-Gvir’s “incursion at an early hour, like thieves, into the Al-Aqsa Mosque courtyards will not change the reality and will not impose Israeli sovereignty over it”.

A Hamas spokesman said Israel would bear the consequences for Ben-Gvir’s “savage assault” on the mosque and it called on Palestinians to step up their visits and “stand as a rampart in the face of all attempts to defile it and make it Jewish.”

Israel captured the Old City of Jerusalem, which includes Al-Aqsa and the adjacent Western Wall, a sacred place of prayer for Jews, during the 1967 Middle Eastern war.

Israel has since annexed East Jerusalem, in a move not recognised by the international community, and regards the entire city as its eternal and undivided capital. Palestinians want East Jerusalem as the capital of a future state.

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