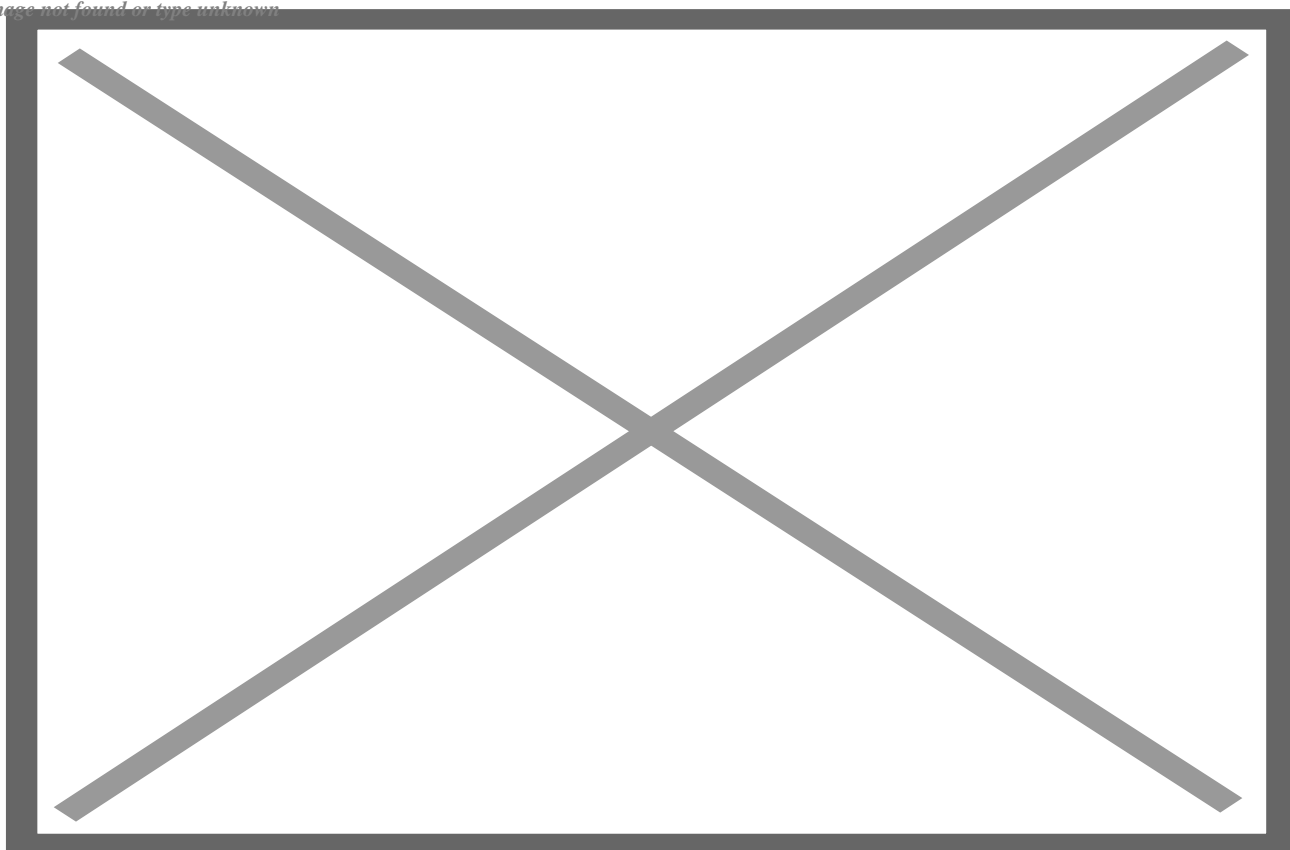


Israeli far-right minister leads incursion of Al-Aqsa compound

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A man holds a copy of the Qur'an as Israeli police blockade the entrance to the Al-Aqsa compound, following the storming of the site by a group of settlers led by Itamar Ben-Gvir and Yitzhak Wasserlauf, Jerusalem, July 27, 2023. (Reuters)

Jerusalem, July 27 (RHC)-- Israel's far-right national security minister Itamar Ben-Gvir has led a group of more than one thousand ultranationalist settlers to the Al-Aqsa compound in occupied East Jerusalem, his third such entrance to the site this year.

The provocative minister's entrance to the holy site on Thursday took place as Jews observed Tisha B'Av, a fast day mourning the destruction of two ancient Jewish temples "This place is important to us and we have to return to it and prove our sovereignty," Ben-Gvir said as he led the group, adding that the "unity of the nation of Israel is important".

Ben-Gvir consistently makes anti-Palestinian remarks and was a former youth leader of a now-banned group that Israel has declared a “terrorist” organisation.

The visit comes as some hardline Israeli Jewish groups promote the destruction of the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound – one of the holiest sites in Islam and a Palestinian national symbol – and the construction of a third Jewish temple in its place.

While ultraorthodox Jews, along with Israel’s Chief Rabbinate, expressly forbid even the entrance of Jews to the compound for religious reasons, nationalist religious Zionists such as Ben-Gvir have encouraged it in recent years.

The situation at the compound was “incredibly tense”, said Al Jazeera’s Laura Khan, reporting from one of the entrances to the compound. At least 1700 Jews had entered the site under police protection, with Khan saying that one man had been arrested and that some arguments had broken out.

Jews are prohibited from praying on the site as part of a longstanding status quo agreement. However, many of those who entered on Thursday were seen praying and singing, while some Palestinian Muslim worshippers trying to enter were turned away, Khan said.

In the past, tensions have broken out on Tisha B’Av, considered the saddest holiday for Jews, but this year there have so far been no major escalations yet, said Al Jazeera’s Mohammed Jamjoom, reporting from occupied East Jerusalem.

Visits by hardline Jews, many of them settlers, in the past year to defy the prayer ban have increased in the past few months. The compound has been managed under a Jordanian-funded waqf, or religious endowment, for hundreds of years. Jordan has condemned Ben-Gvir’s actions, warning of their dangerous consequences.

“The move by an Israeli minister to storm the Holy Al-Aqsa Mosque and violating its sanctity and the practices by [Jewish] extremists is a provocative act and a flagrant violation of international law,” said Sinan al-Majli, a foreign ministry spokesperson.

During Ben-Gvir’s previous visit in May, the minister made inflammatory comments, saying that Israelis are in control of all of Jerusalem. The mosque compound sits on land considered occupied under international law, with Palestinian Muslims saying it is the third-most important mosque in Islam.

The site has often been a flashpoint of violence. In April, Israeli forces raided the mosque as worshippers prayed during the month of Ramadan, firing tear gas and beating Palestinians with stun grenades and batons.

Israeli forces arrested and removed more than 400 people during the raid, despite global appeals to ease tensions.

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